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ICONS, INDEXES, AND SYMBOLS ACROSS CONTEXTS: A COMPARATIVE PEIRCEAN ANALYSIS OF FOOTBALL POSTERS

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Abstract

Football posters are not merely promotional media but also multimodal texts that convey cultural meanings through images, colors, typography, and spatial layout. This study examines how icons, indexes, and symbols, based on Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic theory, construct meanings of competition, national identity, prestige, and individual heroism in football posters. The study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative semiotic approach. Six posters were purposively selected from three categories: two club competition posters, two international football posters, and two posters representing individual players. The data were analyzed through segmentation, categorization using explicit decision rules, and comparative analysis across categories. The findings show that icons are generally represented through players, trophies, and city landmarks that allow audiences to recognize objects directly. Indexes appear through gaze, gesture, printed names, dates and venues, and spatial direction that point toward competition and achievement, while symbols employ culturally recognized codes such as club colors, national flags, emblems, trophies, and award and sponsor branding. Although all three types of signs are found across the posters, their meanings develop according to their respective contexts. Club posters emphasize competition and institutional prestige, and international posters highlight national identity and global audience reach. The two individual-player posters frame achievement differently: as the culmination of a club season (Ballon d'Or) and as a match award framed by nation, tournament, and sponsor (Player of the Match). These findings indicate that, for the six posters analyzed, Peirce's framework helps show them as texts rich in cultural meaning rather than merely promotional media. However, because the study uses only six posters, the patterns identified are indicative and are not intended to be statistically generalized.

Keywords: *Football posters, Peircean semiotics, visual communication, cultural meaning, sports media.*

Introduction

Visual communication has become increasingly prevalent in recent times as a means of creating meaning in today's digitally mediated media environment. Visual texts in different fields like business, politics, education, and sports strategically use images, colours, fonts, and layout to guide audiences' meaning-making (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In sports culture, football posters constitute a distinct form of visual communication which not only functions as a means of promotion and representation but also as a cultural object that creates meaning of rivalry,

status, national identity, and collective excitement amongst various audiences around the world.

Sports communication employs visual elements, including posters, campaign visuals, and broadcast visuals, to act as venues for the construction and reinforcement of cultural values like competition, national identity, heroism, and institutional prestige (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Football, in particular, has been shown to function as a stage for constructing and communicating national image through internationally circulated visual and branding systems (Dubinsky, 2023), while match-day and stadium settings similarly mediate club-based fan identities through recognizable visual and discursive conventions (Worlledge & File, 2023). As a global sport, football creates visual communication that cuts across different cultural contexts and addresses local, national, and international audiences. Consequently, football posters become an important form of visual communication in sports, where common visual conventions are combined with unique signs from local and institutional contexts to create meaning associated with clubs, nations, tournaments, and individual players.

Using semiotic analysis as a methodological approach provides an appropriate way to explore how meanings are created through visual symbols. Previous studies have demonstrated the power of semiotic approaches in analyzing different forms of visual posters, such as film-related posters, political posters, health-related posters, educational posters, and sports posters. However, most existing literature focuses on the analysis of an individual poster or a certain type of poster, which limits the capacity to analyze how identical forms of signs may function differently in different communicative contexts. This is particularly important because meaning-making is context-dependent, and interpretive effects may vary depending on communicative, cultural, and institutional context.

The football posters create an ideal context for examining this subject because they use different unique communicative registers such as club rivalry, international tournament promotion, matchday communication, and individual player representation. Different registers may apply similar visual sign categories but direct them at different cultural interpretations. Nevertheless, existing football-related visual objects, such as club logotypes, stadium tifos, and commemorative statues, have themselves only recently begun to attract sustained semiotic attention (Sørensen, 2024), and this attention has so far concentrated on single genres of football visual culture rather than on cross-genre comparison; posters specifically, and comparative designs spanning multiple communicative registers of football more broadly, remain correspondingly underexamined. Comparative study of different football poster types may thus allow acquiring greater knowledge of visual symbols' functioning in different contexts and football posters' creation of different cultural significances.

This study examines icons, indexes, and symbols in six carefully selected football posters, which represent three communicative types: club competition and rivalry, international football, and individual player presentation. The research will be conducted according to the following questions: (1) How are icons, indexes, and symbols represented across the selected football posters? and (2) How do the signs produce cultural significance in

the visual communication in global football? The current study aims to contribute to the field of visual semiotics and extend the Peircean approach in sport media communication by applying Peirce's triadic semiotic approach to different poster types.

Literature Review

Semiotic analysis provides a solid framework for investigating meanings produced by visual signs. Among different semiotic theories, the theory developed by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce is particularly effective when dealing with visual communication because it regards meaning as the relationship between signs, object, and interpretation (Peirce, 1991). Compared to the dyadic model associated with Ferdinand de Saussure, Peirce treats the sign as a triadic relationship that includes representamen, object, and interpretant. Representamen refers to the form in which something serves as a sign, the object is the thing being represented or symbolized, and the interpretant is the significance created by the connection between the sign and its object (Peirce, 1931).

This triad operates through semiosis, which is a dynamic process whereby signs generate further signs and meanings. From Peirce's point of view, the interpretant is a sign by itself. It follows that the process of meaning generation is dynamic and continuous rather than static. This idea is particularly important for visual communication, as visual signs interact with viewers' understanding, culture, and interpretive practices to generate various but structured meanings (Short, 2007). Hence, the meaning of a visual element is not necessarily separable from the wider cultural and communicative context.

Within this triadic structure, Peirce developed a broad classification of signs according to their relationships with their objects. The most frequently used classification divides the signs into icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons represent their objects through similarity or correspondence. Thus, in the football poster, a photograph of a footballer can act as an icon because of its likeness to the real person. Stadiums, trophies, and other football-related items can immediately identify a poster because of their visual similarity.

