

**Football's Visual Language:
Tifos as Expressions of Club Identity**

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, European football has undergone a fundamental transformation, shifting from a community-rooted cultural phenomenon into a globalized entertainment industry shaped by commercialization and institutional branding. Amid this transformation, supporter groups have increasingly asserted themselves as symbolic custodians of club identity, resisting top-down efforts to redefine what football clubs represent. This thesis investigates the symbolic role of tifos, large-scale choreographed displays created by football supporters, as visual expressions of identity and acts of resistance in the context of modern football's commercialization. It responds to two guiding questions: How do tifos created by football supporters function as visual articulations of club identity? And in what ways do they serve as resistance against the commercialization and rebranding of football clubs? Set against a backdrop where football clubs are increasingly treated as global brands, subject to logo simplification, stadium renaming, and market-driven redefinitions of tradition, the study examines how fans respond through visual performance. Despite the growing visibility of tifos in contemporary football culture, academic research has largely overlooked their communicative and cultural significance. This thesis addresses that gap by reframing tifos as strategic performances through which supporters articulate meaning, affirm identity, and contest institutional authority. Methodologically, the study combines semiotic analysis with hybrid thematic coding. A sample of approximately 50 tifos from European clubs (2010-2025) was analyzed to uncover both literal and symbolic meanings, using a two-step process: first, identifying denotative and connotative elements in the visuals; second, coding these meanings through a thematic analysis. The findings reveal that tifos serve as complex visual interventions through which supporters co-author the identity of their club. They do so by referencing regional belonging, historical memory, and political values, often in direct opposition to top-down rebranding or institutional narratives. Tifos are not random or decorative; they are intentional acts of cultural authorship. Through slogans, symbols, and historical imagery, supporters reaffirm continuity, express ownership, and project resistance. Academically, this study contributes to the field of football studies by positioning tifos as rich, underexamined media forms. Societally, it highlights the ongoing negotiation between fans and institutions over who has the right to define what a football

club represents. As commercial forces reshape the sport, tifos remain one of the few remaining spaces where fans visually reclaim authorship, reminding both clubs and broader audiences that identity is not a marketable asset but a living memory protected by fans.

KEYWORDS: tifo/identity/semiotics/fans/football

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1. Introduction

Football has long ceased to be simply a sport, becoming a complex socio-cultural phenomenon with layers of economic, political, and emotional dimensions. At the heart of this intricate fabric lies the concept of club identity, a multifaceted construct shaped by historical legacy, locality, visual symbols, supporter culture, and institutional narratives (Pauwels Delassus & Mogos Descotes, 2018, pp. 78-90). Supporters play a foundational role in shaping the identity of football clubs because, while clubs invest in official branding, it is often the fans who co-create the emotional and symbolic meaning of the club through historical connection and cultural engagement (Pauwels Delassus & Mogos Descotes, 2018, pp. 78-92).

Identity is therefore not imposed from above, but appears to be continually negotiated between the club and its supporters. This negotiation becomes most visible when fans resist institutional changes that conflict with the club's historical meaning. The case of Cardiff City F.C., where fans protested the change from blue shirts to red and the logo from a bird to a dragon in order to make the club more marketable, exemplifies how visual identity becomes a site of contestation when fans perceive disruptions to tradition as threats to their collective narrative (Pauwels Delassus & Mogos Descotes, 2018, pp. 78-90).

In recent decades, European football has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a localized, community-centred sport into a global entertainment industry dominated by commercialization and branding strategies (Busse & Damiano, 2019, pp. 8-9). Clubs increasingly operate according to market logic, treating identity as a malleable asset for global consumption, as evidenced by logo simplifications, purchase of players from rival teams or organizing matches abroad (Busse & Damiano, 2019, pp. 21-23).

While these processes aim to enhance financial revenues and international appeal, they have provoked growing disillusionment among core supporters, who perceive these changes as an erosion of traditional fan culture and emotional bonds with their clubs (Busse & Damiano, 2019, pp. 26-27). Movements such as "Against Modern Football" or "UEFA=MAFIA" explicitly contest this commodification, uniting ultras and traditional supporters across Europe in defence of historical continuity, supporter autonomy, and club authenticity (Busse & Damiano, 2019, pp. 24-25).

In the context of these dynamics, supporters may be understood as asserting themselves as the true custodians of club identity, engaging in what can be described as symbolic ownership (Bullough et al, 2024, pp. 141-143). This symbolic possession is performed and reinforced through rituals, songs, chants, and increasingly through tifos, which

have become central to the visual culture of European football stadiums, becoming one of the most powerful and symbolic expressions of football fandom. Originating from the Italian term for typhus, the word was used by journalists in the 1930s to describe the feverish passion of football supporters (Kassing & Meân, 2022, p. 1). Over time, it came to denote the visually striking, large-scale displays fans organize in stadiums, particularly before matches. These choreographed spectacles, often handmade and planned over extended periods, have become defining features of football culture worldwide (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 3-5). Created and funded exclusively by supporter groups, tifos are unaffiliated with commercial sponsorship and are executed without official club oversight (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 1-3).

In an era where football clubs are increasingly being redefined as brands, with logos redesigned for minimalist global recognition, stadiums renamed after corporate sponsors or football clubs avoiding to take political stances, tifos can be analysed as counter-hegemonic texts, that remind both the institution and broader audiences that a football club is not a commodity, but a living memory sustained by supporters through community rituals and emotional investment (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 27-29). Visual culture in football is not simply about representation but about identity construction because fans are not just reacting to club developments, they are actively authoring meaning through visual performance (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 36-37).

In light of these dynamics, this thesis seeks to investigate the struggle over symbolic authorship and identity in an increasingly commercialized sport, a core tension present in the contemporary football culture. This line of inquiry leads to the research questions of this study: *How do tifos created by football supporters function as visual expressions of club identity? And in what ways do tifos serve as acts of resistance against the commercialization and rebranding of football clubs?*

Fan culture remains one of the strongest forms of resistance to the trend of commercialization, with tifos acting as vessels for the expression and preservation of identity, memory, and shared values (Bullough et al., 2024, pp. 142-144). Tifos are thus not only expressions of support, but could be considered critical tools through which fans assert authorship, resist change, and affirm who they are, becoming central to the ongoing construction of identity within football culture. These displays are a material means for fans to showcase their unwavering identification with the club, expressing devotion through visual performance (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 35-37). Whether commemorating heroes, invoking history, or projecting defiance, tifos stand as acts of symbolic self-definition, demonstrating

that in modern football, the identity of the club cannot be separated from that of its supporters (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 51-53).

The significance of my thesis is both academic and societal because, while a growing body of literature has addressed football fandom, much of this work concentrates on supporter identities, stadium atmospheres, or broader sociopolitical dimensions of football culture. Comparatively few studies have focused specifically on tifos as a distinct form of visual and ideological communication. Among the limited scholarly attention given to tifos, the most comprehensive work to date is *The Art of Tifo* (Kassing & Meân, 2022), which offers a foundational overview of their history, functions, and symbolic meanings. This book positions tifos at the intersection of performance studies, visual culture, and political communication, emphasizing their role in amplifying fan voices and asserting cultural authorship within the commercialized landscape of modern football.

However, *The Art of Tifo* (Kassing & Meân, 2022) tends to approach the components of tifos at a surface level, offering brief descriptions and historical context rather than examining how these elements work together to produce multifaceted messages that contribute to the collective identity of fan groups. My research seeks to address this gap by analysing approximately 50 tifos from European clubs not merely as aesthetic displays, but as holistic acts of cultural production that challenge dominant narratives in football. It seeks to contribute to filling a scholarly gap by framing tifos not just as aesthetic performances but as potential acts of cultural authorship that may challenge or complicate the modern football industry's dominant narratives.

At the same time, the societal relevance is evident in contemporary shifts within the football world. Recent decisions by clubs such as Ajax and Atlético Madrid to revert to older versions of their logos, following fan requests, suggest that clubs may be beginning to recognize the symbolic capital held by supporters (Footyheadline, 2024; Garcia, 2024). Tifos can be seen as crucial visual expressions of this resistance because, unlike official branding efforts aimed at global audiences, tifos assert a counter-narrative rooted in historical memory, local identity, and ideological defiance (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 51-52).

By creating and displaying tifos, fans materialize collective memory and reclaim cultural authorship over club identity (Pauwels Delassus & Mogos Descotes, 2018, p. 78). Protests against rebranding efforts, such as those by Austria Salzburg fans following the Red Bull takeover, or the formation of breakaway clubs like FC United of Manchester, demonstrate how fans act when they perceive commercialization as violating the sacred bond between club and community (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 122-123). In this light,

understanding the communicative power of tifos offers a valuable perspective into the evolving relationship between fans and institutions in the football culture of the 21st century.

Reading guide:

The thesis will begin by presenting the theoretical framework that grounds this study. The section reviews Stuart Hall's work on representation and meaning-making, the foundational principles of semiotics, Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities, and Mary Bernstein's insights on identity politics. It then introduces three identity dimensions for tifo analysis, which are regional, historical, and political identity. In addition, Nissen's four-stage model of identity work is introduced to provide a structured lens for analysing tifos as performative expressions of fan authorship.

In the section that follows, the methodology is described in detail, beginning with a clear definition of the unit of analysis, fifty tifos selected according to specified temporal, geographical, and competitive criteria, and outlines the mixed-methods approach used to examine them. This includes a two-layered analytical process, the first one being based on semiotic differentiation between denotative and connotative elements, and another based on thematic coding informed by sensitizing concepts.

The results are then organized around five emergent themes: *the manifestation and assertion of political beliefs and values; historical memory as an emotional anchor; assertions of superiority and resistance toward rivals and institutions; supporter ownership and collective identity; intergenerational and territorial belonging*. Each theme is explained through narrative descriptions of recurring code combinations, illustrative tifos, and a discussion of how Nissen's identity-building mechanisms in relation to the themes.

The discussion section then re-engages with the theoretical framework and research questions, situating the findings within broader academic conversations. It illustrates how tifos serve as multidimensional tools for fans to assert sovereignty over football spaces, resisting commercialization while preserving collective identity. This section also highlights the layered symbolism within tifos, showing how individual displays often combine historical, political, and emotional messages in a single performance.

The final sections of the thesis draw together the study's central insights and suggestions are made for future research. It highlights how tifos are not just visual expressions of fandom but vital tools of cultural resistance and authorship in contemporary football. In this final part, it is emphasized that through tifos, supporters assert identity,

challenge commercial and institutional forces, and reclaim agency within the footballing world.

2. Theoretical Framework

To explore how tifos function as visual articulations of identity, resistance, and belonging within football culture, this theoretical framework draws on foundational concepts from both cultural theory and football studies. By integrating the work of key scholars such as Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes, and Benedict Anderson, alongside football-focused researchers like Kassing and Meân and Kassimeris. In addition, it incorporates contextual insights from some of the most significant football rivalries in Europe. These perspectives collectively offer a basis for analysing how meaning is produced, communicated, and contested through visual and performative practices in stadiums. The following sections examine each of these contributions in turn, beginning with Stuart Hall's theory of representation.

2.1. Stuart Hall's representation and meaning-making

In order to understand how tifos function as visual articulations of identity and resistance, this thesis draws on the constructionist theory of representation, which frames meaning as culturally produced through systems of signs and codes rather than passively reflected from reality (Hall, 1997, pp. 17-19). The constructionist theory of representation distinguishes between two interrelated systems of representation: the conceptual system, which organizes the world into mental categories, and the linguistic system, which translates those concepts into signs that others can interpret (Hall, 1997, p. 19). These signs carry meaning not inherently, but through culturally shared conventions that allow them to stand for particular ideas. Even visual representations that seem straightforward must be interpreted through shared conceptual maps and language systems, particularly when symbolic or abstract forms are used, as in many tifos, where the meaning of imagery like a clenched fist, lion, or knight depends entirely on cultural familiarity and context (Hall, 1997, pp. 19-20).

Hall (1997, pp. 20-21) also makes a difference between iconic signs, which visually resemble their referents, and indexical signs, like written or spoken words, which are entirely arbitrary and bear no natural relationship to the concepts they signify. The relationship between signs and meaning is stabilized by cultural codes, which are socially agreed systems that link concepts to signs and govern how meaning is communicated (Hall, 1997, p. 21). These codes are learned, internalized, and unconsciously reproduced as individuals become competent members of their culture, enabling them to interpret and produce meaning through language, images, or performance (Hall, 1997, pp. 21-24).

In this way, culture can be understood as a system of shared conceptual maps, sign systems, and representational codes that allow meaning to circulate and be understood collectively. Hall (1997, pp. 24-26) contrasts three main theories of representation: the reflective approach, where language mirrors reality; the intentional approach, where meaning originates solely with the speaker; and the constructionist approach, which asserts that meaning is constructed through the interaction of signs, concepts, and cultural codes. As mentioned in the beginning of this sub-section, this thesis adopts the constructionist position, treating tifos not as reflections of a fixed truth or expressions of individual intent, but as signifying practices, which are socially embedded performances through which supporters use shared codes to negotiate identity and resistance in the world of football. Meaning is thus produced through the practice of representation, using symbolic systems to make sense of the world and communicate that understanding with others (Hall, 1997, pp. 29-30). In this context, tifos emerge as culturally situated performances that draw upon internalized codes of fan culture, allowing supporters to assert identity and challenge dominant narratives through visual and textual symbolism.

2.2 Foundations of semiotics

Semiotics, broadly defined, is the study of signs and the processes of signification. It examines how meaning is created and communicated through signs in various forms. Ferdinand de Saussure, a foundational figure in modern semiotics, conceptualized the sign as composed of two inseparable elements: the signifier (the form the sign takes) and the signified (the concept it represents), with their connection being arbitrary and based on social convention (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2000, p. 116). This foundational theory influenced Roland Barthes, whose ideas laid the groundwork for visual semiotics: “In Barthesian visual semiotics, the key idea is the layering of meaning. The first layer is the layer of denotation, of 'what, or who, is being depicted here?'. The second layer is the layer of connotation, of 'what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?’” (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2000, p. 94).

2.3 Benedict Anderson’s imagined community

The identity shared among football supporters is best understood through Benedict Anderson’s theory of the imagined community, which frames nations as socially constructed collectivises sustained through cultural rituals, media, and shared memory (Anderson, 2006, pp. 24-35). Although formulated in the context of the nation-state, this concept directly

applies to football fandom, where tifos function as symbolic manifestations of a community that exists in the minds of its participants (Kassing & Meân, 2022, p. 66). Even though most fans will never meet, they act as if they belong to a cohesive and bounded collective, made visible and tangible through ritual acts performed in stadiums and circulated through media (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 27-28).

Tifos are a primary means through which this imagined community is performed. These choreographed visual displays, created collectively and unveiled simultaneously, make abstract feelings of belonging visible. They allow supporters to experience a shared identity through a synchronized ritual, materializing the “image of their communion” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). Tifos signify the imagined communities that football produces, expressing not only emotional allegiance but also shared histories, values, and territorial claims (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 51-53).

The representational power of tifos also aligns with the idea proposed by Shobe (2008, pp. 330-332), that the team becomes an extension or embodiment of a place and its people. Through coordinated actions like chants, banners, and large-scale tifos, supporters project the club as a cultural vessel for local identity, historical memory, and political stance (Shobe, 2008, pp. 331-333). The stadium serves as the spatial anchor for this process, functioning as a sacred site where communal belonging is ritually enacted. Within this context, tifos act as ceremonial offerings that symbolically affirm the community’s continuity and cohesion (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 121-122).

