

A Semantic and Formal Analysis in the Context of Visual Communication Design: The Example of the "Three-Legged Cat" from the 18th Istanbul Biennial

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Abstract

The Purpose of the Study: *This study aims to examine the visual communication design system developed within the scope of the 18th Istanbul Biennial, themed "Three-Legged Cat," to analyze how this system is implemented across different media, and to reveal the connections between the resulting formal and semantic relationships and the biennial's conceptual framework.*

Theoretical Framework: *This study's conceptual framework is grounded in a semiotic approach that examines the meaning-making processes of visual signs. Accordingly, Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis model has served as the basis. In addition, the functioning of certain design elements on the surface that play a role in the formation of meaning in visual communication design has also been examined within a theoretical framework.*

Method: *This study utilized a qualitative research method. In this study, the visual communication design works for the 18th Istanbul Biennial were selected using a purposive sampling method. The printed materials, social media posts, motion graphics, and advertising/promotional films produced for the Biennial have been examined using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis.*

Findings: *The research reveals a formal and conceptual continuity across the printed materials, social media posts, motion graphics, and advertising/promotional films of the 18th Istanbul Biennial. Furthermore, this continuity creates a visual language consistent with the biennial's conceptual theme. However, it is observed that the visual arrangements across different media repeat in line with similar design approaches, thereby establishing a meaningful relationship with the biennale's conceptual framework.*

Conclusion: *The study demonstrates that the visual communication system for the 18th Istanbul Biennial maintains a consistent structure across different media. The repetitive use of visual design elements across the various applications that make up the composition reveals that the biennale theme gains visibility within a consistent, integrated structure. This demonstrates that the biennale's visual*

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communication system functions as a communication structure that is conceptually related, activates the visitor, and shows continuity across media.

Keywords: 18th Istanbul Biennial, three-legged cat, visual communication design, semiotic analysis, visual language

Görsel İletişim Tasarımı Bağlamında Anlamsal ve Biçimsel Bir Analiz: 18. İstanbul Bienali "Üç Ayaklı Kedi" Örneđi

Öz

Çalışmanın Amacı: Bu çalışma, "Üç Ayaklı Kedi" temalı 18. İstanbul Bienali kapsamında geliştirilen görsel iletişim tasarımı sistemini incelemeyi, bu sistemin farklı mecralarda nasıl kurgulandığını ve ortaya çıkan biçimsel ve anlamsal ilişkilerin bienalin kavramsal çerçevesiyle kurduđu bađı ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Kuramsal Çerçeve: Çalışmanın kuramsal çerçevesini görsel göstergelerin anlam üretim süreçlerini inceleyen göstergebilim yaklaşımı oluşturmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda Roland Barthes'in düz anlam ve yan anlam ayırımına dayanan göstergebilimsel çözümleme modeli temel alınmıştır. Ayrıca görsel iletişim tasarımında anlamın oluşumunda rol oynayan bazı tasarım unsurlarının yüzey üzerindeki işleyişi de kuramsal çerçeve içinde ele alınmıştır.

Yöntem: Çalışma nitel araştırma yöntemi çerçevesinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmada 18. İstanbul Bienali'nin görsel iletişim tasarımına ait uygulamalar amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilmiş, bienale ait basılı materyaller, sosyal medya paylaşımları, hareketli grafikler ve reklam-tanıtım filmleri Roland Barthes'in göstergebilimsel analiz yaklaşımı doğrultusunda incelenmiştir.

Bulgular: Araştırma bulguları, 18. İstanbul Bienali'ne ait basılı materyaller, sosyal medya paylaşımları, hareketli grafikler ve reklam-tanıtım filmleri arasında hem biçimsel hem de kavramsal bir süreklilik bulunduđunu ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca bu sürekliliğin bienalin kavramsal temasıyla tutarlı bir görsel dil oluşturduđu gözlemlenmektedir. Bunun yanı sıra farklı mecralarda uygulanan görsel düzenlemelerin benzer tasarım yaklaşımları doğrultusunda tekrar ettiđi ve bu tekrarın bienalin kavramsal çerçevesiyle anlamlı bir ilişki kurduđu görülmektedir.

