



Illustrated posters as a strategy of territorial branding: case of the Mexican host cities of the FIFA World Cup 2026

Carteles ilustrados como estrategia de branding territorial: el caso de las sedes mexicanas de la Copa Mundial FIFA 2026

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Abstract

This article examines the illustrated poster as a strategic tool for territorial branding, using as reference the official designs created for the Mexican host cities of the 2026 FIFA World Cup: Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey. Through a qualitative approach that combines visual and semiotic analysis, it explores how the graphic and narrative resources of each poster communicate cultural values, urban identity, and a sense of belonging. Based on a theoretical review of graphic design, visual communication, and territorial identity, as well as a comparative analysis of the pieces, the study identifies aesthetic and discursive patterns that reinforce the distinctiveness of each city within the global landscape. Complementarily, it incorporates an examination of the methodological process developed by the Mexican illustrator Cuemanche—author of the official posters—whose design practice constitutes a relevant finding by integrating cultural research, creative planning, and visual synthesis in the development of the pieces. The findings highlight two central aspects: the potential of the illustrated poster as a visual resource for projecting cities at both national and international levels in contexts of high visibility, and the importance of design knowledge and methodological application in professional practice.


Keywords: poster, branding, visual identity, illustration, football.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el cartel ilustrado como herramienta estratégica de branding territorial, tomando como referencia los diseños oficiales creados para las ciudades mexicanas sede de la Copa Mundial de la FIFA 2026: Ciudad de México, Guadalajara y Monterrey. Desde un enfoque cualitativo, que combina análisis visual y semiótico, se estudia cómo los recursos gráficos y narrativos de cada cartel comunican valores culturales, identidad urbana y sentido de pertenencia. A partir de una revisión teórica sobre diseño gráfico, comunicación visual e identidad territorial, así como del análisis comparativo entre las piezas, se identifican patrones estéticos y discursivos que refuerzan la singularidad de cada ciudad en el panorama global. De manera complementaria, se incorpora el examen del proceso metodológico desarrollado por el ilustrador mexicano Cuemanche, autor de los carteles oficiales, cuya práctica proyectual constituye un hallazgo relevante al integrar investigación cultural, planificación creativa y síntesis visual en el diseño de las piezas. Los hallazgos destacan dos aspectos centrales: el potencial del cartel ilustrado como recurso visual para proyectar ciudades a nivel nacional e internacional en contextos de alta visibilidad, y la relevancia del conocimiento y aplicación de metodologías del diseño en la práctica profesional.

Palabras clave: cartel, gestión de la marca, identidad visual, ilustración, fútbol.

◆ Introduction

he illustrated poster has been, since its beginnings, an important graphic tool at the visual communication and the symbolic representation of social, political and cultural contexts. Its capacity to condense complex messages in a single visual plane has awarded it an aesthetic, communicative and strategic value within graphic design. Over time, the poster has evolved from an informative function up to transforming itself on a means of identity expression, especially relevant on massive events where they converge culture, politics and visual economy. This transformation responds, in some way, to the simultaneous development of graphic practices and cultural phenomena, as Blanco Ruiz (2024, p. 102) shows when affirming that "design and entertainment industry grew at the same time, accompanying each another to strengthen expectations for the event."

On the same way, the concept of territorial branding has gained strength on the last decades, understanding how a strategy that allows cities, regions and countries to place themselves through symbolic elements that reinforce their collective identity. Almeida (2023) describes the so called territorial brand on the following terms:

The territorial brand is a strategy of global development. From the 1980's, it has been used by more than 50% of countries all around the world. [...]. This process implies to establish an association between a territory and a brand. The brand functions as a distinctive symbol and provides acknowledgment. As well, it acts as a mediator between the involved social actors on the making and development of the territory. (p. 870)

This notion implies the articulation of cultural, historical and visual elements that give personality to a territory, with the aim of showing them to local and international audiences. In this context, graphic design, and

¹ T. note: The cited pages refer to the Spanish version of the book and may be different in the original language.

specifically the poster, becomes a key device to mediate between the image that a city wants to communicate and the perception that it generates to its audience.

The FIFA World Cup 2026 will represent an historic milestone by having for the first time three host countries; Mexico, United States and Canada, and by selecting Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey as official venues in the country (*BBC New Mundo*, 2022). This represents a unique opportunity to observe how visual narratives are built that search to highlight the uniqueness of each city. Mario Cortés, known professionally as Cuemanche, was the winner of the competition to design Mexico's official posters for the FIFA World Cup 2026. He is a Mexican artist, designer, and illustrator from western Mexico City, a graduate of Design and Visual Communication from the Faculty of Arts and Design (FAD) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), who has drawn throughout his life and loves doing so, which is why he decided to become a professional in image and illustration.

