

THE EMPATHIZE APPROACH IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN: A CASE STUDY OF THE POZNAN COMPANY × REAL MADRID COMMUNITY APPAREL CAMPAIGN

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Abstrak. The visual identity of football fan communities constitutes a system of collective symbols and expressions that has grown organically within fandom culture. In the field of visual communication design (VCD), the translation of community identity into visual elements remains relatively underexplored—particularly through the empathize approach within the design thinking framework. This study aims to describe how the empathize stage was applied in the visual campaign design process of Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid, and to examine the relationships among community observation, visual decision-making, and audience response within a fandom-based campaign. The study adopts a descriptive-qualitative approach through a single case study method. Data were gathered via digital observation of the Seputar Real Madrid community, documentation of the campaign's visual assets, and engagement and sales data as supporting indicators of audience response. Findings show that the empathize stage produced several dominant visual identity elements in the campaign: the Cibeles Monument and UEFA Champions League trophy as symbolic anchors, the Spanish-language slogan "SOMOS LOS REYES DE EUROPA," and a black-gold-white color palette. These elements served as the foundation for a campaign visual system grounded in the identity and collective expression of the Real Madrid fandom. Engagement and sales data reflect shifts in audience response over the course of the campaign, including a cumulative reach of 288,000 impressions and rising conversion rates across Batch 1 and Batch 2. In this study, these figures are treated as descriptive indicators for reading a audience engagement rather than as a basis for causal inference. The study contributes to community-based VCD scholarship by documenting the application of the empathize approach in a fandom-centered visual design process.

Keywords: Visual Communication Design; Empathize; Visual Identity; Football Fandom; Apparel

I. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Football fans construct their community identity through the symbols, colors, and narratives associated with the clubs they support. In this context, merchandise is understood not merely as a consumer product but also as a marker of affiliation and an expression of community membership [1]. Visual communication design (VCD) plays a role in translating that identity into visual forms that community members can recognize, own, and share. A number of studies have shown that sport merchandise consumption is closely tied to the degree of fans' identification with their clubs, such that the symbolic value of a product tends to outweigh its utilitarian function [2], [3].

The growth of digital football communities in Indonesia on the X (Twitter) platform has helped shape an interactive space that reinforces the exchange of symbols and fandom identity. This has opened up room for the emergence of community-based apparel brands that draw on cultural closeness with their audience. Unlike mainstream apparel brands, fandom-based brands operate within a system of meaning that has developed organically inside the community, one that includes the use of club-specific slogans, victory symbols, and particular

cultural icons [4]. Literature on brand communities in social media further suggests that community attachment contributes to the formation of trust and audience connection with a brand [5], [6].

In VCD practice, translating community identity into visual elements requires a genuine understanding of the audience's experiences, preferences, and emotions. The empathize approach within the design thinking framework positions this understanding of users as the foundation of the design process. Even so, studies that specifically address the application of empathize in the context of football fandom-based visual design in Indonesia remain relatively scarce. Prior research has largely focused on the relationship between visual elements and digital consumer behavior [7], [8], [9], [10], as well as the role of user-generated content (UGC) in building community trust [11], [12] but few have described in concrete terms how community observation findings are translated into visual decisions within a VCD process.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on how the empathize approach was operationalized in the visual campaign design of Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid. The inquiry is directed at the relationship among fandom identity observation, visual element translation, and the reading of audience response within the context of a community-based campaign.

Problem of the Study

Football fandom has increasingly become a digitally mediated cultural phenomenon in which identity, emotion, and collective belonging are expressed through visual symbols, language, and shared narratives. In this context, community-based merchandise no longer functions merely as a commercial product, but also as a symbolic medium through which fans articulate affiliation, pride, and membership within a particular fan culture [1]–[4]. The rapid growth of football communities on social media has further intensified the circulation of fandom symbols and opened new opportunities for apparel brands to develop visual campaigns that are closely connected to community identity [5], [6]. However, the transformation of community-based fandom identity into concrete visual communication design remains a complex process, because designers must understand not only aesthetic preferences but also the emotional meanings embedded in the community's symbols, slogans, and visual practices.