Sonuç: Çalışma 18. İstanbul Bienali'ne ait görsel iletişim sisteminin farklı mecralarda tutarlı biçimde sürdürülen bir yapıya sahip olduđunu göstermektedir. Kompozisyonu oluşturan görsel tasarım unsurlarının çeşitli uygulamalarda tekrar eden kullanımı, bienal temasının tutarlı ve bütünleşik bir yapı içinde görünürlük kazandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu durum, bienalin görsel iletişim sisteminin kavramsal çerçeveyle ilişkili, ziyaretçiyi aktifleştiren ve mecralar arasında süreklilik gösteren bir iletişim yapısı olarak işlediđini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: 18. İstanbul Bienali, üç ayaklı kedi, görsel iletişim tasarımı, göstergebilimsel analiz, görsel dil

1. Introduction

The concept, which corresponds to the Latin word "communication", refers to the process by which individuals exchange information about events, objects, and phenomena occurring in their environment, and transmit thoughts, feelings, and attitudes stemming from similar life experiences. This interaction takes place within social life through various tools and forms of expression (Oskay, 2011, p. 9). Visual communication is defined as a form of communication that involves establishing this process through visual elements. This field of communication, established through visual images, encompasses the process of designing, structuring, and effectively presenting visual messages for a specific purpose (Koç, 2023, p. 124).

Visual communication is a multifaceted field of research and application that examines how information from the outside world is conveyed to a target audience through visual means. This process can involve simple identification of an object, such as a key, or it can encompass more complex meaning-making processes (Barry, 2020, p. 3). Visual communication is a broad concept encompassing various fields such as clothing, gestures, games, interior and exterior design, as well as different practices including computer software, tool and product design, and even the way information is learned. Within this field, the target audience experiences content not only visually but also through their tactile senses. In other words, the relationship established with these phenomena is based not only on seeing, but also on how individuals physically experience the spaces they inhabit (Machin 2014, p. 7). Today, it can be said that visual communication applications have transformed into a participatory, experiential system that circulates across different tools. This situation raises questions about visual communication design, not only about what is conveyed, but also about how the message is constructed, what formal strategies are used to disseminate it, and how it creates a sense of unity across different media.

Studies on visual communication mostly focus on the social functions, uses, and effects of the visual aspects of modern communication media. This field encompasses diverse production media, including typography, publication design, photography, film, video, and digitally produced images (Griffin, 2013, pp. 136-138). This field, which brings together diverse design disciplines and application areas, exhibits a multidisciplinary structure, as shown. In this context, visual communication design can be classified under different fields such as advertising design, graphic design, and information design. Advertising design utilizes various communication tools, including print media, television commercials, film, and new media. Within this structure, graphic design encompasses various production areas, such as publication design, identity design, motion graphics, and new media practices (Sadokierski, 2010, p. 10). This diversity demonstrates that visual communication design has a multi-layered structure encompassing hybrid production areas and communication environments. Especially

with the development of digital technologies, the production and circulation of information generated by this structure has accelerated significantly. This transformation has increased the role of visual content in communication processes, making visual communication design practices a vital component of today's world.

The broad and interdisciplinary nature of the visual communication field indicates that it is not limited to specific production techniques but also encompasses diverse design practices. This field, which brings together multiple production methods, is related to graphic design but can also include interactive design applications such as three-dimensional modeling, software, and web interfaces. However, visual communication design also plays a significant role in building the image of brands and institutions and creating an impact on their target audiences (Yüksel, 2023, p. 7).

In parallel with these developments, it is observed that studies in the fields of visual communication and visual culture have increased and expanded in recent times. In the past, art and design theory focused primarily on technical aspects such as grid systems, typography, the golden ratio, color, printing processes, and weaving. Over time, studies on the ways and effects of design in generating meaning have become intertwined with different disciplines such as critical approaches, history, sociology, and semiotics. Rather than offering definitive rules, these approaches present observations on how the content works (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006, p. 35).

In international cultural and artistic events such as biennials, visual communication design plays a crucial role in making the event's conceptual framework and identity visible through various media. Visual systems that extend across a wide range of media, such as posters, printed materials, and moving and interactive images, influence how an event is seen and experienced by the audience. Therefore, examining the visual communication design systems of biennials is important for understanding how visual language is constructed in cultural events and how it creates a sense of unity among different communication mediums. In this respect, it can be said that semiotics is an important analytical method for examining how meaning is produced in visual and verbal communication.