The official illustrated posters that were designed by this event function as graphic tools that not only inform, but also activate processes of symbolic representation and identity for the purposes of urban positioning.

Given this scenario, this research aims to analyze the strategic value of illustrated posters as a visual communication medium for territorial branding, through a comparative study of the official posters of the three Mexican cities hosting the FIFA World Cup 2026. This analysis is enriched by information obtained through an in-depth interview with the author of the posters, designer and illustrator Cuemanche, which allowed us to reconstruct the design process and gain a clearer understanding of the conceptual and graphic decisions that shaped each piece. This approach is based on the premise that these posters not only respond to aesthetic or promotional needs, but also form part of a discursive construction that seeks to project an idealized image of the city to a global audience.

The purpose of this study is twofold: on the one hand, to offer a visual theoretical analysis that breaks down the graphic, symbolic, and narrative elements of the posters; on the other, to document and contrast the methodological process in their development with the aim of demonstrating a methodology applicable to the development of illustrated posters as a territorial branding strategy, articulating local identity, visual communication, and international projection.

This research falls within an interdisciplinary perspective between graphic design, visual communication, urban image theory and cultural studies, with the aim to offer a significant contribution both to the academic field and the professional practice of design. Likewise, it seeks to show the potential of the illustrated poster as a graphic device that

could go beyond the tourist and sports promotion, acting as a vehicle that represent cultural representation, collective memory and urban imaginaries.

◆ Theoretical basis

The illustrated poster constitutes an important resource of visual communication: it synthesizes image and text on a highly evocative format for conveying cultural, political, and commercial messages in an immediate and memorable way. Its strength lies in its ability to condense complex narratives into a single visual plane, through the selection of symbols, compositions, and color codes, allowing it to operate as an informative vehicle and symbolic artifact capable of mobilizing collective identities, emotions, and perceptions. Furthermore, due to its reproducible nature and ease of distribution in print and digital media, the poster acts as an effective vehicle for visual viralization and the construction of public memory. Ortiz Ciénega (2025, para. 1) it synthesizes that historical and social role by stating that "Throughout history, posters have been a mirror of society, call for revolution, object of desire and piece of collection."

This condition connects with the idea of "miscoded visual culture" and with *the Culture Code Theory* which examines posters from strategic, semantic, and technical perspectives; when these remain coherent, the information exchange between designer and audience is more effective (Wen *et al.*, 2022). Zhang and Liu (2022) complement this perspective with three key points: first, the visual languages of a poster engage with broader cultural processes and are not merely decorative; second, visual clarity and consistency increase the persuasive power of a message; and third, promoting critical thinking in visual culture strengthens a brand's legitimacy. Therefore, the research and validation phases, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, must also assess attributes such as innovation and sustainability.

In this sense, sport posters exert a symbolic and cultural projection function.

"Sports posters have become a window for countries to show their own country, their own culture and art" (Zhao, 2018, p. 515), massive events such as World Cups, these posters not only inform, but also build visual narratives that appeal to collective emotions and identities. Recent studies note that the design of sports posters has evolved from literal representations to symbolic languages that seek to graphically convey the cultural "spirit" of the host place (Wen *et al.*, 2022). The choice between illustration and realism responds to the communicative purpose of the poster:

"The realistic reproduction of sports posters is inseparable from the depiction of sports styles" (Zhao, 2018, p. 514,).

To understand its role in the FIFA World Cup 2026, it is essential to distinguish between three concepts: urban identity, focused on the cultural and historical essence of the city; territorial identity, which broadens the sense of belonging to a larger geographical area; and territorial branding, understood as a set of *marketing* strategies that build a coherent brand for a territory. This branding communicates the existing identity and its potential, as long as it involves local actors and is consistent with the values of the territory.

The territorial branding has gained force as a strategic tool to place cities and regions into a competitive global environment. Beyond graphic brands or touristic campaigns, it seeks to build an identity narrative that links local and global. Anholt (2004, cited in Bonifaz Damián, 2022) defines it as the application of brand strategies aimed at the economic, political, and cultural development of territories, while De-San-Eugenio and Ginesta (2020) emphasize its role as an asset for attracting investment, talent, and events. Boisier (2005) explains it as a system of supply (management, products, services) and demand (public, markets), whose balance ensures competitiveness, and the UNDP describes it as "the territory's response to globalization, whose strength is based on what is as local as possible and as unique as possible, but with a global outlook" (cited in Bravo Rojas and Téllez Navia, 2023, pp. 794-795). This view of cultural resistance suggests that each territory must find what distinguishes it and communicate it effectively.