Within visual communication design, the challenge lies in how designers identify, interpret, and translate the lived experiences of a community into a coherent visual system. Although visual storytelling, brand imagery, color, typography, and user-generated content have been widely discussed in relation to digital engagement and consumer response [7]–[12], less attention has been given to the way the empathize stage in design thinking operates as a methodological foundation for visual decision-making in fandom-based apparel campaigns. This issue is particularly relevant in the context of Indonesian football fandom communities, where visual symbols are often shaped organically through digital interaction and collective cultural memory. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study concerns how the empathize-based visual communication design process can be operationalized to transform Real Madrid fandom identity into campaign visual elements, and how audience response can be read as an indicator of visual resonance within the Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid collaboration campaign.

Research's State of the Art

Recent scholarship in visual communication design emphasizes that visual elements such as color, typography, composition, illustration, and photography are not merely decorative components, but communicative devices that shape meaning, perception, and emotional response [13], [14]. In digital communication contexts, visual design functions as a representational system through which brands and communities construct identity. Lim and Childs [9] show that branded visual narratives on Instagram can generate emotional closeness through mediated visual experience, while Ware [14] explains that principles of visual perception, including hierarchy, contrast, proximity, and attention guidance, are central to how audiences interpret visual messages. Studies on color and typography also demonstrate that these visual elements contribute significantly to the construction of brand personality and consumer perception, particularly within fashion and apparel contexts [15], [16].

In parallel, design thinking has been widely recognized as a human-centered framework for addressing complex design problems. Brown [17] conceptualizes design thinking as an approach that integrates empathy, creativity, and rationality in problem-solving. Within this framework, the empathize stage is positioned as the

starting point of the design process because it enables designers to understand users' needs, experiences, motivations, and contexts before generating design solutions [18]. More recent studies further argue that empathy is essential in needfinding because users' expectations and emotional responses are not always explicitly expressed, particularly in complex or socially embedded design problems [19]. Ambrose and Harris [20] similarly emphasize that the effectiveness of visual communication depends on the designer's ability to build meaningful connections between visual form and audience experience.

The state of the art also shows growing attention to the relationship between digital communities, brand trust, and user-generated content. Social media-based brand communities have been found to contribute to trust formation, brand attachment, and consumer response [5], [6]. Furthermore, user-generated content has been shown to influence consumer attitudes, online trust, and purchase intention by strengthening the credibility of digital communication within community-based environments [11], [12]. In the context of football fandom, symbolic participation plays an important role in shaping supporter identity, as fans construct belonging through shared rituals, club-related symbols, and cultural signs [4]. These studies collectively indicate that visual communication design, design thinking, brand community theory, and fandom studies provide a relevant conceptual foundation for examining community-based visual campaigns. However, existing scholarship has not yet sufficiently integrated these perspectives to explain how community observation in the empathize stage is translated into visual decisions within a fandom-based apparel campaign.

Gap Study and Objective

Despite the growing body of research on visual storytelling, brand communities, design thinking, and fandom identity, several gaps remain. First, prior studies have largely examined visual design in relation to consumer response or digital engagement, but have not sufficiently explained the internal design process through which community-based symbols are selected, interpreted, and transformed into visual campaign assets [7]–[10], [13]–[16]. Second, although the empathize stage is widely acknowledged as a critical component of design thinking, empirical documentation of how this stage is operationalized in visual communication design practice remains limited, especially in relation to football fandom and community-based apparel design [17]–[20]. Third, existing studies on fandom identity have emphasized symbolic participation and collective belonging, but have rarely connected these concepts to concrete visual design decisions, such as the selection of icons, language, typography, color palette, product mockups, and collectible visual elements [1], [4].

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid collaboration campaign as a single case study of fandom-based visual communication design. The objective of this study is to describe how the empathize approach was applied in the campaign design process, to analyze how Real Madrid fandom identity and emotion were translated into visual elements, and to interpret audience response through engagement, user-generated content, and sales conversion data as descriptive indicators of visual resonance. By doing so, this study contributes to community-based visual communication design scholarship by demonstrating how the empathize stage can function as a methodological bridge between digital community observation and visual decision-making. Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive-qualitative case study approach, which is appropriate for examining a contextual and process-oriented design phenomenon within its real-life setting [21].

II. METHOD

Type and Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a single case study design. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to describe, interpret, and understand the visual communication design process rather than to test causal relationships between variables. The main focus of the inquiry was the way the empathize stage in design thinking was operationalized in the Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid visual campaign and how community identity was translated into visual elements. Qualitative research is particularly relevant for examining contextual phenomena, social meanings, and process-based practices that require interpretive analysis rather than numerical measurement [22]. In this study, the campaign was treated as a

bounded case because it involved a specific collaboration, a specific fandom community, a particular campaign period, and a defined set of visual assets.

