



# A visual social semiotic investigation into the popularity of Ronaldo and Messi's chess photo on Instagram: Implications for new media and audience engagement

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study adopts a visual social semiotic approach to examine the multifaceted engagement incited by Annie Leibovitz's photograph portraying Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi in a contemplative game of chess, ensconced amidst an array of Louis Vuitton merchandise. Through semiotics, mise en scène, and sociolinguistics, we unravel the photograph's layered significances, employing studium and punctum to dissect viewer engagement. Cognitive linguistics reveals the interplay of myths, metaphors, and metonymy, crafting a narrative that intertwines football, chess, and luxury into potent cultural symbols. The mise en scène theory illuminates the nuanced balance between authenticity and artifice, while sociolinguistic insights bridge visual and linguistic communications for a diverse audience. The photograph, as a convergence of composition, culture, and technology, exemplifies how visual narratives blend these elements to forge connections and evoke responses. This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of digital visual storytelling's power in shaping cultural dialogues and perceptions, showcasing the role of iconic imagery in the tapestry of social media discourse.

**Keywords:** visual social semiotics, Annie Leibovitz, Ronaldo, Messi, mise en scène, sociolinguistics, myths, metaphors, metonymy, hyperreality, visual storytelling

## INTRODUCTION

The advent of Web 2.0 technology has transformed the nature of mass media, giving rise to a new category of media distinguished by its digital, interactive, direct access, asynchronous, hyper-textual, user-controlled, globally networked, and often simulation-based, automated, variable, and transcoded features. Known as new media, this category diverges from traditional mass media, with social media standing as a prominent manifestation of this evolution (Manovich, 2001; Rogers, 1986). The nuanced understanding of how visual elements such as gestures, compositions, and symbols contribute to the meaning and appeal of content on platforms like Instagram is crucial. This is where visual social semiotics become indispensable, highlighting how visual design serves as a pivotal mode of communication in our increasingly multimodal world (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006).

New media has revolutionized the landscape of communication by digitalizing qualitative information, signaling a transformative shift from traditional unidirectional to interactive modes of engagement. This evolution has increased passive viewership, replacing it with a dynamic form of active user participation. The erstwhile paradigm of one-to-many communication, a hallmark of conventional media, has been supplanted

by a many-to-many framework, empowering individuals not only to access but also to create, publish, assess, share, modify, and comment on content directly. Furthermore, new media champions the concept of demassification, tailoring specific messages for individual recipients within a broader audience, while its asynchronicity aspect frees users from the constraints of time, allowing for the sending and receiving of messages at one's convenience.

In this digital era, content—be it in the form of pixels, images, text, sounds, frames, or codes—can be independently modified and repurposed, thanks to automation technologies like filters and photo editors. This facility for modification facilitates the creation of multiple versions of a media object, heralding a qualitative change in the way information is consumed, produced, and shared. This change is not merely technological but profoundly cultural and social, altering the fabric of communication and engagement (Manovich, 2001; Rogers, 1986).

Social media, existing at the nexus of face-to-face and mass communication, reflects the significant shifts in technological communication patterns. The advent of computers marked the beginning of the “interactive period,” setting the stage for the “sharing period” propelled by the global expansion of the internet. This was subsequently followed by the “participation period,” highlighted by the rise of social media (Simsek, 2015). Each of these stages has played a pivotal role in shaping societal implications such as user expectations for engagement, public discourse, privacy, and community building. In line with these developments, we are relying on semiotics and symbols more and more as a common language (Nzeaka, 2021), further influencing how we interact across digital platforms. The age of new media, characterized by unrestricted access and semiotic multimodality, introduces novel communication models that highlight the critical role of discernment in interpreting the multifaceted messages conveyed across digital platforms (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023). As we venture towards a metaverse-infused future, we anticipate the dawn of an “experimental period” characterized by an enhanced resemblance to face-to-face communication. This forthcoming period promises new avenues for qualitative experiences and interactions, including the exploration of virtual and augmented realities, underscoring the evolution's implications for social connectivity.

### **Semiotics & Social Media: A Social Semiotic Research Approach**

The process of meaning-making within the realm of social media is garnering widespread scholarly interest. Social media has emerged as a complex socio-technological tool that allows creating, sharing, and modifying meaning within a hyper-textual and hyper-connected context (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014). Social media platforms employ algorithms that facilitate the mathematical analysis of the communication process. Using machine learning and neural network-based systems, computers can now recognize the emotions depicted in social media (Taherdoost, 2023). Immediate feedback can be garnered through clicks, likes, comments, and sharing, providing a form of quantitative data that addresses the “how many” aspect from a process-oriented perspective.

Semiotics studies signs and symbols and how they convey meaning in human communication. Building on the foundational theories of Peirce (1931-1936, 1958), who categorized signs into types like icons, indices, and symbols and introduced the concept of semiosis as a never-ending chain of interpretation (Peirce, 1931-1936, 1958), messages are constructed through signs while interacting with audiences or receivers. Social semiotics is a branch of semiotics that focuses on the social, cultural, and communicative aspects of human interaction (Kress, 2009). In contrast to the process school, semiotics tends to avoid communication failure, viewing text production and interpretation as parallel processes. The interplay between individuals and the text is facilitated by signals and codes rooted in cultural experiences. A social semiotic approach to dialogue recognizes that dialogue involves a functional exchange structure and emotive or evaluative correspondence (Jovanovic & Van Leeuwen, 2018).

Williams (1983) posits culture as a process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development. Today, social media posts are increasingly recognized as essential texts and practices that generate popular culture, often presenting distorted images of reality. Ideology, sometimes synonymous with popular culture, plays a crucial role in elucidating the meaning-making process. It refers to processes of masking, distortion, or concealment, explaining how certain texts and practices present distorted representations of reality (Storey, 2015).