Indexes point to their objects through existential, causal, or contextual relationships. On the football poster, assertive gestures, concentrated glances, expressions, and postures can signify stress, competition, or enthusiasm. Compositional vectors and lines of gaze can direct the viewer’s attention toward a particular element, whereas connotations such as prestige or stress are interpretants of such signs, not indexes in themselves. In addition, on the matchday poster, the dates and times mentioned can refer to a specific sporting event.

A symbol refers to its referent via conventional rules, laws, or customs established in society and culture. A national flag is an example of an object representing the nation; club logos represent affiliation with an organization; and colors like gold usually symbolize excellence or achievement in a particular cultural context (Chandler, 2007; Nöth, 1995). The interpretation of symbolic signs relies heavily on accepted cultural knowledge and conventions.

The icon-index-symbol triad continues to be actively taken up in recent visual semiotics scholarship beyond its classical formulation, having been applied to political imagery (Thellefsen, 2023), cinematic representations of urban

space (Goharipour & Gibson, 2023), and platform-mediated self-representation (Hurley, 2023), which together indicate that Peirce's typology remains a productive analytic lens for contemporary, digitally circulated visual material rather than a strictly historical framework.

Peirce's sign categories should not be regarded as mutually exclusive and rigid classification criteria. The same visual sign can be both iconic, indexical, and symbolic. An image of a footballer can be iconic because it represents the player, indexical because it was made in response to the player's presence in front of the camera, and symbolic as well if the player's identity carries a certain cultural meaning. Consequently, semiotic analysis should take into consideration not only the main sign relation but also the possible impact of other types of relations in one visual element. The value of Peirce's typology is thus not in classification itself, but in revealing the different dimensions through which signs produce meaning.

The football posters can be considered multimodal texts as well. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) suggest that meaning in visual communication emerges as a result of the interaction of multiple semiotic modalities rather than the individual elements. Different visual resources like images, colors, typography, space layout, etc. possess their own semiotic potentials. This complementarity between Peircean sign relations and multimodal composition has recently been formalized in corpus-based multimodal research, which demonstrates that Peircean categories can guide the systematic annotation and interpretation of composite visual texts rather than functioning only as an abstract classification scheme (Hiippala, 2024).

From this perspective, when applied to football posters, a poster must be treated as a complex multimodal object. The cultural significance of a visual artifact may be created due to iconic representation of players, indexical movements, environment, institutional symbolic codes, typography, color schemes, and spatial arrangement. The image of a football player can be iconic because of its resemblance; his posture can be an index of competitive readiness, and the club's colors can symbolically represent institutional identity. The cultural significance of the poster is generated through the interaction of these different semiotic artifacts.

The multimodal perspective becomes particularly important when analyzing football posters, as these posters must communicate multiple levels of meaning at once. They can identify the opponents in a game, set emotional expectations, promote the event, construct the institutional identity, and engage the audience. As a result, the analysis of icons, indexes, and symbols should not be isolated from the broader visual context in which these signs are operating. The semiotic analysis must focus on the process of interaction between different types of sign relationships in the multimodal system of the poster.

As has been seen in earlier research, semiotic analysis proves to be very effective in terms of analyzing visual posters for their cultural, emotional, institutional, and ideological meanings. In Nirmalawati (2008), the author analyzed horror film posters and showed how the interaction between icons, indexes, and symbols generates genre atmosphere and cultural significance. Muazzomah (2023)

analyzed the Joker poster advertisement and showed how visual and linguistic signs guide audience perception, creating certain emotional and thematic context.

The link between cultural identity and visual signs has also been examined in other studies. (Mukhtar et al., 2020) suggested that film posters can signify cultural identity through costumes, props, visual composition, and title composition. Similarly, Widianti et al. (2024) studied the relationship between verbal and visual signs in cyber safety posters and stressed the significance of multimodal composition in public signification.

Additionally, semiotic analysis has been applied to institutional and ideological communication. For example, Panggabean et al. (2025) indicated that political posters employ icons, indexes, and symbols to express political identity, ideology, and persuasion through several semiotic levels. Meanwhile, Moayeri & Ahmadpanah (2024) performed a semiotic analysis of the visual components of WHO health campaign posters, demonstrating that these visual components bear significant communicative importance within official public communication.

Within football specifically, semiotic and visual-branding scholarship has so far concentrated on single object types rather than on posters or cross-genre comparison. Sørensen (2024) analyzed football statues as encyclopedic signs that commemorate players and reinforce club identity, explicitly noting that football-related visual objects had received little prior semiotic attention. In a related but market-oriented vein, Pedersen et al. (2024) showed that consumers' recognition of an athlete's personal logo elements shapes their evaluation of the athlete's brand, indicating that individual sporting recognition is itself constructed through codified visual marks rather than through athletic performance alone. At the level of international sport, Dubinsky (2023) traced how the FIFA World Cup functions as a recurring vehicle for nation branding and country image, in which national visual identity is communicated to global audiences through official symbols and media coverage. These strands confirm that football generates rich, codified visual material at the institutional, national, and individual level, yet none of them examine posters as a genre or compare how the same sign categories operate across these levels within a single design.

All these studies show that semiotic analysis can help identify how visual signs convey meanings that go beyond the imagery. Earlier studies prove that posters can create an emotional environment, cultural identity, public communication, political ideologies, and institutional power. However, there is currently a lack of comparative studies applying semiotics to the analysis of multiple poster categories.