The case study design was selected because the phenomenon under investigation was closely tied to its real-life context. The Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid campaign could not be separated from the digital interaction patterns of the Real Madrid fan community, the visual symbols circulating within that community, and the campaign strategy developed by the apparel brand. Therefore, the case study design allowed the researcher to examine the relationship between community observation, design decision-making, visual asset production, and audience response in an integrated manner. This is consistent with Yin's view that case study research is suitable for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-world settings, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly separable [21].

Data and Data Sources

The data in this study consisted of qualitative and supporting descriptive data. The qualitative data were drawn from digital community observation, visual documentation, and campaign-related archival materials. Digital observation focused on the Seputar Real Madrid community on X (Twitter), particularly on recurring visual symbols, frequently used slogans, interaction patterns, and forms of expression that reflected Madridista identity. Visual documentation included the campaign assets produced by Poznan Company, such as teaser content, product release mockups, poster designs, sticker pack designs, random photocard designs, and user-generated content uploaded by buyers during the campaign period. These visual materials were used to examine how fandom identity was transformed into a coherent visual communication system.

Supporting descriptive data were obtained from Poznan Company's internal campaign archive and the insight data of the Seputar Real Madrid account. These data included reach, likes, interactions, link clicks, pre-order records, units sold, and conversion rates across different campaign phases. In this study, such data were not used for inferential statistical analysis. Instead, they were treated as contextual indicators for reading audience response to the visual campaign. Secondary data were obtained from relevant literature on visual communication design, design thinking, fandom identity, brand communities, user-generated content, and qualitative case study methodology. These sources provided the conceptual and methodological foundation for interpreting the relationship among community identity, visual design decisions, and audience engagement.

Table 1. Profile of the Collaboration Partner: Seputar Real Madrid

Component	Description
Account Name	Seputar Real Madrid
Platform	X (Twitter)
Followers	±170.000 followers
Community Character	Active, interactive, high engagement
Collaboration History	First-ever merchandise collaboration
Revenue Model	Profit-sharing per unit sold
Role in Campaign	Publishing campaign content and reposting buyer UGC

Source: Poznan Company internal records, 2023.

The study's conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1. The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between components within the visual campaign system under study. VCD visual perception principles serve as the foundation for constructing the campaign assets, which are then read through the stages of audience response described by the AIDA model. At the subsequent stage, the emergence of UGC is understood as part of community interaction that relates to the circulation and reinforcement of audience response to the visual campaign.

Engagement and sales conversion data are used as descriptive indicators to read audience response at each stage of the campaign. Within this study, the increase in conversion rate from 10.05% to 19.33% is interpreted as an

indication of a relationship between the campaign's visual strategy, community engagement, and the emergence of UGC during the campaign period studied. Accordingly, visual resonance in this study is understood as the emotional engagement of audiences with visual elements connected to fandom identity.



Figure 1. Conceptual framework: integration of Gestalt-based VCD–AIDA–UGC in the Poznan Company x Community Real Madrid campaign.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection was conducted through non-intrusive digital observation, visual documentation, and archival study. Digital observation was carried out by examining the interaction patterns of the Seputar Real Madrid community on X (Twitter) before and during the campaign period. The observation focused on visual symbols associated with Real Madrid fandom, including the Cibeles Monument, the UEFA Champions League trophy, Spanish-language slogans, color associations, and other recurring cultural signs shared by community members. This technique allowed the researcher to identify symbolic elements that were meaningful to the community and relevant to the empathize stage of the design process.

Visual documentation was conducted by collecting and organizing campaign assets produced during the Poznan Company x Seputar Real Madrid collaboration. These assets included teaser visuals, product mockups, promotional posters, freebies designs, and buyer-generated content. Archival study was also used to obtain engagement and sales data from the campaign records. The use of multiple data collection techniques was intended to strengthen the credibility of the research findings. In qualitative case study research, the combination of observation, documentation, and archival sources enables researchers to build a richer understanding of the case and to examine the phenomenon from different angles [21], [23].

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in three stages. The first involved an analysis of the empathize process, tracing the findings from community observation and connecting them to the visual decisions that emerged during the campaign design process. The second involved an analysis of visual elements across the campaign assets, attending to aspects of color, typography, composition, and imagery, as well as their relationship to Real Madrid fandom identity.