At the operational level, this symbolic construction is reflected in modern brand management. As Lucarelli (2018) states, territorial branding seeks to add value to a place by constantly improving its image, projecting it nationally and internationally. In this context, large-scale events act as catalysts for the process: "Major sporting events have become an opportunity to promote a city, improve its infrastructure, attract tourism, and generate jobs" (Tecnológico de Monterrey, 2022, para. 1). In this way, the illustrated poster acquires a privilege role as a visual emblem of that global projection, condensing local iconography (architecture, traditions, popular symbols) in a single visual narrative.

Díaz Mesa y Ruiz Rallo (2023) remember us that the branding includes the planning and appliance of communications and positioning, meanwhile Delgado Rodríguez (2021) proposes evaluation tools to measure intelligibility, uniqueness and pregnancy of the poster. Thus, specialized architecture points out that methodological triangulation (including surveys, interview and participatory analysis) is essential to validate the identity values of the territory and to assure the cultural coherence of the strategy (Díaz Mesa & Ruiz Rallo, 2023, pp. 4–10; Bravo Rojas & Téllez Navia, 2023, pp. 792–799, 803–805). In this sense, the illustrated poster not only communicates, but also articulates belonging and collective narrative. Its effectiveness is situated in three conditions:

- ❖ Graphically translate local and heritage values into evocative images.
- ❖ Connect with the community's expectations and emotions through participatory processes.
- ❖ Operate as a visual emblem on the global stage of high-impact events.

In addition to studies on visual communication and territorial branding, the analysis developed in this research is based on fundamental contributions from semiotics and image rhetoric. In particular, it draws on the model proposed by Roland Barthes (1964), who distinguishes between denotation and connotation as two structural levels in the meaning of images. Denotation corresponds to the literal description of visual elements, while connotation relates to the symbolic, ideological, and cultural values that these elements activate within a social context. Likewise, Barthes (1964) introduces the notion of myth as a second-order system of meaning that naturalizes certain cultural discourses, a crucial aspect for understanding how illustrated posters can construct identities and territorial narratives.

Complementarily, the perspective of visual rhetoric formulated by Jacques Durand (1970) is incorporated, who demonstrates that images, like verbal language, employ rhetorical tropes to produce complex meanings. These tropes work through substitution, condensation, or intensification of meaning, and allow us to understand how images articulate symbolic structures through metaphors, metonymies, synecdoche, or hyperboles. This theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundations necessary to analyze the construction of meaning in the posters studied, and serves as the basis for its methodological application in the analytical phase.

The illustrated poster is situated between visual communication and territorial branding, as it translates local identities in comprehensible languages globally. In this sense, it acts as a collective pertinence symbol and also as a strategic tool for urban positioning in high-visibility scenarios.

From these conceptual frameworks, which integrate design, visual culture, territorial and semiotic identity of the image, it is possible to establish the necessary theory basis for the visual and narrative analysis of the posters. The set of references allows to understand both the symbolic function of the illustrated poster and the mechanisms through which meanings about the territory are constructed. With this theoretical basis, the following section describes the methodological design applied to operationalize these approaches in the reading and analysis of graphic pieces.

Methodological design

This study was conducted through descriptive documentary research based on a comparative analysis of the official posters for the three Mexican host cities of the FIFA World Cup 2026, designed by the illustrator Cuemanche.

The documentary research was structured into three phases aimed at gathering information and conducting an analysis that would allow us to identify a methodological proposal applicable to the design of the host-city official posters, as well as a theoretical visual analysis that breaks down their graphic, symbolic, and narrative components.

The first phase consisted of gathering information through an interview and questionnaire administered directly to the author. The virtual interview provided insight into his participation in the call for proposals, the assignment guidelines, the conceptualization, and the creative focus. Additional aspects were explored, such as planning, working methods and timelines, adaptation to FIFA's visual guidelines, and observation of the urban and cultural environment. These elements, together with the experiences of the fan and the player as narrative axes, made it possible to gain a closer look at his creative process (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Composition created by the authors based on two photographs of the creative process shared by Cuemanche during the development of the official posters for the FIFA World Cup 2026.



Note: Retrieved from the author's Instagram profile.

The second phase involved a general reflection on design methodologies, taking as reference Jorge Frascara's (2006) proposal in *Communication Design: Principles, Methods, and Practice* and Bruno's Munari (1983) in *How Objects are Born Apuntes para una metodología proyectual*. This review served as a point of departure for comparing and synthesizing these approaches with the process followed by Cuemanche in creating the posters for the FIFA World Cup 2026.