Imagined communities are produced through cultural media, represented through the reading of the newspaper ritual, that allows citizens to imagine themselves as part of a shared experience (Anderson, 2006, pp. 34-36). In contemporary football culture, tifos serve a similar role, as they are not only experienced live in the stadium but also photographed, broadcast, and shared across social platforms, expanding their reach and sustaining identity across time and space (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 138-140). In this way, tifos help reaffirm membership in a symbolic community, reinforcing identity through digital circulation and mediated memory.

Furthermore, Anderson’s (2006, pp. 19-22) notion of sovereignty helps explain why tifos frequently assert autonomy in the face of external control, supporters often using tifos to critique governing institutions or reaffirm the grassroots essence of the club. These displays are acts of symbolic sovereignty, where fans claim cultural ownership over the stadium and the meaning of the club itself. Tifos, then, are not only artistic expressions but declarations of independence, defending the community’s right to define itself without external interference

(Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 10-12). Through this lens, tifos emerge as critical tools for performing imagined community, as they are visual, emotional, and political manifestations of collective identity. They are reinforcing shared memory, asserting cultural authorship, and sustaining the symbolic unity of football supporters across space and time.

2.4 Mary Bernstein's identity politics

This production of identity through tifo can be further understood through the concept of identity politics, which represents a strategic practice through which groups use identity to gain recognition and challenge institutional exclusion (Bernstein, 2005, pp. 49-52). Tifos are visual enactments of this strategy as they do not only express belonging, but they assert rights, challenge commercialization, and critique governance (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 123-128). By employing familiar imagery and concise visual messaging, tifos function as political interventions grounded in collective identity. Bernstein's (2005, pp. 58-60) concept of strategic essentialism is particularly relevant here, as it refers to the temporary simplification of identity to enable political action.

Bernstein also argues that symbolic action can have material consequences, particularly when it challenges dominant power structures (Bernstein, 2005, pp. 58-63). Tifos that protest against UEFA, criticize club ownership, or oppose racist or fascist elements in football culture operate within this logic. They are not simply acts of fandom, but manifestations of political consciousness within a mediated public space. These visual performances make visible the struggles of fans who seek to define their club and defend their values against media comments, attacks of rival clubs or institutional and commercial pressures (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 123-128). Kassimeris (2024, pp. 579-581) further reinforces the connection between tifos and identity politics by locating football clubs as critical arenas for resistance. The cases of FC St. Pauli and FC United of Manchester serve as emblematic examples of this dynamic, in both instances, supporters used tifos and symbolic displays to resist commercialization, challenge the governing bodies and affirm their cultural identity (Kassimeris, 2024, pp. 579-581).

2.5 Conceptual lenses for tifo analysis

Building on the broader understanding of identity in football culture, this thesis draws on three key dimensions of identity as sensitizing concepts: regional identity, historical identity, and political identity. These concepts are grounded in existing scholarship and provide interpretive guidance during the analysis. Rather than functioning as fixed analytical

categories, they act as flexible lenses that help identify meaningful symbolic expressions in tifos (Bowen, 2006, pp. 13-14). The following sections discuss each of these dimensions in detail.

2.5.1 Regional identity

Regional identity forms a foundational dimension in the construction of both football club identity and supporter culture. Within this thesis, it is examined as a crucial lens for understanding how tifos convey meaning, functioning not merely as aesthetic statements but as symbolic affirmations of place-based belonging, memory, and resistance. Football identity is not solely created through branding or top-down institutional narratives, but actually emerges from emotional and symbolic attachments that fans cultivate with their club, many of which are deeply anchored in geography. Football clubs often originate from specific urban contexts such as industrial neighbourhoods, religious institutions, or local communities, serving as cultural extensions of the environments from which they arose (Bullough et al., 2024, p. 138). Football clubs are inherently tied to a place through the wider geographical and topographic features of their surroundings and are frequently viewed by supporters as embodiments of their town, city, or region (Bullough et al., 2024, pp. 138-139).

This spatial embeddedness creates a deep emotional and symbolic association, place not being only a physical location but also a social and emotional construct, a site where personal memory and communal values are embedded (Bullough et al., 2024, pp. 138-140). The use of the word “ours” to describe a club reflects this co-produced sense of regional ownership. It signifies more than loyalty, it denotes continuity, rooted pride, and collective authorship of the club’s identity (Bullough et al., 2024, pp. 138-140). Tifos, as large-scale choreographed spectacles, serve as key performative spaces where regional identity is made visible. Through visual elements such as local symbols, mottos, and historical references, these displays project a cultural geography onto the stadium (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 73-76). Thus, tifos can be seen as one of the most meaningful off-pitch rituals for asserting regional rootedness, particularly in a football landscape increasingly dominated by global branding and corporate influence.

This argument is echoed by Gómez-Bantel (2015, pp. 692-693), who describes tifos as tools for articulating a sustainable philosophy of football identity, one that keeps the club embedded in its cultural and geographical environment. This identity is not produced by institutions but is constantly constructed and reconstructed by supporters through cultural practices and symbolic expression, especially in the visual language of tifos. A clear example

is the knight-themed display by VfB Stuttgart fans, which incorporated regional heraldry and the historical motto “Furchtlos und treu” to assert their Swabian identity (Gómez-Bantel, 2015, pp. 696-697).

Regional identity also intersects with political resistance, tifos having the possibility to express regional defiance in contexts of political centralization. Clubs like FC Barcelona and Athletic Club Bilbao have historically represented regional autonomy struggles, with fans using choreographed displays to celebrate cultural pride and express opposition to state structures (Gómez-Bantel, 2015, pp. 699-700). This is also valid for the eastern part of Europe, in Croatia, the rivalry between Dinamo Zagreb and Hajduk Split encapsulating larger economic and political divides. Hajduk’s tifos often invoke southern identity and anti-centralist resistance, incorporating historical references and controversial symbols such as the Confederate flag to articulate opposition to perceived authority (Tsai, 2021, pp. 133-138).

2.5.2 Historical identity

Historical identity plays an equally significant role in the identity of a football club, as it is one of the most powerful and emotionally charged dimensions through which fans construct collective meaning. In the context of tifos, history is not simply recalled, it is actively performed, visualized, and politicized. Supporters use tifo displays to commemorate foundational events, affirm club heritage, and assert collective narratives of pride, struggle, and continuity (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 76-78).

Budka & Jacono (2013, pp. 5-6) emphasize that historical identity is central to the cultural formation of both clubs and their supporters, which includes shared myths, origin stories, and rituals that are maintained and revived through banners, chants, and most visibly, tifos. Ultra groups, in particular, integrate historical references as part of a broader ethos rooted in localism and resistance, with tifos functioning as visual monuments to this historical identity. Those displays do not merely reflect history, but reinscribe it into the present moment, transforming collective memory into live spectacle (Budka & Jacono, 2013, pp. 5-7).

A concrete example can be observed while looking at Hajduk Split’s supporters, which have used the club’s 1911 founding as a symbol of Dalmatian autonomy, with tifos invoking a collective assertion of cultural distinction from Zagreb and reinforcing a sense of historical and emotional belonging among supporters (Tsai, 2021, pp. 133-135). Dinamo Zagreb’s “Bad Blue Boys” similarly draw on historical narratives tied to national conflict, embedding references to the Yugoslav Wars and nationalist identity into their displays (Tsai,

2021, pp. 131-133). Such uses of history are not politically neutral, (Erik Meier, et al., 2018, pp. 490-493) arguing that identity in sport is shaped by both affective ties and ideological positioning. In clubs such as FC St. Pauli, tifos frequently reference social struggles, drawing on anti-fascist and anti-racist themes to situate the club's identity within a historical continuum of activism and resistance (Kassing & Meân, 2022, p. 112).

This ideological function extends into institutional narratives as well, historical symbols such as the English FA's Three Lions or FC Barcelona's connection to the flag of Catalunya serve to connect contemporary fan identity to deeper historical narratives (Kassimeris, 2024, pp. 575-581). These symbols offer a sense of continuity and rooted identity amid broader experiences of political exclusion and the encroaching commercial pressures that increasingly shape modern football culture (Kassimeris, 2024, pp. 577-581). Spatial and historical identities are frequently entangled, Bullough et al. (2024, pp. 138-139), affirming that football clubs were often established in meaningful places, working-class areas, churches, factories, and that these historic locations remain core to the memory and identity of fans. Tifos visualize this memory by transforming matchdays into rituals of historical affirmation, turning stadiums into living archives of collective history (Bullough et al., 2024, pp. 139-140).

2.5.3 Political identity

The third analytical dimension explored in this study is political identity, which represents the civic, ideological, or moral lens through which supporters construct, negotiate, and perform collective identity. As (Erik Meier, et al., 2018, pp. 488-493) emphasize, identity in sport is never purely emotional or affective, it is deeply ideological, formed through beliefs about shared values, civic belonging, and ethical alignment. Football clubs, function not just as teams but as vehicles through which fans express what they stand for, how they see society, and where they position themselves in relation to larger political or social structures. These shared values, whether aligned with anti-fascism, anti-racism, social justice, or nationalism, shape the meaning of support beyond the realm of the sport (Erik Meier, et al., 2018, pp. 478-481).

Within this context, tifos are not merely decorative banners or moments of spectacle, but methods to communicate ethical and political orientations, embedding those worldviews into the space of the stadium and becoming visual interventions that signal solidarity, critique injustice, or reject dominant ideologies (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 121-123). Bullough, et al. (2024, pp. 139-140) argue that in an era where traditional ties to clubs are weakened,

visual rituals like tifos increasingly carry the weight of fan identity. Through them, fans act as though they possess the club, shaping its identity through rituals, songs, badges, and visual media (Bullough et al., 2024, pp. 139-140).

This sense of symbolic ownership allows supporters to reframe and challenge institutional definitions of the club, particularly in communities with strong political engagement. Kassimeris (2024, pp. 577-580) observes that symbols such as crests, flags, and slogans used by fans often carry deeply rooted political meanings which, when rendered in tifos, they become tools of ideological expression, turning the stadium into a platform for civic engagement and resistance. FC St. Pauli stands as a clear example of the relationship, its supporters routinely employing tifos that display anti-Nazi imagery, rainbow flags, and pro-refugee messages, reaffirming values of anti-fascism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ inclusion. These displays are not isolated acts but components of a broader cultural ecosystem that includes street murals, community events, and activist campaigns, all of which extend the political meaning of fandom beyond matchday (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 112-113).

Other clubs also reflect this connection between tifos and political identity, this being very common in Eastern Europe, where clubs such as CSKA Moscow or Partizan Belgrade incorporate the red star in their crests, a symbol tied to communist history and political legacy (Kassimeris, 2024, p. 577). Similarly, England's Three Lions crest evokes monarchical tradition and national pride, and when used in tifos, becomes a symbol through which fans negotiate national belonging or reinforce traditional values (Kassimeris, 2024, pp. 575-576). All of these displays are not just about current beliefs, they are grounded in a long-standing history of political meaning and opposition, which when replicated in tifos, recontextualize past ideologies within present-day fandom (Kassimeris, 2024, pp. 576-577).

The symbolic and ideological framing of tifos also reveals deeper tensions between supporters and institutional authorities over the control of meaning within football culture. The traditional expectation that tifos must be designed, created, and funded by supporters without corporate sponsorship is not merely a stylistic preference, it is a political stance (Kassing & Meân, 2022, p. 2). It reflects an insistence on sovereignty, in the sense outlined by Anderson (2006, pp. 19-22), where in the case of tifos legitimacy is imagined through communal authorship rather than institutional authority. Fans act as sovereigns of cultural production, asserting that their emotional, moral, and social investments entitle them to define the symbolic boundaries of club identity. This imagined sovereignty mirrors broader historical shifts in which traditional hierarchies, monarchs, elites, and now club executives, are displaced by popular will, contemporary fan cultures rejecting the monopolization of

identity by corporate actors, marketing departments, or commodified governance models (Anderson, 2006, pp. 19-22; Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 123-129). In this context, resistance to the commercialization of tifos becomes a civic value in itself, an ideological stance embedded in visual culture. It expresses not only who fans are, but how they believe the game should be organized and who should have the right to shape its public symbols.

The political identity in the context of tifos also includes what Bernstein (2005, pp. 58-60) terms strategic essentialism, the deliberate simplification and foregrounding of certain identity markers to foster unity and communicability in moments of political performance. Tifos, as emblematic devices of this practice, often utilize symbols such as antifascist logos, the red star, rainbow flags, or anti-UEFA slogans to express broader ideological positions into bold visual statements (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp.111-113). These are tactical interventions that foreground essentialized symbols to provoke, unite, and resist. In this way, strategic essentialism in tifos is not a reductive move, but a politically strategic performance of identity designed to assert civic presence and contest hegemonic narratives.

2.6 Tifos as identity work: reflecting, expressing, impressing, mirroring

To understand how tifos function within football culture and discover how do tifos function as visual expressions of club identity, and in what ways do they act as resistance against the commercialization and rebranding of football clubs, it is first necessary to explore the broader concept of club identity. This thesis conceptualizes club identity not as a static or institutionally imposed attribute, but as a fluid and negotiated construct, shaped through continuous interactions between internal values and external perceptions. Rather than viewing identity as a top-down projection from clubs, this approach positions supporters as central agents in its formation having the function of both emotional stakeholders and active cultural producers.

To frame this dynamic understanding of identity, the thesis draws on the Organizational Identity Dynamics Model adapted to the football context by (Nissen, 2015). According to this model, identity is not fixed, but emerges from the interplay between an organization's internal self-concept and the way it is perceived by external actors. This interaction unfolds through four interconnected processes: reflecting, expressing, impressing, and mirroring (Nissen, 2015, pp. 544-547). In the context of this thesis, the model provides a useful analytical lens to interpret tifos not as decorative fan activities, but as intentional acts of identity construction that reflect the supporters' role in shaping the symbolic meaning of their club.

Nissen's analysis of the Danish football club Brøndby IF illustrates how football clubs are shaped by ongoing negotiations involving both internal actors and external forces. Fans play an important role in this process as they hold a unique position as emotional stakeholders and cultural participants, contributing directly to the formation and articulation of club identity (Nissen, 2015, pp. 533-535). Supporters carry the emotional, cultural, and historical essence of the club, making them indispensable to its symbolic construction. By applying this framework, tifos are analysed as acts of identity work through which fans assert interpretive authority and embed their perspectives into the visual fabric of the club (Pauwels Delassus & Mogos Descotes, 2018, p. 87).

2.6.1 The first stage of identity formation: Reflecting

The reflecting process involves an internal articulation of identity shaped by cultural memory and shared history (Nissen, 2015, pp. 543-544). In football culture, this is manifested through tifos that commemorate iconic players, founding moments, or periods of adversity. These visual displays act as collective rituals of remembrance, grounding the club's identity in core narratives that foster unity among supporters (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 73-74). Especially during periods of transition or uncertainty, fans turn to the past through these displays to affirm continuity and uphold the values they believe define their club (Nissen, 2015, pp. 543-544). This practice aligns with the concept of the imagined community, where shared memory serves as the foundation for a collective sense of belonging (Anderson, 2006, pp. 24-35). The reflecting stage is thus an introspective process in which supporters revisit the club's foundational values, local heritage, and collective memory to reaffirm identity. This stage is particularly linked to regional and historical identity, dimensions rooted in place and tradition, which remain constant and are beyond the influence of supporters. A fan cannot alter the geographic or historical origins of their club, rather, tifos that reflect this identity act as ritual affirmations of an enduring sense of "who we are" (Kassimeris, 2024, p. 573).