Semiotic resources are foundational elements in social semiotic theory. They encompass the material, social, cultural, or technological means that individuals use for meaning making (Van Leeuwen, 2005). These resources are versatile and capable of constructing narratives, expressing emotions, and conveying social and cultural values. In this broad context, semiotic resources serve as the building blocks of communication, facilitating complex interactions among individuals. Within the specific realm of social media, platforms like Instagram offer a rich array of these semiotic resources, including text, images, videos, emojis, hashtags, and filters. The data on social media is inherently multimedia and hypertextual, allowing for the construction of meaning across multiple layers such as posts, emojis, and comments (Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019). This multimedia nature falls under the purview of visual social semiotics, which examines how meaning is shaped through the interplay between social reality and various forms of content. Unlike traditional semiotic analyses that might focus solely on linguistic or symbolic aspects, visual social semiotics uniquely enables a deeper exploration of Instagram's multimodal content—integrating visual, textual, and contextual elements to reveal how they collectively influence perception and engagement. This approach is particularly suited for dissecting the viral photograph of Messi and Ronaldo, offering insights into the layered meanings that transcend conventional media narratives. It particularly focuses on how people interact with images and other visual objects, all interpreted within a social context (Elhamy, 2022).

### Visual Social Semiotics & Instagram: Meaning in Age of Digital Expression

The study of social semiotics has been applied to diverse areas such as online dating environments, data visualization, tourism, journalism, political communication, and social media to assess narrative themes in images and the influence of compositional choices on connotations in photographs, emphasizing the role of semiotics in shaping meaning for viewers (Midberry & Dahmen, 2019). Additionally, the significance of social semiotics in understanding multimodal texts and the principles that underpin them has been underscored, particularly in relation to their epistemological and social/pedagogic significance (Bezemer & Kress, 2008).

The study of social semiotics has also extended to the analysis of social media, with a focus on the semiotic strategies employed by individuals, including politicians, to convey authenticity in their self-presentation (Poulsen et al., 2018). The work of visualization conventions in data visualization has been highlighted, emphasizing the economic and political implications of semiotic activity (Elhamy, 2022).

Visual social semiotics stands out for its approach to interpreting images as integral to broader social processes, unlike other methods like Gestalt theory, art history, psychoanalytical analysis, and iconography, which might view images more as isolated works or through different lenses. This perspective emphasizes the interactive nature of image meaning, rooted in the social, cultural, and political contexts of both creators and viewers, thus offering a dynamic understanding of how images, in conjunction with text, communicate and construct meaning within society. This approach not only deepens the analysis of imagery but also enhances collaborative discussion and interpretation skills (Harrison, 2003).

Instagram, as a cornerstone of digital culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, exemplifies the expansive role of visual social platforms in fostering interaction, self-expression, and community. It supports a broad spectrum of communication forms, catering to diverse objectives from entertainment to business, and social engagement across various demographics, including housewives, demonstrating its capacity to tailor to a wide audience (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Fornara & Lomicka, 2019; Sjoiraida et al., 2020). Its significance extends to political communication, positioning it as a critical space for political narratives, community involvement, and a new avenue for visual self-expression that shapes perceptions of credibility and leadership in the digital age (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017).

Instagram's integration into diverse aspects of social, political, educational, marketing, and design realms underscores its unique ability to seamlessly connect professional and personal spheres. This adaptability is highlighted through its profound influence on various societal constructs, including national identity, settler colonialism, and youth intimacy, showcasing its role in sculpting cultural narratives (Bedir & Oztunc, 2022; Karsgaard & MacDonald, 2020; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016).

The platform's efficacy in fields such as marketing and sports, coupled with its day-to-day impact, demonstrates transformative strategies for engagement and promotion, leveraging its visual and interactive capabilities (Prianti, 2020; Yousuf & Ganjera, 2020). Studies indicate that Instagram usage patterns correlate

with higher levels of gratitude, altruism, and charitable engagement among users, illustrating the broader effects of social media engagement on behavior (Mendini et al., 2020).

Further research into student use of social media reveals a complex landscape of identity exploration, concealment, and expression, enriching our comprehension of digital platforms as spaces for intricate identity management (Talbot et al., 2022). Instagram, in particular, through its content and user interactions, facilitates cultural diffusion, nuanced self-presentation, and increased visibility for LGBTQ+ communities, emphasizing its crucial role in broadening the representation of diverse identities and practices (Deeb-Swihart et al., 2017; Duguay, 2014). Instagram's role in enhancing visual literacy and adult education underscores its value as a pedagogical resource, highlighting the increasing significance of visual communication in educational strategies (Carvalho et al., 2021; Nasution, 2023; Prameswari et al., 2023). As a multifaceted platform, Instagram profoundly influences social interaction, communication, and the expression of identity, reflecting the complex ways in which visual social media platforms are woven into the fabric of contemporary society. Its extensive impact across personal, political, and educational domains showcases the pivotal role these platforms play in shaping and reflecting both digital and physical realities.

The platform's capacity for visual social semiotics is exemplified by the engaging photograph of soccer icons Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, captured in a moment of strategic play, against the backdrop of the Louis Vuitton (LV) brand. This image, symbolizing the confluence of sports, fashion, and global events like the World Cup 2022, offers a rich tableau for semiotic analysis. It demonstrates how Instagram facilitates complex semiotic dialogues, combining visual and textual elements to create multifaceted narratives that resonate with a global audience, further cementing Instagram's instrumental role in contemporary visual culture.

In recent years, numerous studies have explored Instagram's visual communication, yet a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between visual elements and social interaction remains elusive. There's a noted gap in fully appreciating the complexity and evolution of how Instagram influences political, social, and personal identity expressions. This study employs visual social semiotics to analyze the intricate semiotic resources in the viral photograph of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi playing chess, aiming to unveil new dimensions of Instagram's impact on contemporary visual culture and social discourse.

It is aimed to unravel the mechanisms through which emerging media, especially social platforms like Instagram, shape popular culture and engage audiences. Focusing on the widely celebrated "Ronaldo and Messi's Chess Photo (RMP)," which rapidly garnered an unprecedented number of likes and was recognized as having 'broken the internet,' our analysis delves into the factors contributing to its vast appeal. By examining this viral photograph depicted in [Figure 1](#), we aim to uncover insights into the underlying dynamics of social media and the intricate interplay between individuals within these virtual spaces.