Previous literature has demonstrated the analytical potential of Peircean semiotic theory in analyzing visual posters across film, politics, health campaigns, and cyber-safety communication (Nirmalawati, 2008; Muazzomah, 2023; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Widianti et al., 2024; Panggabean et al., 2025; Moayeri & Ahmadpanah, 2024), and, within football specifically, single-object studies such as Sørensen (2024) have begun to apply semiotic analysis to football-related visual culture. However, to our knowledge, based on searches in google scholar conducted in August 2026, we found no study that compares how the same Peircean sign categories

operate across multiple communicative registers of football posters within a single comparative design; the studies identified above each examine one poster type, one football-related object, or one football-adjacent domain rather than placing club, international, and individual-player registers side by side. This limitation is important in theoretical terms since Peircean semiosis emphasizes the active interaction between signs, objects, and interpretants, thus implying that meaning generation may be influenced by the context in which a sign occurs.

Football posters present a significant empirical domain where this problem can be addressed. Contrary to studies that focus on a particular poster or category of posters, the current research considers three types of communication: competition and rivalry between clubs, international football, and posters featuring individual players. Each of these types shows various forms of communication and uses the same kinds of sign types for different cultural purposes. Club posters can emphasize competition and club status, international football posters can accentuate national identity and global ties, whereas individual player posters can symbolize personal success and uniqueness.

Thus, the uniqueness of this research is that it considers the comparative use of Peirce's concept of icons, indexes, and symbols in the context of different categories of posters. The difference between this research and previous studies lies not in considering the meanings of the sign category, but in investigating how icons, indexes, and symbols operate in different types of communication and how their combination gives birth to new cultural meanings of visual communication in global football.

Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach within a comparative semiotic framework, appropriate for visual texts requiring interpretation rather than quantitative measurement (Creswell, 2014). Each poster is analyzed both as an integral composition and as a set of deconstructed sign components, following a multimodal approach to visual texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The sample consists of six football posters selected through two-stage purposive sampling. First, three communicative categories were identified as the main registers of football poster meaning-making: club competition and rivalry, international football, and individual player representation. Second, two posters were selected for each category based on visual integrity, clear thematic relevance, and reference to football events of the 2025–2026 cycle wherever the event could be established. The club competition category comprises the El Clásico poster (FC Barcelona vs. Real Madrid) and the UEFA Champions League Final poster (Paris Saint-Germain vs. Arsenal); the international football category comprises the FIFA World Cup 26 promotional poster and the Germany vs. Portugal UEFA Nations League poster; and the individual player category comprises the Ballon d'Or poster of Ousmane Dembélé and the Michelob Ultra Player of the Match poster of Jude Bellingham. The six posters were obtained from publicly available digital sources between 25 June and 15 July 2026 and archived at the highest resolution available together with contextual metadata. The data-collection window should not be confused with the dates of the posters: each poster had been

in circulation before it was archived. Table 1 therefore reports, for each poster, the event it refers to and the date of that event, the date or year printed on the poster itself (where one appears), the producer, the date on which the poster was uploaded to the platform where we found it, and the date on which we accessed and archived it. Five of the six posters refer to events between June 2025 and July 2026; the fixture referred to in Picture 1 could not be dated from the poster itself. The 2025–2026 restriction is a sampling criterion that keeps the corpus comparable as recent football communication; it does not imply that the posters were produced during data collection. Picture 5, for example, refers to the 2025 Ballon d'Or cycle (2024/25 season), awarded on 22 September 2025 in Paris. As a small, purposively balanced corpus, the six posters allow patterns to be identified as indicative features of this dataset rather than statistically generalized findings.

Table 1. Poster Metadata: Event, Printed Date, Producer, Upload, and Access Dates

No.	Poster and event referred to	Event date	Date/year printed on poster	Producer / source	Uploaded	Accessed
1	El Clásico (FC Barcelona vs. Real Madrid); fixture not stated on the poster	10 May 2026	None printed	Fabrizio Romano / https://www.instagram.com/p/DYIi_mjDCKT/?exln=cGh3a2w5cG01d3lq	10 May 2026	12 July 2026
2	UEFA Champions League Final, Budapest (Paris Saint-Germain vs. Arsenal)	30 May 2026 (Puskás Aréna, Budapest)	"Budapest 26 Final"	UEFA (official); final identity by TwelfthMan with Márton Nemes (TwelfthMan, 2026); uefa.com	26 May 2026	13 July 2026
3	FIFA World Cup 26 promotional poster	11 June–19 July 2026 (tournament)	"26" in the FIFA World Cup wordmark	FIFA / fifa.com	3 Maret 2026	13 July 2026
4	UEFA Nations League 2025 Finals, semi-final, Germany vs. Portugal (Munich)	4 June 2025, 21:00 CEST	"5 June | 8PM"; 2025	Broadcast-style graphic with Vision+ logo; https://id.postermywall.com	4 Juni 2025	13 July 2026
5	2025 Ballon d'Or (Ousmane Dembélé)	22 September 2025 (Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris)	None; award name engraved on the object	433 / dribble.com	2 Juni 2025	14 July 2026
6	Michelob Ultra Superior Player of the Match, FIFA World Cup 2026 (Jude Bellingham)	11 July 2026	"FIFA World Cup 26" on backdrop; 11 July 2026	Media brand 433 (mark on image); https://www.instagram.com/p/Dasq6LMifBl/?img_index=3&exln=N3BtYmw5bmk0YWNx	11 July 2026	14 July 2026

Note. "Uploaded" is the date displayed by the platform on which the poster was found; "Accessed" is the date on which we accessed and archived the poster (between 25 June and 15 July 2026). Event dates follow official match and ceremony records.

