National football leagues as a source of soft power

Ricardo Gúdel [a], Emilio Hernández-Correa [a], Javier Pajares [a],

Heredero, Laura[a]

aDepartment of Business Organization and Marketing, University of Valladolid,

Valladolid, Spain.

Author's note

Ricardo Gúdel, PhD Candidate
ricardo.gudel@uva.es
0000-0002-1567-2227

Emilio Hernández-Correa, PhD
emilio.hernandez@uva.es
0000-0003-2574-8042

Javier Pajares, PhD
javier.pajares@uva.es
0000-0002-9573-2284

Laura Heredero, PhD candidate
lauracarmen.heredero@estudiantes.uva.es
0009-0009-2788-5690

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Abstract

This study seeks to determine if the development of a country's national football league is significantly correlated with its soft power. Moreover, this research aims to provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the cultural soft power of a country besides sporting mega-events and develops a novel soft power and sport diplomacy managerial perspective. We first estimated the model using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and then applied the General Linear Model (GLM) to enhance the robustness of the analysis. The results suggest that investment in football development can powerfully influence soft power. The league's cultural heritage and its talented players contribute more than the rest of the variables to increase the soft power score. Institutions and organizations from countries with relatively low soft power could still benefit from investment in football development. Finally, this study highlights the importance of the football industry and its historical heritage preservation as critical elements within a country's soft power strategy.

Keywords: soft power, football industry, national leagues, sports heritage, competition

Introduction

The world is undergoing an accelerated change process, and soft power reflects the rapid growth of interconnection and interdependence between countries globally (Gallarotti, 2011), changes in economic power, rapid technological development, and the need for flexibility in the adaptation by countries directly impact how sports are understood (Chadwick, 2022). Sports can influence others through non-coercive means (Dubinsky, 2019), and the new conception of sport as a geopolitical tool, places it now as an essential source of soft power, diplomacy, and business with countries also using strategies of place

branding through sport (Richelieu et al., 2021). As a result, sports diplomacy is becoming a crucial aspect of international and cultural relations (Jarvie, 2021).

In this sense, globalisation and internationalisation, especially in the football industry, and the generation of value chains within the sector (Brewer, 2019) allows the use of sport as a tool to exert influence and impact foreign policies and relations with other nations (Reiche, 2015). The substitution of local owners and the growing interconnectedness in the ownership of European clubs by various states generate the need to attract a global audience and provide a platform for a country to showcase its culture, traditions, and values. They also generate economic benefits and can help to promote tourism and investment (Giampiccoli et al., 2015). The recent FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar is an example of a mega-event hosted in a country in the Persian Gulf region, an area with capital ownership of clubs such as Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain, or Newcastle United. Similarly, the major state-owned airlines (Qatar Airways, Etihad Airways, and Emirates Airlines) have established a strategy through sponsorships in major European clubs for the past twenty years (Krzyzaniak, 2018).

Due to the geopolitical and economic impact of soft power strategies, researchers have widely studied cultural soft power in football during the last few years (Connell, 2018b; Giulianotti, 2019). In this regard, most previous works on cultural soft power in football management have relied on studying sports mega-events (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Grix et al., 2019). Moreover, previous scholars have found a positive and significant relationship between football mega-events and cultural soft power indexes (Grix et al., 2015; Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Thus, hosting international sporting events such as the Olympics, World Cup, or other major championships can be a significant soft power opportunity for a country. However, national football leagues, which hold important and multiple worldwide broadcasted events, have yet to be used to understand the relationship

between football and cultural soft power. This is surprising because national football leagues are a powerful platform to showcase culture and values to a global audience, for example, the case of the English Premier League (Connell, 2018b). Moreover, analyzing national leagues is particularly important in the current context where national leagues are debated due to the possible creation of continental competitions that could threaten the power of national leagues, as is the case of the European Superliga (Brannagan et al., 2022; Macedo et al., 2023). A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between national football leagues and soft power can provide valuable insights for managers and decision-makers in various fields, including sports management, tourism, international business, and diplomacy. Thus, we follow previous scholars that emphasize how valuable it is for sports organizations to acknowledge the relationship between football and soft power (Chadwick et al., 2018; Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2020).