Analyzing this photo through visual social semiotics not only deepens our understanding of digital communication's nuances on platforms like Instagram but also sheds light on the broader cultural expressions and social dynamics, potentially redefining the discourse in media studies, digital sociology, and visual culture.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing visual social semiotic methodologies to analyze the appeal of a viral Instagram photograph of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo playing chess. Barthes's (1981) concepts of studium and punctum were applied to explore viewer engagement and interpretation alongside Peirce's (1931-1936, 1958) semiotic principles for classifying elements into symbols, indexes, and icons. This enhances our understanding of the image's complexity and appeal. Our coding scheme, informed by the theories of Barthes (1957, 1981) and Peirce (1931-1936, 1958), meticulously identifies visual and textual elements representing cultural symbols, direct representations, or icons for qualitative analysis.

Further, Myths, metaphors, and metonymy were explored through cognitive linguistics, revealing deeper meanings that resonate beyond the sports realm. Sociolinguistic perspectives, particularly Bernstein's (1964), theories on broadcast and narrowcast codes, help us examine how varied communication codes affect engagement on Instagram, offering insights into audience interactions.



**Figure 1.** “Ronaldo & Messi’s Chess Photo” (victory is a state of mind @Cristiano & @LeoMessi captured by @AnnieLeibovitz for @LouisVuitton) (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CIHTdZhMkjW/>)

Integrating visual social semiotics, cognitive linguistics, and sociolinguistics, this methodology forms a cohesive framework for a comprehensive understanding of the photograph’s impact across diverse audiences. Manual analysis approach, chosen over software-assisted tools, is motivated by our goal for a nuanced, in-depth engagement with the data. The selection and interpretation of Instagram metrics and comments follow clearly defined criteria to ensure transparency and depth in our analysis. This approach aims to uncover the constructed nature of social media images and their influence on authenticity, narrative development, and digital interaction dynamics.

### Research Questions

To comprehensively understand the reasons underlying the remarkable popularity of the photograph depicting Ronaldo and Messi engaged in a game of chess on social media, an insightful semiotic examination of its virality was undertaken. This research initiative aimed to delve into the underlying factors by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do Barthes’ (1981) concepts of studium and punctum apply to the interpretation of a photograph showing Messi and Ronaldo playing chess? What are the broader sociocultural implications of these semiotic elements in this photograph’s context?
2. How do myths, metaphors, and metonymy help to construct meaning and convey the interplay between chess and football in the photograph?
3. How does the application of mise en scène and the revelation of composite construction in the photograph of Messi and Ronaldo playing chess contribute to the interplay between authenticity, manipulation, and illusion in the context of social media representations?
4. How do broadcast (elaborated) and narrowcast (restricted) codes affect engagement levels in Instagram posts featuring Messi and Ronaldo playing chess?
5. What strategies can effectively balance these codes to appeal to both broader and narrower audiences?

### FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In this section, a systematic analysis has been conducted within the context of research questions.



## Using Semiotic Resources in Social Context: Barthes' (1981) *Studium* & *Punctum* in a Photograph of Messi & Ronaldo Playing Chess

### *Studium: Cultural significance & symbolic depth*

Barthes (1981), a French literary theorist and philosopher, developed the concepts of *studium* and *punctum* in his work, "Camera Lucida." These terms refer to two different ways of interacting with and interpreting a photograph. *The studium* is the *initial attraction* that draws the viewer in, and *the punctum* is the *second element that creates interest and impact* *studium* is what initially draws the viewer to a photograph. It refers to the photographer's intention, which the viewer can determine with their logical, intellectual mind. *Studium* describes *the elements of an image* rather than the sum of the image's information and meaning.

In the case of the photograph under consideration, the first *studium* is the football icons *Messi and Ronaldo*, which are recognized worldwide, as they draw attention and interest due to their familiar, cultural significance. Culture is an essential connotation within *studium*, as it is culturally that the viewer participates in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, and the actions of the photograph (Barthes, 1981). They both focused on chess in a small area, within a friendly position, but focused on winning. The cultural significance of these two athletes, known for their rivalry in the football world, engaging in a strategic board game, presents a powerful representation of their professional personas. The juxtaposition of Messi and Ronaldo in a chess match, moving beyond their iconic football rivalry, employs visual semiotics to captivate and engage audiences. This strategic portrayal not only broadens the photograph's appeal but also sparks discussions, offering a novel reinterpretation of their competition that enriches viewer engagement and underlines the photograph's widespread allure. The consumption of celebrity culture through visual semiotics involves an active engagement, where audiences decode and internalize symbolic content in celebrity images, thus participating in the shaping and reinforcement of societal narratives surrounding celebrity (Turner, 2004).

The *second stadium* is the chessboard, signifying football, which transcends mere representation to embody a strategic duel of intelligence, mirroring the anticipatory dynamics of the sport. This metaphor, enriched by visual semiotics, engages global audiences, turning their interaction with the photograph into a contemplative analysis of strategy. It highlights how objects like the chessboard, deeply embedded in social life, convey intricate ideas and emotions, showcasing the power of visual symbols to encapsulate significant cultural and intellectual themes (Barthes, 1957).

The *third studium*, marked by LV bags situated under the chessboard, introduces a multifaceted cultural and socioeconomic dimension. These luxury symbols, as noted by Peirce (1931-1936, 1958), extend beyond mere opulence to signify success and a desired lifestyle. Their association with Messi and Ronaldo not only underscores their financial stature but also highlights their social standing as elite athletes. The deliberate placement of these bags transcends traditional luxury symbolism to suggest strategic mastery and triumph, mirroring the intellectual depth and competitive essence of chess (Kaftandjiev, 2023). This configuration, bridging athletic prowess with socio-economic success, crafts an intricate commentary on the confluence of sports excellence and societal status, not merely elevating the status of individual athletes but also subtly reinforcing societal norms valuing success and intellectual mastery. It unveils a layered narrative of dominance within the metaphorical game of life, a complexity often overlooked (Muttaqin et al., 2023).

