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The Identity of Madura in the Symbols of Madura United Football Club

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Abstract

Football is continuously evolving at a rapid pace. This development has made football a tool and a source for achieving various goals, ranging from capital, ideology, and existence, to power. Madura United Football Club (FC), originating from Madura, has transformed into a new icon of the region, directly and indirectly enhancing the cultural, social, and economic conditions of the Madurese people. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, using secondary data collected from books, local and international journals, and other supporting materials, including mass media. Madura United FC has turned football into a shared culture among the people of Madura. Its attributes—such as team jerseys, flags, scarves, and other merchandise have now become iconic souvenirs of the region, standing alongside other products that were previously considered as Madura's main symbols. The study finds that Madura United FC has succeeded in fostering a sense of pride and self-confidence among the Madurese regarding their cultural identity. This enthusiasm is reflected in the passionate support given to the team, both by residents of Madura and those living abroad.

Keywords: Identity, Symbol, Icon, Football, Madura

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Introduction

"Now, it is time to expand your knowledge about the iconic elements of Madura. Not only the skullcap, sarong, bull races, salt, Islamic boarding schools, resilient traders, or even carok! Madura now also means football. Madura United FC has become and will continue to be a unifying icon for the people of Madura. A shining icon that shows football is love. The love of the people of Madura. From Sumenep to Bangkalan, from Sampang to Pamekasan. All united for Madura United FC." (Hardimen Koto)

In the past, the public only associated Madura with salt, bull racing, tobacco, corn, and carok. However, the presence of Madura United FC has gradually but surely transformed these perceptions and stigmas.

It all began when the Pamekasan Football Association (Persepam) was promoted to the Premier Division of the Indonesian League. In the 2010/2011 season, Persepam secured promotion after finishing fourth in Division I. In the 2011/2012 season, the club competed in the Premier Division and finished in third place, earning promotion to the Indonesia Super League (ISL). Since then, the name Madura United began to gain recognition.

Following a government regulation that prohibited professional sports clubs in Indonesia from using regional budgets (APBD) for operational costs, the Chairman of Persepam and Regent of Pamekasan at the time, K.H. Kholilurrahman, partnered with Achsanul Qosasi, a prominent Madurese figure and member of the Indonesian Parliament, to manage the club.

This partnership resulted in the renaming of Persepam to Persepam Madura United (abbreviated as P-MU), along with the transformation from an amateur club to a professional one under the management of PT. Pojur Madura United.

In their debut season in the 2012/2013 Premier Division, P-MU immediately finished third, earning promotion to the ISL—the highest tier of Indonesian football. Notably, a football season in Indonesia typically runs for ten months, from August to May of the following year.

As a new club in the top division, P-MU, nicknamed Laskar Sape Kerrab, successfully secured sponsorships from major companies previously uninvolved in Indonesian football, including Carrefour, Bank Rakyat Indonesia (BRI), PT. Garam (Persero), Telkomsel, Merpati Nusantara Airlines, and MNC Group.

However, after just two seasons, P-MU was relegated at the end of the 2013/2014 season, finishing 10th out of 11 teams in the Eastern Conference. Following the relegation, the new Regent of Pamekasan, Achmad Syafii, took back control of the club, removing the Persepam affiliation from Madura United.

For a short time, the name Madura United was associated with Perssu Sumenep during the 2014/2015 season. However, this was short-lived due to the government suspending all football competitions amidst a leadership dispute within the Indonesian Football Association (PSSI) between Djohar Arifin Husin and La Nyalla M. Mattalitti.

On January 10, 2016, the name Madura United was revived when Achsanul Qosasi, a passionate football fan from Madura, acquired the playing license of Persipasi Bandung Raya (PBR) from majority shareholder Nirwan Dermawan Bakri.

Since then, Madura United FC has officially existed as a standalone professional football club, legally established as PT. Polana Bola Madura Bersatu (PBMB). "I'd be stressed if I were not involved in football management directly!" said Achsanul Qosasi.

In his book Football: The Beautiful Game and the Global Spectacle, Richard Giulianotti wrote that football has become a mass cultural engine and a part of global pop culture. As a popular sport, football also serves as a group identity.

Before the emergence of Madura United FC, football in Madura was merely a pastime with no significant achievements or professional management. Madura was not represented on the national football map, as there were no clubs from the island competing in the top division.

Madura United's participation in national competitions has had a positive impact, with the name "Madura" mentioned thousands of times daily across media platforms—during live TV broadcasts, in print, on the radio, digital news portals, YouTube, and more—especially around match days.