The third phase was focused on the visual, conceptual and cultural reading of each poster. Through the examination of the pieces corresponding to Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey, an analysis of the denotative and connotative aspects was conducted, allowing us to assess their contribution to territorial branding and their ability to articulate identity, narrative, and international projection.

Analysis *First phase*

As described earlier, the first phase involved searching for compiling information about the designer's process experience during the creation of the three pieces, in which it was possible to identify, from the interview made to Cuemanche (2025), valuable and significant insights, not only for understanding their creative process in terms awareness and visualization, but also for grasping the experience of developing proposals that, under very specific guidelines, were selected as winners in this international competition.

Firstly, although FIFA had already established highly specific branding guidelines, such as the use of an official font, predetermined color palettes, and other visual elements to be harmonized within the design, there was still considerable diversity in the proposals submitted, as each designer applied these elements with substantial freedom. Thus, although the brief may seem a little restrictive, the research-based interpretation opens the door to a variety of outcomes.

Another factor adding complexity to the project was that, unlike other countries, "Mexico issued a single call for proposals for all three cities (Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Monterrey) which required thinking in terms of a trilogy, a visual triptych that conveyed conceptual and aesthetic unity" (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025). This task was assigned to a single designer.

Regarding planning and working methods, the author organized the process from the outset. He considered the effective weeks available to produce the three proposals, including personal time assigned to independent commitments. He acknowledged that although the plan did not unfold exactly planned, the development was more fluid and flexible. Even so, the structure provided clarity and allowed him to move forward with focus. This achievement was linked to creative moments during what some authors describe as "incubation periods", which arose during pauses for reflection, often while walking or swimming.

I organized myself thinking on a week for conceptualization, another for sketching, three to develop the posters, and one additional week for modifications. Of course, not everything went exactly according to plan, but having that plan allowed me to have mental clarity and make better use of my creative moments. (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025)

After reviewing FIFA's specifications and completing the planning stage, a key question emerged that defined the beginning of the research prior to the creative proposal: "How can we represent three different but united identities within the same visual language?", since all participants were required to design the three posters for the host cities. In establishing a deeper connection and reflections, Cuemanche points out:

That's how I arrived at the central question: what makes soccer unique in each city? Soccer is played by the same rules everywhere, yes, but what surrounds it changes... In Monterrey, for example, it is strongly associated with the carne asada. That simple social gesture is part of how they experience soccer there. In Mexico City, it might be *tacos al pastor* while watching the game with friends. They are cultural, gastronomic, coexistence details, but they build one unique narrative. These elements began to emerge in parallel and became the conceptual focus of the three posters. Before drawing anything, I focused in these ideas. (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025)

From there, he proceeded with conceptualization, which he identifies as an essential part of the creative process, managing to find representative elements through urban observation, particularly during his daily commute in Mexico City, either on foot or by bicycle, where architecture emerges as a source of inspiration. "One day, I stopped in front of an *Art Deco* building and had a kind of revelation [...] I understood that I could construct my posters as if they were the facades of houses (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025). This became a major challenge, as the Federation's initial guidelines prohibited the use of specific buildings due to copyright and cultural appropriation concerns, but allowed for their reinterpretation, which was resolved with different language. Ironically, although they were later authorized, this challenge had already been met.

Other elements in the three posters emerged from exploring representative figures determined by answering that central question about what makes soccer unique in each city, but not only that, also considering the perspective of popular culture and the lived experiences of fans and players as a visual and symbolic axes.

I realized that a few people talk about how fans experience the game. I wanted to reflect that in my posters: the sound of the organ grinder in Mexico City, the mariachi in Guadalajara, the norteño music in Monterrey. Details that are on the atmosphere, not on the stadium. (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025)

Players were used to construct a type of visual choreography, not in a duel, since Cuemanche did not want to depict dominance, but rather shared narrative rhythm of the game, forming part of the visual and symbolic rhythm of the poster.

After observing the result of his work, the interviewee stated that the three posters he developed won "precisely because the succeeded in communicating both branding and the desired visual narrative effectively" (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025). This statement shows the importance of applying a tool such as branding strategy, in this case territorial branding, when designing posters in order to achieve more effective results.

Second phase

Once the visualization and reflection on the methodologies applied in the design proposals were completed, a methodological comparative analysis was conducted, shown in Table 1. In this comparison, the stages that coincide in both Frascara's (2006) and Munari's (1983) methodologies were identified, along with a third column indicating the corresponding stages based on insights from both the interview with Cuemanche and from the poster design process.