The *fourth studium* is the accompanying text "victory is a state of mind". The text not only highlights the intellectual and psychological facets of competitive sports, underlining that triumph extends beyond mere physical ability to include mental strength and strategy, but also fosters a broader cultural shift towards valuing psychological resilience and intellect. Its presence as visual semiotics in media further underscores the text's power to shape and reinforce these evolving societal values, demonstrating the significant role language plays in the perception and valuation of success within society (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981).

The *fifth studium* is the famous photographer "Annie Leibovitz" herself. Being one of the well-known and experienced photographers, her name was added to the main post after the name of two football stars. Her work, epitomized by the poignant "Last Kiss" photo of Yoko Ono and John Lennon (Cohen, 2019), aligns with LV's prestige, emphasizing the photograph's status as a cultural artifact. This alignment, much like Barthes' (1967) "death of the author" theory, challenges traditional celebrity perceptions through visual semiotics,

encouraging a nuanced interpretation of images that transcends the creator's intent, thereby fostering a societal shift in the engagement and understanding of celebrity images (Riefe, 2019).

### **Punctum: Personal resonance & emotional impact**

Punctum, as Barthes (1981) elucidates in "Camera Lucida", is that part of the photograph, which emotionally pierces the viewer, introducing an element of surprise or accidental discovery that significantly enriches the image's depth and meaning. This unique, personal aspect of the photograph engages viewers on an individual level, driven by their experiences and emotions, making it a distinct point of focus whose impact varies across different audiences. The intertwining of studium and punctum, particularly through the intense focus captured in Ronaldo and Messi's expressions, serves to transform societal perceptions of competition. It embeds a nuanced semiotic message that elevates the pursuit of excellence to a cultural aspiration, compelling viewers to reconsider personal and collective ambitions through the culturally rich metaphor of a chess match for the World Cup.

*The first punctum* of the photo of Ronaldo and Messi is the *thoughtful facial expression, body movement and the intensity of the concentration in the room*. The studium is also the punctum in this photo too. The intense focus on Messi and Ronaldo's faces could be indicative of the depth of their engagement in the game and reflective of their competitive spirit. Touching and Holding LV bags could be considered the desire to take the World Cup.

*The second punctum* is the *arrangement of the chess pieces*. The positioning of the chess pieces subtly indicates the state of the match and evokes intrigue about their strategic thinking. For others, the punctum might be the incongruity of seeing these football stars outside their usual context, playing a cerebral board game instead of engaging in their usual physical sport. This incongruity might evoke a range of emotions or thoughts in the viewer, such as surprise, humor, or deeper reflections about the athletes' personas and lives off the field. The comment of Ruhaabsehgal has been *liked 22766 times as of 21 August 2023*.

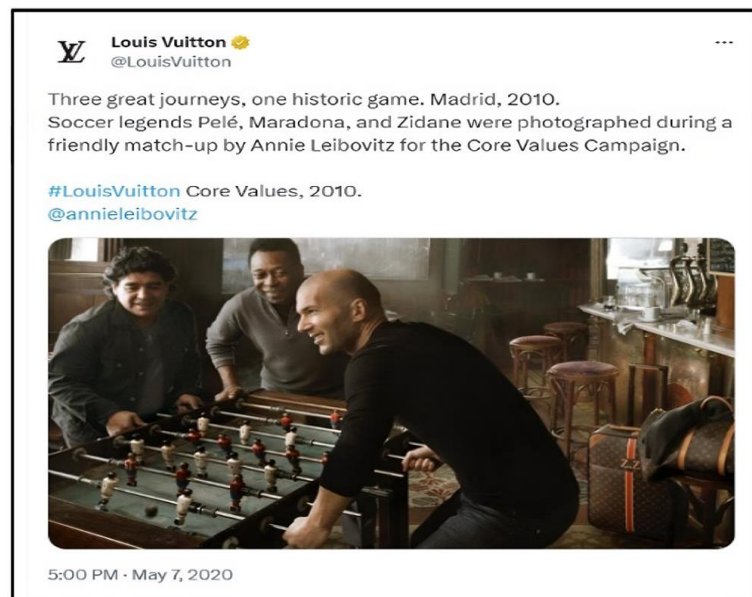
"This picture comes from a real game between chess world champion Magnus Carlsen and Hikaru Nakamura in 2017. Interestingly, the game ended in a draw, indirectly meaning that Messi and Ronaldo are equally good. This is the enjoyment of decoding the photo by audiences."

*The third punctum* is that these two players are *not in their typical setting—a football field—but are seen engaging in a game of chess in a room*. The unusual setting provides an unexpected element, disrupting the viewer's expectations and adding an additional layer of emotional engagement.

*The fourth punctum* is the interaction of Ronaldo and Messi with *LV bags under the chessboard*. In 2010, for the first time, FIFA commissioned LV to design a special case to hold the World Cup trophy (Alexander, 2010; Mulligan, 2010). This detail might jump out and evoke those feelings in viewers with personal memories or emotional attachments associated with the World Cup. The placement of luxury bags under a chessboard on which two of the world's top footballers are playing is an unexpected detail, and the incongruity between the casual game scenario and the high-end product can serve as a punctum.

*The fifth punctum* is the intertextual aspect of RMP with another photograph taken by the same photographer as part of the Core Values Campaign by Annie Leibovitz, which featured three renowned footballers, Maradona, Pele, and Zidane (see [Figure 2](#)). The photograph juxtaposes the world of football with the luxury brand LV. Pele, Diego Maradona, and Zidane, three legendary football players, are depicted in a friendly match-up scenario, symbolizing the timeless appeal of the sport in 2010. That iconic image might be subtly referenced or paralleled in RMP. By featuring Pele, Maradona, and Zidane alongside these luxury items, the photograph previously implies a connection between their celebrated careers and their iconic status, which extends beyond the football field. The bags, being associated with LV, a brand synonymous with opulence and exclusivity, symbolize not just material luxury but also the achievements and recognition that come with being exceptional in one's field (Peirce, 1931-1936, 1958).