This study has a triple contribution. First, as far as we are concerned, this is the first research to analyze the relationship between the predictor variables of a country-leading national football league industry and its soft power. Specifically, it seeks to determine if the investment in infrastructure, the spectators' attendance, the players' market value, the historical heritage of the competition, and the number of events of the football leagues are significantly correlated with the cultural soft power. Secondly, this study aims to provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the cultural soft power of a country. Moreover, we analyze the differences between groups of countries more rooted in football culture and those that are not, evaluating the impact of the football industry on their cultural soft power index. By doing so, we address recent calls to increase knowledge of soft power and sports diplomacy in different scenarios (Postlethwaite et al., 2023; Santos, 2021). Finally, little attention has been given to the relationship between managerial strategies and soft power in the existing literature (Abodohoui & Su, 2020).

In this regard, this study develops a novel soft power managerial perspective resulting from different strategic decisions in the sports field involving clubs, league organizations, institutions, and football industry actors reflected in the explanatory variables. Thus, clubs' and leagues' stakeholders can use this information to apply strategies that leverage a country's football culture to enhance its soft power and, thus, its media attention, coverage, and eventually revenues and growth.

Theoretical Framework

Soft power refers to a nation's ability to influence others through its cultural, political, and societal values and ideals rather than military or economic means. Nye (2021) considered it an essential tool of foreign policy and diplomacy, enabling nations to achieve their goals without coercion or force. Researchers often see it to build relationships, promote cooperation between nations, and fostering mutual understanding and respect (Ding, 2010; McNamara et al., 2018). As Nye (2004, p.5) explains: "A country can obtain the results it desires in international politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example and aspiring to its level of prosperity - will want to follow it".

Sport is not alien to cultural soft power. According to Dubinsky (2019), the emphasis on culture, international exposure, and the promotion of peaceful values through sports renders it a valuable instrument for nations to employ soft power strategies, thereby attaining global objectives and enhancing their public diplomacy and relationship-building efforts between nations. For example, hosting international sports mega-events such as the Olympics or the World Cup can help to showcase a nation's culture, hospitality, and organisational abilities. It also can generate positive media coverage and attention worldwide. Football can serve as a platform for a nation to showcase its culture,

traditions, and values to the world (Leite Júnior & Rodrigues, 2017). In this regard, soft power is also derived from the globalisation of football and "represents the rise of an acceptable, diversionary, engaging, and relatively cheap form of consumption" (Connell, 2018b).

Previous research has extensively studied cultural soft power in sports, mainly through mega-events like the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Grix et al., 2019). Hosting high-profile international events represents an important soft power tool for governments and a part of a global geopolitical strategy (Chadwick, 2022). However, only some studies have examined the relationship between national leagues and cultural soft power. This study opts for a national approach to exploring football diplomacy, attempting to identify the most critical, explicative variables and their impact on the cultural soft power index. National football leagues are a crucial aspect of football diplomacy as they represent the backbone of the football industry in each country (Murray & Pigman, 2014; Rockerbie, 2019). Moreover, national leagues allow teams to compete regularly, attracting a significant audience of supporters and generating substantial revenues for the clubs and the national football federations. By analysing national football leagues' variables, we can identify causal relationships between variables and make informed decisions on improving competition outcomes on soft power. Variables considered explanatory are intrinsically from national leagues' data.

Explanatory variables

Regarding the explanatory variables of this study, it is crucial to measure the quality of the infrastructure to access football match events which can play an essential role in measuring which extent stadiums can showcase a country's ability to promote its image through these facilities (Freeman, 2012; Maennig, 2007). The infrastructure is an essential

indicator of the country's investment in developing the national football industry (Memari et al., 2021). It serves as a constructor of footballing identities across teams and countries (James & Day, 2015). Similarly, a high grassroots football development can lead to well-maintained training facilities and academies that can also help to produce world-class footballers who can become cultural ambassadors for their countries (Liang, 2016). Due to the importance of the relationship between infrastructure development and cultural soft power, researchers have widely investigated it in recent years (I. Dubinsky, 2021; Vondracek, 2019). Nevertheless, there has been limited exploration of how infrastructure development is related to cultural soft power in the national football league's context.

