

A Qualitative Comparative Study on Creative Workflows among Filipino Graphic Designers

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Abstract- *This qualitative comparative study examines how learning pathways shape the creative operational workflows of graphic designers in the Philippines. Utilizing a comparative case study design, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 active design practitioners, partitioned equally into formally-educated (n = 6) and self-taught (n = 6) groups, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework. Interpreted through Constructivist Learning Theory, the findings reveal a fundamental operational divide across the commercial design lifecycle: formally educated practitioners employ a research-first, linear workflow scaffolded by sketching and design principles (Social Constructivism); while self-taught practitioners utilize an agile, canvas-first workflow brought upon by immediate digital canvas interaction, exploratory software experimentation, and trend-driven iteration (Cognitive Constructivism). While formal training provides robust theoretical grounding and presentation of design rationale, it faces institutional curriculum lag. Conversely, self-directed learning yields high software agility but leaves practitioners vulnerable to theoretical blind spots. These findings provide empirical foundations for higher education studio curriculum modernization and strategic upskilling within the Philippine creative industry.*

Keywords: *Graphic Design, Creative Workflows, Design Education, Formal Education, Self-taught Designers, Philippine Creative Industry*

I. INTRODUCTION

Graphic design functions as a strategic discipline that translates abstract ideas into visual identities across print and digital media (Frascara, 2004), effectively conveying messages and information visually to specific audiences. In the Philippines, entering the creative industry traditionally meant pursuing a four-year degree, such as a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) or Bachelor of Multimedia Arts (BMMA), offered by recognized higher education institutions (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2017).

Over the past decade, however, the democratization of design software and the emergence of non-formal digital learning pathways have disrupted this traditional pipeline (Fleischmann, 2015), with self-directed learners increasingly relying on resources ranging from open-access YouTube tutorials to structured courses on Skillshare, Coursera, and LinkedIn Learning.

Today, an increasing number of local creative practitioners build market-ready competencies through self-directed learning rather than formal art school training (Design Center of the Philippines, 2020).

This trend regarding “informal education” is deeply tied to local socioeconomic realities within the country. Private design programs in the Philippines carry steep annual tuition fees, creating a financial barrier when weighed against entry-level design salaries averaging ₱12,000 to ₱17,000 per month (Department of Labor and Employment [DOLE], 2022). Physical access is further restricted by regional distribution: out of more than 2,000 higher education institutions across the archipelago, only a small fraction offer specialized graphic design or multimedia arts degrees (CHED, 2020). For many aspiring local creatives, self-directed learning is not merely a modern alternative—it is often the primary accessible route into the professional creative industry.

In professional environments, graphic designers are frequently evaluated through their final visual portfolios rather than the underlying cognitive processes that produce them (Cross, 2006), which are based on one's educational background — even as self-taught practitioners become more prominent in agencies and freelance markets. Constructivist learning theory provides a useful lens for examining

this transition. As Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978) established, learners do not passively absorb knowledge; they construct mental models through active experience and problem-solving. In formal academic programs, this takes the form of social constructivism, where academic critiques, faculty guidance, and structured curricula supply institutional scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). Informal learning operates differently. It aligns with cognitive constructivism, where designers gain competence through hands-on software experimentation, trial and error, and self-directed problem-solving (Piaget, 1952).

To bridge this gap, this qualitative comparative study examines the operational workflows of active Filipino graphic designers. By analyzing the answers of the formally-educated and self-taught graphic designers — the study addresses the question: “How do the creative workflows of formally-educated graphic designers differ from those of self-taught graphic designers in the Philippines when responding to a design project?”

By mapping these operational differences from the initial brief intake to the final output, this paper provides insights to inform university curriculum modernization and assist self-directed learners in optimizing their professional creative workflows.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research design

To examine how background influences creative workflows, this study employs a qualitative comparative case study. Internal creative logic and visual decision-making cannot be captured through numerical variables; they require detailed descriptive accounts from practitioners themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

By comparing formally-educated and self-taught graphic designers, the inquiry isolates how different learning paths shape workflow under identical conditions (Yin, 2018). The analysis evaluates both

cases across the standard commercial brief lifecycle—from brief intake and structural planning to production and rationale delivery—highlighting key operational variations between the two groups.