Table 1
Comparative of the methodological process stages

Stage	Frascara methodology	Munari methodology	Case: Cuemanche posters
Beginning	Message to a specific audience	Functional problem, real necessity.	FIFA brief with guidelines: projecting local identity in an international setting.
Research	Audience and objectives diagnosis	Personal thought, observation.	Observation of each city; cultural and urban research; symbols of everyday life.
Exploration	Programming and strategy.	Sketches, models, files.	Mood boards and starting sketches; grid tests inspired by the soccer field.
Visual development	Coherent project with a message.	Prototype and testing.	Flat-style digital illustration; integration of local icons and color testing.
Performance	Implementation with appropriate means.	Useful and functional solution.	Final digital art; application of FIFA lineaments; delivery in scalable formats.
Evaluation of the proposal	Measure communication effectiveness.	Formative experience.	FIFA validation; review of readability and consistency; critical reflection by the author.

Note: Compiled by authors.

Table 1 highlights the contrast among the three methodological approached and their characteristics, which in practice many designers combine, since while Frascara (2006) provides communicational rigor, Munari (1983) introduces creative and experimental richness. In this case, there is a stronger inclination toward Munari's process, as the designer relied more on creative exploration, sketching, testing, and experiential learning along the way, leaving aside the message to the specific audience and the diagnosis of the audience or objectives.

It is important to mention that, according to the reflections derived from interview, for Cuemanche "the project not only was a graphic execution, but rather a deep exploration of identity, culture, context, and emotion, translated into an image meant to represent Mexico on a global event" (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025). He added that his intention in sharing this journey in such detail stems was because from his belief that it can serve as a method for other designers and students, not as a rigid formula, but as inspiration for them for building their own processes.

To conclude this phase, it should be noted that this comparison, supported by the interview, clearly identified that, although over time steps can be "omitted" or carried out in a more empirical manner, any design proposal is built on the learning of a methodology or even a combination of several methodologies, which is important to make clear to the public, designers in the process, and employers, as it speaks to the value of constructing a piece of design.

Third phase

In this phase we can observe each of the three posters through a visual, conceptual and cultural reading of each host city, describing the denotative and connotative elements in the pieces (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Composition created by the authors based on the official posters for the FIFA World Cup 2026 in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey, designed by Cuemanche (2023).



Note: Compiled by authors based on the author's Instagram profile

To strengthen the methodological rigor of the connotative analysis applied to the posters, a semiotic model based on Roland Barthes' classic proposal (1964) was adopted, which distinguishes two levels of meaning: denotation, understood as the literal description of visible elements, and connotation, associated with the symbolic, cultural, and ideological values that these signs mobilize within an interpreting community. This model made it possible to structure the visual reading of each piece through a systematic identification of signs, codes and cultural associations linked to the represented territory.

Following Barthes (1964), connotative analysis was based on the notion of myth as a second-order system of meaning, understanding that posters not only show recognizable objects or scenes, but also construct collective imaginaries about each city: modernity and industry in Monterrey, cultural festivities in Guadalajara, or plurality of identity in Mexico City. This perspective allowed us to observe how graphic signs (colors, shapes, icons, human figures, architectonic patterns) activate narratives about the territory beyond its literal appearance.

In addition, we used the rhetoric of the image developed by Jacques Durand (1970), which classifies visual tropes as procedures for transforming meaning that operate through substitution, condensation, displacement, or intensification. In this study four tropes were mainly considered, whose senses are detailed below:

- ❖ **Metonymy.** It is produced when a sign represents another by its relation of contiguity, cultural proximity or functional linking. In visual rhetoric, it operates by replacing a broad phenomenon with a specific element that accompanies or characterizes it. It does not appeal to similarity, but to contextual association. Applied example: In Monterrey's poster, the "carne asada" functions as a metonymy for the social ritual that accompanies soccer in the region; it does not represent the territory itself, but rather the cultural environment that distinguishes it.

- ❖ **Synecdoche.** It is a specific form of metonymy in which a part represents the whole or the whole represents the part. In images, it is often used to condense complex identities into a simplified element, achieving symbolic economy and visual significance. Applied example: The geometric abstraction inspired by the Angel of Independence operates as a synecdoche for Mexico City, taking a fragment (the reinterpreted monumental column) as a synthesis of the metropolitan identity.

- ❖ **Metaphor.** It consists of the transference of meaning based on a formal or conceptual similarity between two elements. Visually, it is not a matter of literally representing an object, but rather of symbolically associating a concept with a form that shares figurative, structural, or semantic features. Applied example: The vertical structure of the posters, organized as "symbolic facade", functions as a visual metaphor for the territory, understood as a narrative structure composed of cultural, social and urban layers.