Match attendance denotes the number of individuals present at a sporting event, precisely a football match. This metric serves as a crucial and classic indicator of the popularity and achievement of a particular sport or team (Ansari & Schreyer, 2021; Falter & Perignon, 2000). High attendance figures can represent a significant source of revenue for teams and leagues and incomes from ticket sales and other event-related sources can significantly contribute to the overall financial success of the organization (Rodriguez, 2019). In this sense, the attendance of football matches can also impact a country's cultural soft power. Large crowds at football matches can create a sense of national pride and identity, reflecting a country's passion for football and contributing to a country's image (Leite Júnior & Rodrigues, 2017). Academics tend to consider attendance essential to demonstrate to worldwide audiences' leagues and teams' capacity to host effective and successfully match-day events (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016). However, as far as we can explore, this is the first study to use match attendance as a construct to predict a country's cultural soft power.

Soft power's appeal arises not solely from its cultural sway or ability to construct narratives, but primarily from the emotional attachments that audiences form to the

identity images it generates (Solomon, 2014). These emotional attachments are crucial in the relationship between football players and the audience, both national and global. Moreover, the more high-talented players in a league, the better teams' performance (Liu et al., 2016) and the bigger the possibilities to commercialize a country's football industry (Ma & Kurscheidt, 2019). According to Garcia-del-Barrio & Pujol (2020), showcasing high-talented players can increase the league's visibility on an international stage. The high-talented players also leverage a good global perception of the country regarding grassroots football development and the football industry's strength, which is a fundamental part of top-level football (Sugiyama et al., 2017). Although several authors consider a player's or athlete's high talent a critical aspect of soft power strategy, researchers have yet to use this variable to predict a nation's cultural soft power.

Likewise, researchers have scarcely studied the relationship between heritage and cultural soft power (Nakano & Zhu, 2020; Schreiber, 2017). Nevertheless, a national league's heritage can significantly impact a country's cultural identity as it carries more history and cultural traditions (Moore, 2016). These ritualistic traditions can boost rivalries, link to the country's history, and represent important moments, and achievements in the sport's development (O'Brien, 2014). Thus, through national traditional sports development, a long-standing league can enhance a country's cultural soft power by promoting its values and traditions globally through football. Despite the importance of the heritage of a national football league, researchers have yet to consider it to explain its impact on cultural soft power.

Finally, football is a recurring instrument of influence countries use to attract tourism (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2020). Suppose a country has many sporting events, in that case, it may attract more tourists who want to witness and participate in these events, increasing the country's exposure and international image (Freeman, 2012). Furthermore,

the number of sporting events for a given sport in a country correlates with the amount of attention and enthusiasm given to the sport (Chappelet & Parent, 2017) increasing national visibility as a vital component of the projection of cultural soft power (Connell, 2018a). Match-day events conform to the main showcase scenarios of a league's format competition and this study uses them as an essential predictor of cultural soft power.

Methodology

Consistent with previous research, our study focuses on which countries achieve a better cultural soft power index by developing and leveraging unique and valuable resources, such as high-talented players, match-day events, league's heritage, fan base and well-developed infrastructure (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1]

We use the "stadium utilisation" measure on the same scale other academics use in sports management, calculated by dividing the league's total attendance obtained by all teams in a season by the total number of seats available (Alm et al., 2016), considering both infrastructure and attendance constructs in one measure. Similarly, researchers commonly use the market value of the players as an essential indicator of how talented a determined team or a league is (Hofmann et al., 2021). In this sense, academics have widely used market value variables in similar scales to analyze the national football industry. We used a scale adapted from (Serrano et al., 2015) to operationalize this variable.