B. Participants & sampling

To examine the creative workflows of graphic designers in the Philippines, this study utilized a non-probability purposive sampling strategy. 12 participants were selected based on two primary inclusion criteria: (1) active professional engagement within creative agencies, corporate in-house design teams, or freelance networks, and (2) active design practice in the Philippines. The sample was separated into two comparative groups based on their primary skill acquisition pathway:

1. Formally-educated graphic designers (6): Practitioners who hold a formal academic degree or diploma in graphic design, fine arts, multimedia arts, or a closely related discipline from a recognized higher education institution in the Philippines.
2. Self-taught graphic designers (6): Practitioners who possess no formal academic background or tertiary degree in graphic design, having acquired their professional competencies through self-directed, informal learning pathways (e.g., online tutorials, peer communities, and software experimentation)

To reflect the Philippine creative sector, the self-taught graphic designers were selected based on active professional standing rather than initial undergraduate field. The participants with diverse non-art degrees (e.g., engineering, health sciences, business) capture the organic entry pathways into the creative industry. Across both groups, all twelve participants possessed a minimum of two years of commercial experience (averaging 5.8 years across the sample), ensuring that all comparative data reflects established professional workflows rather than novice or student behaviors.

Table 1. Demographic and Operational Profile of Qualitative Study Participants

Participant Code	Educational Pathway	Degree / Academic Background	Industry Experience	Primary Operating Environment
FE1	Formally-educated	BA Advertising Arts	7 Years	In-House Graphic Designer
FE2	Formally-educated	BA Communication Arts (Major in Media Arts)	10 Years	In-House Graphic Designer & Animator
FE3	Formally-educated	BS Multimedia Arts and Sciences	10 Years	Freelance Multimedia Artist
FE4	Formally-educated	BA Multimedia Arts	10 Years	In-House Graphic Designer & Video Editor
FE5	Formally-educated	BA Multimedia Arts	10 Years	Freelance / Agency Contract Designer
FE6	Formally-educated	BA Fine Arts	3 Years	In-House Graphic Designer
ST1	Self-taught	BS Civil Engineering	2 Years	Creative Agency
ST2	Self-taught	BS Information Technology	4 Years	Creative Agency
ST3	Self-taught	BS Computer Engineering	4 Years	Freelance Graphic Designer
ST4	Self-taught	BS in Nursing	5 Years	Freelance Graphic Designer
ST5	Self-taught	BS International Tourism Management	10 Years	Freelance Graphic Designer
ST6	Self-taught	BS Exercise & Sports Sciences	2 Years	Freelance Graphic Designer

C. Data collection & thematic analysis

Data was gathered through semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews conducted individually with each of the 12 designer participants. A semi-structured format was selected to maintain thematic consistency across both types of graphic designers, with the sessions lasting between 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted virtually via video conferencing platforms. The interview traced the life cycle of

project execution: brief intake, pre-production planning, production, and rationale delivery.

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework. Rather than applying a predetermined codebook, a comparative table is coded according to concrete behaviors such as off-screen sketching, direct-to-software execution, and client presentation

strategies. These initial codes were structured across the four project lifecycle phases to contrast formally educated and self-taught practices. Candidate themes were checked against all 12 transcripts for consistency and synthesized using constructivist frameworks to capture the cognitive rationale behind each approach.

III. RESULTS

Data analysis of the 12 interviews revealed the differences in creative workflows between the formally-educated graphic designers and the self-taught graphic designers. These differences are categorized into four phases:

Table 2. Comparative Table of Creative Workflow Phases Between Graphic Designers

Workflow phase	Formally-educated graphic designers	Self-taught graphic designers
Phase 1: Brief intake	Research-first (reads brief, constructs mood boards, conducts client research, and sketches)	Straight to production (minimizes sketching; opens digital software immediately to test initial visual ideas)
Phase 2: Pre-production planning	Applies principles of graphic design and relies on composition systems (grids, visual hierarchy rules, etc.)	Trial-and-error, arranges visual elements dynamically on screen until composition "feels balanced"
Phase 3: Production	Follows a sequence, treats software strictly as the final execution stage for a predetermined sketch	Exploring directly in the software (uses the software interface itself as an active canvas for ideation and experimentation)
Phase 4: Rationale delivery	Justifies design choices using formal design vocabulary and institutional rationale	Aligns designs with current trends and explains like so

A. Phase 1: Brief intake & Ideation

When receiving a creative brief for a design project, formally-educated designers demonstrated a research-first, linear pipeline. These practitioners prioritize off-screen preparation, target audience analysis, and manual sketching before opening digital tools. Participant FE2 presented this approach:

“When I get a brief, I don't go straight to Photoshop or Illustrator. I start in my sketchbook. I map out mind webs, write down keyphrases from the brief, and sketch quick thumbnail ideas on paper. If you jump into software too early, the tool dictates your ideas instead of your brain.”