2.6.2 The second stage of identity formation: Expressing

The expressing mechanism refers to the outward communication of internal identity, how it makes itself known through identity claims (Nissen, 2015, pp. 544-545). While football institutions may engage in public partnerships to promote specific values, fans express their own interpretations of the club's ethos through tifos (Nissen, 2015, p. 544). These displays often assert cultural or political views or critique developments perceived as compromising the club's heritage. Tifos serve as a medium through which supporters assert

authenticity and legitimacy, often employing satire, symbolism, or visual metaphor to reinforce their role as cultural authors (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 128-129). The expressing stage thus involves a deliberate projection of identity, where fans visually communicate ideological stances, values, or claims of ownership. This phase aligns most closely with political identity, particularly in its sovereignty subtype, as tifos are intentionally crafted to convey a message to a broader audience. These displays go beyond affirming group belonging as they assert authority, visually declaring, “this is how we define our club.” Whether invoking civic values attributed to the club or staking symbolic ownership (“Our Club”), this stage transforms fandom into visual authorship, projecting deeply held beliefs into the public sphere (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 121-123).

2.6.3 The third stage of identity formation: Impressing

Impressing refers to the strategic effort to influence how external audiences perceive the club and its supporters (Nissen, 2015, pp. 545-546). While official club campaigns may be dismissed as superficial or overly commercial, tifos often succeed in shaping public perception due to their emotional intensity, creativity, and scale (Kassing & Meân, 2022, p. 37). These fan-produced displays highlight loyalty, unity, and passion, enhancing the club’s image while also challenging dominant media narratives or institutional authority. As symbolic interventions, tifos can provoke admiration, spark controversy, or stimulate broader public discourse, positioning fans as key agents in defining the club’s external image (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 108-111). The impressing stage involves projecting identity outward with the specific aim of shaping how external actors, such as media outlets, rival fans, or governing bodies, perceive the club and its supporter culture (Nissen, 2015, pp. 545-546). This mechanism spans all three identity dimensions, regional, political, and historical, because tifos are inherently performative and crafted for visibility. Whether asserting tradition, political autonomy, or regional pride, tifos become powerful tools through which supporters seek not only to express identity but to actively influence how that identity is received and understood by the outside world (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 1-4).

2.6.4 The fourth stage of identity formation: Mirroring

Mirroring refers to the process by which fans respond to external perceptions of the club (Nissen, 2015, pp. 546-547). In the face of negative portrayals, institutional criticism, or stigmatization, supporters use tifos to reject imposed narratives and assert alternative interpretations of the club’s identity. These displays may protest against leadership decisions,

governing bodies, or media framing, serving as cultural counter-narratives that reclaim symbolic ownership of the club (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 128-129). This stage represents a reactive phase in the construction of identity, where supporters engage with external actors, such as the media, rival supporters, or football authorities, not by remaining passive but by confronting and reshaping how the club is publicly understood (Nissen, 2015, pp. 546-547). Mirroring is closely associated with political identity, conveyed through expressions of sovereignty, and most distinctly through the use of strategic essentialism: the distillation of complex frustrations into emotionally charged, simplified symbols (e.g., “UEFA = Mafia”). Through mirroring, fans do more than express or project identity, they actively reaffirm it in defiance of external pressures. In this way, tifos become tools of resistance, allowing supporters to challenge dominant narratives and reinforce a collective sense of meaning tied to their vision of the club (Kassing & Meân, 2022, p. 129).

By engaging through these four mechanisms, reflecting, expressing, impressing, and mirroring, tifos can be analysed as an integral part to the creation of the club identity by fans. They preserve historical consciousness, assert values and ideological positions, influence broader perception and challenge contested representations. Supporters, therefore, act not only as custodians of tradition but also as active producers of meaning, making tifos a primary medium through which football identity is constructed, contested, and sustained over time.

2.7 Contextual background of clubs and rivalries

To understand how tifos express club identity, it is important to consider the social, cultural, and political background of each club, as well as the football rivalries in which they are involved. These contexts help ensure that the meaning of each tifo is grounded in real club culture, not just personal interpretation. The clubs described below provide essential context for understanding the tifos associated with them.

Celtic FC vs. Rangers FC. The rivalry between Celtic FC and Rangers FC is rooted in Scotland’s sectarian history, the clubs representing distinct socio-political and religious affiliations. Celtic FC, founded by Irish Catholic immigrants, maintains a strong Irish-Catholic identity, which is often marginalized in Scottish society. Rangers FC, traditionally linked to Unionist and Protestant values, maintained an unofficial anti-Catholic policy until 1989 (Kelly, 2010, p. 3-5).

Liverpool FC vs. Manchester United FC. The Liverpool Manchester United rivalry can be traced back to the 19th century, when Manchester's rise in the cotton trade and the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal, which bypassed Liverpool's port, fuelled regional resentment. Their rivalry grew as both clubs became the most successful in English football, matches reflecting sporting competition and deeper city-based and cultural identities (Gerald, 2021).

FC Barcelona vs. RCD Espanyol. The rivalry between FC Barcelona and RCD Espanyol, two Barcelona-based clubs, is based on their fan cultures, who express opposing views of Catalan identity. FC Barcelona is widely seen as a symbol of Catalan nationalism and resistance, while RCD Espanyol was historically associated with Spanish institutions due to its royal patronage, which led to its marginalization in Catalan identity politics (Kubiacyk, 2021, pp. 136-138).

Atlético Madrid vs. Real Madrid. Real Madrid, tied to wealth and national power, is based in the upscale north and promotes a global, commercial image, centred around the city of Madrid and the stadium Santiago Bernabéu (Rodríguez Ortega, 2017, pp. 717-719). Their rival, Atlético Madrid, with origins rooted in the working-class south at the Vicente Calderón Stadium, has seen its identity shift with the move to the Wanda Metropolitano. This relocation, driven by commercial interests, has raised concerns among fans about losing the club's community-focused spirit (Rodríguez Ortega, 2017, pp. 717-719).

Bayern Munich vs. Borussia Dortmund. The rivalry between Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund is shaped by regional identity and contrasting club cultures. Unlike local derbies, it reflects deeper tensions in German football between corporate dominance and grassroots loyalty. Bayern symbolizes success and commercialization, with a strong focus on global branding. In contrast, Dortmund, rooted in the working-class Ruhr region, is known for its passionate, community-based support (Bundesliga, 2025).

FC St. Pauli vs. FC Hansa Rostock. The derby between FC St. Pauli and FC Hansa Rostock is known in the football world as the "Fear Derby". St. Pauli's fans are known for their leftist, anti-fascist stance, often using tifos to promote anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic messages, prioritizing social justice over profit. In contrast, Hansa Rostock, from economically troubled Eastern Germany, has seen a rise in far-right elements among its fans, many tifos reflecting nationalist or xenophobic themes (Clover, 2011).

Paris Saint-Germain vs. Olympique de Marseille. The rivalry between Paris Saint-Germain and Olympique de Marseille reflects France's socio-cultural divide between the wealthy capital and the working-class south. PSG, founded in 1970 and backed by Qatar Sports Investments since 2011, represents centralization and the commercialization of modern football. In contrast, OM, with its roots in Marseille's gritty, multicultural identity, is seen as more authentic and resistant to corporatization (Get French Football News, 2024).

Saint-Étienne vs. Olympique Lyonnais. The Derby du Rhône, seen as France's first major football rivalry, reflects regional and socio-economic contrasts. Saint-Étienne, with its working-class, industrial roots, is linked to a nostalgic, community-focused football culture. In contrast, Lyon's OL, especially under Jean-Michel Aulas in the 2000s, represents modern, commercially driven success (Through the Turnstiles, n.d., A Brief History of AS Saint-Étienne v Olympique).

Inter Milan vs. AC Milan. The Derby della Madonnina, contested between Inter Milan and AC Milan, reflects a deeply rooted socio-cultural divide within the city of Milan. Historically, AC Milan was seen as the club of the working class and local Milanese, while Inter Milan positioned itself as cosmopolitan and bourgeois, embracing international players and a broader identity (Football Today, 2020).

AS Roma vs. SS Lazio. The rivalry between AS Roma and SS Lazio, known as the Derby della Capitale, is one of the most politically and culturally charged in European football. AS Roma has historically been associated with the working-class districts of Rome, while Lazio draws support from more affluent northern neighbourhoods and is linked with conservative and nationalist leanings (Sagerson, 2025).

Brøndby IF vs. FC København. The rivalry between Brøndby IF and FC København is deeply embedded in contrasting socio-cultural identities. Brøndby IF, rooted in the working-class suburb of Vestegnen, embodies a culture of solidarity, resilience, and local pride. In contrast, FC København represents the urban, affluent, and cosmopolitan identity of central Copenhagen (Football In Denmark, 2022).

Legia Warszawa vs. Wisła Kraków. The rivalry between Legia Warszawa and Wisła Kraków is based in the long-standing subcultural dynamics of Polish hooliganism. Unlike many traditional football rivalries shaped by geographic or class distinctions, this antagonism

is largely rooted in the violent and performative competition between ultras groups associated with both clubs (To My Kibice, n.d).

Panathinaikos vs. Olympiakos. The rivalry between Panathinaikos and Olympiakos is not only the most intense football rivalry in Greece but also a symbolic clash of socio-political identities. Olympiakos, based in the port city of Piraeus, historically represents the working-class population and the industrial, seafaring community. In contrast, Panathinaikos, located in central Athens, is traditionally associated with the upper-class and intellectual elite (Bleacher Report, 2018).

Dinamo Bucharest vs. FCSB/Steaua Bucharest. The rivalry between FCSB and Dinamo Bucharest is rooted in the country's communist past and institutional power dynamics. Steaua symbolized the military elite, while Dinamo was created under the control of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (McGarry, 2020). In recent years, the rivalry has taken on new layers of complexity due to the highly unusual situation surrounding Steaua's identity. After a legal dispute over the ownership of the name, brand, and honours, the original army-backed club, now known as CSA Steaua, was separated from the club competing in the top division, FCSB, owned by businessman Gigi Becali (McGarry, 2020).

FC Porto vs. SL Benfica. The rivalry between FC Porto and SL Benfica, often referred to as "O Clássico," is one of the most politically and culturally charged in European football. It reflects a deep-seated regional divide between Lisbon, Portugal's capital and traditional power centre, and Porto, the economic hub of the north (Alves, 2018).

Fenerbahçe vs. Galatasaray. Originating in Istanbul, this derby reflects cultural, political, and class-based divisions within Turkish society. Galatasaray has long been associated with Westernized, upper-class segments of Istanbul's population. Fenerbahçe, established in the Kadıköy district, traditionally draws support from more nationalist and conservative communities (GiveMeSport, 2023).

Red Star Belgrade vs. Partizan Belgrade. The clubs were initially founded in the aftermath of World War II with ties to state institutions, Red Star linked to the Yugoslav People's Army and Partizan to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Today the rivalry is driven less by politics and more by history, fan culture, and territorial dominance. Violence plays a central role in shaping the identity of both fan groups, with clashes between them happening often (BBC Sport, 2018).

Ajax Amsterdam vs. Feyenoord Rotterdam. The rivalry between Ajax and Feyenoord embodies more than sporting competition. Ajax, based in Amsterdam, represents a cosmopolitan, liberal identity linked to wealth, artistry, and progressive values. Feyenoord Rotterdam symbolizes working-class, the club drawing on the city's blue-collar history, shaped by post-war reconstruction. Feyenoord fans see themselves in opposition to Ajax's perceived elitism and metropolitan detachment, embracing a gritty, anti-establishment identity (Billingham, 2018).

R.S.C. Anderlecht vs. Standard de Liège. The rivalry between R.S.C. Anderlecht and Standard de Liège encapsulates linguistic, regional, and class divisions within Belgium. Anderlecht, situated in Brussels, a bilingual capital, has historically been associated with affluence and the bourgeois elite. In contrast, Standard de Liège is from the industrial city Liège in Wallonia, representing the working-class and the French-speaking community of the region (Šifta, 2023, December 06).

AIK vs Djurgården. The Stockholm Derby between AIK and Djurgården is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural and class divisions of Swedish society. AIK, traditionally associated with the working-class neighbourhoods of northern Stockholm, contrasts with Djurgården, historically connected to the more affluent Östermalm district (Ostlere, 2018).

Hajduk Split vs. Dinamo Zagreb. The rivalry between Hajduk Split and Dinamo Zagreb reflects divisions based on regional elements. Hajduk embodies a Dalmatian identity rooted in perceived marginalization by the central government in Zagreb, while Dinamo represents the Zagreb-based identity and is historically linked with state power and nationalist narratives (Tsai, 2021).

CSKA Sofia vs. Levski Sofia. CSKA Sofia against Levski Sofia stands as one of Eastern Europe's most ideologically charged football rivalries. CSKA, originally the club of the Bulgarian army, has long been associated with centralized authority and the former communist regime. Conversely, Levski Sofia has been viewed as the anti-establishment side, tied to liberalism (Šifta, 2023, October 04).

Slavia Prague vs. Sparta Prague. Slavia and Sparta have historically represented opposing cultural and political poles within Czech society. Sparta has long been associated with the establishment and was particularly tied to the communist regime. Slavia Prague has

cultivated a more intellectual and cultural identity, historically supported by Prague's liberal elite (Through the Turnstile, n.d, The Prague Derby).

Ferencváros vs Újpest Ferencváros, traditionally supported by Hungary's working-class and nationalist segments, is often associated with more conservative political ideologies and a strong Hungarian identity. Their rival, Újpest, has often been associated with a more liberal, intellectual fanbase and perceived as cosmopolitan, sometimes even internationalist, particularly during the socialist era (Cserep, 2019).

Rapid Wien vs. Austria Wien. Rapid Wien has traditionally drawn its support from the working-class western districts of Vienna, the club being formed in a brewery and embodying labour-oriented values. Austria Wien developed a reputation as the club of the more affluent, middle-class eastern parts of the city, with associations to cultural elitism. Austria Wien is perceived by many Rapid fans as representative of the sanitized, corporatized vision of modern football (Flint, 2015).

3. Methodology

After the theoretical framework has been established, a strong methodological approach is required to support the analysis. This section outlines the multilayered methodological framework employed to address the research questions: *How do tifos created by football supporters function as visual expressions of club identity? And in what ways do tifos serve as acts of resistance against the commercialization and rebranding of football clubs?*

In order to do that, a qualitative, two-layered analytical strategy, which combines semiotic analysis and hybrid thematic coding that integrates both deductive and inductive approaches. Qualitative research methods are particularly appropriate for this study, as they focus on interpretation, subjectivity, and meaning-making in cultural contexts (Boeije, 2010, pp. 3-7). Tifos, as rich visual and symbolic artifacts, require analytical tools capable of uncovering not only their surface-level imagery but also their deeper cultural, emotional, and political significance. Therefore, the methodological design of this thesis was inspired by the framework proposed by Georgousis et al. (2022), which successfully integrated semiotic analysis with thematic coding in a study of student perceptions related to geoenvironmental concepts. While the subject matter differs, the analytical approach offered a valuable model for adapting these techniques to the study of tifos as communicative and ideological acts.

3.1 Unit of analysis and criteria

Each individual tifo display is treated as a separate unit of analysis, considered as a complete visual and symbolic communication artifact. The study includes tifos created by supporter groups between 2010 and 2025 in European football clubs. This period was selected because, after 2000 and especially after 2010, tifos became more widespread and visible due to the growth of media and social media, which enabled their rapid dissemination across different platforms and locations (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 137-138).