Each poster was examined through seven visual parameters drawn from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006): (1) modality, that is, whether the image is photographic, a composite, or an illustration; (2) light and color, including the lighting key, dominant hues, and saturation; (3) camera angle and contact, including vertical angle, distance, and whether depicted participants look at the viewer; (4) composition and salience, including centrality, scale, symmetry, and the top/bottom and left/right placement of elements; (5) background and texture; (6) gesture, gaze, and posture; and (7) typography and printed text. These parameters were used to locate the visual evidence for each sign, and each sign was then assigned to a Peircean category using explicit decision rules. A sign was coded as an icon when it signifies by resemblance, whether as an

image (a likeness of a player or object), a diagram (a spatial arrangement that mirrors a relation, such as higher and lower positions mirroring status), or a metaphor. It was coded as an index when it signifies through an existential, causal, or directional connection to its object: the physical trace of a person before a camera in a photograph (Peirce, 1931, CP 2.281), a gaze or gesture that points toward something, or a name, date, or venue that designates a particular person or event. It was coded as a symbol when its meaning depends on a convention viewers must already know, such as crests, flags, brand marks, and color codes. Connotations such as 'prestige' or 'sacredness' were treated as interpretants of these signs, not as indexes in themselves. The photographic claim to indexicality is weaker for digitally composited posters (Pictures 1, 3, and 5) and does not apply to Picture 2, which is an illustration; for these posters, indexical coding relied on gaze, gesture, direction, and designation.

The analytic process followed four stages adapted from Peircean visual semiotics (Chandler, 2007; Nöth, 1995), multimodal analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and recent corpus-based procedures for annotating and querying visual material through Peircean categories (Hiippala, 2024): (1) visual segmentation, dividing each poster into basic units such as people, gestures, colors, typefaces, logos, and spatial arrangement; (2) classification of each unit by its predominant sign relation iconic, indexical, or symbolic with secondary relations noted where relevant; (3) interpretation of each sign within its communicative and institutional context to establish its interpretant; and (4) comparative analysis across categories to identify patterns and differences in the visual grammar of these posters.

Analytical credibility was supported by evaluating each poster individually before cross-comparison, grounding interpretive claims in clearly identifiable visual units, and having two of the four authors code each poster independently, resolving disagreements through discussion; a formal quantitative intercoder reliability measure was not calculated given the corpus size. All posters analyzed are copyrighted advertisements used here solely for noncommercial educational purposes.

Results and Discussion

The following sections comprise semiotic analysis of the six football posters divided into three communicative categories. In each category, a summary of the communicative functions performed by the posters, an analysis of each poster, a summary table, and an analysis of differences between the posters are provided. The conclusion of the discussion comprises the comparative analysis of all three categories.

The main communicative purpose of club competition and rivalry posters is to advertise matches between club teams. These posters must create an engaging atmosphere of rivalry as well as enhance the image and identity of the involved clubs. Thus, they operate in the framework of (Panggabean et al., 2025) rhetoric of conflict and institutional power defined as a visual strategy for the construction of meaning through the contrast of competing identities and raising competitive stakes. There are two posters belonging to this category - El Clásico and UEFA Champions League Final.

Club Competition and Rivalry Posters



Picture 1
El Clásico poster (FC Barcelona vs. Real Madrid; fixture and event date 10 May 2026; accessed: 12 July 2026)

Icon: Players from Barcelona and Real Madrid (photographic likenesses); the trophies; the stairs-and-dais arrangement as a diagram of status (higher = possession, lower = pursuit).

Index: The tilted heads of the Real Madrid players and the beam of light as vectors leading the eye from the bottom of the frame to the trophy; the names and numbers on the Madrid shirts (VINI JR. 7, BELLINGHAM 5), which designate particular players.

Symbol: Club colors and crests; the trophies; the cathedral-like setting, whose sacred or throne-like reading depends on shared cultural convention.

Interpretation: Frames the fixture as a ritual ascent toward a sacralized prize, in which one side already stands near the summit.



Picture 2
UEFA Champions League Final poster, Paris Saint-Germain vs. Arsenal (event: 30 May 2026; printed: "Budapest 26"; accessed: 13 July 2026)

Icon: Stylized trophy silhouette; stylized Budapest landmarks (the Hungarian Parliament Building, the Széchenyi Chain Bridge, and the Archangel Gabriel statue).

Index: The landmarks, the city name, and the year ("Budapest 26"), which designate a specific venue and edition; the river path that directs the eye from the competition wordmark to the trophy and the title.

Symbol: UEFA Champions League wordmark; PSG and Arsenal badges; the trophy as an institutional emblem; the neon palette as the edition's brand identity.

Interpretation: Frames the Final as an institutional event anchored to a city and a brand, in which the two clubs are equal participants and no individual appears.

Picture 1 is a dark, low-key digital composite. A warm golden flare behind and above the large trophy is the only strong light source; it produces a halo-like glow, scattered bokeh, and rim light on the two Barcelona players, while the

carved dark-wood and stone setting sinks into shadow. The composition follows a central vertical axis. The Barcelona players stand frontally on a raised dais and are shown from a low angle, so the viewer looks up at them; they are upright, arms relaxed, and look steadily ahead. The two Real Madrid players occupy the bottom third, seen from behind on a stone staircase, their pale kits catching the light, heads tilted upward and, in one case, a fist closed at the side. The viewer thus stands behind the Madrid players and shares their line of sight.