This structure reflects academic studio scaffolding, where conceptual documentation and sketches are mandatory assignment deliverables. In contrast, self-taught designers view paper sketching as an unnecessary bottleneck, preferring to test ideas

immediately inside digital software, displaying a canvas-first, agile pipeline. Participant ST3 described this entry routine:

“I rarely use a pencil unless I'm doing custom lettering. Once I read the client's request, I immediately open Illustrator or Photoshop, set up my canvas, and start dropping in reference images, typography options, and color palettes directly onto the side artboards. My ideation happens live on screen.”

B. Phase 2: Pre-production planning

During pre-production planning, formally-educated designers relied on design principles and systems like systemic grid compliance and formal visual hierarchy rules. Their visual logic is structured using grids and typographic alignment systems – knowledge and reasoning that were acquired through academic courses. As FE3 explained:

“Everything in my layout has to be anchored to a grid—whether it's a 12-column grid for web or a modular grid for print. I pay close attention to kerning, baseline alignment, and visual hierarchy before decorative elements are added. The structure has to be sound.”

On the other hand, self-taught graphic designers employed an intuitive trial-and-error composition process. Rather than establishing preliminary layout grids, these designers manipulate elements dynamically on screen immediately, evaluating overall composition through optical feedback. Participant ST1 noted:

“I don't manually calculate column widths or set up strict grid rules. I place the hero image, throw in the headline, and keep resizing, shifting alignment, and tweaking spacing until it looks visually right to my eyes. It's an organic process of moving things around until the composition clicks.”

C. Phase 3: Production

The production phase highlights contrasting relationships with digital design software. Formally-educated graphic designers treat design software as a sequential execution medium — a tool meant to digitize and polish a concept that was already finalized during off-screen research. Participant FE5 observed:

“Software is just an execution tool. By the time I open InDesign or Illustrator, 80% of the creative work is already finished in my head and in my sketchbook. The software is just there to produce clean vector files.”

In contrast, self-taught design practitioners engage in exploratory software execution. They utilize the software workspace as an active playground for ideation, leveraging tool presets to discover unexpected visual directions during execution. Participant ST6 shared:

“My software is my playground. I'll take a typography element, duplicate it ten times across the

artboard, throw different effects or blend modes on each copy, and see what happy accidents occur. The software gives me ideas that I couldn't have envisioned on paper.”

D. Phase 4: Rationale delivery

In the final phase, formally-educated practitioners utilize institutional framework defense. They make design decisions using formal design terminology, color theory, and brief objectives practiced during critiques in university. Participant FE4 reflected:

“In university, we had to defend every single design choice during panel critiques. You couldn't just say 'it looks nice.' You had to explain why that typeface fits the brand identity or why that color palette evokes a specific emotional response. That training helps me explain the strategic value of my designs to corporate clients.”

By comparison, self-taught graphic designers manage client feedback through agile trend alignment and rapid visual iteration. Rather than defending theoretical concepts verbally, they respond by generating rapid visual variations directly on screen, relying on current trends and quick turnarounds. Participant ST2 noted:

“If a client doesn't like a visual direction, I don't argue with them using design theories. I just quickly generate two or three alternative visual options, pulling inspiration from current Behance or Pinterest trends, and let them see the visual differences in real time.”

E. Post-Study Reflections on Educational Pathways

To investigate the long-term perceived value and structural trade-offs of each educational route, four practitioners (two formally-educated, two self-taught) were asked follow-up questions. Participants evaluated whether they would choose their original learning pathway or pursue the alternative if given the opportunity, reflecting on cognitive scaffolding, operational friction, and workplace hierarchies.