The studium provides a universal context for understanding, while the punctum adds a depth of personal engagement and emotional resonance, together creating a dynamic and captivating visual experience (Reid & Sanders, 2021). Therefore, while these LV bags could serve as the punctum for some related to the World Cup, they might be part of the stadium decoding only as a luxury brand. The popularity of this photograph



**Figure 2.** Pele, Maradona, & Zidane in core values 2010 campaigns by Louis Vuitton (<https://twitter.com/LouisVuitton/status/1258396177558536199>)

could largely be attributed to this intricate and nuanced utilization of semiotic resources, making it a compelling piece of visual communication.

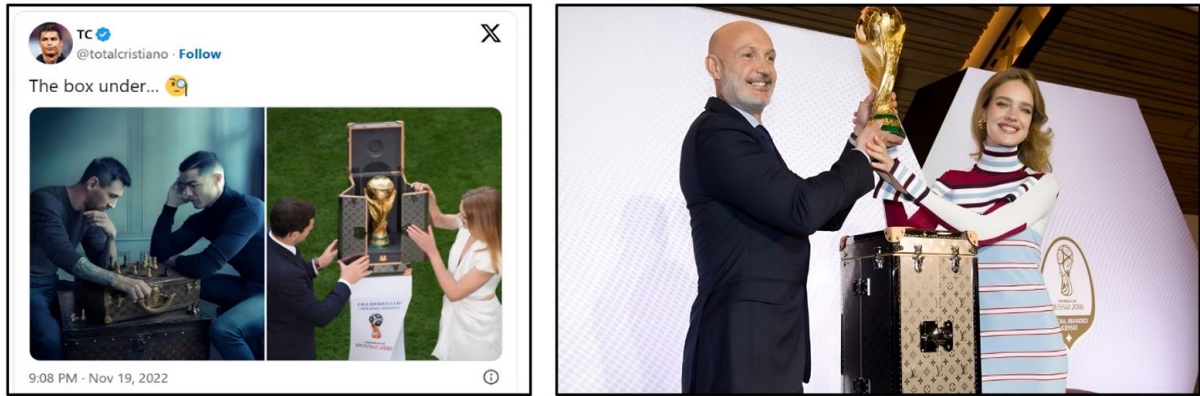
### Use of Myths, Metaphors, & Metonymy in Cognitive Linguistics of a Photograph Depicting Chess & Football

In cognitive linguistics, the interplay of myths, metaphors, and metonymy plays a crucial role in how we interpret and derive meaning from language and imagery. Myths are collective narratives and beliefs that transcend logical and tangible aspects of our reality, shaping our understanding of the world and the self (Gurevich, 2021). Metaphors, defined by Kövecses (2002) as the interpretation of one conceptual domain through the lens of another, alongside metonymy—highlighted by Gibbs (1999) for its use of one closely related entity to represent another—enrich our cognitive and communicative experiences. Barthes (1981) draws a parallel between metaphors and myths, emphasizing their shared reliance on substitution to weave complex layers of meaning, where denotation and connotation merge to form myth, an advanced order of signification. This semantic complexity is evident in the photographer's ability to engage, represent, and evoke emotions, allowing spectators to derive varied levels of enjoyment and interpretation from the visual narrative.

Messi and Ronaldo transcend their status as football icons to embody *cultural myths* within a photograph, enriching their interpretive layers (Barthes, 1957). As symbols in Peirce's (1931-1936, 1958) semiotic framework, their contrasting personas—Messi's "homegrown hero" and Ronaldo's "self-made" archetype (Lev, 2018; Murray, 2016)—illustrate the dynamic interplay of myths shaping their public perception. This portrayal on a chessboard not only mirrors their strategic acumen in football but also situates them within the luxurious realm of LV, signifying their influence beyond the sport into fashion and opulence. Thus, the photograph leverages their mythical status to convey themes of rivalry and elegance, embodying Barthes' (1957) view of myth as a tool for amplifying cultural ideologies. This visual narrative redefines celebrity and luxury perceptions, encouraging viewers to unravel a complex tableau that mirrors the societal chess game of values and goals, thereby transforming visual semiotics from mere interpretative means to a platform for rethinking cultural stories and identities.

The photograph's chess imagery serves as a *metaphor* for football, highlighting the need for strategic insight and execution inherent in both activities. Rather than depicting football directly, it uses a chess match featuring two renowned players to symbolize football's strategic and tactical demands, positioning the chessboard and pieces as *iconic signs* that reflect football's intellectual rather than purely physical challenges (Peirce, 1931-1936, 1958). The image captures a moment of intense focus, mirroring the mental sharpness essential in top-level football, and alludes to the historical rivalry between the players, suggesting the image





**Figure 3.** LV briefcase is claimed to be part of 2018 World Cup campaign (<https://www.euronews.com/culture/2022/11/23/the-incredible-hidden-details-you-missed-in-ronaldo-and-messis-viral-chess-photo> & <https://wwd.com/accessories-news/leather-goods/louis-vuitton-2018-fifa-world-cup-russia-natalia-vodianova-1202676230/>)



**Figure 4.** Magnus Carlsen (2832) vs. Hikaru Nakamura (2785), 2017 Norway Chess (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jVwpGppkBc> & <https://twitter.com/GMHikaru>)

could symbolize a metaphorical Argentina-Portugal final in Qatar. This layering of metaphors enriches the photograph, inviting audiences to explore deeper narratives of strategy and rivalry embedded within.