In Peircean terms, the players are iconic images, and the stairs-and-dais arrangement is a diagrammatic icon: the higher/lower relation of the figures mirrors a relation of status, possession versus pursuit. The tilted heads and the beam of light are indexical vectors that lead the eye from the bottom of the frame to the trophy, and the names and numbers on the Madrid shirts (VINI JR. 7, BELLINGHAM 5) designate particular individuals. Club colors, crests, the trophies, and the cathedral-like architecture are symbols, since reading the setting as a sacred or throne-like space depends on shared cultural conventions. The resulting interpretant is the fixture as a ritual ascent toward a sacralized prize, in which one side already stands near the summit. Because the poster carries no printed title or date, the fixture is identified through kits and names, not through text, and the specific match it refers to could not be established (Table 1).

Picture 2 differs from the other posters in modality: it is a flat vector illustration with visible grain, not a photograph. Its palette is saturated neon (magenta, violet, electric blue, orange, and a thin lime line), applied as graphic gradation, so ‘lighting’ here is a stylistic effect and not the record of a light source. A blue river curves from the competition wordmark at the top, past the trophy, to the title at the bottom, forming a reading path. The trophy sits on the central axis as a nearly white silhouette, the only light-valued mass against deep blue, which makes it the most salient element. The two club badges sit symmetrically at lower left and right in dark circular frames with the same orange-pink rim, giving the clubs equal visual weight and removing the hierarchy seen in Picture 1. Stylized Budapest landmarks (the Hungarian Parliament Building, the Széchenyi Chain Bridge, and the Archangel Gabriel statue) frame the trophy. At the bottom, ‘BUDAPEST 26’ is set in large, slanted brush-style lettering while ‘FINAL’ appears in small, widely spaced capitals, so typographic salience goes to place and year before finality.

The trophy silhouette and the landmarks are icons by resemblance, though heavily stylized. Because no photograph is involved, indexical work is done by designation and direction: the landmarks, city name, and year point to a specific venue and edition, and the river path directs the eye. The competition wordmark, the club badges, and the trophy’s conventional status are symbols; the neon palette is better read as the tournament’s brand identity for this edition than as a code of ‘prestige’. The identity was commissioned by UEFA from the design studio TwelfthMan in collaboration with the Budapest artist Márton Nemes, whose palette draws on the city’s neon signs and ruin-bar lights (TwelfthMan, 2026). The interpretant is the final as an institutional event anchored to a city and a brand, in which the clubs are equal participants and no individual appears. This institutional weighting is comparable to Sørensen’s (2024) finding that football statues encode club identity and commemorative

status through symbolic and encyclopedic signs.

Table 2. Summary of Icon, Index, and Symbol Elements – Club Competition and Rivalry Posters

Sign Category	El Clásico	UEFA Champions League Final (Budapest 26)
Icon	Players from Barcelona and Real Madrid; trophies; stairs-and-dais arrangement as a diagram of status	Stylized trophy silhouette; stylized Budapest landmarks
Index	Tilted heads and light beam as vectors toward the trophy; names and numbers on the Madrid shirts designating players	Landmarks, city name, and year designating a specific venue and edition; river path directing the eye
Symbol	Club colors and crests; trophies; cathedral-like setting read as sacred or throne-like by convention	Competition wordmark; PSG and Arsenal badges; trophy as an institutional emblem; neon palette as the edition's brand identity
Interpretation	Frames the fixture as a ritual ascent toward a sacralized prize, with one side already near the summit	Frames the Final as an institutional event anchored to a city and a brand, with the clubs as equal participants

The two club posters stage competition in markedly different ways. Picture 1 relies on human figures and a spatial hierarchy of possession and pursuit, whereas Picture 2 relies on the trophy, the city, and the competition's brand, with the clubs reduced to equal badges and no individual shown. What they share is the use of institutional identifiers, such as crests and competition marks, as symbols of belonging and prestige.

International football posters communicate in a completely different manner than club posters. Rather than instigating competition between two parties with the same national or regional cultural affiliations, international posters must evoke national identity and connection to the world at the same time. International football posters are designed for audiences from different national backgrounds but who recognize the visual language of football throughout the globe. Here we find two sub-registers of international football communication – promotion of an international tournament and an international match.

International Football Posters



Picture 3
FIFA World Cup 26 promotional poster (event: 2026 FIFA World Cup; printed: "26"; accessed: 13 July 2026)

Icon: Players photographed in close-up and full body; football gameplay figures in national kits.

Index: Open mouths and tense expressions as symptoms of effort and emotion; the photographs as traces of real persons before a camera (weakened by compositing).

Symbol: FIFA World Cup 26 wordmark and numeral; national kit colors; the trophy.

Interpretation: Frames the World Cup as a shared global spectacle in which many nations appear at once and no single player dominates.



Picture 4
Matchday poster for the UEFA Nations League 2025 semi-final, Germany vs. Portugal (event: 4 June 2025; date printed on poster: 5 June; accessed: 13 July 2026)

Icon: Cut-out photographs of a German and a Portuguese player; national team kits.

Index: The contrast of calm and aggression (crossed arms and a slight smile versus a shout); the outstretched arm pointing at the opponent; the printed date, time, and venue, which designate a particular fixture; the broadcaster logo.

Symbol: National flags; UEFA Nations League logo; the "VS" sign; Vision+ logo.

Interpretation: Frames the match as a televised national duel in which the two sides are staged in different emotional registers.

Picture 3 is a photographic collage of close-up faces arranged in tiers over a pale cyan background, with blue and orange color wedges at the edges and a small FIFA World Cup 26 wordmark at the top. The faces in the upper two-thirds are tightly cropped and show open-mouthed shouting, set jaws, and focused stares; most look away from the camera, so the viewer observes the players and is not addressed by them. Scale decreases downward: close-ups give way to small full-body figures in national kits on a pitch, gathered around a small trophy at the bottom center. Following Kress and van Leeuwen's information value, the large faces occupy the 'ideal' upper zone and the playing figures the 'real' lower zone, and the tapering tiers produce a rising, crowd-like mass. The light is even and bright, with no dramatic shadow, which supports a festive, inclusive tone in contrast to Pictures 1 and 5.