- ❖ **Hyperbole.** It is a deliberate technique of exaggeration used to intensify a visual, chromatic, or symbolic feature in order to increase its expressive power and communicative significance. It can manifest itself in extreme contrasts, an overabundance of elements, or chromatic saturation. Applied example: The chromatic intensification and abundance of patterns in the Guadalupe poster constitute a visual hyperbole that emphasizes the festive and vibrant character of the city.

The articulation of Barthes' model with Durand's visual rhetoric made it possible to establish, with clarity and coherence, the connotative reading of the posters. Through this perspective, it was possible to demonstrate how graphic signs (colors, shapes, iconography, and spatial arrangement) generate identity narratives consistent with the objectives of territorial branding, while constructing cultural meanings that dialogue with the history, social practices, and urban imaginaries of each location.

Below is a brief analysis of each of the posters.

Mexico City: visual, conceptual and cultural reading.

Mexico City's poster uses a vibrant palette with orange, green and purple shades, reinforcing a sense of energy and diversity. The composition is organized around a central column inspired by the Angel of Independence, from which urban and cultural references unfold—domes, transportation, organ grinders, wrestling motifs, and lake fauna—that dialogue with everyday life in the capital. This vertical structure connects the historical with the popular, constructing a visual narrative that reflects the city's characteristic diversity (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Official poster of the FIFA World Cup 2026 for Mexico City



Note: Retrieved from the author's Instagram profile.

Denotative reading. Orange background; monumental central column inspired by the Angel of Independence; upper section with domes and performing arts; base with stadium and water waves; motifs of wrestling, organ grinder, transportation, and urban fauna.

Connotative reading. The column acts as a metonymy of the capital, organizing the narrative between past, present and daily. The coexistence of historical and ancestral archetypes with contemporary popular culture (organ grinders, wrestling) generates a hybrid urban myth. Orange suggests civic energy; greens and purples provide contemporaneity; the water refers to the lake basin.

Conceptually, this poster embraces polysemy: condensing multiple identities into a single image. From the territorial branding, it shows Mexico City as a plural and multifaceted destination. Semiologically, iconographic density enriches territorial storytelling, although it requires strategic clarity so that the message is not diluted. The author's intention of reflecting the "soccer on the street" matches with the social reading: the audience recognizes both monumental and popular, even if it ignores the legal solution of avoiding literal representations of the Angel.

In methodological terms, the poster exemplifies the narrative synthesis phase: integrating diverse attributes into a single visual brand, and the need to validate it with legibility tests on different media.

Guadalajara: visual, conceptual and cultural reading

Guadalajara's poster presents a vibrant palette ruled by shades of pink, green and yellow, which give it a festive and warm aesthetic. Compositionally, the piece organizes its elements in layers: architectural and landscape references appear at the top, a set of cultural symbols and activities—music, crafts, regional architecture—are articulated in the center, and the stadium is located at the base as the epicenter/meeting place. This vertical structure functions as a hierarchical reading: from the heritage and symbolic (above) to the contemporary and experiential (below), which favors a narrative that links history and tradition with the modernity of the sporting event (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.
Official poster of the FIFA World Cup 2026 for Guadalajara



Note: Retrieved by the author's Instagram profile.

Denotative reading. Magenta background; stamp-like perforated frame; axial composition with a central portico alluding to historical architecture; stadium at the base; ascending agaves as a plume; soccer balls and players in action; mariachi, dance, and equestrian tradition motifs; tournament dates at the base.

Connotative reading. Agave functions as territorial synecdoche (landscape, tequila industry, culture), crowning the stadium as a symbol of festive identity. The colors magenta, green, and yellow symbolize vitality and celebration, while the repetition of circles creates rhythm and a playful metaphor. The symmetrical grid pattern stabilizes the dense iconographic inventory.

From a semiotic perspective, the chosen icons (musical instruments, artisanal motifs, festive elements) operate as condensers of identity markers: they appeal to the Guadalajara imagination linked to music, celebration, and popular tradition. This repertoire responds to imagery that is consistent with *Culture Code Theory*, characterized by signs that are legible to local audiences and anchors of recognition for foreign audiences (Wen *et al.*, 2022). In line with the logic of territorial branding, the poster seeks to position Guadalajara as a culturally rich and festive city, an attribute that is useful for attracting tourists and differentiating the territory.