In this study, we also use the longevity of a league scaling the number of years since its professionalization as the heritage variable. As far as our research has come, this is the first study to scale football heritage using the proxy of the number of years since the league's professionalization. Finally, there is generally a consensus on using the events

as a crucial variable in analyzing soft power (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Grix et al., 2017). This study uses the total number of matches in a league over a season. This study considers the Portland Soft Power 30 Culture sub-index as the explained variable. This index is released jointly by strategic communications consultancy Portland Communications, Facebook and the CPD (Center on Public Development, University of Sothern California). The index has been widely used by academics (Nye, 2019; Schreiber, 2017). In this regard, it evaluates the comparative potency of a country's soft power assets through a blend of objective and subjective data. The index examines various factors such as the calibre of a country's political establishments, the breadth of its cultural appeal, and the might of its diplomatic network, among others (McClory & Harvey, 2016). The culture sub-index includes measures like the annual number of international tourist arrivals, music industry exports, and international sporting success (McClory, 2019).

Regarding the availability of the data, we have selected 23 countries from the sub-index (see Table 1), not considering those that were not in the top 30 during the chosen period. Canadian Premier League's first year of competition was in 2019. For this reason, we have eliminated Canada from the study. Similarly, we found possible biased data in the research derived from the mega-event FIFA World Cup 2018. To avoid this, Russian Federation has not been considered for this study.

[Insert Table 1]

For those 23 countries chosen, this research uses the most economically and socially relevant football competition in the geographic area to construct the explanatory variables (as shown in Table 2).

[Insert Table 2]

To evaluate the Cultural Soft Power Index (CSPI), the data for the 115 cases were collected for the 2015-2019 period using Portland 30, 2015-2019 Reports indexes (McClory, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). Moreover, data from official clubs and competition websites, the specialized website transfermarkt.com, and the Eurasian Football Industry Database have been collected to construct the variables. Transfermarkt.com is a specialized website mainly known for publishing the monetary or market value and statistics of a wide range of professional football players and teams. Researchers have widely used Transfermarkt.com in sports studies (Coates & Parshakov, 2022; Prockl & Frick, 2018). Transfermarkt valuations are also commonly used by club managers and players' agents during player contract negotiations, showing contemporary significance for the football player transfer market (Peeters, 2018). The Eurasian Football Industry (EFI) Database of the Department of Business and Marketing of the University of Valladolid was created in 2021 in the framework of the research of the Eurasian football industry. EFI Database gathers data exclusively from secondary and official sources and organizations specialized in market research and data analytics. The combination of these sources of information allowed us to obtain a comprehensive and accurate view of the dependent and independent variables used in the analysis. The data was cleaned, verified, and analyzed to obtain the research results. Table 3 lists the variable definitions and descriptive statistics for the period assigned.

[Insert Table 3]

Scores on explanatory variables were included in a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's linkage method (Ward, 1963; Milligan, 1981) with the squared Euclidian distance measure to identify which countries have a more robust football industry, identified in this study as high-football countries, and low-football countries (see Table 4). Since cluster analysis is sensitive to extreme or outlier values (Hair et al., 1998), these values

may influence the closeness or similarity between the cases. In this regard, no outliers were found in the data, suggesting that the variables are not significantly biased, and that measures of central tendency and dispersion can be appropriately used to summarize and describe the data.

[Insert Table 4]

Regarding Table 4, High Football Context (HFC) are the countries in which the historical heritage of the league is relevant to the sports panorama, the number of events is significant compared to other countries, and the market value of the high-talented players is high. The occupation ratio is also slightly higher for these countries. Low Football Context (LFC) countries are the ones in which the national league is not an event of historical transcendence to the sports panorama. There is a low number of football events compared to other countries, and the market value of the high-talented players is low. The occupation ratio is slightly lower for these countries.

Before multiple regression analysis, variables were transformed to ensure a normal distribution and reduce the influence of outliers on the results. In this regard, multicollinearity can affect the precision and reliability of the regression model results, thus, we also examined the zero-order correlation coefficients (see Tab. 5) and verified that all the constructs exhibit good psychometric properties.