Finally, *the luxurious setting and the presence of LV bags* serve as metaphors for the high stakes involved in their professional encounters and the rewards reaped by the victors. Moreover, LV briefcase in the picture is claimed to be part of the 2018 World Cup campaign in Russia and had the trophy before it was presented at the opening fixture and final, which is depicted in **Figure 3**. The mention of LV briefcase being part of the 2018 World Cup campaign adds an interesting historical and symbolic layer to the story.

The photograph's chess match *metonymically* parallels a notable 2017 game between Magnus Carlsen and Hikaru Nakamura, with a specific focus on the strategic positioning of the chess pieces, as seen in **Figure 4**. This arrangement not only symbolizes the strategic depth of football but also mirrors the current standing and reputations of the players in the sports arena. Moreover, the chessboard serves as a metonym for the players' career trajectories, especially in the context of the World Cup. The similar body language between the soccer players and Carlsen and Nakamura underscores the mental rigor and focus inherent in both chess and football, highlighting the psychological parallels in preparing for and engaging in high-level competitive situations.

Moreover, *LV bags*, an iconic symbol of luxury and status, have become a metonymic representation of the FIFA World Cup—an event associated with global prestige for the significance of carrying the World Cup since 2010. Additionally, luxury bags are associated with famous and rich footballers or models like Naomi



**Figure 5.** Louis Vuitton unveils 2010 FIFA World Cup trophy case: The World Cup is a spectacle not only of sport, but of style (<https://hauteliving.com/2010/06/louis-vuitton-unveils-2010-fifa-world-cup-trophy-case/53442/> & <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/15/620494860/photos-the-world-cup-is-a-spectacle-not-only-of-sport-but-of-fashion>)

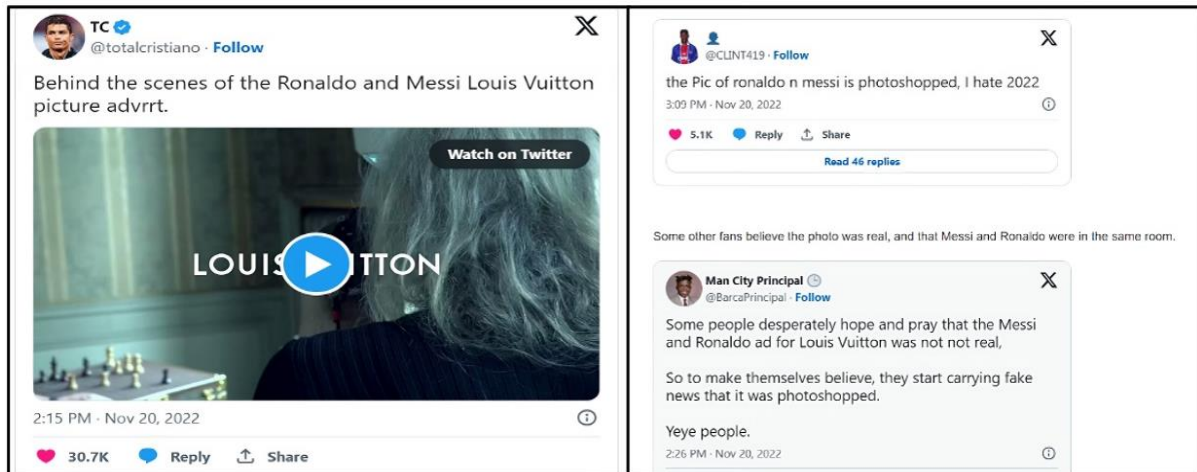


**Figure 6.** Behind-the-scenes footage of Lionel Messi & Cristiano Ronaldo's internet-breaking picture has been released (<https://www.sportbible.com/football/lionel-messi-cristiano-ronaldo-louis-vuitton-20221120> & <https://www.klix.ba/sport/nogomet/kako-je-nastala-nogometna-fotografija-stoljeca-pogledajte-scene-sa-snimanja-messija-i-ronalda/221120026>)

Campbell or Natalia Vodianova, who married with the son of Bernard Arnault, the chairman and CEO of LVMH, as seen in **Figure 5**.

*Messi and Ronaldo* themselves serve as metonyms for who can buy these luxury products. *The environment they're pictured in* exudes a certain luxury, and opulence can be a metonym for the wealth and success that professionals like Messi and Ronaldo enjoy. *Messi and Ronaldo's casual yet stylish attire* can be a metonymic representation of their public personas as exceptional professionals and fashion icons. They influence popular culture and fashion trends.

Luxury items like LV bags in photographs with football legends such as Maradona, Pele, and Zidane (referenced in **Figure 2**) exemplify a recurring semiotic motif. This strategy crafts a narrative that transcends the photo's surface, using luxury symbols to articulate themes of success and distinction. Such semiotic practices, melding high-end fashion with sports icons, create a resonant narrative of aspiration and achievement, demonstrating the power of visual semiotics to engage global audiences and establish a narrative continuity across diverse cultural icons. Furthermore, Annie Leibovitz's association (**Figure 1** and **Figure 6**) introduces a metonymic layer, positioning Messi and Ronaldo as eminent global celebrities. Her involvement signifies more than mere photographic excellence; it highlights their elevated status in the cultural lexicon, drawing interest from beyond the football community and enriching the photograph's significance by embedding it within a broader cultural and semiotic framework.



**Figure 7.** Louis Vuitton have released incredible behind-the-scenes footage for their incredible internet-breaking ad featuring Lionel Messi & Cristiano Ronaldo & reactions (<https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/20487132/behind-the-scenes-footage-messi-ronaldo-chess-not-together/> & <https://sportsmanor.com/soccer-news-they-werent-even-in-the-same-room-lionel-messi-and-cristiano-ronaldo-chess-game-photograph-was-fake-soccer-world-melts-down/>)

### Analyzing Photograph of Messi & Ronaldo Playing Chess Through *Mise en Scène* & Semiotic Concepts

Analyzing the photograph of Messi and Ronaldo playing chess through the lens of *mise en scène* reveals its nuanced communication, akin to a form of visual écriture. This concept, drawing from Barthes' (1981) analysis (Carmody, 1990), treats the photograph as a textual language, where the chessboard layout and the players' placement convey layered meanings, akin to theatrical scenery and props. Although photography captures gestures and settings, it cannot fully represent the dynamic *gestus* or *tableau*, yet it serves as a critical medium for discussing and interpreting performance elements within a static frame.