Only tifos that feature visual or textual elements related to club identity were included, particularly those created during periods of tension between fans and clubs, such as conflicts with management, phases of branding and commercialization, changes in ownership, poor sporting results (e.g., relegations or rival dominance), or disputes with football governing bodies like UEFA and FIFA. To ensure that the displays reflect collective and organized expressions of supporter culture, only large-scale tifos covering entire stands and incorporating multiple visual elements (e.g., banners, flags, card displays) were selected.

Tifos limited to small sections, lacking substantial visual complexity were excluded, because such tifos may not offer enough material for comprehensive semiotic analysis. The selection of countries and football clubs for this study was guided by several interrelated criteria. Primarily, emphasis was placed on nations where football enjoys widespread popularity, supported by the presence of historically significant clubs with large, passionate fan bases. Additional factors included the existence of strong local or national rivalries, and the visibility and engagement of supporters within the online football culture, especially through the documentation and sharing of tifo displays.

In instances where reliable data was lacking due to a limited digital footprint, such as in countries like Moldova or Ukraine, those nations were omitted from the analysis. A further consideration was whether the country is a UEFA member and actively participates in European competitions. This framework explains the inclusion of Turkey, whose clubs regularly feature in continental tournaments, while Russia was excluded due to ongoing restrictions. Additionally, selection was based on participation in UEFA competitions rather than strict geographical criteria, as UEFA functions as the organizational home for European football clubs and offers a more practical basis for defining the scope of this thesis.

Moreover, the study sought to include the main rivals of the featured teams. Tifos often reach their peak expression during derby matches, when emotions are heightened and visibility is at its greatest. Including rival clubs ensures a more balanced representation of the football culture in those contexts, and allows for a fuller understanding of the dynamics at play. This also accounts for the presence of more than two teams from some countries, as their inter-club rivalries and the cultural impact of their tifos were too substantial to ignore.

Importantly, the study also made space for clubs with a strong tradition of using tifos to communicate social or political values, even if they do not belong to the most commercially successful or widely supported teams. A notable example is FC St. Pauli in Germany, which, despite not being among the nation's biggest clubs in terms of trophies or market size, was included due to its internationally recognized fan culture and long-standing history of expressive, political-driven tifo displays.

3.2 Methodological inspiration and adaptation

Georgousis et al. (2022) model which combined semiotic analysis with thematic analysis, allowed for the identification of both explicit and latent meanings in short textual responses by using sensitizing concepts and a combination of deductive and inductive coding strategies (Georgousis et al., 2022, pp. 5-9). While the data used by Georgousis et al. (2022)

consisted of written responses, this study adapts the same logic, but instead of student sentences, the unit of analysis here are the tifos. Like Georgousis et al. (2022), the study applied a two-layered strategy: first, a semiotic reading of visual and textual elements within tifos, and second, a thematic coding process informed by the theoretical framework of this thesis (2022, pp. 1-2). Though these two phases are methodologically distinct, they are interconnected because the semiotic analysis provides the interpretive material necessary for thematic coding, while the coding process structures the interpretation and brings analytic clarity. Together, they enable the tifos to be understood not merely as visual spectacles but as active texts through which supporters construct identity and challenge commercial narratives.

3.3 First layer of analysis: semiotic analysis

The first analytical layer employs a semiotic approach grounded in Roland Barthes' two levels of signification: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the most immediate, literal meaning of a sign, what is directly visible and commonly recognized without deeper interpretation (Chandler, 2021). In the context of this thesis, the denotative stage involves systematically documenting all visual and textual elements present in each tifo. This includes visual features such as club crests, stadium illustrations, portraits of players, or national flags, as well as textual elements like slogans or dates. The focus remains on identifying what is shown, not what it might imply. For example, a tifo featuring the phrase "Our Club, Our Rules" or the image of a trophy is first recorded at face value, without yet attaching symbolic meaning. Although this step appears objective, it is important to acknowledge that denotation is already shaped by cultural norms and dominant interpretations that often present themselves as neutral (Chandler, 2021).

Connotation forms the second stage of analysis and refers to the culturally and emotionally charged meanings attached to the signs identified in the denotative process. This level uncovers the symbolic associations that elements of the tifo may carry, such as pride, loyalty, protest, or resistance, depending on their historical and cultural context (Chandler, 2021). At this level, meaning is no longer fixed or literal, but instead socially constructed and ideologically informed. For example, a clenched fist may connote political resistance, while a club's original crest might evoke authenticity and opposition to commercial rebranding. These interpretations are guided by shared cultural codes and can also draw on intertextuality, referencing wider themes such as rivalries, national identity, or political struggle (Chandler, 2021). Example of the semiotic analysis discussed here can be found in Appendix A, where tifos discussed in the thesis text are presented as models; the same analytical framework was

systematically applied to all other tifos examined in the study. The connotative analysis was guided not only by general semiotic principles, but also by contextual football knowledge specific to each club and rivalry, as detailed in the Theoretical Framework.

3.4 Second layer of analysis: thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns, known as themes within a data set (Naeem et al., 2023, pp. 1-2).

These themes represent recurring meanings that are significant in understanding the studied phenomenon. The approach is particularly useful in social sciences for generating insights from complex, descriptive data such as interview transcripts, focus groups, or even visual content. According to Naeem et al. (2023, pp. 1-2)., thematic analysis provides a structured yet flexible methodological framework that enables researchers to explore data in depth and articulate findings that are both theoretically grounded and practically meaningful. While thematic analysis can be conducted inductively, where themes emerge purely from the data without preconceptions, it is equally suited to a deductive approach, which is particularly relevant for theoretically informed research (Naeem et al., 2023, pp. 1-2).

Importantly, this analysis followed a hybrid thematic approach, combining both deductive and inductive strategies. This decision was guided by the research goal of interpreting tifos not just through pre-established theoretical categories, but also by remaining open to patterns and meanings that emerged from the data itself

In deductive thematic analysis, the researcher begins with pre-established concepts or theoretical constructs and uses them to guide the coding and theming process (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 13). Deductive coding is a top-down approach in which the theoretical framework serves as a lens through which the data is interpreted, helping to structure the analysis from the outset (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 9). The deductive component of the analysis was informed by sensitizing concepts drawn from the theoretical framework, namely regional identity, historical identity, and political identity. These concepts guided the initial development of a structured codebook prior to analysis. At the same time, the study maintained inductive flexibility, allowing new codes to emerge directly from the data during the coding process.

The data for the thematic analysis consisted of the interpreted symbolic components of approximately 50 tifos, as established in the prior semiotic analysis. Each tifo was broken down into specific elements, such as slogans, symbols, colour schemes, or visual references and these components were then coded based on their symbolic and ideological meaning. In

other words, the thematic analysis was not performed on raw visual data alone, but on the interpreted meaning of visual and textual elements, previously analysed semiotically.

3.4.1 Sensitizing concepts and Code Book

The thematic coding process in this study was informed by three key sensitizing concepts developed from the theoretical framework: regional identity, historical identity, and political identity, as it can be observed in Appendix B. These concepts, explored in detail in the previous section, served as interpretive lenses to help unpack the symbolic and ideological functions of tifos within football culture. Rather than operating as rigid analytical categories, sensitizing concepts function as flexible tools that direct the researcher's attention to potential meanings within the data (Bowen, 2006, p. 2). As conceptual anchors, they made it possible to interpret the tifos not merely as decorative fan displays, but as complex visual texts through which supporters perform cultural authorship, resist commercial homogenization, and construct shared identity.

Prior to engaging in full thematic analysis, a pre-defined codebook was constructed based on the sensitizing concepts developed from the literature reviewed in the theoretical framework. This codebook was not adopted from an existing source, but was instead custom-built through engagement with key studies on identity, visual culture, and fan resistance in the context of football. For instance, work by Bullough et al. (2024) and Gómez-Bantel (2015) shaped the regional identity codes, while Budka & Jacono (2013) and Tsai (2021) informed the coding of historical identity. Political identity codes were derived from conceptual insights by Kassimeris (2024), Anderson (2006) and Bernstein (2005), whose work, even though not related to football, on symbolic sovereignty and strategic essentialism provided essential theoretical foundations.

Each sensitizing concept informed a distinct set of codes that were used for the analysis of 50 tifos drawn from European football clubs and which enabled the identification of symbolic elements and recurring motifs within the tifos. For example, tifos expressing regional identity frequently included localized imagery such as city landmarks, regional flags, or slogans referencing urban pride and geographical belonging. These informed codes such as *stadium representation*, *direct reference to location*, and *local symbols and colours*. Similarly, the concept of historical identity guided the development of codes that captured references to the club's foundation, legendary players, key anniversaries, and historic rivalries, including *foundational memory* or *commemorative reference*. The third cluster, political identity, drew on displays that conveyed ideological or civic positions, including anti-fascist symbolism,

pro-sovereignty claims or critiques to football institutions. The codes developed based on political identity were *sovereignty*, *ideological or religious stance*, *strategic essentialism*, and *nationalistic reference*.

However, while deductively grounded, the codebook's application remained flexible and iterative. As new variations or unexpected combinations of visual motifs appeared during the analysis, codes were refined and, where necessary, expanded. This allowed the analysis to remain responsive to the data, preserving the empirical richness of tifos as performative acts of meaning-making. In this way, two new codes related to historical identity emerged, which are *rivalry-based history* and *brotherhood between fans*. The final codebook is outlined in Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3, detailing the codes used in the analysis.

Sensitizing Concept: Regional identity

Code	Description
Direct reference to location	Affirmation of the club's connection to a specific city, town, or region.
Stadium representation	Depictions of the club's home stadium, especially iconic or original grounds.
Local symbols and colours	Use of regional flags, coats of arms, or traditional colour schemes associated with local identity.

Table 1: Codes used to analyse regional identity in tifos

Sensitizing Concept: Historical identity

Code	Description
Foundational memory	References to the club's founding moments, early emblems, or legendary historical figures.
Commemorative reference	Visual tributes to past players, anniversaries, historic victories etc.
Rivalry-based history	Representations of long-standing rivalries rooted in historical narratives.
Brotherhood between fans	Displays that celebrate enduring alliances between fan groups from different clubs

Table 2: Codes used to analyse historical identity in tifos

Sensitizing Concept: Political Identity

Code	Description
Ideological or religious stance	Visuals expressing ideological or religious worldviews (e.g. socialism, anti-fascism, faith affiliation).
Nationalistic reference	Symbols or statements related to national identity, state politics, or territorial belonging.
Sovereignty	Visual claims that fans are symbolic owners or authors of the club's identity. Often includes slogans like "Our Club" or prominent ultra-group symbols.
Strategic Essentialism	Simplified, emotionally charged messages of resistance or protest, often directed at institutions like UEFA or club management.

Table 3: Codes used to analyse political identity in tifos

3.4.2 Coding process

The thematic coding process in this study was conducted manually using a structured spreadsheet designed to organize and interpret the complex visual and textual elements present in each tifo. Each tifo was treated as an individual unit of analysis, but its internal composition was examined in detail to account for the rich and layered symbolism characteristic of these visual performances, so, rather than analysing each tifo as a single, unified message, the approach involved breaking it into its component parts, such as written slogans, visual metaphors, banners, references to historical figures, symbolic colour schemes, and other distinctive visual features. These parts had already been examined through semiotic analysis to understand what they might mean or represent in a deeper, cultural or symbolic way.

The thematic analysis then worked directly with these interpreted elements, meaning that the two methods were not used separately, but built on each other. The meanings found in the semiotic stage became the basis for the themes identified later on. In this way, the semiotic and thematic analysis worked together as a connected process: first interpreting what the elements mean, and then organizing those meanings into broader categories based on the theory used in the study. The analytical process was guided by the hybrid thematic framework presented previously, combining both inductive and deductive methods.

The coding process in this study followed the six-phase model of thematic analysis proposed by Naeem et al. (2023), adapted to the specific requirements of analysing tifos as

visually and symbolically complex cultural texts. The first step consisted of organizing the textual data previously identified during the semiotic analysis, into a structured spreadsheet. These components included interpreted visual motifs, textual slogans or colour symbolism, each associated with a particular club. This initial step aimed to establish a comprehensive and structured dataset for subsequent analysis (Naeem et al., 2023, pp. 5-6). The second step involved familiarization with the data, this phase entailing multiple close readings of the recorded elements to develop a nuanced understanding of their meanings, relationships, and functions. Special attention was given to recurring motifs across different tifos (Naeem et al., 2023, pp. 6-7).

Once the data had been thoroughly reviewed, the third step began, during which the pre-established codes were applied. These codes consisted of descriptive labels that captured the significance of individual elements. For example, a depiction of a stadium could be labelled as *stadium symbolism*, while an image commemorating a historic victory might be coded as *commemorative reference*. The codes served as analytical tools that translated data into conceptual units suitable for thematic analysis, and each code was assigned in order to reflect both the explicit and implied meanings of the element it represented, allowing for a more interpretively rich categorization (Naeem et al., 2023, pp. 7-8). Sensitizing concepts were used in my analysis because they provided a flexible and open-ended framework for interpreting the data. Unlike fixed, definitive concepts, which narrowly define what to look for, sensitizing concepts act more like guiding ideas, they offer a starting point for exploration without limiting interpretation (Bowen, 2006, p. 2). This openness allowed for new codes to emerge, such as *rivalry-based history* and *brotherhood between fans*.

The fourth phase consisted of categorizing these codes under broader themes. Theme development involves clustering codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships that yield deeper insights into the research question. At this stage, the focus shifts from a detailed analysis of individual codes and categories to a more abstract level by constructing overarching themes. These themes are more than just recurring elements, because they reflect patterned meanings that connect the data with the research objectives (Naeem et al., 2023, pp.10-11). Selected keywords often aligned with established theoretical concepts or hypotheses, guiding the organization and interpretation of data (Bowen, 2006, p. 11).

A guiding principle in this phase was that each tifo was assigned to a single, most thematically relevant category, based on the combination of symbolic codes it contained. Although many tifos contained overlapping elements, thematic classification was determined

by the combination of codes present in the display. Because certain codes, such as *sovereignty*, *foundational memory*, or *strategic essentialism*, appeared across multiple themes, their meaning was interpreted in relation to the specific combination in which they occurred, rather than in isolation, this approach allowing for a coherent structure while acknowledging at the same time the multidimensional character of tifos.

After categorization, during the fifth step, the themes were reviewed and refined to improve internal consistency and conceptual clarity. The goal of this phase was to enhance the analytical robustness of the coding structure by ensuring that each theme was clearly defined, distinct from others, and consistently applied. Refinement helped preserve the alignment between empirical observations and the theoretical constructs guiding the study (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 12).

The sixth and final step involved the development of an interpretive model that synthesized the findings of the thematic analysis. The final stage of thematic analysis involves constructing a conceptual model, a synthesized representation of the data shaped by both empirical findings and theoretical insights. This model functions as a response to the research questions and highlights the study's original contribution to the field. It brings together all key themes, relationships, and patterns identified throughout the analysis, offering a cohesive framework that encapsulates the core meanings derived from the data (Naeem et al., pp. 13-14).

In parallel with the thematic coding, each tifo was also analysed through the lens of Nissen's (2017) Organizational Identity Dynamics Model which conceptualizes identity not as a fixed trait, but as a dynamic process constructed through four interrelated mechanisms: reflecting, expressing, impressing, and mirroring. Unlike thematic grouping, which was based on specific combinations of symbolic codes, the alignment with Nissen's stages was determined by the presence of individual codes associated with each stage. For instance, *foundational memory* signalled reflecting, while *strategic essentialism* indicated mirroring.

