

Why do some fans prefer Ronaldo and some Messi? The answer may indicate political ideology



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Ronaldo or Messi? Preference may be a political ideology, study finds

Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo have divided football fans around the world for more than two decades. But it's more than just footwork or free kicks that are shaping people's preferences. A new study from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore has found that a person's political views can also determine which side of the Ronaldo-Messi rivalry they choose. For the study, whose findings were published on the advance platform SSRN on May 20, researchers from NTU Singapore surveyed over 10,000 people in 26 countries, including

Germany, Argentina, Portugal, India, South Korea, Mexico, Japan, Brazil, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Respondents were asked to choose between the two biggest football stars, 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 support the player whose public image aligns with their "wider values".

"Messi and Ronaldo display markedly different public personas. Messi is usually associated with a more calm and team-oriented image, while Ronaldo is known for openly expressing his ambition and celebrating individual achievements. People may be more attracted to the player whose public image aligns with their broader values," he said.

Messi or Ronaldo?

The researchers found that out of the 26 countries, Messi received strong support in his homeland, Argentina, along with the US, UK, Canada, South Korea, Finland, Spain and Norway. For Portuguese football legend Ronaldo, his fans were most concentrated in North Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. These included countries like Mexico, Portugal, Indonesia, India, Turkey, China and Nigeria, among others.

South Korea was found to have the strongest relative preference for Messi, even more so than Argentina. The country also gave Ronaldo the lowest average rating, which the researchers said could be because the Portuguese star failed to show up to play in the 2019 friendly in Seoul, disappointing fans.

But there's more than one factor shaping people's preferences for players. Fans who rely on platforms like Instagram and TikTok are for Ronaldo, which could be due to his strong online presence.

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

"People may want to present themselves as modest, but that doesn't mean they identify more strongly with modest public figures. Those with higher self-esteem may gravitate toward someone who embodies excellence, confidence, and achievement—qualities they can see reflected in themselves," Saifuddin said.