The faces and bodies are icons by photographic likeness and, as photographs, indexes of real persons who stood before a camera, although the compositing weakens any claim that they share a single occasion. Open mouths and tense expressions are indexical symptoms of effort and emotion. The kit colors are symbols that distinguish national teams, and the FIFA wordmark, the '26' numeral, and the trophy are symbols of the institution and the edition. The interpretant is the World Cup as a shared global spectacle in which many nations appear at once and no single player dominates. This reading is

consistent with nation-branding research on the tournament, which shows that FIFA and host countries use World Cup visual and media systems to project a unified image of global football while still allowing individual nations to be read within that shared frame (Dubinsky, 2023).

Picture 4 is a template-style matchday graphic. Two studio-lit cut-out photographs are placed over a dark navy background with faint geometric facets; a white tab at the top holds the UEFA Nations League logo, with mosaic strips at the corners. Heavy slanted capitals spell 'MATCHDAY' and 'SEMI-FINALS'. The players are shown from the waist up at about eye level. The German player, on the left, stands with arms crossed and a slight smile; the Portuguese player, on the right, leans forward with mouth open in a shout and one arm extended toward the opponent. This contrast of calm and aggression creates a diagonal tension, and the Portuguese figure, larger and more dynamic, is the more salient. Beneath each player a diamond-shaped flag points toward a central 'VS', and the lower band gives '5 JUNE | 8PM', 'MUNICH FOOTBALL ARENA', and the Vision+ logo.

The photographs are icons and, as photographs, indexes of the real players. The outstretched arm and open mouth form a vector pointing at the opponent, and the printed date, time, and venue designate a specific fixture. The flags, the competition logo, the 'VS' sign, and the broadcaster logo are symbols; crossed arms and a shout also draw on conventional codes of composure and aggression. The fixture advertised is the UEFA Nations League 2025 semi-final played at the Allianz Arena in Munich on 4 June 2025, with kick-off at 21:00 CEST. The printed '5 June | 8PM' differs from that official kick-off, so we treat the printed date and time as the poster's own claim about the fixture and not as a record of when it was played; Table 1 therefore lists the event date and the printed date separately. The interpretant is a televised national duel in which the two sides are staged in different emotional registers and not with symmetrical hostility.

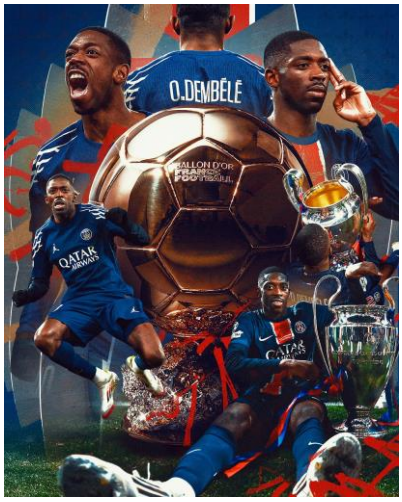
Table 3. Summary of Icon, Index, and Symbol Elements – International Football Posters

Sign Category	FIFA World Cup 26	Germany vs Portugal 2025
Icon	Players photographed in close-up and full body; football gameplay figures in national kits	Cut-out photographs of a German and a Portuguese player; national team kits
Index	Open mouths and tense expressions as symptoms of effort and emotion; photographs as traces of real persons (weakened by compositing)	Calm versus aggressive affect (crossed arms and smile versus shout); outstretched arm pointing at the opponent; printed date, time, and venue designating the fixture
Symbol	FIFA World Cup 26 wordmark and numeral; national kit colors; the trophy	National flags; UEFA Nations League logo; "VS" sign; Vision+ logo
Interpretation	Frames the World Cup as a shared global spectacle in which	Frames the match as a televised national duel, with the two sides

	many nations appear and no single player dominates	staged in different emotional registers

The way posters introducing individual players operate differs from club and international posters, since the latter utilize principles associated with promoting a specific idea: institutional confrontation or national identity. Such posters use sign elements that allow them to reflect the image of an individual player or footballer and demonstrate his cultural significance in terms of athletic excellence, personal success, reputation, and ideal heroism. With the help of both the posters in this category, the Dembélé Ballon d'Or poster and the Jude Bellingham Michelob Ultra Player of the Match poster, the main point is illustrated in two different subcategories of the concept of individual achievement: the international award and the award for a match.

Individual Player Representation Posters



Picture 5
Ballon d'Or poster, Ousmane Dembélé (event: 22 September 2025; no date printed; accessed: 14 July 2026)

Icon: Five photographic treatments of Ousmane Dembélé; the oversized golden ball; the Champions League trophy.

Index: The name on the shirt (O. DEMBÉLÉ), which designates the player; shouts and gestures as symptoms of emotion; the grass and the trophy ribbons in club colors, which point to a particular pitch and victory.

Symbol: The engraved award name (BALLON D'OR FRANCE FOOTBALL) and the golden ball as award signs; the PSG crest and kit colors; the Qatar Airways, Jordan, and Nike marks.

Interpretation: Frames the award as the culmination of a season of club success, in which individual honor and institutional belonging are fused.



Picture 6
Michelob Ultra Player of the Match poster, Jude Bellingham (match: 11 July 2026; no date printed; accessed: 14 July 2026)

Icon: Photograph of the player (identified as Jude Bellingham in [https://www.instagram.com/p/Dasq6LMifBl/?img_index=3&exln=N3BtYmw

5bmk0YWNx]); the Michelob Ultra trophy held in both hands; a gray England shirt with the three lion crest.