[Insert Table 5]

We considered Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and General Linear Model (GLM) to evaluate the model fit. Initially, we conduct an estimation of the model through the OLS method. The OLS approach aims to minimise the sum of squared residuals and assumes that the explanatory variables are linearly independent and not highly correlated. OLS assumes that the errors in the model are homoscedastic and customarily distributed

(Lewis & Linzer, 2005). Due to the apparent limitation regarding the sample size or countries, we estimate an exploratory regression by combining longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis with 23 countries in 5 years. Following Johnson & Lyon (1973), OLS can calculate the actual value applied to the pooled data results excellently. In this case, we use a sample representing a high population percentage, and data from several years have been collected. These should not be taken as actual countries' cases but as more information to load into the analysis to obtain a model in which real cases can be compared.

Moreover, to add more robustness to the model, we have used the GLM to prove whether the four independent variables are relevant or not. The confirmed cases are the groups defined and reached through the GLM (see Table 6). In this regard, GLM can help to model nonlinear effects or additional categorical variables and check that the interactions between the independent variables are relevant to the model. Thus, it allows the specification of these interactions and estimates their effects on the dependent variable (Tsai & Gill, 2013). With the OLS regression, we prove that the football variables do influence the CSPI. With the GLM analysis, we set a frame for comparison, attending to the countries' CPSI and "football" to prove which variables can also be significant to other countries regardless of their CSPI score and "football". The GLM model allows comparisons between countries further to analyse the "football" influences in the CSPI.

[Insert Table 6]

Results

The proposed methodology for model estimation is tested using IBM® SPSS® Statistics Software 26.0 version.

OLS estimates of the proposed linear model appear in Figure 1. The results (see Table 7), interpreted in percentage terms, show a significant positive relationship between the explanatory variables and the CSPI for the entire sample. The variables Infrastructure and Attendance (IA), High-Talented Players (HTP) and League's Heritage (LH) are significant to the model. Match-Day Events (MDE) are not significant at 95% confidence intervals. IA ($\beta = 0.36$, $p > 0.001$), along with LH ($\beta = -0.11$, $p > 0.001$), are the most contributions to the CSP Index. HTP is the one that contributes the least ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$).

Additionally, to further investigate the relationship between football development and CSPI, we divided the countries into two clusters based on their level of football development (HFC and LFC). For the LFC cluster, the results show that the explanatory variables are not a significant predictor of the CSPI (NS), suggesting that countries' investment in football development may not be as effective in improving CSPI for countries with lower levels of football development. The non-significance of the variables and the low explanation of the variability of the model ($R^2 = 0.19$) indicate that OLS is not an excellent method to explain the low football countries' football contribution. None of the variables are relevant to the football industry of these countries. In contrast, for the HFC cluster, football development was found to be a significant predictor of the CSPI ($R^2=0.69$), which is in the ideal interval of acceptance for the explanatory variables to be enough to explain the behaviour of the independent variables. IA ($\beta = 0.77$, $p < 0.001$) and MDE ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$) contribute positively to CSPI, indicating that investment in football development is particularly effective in improving CSPI for countries with higher levels of football development and that countries with higher levels of football development tend to have higher CSPI scores.

[Insert Table 7]

The football explanatory variables contribute to the CSPI, as shown in the OLS model. Beyond this analysis, we use the GLM model to know which group of countries, divided by the factor Soft Power (high or low) and Football (HFC and LFC) the explanatory variables have greater importance. Specifically, the analysis assesses the tendency of 'football' explanatory variables for each group considering the intersection of variables. Results indicate that there is a higher punctuation of variables among 'high-football' countries and 'high-CSPI' countries, regardless of their level of football development.

[Insert Table 8]

Results (Table 8) suggest a strong relationship between a country's level of football development and its CSPI. This relationship is consistent across all the explanatory variables studied. It means that countries with high levels of football development and high cultural soft power tend to have higher scores in the rest of the explanatory variables studied. We analysed this trend without considering the interaction between cultural soft power and the level of football development. In this regard, we found that two variables ('High-Talented Players' and 'League's Heritage') showed significant differences between the different groups of countries studied. Thus, HTP and LH have significant differences between the established groups and between the model's factors. The relative importance of HTP for the groups can be described as G1>G3>G2>G4. Results suggest HTP is more critical in groups with high football development and cultural soft power. Moreover, LH does not follow the tendency of all groups, and its relative importance can be described as G1>G3>G4>G2.