Table 3. Participant Reflections on Workflow Trade-Offs

Participant code	Primary pathway	Counterfactual decision	Identified Primary Core Advantage	Noted Key Operational / Structural Trade-Off
FE2	Formally-educated	Formal education	Proactive error reduction via mentorship; peer critique environment	Adherence to design structures limits experimentation
FE4	Formally-educated	Hybrid (formal education + self-taught)	Theoretical "arsenals" and multi-perspective peer problem solving.	Curricular rigidity limits spontaneous creative autonomy
ST1	Self-taught	Formal education	Decisive, confidence-driven execution grounded in standard principles	Operational latency from searching for tutorials mid-brief; self-doubt
ST3	Self-taught	Non-art field (self-taught)	Task-oriented tool flexibility; fast turnaround using accessible tools (Canva/AI)	Credential-based hierarchy and lack of authority in design defense

IV. DISCUSSION

The comparative findings demonstrate that a graphic designer's learning pathway determines their operational workflow. Rather than producing purely aesthetic variations, formal higher education and autonomous self-directed learning foster divergent problem-solving strategies, tool dependencies, and client communication practices across all four stages of the commercial design lifecycle

A. Theoretical & Operational Synthesis

1. Social Constructivism in Formal Practice

The research-first, linear pipeline utilized by formally-educated graphic designers (FE1–FE6) is an operational manifestation of institutional scaffolding. The environment within a university enforces structures — such as mood-board, design defense, concept mapping, and sketching — before moving on to software execution. These formally-educated graphic designers internalize a cognitive routine that prioritizes conceptualization, design principles, and design rationale. As shown in Phase 4, the academe equips formally-educated practitioners with the institutional vocabulary necessary to present design

choices as strategic business solutions rather than arbitrary aesthetic preferences.

2. Cognitive Constructivism in Self-Taught Practice

In contrast, the canvas-first, iterative pipeline of self-taught practitioners (ST1–ST6) is rooted in autonomous interaction with digital software interfaces. Learning outside institutional boundaries lets self-directed practitioners acquire skills and knowledge through hands-on experimentation, immediate optical feedback, and online tutorials. The software canvas serves not merely as a production output tool, but as an active sensory workspace for visual ideation. This equips self-taught graphic designers with high software agility, trend knowledge, and rapid turnaround speeds.

B. The Dual Bottlenecks: Academic Curriculum Lag vs. Theoretical Vulnerability

A critical insight brought about from the participant reflections is that both learning pathways carry distinct structural friction and operational trade-offs:

1. The Institutional Lag of Formal Curricula

While graphic designers with formal education impart strong foundational theory, participants noted

that university curricula frequently lag behind industry tools and commercial workflows. Rigid academic pipelines and outdated software instruction create operational friction when graduates transition into professional work settings that demand immediate design production.

2. The Theoretical Vulnerability of Autonomous Learning

While self-taught graphic designers achieve fast design production speed, their reliance on decentralized online resources leaves them vulnerable to blind spots in foundational design theory (e.g., typography, kerning rules, print production color spaces, and the like). Furthermore, as noted in the post-study reflections, self-taught practitioners experience operational latency from troubleshooting technical barriers mid-project and face difficulty in negotiating design choices in a professional setting due to lack of credentials (design degree).

C. Recommendations

Based on these comparative findings, recommendations are outlined for academic institutions, independent creatives, and industry gatekeepers:

1. For Higher Education Institutions

- a. Academic programs should balance traditional manual sketching with agile design exercises that mirror turnaround expectations in a professional setting.
- b. Tools that are included in the curriculum should be synchronized with industry standards to bridge the gap between academic theory and active market workflows (e.g., widely-used design software, real-time collaborative design tools, digital asset management).

2. For Self-Taught Practitioners

- a. Self-directed designers should intentionally study design theories and principles, color theory, and composition to eliminate theoretical gaps that undermine long-term career growth.

- b. Independent creatives must move beyond trends and cultivate the vocabulary required to defend the design choices made.

3. For Creative Directors & Industry Gatekeepers

- a. Hiring managers should look beyond surface portfolio aesthetics by evaluating the problem-solving skills of self-taught applicants and assessing the design agility of formal graduates to be able to form balanced and skillful creative teams.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the creative workflows of Filipino graphic designers are deeply structured by their foundational learning pathways. Formally educated designers operate through a research-first, linear methodology scaffolded by academic theory and structural grid adherence, whereas self-taught designers execute through an agile, canvas-first methodology driven by autonomous software experimentation and trend responsiveness. Recognizing these divergent cognitive workflows enables educational institutions to modernize studio pedagogy and empowers self-directed creatives to strategically bridge theoretical gaps, fostering a more resilient and versatile Philippine creative workforce.

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