This study aims to examine the visual communication design system developed within the scope of the 18th Istanbul Biennial, themed "Three-Legged Cat", to analyze how it is implemented across different media and to reveal the connections between the resulting formal and semantic relationships and the biennial's conceptual framework. The visual arrangements selected as samples, such as printed materials, social media content, motion graphics, and advertising/promotional films, are analyzed in terms of their connection to the biennale's conceptual theme, within the framework of Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis approach, which consists of denotative and connotative meanings.

2. Method

This study aims to examine the visual communication design system developed within the scope of the 18th Istanbul Biennial, themed "Three-Legged Cat", to determine how this system is implemented across different media, and to reveal the connections between the resulting formal and semantic relationships and the biennial's conceptual framework. The analysis method is based on Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. In this regard, the research is based on Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation. Based on this, the meanings carried by the visual and linguistic elements within the biennial's visual communication design system were examined within the framework of this distinction.

Different applications of the visual communication design system of the 18th Istanbul Biennial were selected using a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling involves the researcher's conscious selection of samples directly related to the research topic and capable of representing the phenomenon being studied. This method, widely used in qualitative research, is based on deliberately selecting examples that can provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2017, p. 809). Visual communication design is a broad design field that encompasses various application areas such as graphic design, information design, new media, and user interface design. However, the review conducted within the scope of this study is limited to printed materials, social media content, motion graphics, and advertising/promotional films used during the promotional process for the 18th Istanbul Biennial. The reason for selecting the visual communication design applications of the 18th Istanbul Biennial as an example is that the biennial's visual identity system exhibits diversity across different media, and the biennial's thematic structure is amenable to both semantic and formal interpretation. Before moving on to the analysis section, it would be appropriate to briefly touch on the theoretical foundations of the semiotic approach used in the research's analysis.

Most works of art and design utilize symbolic references and signs to convey multifaceted information. The field of study that examines these signs is called semiotics. Semiotics is a field that studies the formation of meanings produced through sounds, words, and images (Ambrose & Harris, 2010, p. 103).

Semiotics is a field that studies how meaning is produced, how reality is represented, and how it is constructed through signs and sign systems (Chandler, 2022, p. 2). Semiotics is the branch of science that studies signs. Any form, object, or phenomenon that stands for something or points to a different state outside itself is defined as a sign. For example, a tapping sound at the door indicates that someone is behind the door. Signs can be expressed through words, images, sounds, gestures, or objects (Yaylagül, 2015, p.11).

In semiotic approaches, the structure of meaning production has been explained by various theorists using different models. The person who forms the theoretical basis of the analytical approach in this study is the French semiotician and thinker Roland Barthes (1915-1980). Barthes states that meaning does not consist of a single-layered structure. According to him, a semiotic system can become part of another system of signification. During this process, a new layer of meaning emerges. In this case, the first-level meaning-making system is entirely transformed into the expressive plane of a second system. Thus, meaning production acquires a multi-layered structure. Barthes explains this relationship as follows: every system of meaning encompasses a plane of expression (A) and a plane of content (I), and meaning is equivalent to the connection (B) between these two planes (A-B-I). In this context, it is stated that an A-B-I system can become an element of a second system that contains it. In the first case, the first system (A-B-I) becomes the plane of expression or signifier of the second system (Barthes, 1979, p. 87).

In Barthes' semiotic approach, the primary meaning of a sign is defined as its denotative meaning. The first association a word or image evokes in the mind forms its literal meaning. However, the same signs can convey different levels of meaning in different contexts. For example, while the word "door" in everyday language refers to a physical object, in expressions such as "opening the door to one's heart", it may signify love or emotional acceptance. This level of meaning is called connotative meaning. For connotative meaning to exist, the sign must establish a specific relationship with its denotative meaning. Connotation is also seen as an important mechanism for meaning production in the fields of art and literature (Akerson, 2005, p. 120). In this context, Roland Barthes' layered meaning approach is useful for examining the processes of meaning production in images across visual culture, art, and design. This approach is important for understanding and interpreting the signs in the biennale's visual communication design system.