The third stage involved a reading of audience response using engagement, interaction, and sales data as descriptive indicators for understanding audience involvement with the visual campaign. These data were not treated as dependent variables in statistical testing; rather, they function as supporting evidence for reading community response within the case studied.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, cross-referencing community observation findings, visual campaign documentation, engagement data, and sales data so that each source could mutually corroborate the others throughout the analysis process.

Table 2. Data Triangulation Matrix

Research Question	Visual Data	Engagement Data	Sales Data
RQ1. How was the empathize process operationalized?	Digital community observation notes and campaign design assets were used to describe the empathize process in concrete terms.	Engagement patterns on teaser and mockup content were used to confirm audience involvement with community symbols.	Not used as a primary source; serves only as contextual support.
RQ2. How were identity and emotion translated into visual elements?	Visual element analysis (Cibeles icon, UCL trophy, Spanish typography, color palette) was used as the basis for interpreting fandom identity.	Reach and interaction per content category were used to confirm visual resonance with the community.	Not used as a primary source; provides additional context for audience response.
RQ3. How can visual resonance be read from audience response?	UGC assets and community repost documentation were used to interpret resonance and community trust.	Cumulative reach, likes, and interactions were used as indicators of audience engagement with the campaign.	Sales conversion data were used as a supporting indicator, not as direct causal evidence.

III. RESULTS

A. Empathize Findings: Community Observation

Digital observation of the Seputar Real Madrid community over approximately two months revealed several recurring visual patterns and forms of community expression that subsequently served as the foundation for the campaign design process. First, European victory symbols (particularly the Cibeles Monument and the UEFA Champions League (UCL) trophy) appeared consistently in content that generated relatively high levels of engagement. This suggests that these symbols carry a strong connection to the collective memory and identity of the Madridista community.

Second, the use of Spanish in community slogans, most notably "SOMOS LOS REYES DE EUROPA," emerged as an identity marker that recurred frequently in community conversations and posts. In the design process, this slogan was subsequently positioned as the primary verbal element in the campaign's visual design, as it was seen to represent the community's pride in Real Madrid's history of European triumph. Third, the black-gold-white palette tended to be associated by the community with a sense of exclusivity and elegance. Fourth, collectible elements such as freebies distributed through a random system showed a connection to community enthusiasm and encouraged organic interaction among members.

The observation also identified three dominant emotional tendencies within the community: pride in Madridista identity, nostalgia for the championship celebration moments at Cibeles, and a sense of exclusivity tied to belonging to a fandom with a distinguished history of success. These three dimensions then formed the basis for the visual decisions made in the subsequent stages of the design process.

B. Define and Ideate: Formulating the Visual Concept

The findings from the empathize stage were used as the basis for the define stage, in which the visual requirements of the campaign were formulated. This process produced several key considerations: the use of symbols readily recognizable to the community, the reinforcement of a visual tone associated with the club's

prestige, and a connection to the narrative of Real Madrid's success in European competition. Drawing on these considerations, the campaign's visual concept was developed around the theme "Los Reyes de Europa".

In the ideate stage, visual exploration was conducted across three main areas. First, the iconic combination of the Cibeles Monument and the UCL trophy was selected as the primary visual anchor, as both elements appeared most frequently in community representations of victory within the Madridista fandom. Second, a classically styled typography with an editorial character was chosen to maintain alignment with the community's visual identity and language, in preference to a modern sans-serif alternative that was considered less suited to the visual character being established. Third, the black–gold–white palette was retained on the basis of its association with the sense of exclusivity that had been identified during the community observation stage.

Taken together, these three visual decisions illustrate that the design process was driven not solely by aesthetic considerations, but by a reading of the symbols and visual preferences that had developed organically within the fandom community.

C. Visual Asset Production: Prototype Stage

Visual asset production was carried out in stages through the Seputar Real Madrid community account. The campaign assets were organized into several content categories: teaser, product release, freebies, and user-generated content (UGC). Insight data for each content category in Batch 1 are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Content Insight Data: Visual Campaign Batch 1

Content Type	Reach	Likes	Interactions
Coming Soon (Teaser)	38.000	608	670
Product Release (Mockup)	159.000	402	523
Sticker Pack Freebies	61.000	122	144
Random Photocard Freebies	30.000	225	277

Source: Poznan Company internal archive, 2023.