The revelation that Messi and Ronaldo were photographed separately and digitally combined in post-production (referenced in [Figure 6](#)) underscores the constructed nature of photographic images, their susceptibility to manipulation, and the critical role of spectatorship theories. This composite creation not only deepens our appreciation for the image's communicative depth but also introduces a critical perspective on authenticity and the crafting of narratives in the digital age.

This approach brings to light the semiotic power of the image: initially perceived as an authentic capture of camaraderie, the knowledge of its composite nature (illustrated in [Figure 7](#)) shifts its interpretation, emphasizing themes of authenticity, manipulation, and the creation of social media narratives. This intricately constructed photograph exemplifies Baudrillard's (1994) notion of the 'hyperreal,' where the blurred line between reality and simulation projects an illusion of a shared moment between Messi and Ronaldo, despite being artfully assembled through individual shoots and digital editing, thus challenging our perceptions of reality and representation. Knowledge of the image's composite nature might cause disappointment or disillusionment among viewers who value authenticity. This reaction resonates with the theoretical stance of theorists such as Debord (1994), who posits that modern society has become a society of the spectacle, where representations and images often take precedence over genuine human experiences. The frustration and denial of the composite structure of the photos were examined in [Figure 7](#). In this context, the photograph becomes a symbol of the spectacle of social media, where images are often manipulated or staged for impact, altering the viewer's perception of reality. The viewers, who were perhaps expecting an authentic interaction between the football stars, are instead presented with a manufactured scene, emphasizing the role of social media platforms in creating and perpetuating illusions.

The strategic fusion of Messi and Ronaldo into a single frame, unveiling its composite origin, not only challenges the authenticity within visual semiotics but also mirrors the concept of the spectacle reflecting a society engrossed in the imagery over reality (Debord, 1967). This scenario urges a societal reevaluation of



Rank ↕	Account name ↕	Owner ↕	Post description	Post	Likes (millions) ↕	Date posted (UTC) ↕
1	@leomessi	Lionel Messi	Photos of <a href="#">Lionel Messi</a> and the <a href="#">Argentina national football team</a> after winning the <a href="#">2022 FIFA World Cup</a>	[1] <a href="#">↗</a>	75.4	December 18, 2022
2	@world_record_egg	Chris Godfrey	Photo of an egg	[2] <a href="#">↗</a>	60.1	January 4, 2019
3	@leomessi	Lionel Messi	<a href="#">Lionel Messi</a> in bed with <a href="#">Mate</a> drink and the <a href="#">FIFA World Cup Trophy</a>	[3] <a href="#">↗</a>	54.5	December 20, 2022
4	@cristiano	Cristiano Ronaldo	<a href="#">Lionel Messi</a> and <a href="#">Cristiano Ronaldo</a> playing chess, advertising for <a href="#">Louis Vuitton</a>	[4] <a href="#">↗</a>	42.5	November 19, 2022
5	@leomessi	Lionel Messi	<a href="#">Lionel Messi</a> on an airplane with the <a href="#">FIFA World Cup Trophy</a>	[5] <a href="#">↗</a>	41.8	December 19, 2022
6	@leomessi	Lionel Messi	Celebrating the <a href="#">2022 FIFA World Cup</a> win in <a href="#">Argentina</a>	[6] <a href="#">↗</a>	34.2	December 21, 2022
7	@cristiano @alnassr	Cristiano Ronaldo Al Nassr FC	Announcement of <a href="#">Cristiano Ronaldo</a> joining <a href="#">Al Nassr FC</a>	[7] <a href="#">↗</a>	34.2	December 30, 2022
8	@jiangzhibin24	Liz 6	Reel of a sunset	[8] <a href="#">↗</a>	34.2	August 5, 2023
9	@cristiano	Cristiano Ronaldo	After elimination of <a href="#">Portugal</a> from the <a href="#">2022 FIFA World Cup</a>	[9] <a href="#">↗</a>	34.0	December 11, 2022
10	@leomessi	Lionel Messi	<a href="#">Lionel Messi</a> and <a href="#">Cristiano Ronaldo</a> playing chess, advertising for <a href="#">Louis Vuitton</a>	[10] <a href="#">↗</a>	32.7	November 19, 2022
11	@xxtentacion	XXXTentacion	Final post before his death	[11] <a href="#">↗</a>	32.6	May 19, 2018
12	@cristiano @georginagio	Cristiano Ronaldo Georgina Rodríguez	Their twins pregnancy announcement	[12] <a href="#">↗</a>	32.2	October 28, 2021
13	@cristiano	Cristiano Ronaldo	Post in remembrance of <a href="#">Pelé</a>	[13] <a href="#">↗</a>	32.1	December 29, 2022
14	@leomessi	Lionel Messi	After <a href="#">2022 FIFA World Cup</a> match against <a href="#">Croatia</a>	[14] <a href="#">↗</a>	29.5	December 14, 2022
15	@michaelareed31	Michaela Reed	Reel of a boy running and getting hurt	[15] <a href="#">↗</a>	29.5	April 2, 2024
16	@cristiano	Cristiano Ronaldo	Post of <a href="#">Cristiano Ronaldo</a> being presented to the <a href="#">Al Nassr FC</a> fans	[16] <a href="#">↗</a>	27.8	January 3, 2023
17	@cristiano	Cristiano Ronaldo	Post of friendly between <a href="#">PSG</a> and <a href="#">Riyadh XI</a>	[17] <a href="#">↗</a>	27.7	January 19, 2023
18	@zendaya	Zendaya	Happy birthday post to <a href="#">Tom Holland</a>	[18] <a href="#">↗</a>	26.3	June 1, 2022
19	@leomessi	Lionel Messi	Post in remembrance of <a href="#">Pelé</a>	[19] <a href="#">↗</a>	25.9	December 29, 2022
20	@selenagomez	Selena Gomez	Selfie photo with caption "Violet Chemistry"	[20] <a href="#">↗</a>	25.7	March 14, 2023

As of 26 April 2024

**Figure 8.** List of most-liked Instagram posts (as of 26 April 2023) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_most-liked\\_Instagram\\_posts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-liked_Instagram_posts))

truth in the digital era, highlighting the impact of such spectacles on our collective perception, where the line between illusion and authenticity blurs, compelling us to discern genuine amidst omnipresent digital façade.