The purpose of this stage was to determine whether tifos could be understood as holistic and dynamic expressions of club identity. Tifos that included elements linked to all four stages were interpreted as fully developed acts of symbolic authorship, going beyond simple decoration to actively shape and negotiate the club's identity. If any had not, they would have been replaced to ensure the sample consisted only of visual performances that meaningfully participated in the co-construction of club identity. However, that was not the case as all selected tifos met the requirement.

It is important to mention that, while most of the analytical codes are grouped under broader identity dimensions, two specific codes, *sovereignty* and *strategic essentialism*, are listed separately within political identity in Table 4. These two codes are particularly relevant for answering the second research question, which focuses on resistance to commercialization and rebranding. They capture moments where tifos go beyond expressing values and actively push back against institutional control: either by claiming symbolic ownership over the club or by using simplified but powerful protest messages. Highlighting them in this way helps draw attention to how tifos act not only as identity expressions, but also as tools of visual resistance.

Identity Dimension	Definition	Example in Tifos	Stages of Identity Construction
Regional Identity	Any reference to the club's geographic context, ranging from neighbourhood, city, region, or nation, that symbolizes the connection between the team and its socio, spatial environment. These references signal a shared sense of belonging, cultural rootedness, and emotional attachment to place among supporter	Dinamo Bucharest depicting their original 1948 stadium in tifos to reaffirm local roots.	Reflecting stage Impressing stage
Historical Identity	References to foundational moments, celebrated successes, historical struggles, or other defining events from the past that have significantly shaped the club's narrative and meaning. These references serve to reinforce continuity, collective memory, and a sense of authenticity among supporters.	Manchester United's tifo with 'The Spirit of '68' celebrating their first European Cup victory.	Reflecting stage Impressing stage
Political Identity	Any reference that articulates civic, ideological, or moral values through visual or textual elements. These expressions position the club and its supporters within broader political or ethical frameworks, transforming fandom into a site of ideological engagement and resistance.	Celtic using the Celtic cross to emphasize the club's Irish and Catholic heritage.	Expressing stage Impressing stage Mirroring stage
Political Identity: Sovereignty	References to the symbolic and discursive assertion by supporters of their right to define, represent, and possess the club's identity. It is often expressed through language of ownership (e.g., "our club", "my city"),	Ajax displaying a banner reading 'Our Club from Amsterdam' to assert fan ownership and identity.	Expressing stage Mirroring stage

	affirming fans as the rightful cultural authors of the club.		
Political Identity: Strategic essentialism	A simplified, symbolically potent form of resistance expressed through visual and textual elements in tifos. It is used by supporters to challenge governing bodies, club management, or institutional power by reducing complex grievances into emotionally charged and easily recognizable messages.	Borussia Dortmund's tifo with the slogan 'UEFA = Mafia' protesting against institutional control.	Mirroring stage

Table 4: Dimensions of identity expressed through tifos

4. Results

This section presents the five main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the selected tifos. These themes reflect the ways in which supporters visually construct, affirm, and contest club identity through choreographed displays. The analysis resulted in five key themes: *Manifestation and assertion of political beliefs and values*, *Historical memory as emotional anchor*, *Assertion of superiority and resistance toward rivals and institutions*, *Supporter ownership and collective identity*, and *Intergenerational and territorial belonging*.

Throughout this chapter, the format “*code + code + code*” was used to represent combinations of codes identified during the thematic analysis. These codes, outlined in Table 1,2,3, reflect how tifos simultaneously express multiple dimensions of identity. For example, a sequence like “*foundational memory + sovereignty + strategic essentialism*” signals the presence of layered meanings within a single display, combining references to tradition, symbolic ownership, and protest.

These combinations of codes served not only as interpretive tools for understanding the complex messages embedded in tifos, but also as the foundation for the thematic structure. The five themes emerged directly from patterns of code combinations, each reflecting how supporters negotiate and perform regional, historical, and political dimensions of identity through visual display. Each theme is therefore grounded in distinct clusters of code combinations, as it can be observed in Appendix C, highlighting the consistent ways in which supporters construct and assert identity within the football context.

In addition to examining the presence, combination, and meaning of codes within each theme, this section also discusses how each theme aligns with the different stages of identity construction defined by the Organizational Identity Dynamics Model adapted to the football context (Nissen, 2015). This model conceptualizes identity as a dynamic process composed of four interrelated mechanisms: reflecting, expressing, impressing, and mirroring (Nissen, 2015, pp. 544-547). As outlined in the theoretical framework of this thesis, a tifo can be considered a fully realized act of identity construction when it engages with all four of these stages.

Rather than treating this model as a standalone category, its four identity-building stages are applied directly within each thematic section, allowing for a better analysis. The presence of specific codes, linked to the three main identity dimensions (regional, historical, and political), indicates participation in one or more stages of this model. These dimensions,

as presented in Table 4, are associated with particular symbolic markers that directly correspond to the stages of reflecting, expressing, impressing, and mirroring. In this way, each theme demonstrates how tifos function as complex cultural practices that are deeply embedded in identity work.

4.1 Theme 1. Manifestation and Assertion of Political Beliefs and Values

This theme was identified in the analysis and addresses the ways in which tifos operate as visual manifestations of political beliefs and values. These choreographed displays are not merely decorative but are deeply embedded in supporter culture as symbolic acts through which fans articulate collective beliefs such as nationalistic identity, resistance or social justice. In this sense, tifos are turned into platforms for political performance, used by supporters to place both their club and their community within broader ideological narratives. However, these narratives are not necessarily universally shared, but rather are shaped by specific historical, territorial, and cultural contexts, often reflecting the lived experiences of particular cities, regions, or neighbourhoods.

The theme *manifestation and assertion of political beliefs and values* demonstrates how tifos often fuse political identity with local or regional pride. Code combinations such as *direct reference to location + sovereignty* or *nationalistic reference* shows how supporters ground ideological statements in territorial belonging. Tsai's (2021, pp. 133-135) study of Hajduk Split illustrates this clearly: fans draw on Dalmatian identity, resistance against policies that favour the city of Zagreb and historical memory to express autonomy in a politically centralized context. Similar dynamics are visible in FC Barcelona tifos, which link Catalan regional identity to aspirations for sovereignty (Gómez-Bantel, 2015, pp. 699-700).

Beyond nationalism, tifos also articulate ideological sovereignty, the belief that supporters, not institutions, determine the club's meaning. Fan performances are often tied to values such as social justice, anti-fascism, or civic autonomy, in this sense, tifos become sports media products which function as public interventions, transforming the stadium into a site where identity, values, and resistance are visibly performed (Erik Meier, et al., 2018, pp. 477-480).

After the analysis, a total of 14 unique combinations of codes were associated with this theme, offering insight into how various political dimensions are interwoven in the discourse of supporters. The most elaborate combination that forms this theme is: *direct reference to location + nationalistic reference + sovereignty + local symbols and colours + strategic essentialism* and expresses local pride, national belonging, symbolic ownership, and

resistance to authority all into a singular visual statement. The inclusion of *strategic essentialism* in this configuration reveals how supporters often condense complex political or historical grievances into emotionally potent displays designed to provoke, as well as to unify. As shown in Figure 1, the Celtic tifo encapsulates the core codes of the theme: it combines a *direct reference to location* (the Irish context symbolized by the united Ireland badge), a *nationalistic reference* (again the united Ireland badge), and *sovereignty* (the use of the word “we”). The use of *local symbols and colours* (green-and-white) further reinforces the connection with Ireland, while *strategic essentialism* (Today we date to win quote) refer to political resistance of the Irish diaspora from Glasgow against the British Unionist values.



Figure 1 Celtic choreography
Source: Ultras Tifo, 2022

Another frequent pattern is *direct reference to location + sovereignty + nationalistic reference*, reflecting the assertion of political beliefs that are deeply rooted in the regional context, illustrating how supporters use tifo displays to express their political stance as it relates to their immediate surroundings. Rather than addressing abstract or distant political issues, these tifos focus on localized concerns, highlighting the social, cultural, or ideological tensions within the supporters' own communities. Other combinations such as *strategic essentialism + local symbols and colours + sovereignty* and *local symbols and colours + strategic essentialism* reveal how fans strategically employ visual symbols that signify both regional belonging and implicitly reference political acts or tensions specific to that region. These tifos do not always convey explicit political messages, but through carefully chosen imagery, they embed subtle commentaries that resonate with the local community's socio-

political landscape. The FC Barcelona tifo reflects the code combination *direct reference to location + strategic essentialism + nationalistic reference* with the Senyera stripes signalling Catalan identity, the club's alignment with the Catalan independence movement and a strong nationalistic sentiment rooted in regional pride. It also includes *local symbols and colours* (Catalan flag) and *sovereignty* through the simplified symbolism of the number 12 shirt, which refers to the importance of fans. Together, these codes embed localized political commentary within a celebration of community identity.

The following paragraph examines how *Manifestation and Assertion of Political Beliefs and Values* unfolds across the four stages of the Nissen model. In this theme, the reflecting stage becomes evident when supporters draw on shared memory and territorial identity to reinforce their political stance. This is particularly visible through recurring codes such as *direct reference to location* and *foundational memory*, with elements linked to regional identity appearing more frequently in this theme. For example, Celtic's tifo, featuring the united Ireland badge and green-and-white colours, combines the codes *direct reference to location* and *local symbols and colours*. These elements reaffirm a collective identity grounded in regional pride and tied to political movements specific to that geographical context.

The expressing stage emerges through the clear articulation of political values as well as through the symbolic ownership of the club by its fans. FC St. Pauli's tifo, which includes imagery of Che Guevara and a group of women, reflects the *ideological or religious stance* code, as does the Celtic tifo, which incorporates the map of a united Ireland. These displays transform political beliefs into bold visual declarations, expressing supporter-aligned values such as anti-fascism, gender equality, and social justice. The code *sovereignty*, which is particularly relevant to this stage, appears frequently, for example, in the repeated use of personal pronouns, as seen in Celtic's tifo with the phrase "Today we dare to win."

The impressing stage is reflected in the visual design, emotional tone, and symbolic clarity of these tifos, which aim to shape how the supporter base is perceived externally by rival fans, media outlets, or institutions. As inherently performative spectacles, tifos function across all three identity dimensions to project the image of the football club.

The mirroring stage is strongly activated through the code *strategic essentialism*, where fans respond to external forces such as UEFA sanctions, political marginalization, or negative media narratives with simplified yet powerful messages. Examples include FC Barcelona's tifo, as shown in Figure 2, in which the Senyera stripes symbolically reference

Catalan independence, or St. Pauli's use of the slogan "Ultra has no gender", both functioning as direct responses to perceived external pressures.



Figure 2 FC Barcelona tifo
Source: The most memorable mosaics, 2021

4.2 Theme 2. Historical memory as emotional anchor

This theme explores tifos as collective acts of remembrance, through which supporters invoke the past to create a symbolic connection between former glory and the present, especially during difficult periods. These displays act as emotional bridges, designed to inspire resilience and provide support by drawing strength from memory. Rather than merely commemorating, tifos in this category mobilize the past as a resource, offering encouragement, unity, and a reaffirmation of identity rooted in a shared historical experience. Usually shown in moments marked by institutional uncertainty, managerial shifts, or sporting crisis, these visual displays offer a stabilizing force and act as a reminding for supporters about victories, enduring values, and a long-standing identity that transcends current instability.

The theme *Historical memory as emotional anchor* emphasizes the use of remembrance as a tool for identity assertion. Combinations such as *commemorative reference* + *sovereignty* and *foundational memory* + *strategic essentialism* demonstrate that memory is not passive, but deployed as a political and emotional resource. As Kassing and Meân (2022, pp. 76-77) argue, tifos act as visual monuments, embedding history into matchday rituals to reinforce legitimacy.

These commemorations do not merely honour past victories or figures, they reaffirm ideals like loyalty, defiance, and sacrifice. Budka and Jacono (2013, pp. 5-7) highlight that

fan groups use historical references as part of a broader resistance-oriented ethos. During periods of disruption, which can include relegation, rebranding, or ownership change, tifos turn to memory to assert continuity and unity. These performances serve as stabilizing responses to institutional change, because in moments of uncertainty, tifos reaffirm that the meaning of the club lies with those who remember it (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 123-128).

The analysis revealed 11 distinct combinations of codes associated with this theme, underscoring the rich symbolic layering through which supporters transform the past into a visual anchor for the present. The combinations of codes display a remarkable consistency because each includes *commemorative reference* as a central component, this finding affirming that memory is a foundational lens through which identity is expressed.

The most complex combinations include configurations of codes such as *commemorative reference* + *strategic essentialism* + *sovereignty* + *direct reference to location* + *foundational memory* and perform several functions at once: they honour historical figures or victories (*commemorative reference*), frame memory as a political tool (*strategic essentialism*), assert symbolic ownership (*sovereignty*), tie the display to a particular geographic space (*direct reference to location*), and root it in the club's history (*foundational memory*). These combinations exemplify tifos as powerful vehicles for continuity, framing memory not as a passive reflection of the past but as an active tool used by supporters to intervene in moments of contemporary instability.

Several combinations situate commemorative acts alongside *strategic essentialism*, such as *commemorative reference* + *strategic essentialism* and *commemorative reference* + *strategic essentialism* + *sovereignty*. These pairings indicate that remembrance is frequently activated in moments of perceived crisis, not merely as a gesture of tribute, but as a form of symbolic resistance. In these cases, memory is weaponized, repurposed as a protest against institutional neglect, commercialization, or loss of identity, and reframed as a call to return to the club's foundational values and cultural legitimacy. Across all combinations, a clear pattern emerges: memory is not used to dwell on the past, but to chart a way forward. It serves as an emotional anchor that equips supporters to respond to contemporary challenges with a sense of continuity, purpose, and belonging. The recurring presence of strategic essentialism alongside commemorative reference underscores how historical moments are transformed into powerful visual statements that reaffirm identity in times of instability.

A tifo that is part of this theme is the one by Dinamo Bucharest, which featured two legendary club figures, Florea Dumitrache and Cătălin Hîldan, depicted with angel wings beside a large red “D,” referencing the club’s historic crest. Below the image, a banner read: “Voi generații ce veniți din urmă, să știți că numele e scris de ei” (“You generations that come after, know that the name was written by them”) (Fig. 3). Through the codes of *commemorative reference* and *foundational memory*, the display constructed a narrative of legacy, honouring past players as moral and emotional anchors during a time of institutional change, thus also acting through the code *strategic essentialism*.



Figure 3 Dinamo Bucharest tifo
Source: Ultras Tifo 2013

It is interesting that only a minority of combinations integrate ideological or religious stance. This indicates that within the context of memory, political content often takes a secondary role. The primary focus remains on remembrance and symbolic heritage, with the emotional power of collective memory acting as the central unifying force that binds supporters across generations and identities.

The following analysis applies the Nissen model to the theme *Historical memory as emotional anchor*, tracing its presence across all four stages. The reflecting stage is central in this theme, as tifos commemorate players, historical victories, and foundational events to reinforce continuity and collective identity. For instance, Dinamo Bucharest’s tifo featuring Florea Dumitrache and Cătălin Hîldan placed beside the club’s original crest activates both the *commemorative reference* and *foundational memory* codes, both linked to historical

identity and thus representative of the reflecting process. While some tifos in this theme also include elements of regional identity, such as the code *direct reference to location* in Ajax's tifo for their 125th anniversary, which included a large banner reading "Our club from Amsterdam", codes associated with historical identity are encountered more frequently and play a dominant role.