(a) 'Coming Soon' teaser content — Cibeles Monument and UCL trophy as community awareness trigger



(b) : Product release content — jersey mockup and 'Los Reyes de Europa' poster (Poznan Company x Seputar Real Madrid)



(c) : 'Los Reyes de Europa' jersey product mockup — front, back, and graphic detail views



(d) Random photocard freebies design — 20+ Real Madrid player variants in monochrome aesthetic system



(e) Sticker pack design — Real Madrid cultural icons assembled as a community collectible set



(f) Buyer User-Generated Content (UGC) — unboxing photos and worn product shots circulating organically within the community

Figure 2. Visual asset composition: teaser, product release, freebies (sticker pack & photocard), and UGC. *Source: Poznan Company visual archive, 2023.*

Figure 2 presents the visual asset categories used in the Poznan Company campaign in collaboration with the Seputar Real Madrid fanpage. The "Coming Soon" teaser content used the Cibeles Monument as its primary visual element to build initial community awareness ahead of the campaign launch, reaching 38,000 impressions at the early stage of distribution.

The product release content featured a product mockup with "Somos Los Reyes de Europa" as the campaign's primary verbal element. This category recorded a reach of 159,000 impressions and 1,512 link clicks, reflecting a higher level of audience attention compared to the preceding teaser content. The sticker pack and random photocard, meanwhile, were included as freebies elements connected to the collectibility aspect of fandom culture.

In the subsequent stage, UGC emerged as buyers received their orders and began sharing content organically within the community. In the context of this campaign, UGC is understood as a form of community participation that extended the organic reach of the campaign's visual content. The emergence of UGC also coincided with an increase in purchase response during Batch 2, which reached 297 units. This increase, however, is not attributed solely to the visual design; rather, it is read as part of the interplay between visual strategy, community participation, and content circulation within the campaign studied.

D. Sales Data as a Supporting Indicator of Audience Response

Sales data are used in this study as descriptive indicators for reading audience response to the visual campaign carried out by Poznan Company. They are not positioned as the basis for testing causal relationships; rather, they serve as a contextual point of comparison between the sales method used prior to the collaboration and that employed during the campaign period. Table 4 presents the conventional sales data from before the collaboration, recorded in May 2023.

Table 4. Conventional Sales Data (Pre-Collaboration, May 2023)

Component	Data
Production Cost	IDR 1.920.000
Stock Produced	24 units
Units Sold	15 units
Remaining Stock	9 units
Paid Promotion Cost	IDR 100.000
Paid Promotion Reach	58.000
Link Clicks	315

Source: Poznan Company internal archive, 2023.

Table 5 presents a comparison of sales indicators across the three campaign conditions run by Poznan Company: the conventional method, Batch 1 using a visual campaign approach, and Batch 2 accompanied by the organic circulation of community UGC.

Table 5. Comparative Sales Indicators Across Three Methods

Method	Link Clicks	Units Sold	Conversion Rate	Production Cost
Conventional (May 2023)	315	15 units	±4,7%	IDR 1,920,000
Batch 1 – Visual (Jul 2023)	1.512	152 units	10,05%	IDR 0
Batch 2 – Visual + UGC (Aug 2023)	1.562	297 units	19,33%	IDR 0

Source: Poznan Company internal archive, 2023.

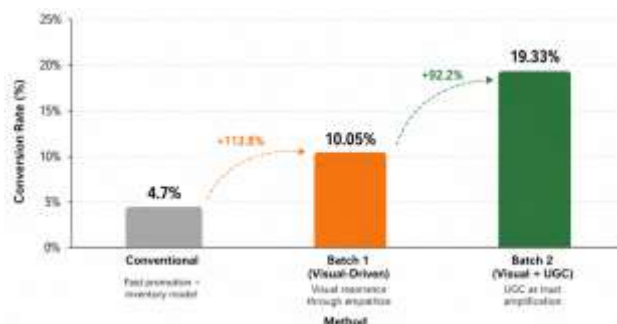


Figure 3. Comparative Conversion Rates Across Three Sales Approaches

Figure 3 visualizes the difference in conversion rates across the three sales conditions compared in this study. The conventional pre-collaboration method yielded a conversion rate of 4.7%. In Batch 1, the fandom identity-based visual campaign produced a conversion rate of 10.05%. Batch 2 then showed a conversion rate of 19.33%, recorded as the campaign ran alongside the organic circulation of UGC by the community.