According to an article on bola.com accessed on Saturday, June 28, 2025, at 16:14 WIB, Madura United FC has become a proud new icon for the Madurese people. (http://www.bola.com/indonesia/read/2601215/bukti-madura-united-makin-dicintai-masyarakat-di-pulau-garam)

The club has also become a unifying force for Madurese communities both on the island and in the diaspora. This vision was highlighted by the late national journalist Hardimen Koto on maduraunited fc.com.

The establishment of Madura United FC fulfills a long-standing aspiration for a prominent football club from Madura. According to an article from kompas.id titled "Wacana Madura Bersatu Diwujudkan Madura United" (May 30, 2024), the idea of a united Madura football association encompassing clubs across the island dates back to January 1930.

That article recounts a meeting of Madurese leaders in Surabaya, which led to the formation of the Madura Sports Association, aiming to unify Madurese football players for competitions in Surabaya, as reported by the Soerabaijasch Handelsblad on January 28, 1930.

The founding of Madura United FC provided a platform for football enthusiasts in Madura to express their regional identity. Whether by birthplace or domicile, Madurese supporters unite through their shared passion and pride in supporting Madura United FC. This phenomenon illustrates how football fandom, particularly in regions like Madura, is deeply entwined with regional identity.

Literature Review

The study of identity in sports culture, particularly through symbolism, has been an important area in cultural and communication studies. Madura United Football Club (MUFC), as one of the leading football teams in Indonesia, has served not only as a sporting entity but also as a cultural ambassador of the Madurese identity. Scholars such as Anderson (2006) in *Imagined Communities* discuss how national and regional identities are constructed, including through sport and symbols. In this context, Madura United becomes a site where regional pride and identity are performed and visualized.

Several scholars have examined how sports teams use symbols—such as logos, mascots, colors, and slogans—to represent cultural and regional identities (Guschwan, 2013; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007). The bull symbol in the Madura United logo, for instance, is not arbitrary. It represents Karapan Sapi (bull racing), a traditional Madurese sport, embodying both the strength and heritage of the island. This directly ties the club's image to a culturally specific and iconic tradition of Madura, reaffirming its role as a cultural institution, not just a football team.

Moreover, research on Indonesian football culture (Purnomo, 2020; Nugroho, 2018) illustrates how local football clubs serve as vehicles for regional expression, sometimes in opposition to national narratives. In the case of Madura United, the club's adoption of red—symbolizing bravery and local spirit—alongside the slogan "Sape Kerrab" (The Mad Bull), reinforces the collective identity of Madurese people as strong, independent, and community-

oriented. The club thus acts as a narrative space where Madurese pride is visually and emotionally expressed.

From a semiotic perspective, the works of Barthes (1967) and Chandler (2002) provide frameworks to analyze how meaning is constructed through signs. In the case of MUFC, symbols such as the club crest, uniform colors, and chants used by fans during matches form a semiotic system that encodes messages about local values, identity, and aspirations. This reinforces the idea that the football club becomes a medium through which cultural narratives are continuously produced and consumed.

Furthermore, identity construction in football has also been linked to fan culture. Studies by Armstrong and Giulianotti (2001) emphasize that the supporters of a football club often enact and amplify the club's identity. For Madura United, fan groups such as Trunojoyo Mania and K-Conk Mania do not merely support the team; they embody the ethos of Madura itself—loyalty, pride, and resilience. Their chants, clothing, and rituals echo the same symbols found in the official branding of the club, creating a feedback loop between institutional and popular forms of identity.

Finally, in the broader discourse of sports and regionalism in Indonesia, Madura United's branding strategies can be understood as a response to the marginalization often experienced by peripheral regions. Through their symbols, MUFC reclaims cultural space and projects Madura as a distinct and proud identity within the national football arena. This echoes the broader academic argument that local cultures use sports as a platform for visibility and recognition (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2000).

Research Methods

This research employs a qualitative method using secondary data as the primary data collection technique. The data were obtained from books, local and international journals, as well as other supporting sources, including mass media.

Lexy J. Moleong, in his book Qualitative Research Methodology (2007), states that qualitative research is conducted to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects—such as behavior, perceptions, motivations, and actions—in a holistic manner, and it is described in words and language within a specific natural context using various natural methods.

Bogdan and Taylor (1975), as cited by Moleong (2007:4), define qualitative methodology as a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behaviors. Similarly, David Williams and Norma Chadwick (1986), as quoted by Moleong (2007:5), assert that qualitative research involves data collection in a natural setting using natural methods and is conducted by researchers with genuine interest in the phenomena.

Baxter and Babbie (2004) argue that qualitative research is typically used in interpretive and critical studies, with the goal of understanding meaning from the perspective of the participants and the rules that organize the meaning-making process.