3. Analysis and Findings

18th Istanbul Biennial

The Istanbul Biennial is one of the most important international contemporary art events in Turkey, organized by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV) since 1987. The Biennial is conceived as a meeting platform aiming to bring together artists and audiences from different cultures in Istanbul within the field of visual arts. The biennials, organized by İKSV, bring together different trends in contemporary art every two years, while also contributing to the formation of an international cultural network among art circles, artists, curators, and critics both in Turkey and abroad.

Curated by Christine Tohmé, the 18th Istanbul Biennial, titled "The Three-Legged Cat", is conceived as a three-stage program spanning 2025-2027. The first stage, from September 20th

to November 23rd, 2025, includes an exhibition featuring works by over 40 artists, as well as performances, screenings, and talks. The second stage, planned for 2026, focuses on establishing an academy and developing public programs in collaboration with local initiatives. The third and final stage, taking place in 2027, concludes with an exhibition and workshop program that brings together the discussions and experiences that have emerged throughout the process.

The metaphor of the "three-legged cat", which forms the theme of the biennial, signifies a relationship between fragility and resilience, between loss and the effort to regain balance. Known for its curiosity and agility, the cat represents an existence that oscillates between play and danger; while the image of the three-legged cat opens this state of motion to contemplation through disruption, harmony, and the pursuit of rebalance. In this respect, the cat, which retains its wild nature despite thousands of years of domestication in the face of dangers, conveys a symbolic meaning that references individual and social experiences while trying to find its bearings in changing circumstances (İKSV, n.d.).

Analysis of Formal Elements

This section first examines the dominant elements in the formation of visual language, analyzing them through texture designs applied to surfaces, color usage, and typographic choices and arrangements. Then, the applications produced in print and moving media that constitute the biennale's visual communication design are analyzed in terms of their denotative and connotative meanings. When evaluating visual arrangements, compositional relationships such as surface density, use of space, use of color, typographic arrangement, and readability are considered.

Pattern

Texture is a form of visual organization that relies on the repetition of a visual element and produces perceptions of regularity or variety depending on the characteristics of that repetition, such as uniformity, scale, or intensity (Dabner, Stewart, & Vickress, 2017, p. 35). Texture can also be defined as a visual structure that creates a rhythmic and orderly effect on a surface through the repetition and arrangement of visual elements. It can consist of simple decorative arrangements such as texture, lines, zigzags, or polka dots, or it can create more complex visual structures. In design, when texture is used in conjunction with organizing principles like grids, it allows for the production of numerous visual variations by replicating a single element in different arrangements (Poulin, 2018, pp. 245–246). In this respect, it can be said that the texture element plays an important role in establishing visual order by creating rhythm, direction, and perceptual movement on the surface when forming a composition.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 contain examples of texture applications used in the biennial's visual communication design system. The side-by-side arranged texture applications exhibit a repetitive structure consisting of organic curves.

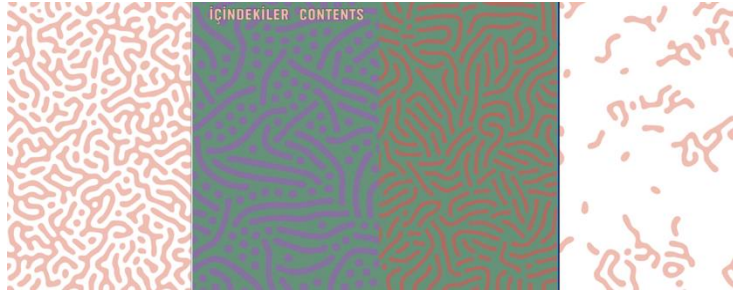


Figure 1. The 18th Istanbul Biennial's visual communication system features repeating texture samples on different surfaces (İKSV, 2025).

In the first three texture applications shown in Figure 1, the ground is densely covered by linear and point elements due to the low space utilization. This situation transforms the surface from a static background. However, by enabling the gaze to move across the surface, it conveys an experience that enhances the sense of movement. Additionally, in the fourth example on the far right in Figure 1, the negative space is more dominant. The texture element is mostly represented as a surface pattern.



Figure 2. The 18th Istanbul Biennial's visual communication system features repeating texture samples on different surfaces (İKSV, 2025).