These differences in conversion rates reflect shifts in audience response across each campaign condition. They are not, however, interpreted as the sole result of the visual elements employed. Within the context of this study, audience response is understood as the outcome of an interplay between visual strategy, community content circulation, and audience participation within the fandom-based campaign.

Discussions

Empathize as the Foundation of Visual Decision-Making

The findings from the empathize stage indicate that the Cibeles Monument, the UCL trophy, Spanish-language usage, and the black-gold-white palette all carry a strong connection to the visual identity of the Madridista community. These findings subsequently served as the basis for the visual decisions made throughout the campaign design process.

This process illustrates that the outcomes of community observation did not remain at the level of identifying visual preferences but were carried forward and translated into design elements applied consistently across the campaign assets. This is consistent with Hanington and Martin [18], who position empathize as a process of understanding the audience's experiences and characteristics in order to support more purposeful design decisions.

In the context of football fandom, the use of community symbols and language is also bound up with practices of collective identity. Crawford [1] argues that merchandise within fandom culture functions not merely as a consumer product but as a medium through which community identity is expressed. In this study, that connection is evident in the use of victory symbols and community slogans as the primary elements of the *campaign's visual system*.

Translating Identity and Emotion into Visual Elements

Table 6 summarizes the relationship between the findings from the empathize stage and their translation into the campaign's visual elements.

Table 6. Visual Elements and Their Functions in Fandom Identity within the Campaign's Design System

Visual Element	Design Form	Communication Function	Connection to Fandom Identity
Symbolic Icon	Cibeles Monument holding the UCL trophy	Triggers immediate recognition and pride	Symbol of European championship celebration
Typography	"SOMOS LOS REYES DE EUROPA"	Reinforces Madridista cultural authenticity	Spanish language = fandom identity
Color Palette	Black-gold-white	Associates the product with exclusivity	Club prestige and elegance
Visual Freebies	Sticker pack + random photocard	Builds collectible value and anticipation	Collecting as a fandom practice
Realistic Mockup	Photorealistic product imagery	Elevates perceived product quality	Visual evidence as a trust medium

Source: Authors' analysis based on campaign data and VCD framework.

The pattern in Table 6 shows that each visual element performs a function that is interconnected with the others in constructing a representation of fandom identity. The use of the Cibeles icon and the UCL trophy is tied to the collective memory of Real Madrid's victories, while the slogan "SOMOS LOS REYES DE EUROPA" was employed to reinforce a sense of closeness with Madridista cultural identity.

The black–gold–white palette is associated with the cultivation of a sense of prestige and exclusivity, while the sticker pack and random photocard extend the visual experience into a form of collectibility that resonates with fandom practices. The photorealistic product mockup, in turn, helps present a more concrete visual representation of the product to the audience.

The combination of these elements suggests that fandom identity was translated through a mutually reinforcing visual system rather than through any single element in isolation. This finding is consistent with Giulianotti [4], who argues that fandom identity is formed through symbolic participation and the shared use of cultural signs recognized collectively by the fan community.

Audience Response as an Indication of Visual Resonance

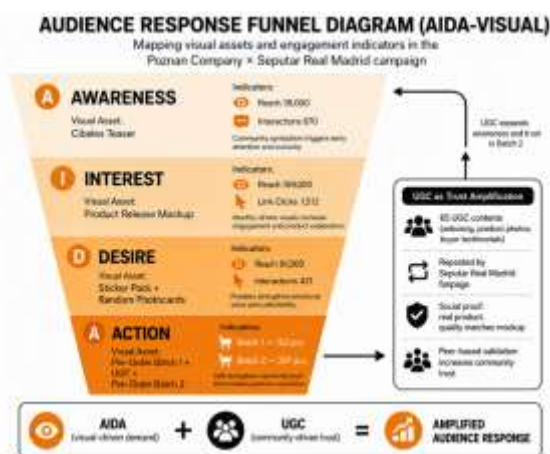


Figure 4. Audience Response Funnel Based on the AIDA Framework.