Qualitative research is often described as inductive and ideographic. According to Neuman (2007), qualitative research seeks to explore and explain specific findings within general situations, without necessarily aiming to confirm or reject a hypothesis. Ideographic research contextualizes findings within specific times and historical settings, implying that the truths discovered are not absolute, but relative to those specific contexts.

Mohammad Nazir (1998) describes descriptive research as a method used to study objects, people, conditions, systems of thought, and events, with the aim of systematically, factually, and accurately depicting the facts, characteristics, and relationships among phenomena.

Qualitative research involves various empirical materials such as case studies, cultural texts and productions, individual experiences, introspection, life stories, interviews, historical and interactional data, as well as visual texts that reflect the meanings and routines of social life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The descriptive qualitative approach in this research aims to illustrate and reveal issues concerning the symbols or icons of Madura United FC, which have ultimately come to represent the identity of Madura as a whole.

The site of this research is Madura United FC, which is managed by PT. Polana Bola Madura Bersatu. The research objects include the club's logo, jerseys, supporter flags, banners, and various merchandise items.

Primary data is analyzed using theoretical approaches related to symbolism, and is supported by additional data collection techniques such as interviews, documentation, observation, and literature review. The primary data were sourced from media coverage of Madura United FC on various mass media platforms, books, journals, interviews with competent informants, and other documents supporting this study as part of its secondary data.

Results and Discussion

Jersey

Football encompasses a wide range of elements, including social, political, identity, economic, cultural, patriotic, artistic, and even literary dimensions. It is no longer merely about kicking a ball, dribbling, or scoring goals. Football is a globally adored sport with massive impacts, including on national and regional identity. It has also become a symbol of global capitalism.



Figure 1

2024/2025 Madura United FC home jersey featuring red and white stripes with karapan sapi (bull racing) motifs.

Source: jawapos.com

Madura United FC deliberately chose attributes that are easily recognized by the public. The club president, Achsanul Qosasi, expressed his hope that whenever people see the Madura United jersey, they will immediately recognize it as representing a team from Madura.

As a club that originates from and carries the name of Madura, the jerseys and logo of Madura United FC are infused with widely known elements of Madurese cultural identity. Since the club's inception, the primary jersey has featured red-and-white stripes on the top and black shorts—colors traditionally associated with Madura, similar to the attire worn by the folkloric figure Pak Sakera.

The home and away jerseys for the 2024/2025 season feature red-and-white striped patterns with bull racing (karapan sapi) motifs, a cultural hallmark of Madura. These jerseys are made from jacquard-patterned fabric—a complex, raised-weave textile produced using specialized looms. Jacquard fabric offers both beauty and uniqueness.

The use of jacquard fabric in Madura United FC's jerseys symbolizes strength, speed, and unyielding fighting spirit, echoing the energy of karapan sapi. This philosophy underpins the expectation that the players will embody the tireless drive of the bull race, which never stops until reaching the finish line. Furthermore, karapan sapi is a deeply respected tradition and cultural symbol in Madura, reflecting the community's identity and pride.



Figure 2

2024/2025 Madura United FC third jersey featuring a black base color with celurit (traditional sickle) motifs.

Source: Author's documentation

The third jersey is entirely black (top and bottom) and features a bolder and more iconic design—a celurit motif, representing a traditional Madurese weapon. The celurit symbolizes bravery, fighting spirit, and protection. Its inclusion in the third kit is intended to ignite the spirit of both players and fans, empowering them with a sense of courage and resilience.

The primary jersey, with its red-and-white striped top and black bottoms reminiscent of traditional Madurese attire known as baju sakera, has become a visual trademark of the club. The red-and-white stripes on the jersey number ten in total, spanning the front, back, and sleeves.

This design was created and patented by club owner Achsanul Qosasi, who holds a personal connection to the number ten—being born on the 10th and the tenth child among ten

siblings. In football, the number 10 jersey is typically reserved for a team's star player, adding another layer of significance to the design.

Logo

One of the key distinguishing features of Madura United FC compared to other football clubs in Indonesia is its uniquely shaped logo, which is designed without any sharp corners. This logo was created by Achsanul Qosasi and carries a deep philosophical meaning rooted in the life values of the Madurese people. According to Qosasi, the Madura United logo is simple, using only four colors: red, white, black, and gold.



Figure 3

Official logo of Madura United Football Club.

Source: maduraunitedfc.com

The logo's form, resembling a cornerless jar above the words "Madura United," is a symbolic expression of the club's role as an inclusive platform for the people of Madura—embracing individuals of all backgrounds, professions, and educational levels. It signifies a flexible and accommodating spirit that reflects Madura United's commitment to representing and uniting the entire Madurese community.