Color is one of the most important elements of composition. It forms a distinct layer on the visual plane and is an element that both differentiates and complements the meaning (Keyes, 1993, pp. 638-639). On the spatial plane, it regulates the positional relationships of visual elements on the surface. It contributes to the organization of the composition and the establishment of a hierarchical structure among the elements. Color can also be used to encode information and organize meaning (Samara, 2012, p. 85). Accordingly, the color palette for the biennale's visual communication is arranged in shades of purple, pink, blue, green, orange, red, black, and white, and these colors are used in varying ways across different

surfaces and applications. Using colors interchangeably in different applications helps create a visual and semantic link between media.

The relationships between colors on a design surface are often explained using the color wheel. The color wheel is a fundamental system that shows the relationships between primary, secondary, and tertiary colors. According to color theory, primary colors are considered to be red, blue, and yellow; mixing these colors produces secondary colors such as green, orange, and purple. By combining primary and secondary colors in different proportions, tertiary colors such as blue-green, blue-purple, red-orange, red-purple, yellow-orange, and yellow-green are formed. This system provides a fundamental reference for understanding the color combinations used on design surfaces and interpreting the relationships between colors (Pettersson, 2024, pp. 43-44). In this context, the color palette used in the visual communication design of the biennale is seen to span a wide spectrum, bringing together different color groups such as primary colors (red, blue), secondary colors (green, orange, purple), tonal variations of these colors (pink), and achromatic colors (black, white). When examined at the denotative level, the colors used in the biennial's visual identity serve as an organizing element, distinguishing different visual elements within the composition. Additionally, it contributes to the differentiation of visual layers by creating a hierarchical arrangement among elements on the surface. At the figurative level, the variable use of colors conveys an appearance that evokes the diverse color atmospheres encountered in the urban texture. However, the use of pastel tones creates a serene space where the eye can move freely across the surface, rather than encountering harsh contrasts. This draws the viewer away from fixating on a specific focal point and encourages them to wander across the visual.

Typography

Throughout history, writing has appeared in various forms, from cave walls to hieroglyphs, from manuscripts to modern-day advertisements. Typography, a field concerned with the arrangement and structuring of text, has long been recognized as one of the fundamental components of visual communication. With the development of digital technologies and the proliferation of multimedia platforms, typography has evolved into a layered structure that integrates not only traditional written text but also visual symbols, icons, and images. This situation enables the transmission of complex information across different fields and channels, the generation of emotional responses, and decision-making (Mehta & Yadav, 2023, p. 90). In many areas of daily life, typography serves to inform and direct in physical space through elements such as signs, timetables, commercial documents, advertising and promotional materials, banknotes, tickets, and stamps. (Baines & Haslam, 2005, p. 7).

The typography used in the biennial's visual identity is exemplified on the poster surface in Figure 3. When examined at the denotative level, the font is bold, sans-serif (without serifs),

and consists entirely of capital letters. The sans-serif font represents modernity and simplicity. This style is among the complementary features of modernist typography (Ambrose & Harris, 2012, p. 248). Additionally, it is observed that font characters are used in combination with varying shades of a color palette within different applications and placed within the composition. The textures used on the surfaces are seen to extend onto the bodies of the typographic elements. Therefore, it can be said that the composition is structured within a dynamic order rather than a fixed hierarchy.

In the main poster below (Figure 3), the typography is examined at a secondary level of connotation. Textural lines that extend beyond the linguistic messages appear as traces circulating on the surface. This appearance makes the text's boundaries permeable. It is observed that the text is repeated in different colors and within a hierarchical structure. This situation leads to the gradual emergence of the title in a layered structure. This situation enables the title to gain visibility on the surface in a continuous yet segmented progression. Additionally, it establishes a visual connection with the idea of persistence despite the obstacles highlighted in the theme.

Analysis of Visual Communication Applications

This section analyzes how the visual communication design system of the 18th Istanbul Biennial is implemented across different applications. In this context, design applications used in different communication platforms, such as printed materials for the biennial, social media posts, motion graphics, and advertising/promotional films, are examined. The analysis process evaluates the visual arrangement methods of the applications in question, how the design elements used are rearranged across different environments, and the relationship these arrangements establish with the conceptual framework of the biennale.

