

Why do some fans prefer Ronaldo over Messi? The answer lies in their political ideology

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This is the sixth World Cup for both Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi | Source: @fifaworldcup, Instagram

New Delhi: Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo have divided football fans across the globe for over two decades now. But it is more than just their footwork or free kicks that is shaping people's preference. A new study by Nanyang Technological University, Singapore has revealed that a person's political views may also decide which side of the Ronaldo–Messi rivalry they choose.

For the [study](#), whose findings were published on the preprint platform SSRN on 20 May, researchers from NTU Singapore surveyed over 10,000 people across 26 countries, including Germany, Argentina, Portugal, India, South Korea, Mexico, Japan, Brazil, the UK, and the US.

The respondents were asked to choose between the two biggest football stars today, while also revealing their political leanings. The results showed that those who prefer Ronaldo are likely to be more conservative while Messi fans tend to be more liberal.

According to Saifuddin Ahmed, Associate Professor at NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, fans often root for the player whose public image aligns with their "broader values".

"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.

Messi or Ronaldo?

Researchers found that of the 26 countries, Messi got strong support in his homeland Argentina, along with the US, the UK, Canada, South Korea, Finland, Spain, and Norway.

For the Portuguese football legend Ronaldo, his fans were more concentrated in North Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. These included countries such as Mexico, Portugal, Indonesia, India, Turkey, China, and Nigeria, among others.

South Korea was found to have the strongest relative preference for Messi, even more than Argentina. The country also gave the lowest average rating to Ronaldo, which, researchers said, could be because the Portuguese star did not turn up to play in the 2019 exhibition match in Seoul, disappointing fans.

But there is more than one factor shaping people's player preference. Fans who relied on short-form platforms such as Instagram and TikTok for new favoured Ronaldo, which could be because of his strong presence online.

Those siding with Ronaldo also had higher self-esteem. The researchers said such people tend to choose players with dominant and aspirational personalities.

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