The expressing stage becomes visible when historical references are framed not only as memory but also as political alignment or as a form of symbolic possession. In these cases, tifos incorporate codes such as *ideological or religious stance* and *sovereignty* to assert value-based interpretations of the past. For example, Real Madrid's tifo prominently uses the colour purple, symbolically linked to the club's royal heritage and the supporters' historical association with monarchy and Spanish unionism. These displays show that memory is not neutral, but it is often mobilized to express deeper political or cultural meanings.

The impressing stage is also prominent, as these tifos are intended to shape how others perceive the club and its fan base, usually as emotionally committed, loyal, and deeply connected to tradition. By referencing iconic figures, club anniversaries, or celebrated victories, fans present themselves and their club as historically rich and resilient. The visual design, symbolic content, and emotional tone of these tifos work together to project strength, unity, and depth, reinforcing the club's public image both within and beyond the stadium.

Within the mirroring stage historical references are used as a subtle form of resistance. In situations of commercialization or club rebranding, supporters invoke memory as a way to reject imposed changes and reaffirm foundational meaning. This can be seen in Dinamo Bucharest's tifo, which included a banner reading "You generations that come after, know that the name was written by them". This phrase, functioning as strategic essentialism, acts as a symbolic warning to new owners and players, reminding them of the club's legacy even amid a process of transformation, memory being used as a tool to influence the present and defend their interpretive authority.

4.3 Theme 3. Assertion of superiority and resistance toward rivals and institutions

This theme captures tifos as forms of expression through which supporters articulate feelings of dominance, resistance, and identity in opposition to rival clubs, institutional authorities, or governing bodies. These displays frequently emerge in the context of long-standing rivalries, controversial officiating decisions, institutional sanctions, or broader frustration with commercialized football governance. As such, tifos associated with this

theme are symbolic acts of resistance aimed at asserting control over power relations within the ecosystem of football.

The analysis revealed six unique combinations of codes within this theme, with *rivalry-based memory* appearing in four of them. However, what most distinctly defines this theme is not any single code, but the way dominance is asserted through layered combinations of elements. These displays often ground their message of superiority, besides in the context of rivalries, in historical narratives or territorial symbolism, using memory and place as foundations for legitimizing authority and asserting cultural primacy over rivals or institutions. The most complex combination of codes is *strategic essentialism + rivalry-based memory, +local symbols and colours + sovereignty* and represents a powerful convergence of protest, history, place, and identity. Tifos constructed within this framework serve as powerful declarations of superiority, meant to create a boundary between “us” and “them.”

Tifos in this theme frequently adopts identity politics, mobilizing collective identity to contest exclusion or commodification (Bernstein, 2005, pp. 49-52). Fans use simplified, but emotionally charged symbols which are meant to function as bold statements of unity and resistance (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 51-53). Importantly, this resistance is often expressed through rivalry. Historical tensions, past defeats, and long-standing animosities are activated as sources of legitimacy, tifos reframing competition not as banter, but as symbolic struggles over meaning, authenticity, and cultural integrity (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 81-82). Importantly, not all combinations within this theme are centred on rivalries. The presence of combinations like *direct reference to location + strategic essentialism* shows that tifos can also be aimed at broader institutions rather than specific opponents. These displays often take the form of localized protests, where the club’s geographic identity, its city or region, is emphasized while expressing dissatisfaction with distant or impersonal entities such as UEFA, club owners, or the media. In these cases, the local area becomes more than just a backdrop; it acts as a symbolic base from which fans voice resistance and assert their values.

An interesting tifo that reflects the code combination *rivalry-based memory + strategic essentialism + sovereignty + local symbols and colours* is the one by FC Porto. The tifo illustrates a red octopus, which symbolizes Benfica and long-standing accusations of systemic manipulation, serving as *rivalry-based memory*. The clear, emotionally charged imagery, octopus tentacles gripping symbols of influence, exemplifies *strategic essentialism*, reducing complex narratives into a striking visual. The Templar knights represent symbols of the city of Porto. The banner, “JUNTOS VAMOS DESTRUIR O POLVO” (“Together we

will destroy the octopus”), emphasizes *sovereignty* by framing the fans and club as a united front resisting external control (Fig. 4).



Figure 4 FC Porto choreography
Source: *Ultras Tifo*, 2017

Now, the Nissen model is used to unpack how *Assertion of superiority and resistance toward rivals and institutions* operates within the stages of reflecting, expressing, impressing, and mirroring. The reflecting stage is present in this theme when superiority is grounded in historical rivalries or long-standing tensions between clubs. For example, FC Porto’s tifo portraying Benfica as a red octopus, which references allegations related to corruption of the club from Lisbon, activates the code *rivalry-based memory*. By drawing on shared narratives of injustice and dominance, fans reaffirm their own club’s moral and historical position within a contested rivalry.

The expressing stage is strongly represented through the use of mocking imagery, confrontational symbols, and visual contrasts that frame identity in oppositional terms. These tifos act as declarations of “who we are versus who they are,” often combining the codes *sovereignty* and *nationalistic reference* to mark symbolic boundaries between clubs, ideologies, or fan cultures. AIK’s tifo, for instance, depicts their stadium as a medieval fortress under siege, with the slogan “Här möter man Fotbollen” (“Here one meets football”), presenting AIK as the last bastion of authentic football.

The impressing stage is also visible, as many of these tifos are designed to shape how fans, institutions, and outsiders perceive the club. The goal is to project emotional intensity, loyalty, and symbolic strength, positioning the fan base as passionate, united, and historically

aware. Through bold visuals and emotionally charged messages, these tifos aim to elevate the club's public image while discrediting rivals or governing institutions.

The mirroring stage plays a critical role in this theme as supporters respond to perceived injustices or institutional overreach by simplifying complex frustrations into emotionally resonant messages. This is clearly expressed through the code *strategic essentialism*, as seen in Djurgården's tifo containing anti-governance slogans, most notably "UEFA = Mafia" (Fig. 5). Here, the tifo acts as a reaction to external threats, allowing supporters to reject top-down control and reclaim agency through public, symbolic defiance.



Figure 5 Djurgården tifo
Source: Maisfutebol Editorial, 2024

4.4 Theme 4. Supporter ownership and collective identity

This theme centres on tifos as strong declarations of symbolic ownership, presenting supporters not as passive observers simply reacting to club developments, but as active co-authors of the club's identity, history, and future. In this perspective, the boundaries between club and supporters blur and the club becomes a reflection of the fans, and the fans, in turn, embody the spirit of the club. The tifos examined under this theme highlight the emotional, cultural, and symbolic work carried out by supporters, portraying them as the rightful custodians of the club's legacy and meaning.

The theme, *Supporter Ownership and Collective Identity*, positions tifos as acts of authorship. Fans do not merely support their clubs, they define them. Visual references to stadiums, historical crests, and slogans like "Our Club" or "We Built This" articulate a claim

to symbolic sovereignty. These messages assert that clubs derive their meaning from the community that sustains them. As Bullough et al. argue, fans see themselves as the emotional and cultural core of the club (2024, pp. 140-142).

Tifos are typically created without commercial backing, reinforcing their status as grassroots cultural expressions (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 1-3). Drawing on the concept of imagined sovereignty, these choreographies become declarations of symbolic control (Anderson, 2006, pp. 19-22). This authorship can even extend beyond local boundaries as references to *brotherhood between fans* suggest that supporters view themselves as part of broader cultural alliances that transcend clubs. These acts resist the commodification of football identity and reaffirm that meaning is authored by those who live it, not by institutions who brand it. These acts resist the commodification of football identity and reaffirm that meaning is authored by those who live it, not by institutions who brand it, which is highlighted by often the stand-alone presence of the code sovereignty or by in combination with strategic essentialism

Within this theme, the analysis uncovered 18 distinct combinations of codes, making it the most densely populated category in the dataset. This thematic density signals a rich diversity of ways through which fans lay claim to authorship and assert their cultural primacy. What binds these combinations together is *sovereignty*, which appears in every single configuration. This consistent coding pattern reflects the central premise of the theme that fans claim symbolic possession over the club's meaning. The simplest expression of this claim appears in the standalone *sovereignty* code, which does not have to be taken in combination with another codes to manifest the idea that the club belongs to the supporters or that the supporters are the club.

Many of the combinations in this theme build on the core idea of *sovereignty* by embedding it within broader identity narratives that link supporters to both history and place. For example, combinations like *foundational memory* + *sovereignty* suggest that fans are not only emotionally invested in the club, but also see themselves as rightful heirs to its legacy, the heroes of the club and its historic victories are also seen as the fans' own achievements. Similarly, combinations such as *stadium representation* + *sovereignty* and *local symbols and colours* + *sovereignty* highlight the deeply rooted connection between supporters, the club, and the region. From a geographic and cultural perspective, these tifos suggest that the fans, the club, and the region are one and the same, supporters not being just protectors of the club's identity, but also of the community and traditions it represents.

The tifo by AC Milan fans is part of this theme and illustrates combinations such as *foundational memory + sovereignty + local symbols and colours*. The red devil represents *foundational memory*, symbolizing the club's historic crest and nickname. The dates “1968-2018” and the figure of the tattooed ultras (Fig. 6) reflect *sovereignty*, emphasizing the fans' long, standing claim over the club's meaning and legacy. The Milanese flag and the club's colours reinforce local identity, showing that the fans, the club, and the city form a unified cultural and geographic whole. Together, these codes affirm the ultras' role as heirs and protectors of both club and community.



Figure 6 AC Milan tifo
Source: Ultras Tifo, 2018

Another important and interesting aspect of this theme is the presence of *brotherhood between fans* in several code combinations, which highlights how supporter culture can extend beyond the boundaries of a single club. Combinations such as *brotherhood between fans + direct reference to location + sovereignty* demonstrate that fans often form strong alliances with other supporter groups, even when the clubs themselves have no direct historical or regional connection. These tifos emphasize solidarity based on shared values, struggles, or territorial identity, suggesting that fan loyalty is not limited to one crest but can be part of a broader cultural network.

The next paragraphs explore how the theme *Supporter ownership and collective identity* aligns with each stage of the Nissen model. The reflecting stage is active in this theme through codes associated with both regional identity and historical identity, which appear frequently in the tifos analysed. Codes such as *foundational memory*, *commemorative reference*, *local symbols and colours*, and *stadium representation* are commonly used to

reaffirm supporters' longstanding connection to the club. For example, in AC Milan's tifo, the inclusion of the Milanese flag reflects the code *local symbols and colours*, projecting an identity rooted in both place and culture. Similarly, Standard Liège's use of the red devil icon activates the *foundational memory* code, referencing the club's historical nickname and reinforcing a sense of traditional belonging.

The expressing stage is dominant in this theme, as supporters clearly articulate their role as co-authors of club identity. Slogans such as using personal pronouns such as "Our Club" exemplify the *sovereignty* code, asserting fan ownership and emotional investment. In AC Milan's tifo, the banner reading "I never left you" and the depiction of ultras with club tattoos further emphasize *sovereignty*, visually reinforcing the idea that identity is constructed and preserved by the supporters themselves.

The impressing stage is also strongly present, as these tifos are crafted not only for internal unity but to influence how institutions, rival supporters, and the wider public perceive the club. Through emotionally charged imagery and historical references, fans project symbolic strength and cultural continuity, positioning themselves as the moral foundation of the club and elevating its public image in contrast to corporate or external narratives.

The last stage, mirroring, is activated in response to top-down decisions that threaten supporter involvement, such as rebranding, commercialization, or poor governance. These tifos serve as symbolic resistance to the erosion of supporter influence. A notable example is the CSKA Sofia tifo (Fig.7), which features the presence of ultras alongside a banner which is translated as "When people used to die for CSKA in the stands". This tifo combines the codes *sovereignty* with *strategic essentialism*, serving as a critique of modern football's commercialization and the perceived decline in supporter culture, while reaffirming the passion that defined earlier generations of fans.



Figure 7 CSKA Sofia tifo
Source: *tribun.fanatics*, 2024

4.5 Theme 5. Intergenerational & territorial belonging

This theme explores how tifos function as visual expressions of spatial identity, where the boundaries between club, city, and community become blurred. In these choreographed displays, supporters are actively situating themselves within the symbolic geography of their city or region, the football club becoming an extension of the geographical space.

It is important to mention that this theme also incorporates what was originally identified as a separate category named *Intergenerational Transmission of Values*. Further analysis revealed that these generational connections are almost always expressed through spatial elements, which can be regional symbols, stadium imagery, or civic landmarks. Tifos that reference family, legacy, or long, standing supporter traditions consistently draw on regional iconography, reinforcing the idea that values passed down through generations are closely tied to place. Therefore, these intergenerational expressions are not separate but deeply rooted within a larger theme that also includes the idea of territorial belonging.

The theme *Intergenerational and territorial belonging* highlights how tifos root identity in both space and time. Supporters express symbolic ownership not only through memory, but also through geography. As Bullough, et al. (2024, pp. 139-140) note, fans understand themselves as stewards of the club's meaning, especially during periods of change or crisis, this custodianship is enacted through stadium representation, civic landmarks, and local symbols.

This spatial logic is inseparable from generational continuity. Tifos that show parent, child relationships, family bonds, or inherited traditions convey the idea that identity is actively passed down. Such displays reaffirm Anderson's notion of the imagined community, in which collective identity is preserved through ritual and symbolic media (2006, pp. 34-36). Tifos, experienced in the stadium and shared online, become cultural anchors, tools for transmitting meaning across time, space, and generations (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 35-38).

A total of 12 unique combinations of codes were assigned to this theme, revealing a consistent interplay between spatial markers and ideological content. The most elaborate combination characteristic of this theme is *direct reference to location + ideological or religious stance + sovereignty + stadium representation* and is reflecting the holistic nature of this theme. These tifos do not just present regional symbols, but instead, they use them to construct a visual performance in which the football club is at the centre of a symbolic ecosystem in which local identity, geographic belonging, and regional ideological meanings are closely intertwined. Through this fusion, tifos transform the stadium into a site where the essence of the community is both represented and reaffirmed. Another highly developed

combination is *commemorative reference + nationalistic reference + sovereignty + strategic essentialism* which expresses how territorial pride can be an act of resistance against dominant power structures. The Borussia Dortmund tifo reflects the elaborate combination *direct reference to location + ideological or religious stance + sovereignty + stadium representation*. The city landmarks and industrial imagery serve as a *direct reference to location*, while the inclusion of factories symbolizes a working, class ideological stance. The bold slogan is expressing fan ownership of the club's meaning, while stadium's prominent placement emphasizes stadium representation as the core of communal identity. Together, these elements create a cohesive visual narrative where club, city, and community values are deeply and visibly intertwined.

Other combinations within this theme also place a stronger emphasis on territorial pride, combinations like *local symbols and colours + sovereignty + direct reference to location* and *sovereignty + commemorative reference + local symbols and colours* connect regional imagery with emotional memory and symbolic ownership. These tifos frame the club as a living representation of local heritage, suggesting that supporting it means being part of a shared civic story deeply rooted in place.

The following paragraphs applies the Nissen model to the theme *Intergenerational & territorial belonging*, tracing its presence within all four stages. The reflecting stage is central to this theme, as tifos frequently reference shared origins, regional landmarks, and inherited values to reaffirm the club's deep connection to place and tradition. Borussia Dortmund's tifo, for instance, includes city landmarks, industrial factories, and the stadium, activating the codes *stadium representation* and *direct reference to location*. (Fig 8). These elements anchor the club's identity in its working-class, industrial roots, portraying football as an expression of regional pride.