Printed Materials

When the main poster design shown in Figure 3 is examined at a purely denotative level, it is evident that the design employs a textured background of light-colored, organic lines. The title text is placed on the surface in different sizes in Turkish and English, and the typographic elements are distributed throughout the surface rather than gathered into a single block in the center. Date information and event details are positioned around the title in different directions, and the institution logos and informative texts are given in a horizontal band in the lower section.



Figure 3. 18th Istanbul Biennial main poster (İKSV, 2025).

When examined at the level of connotative meaning, it is seen that the linguistic messages contained in the composition are positioned diffusely on the surface instead of hierarchical ordering. This arrangement prevents the gaze from being focused on a single point and allows for the gradual perception of information. Thus, it can be said that the poster produces a non-linear reading structure. This structure, associated with the three-legged cat metaphor that gives the biennale its name, evokes a visual order that continues to progress despite deviating from the usual flow.



Figure 4. Promotional tote bag designed for the 18th Istanbul Biennial (İKSV, 2025).

In the application shown in Figure 4, it can be seen that the main visual element of the biennial is detached from a fixed surface and placed on the surface of a cloth bag, which is an object of everyday use. At the denotative level, the product functions as a promotional material carrying the identity information of the event. When evaluated at the level of

connotation, texture, and typography are seen as placed on a moving object. This allows the biennale's visual language to regain visibility in different environments without being confined to a single exhibition space. Thus, instead of being fixed to a single surface, the visual arrangement becomes a recurring trace across different spaces and times. This allows the biennale's visual identity to become a structure encountered in different environments within everyday circulation.



Figure 5. Map brochure of the 18th Istanbul Biennial (İKSV, 2025, p. 42)

The map shown in Figure 5 is a two-part printed wayfinding material distributed to visitors at the biennale entrances. The right-hand side of the page features a low-contrast city plan. The left-hand side contains a list of venues and themed stickers on a purple background. Each sticker represents a different biennale venue. As visitors move through the exhibition spaces, they place stickers on the panel at points corresponding to locations on the urban plan. Thus, the map is updated and completed during the visit. The material ceases to be a passive plan and transforms into an experiential space that evolves throughout the usage process.

The stickers used on the map consist of motifs inspired by architectural elements in the exhibition spaces. These motifs include textural variations such as geometric stars, plant ornamentation, polygons, checkerboard patterns, and grids. Each is used to mark a specific point on the city plan. The motifs here function as marker units and correspond to numbered points on the map. When the visitor places the sticker on the surface, the map acquires new visual layers. Thus, the map becomes not merely an informative application but a participatory surface that is completed during use.



Figure 6. Stickered visitor map of the 18th Istanbul Biennial (IKSV, 2025).

This participatory circulation structure aligns with the statements in the biennale catalog, which describe the exhibition spaces as opening out to Beyoğlu like a constellation, inviting visitors to create their own experiential route by walking between these points (İKSV, 2025, p. 40). The placement of stickers by the visitor at the points on the map embodies this metaphor on the visual plane. Thus, the design transforms into a personal map associated with the visitor's movement. This situation allows the map to be read not only as a navigational function, but also as a practice of exploration. Thus, the idea emerges that the biennale is an experience completed by walking through the city.

Social Media/Web Applications

The biennale's visual identity is maintained consistently not only in print materials but also across its website and social media accounts. The official website presents visual design practices in a simpler and more corporate style. In the Instagram, Facebook, and X posts featured in Figure 7, the same typography, color palette, and organic patterns are used in combination with everyday city images.

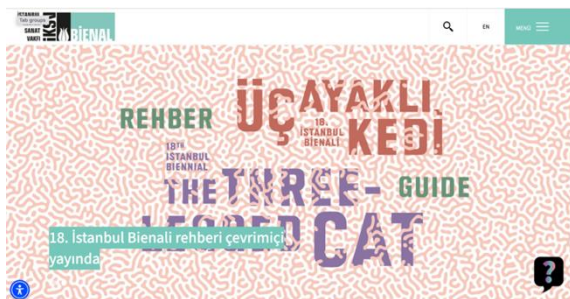


Figure 7. Stickered visitor map of the 18th Istanbul Biennial (IKSV, 2025).