The abundance of patterns generates high salience, but poses challenges for readability at a distance or in small formats. There is agreement between the author's intention and the social interpretation: both emphasize the festive and heritage aspects. However, the risk is that, without complementary narratives, a stereotype of "folklore/fiesta" will be reinforced without showing the contemporary dimensions of cultural innovation in the city.

Monterrey: visual, conceptual and culture reading

Monterrey's poster uses a deep blue and green palette, with red accents, which give it a sober and "firm" feel compared to the other pieces. Compositionally, it places the stadium and mountainous-industrial landscape in the foreground, integrating images of grilled meat, northern music, and regional fauna. The geometric stylization reinforces an interpretation of modernity and solidity (see Figure 5).

Figure 5.
Official poster of the FIFA World Cup 2026 for Monterrey



Note: Retrieved from the author's Instagram profile.

Denotative reading. Deep blue background: red column (Faro del Comercio) at the center; triangular mountains (Sierra Madre); industrial symbols; carne asada grill; regional fauna; stadium at the base with water waves.

Connotative reading. The column symbolizes progress and industrial momentum, reinforced by mountainous triangles. The carne asada

serves as a social metonymy for Monterrey's soccer ritual. The blue-red palette builds a technological and industrial profile, with a contrast that assures legibility.

From the cultural reading, the motifs reinforce common attributes of Monterrey: work, industry, modernity. In territorial branding, it positions the city as an economic and organizational center, aligning visual discourse with real strategic attributes. The author's intention matches with the local reading (the carnita asada as ritual), but internationally it can be reduced to culinary exoticism, losing the social significance it has for enthusiasts. This discrepancy highlights the importance of contextualizing symbols to avoid superficial interpretations.

In methodological terms, Monterrey reminds us that visual discourse must be aligned with the territorial diagnosis and validated with the target audiences (residents, visitors, and key stakeholders).

Results

The analysis of the official posters designed for the Mexican host cities of the FIFA World Cup 2026 revealed three main axes that allow to understand their contribution to the territorial branding. The first one corresponds to the narrative and territorial identity, where each poster builds a personal story from cultural, architectonic and popular symbols that reinforce the uniqueness of the represented city. The second refers to visual composition and cohesion, which ensures the unity of the whole thanks to a shared structural and stylistic system, albeit with nuances that differentiate each piece. Finally, the transferability and global projection of visual language is observed, a finding that shows how the system can adapt to new contexts while maintaining a balance between local authenticity and international visibility.

Narrative and territorial identity

The most obvious finding relates to each poster's ability to articulate a narrative that projects the city's identity. From the conceptual phase, the author pointed out that he searches to "give each one its own personality, its own unique narrative" (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025). Based on this premise, Mexico City is presented as a historic and ancestral city, Guadalajara as the heart of arts and traditions, and Monterrey as an emblem of industry and development.

These narratives are supported by the selection of symbolic repertoires that function as markers of identity. The Mexico City piece combines the Palace of Fine Arts with pre-Hispanic iconography, endemic fauna, and popular cultural expressions such as wrestling. Guadalajara integrates the Rotonda de los Jaliscienses Ilustres and its cathedral with mariachi music, equestrian tradition, and ornamental elements such as butterflies. Monterrey, for its part, emphasizes the Faro del Comercio and the Puente de la Unidad, accompanied by the Sierra Madre mountains,

industrial symbols, and fauna characteristic of the region. Together, the three posters show how illustration can function as a visual narrator of distinct urban and territorial identities.

Composition and visual cohesion

A second axe of results is related with the formal unity of the system. The three posters share a reticle based on the soccer field, which allowed to organize the elements with symmetry and balance.

Considering the soccer context of the project, the field was the natural setting to choose: its symmetry and well-defined areas (midfield, penalty areas, corner kicks) offered a clear spatial organization that was also consistent with the geometric system the author was developing. Thus, the court became the structural axis that allowed the visual elements to be distributed harmoniously on the poster (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025).

This choice ensured the coherence of the whole and the harmony of each piece. The graphic style also reinforces this cohesion: flat, saturated colors, sharp contrasts, and stylized human figures in action. It should be noted that the color choice was not arbitrary, but was conditioned by the guidelines established in the identity communication system developed by FIFA for the 2026 World Cup. The author followed these guidelines, adapting them to the specific characteristics of each city.

Even so, there are chromatic variations that contribute to distinctive nuances: Mexico City uses a hybrid palette that links the past and the present; Guadalajara favors warm tones associated with festivity; and Monterrey opts for a soberer palette, linked to industrial modernity. This combination of structural unity and chromatic differentiation shows that visual cohesion does not dilute the uniqueness of each location, but rather enhances it.