In summary, we found a positive relationship between football development and CSPI, as countries with higher levels of football development tend to have higher CSPI scores. However, the effectiveness of investment in football development in improving CSPI varies based on a country's level of football development. For countries with lower levels

of football development, investment in football development may be less effective in improving CSPI. In comparison, it is particularly effective for countries with higher levels of football development. The study also found significant differences between explanatory variables, especially for HTP and LH, not following a clear tendency among all groups to be one of the elements. This suggests that, in relative terms, LH and HTP contribute more than the rest of the variables to increase the punctuation of the CSPI score. Although it contributes little to this kind of country where football may not be essential, it contributes significantly compared to other sources of cultural soft power.

Discussion

By investigating the relationship between national leagues and cultural soft power, this study aims to shed light on the role of football diplomacy in leisure studies when promoting a country's cultural influence on the international stage. Moreover, the findings of this study have important managerial implications for governments, sporting organisations and teams seeking to improve their cultural impact and generate positive media coverage and attention.

The impact of football on Soft Power seems significant as can be seen in the results (see Table 7). Therefore, the findings in this study confirm previous research about how important football is for a nation's soft power strategy (Ahsan, 2022). As expected, and under the proposed methodology, it is demonstrated that the explanatory variables influence the punctuation in the Cultural Soft Power Index, especially for high-football context countries, in which there is a relatively stronger football infrastructure and hold more cultural significance to the sport. This aligns with the research of (Connell, 2018b), who realized how important is to acquire international recognition through sports and develop a powerful football industry. In this regard, this is easier for countries in which

the football industry is already globalized but takes time in countries with a less significant football infrastructure.

The analysis also confirms the lines of research of Nakano & Zhu (2020). The promotion of cultural heritage is a characteristic of nation-building and nation-branding. Historical heritage is crucial for promoting values and traditions globally through national football leagues and so is reflected in the results. Similarly, results seem to confirm previous research supporting that exhibiting high-talented players enhance the visibility of a country in the global arena (Garcia-del-Barrio & Pujol, 2020) and that building or improving sporting facilities and the infrastructure to support them is also a crucial aspect that leads to an increase in soft power (Freeman, 2012).

In the present study, we investigated the relationship between match attendance and soft power, exploring an area that has yet to be addressed in the academic literature. Our findings reveal a significant relationship between match attendance and soft power, supporting that spectator participation in a league's sporting events can substantially impact a country's soft power projection. These results broaden our understanding of how cultural and managerial football aspects can strengthen a nation's soft power.

Surprisingly, findings suggest that match-day events in a national league do not impact the CSPI. These results are striking because they could have important implications for national league organisations during the debate on creating a European Superleague. This could mean that none or only a few matches with high-media attention during a season could have relative relevance in terms of soft power. The sum of all national league events seems not determinant for CSPI purposes. Thus, national leagues should assess different formulas to increase these events' significance to improve the impact and visibility of the league in a global scenario. The leagues, assumed to be the contest organisers in

professional team sports (Szymanski, 2003), may not be using an adequate organization strategy for this study's purposes.

In HFC, higher levels of infrastructure and attendance correlate with a more significant number of events. As expected, this indicates that the football industry holds greater significance in countries with a more robust football culture (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Although these variables contribute to the cultural soft power of all countries, the GLM model reveals that high CSPI countries place greater importance on the explanatory variables' contribution, as evidenced by their higher scores. This suggests that explanatory variables significantly impact cultural soft power in these countries, possibly due to their size, media coverage, and substantial economic effects. However, further research is needed to understand the nature of these impacts. Moreover, the higher importance of high-talented players is found in groups with HFC and high CSPI, while the importance is lower in low "football" and CSPI groups. These results follow the research conducted by Shapiro et al. (2017).