Index: The direct gaze as an act of address; the repeated logo wall as a trace of the controlled post-match media setting in which the image was made.

Symbol: England three lions crest; the kit manufacturer's mark; the FIFA World Cup 26 emblem; the Michelob Ultra wordmark; the 433 platform mark.

Interpretation: Frames recognition as personal but routinized, anchored in nation and tournament and mediated by sponsor branding.

Picture 5 is a composite whose dominant color is the deep navy of the club kit, overlaid with halftone texture and red brush strokes in a graffiti manner. Gold is not the field color: it is concentrated in one enormous central object, a polished, metallic Ballon d'Or whose specular highlights and engraved lettering ('BALLON D'OR FRANCE FOOTBALL') make it the most salient element. Around it the same footballer appears in five treatments: roaring at the upper left, seen from behind with his name on the shirt (O. DEMBÉLÉ) at the top, with a hand raised to his temple at the upper right, leaping at the left, and seated on the grass beside the Champions League trophy, its ribbons in club colors, at the lower right. A boot cropped in the foreground and grass along the bottom edge place the viewer close to the pitch. The poster refers to the 2025 Ballon d'Or cycle, awarded on 22 September 2025.

The player images are icons and photographic indexes of the person; the shirt name designates him, the grass and ribbons point to a specific pitch and victory, and the shouts and gestures are symptomatic indexes of emotion. The engraved award name, the trophy forms, the club crest, and the color gold act as symbols. Sponsor and brand marks (Qatar Airways, Jordan, Nike) also appear on the kits. The interpretant is therefore the award framed less as a detached individual canonization than as the culmination of a season of club success, which the Champions League trophy and club colors keep in view. Individual honor and institutional belonging are fused, so this poster cannot be described as 'self-contained' in contrast to Picture 6.

Picture 6 is a frontal medium close-up at eye level with even, high-key lighting that leaves almost no shadow. The player (identified as Jude Bellingham is centered and looks directly into the camera with a composed, neutral expression: in Kress and van Leeuwen's terms, a 'demand' image that addresses the viewer. He wears a gray long-sleeved England shirt with the three lions crest and holds a silver trophy with red and blue accents in both hands at the lower left, tilted slightly toward the lens as if presented to the viewer. The background is a flat, saturated royal-blue step-and-repeat wall with repeated FIFA World Cup 26 emblems and Michelob Ultra wordmarks, cropped at the edges, and a small '433' mark at the top left. There is no depth, no texture other than the printed repetition, and no staged drama.

The photograph is an icon and an index of the player's presence before the camera; the direct gaze is an indexical act of address, and the repeated logo wall indexes the controlled post-match media setting in which the image was made. The three lions crest, the kit manufacturer's mark, the FIFA World Cup 26 emblem, the sponsor wordmark, and the platform mark are symbols of nation, brand, tournament, sponsor, and distributor respectively. The interpretant is

recognition that is personal but routinized, anchored in nation and tournament and mediated by sponsor branding. This layering of institutional and sponsor marks echoes Bishop's (2001) semiotic analysis of professional sports logos and is consistent with athlete-branding research showing that consumers' evaluations of an athlete's brand depend on their ability to decode the visual marks attached to it (Pedersen et al., 2024).

Table 4. Summary of Icon, Index, and Symbol Elements – Individual Player Representation Posters

Sign Category	Ballon d'Or Dembélé 2025	Michelob Ultra Player of the Match (Bellingham) 2026
Icon	Five photographic treatments of Dembélé; oversized golden ball; Champions League trophy	Photograph of the player; the Michelob Ultra trophy; gray England shirt
Index	Name on the shirt designating the player; shouts and gestures as symptoms of emotion; trophy ribbons and grass pointing to a particular victory	Direct gaze as an act of address; repeated logo wall as a trace of the post-match media setting
Symbol	Engraved award name and golden ball; PSG crest and kit colors; Qatar Airways, Jordan, and Nike marks	England three lions crest; kit manufacturer's mark; FIFA World Cup 26 emblem; Michelob Ultra wordmark; 433 mark
Interpretation	Frames the award as the culmination of a club season, fusing individual honor and institutional belonging	Frames recognition as personal but routinized, anchored in nation and tournament and mediated by sponsorship

Taken as a whole, the analysis of both player posters shows that individual-player representation does not form a single, uniform semiotic category. Both posters focus on the human figure and carry signs associated with achievement, and both are institutionally anchored. They differ in how achievement is framed: Picture 5 presents the Ballon d'Or as the culmination of a season of club success, in which the Champions League trophy, the club colors, and the kit sponsors stay in view, whereas Picture 6 presents a match award framed by nation, tournament, and sponsor branding. Within this limited set of posters, the contrast is therefore not between individual and institution but between an award framed as the culmination of a club season and an award framed by nation, tournament, and sponsorship.

The comparative investigation of the six posters, now uniformly distributed between the three groups, suggests, for this corpus, a recurring way in which the six posters combine sign types and, at the same time, highlights distinctions in meaning-making within it. As far as sign types are concerned, all six posters include signs in all three forms: icons, indexes, and symbols, which means that Peirce's triadic typology proved sufficient to describe the six posters analyzed. The constant presence of all three signs illustrates the complexity of communication in football posters, as they should provide instant visual identification (with the help of icons),

meaning and context (by means of indexes), and use interpretable cultural codes (in symbols).