The five red-and-white stripes also reinforce the symbolism of the five regencies, supporting the long-term aspiration of provincial autonomy. The golden nose ring highlights the Madurese affinity for gold, while the bull's head pays tribute to karapan sapi, an iconic cultural tradition.

The Meaning Behind the Madura United FC Logo

Element	Meaning
Cornerless Jar Shape	Represents flexibility, serving as a protector and accommodating all components of Madurese society without marginalizing any group.
Red and White Background	Symbolizes the number of regencies in Madura—four existing and one proposed—

	fulfilling the requirements for establishing a new province.
Bull's Head	Evokes <i>karapan sapi</i> (bull racing), a well-known icon of Madura recognized as a cultural trademark both nationally and internationally.
Golden Nose Ring	Reflects Madurese identity, where gold is highly favored in daily life, particularly among Madurese women.
"Madura United" Inscription	Represents the founding vision of uniting all Madurese people under one identity, regardless of their regency of origin.

Nickname

Like many football clubs and other sports teams, Madura United FC also has a nickname. While the team was still competing in the Premier Division under the name P-MU, the nickname Laskar Sape Kerrab (The Charging Bull Warriors) emerged from a naming competition held by the club's management in collaboration with a local print media outlet in Madura. In a public poll, most supporters voted for a nickname inspired by karapan sapi, Madura's traditional bull racing.

Sape Kerrab directly reflects Madurese cultural heritage. It symbolizes perseverance and the relentless pursuit of identity and excellence. The philosophy embedded in this phrase implies that there is no giving up before the finish line. If one falls, they must rise immediately. If an opportunity slips away, it must still be chased. Defeat is not the end, and one must rise again in the next match and fight for victory ([Yuni K, K. C., Hidayat, N., & Musfiroh, A., 2025)..

This nickname is not just a label; it encapsulates a philosophy that is hoped to be internalized by Madura United players. It shapes the team's identity as brave, tough, hardworking, and resilient athletes.

The Sape Kerrab philosophy aligns with the bull racing tradition, which is characterized by constant forward motion until the finish line. It is this unrelenting spirit that Madura United FC aims to mirror in its playing style—never giving up, always fighting to the end. The nickname Laskar Sape Kerrab has since been officially registered by the club's management with the Indonesian Ministry of Law and Human Rights, making it a permanent identity of Madura United FC.

For Madura United FC, football is not merely a sport; it is a platform for expressing politics, economics, business, and capital. Madura United FC represents a revolution in modern football, being one of the few clubs that believe a team's jersey and logo can embody a collective identity.

Unifier of Madura

The name Madura United FC was deliberately chosen to symbolize the club's identity as the true representative of the Madurese people, especially after it was officially separated from Persipasi Bandung Raya. The inclusion of the word United was intended as a symbol of unity—an aspiration for the club to serve as a unifying force for the people of Madura.

The club's owner, Achsanul Qosasi, carefully selected the name Madura United FC based on a clear rationale: to bring together the four regencies of Madura—Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep—under a single umbrella. The goal was to foster unity without divisions or barriers, so that Madura could truly become one cohesive entity, represented by one football club.

Icon and Semiotics

Semiotics—or semiology—is the study of signs. In the semiotic system, signs serve a communicative function: they convey messages based on specific rules or codes established between the sender and the receiver (Tinarbuko, 2009).

Charles Sanders Peirce, in his theory of semiotics, defines an icon as a type of sign that has a direct relationship with the object it represents, based on physical or visual resemblance. These include images, diagrams, maps, sounds, or other visual representations that mimic the object they signify (Sobur, 2003).

Peirce emphasized two fundamental properties of signs: representational and interpretive. The representational nature means that a sign stands for something else, while its interpretive nature implies that signs invite interpretation, depending on the user and recipient. Thus, Peirce views the process of signification—meaning-making—as crucial, because humans assign meaning to the realities they encounter (Rusmana, 2014).

Ferdinand de Saussure also conceptualized semiotics as the science of signs in social life, focusing on the relationship between the signifier (form or expression) and the signified (the concept or meaning represented by the sign). Saussure's theory was later expanded by Roland Barthes, who analyzed how the signifier and signified interact to produce cultural meaning.

For Barthes, this relationship is equivalent and unified. Barthes proposed three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal or primary meaning; connotation encompasses figurative or secondary meanings; and myth explains how culture interprets certain aspects of reality.

It is this framework of signs and meanings that Madura United FC strategically employs to realize the aspirations of the Madurese people: to reclaim pride and construct a new identity—countering the negative stereotypes that have long persisted. These efforts are embodied in various elements of the club such as its logo, jersey, slogan, nickname, and merchandise—all of which function as culturally meaningful signs.