Interestingly, High-Football Countries and low CSPI countries show more significant importance in football than soft power. Low to high cultural soft power index differences are more significant for this variable. For example, a decrease in the national leagues' industries will negatively impact the players' talent of High-Football Countries and high CSPI countries. Understanding the importance of players' talent is crucial as it justifies why countries with higher scores seek to protect it, along with CSPI. Results show that G1 and G3 are strongly affected by how national leagues are managed, mainly due to the importance of the historical heritage. This finding confirms and broadens the previous research of Ogbonna & Harris (2014), and highlights the importance of a well-development in grassroots football as a crucial tool to steadily develop talented players at the national scope. Countries with low CSPI and short football traditions still have

significant heritage, which can contribute to their CSPI score. This means clubs, league organisations, institutions and governments can strengthen their country's soft power by supporting their national football league and historical heritage. This finding also supports previous research (Cockayne et al., 2022; Gúdel & Hernández-Correa, 2023) about how important a long-term and sustainable soft power strategy is for countries with low development in their football industry. Nevertheless, unfortunate management strategies in national leagues will have a more significant negative impact on countries with low CSPI but high league heritage.

In G1, the loss of national leagues is significant because it is linked to being a High-Football Country correlated with high CSPI. Therefore, governments, league organizations, international associations, and institutions must consider the impact of the national league management on the football industry and the country's soft power and historical heritage, especially for countries with low CSPI but high League Heritage scores. This underpins the need to protect and promote a national football industry and its historical heritage as essential elements of a country's soft power strategy.

Conclusions

This study aimed to assess the influence of football development on the Cultural Soft Power Index across a sample of 23 countries over five years. To achieve this, we first estimated the model using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and then applied the General Linear Model (GLM) to enhance the robustness of the analysis. The OLS approach assumes that the explanatory variables are linearly independent errors that are homoscedastic and customarily distributed. However, due to the limited sample size, an exploratory regression was conducted by combining longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis. The GLM model, on the other hand, allows for the modelling of nonlinear effects

and additional categorical variables and checks for interactions between independent variables. Through the GLM analysis, we could compare the influence of football development on CSPI scores, regardless of a country's CSPI and football explanatory variables' scores.

The results suggest that investment in football development can positively influence CSPI. Therefore, policymakers and sports organizations should prioritize the development of football infrastructure and talent identification programs to enhance their national soft power strategy in the long term. Furthermore, our results demonstrate that institutions and organizations from countries with low CSPI scores could still benefit from investment in football development and highlights the importance of a well-development grassroots football to develop talented players. Thus, countries with limited resources may consider investing in football in the long term to improve their soft power rather than focusing solely on other sports. Moreover, upon this research emerge the imperative to uphold and foster the national football industry and its historical heritage as key elements within a country's soft power strategy.

Finally, previous studies on soft power mainly focus on descriptive literature on how sports diplomacy and development can affect a nation's soft power. Most of them specially focused on international relations and sociology. Nevertheless, in this study, we have developed a new framework from a managerial perspective in which soft power is considered as an outcome of different strategic decisions in sports from clubs, stakeholders, league organizations, institutions and actors involved in the football industry. This outcome is significant for enhancing a country's image worldwide and increasing potential customers in terms of audiovisual media attention, sponsors, fans, and spectators, ultimately leading to high revenues and the growth of the industry.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to consider in studying the variables related to football management and cultural soft power. First, it is essential to acknowledge that the football industry is complex and multifaceted, comprising numerous interconnected factors in the supply chain that can influence soft power. Therefore, research focusing solely on a subset of variables may provide an incomplete understanding of the dependent variable. The league's promotion and relegation system, regulations, and labour conditions could also explain football's impact on soft power. Second, the sample of the league is reduced, and it is limited due to data paucity.

To further advance the understanding of the relationship between football leagues and soft power, future research should incorporate other explanatory factors into their analysis to comprehensively understand the relationship between football industry drivers and soft power. Finally, future studies can focus on a lower-scale relationship between football teams and soft power.