Figure 4 illustrates the stages of audience response in the Poznan Company visual campaign as read through the AIDA framework. At the awareness stage, the teaser content featuring the Cibeles Monument reached 38,000 impressions and generated 670 interactions. The interest stage is reflected in the "Los Reyes de Europa" product release content, which achieved a reach of 159,000 and 1,512 link clicks. At the desire stage, the announcement of the sticker pack and random photocard freebies recorded a cumulative reach of 91,000. The action stage is indicated by purchase conversions of 152 units in Batch 1 (10.05%) and 297 units in Batch 2 (19.33%).

Within the diagram, UGC is positioned as part of the reinforcement of community interaction at the later stages of the campaign. The resharing of content by buyers and the community fanpage demonstrates that the campaign did not unfold solely through official brand posts, but also through community members organically distributing their own visual experiences.

The data in Table 3 show that the product release content generated the highest reach of all content categories. This indicates that the use of symbols and visual elements closely tied to fandom identity is associated with the level of audience attention the campaign received. At the same time, the teaser content—which had not yet revealed the product—still produced community interactions, suggesting that visual symbols such as the Cibeles Monument already carried particular meaning for the Madridista audience. This is consistent with Ware's [14] account of how visual perception patterns can be used to draw audience attention toward a visual message.

The data in Table 5, meanwhile, show differences in purchase response across the conventional method, Batch 1, and Batch 2. The increase in orders from 15 units to 152 units in Batch 1 and subsequently to 297 units in Batch 2 reflects a shift in audience response over the course of the campaign. This increase is not, however, attributed directly to the visual design alone. In the context of this study, audience response is understood as connected to a combination of visual strategy, community content distribution, and UGC participation in broadening audience trust and engagement. This finding is consistent with Khoa [11] and Demba et al. [12] on the role of UGC in building trust within digital communities.

Novelty and contribution

The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on the operationalization of the empathize stage in a football fandom-based visual communication design campaign. While previous studies have discussed the relationship between fandom, symbolic identity, merchandise consumption, digital communities, visual storytelling, and user-generated content [1], [4], [5], [9], [11], [12], this study provides a more process-oriented explanation of how community observation was translated into concrete visual decisions. In this sense, the study does not merely analyze the final visual output of the Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid campaign, but also traces the relationship between digital community observation, visual concept development, asset production, and audience response.

This study contributes theoretically to visual communication design scholarship by positioning the empathize stage as a methodological bridge between fandom identity and visual decision-making. The findings indicate that fandom identity is not only represented through general club-related symbols, but through a carefully interpreted system of community-specific visual signs, including the Cibeles Monument, the UEFA Champions League trophy, Spanish-language slogans, collectible elements, and the black–gold–white color palette. These elements were not selected solely for aesthetic reasons; rather, they emerged from the reading of community expressions, collective memory, and emotional attachment within the Madridista fandom. This finding extends the discussion of visual perception and community identity by showing that visual design in fandom-based campaigns operates as a symbolic system that connects recognition, emotion, and belonging [4], [14].

Methodologically, the contribution of this study lies in its integration of digital observation, visual asset analysis, engagement data, sales data, and user-generated content as descriptive evidence for reading audience response. The study shows that audience engagement can be interpreted not only through quantitative indicators such as reach, interactions, link clicks, and conversion rates, but also through the circulation of visual content generated by the community. In this regard, user-generated content becomes an important indicator of visual resonance because it reflects voluntary audience participation and the community's willingness to reproduce and circulate the campaign's visual identity [11], [12]. Thus, this study offers an empirical example of how community-based visual campaigns can be analyzed through the interaction between design process, symbolic identity, and digital participation.

Limitation and future study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted as a single case study focusing on the Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid collaboration campaign. As a result, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be generalized to all forms of fandom-based visual communication design. The characteristics of the Real Madrid fan community, the symbolic value of the campaign elements, and the role of the Seputar Real Madrid fanpage are particular to the case studied. Other fandom communities may have different symbolic systems, interaction patterns, and emotional attachments.

Second, the audience response data used in this study were treated as descriptive indicators rather than as evidence for causal inference. Reach, interactions, link clicks, units sold, and conversion rates were useful for reading shifts in audience response across the campaign period, but they cannot prove that the visual elements alone caused the increase in engagement or sales. Audience response may also have been influenced by other factors, including community trust, timing of the campaign, product appeal, fanpage credibility, peer influence, pricing, and the circulation of user-generated content.