Nevertheless, the particular elements that perform every sign function and the meanings created by these signs differ significantly between the categories. In this corpus, the leading icons in five of the six posters are human figures, especially players, whereas Picture 2 relies on a stylized trophy and city landmarks and shows no individual at all; football poster communication in this corpus is thus mostly, but not always, human-focused. Nevertheless, the functions of these famous individuals differ. For example, in Picture 1 they can be viewed as representative images of conflict; in international posters, they embody nations; and in individual player posters, they illustrate the cultural ideal of valor or excellence. Nonetheless, even within posters of one player, the degree of relation between the notion of the ideal and the concept of national and commercial affiliations is different because of the nuances of the notion under consideration. Thus, the actual differentiation of the same category of symbols in different contexts indicates that iconicity in these posters is not a culturally neutral phenomenon.

Indexical signs display a consistent structural presence across all posters while exhibiting contextual variation in their particular components and interpretations. In posters for club rivalries, indicators of competitive tension, psychological stress, and institutional dominance are highlighted. In global posters, indicators of national pride, competitive preparedness, and mediated viewing are essential. In the individual player posters, indicators of personal success and extraordinary quality prevail, although their emotional tone varies: the Ballon d'Or poster signifies exuberant, joyous fulfillment, whereas the Bellingham poster signifies a more measured, subtle type of achievement. Light and color function as expressive resources in all six posters, but by different means: staged chiaroscuro (Picture 1), graphic gradation (Picture 2), even bright light (Pictures 3 and 6), studio-lit cut-outs (Picture 4), and a navy-and-gold composite (Picture 5). They are better read as stylistic resources that support the interpretants than as indexes in themselves.

Symbolic indicators exhibit the highest level of differentiation within categories. Club posters depend on organizational symbols, team colors, emblems, and tournament logos that require a particular understanding of football's institutional culture for interpretation. Global posters depend on national emblems, flags, and color schemes that reflect a deeper cultural understanding of national identity. The individual player posters utilize the Ballon d'Or object and award name, together with club kit colors and the Champions League trophy, in one, and national, tournament, and sponsor logos in the other, reflecting conventions of excellence acknowledgment in sports culture, while varying in their institutional ties to those conventions. This distinction aligns with Peirce's conceptualization of symbols as culturally diverse: their significance relies on conventions and is thus context-dependent in a manner that iconic and indexical meanings are not.

At the cultural significance level, the comparative examination uncovers three interpretive tendencies in this corpus. Club posters create a narrative of institutional competition, status, and shared identity principles linked to the club as a cultural entity and social group. International posters create a narrative of

national identity, global affiliation, and mediated spectator values linked to the nation-state as both a political and cultural entity, as well as with media consumption as a means of social engagement. The analyzed individual player posters create a narrative of personal success and symbolic distinction linked to individualistic ideas of excellence and acknowledgment. However, as mentioned earlier, the two posters frame this narrative differently: as the culmination of a club season (Picture 5) and as a match award framed by nation, tournament, and sponsors (Picture 6), and a broader sample is required to determine the extent of this internal variation. These three tendencies are offered as hypotheses grounded in the analyzed material, not as category-level patterns.

The results presented above are consistent with, and further develop, existing semiotic research into poster studies. They support (Nirmalawati, 2008) the idea that icons, indexes, and symbols may systematically create cultural and atmospheric sense within poster communication. They also support (Mukhtar et al., 2020) the statement about the contribution of visual symbols to the formation of cultural identity in the poster communication. At the same time, they widen the scope of research, showing how various forms of identity may be constructed in one particular genre of communication. Besides, they expand (Panggabean et al., 2025) the research into politics-related discourses of identity and ideology into the area of sports media. It means that the discourses of identity and prestige construction are no less complicated in the field of sports communication than in politics. Relative to Sørensen's (2024) single-genre semiotic treatment of football statues, the present comparative design across club, international, and individual-player posters offers a complementary contribution: rather than describing how one type of football object encodes institutional meaning, it shows how the same three sign categories are redistributed across communicative registers within a single medium, which is the specific gap this study set out to address.

Conclusion

This study examined icons, indexes, and symbols in six football posters, two each from club competition, international football, and individual-player representation, using Peirce's triadic framework. The findings are interpretations of these six posters only and are not claims about football posters in general. All three sign types could be identified in every poster, but the elements carrying them differed. Icons were built around recognizable players and match-related objects in the five photographic posters and around a stylized trophy and city landmarks in the illustrated one; indexes arose from gaze, gesture, printed names, dates and venues, and spatial direction; and symbols drew on crests, flags, color codes, and award and sponsor branding.

Three interpretive tendencies were observed in this corpus: institutional competition and prestige in the two club posters, national identity and mediated viewing in the two international posters, and personal achievement in the two individual-player posters, where the two posters diverged markedly in how achievement was framed. Two posters per category cannot establish category-level patterns, so these tendencies are offered as hypotheses grounded in the analyzed material. Posters that are fan-made, regional, or concerned with women's football, and those produced in

other periods, may organize signs differently.

The study illustrates, in six posters, how identical sign categories can take different contextual meanings, and it shows the usefulness of a small comparative corpus coded with explicit decision rules. These contributions are limited in five ways. First, the corpus is small and purposively selected, and all six posters concern elite men's football. Second, the posters differ in provenance (official or designer-made) and in modality (photograph, composite, illustration), which affects how signs can be classified. Third, coding relied on interpretive consensus among the authors and no formal intercoder reliability was calculated. Fourth, the study contains no audience data, so the interpretants reported are the authors' constructions, not observed readings. Fifth, the digital copies analyzed vary in resolution and cropping.

Future research should analyze larger and more varied corpora, including fan-made, regional, and women's football posters from different periods; test the interpretants proposed here through audience reception studies such as interviews, surveys, or eye-tracking; report formal intercoder agreement; and adopt a longitudinal design to trace how football poster semiotics change over time.

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