

‘Different public personas’: Why do some people prefer Messi while others prefer Ronaldo? A Singapore study has an answer

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June 27, 2026



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SINGAPORE: A person's preference for either Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo may reveal more than just their footballing tastes, according to a new international study led by Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

The survey, which gathered responses from more than 10,000 people across 26 countries, found a notable link between political ideology and support for the two football superstars. Respondents who identified as politically liberal were generally more likely to favour Messi, while those who identified as conservative tended to prefer Ronaldo.

Researchers noted, however, that the relationship was most pronounced among younger respondents and became significantly weaker among older adults.

At the national level, Ronaldo emerged as the more favourably rated player in 11 countries, including Singapore. Messi was preferred in eight countries, while respondents in seven countries showed no statistically significant preference for either player.

Associate Professor Saifuddin Ahmed from NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, who led the study, said the findings point to a broader connection between political identity and seemingly unrelated cultural preferences.

“Messi and Ronaldo project markedly different public personas. Messi is commonly associated with a quieter, team-oriented image, while Ronaldo is known for openly expressing his ambition and celebrating individual achievement. People may be more drawn to the player whose public image aligns with their broader values,” he said.

Assoc Prof Saifuddin added that while previous research on the relationship between political identity and cultural preferences has largely focused on the United States, the survey suggests that similar patterns may exist elsewhere.

“They offer a starting point for examining how political identity may increasingly intersect with popular culture and everyday choices in different societies,” he said.

Beyond political beliefs, the researchers also explored whether media consumption habits and personal characteristics were linked to player preferences.

The study found that respondents who relied more heavily on short-form video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram for news were more likely to favour Ronaldo. Researchers suggested that this could be linked to Ronaldo’s strong presence on highly visual social media platforms, where users are frequently exposed to his carefully cultivated public image.

Another notable finding involved self-esteem. Respondents reporting higher levels of self-esteem were also more likely to prefer Ronaldo.

According to the researchers, this aligns with previous work on self-affirmation. One possible explanation is that individuals with higher self-esteem may identify more readily with public figures who project confidence, dominance and exceptional achievement.

“People may want to present themselves as modest, but that does not mean they identify most strongly with modest public figures,” said Assoc Prof Saifuddin, “Those with higher self-esteem may instead gravitate towards someone who embodies excellence, confidence and achievement – qualities they may see reflected in themselves.”

The survey also highlighted significant differences between countries. Messi received stronger average ratings in Argentina, several Western European nations, the United States, Canada and South Korea. South Korea recorded the strongest relative preference for Messi, surpassing even Argentina.

Researchers noted, however, that South Korea’s result was driven largely by comparatively low ratings for Ronaldo rather than exceptionally high ratings for Messi. South Korea was the only country surveyed where Ronaldo received an average score below four on the study’s seven-point rating scale.

The researchers suggested that lingering dissatisfaction over a 2019 exhibition match in Seoul may have contributed to those views. Ronaldo did not take part in the match despite being the event’s headline attraction.

Meanwhile, Ronaldo received stronger average ratings in a number of countries across North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

The study found no relationship between a country's FIFA ranking and overall player preference. Researchers also determined that national support for either footballer could not simply be explained by loyalty to a player from the respondents' own country.

Looking ahead, the research team plans to explore why the link between political ideology and player preference changes with age.

They also said the findings relating to short-form video news consumption raise broader questions about how social media exposure shapes people's perceptions of public figures, and how those perceptions may intersect with political beliefs and personal values.