The club's slogan, "Settong Dhere" (meaning "One Blood" in Madurese), expresses a strong commitment to unity among the Madurese. For years, this slogan has articulated a desire among the people of Madura to shed internal divisions—between Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep—and instead embrace a shared identity as Madurese.

For the people of Madura, Madura United FC is "more than a club." It is the only football team from Madura that competes in the highest tier of Indonesian football, and it serves as a representation of both the region and its cultural identity. The red-and-white striped jerseys, logo, and club flag visually reflect and affirm this identity.

The symbols used by Madura United FC have successfully elevated the identity of the Madurese community. Although the team has yet to win a national league title, it has

consistently contributed players to the Indonesian national team—at both senior and youth levels. Notable players include Fachruddin Aryanto, Beto Gonçalves, Greg Nwokolo, Andik Vermansyah, Muhammad Ridho, Slamet Nurcahyono, Zulfiandi, and youth prospect Riski Afrisal (Indonesia U-20). Two more young players, Rendy Razzaqu and Miraj Riski Sulaiman, were selected for Indonesia U-17's training camp for the 2025 FIFA U-17 World Cup.

These players, although not ethnically Madurese, fully understand and embody the symbolic identity of Madura United FC. Their participation not only elevates the club's profile but also enhances the visibility of Madura at national and international levels.

Madura United President Achsanul Qosasi once stated: "Madura United FC must live on. It must not die. I will take full responsibility to keep it alive into the future." This declaration underscores the vital role that Madura United FC plays in representing the ethnic and cultural identity of the Madurese people. From its inception to the present day, the club has grown into a true symbol of Madurese society.

According to Barthes, myths—while appearing as natural truths—are cultural constructions based on generalized observations. Madura United FC effectively conveys the identity of the Madurese through culturally resonant symbols such as the red-and-white striped pattern and the use of the Madurese language in its nickname, Laskar Sape Kerrab.

For fans and supporters—whether of Madurese descent or not—wearing Madura United FC's symbols and merchandise allows them to identify with the Madurese identity. This collective display of identity is performed repeatedly in stadiums, on social media, and in public spaces, through the proud exhibition of symbolic items (Najiatun, Wulandari, N., Hidayat, N., Arifah, H. K. N., Khan, H. A. U., & Rohmayati, N. S., 2025).

Madura United FC has become an essential space for preserving and evolving Madurese identity. In a way that mirrors religious devotion, football has become a "second religion" for many. This sentiment was captured in the documentary Arema: Second Religion, which explores how fans embrace football as a shared cultural practice. Just like in Malang, Madura's people now consider jerseys, scarves, jackets, t-shirts, and merchandise as local heritage souvenirs (Yuni K, K. C., Hidayat, N., & Musfiroh, A., 2025)...

The passionate support for Madura United FC has generated a new potential for Madura through city branding—an approach that leverages football club identity to enhance regional identity and pride. The sociopolitical dimensions of football fandom, along with increased local wisdom, contribute to the politicization and celebration of identity through sport.

Madura United FC serves as a platform for expressing Madurese collective identity. Its impact in the public sphere has fostered a growing collective awareness of what it means to be Madurese and has helped dispel long-standing negative stereotypes.

By nurturing a shared sense of Madurese identity through community-based football culture, Madura United FC has become the most recognizable symbol of the region today.

Known not only across Indonesia but also in Southeast Asia and beyond, Madura United FC is more than a regional representative—it is a global cultural ambassador. Matches broadcast live on national TV and the club's participation in the 2024/2025 Asian championship have firmly placed Madura on the map, both nationally and internationally.

Conclusions and Practical Implication

This study demonstrates that football is currently the most popular sport among the public. The immense enthusiasm surrounding football has positioned it not only as a form of entertainment but also as a powerful cultural and regional symbol.

Elements such as jerseys, logos, flags, and other merchandise associated with football clubs have become identity markers for the communities they represent—especially when there is synergy between the club and relevant stakeholders in developing football as a regional icon. The symbolic attributes of Madura United FC—its logo, jersey, red-and-white striped color scheme, and the Madurese-language slogan "Settong Dhere"—support the conclusion that Madura United FC has emerged as a contemporary interpretation of Madurese identity.

Madura United FC has also proven its ability to captivate and earn the sympathy of the public. This is evident in the commitment expressed by the club's President, Achsanul Qosasi, who vowed to ensure that Madura United FC continues to thrive and never ceases to exist—so that it may forever serve as a representation of the Madurese people's identity.

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