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Tables

Table 1

Research sample countries

Australia	China	Germany	Japan	Portugal	Switzerland
Austria	Denmark	Greece	Netherlands	South Korea	United Kingdom
Belgium	Finland	Ireland	Norway	Spain	United States
Brazil	France	Italy	Poland	Sweden	

Source: own elaboration

Table 2

Sample of 2019's Cultural Soft Power Index

Rank	Country	Score	League
1	United States	73.34	Major Soccer League
2	United Kingdom	72.47	English Premier League
3	France	65.22	Ligue 1
4	Germany	60.10	Bundesliga
5	Spain	50.87	LaLiga
6	Japan	50.66	J1 League
7	Italy	48.63	Serie A
8	China	48.48	Chinese Super League
9	Netherlands	46.96	Eredivisie
10	Belgium	46.00	Belgian Pro League

Sources: (McClory, 2019)

Table 3

Variables' definitions and descriptive statistics

Symbol	Variable	Measure	Mean	S.D.
IA	Infrastructure and attendance	Stadium utilisation	0.321	0.099
HTP	High-talented players	Market Value	1.07E9	1.72E9

LH	League's heritage	Years since a league's professionalization	66.2	36.62
MDE	Match-day events	Total number of matches during a season	252.8	112.92

Source: own elaboration

Table 4

High-football and low-football countries' sample

HFC	LFC
Belgium	Australia
Brazil	Austria
France	China
Germany	Denmark
Italy	Finland
Netherlands	Greece
Spain	Ireland
United Kingdom	Poland
United States	Portugal
	Norway
	South Korea
	Sweden
	Switzerland

Source: own elaboration

Table 5

Zero-order correlations coefficients

	Occupation ratio	High-talented players	Heritage	Match-day events
Stadium utilization		0.360	0.310	0.012
High-talented players	0.360		0.589	0.531
Heritage	0.310	0.589		0.314
Match-day events	0.012	0.531	0.314	

Source: own calculation

Table 6

General Linear Model groups

	High CSPI	Low CSPI
HFC	G1	G3
LFC	G2	G4

Source: own elaboration

Table 7

Standardized parameters estimate

	Model CSPI		Model CSPI
Full Sample		**HFC**	
IA	0.36**	IA	0.77**
HTP	0.08**	HTP	ns
LH	-0.11**	LH	ns
MDE	ns	MDE	0.44**
R^2 Full Sample	0.47		
R^2 HFC	0.69		

Significance levels: ** $p<.0.001$; * $p<.0.05$ (one-tailed test).
ns = non-significant
Source: own research

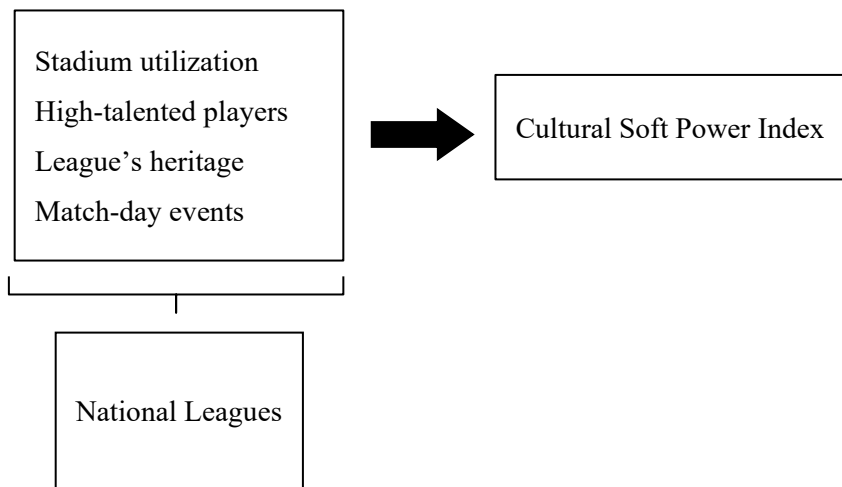**Table 8**

GLM results for the research model

		SP		Football	
		LSP	HSP	LFC	HFC
	IA	-1,302	-1,107	-1,297	-1,112
	HTP	18,948	20,034	18,563	20,419
Average	LH	4,039	3,738	3,366	4,41
	MDE	5,268	5,471	5,059	5,679

Source: own research

Figures

Figure 1

Research Model

Source: own elaboration