The 18th Istanbul Biennial uses a visually consistent language, both formally and semantically, on its social media accounts and reaches visitors with short, everyday informational messages in its posts. The posts in the social media images shown in Figure 8 include expressions such as "Final weekend of the Biennial", "Last month to visit the Biennial", "Today is the last day of the Biennial", and "All Biennial venues are open on October 28–29". This style of communication uses everyday reminders rather than a formal, distant promotional approach. These messages are used in conjunction with imagery such as Bosphorus views, ferry journeys, and especially street cats. In this way, the biennale's theme is linked to familiar experiences of city life. At the denotative level, these posts serve an informative and directive function. At the connotative level, a connection is established between the biennial and Istanbul's daily life. The biennial is positioned as an element within the city's natural flow. Additionally, it references the "Three-Legged Cat" theme through everyday encounters.



Figure 8. Cross-platform social media posts of the 18th Istanbul Biennial (IKSV, 2025).

Motion Graphics

The motion graphic designs shown in Figure 9, used in the biennial's social media announcements, can be considered not only informative visuals but also visual messages conveying meaning at multiple levels. The title "Guided Tours" appears in the composition alongside the horizontal movement of linear textures. Following this title, a video clip containing footage from the guided tour appears on the screen. At the denotative level, the design serves as an announcement function, conveying the event's time and content to the audience. At the connotative level, this movement creates an effect that evokes spatial circulation by directing the audience's gaze horizontally. Additionally, this movement supports typographic organization, enables sequential perception of information, and serves a function that

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complements the biennial's visual language. The repetition and seamless movement of textures emphasize the biennale's continuous and visitor-driven structure. In this respect, the event is positioned as a continuously functioning and participatory experience.



Figure 9. Motion graphic I of the 18th Istanbul Biennial (IKSV, 2025).

In the motion graphic application in Figure 10, the background rotates counterclockwise while the typographic elements remain stationary. The phrase "Free Entry" appears in both Turkish and English, with temporal transitions, and the date information is located in the sub-section. In the layout read at the denotative level, while the background is in constant rotational motion, the text position remains unchanged. The repetition of the texture in posters and printed applications demonstrates that the visual language is sustained across different media through similar design elements. Thus, the visual language exists as a design system that maintains its integrity within the temporal flow.



Figure 10. Motion graphic II of the 18th Istanbul Biennial (IKSV, 2025).

Advertising-Promotional Films

The first advertising film for the biennial, shown in Figure 11, constructs the narrative from the cat's perspective. It presents urban images from this perspective through the use of a subjective camera. In a subjective camera angle, the image is conveyed from a personal point of view. In this type of shot, the viewer experiences the events through the character's perspective (Gürses, 2010, p. 13). Throughout the film, cultural and local elements such as the Bosphorus view, street vendors, taxis, tourists, carpets, and tea appear in the frame. The cat figure moves through urban spaces within the continuity of this movement. The phrase "The Art of Survival" appearing on the digital screen at the end of the film is presented to the audience alongside the biennial title.



Figure 11. Advertisement Film I of the 18th Istanbul Biennial, (Norm Talent, 2025).

At the denotative level, the film presents images of everyday life along with the cat's movement through the city. At the connotative level, it directs the viewer to perceive the city from the perspective of a fragile living being. This planning creates a sense of urban mobility. Thus, the city is presented as a space experienced in motion. The idea of existence and survival associated with the "Three-Legged Cat" theme also becomes visible within the flow of daily life. In this respect, the biennial is not merely an event attended at an exhibition venue, but is understood as an experience encountered within urban life.



Figure 12. Advertisement Film II of the 18th Istanbul Biennial, (Koç Holding, 2025).

While the first commercial film reveals the texture of Istanbul using classic filming techniques, the second film, shown in Figure 12, was designed as a fictional animated film using the real-time 3D production engine "Unreal Engine". In this film, the city's historical and aesthetic features once again serve as important elements of the narrative, highlighting the biennial's contribution to Istanbul's brand value (Koç Holding, 2025). In this narrative, the cat begins at the ground level and progresses towards trees, rooftops, and high points in the city. From this perspective, urban landmarks such as the Bosphorus, the Galata Tower, and the silhouette of the mosque become visible. The narrative concludes with the message "The Art of Survival" at the end of this film.