Figure 8 Borussia Dortmund tifo
Source: Imaao. 11freunde.de. 2020

The expressing stage emerges in tifos that visually assert belonging across generations and geography. In the Rangers tifo, a father and son are shown standing before the iconic Ibrox gates, accompanied by the phrase “All my sons will be like me”. This display combines the code *sovereignty* with markers of regional identity, illustrating how fandom is passed down as both a cultural and emotional legacy. A similar message appears in the Borussia Dortmund tifo, where the banner “Big city, my dream” affirms the emotional bond between individual supporters and their urban environment

The impressing stage is present, as these tifos aim to influence how the club is perceived externally, by institutions, rivals, and the broader public. Through the use of imagery, supporters position themselves as the true representatives of their local community, presenting the club as an extension of that community and its values, demonstrating to external audiences what their community stands for and to what they collectively belong.

The mirroring stage is expressed through tifos that push back against institutional or political forces perceived as undermining local values or identity. This often happens through the code *sovereignty*, asserting that “the club is ours” regardless of external changes. The code *strategic essentialism* is also present, as seen in Espanyol’s tifo displaying the message “Always against the current”, which expresses resistance to dominant political ideologies in Catalonia. These acts of visual defiance reaffirm the supporters’ role as guardians of both territorial and ideological integrity.

5. Discussion

The analysis presented in the previous chapter has revealed a set of recurring structures and identity dimensions embedded in tifos. Building on these empirical patterns, the following chapter turns toward interpretation, seeking to contextualize the results within broader theoretical frameworks. The discussion that follows will explore how the research questions are addressed, present the two main findings, and interpret them in the context of the theoretical framework.

5.1 Restating the Research Question

This research emerged in the context of modern football, where processes of commercialization and rebranding increasingly challenge the continuity of club identity (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 121-122). It was based on the premise that supporters across Europe actively use tifos not only to affirm the vision of identity they value, but also to resist institutional transformations that they perceive as eroding tradition and authenticity. Thus, choreographed displays can be interpreted as symbolic tools through which fans reassert what the club means, from their point of view, and oppose narratives imposed from above (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 1-4).

Furthermore, the study was grounded in the expectation that despite cultural and historical differences across national football traditions, the forms of expression and modes of resistance enacted through tifos would show important similarities across European supporter cultures. This hypothesis was confirmed by the analysis, because across different clubs and countries, tifos were found to follow a similar pattern: they communicate values such as belonging, memory, pride, and protest through a recurring visual language that transcends geographic boundaries. In this way, the analysis suggests that tifos emerge not only as localized expressions of fan culture, but also as part of a broader European culture of visual resistance and cultural authorship.

5.2 The connectedness between symbolic elements

This first major finding directly addresses the research question: *How do tifos created by football supporters function as visual expressions of club identity?* As the analysis has shown, tifos are not isolated dimensional displays. Instead, they represent a highly symbolic and interconnected practice through which supporters construct, perform, and defend club identity across multiple registers. What emerged clearly in the analysis is that even though

they are part of different themes, all tifos interact simultaneously with all four identity mechanisms outlined in Nissen's (2015, pp. 543-547) Organizational Identity Dynamics Model. Based on this aspect, it means that even as the symbolic content varies, the deeper function of tifos remains consistent, with each display serving as a complex act of cultural authorship.

As mentioned in the previous sections, tifos function as dynamic acts of identity work, engaging supporters in a process of reflecting, expressing, impressing, and mirroring. In reflecting, fans invoke shared memory, commemorating historical figures and foundational events to assert continuity during moments of institutional change. Expressing involves outward declarations of meaning, where tifos articulate political stances and assert symbolic ownership, reinforcing grassroots authorship against top-down narratives. Through impressing, supporters project an image to external audiences, in order to shape public perception. Mirroring marks a reactive phase, where tifos respond to perceived threats or misrepresentations with strategic essentialism, distilling complex frustrations into emotionally charged visual slogans. Across these stages, tifos emerge not as decorative spectacles but as critical instruments through which fans negotiate identity, resist commercialization, and claim cultural authorship.

Since tifos operate across all four of identity stages, and because this occurs consistently across different themes, the research proposes the idea each tifo, while visually distinct, adheres to a similar structural logic: it reflects memory, expresses authorship, shapes perception, and resists external control, no matter what is their main theme. In this sense, tifos represent not only diversity in symbolic elements, but a remarkable unity of function.

While each tifo was assigned to a single dominant theme, the boundaries between political, historical, and regional identity dimensions were often deeply interwoven. For instance, tifos categorized under the theme *Manifestation and Assertion of Political Beliefs and Values* focused primarily on political identity, such as ideological stances, protest slogans, or claims of sovereignty, but these messages were frequently expressed or connected through regional or historical references. Or, tifos placed under *Historical Memory as Emotional Anchor* emphasized shared memory and commemorative references but often relied on regional colours, local landmarks, or subtle political undertones or claims of sovereignty. These examples show that the identity dimensions are not expressed in isolation, instead, they reinforce one another. The themes themselves are interconnected, with one set of symbolic meanings helping to build and support the others. As a result, tifos not only share a common structure and function, but also produce an interconnected symbolic language, in

which elements of political, regional and historical identity are combine to articulate a unified vision of club identity.

All of these aspects suggest that tifos are not random or decorative, but intentional and ritualized performances that visually encode collective identity. Their activation of all stages of the Nissen model, along with the repeated use of similar codes while simultaneously expressing different themes, suggests that tifos, while grounded in specific contexts, ultimately convey a shared message: that the identity of a football club has certain defining characteristics that cannot be easily changed, and that it is inseparable from the fan community that sustains it, the very community that presents and defends this identity through visual performance. Thus, the visual expressions presented through tifos can be seen as both highly specific in content and remarkably uniform in symbolic logic, reinforcing the notion that tifos are a central, not peripheral, medium through which football supporter identity is constructed and communicated.

5.3 The Centrality of Sovereignty

The second key finding of this study relates to the second research question: *In what ways do tifos serve as acts of resistance against the commercialization and rebranding of football clubs?* The empirical evidence proposes that tifos consistently act as visual and symbolic responses to institutional attempts to commodify club identity. As European football increasingly operates according to market logic, prioritizing global appeal through branding strategies such as logo simplification, stadium renaming, and ideological neutrality, supporters have not remained passive. Instead, they have responded through a growing backlash rooted in a sense of cultural erosion and emotional disconnection (Busse & Damiano, 2019, pp. 8-10).

The analysis suggests that tifos are among the most powerful and consistent instruments of this resistance. They function according to principles which can be characterized as a form of symbolic ownership, which manifests in public rituals through which fans assert not only loyalty but legitimate authorship over the club's meaning (Kassing & Meân, 2022, pp. 28-30). While strategic essentialism, seen in slogans like "UEFA = Mafia", captures the explicit visual language of protest, the results of this study show that the more fundamental and recurring pattern is a quiet but firm assertion of sovereignty. Supporters repeatedly use tifos to reaffirm continuity with the past, claim moral authority in the present, and preserve autonomy in defining the future. In this sense, resistance is not always direct opposition, it is just as often the reaffirmation of authorship through symbolic

repetition. These displays embody the idea that legitimacy comes not from official mandates but from cultural participation and collective authorship.

The results of this study thus suggest that tifos are not merely reactive responses to branding or commercialization, but acts of cultural resistance and symbolic ownership. Rather than passively opposing change, supporters use tifos to reaffirm their interpretive authority over what the club represents, asserting their position not only as fans, but as symbolic custodians of the club's legacy. In doing so, they defend their right to shape the club's identity from below, resisting institutional efforts to redefine it from above. Tifos therefore serve not just as tools of protest, but as visual declarations of what the club is, was, and should remain.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore two central research questions. First, it asked: *How do tifos created by football supporters function as visual expressions of club identity?* Second, it examined: *In what ways do they act as resistance against the commercialization and rebranding of football clubs?*

To address the research questions, the thesis began by situating tifos within broader academic discussions on football fandom. While prior studies have explored fan behaviour and supporter identity, few have treated tifos as central objects of analysis. The theoretical framework guiding this analysis draws on Stuart Hall's work on representation and meaning-making, the foundational principles of semiotics, Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, and Mary Bernstein's insights on identity politics. Based on these perspectives, three key identity dimensions were defined for analysis: regional, historical, and political identity. In addition, Nissen's four-stage model of identity work was introduced to offer a structured lens through which tifos could be examined as ways in which tifo construct identity.

Methodologically the thesis employed a dual approach, it first consisted of a semiotic analysis at both denotative and connotative levels, and then it continued with a thematic coding. A comparative sample of approximately 50 tifos from various European contexts was analysed and the coding process was guided by sensitizing concepts, which aimed at identifying recurring patterns and deeper symbolic logics across the displays. Themes were constructed based on code combinations, while Nissen's identity stages were identified through specific codes that signalled identity work in action.

The analysis showed that tifos act as complex and intentional performances of identity, bringing together political, historical, and regional elements within a single visual language. Despite thematic differences, all tifos consistently activated the four stages of identity work, reflecting, expressing, impressing, and mirroring, demonstrating a shared structure and purpose. This revealed that tifos visually construct identity not through isolated symbols, but through interconnected narratives that reinforce collective belonging and cultural authorship.

At the same time, the study showed how tifos function as acts of resistance against institutional attempts to redefine club identity for global markets. Sovereignty emerged as a central element, as fans used tifos to assert their role as the rightful authors of what the club

represents, defending tradition, meaning, and continuity against top-down rebranding efforts. In this way, tifos serve both as expressions of identity and as visual assertions of symbolic ownership in an increasingly commercialized football landscape.

6.1 Contribution of the Thesis

This thesis proposes several contributions to the academic study of football culture in relation to tifos, an area that remains relatively underexplored within existing literature. This research positions tifos as the primary object of inquiry, suggesting a multidimensional approach for understanding tifos as sites identity construction.

In doing so, the thesis suggests that tifos should be viewed not merely as decorative or supportive rituals, but as a form of media through which supporters actively participate in the construction and communication of club identity. Rather than occupying a passive role, fans are framed as cultural agents who use visual language to negotiate meaning, assert symbolic ownership, and respond to institutional developments such as commercialization or rebranding.

Through their symbolic content, public visibility, and circulation across digital platforms, tifos articulate historical memory, political values, and territorial affiliation. As such, they may play a significant role in shaping both internal fan discourse and broader narratives about the meaning of football clubs. This perspective positions tifos not only as aesthetic performances, but as media artefacts that enable fans to participate in authorship and cultural resistance within the evolving landscape of modern football.

6.2 Limitations and credibility of the research

Validity and reliability are two essential criteria that any qualitative researcher must consider when designing a study, analysing results, and assessing the quality of findings (Golafshani, 2003, pp. 598-600). The reliability of qualitative research, understood as the degree to which a study is reproducible in terms of method and outcome, can be enhanced by ensuring transparency in the research design, theoretical framework, and analytic procedures (Ahmed, 2024, p. 2). In this study, several strategies were employed to support reliability, these include the presentation of the sensitizing concepts that guided the thematic coding (Tables 1-3), as well as a clear outline of the theoretical framework and the methodology used. A detailed codebook, alongside the coding tree and the structure used for semiotic analysis at the connotative level, is included in the appendices and supplementary files, ensuring the traceability of the interpretive process.

With regard to validity, the extent to which the research accurately captures what it intends to measure, this study employed triangulation, which strengthens the credibility of qualitative studies by combining methods to control bias and establish valid propositions (Golafshani, 2003, pp. 598-604). This research adopted a dual-layered approach, combining semiotic and thematic analysis. While the semiotic analysis unpacked symbolic meaning at both denotative and connotative levels, the thematic coding, guided by theory and sensitizing concepts, identified broader patterns related to identity and resistance.

Nonetheless, this approach is not without its challenges. Semiotic interpretation, particularly at the connotative level, involves a high degree of subjectivity and relies heavily on cultural familiarity (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2000, p. 117). Despite efforts to ground these interpretations in academic literature and contextual knowledge, they remain open to alternative readings.

6.3 Researcher positionality and external analysis

Another limitation arises from my positionality as a researcher. Although I am a passionate follower of European football, having attended matches in various countries and engaged with fans from diverse backgrounds, I remain an outsider to most fan groups whose tifos I analysed. This external perspective, while beneficial for analysing how tifos appear to broader audiences, limits access to the insider meanings and emotional layers embedded in some displays.

However, the aim of this study was not to claim full insider knowledge, but rather to analyse how tifos visually construct identity in a way that resonates beyond the fan base, towards institutions, media, and neutral supporters. Since tifos are public, performative texts designed to convey meaning across cultural boundaries, this outward-facing perspective remains both appropriate and analytically relevant.

Despite these limitations, the combination of triangulated methodology, theoretical grounding, and transparent documentation positions this research as a credible contribution to the study of tifos as complex, symbolic acts of identity construction and cultural resistance in modern football.

6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Although the thesis offers a foundation for understanding tifos as meaningful visual performances, several areas of inquiry remain open for future research. One possible direction would involve expanding the geographic scope of analysis to include tifo cultures in

South America or Africa. In these regions, differing histories and supporter traditions could offer new insights into how tifos function in alternative political or cultural settings, enriching the comparative value of the current findings.

Another promising research could focus on regional comparisons within Europe, particularly between Eastern and Western contexts. Given the different trajectories of post-communist states compared to the other countries from Europe, such a study could explore how historical and political backgrounds shape the visual and ideological dimensions of tifos.

Further research could also benefit from more direct engagement with fan communities. Ethnographic work, including interviews with ultras, designers, or core supporters, might help illuminate the internal processes behind tifo creation, their planning, funding, and the emotional or ideological motivations behind them. This kind of data could complement the semiotic and thematic readings used here, providing a fuller picture of how tifos operate both as visual texts and as lived practices. Pursuing these directions could extend the findings proposed in this thesis and deepen our understanding of tifos not only as cultural expressions, as evolving forms of fan agency within the landscape of 21st century football.

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Appendix A

Analysis of the Dinamo Bucharest tifo, as illustration

Denotative level: The tifo features two footballers dressed in classic red-and-white Dinamo kits, each illustrated with angel wings. At the centre is a large red letter “D,” and the background is filled with coordinated red and white card displays. A section of the stand forms the image of a football pitch using pancards. Beneath the main image, a banner reads: “Voi generații ce veniți din urmă, să știți că numele e scris de ei.”

Connotative level: The banner, translated as “You generations that come after, know that the name was written by them”, pays tribute to two of Dinamo Bucharest’s most legendary figures: Florea Dumitrache and Cătălin Hîldan. Dumitrache was one of the club’s all-time great strikers, known for his extraordinary talent and contributions to Romanian football, while Hîldan, who tragically died at age 24 during a match, remains a symbol of loyalty and passion for the club. A product of Dinamo’s academy and former captain, Hîldan is immortalized by the naming of the north stand of Dinamo Stadium in his honour (Mangu, 2024). The central red “D” refers to the old Dinamo crest, invoking the club’s historical identity and emotional resonance for longtime fans (Bădescu, 2011)

This tifo comes at a significant moment in the club’s history, as Dinamo undergoes structural changes under the “New Dinamo” initiative. In this context, the tribute serves both as a remembrance and a statement. It reminds current and future generations that Dinamo’s legacy was built through dedication and sacrifice, values embodied by Dumitrache and Hîldan, and that this legacy must be preserved and respected as the club moves forward (Mangu, 2024).

Appendix B

Coding book

Sensitizing Concept: Regional identity

Code	Description
Direct reference to location	Affirmation of the club's connection to a specific city, town, or region.
Stadium representation	Depictions of the club's home stadium, especially iconic or original grounds.
Local symbols and colours	Use of regional flags, coats of arms, or traditional colour schemes associated with local identity.