Transferability and global projection

Finally, results show that this work is not limited to the production of three posters, but to the development of a replicable visual language. The designer acknowledges that his methodology, which included conceptualization, sketching, individual-group development and final adjustments, could be applied on other projects of territorial identity (Cuemanche, personal communication, July 25, 2025)

Guidelines for the poster development in territorial branding projects

Based on Cuemanche's creative process and the visual semiotic analysis carried out in this article, a set of guidelines emerges that guide the design of illustrated posters for territorial branding purposes. These

guidelines are not a closed formula, but rather a series of practical conditions that can serve as a guide for designers, cultural managers, and academics alike:

1. Comply with institutional guidelines

Every international project requires adaptation to pre-established guidelines (color palettes, fonts, logos, graphic restrictions). In this case, FIFA delimited plain figures, specific colors and official typography. Following these rules ensures consistency with the global brand without limiting local creativity.

2. Plan creative times and processes

The design of complex posters requires a clear temporary structure—conceptualization, sketching, development, and final adjustments. Cuemanche organized his work in weekly stages, which allow him to advance in an organized manner and respond to contingencies.

3. Define a conceptual axis from local experience

The starting point should respond to the following question: What makes the territory unique in relation to the event? In this case, daily practices such as the carnita asada in Monterrey, pastor tacos in Mexico City or the mariachi in Guadalajara became narrative triggers.

4. Build coherent visual narratives in systems

The commission was not resolved in a single poster, but rather in a visual triad with formal coherence and variations in identity. The use of a geometric grid (inspired by a soccer field) allowed for the integration of symbolic diversity without losing unity.

5. Incorporate reinterpreted, not literal, symbols

To avoid legal conflicts and encourage creativity, the author transformed iconic referents, such as the Angel of Independence, in geometric metaphors. This strategy shows how to evoke without directly copying.

6. Observe the urban and cultural environment as source of inspiration

The designer acknowledged that walking around the city, recording facades, sounds, and social rituals gave him clues for structuring his compositions. Territorial observation thus becomes a methodological input.

7. Place the player and the fan at the center

Soccer is a team sport: the posters feature the generic figure of the player and, at the same time, evoke the fan through cultural practices. This balances sporting roots with social identity.

8. Grant legibility and adaptability in multiple formats

Visual impact must be maintained in billboards, social media, and promotional products. Cuemanche's geometric and chromatic solution ensured scalability and extended the graphic system's useful life.

9. Validate with the community and with key stakeholders

The legitimacy of the poster depends not only on its aesthetics, but also on its reception among local audiences, visitors, and institutions. Participatory processes reduce the risk of stereotypes and strengthen cultural relevance.

10. Balance local authenticity and international visibility

Symbols should be legible in global key without losing local roots. Thus, when placed in context within a narrative, Monterrey-style carnita asada and Guadalajara mariachis appeal to both national and international audiences.

Taken together, these guidelines show that illustrated posters, conceived as a territorial branding strategy, require cultural research, visual synthesis, and community validation. Beyond producing attractive graphic pieces, it is about building narrative systems capable of balancing local authenticity and international projection.

◆ Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the official posters of Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey confirm that illustrated posters function as a strategic resource for territorial branding by articulating identity narratives, formal cohesion and global projection. Each piece succeeds in highlighting specific urban attributes, metropolitan diversity in Mexico City, festive vibrancy in Guadalajara, and industrial momentum in Monterrey, through recognizable and pertinent symbols. The grid inspired by the soccer pitch and the color scheme regulated by FIFA for the 2026 World Cup ensure consistency and legibility, while the documented creative process evidences a working system that can be adapted to other contexts of territorial identity.

In addition, the study identified contributions that enrich the reflection on the illustrated poster in the context of territorial branding. Among them, it highlights the value of the poster as a multilevel narrative device—capable of offering immediate and profound interpretations—as

well as the need to balance authenticity and stereotype in the use of cultural icons. These elements highlight the importance of involving the community and to construct contextualized narratives that preserve cultural relevance.

Similarly, we recognize the importance of ensuring the transferability of visual language to multiple formats and the possibility of developing hybrid methodological approaches, combining cultural research, narrative synthesis, and readability assessment. The contrast between Cuemanche's process and the methodologies of Frascara (2006) and Munari (1983) shows that professional practice can enter into dialogue with theory to generate replicable frameworks for territorial branding projects.

Taken together, these findings and contributions reinforce the relevance of the illustrated poster as a medium capable of communicating identities authentically, generating social belonging, and projecting territories with strength in global contexts. ●

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