When read at the denotative level, the film presents a narrative in which the cat moves through the city and towards its upper reaches. When read at the connotative level, this circular, upward movement suggests that the narrative is structured from the cat's perspective rather than a human-centered one. This perspective makes visible the multi-layered structure of urban space extending from the ground to the roof and high points. The obstacles and transitions encountered throughout the film, when considered alongside the phrase "The Art of Survival", are associated with the continuation of movement despite interruption. This situation aligns with the references made in the biennial theme to the cat's progression and adaptability within everyday life (Koç Holding, 2025). The description of the three-legged cat also connects to the idea of continued movement despite difficulties within the narrative. While the first film conveys urban circulation and upward movement, the second film expands on this theme through different spatial transitions and encounters. Thus, a thematic and narrative continuity emerges between the two films.

In addition to the promotional films, the graphics, photographs, short videos, and reels content shared on the biennial's official social media account demonstrate that the biennial's visual communication design continues to be disseminated across different platforms. The posts include poster designs, street views, tram lines, cat figures, paths between locations, and

interior images. In addition to calls for entries and announcements regarding the biennial program, videos describing access to the venues are also shared on the biennial's official Instagram account. These elements enable the transmission of routing information not only in textual form but also through visual representation. In particular, sequential posts and route descriptions are based on step-by-step visualization of transportation to locations. These images establish a relationship with the biennial's theme and spatial experience, contributing to the perception of the visual identity alongside the city and exhibition spaces. Thus, it can be said that the biennial's visual identity design has become a communication system that maintains consistency across different media.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study examines how the visual communication design system developed for the 18th Istanbul Biennial, themed "Three-Legged Cat", was implemented across different media and how this system relates to the biennial's conceptual framework. The findings obtained through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method revealed that the biennial's visual communication design system functions as an integrated design system that maintains continuity across different surfaces and communication media.

Analyses have shown that formal elements such as texture, color, and typography in compositions are not merely aesthetic tools of arrangement; they also play an active role in the production of meaning. Organic linear and dot textures created an effect of circulation, rhythm, and movement on the surface. The use of varying colors established a visual connection between different applications. Typographic arrangements, on the other hand, enabled the transmission of information through a layered and dynamic structure.

Examinations conducted through printed materials, social media applications, motion graphics, and advertising/promotional films have shown that the visual design system is recreated in different environments while preserving its basic formal elements. This finding reveals that the biennial's visual communication design functions as a system that is not bound to a single medium, can be adapted to different platforms, and maintains its conceptual integrity. It is stated that visual communication design has a wide range of applications, encompassing different design practices, not just limited to specific production techniques. This diversity plays a significant role in making the image of institutions or cultural organizations visible and creating an impact on the target audience. This view, put forward by Yüksel (2023), is also consistent with this study's findings.

In particular, the map-sticker application, social media visuals, and interactive content demonstrate that the audience is no longer passively receiving information but is positioned as an active participant engaging with the event through circulation, interaction, and encounter. These findings reveal that visual communication can be established not only on graphic

surfaces but also through spatial and experiential arrangements. In line with this, and in parallel with the definition of visual communication given in the theoretical section (Machin, 2014), it is seen that the visual identity design of the 18th Istanbul Biennial is not limited only to graphic surfaces, but creates a visual communication system that aims to establish a relationship with the visitor through different media.

Another noteworthy result of the study is that the conclusion of the 18th Istanbul Biennial, with the first phase of its planned three-stage structure, aligns meaningfully with the "Three-Legged Cat" metaphor that serves as the biennial's conceptual framework. The first phase of the 18th Istanbul Biennial took place between September 20 and November 23, 2025. Following the resignation of curator Christine Tohmé due to personal reasons, the biennial was declared complete after its first phase, and it was announced that the 19th Istanbul Biennial is planned for 2027 (İKSV, 2025). The theme's emphasis on progress through disruption, harmony, and incompleteness is reflected not only in the visual design system but also in the biennale's realization process.

Consequently, the study demonstrates that in cultural and artistic events, visual communication design should not be considered merely a tool serving an informative function. Still, rather an integrated communication system that produces a conceptual framework across different media, circulates it, and establishes a relationship with the audience. In this respect, the study reveals the role of visual communication design in meaning production within multi-layered cultural organizations such as biennials. It provides a basis for evaluating future studies of the visual identity systems of similar events.

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