Sensitizing Concept: Historical identity

Code	Description
Foundational memory	References to the club's founding moments, early emblems, or legendary historical figures.
Commemorative reference	Visual tributes to past players, anniversaries, historic victories etc.
Rivalry-based history	Representations of long-standing rivalries rooted in historical narratives.
Brotherhood between fans	Displays that celebrate enduring alliances between fan groups from different clubs

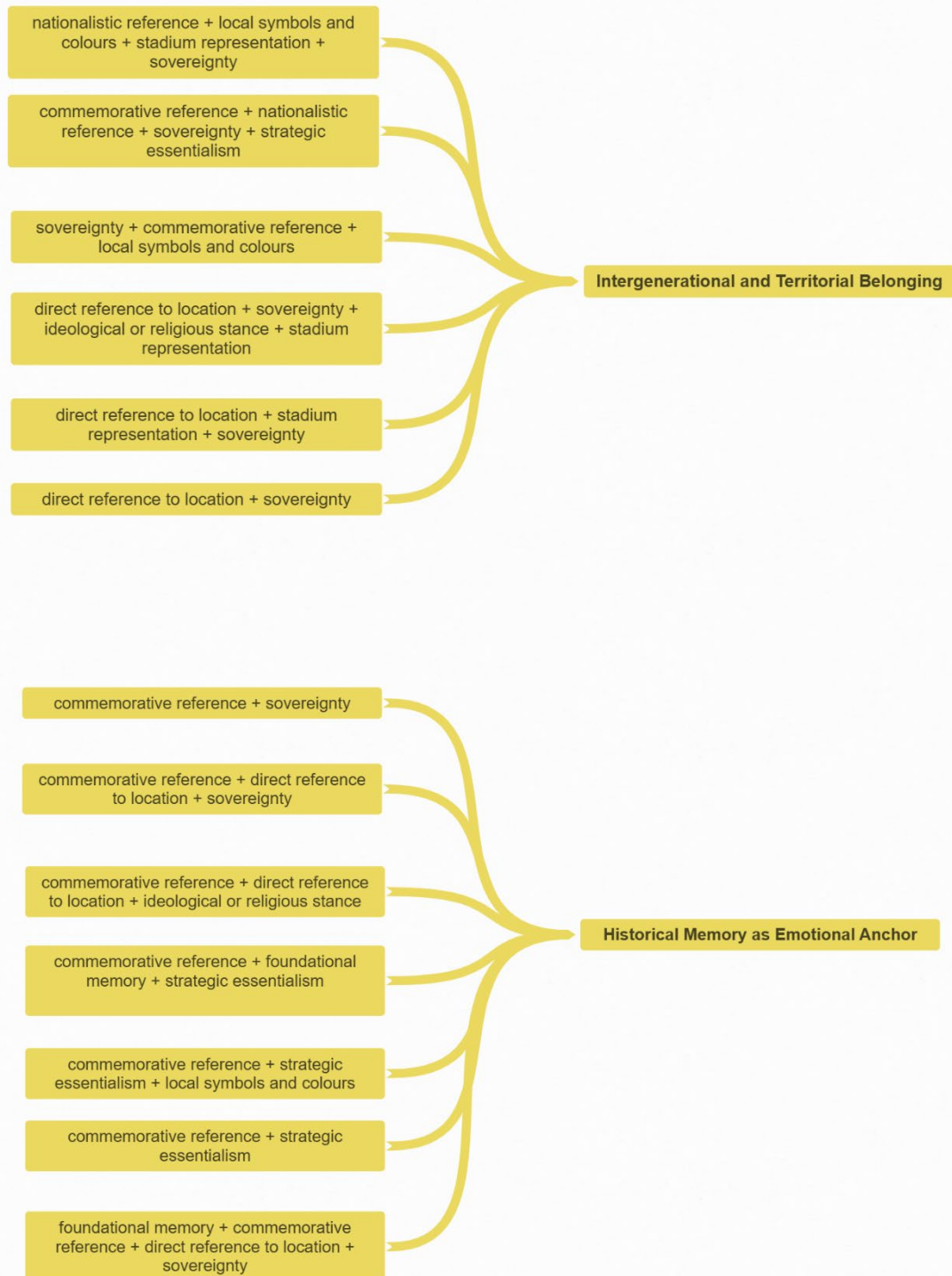
Sensitizing Concept: Political Identity

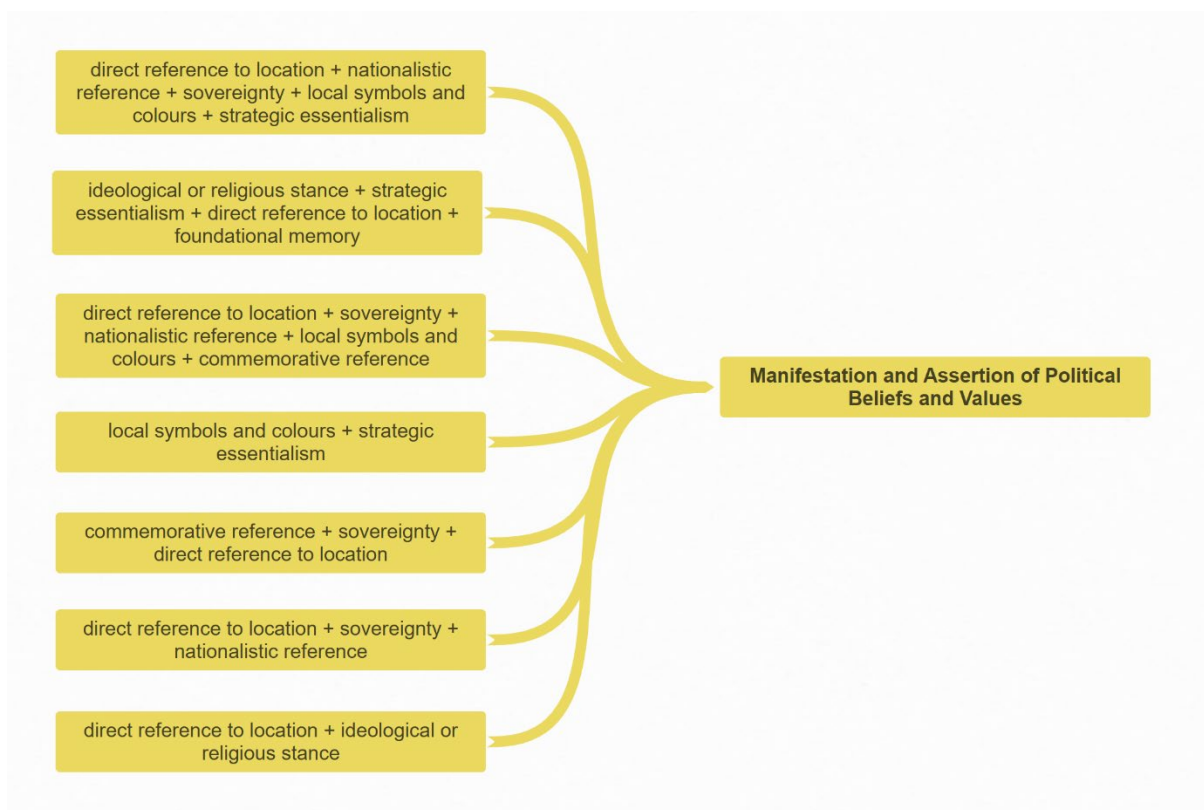
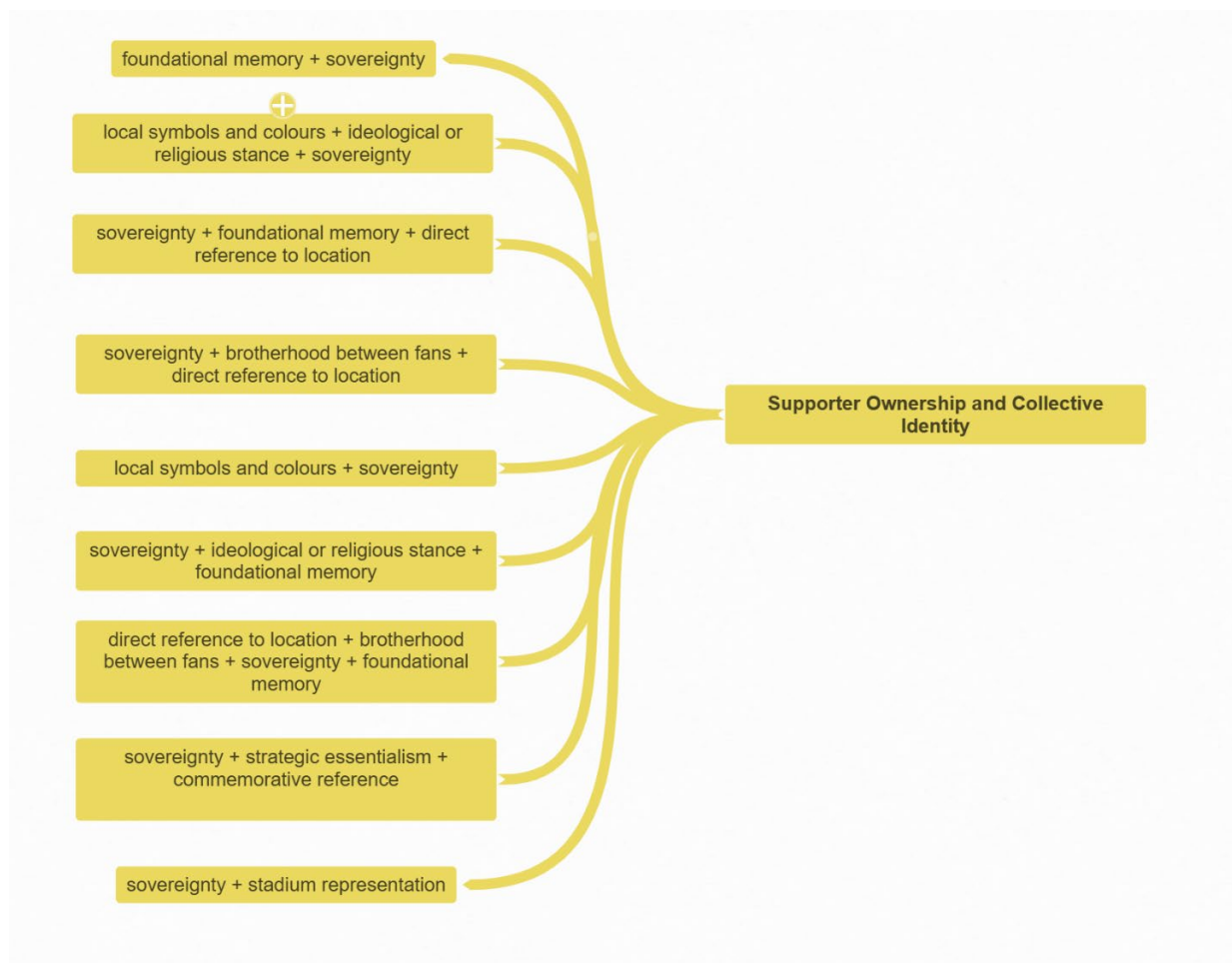
Code	Description
Ideological or religious stance	Visuals expressing ideological or religious worldviews (e.g. socialism, anti-fascism, faith affiliation).
Nationalistic reference	Symbols or statements related to national identity, state politics, or territorial belonging.
Sovereignty	Visual claims that fans are symbolic owners or authors of the club's identity. Often includes slogans like "Our Club" or prominent ultra-group symbols.
Strategic Essentialism	Simplified, emotionally charged messages of resistance or protest, often directed at institutions like UEFA or club management.

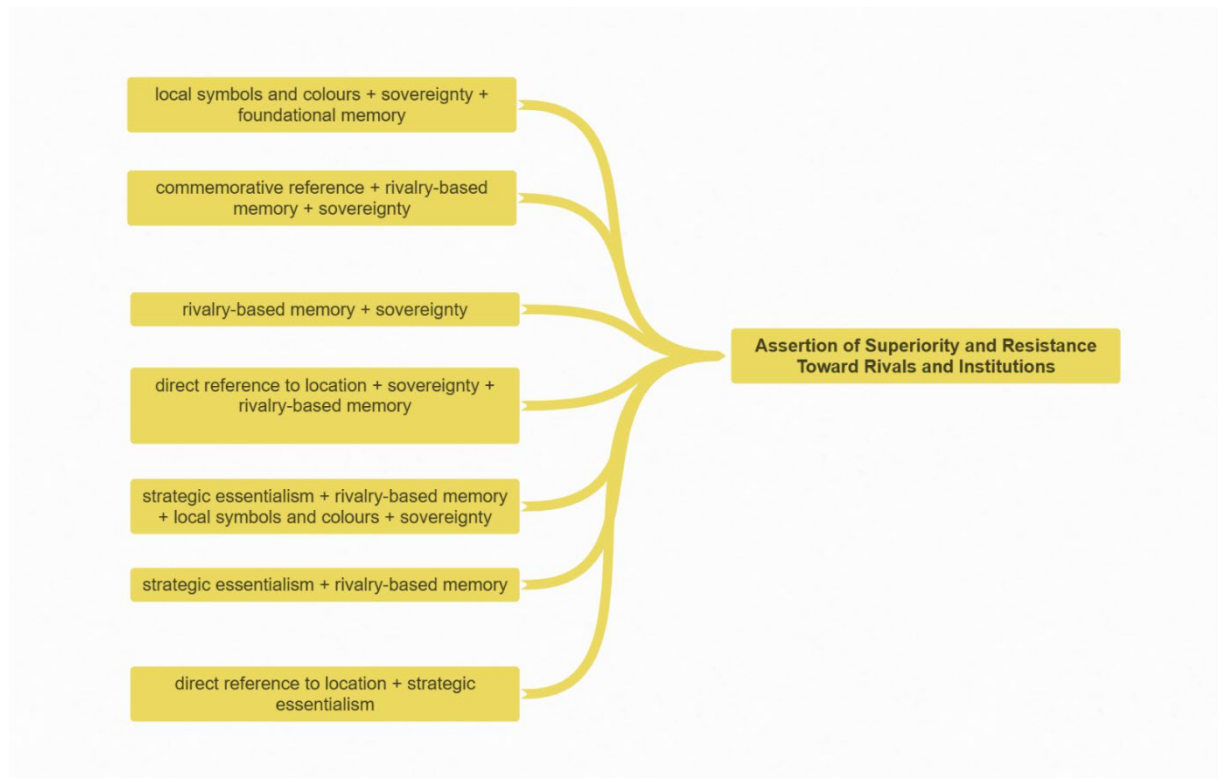
Appendix C

Coding Tree

The thematic coding process: clusters of code combinations







Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Ile Tudor-Cristian

Student ID: 739353

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Carmen Longas Luque

Date: 25/06/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content

was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: 

Date of Signature: 25/05/2025

Prompts used in ChatGPT:

1. I need to find a better title can you give me some suggestions
2. Could you help me correct the grammar of these sentences
3. I came up with some names for my themes and codes can you help me improve them
4. Can you help me correct spelling
5. Can you help me understand these paragraphs
6. Give me a list of the biggest football rivalries in Europe
7. Give me a list of tifos made by every European club
8. Explain in very simple terms Bernstein's strategic essentialism
9. Give me synonyms for...
10. What parts repeat themselves
11. How can I improve the cohesion between these paragraphs
12. What does Anderson mean by sovereignty and reading the morning newspaper ritual