Third, the digital observation was limited to the X (Twitter) platform and to the available campaign archive. This means that the study may not fully capture audience responses occurring on other platforms or in offline fan interactions. In addition, the study did not include direct interviews with community members or buyers. Therefore, the interpretation of audience emotion and visual resonance was based primarily on observed digital behavior, campaign documentation, engagement data, and sales records.

Future research may expand this study by examining similar visual communication design campaigns in other fandom contexts, such as K-pop fandom, esports communities, local football clubs, film fan communities, or other interest-based digital communities. Comparative case studies could be conducted to identify whether the empathize

approach operates similarly across different types of fandom. Future studies may also employ mixed-method designs by combining digital observation, visual analysis, interviews, surveys, and audience reception studies. Such approaches would provide a deeper understanding of how audiences interpret visual symbols and how emotional resonance contributes to engagement and purchase intention. Further research may also develop a more systematic framework for applying the empathize stage in community-based visual communication design, especially for digital campaigns that rely on symbolic identity, participatory culture, and user-generated content.

Implication and suggestions

The findings of this study have several implications for visual communication design practice, particularly in the development of community-based apparel campaigns. First, designers and apparel brands should treat the empathize stage not as a preliminary formality, but as a strategic foundation for visual decision-making. In the context of fandom-based design, understanding the audience requires more than identifying demographic characteristics or general consumer preferences. Designers need to observe how community members communicate, what symbols they repeatedly use, what forms of language they consider authentic, and what emotional narratives are attached to their collective identity. Such observation enables visual decisions to become more culturally grounded and emotionally relevant.

Second, the study suggests that fandom-based visual campaigns should be developed through a coherent visual system rather than through isolated design elements. The success of the Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid campaign was supported by the consistency between symbolic icons, slogans, color palette, product mockups, freebies, and user-generated content. Each element played a different communicative function, but together they formed a unified representation of Madridista identity. Therefore, visual communication designers are encouraged to construct campaign assets that mutually reinforce one another across different stages of audience response, from awareness and interest to desire and action.

Third, community fanpages and digital communities should be understood not only as promotional channels but also as active participants in the production and circulation of visual meaning. In this study, the Seputar Real Madrid community functioned as a symbolic environment where campaign visuals gained relevance, legitimacy, and distribution power. The emergence of user-generated content further shows that audience members can become co-distributors of campaign identity. For practitioners, this implies that collaboration with digital communities should be built on trust, cultural proximity, and shared symbolic understanding rather than merely on transactional promotion.

Based on these implications, several suggestions can be proposed. Designers should conduct systematic digital observation before developing visual concepts for community-based campaigns. Apparel brands should identify the most meaningful symbols, language patterns, emotional associations, and collectible practices within the target community. Campaign strategies should also provide space for user-generated content, because community participation can strengthen credibility and extend the circulation of campaign visuals. Finally, visual campaign evaluation should combine engagement indicators with qualitative interpretation, so that audience response is not reduced only to numerical metrics but is also understood as part of a broader symbolic and emotional interaction.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study describes the application of the empathize approach within the visual communication design process of the Poznan Company × Seputar Real Madrid collaboration campaign. The findings indicate that observation of the fandom community played a meaningful role in shaping the direction of the visual decisions made throughout the campaign. Digital observation of the Seputar Real Madrid community showed that the Cibeles Monument and UEFA Champions League trophy, the Spanish-language slogan "SOMOS LOS REYES DE EUROPA," and the black-gold-white palette all carry a strong connection to the visual identity of the Madridista community. These findings were then translated into the campaign's visual elements through the empathize, define, ideate, and prototype stages. The findings also show that the campaign's visual elements (spanning the teaser, product mockup,

freebies, and the circulation of UGC) functioned as a mutually reinforcing visual system in constructing a representation of fandom identity. In this respect, the campaign visuals served not only as a medium for product promotion but also as a medium for the community's symbolic expression. Engagement and sales data reflect shifts in audience response over the course of the campaign. A cumulative reach of 288,000, a conversion rate of 10.05% in Batch 1, and 19.33% in Batch 2 are used as descriptive indicators for reading audience engagement with the visual campaign. These figures are not, however, positioned as the sole outcome of the visual design, as the spread of UGC and community support were also associated with the audience response that emerged during the campaign. More broadly, this study contributes to community-based VCD scholarship by documenting how the empathize stage was operationalized within a football fandom-based visual design process. Further research may be conducted in other fandom contexts (such as K-pop, esports, or local communities) to explore the transferability of the approach employed here.

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