### Balancing Broadcast & Narrowcast Codes in Instagram Posts for Increased Engagement: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

In Instagram communication, bridging the gap between broad and narrow cultural audiences can be nuanced, yet employing broadcast and narrowcast codes, as delineated by Bernstein (1964), enhances audience engagement. Bernstein’s (1964) elaborated and restricted codes offer insight into tailoring messages for diverse groups. Restricted codes, characterized by their simplicity and directness, often resonate in more intimate or familiar contexts. The prominence of Ronaldo and Messi in the most-liked Instagram photos as of 26 April 2023, with 14 out of top-20 photos featuring them (Figure 8), exemplifies their role as symbols of restricted codes to their audience. Their portrayal, with matching attire and the absence of eye contact, functions as ‘indexical signs’ (Peirce, 1931-1936, 1958), symbolizing a concentrated and shared focus that negates the need for explicit verbalization. This subtle communication, suggestive of unity and earnestness, transcends verbal barriers, making the message accessible to a wider audience without requiring detailed knowledge of chess or its history, thereby magnifying image’s appeal through strategic use of visual semiotics.

## Engagement: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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## CONCLUSIONS

This paper embarked on a detailed exploration of a photograph capturing Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, taken by Annie Leibovitz, from a visual social semiotic perspective. It dissected the complex interaction between prominent personalities and their broader societal impact, shedding light on modern communication dynamics. Through semiotics, *mise en scène*, and sociolinguistics, this analysis uncovered the photograph's depth, demonstrating its capability to connect with and captivate a diverse audience spectrum. The application of Barthes' (1981) *studium* and *punctum* concepts revealed the semiotic richness of the image, blending visible elements with profound emotional resonance, thus broadening its appeal (Singh & Ladsaria, 2017).

The exploration of cognitive linguistics unveiled how myths, metaphors, and metonymy converge to shape the narrative within the photograph considering language, cognition, and reasoning (Valenzuela & Soriano, 2005). Messi and Ronaldo's mythical statuses and metaphoric alignments between football, chess, and luxury items construct a layered discourse that transcends sports, intertwining culture, strategy, and aspiration. This study revealed how these linguistic elements work harmoniously to craft a compelling narrative that extends.

Applying *mise en scène* theory enriched our comprehension of the image's construction and role in shaping contemporary visual narratives (Hodsdon, 1992). The revelation of its composite nature underscored the interplay between authenticity and manipulation, echoing Baudrillard's (1994) concept of the 'hyperreal' and aligning with the era of blurred boundaries between reality and simulation in social media. Baudrillard (1994) mentioned the ideas of Ecclesiastes that "*the simulacrum is never what hides the truth-it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.*" Therefore, hyperreal is a real without an origin or reality. This photo, therefore, could evoke feelings as if it is authentic.

Sociolinguistic insights highlighted the strategic fusion of broadcast and narrowcast codes (de Valck & Teurlings, 2013), catering to a diverse audience while maintaining depth through elaborate metaphors. The photograph's visual language bridges linguistic gaps and invites enthusiasts to explore nuanced connections (Tolia-Kelly, 2007). The visual cues, such as the matched colors and non-verbal expressions, transcend linguistic barriers and extend an invitation to enthusiasts who understand the nuanced connection between chess and football strategy. Research supports the importance of finding a balance between these two codes. For example, Lee and Ma (2012) found that social media users are likelier to share content that appeals to their interests and preferences. Still, they also value content that has broader appeal and relevance. In addition, Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) found that emotional content that appeals to a specific cultural group can increase engagement. Still, it is also essential to balance emotional content with more neutral or informational content to appeal to a broader audience.

In this study, we delved into the dialogue between society and iconic imagery through the lens of a notable photograph of Messi and Ronaldo. By applying Barthes' (1981) concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, the research illuminated how this image transcends its visual appeal to stimulate a global conversation, bridging cultural narratives and intellectual engagement with elements of luxury. This analysis, specific to this



photograph, suggests the broader applicability of visual semiotics across different contexts, highlighting their role in engaging audiences and constructing narratives.

By integrating Barthes' (1981) *studium* and *punctum* with the iconic imagery of Messi and Ronaldo, the discussion not only deciphers the layered communication within the photograph but also contextualizes its societal resonance, effectively answering how semiotic elements bridge cultural narratives and provoke intellectual engagement. The exploration of myths, metaphors, and metonymy, alongside the application of *mise en scène* and the digital construction of imagery, directly addresses the interplay between real and virtual, authenticity and manipulation, illustrating the photograph's role in shaping perceptions within the digital age. Finally, the analysis of broadcast and narrowcast codes within the Instagram context demonstrates strategic approaches to enhancing audience engagement, showcasing the balance between appealing to specific interests and broader appeal, thereby providing actionable insights into effective visual communication in social media landscapes.

Moreover, the study opens discussions on the ethical implications of digital image manipulation, emphasizing the need for transparency and integrity in visual storytelling. The combination of football icons within a sophisticated setting not only showcases the power of imagery in cultural and emotional exchange but also encourages a broader reflection on the impact of visual semiotics and ethical considerations in digital storytelling. This pursuit of understanding visual narratives in the digital age underlines the importance of maintaining a balance between creativity and ethical standards, ensuring that our visual stories resonate truthfully and responsibly with audiences worldwide.

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