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Country of Origin effects in Portuguese football

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Master's in Management

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BUSINESS
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Departamento de Marketing, Operações e Gestão Geral

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RESUMO

Esta dissertação investiga os efeitos do País de Origem (Country of Origin – COO) e a sua interação com o Nation Branding no contexto do futebol português. O problema de investigação reside na relação ainda pouco explorada entre identidade nacional, perceção internacional e valor na indústria global do futebol, na qual Portugal se destaca como uma nação pequena, mas relevante. Este estudo fornece uma compreensão aprofundada sobre como a reputação nacional e o soft power são desenvolvidos através do desporto, contribuindo tanto para o avanço académico como para a prática da gestão e do branding desportivo. O principal objetivo é analisar de que forma a nacionalidade portuguesa influencia as perceções sobre jogadores, treinadores e clubes, avaliando o seu contributo para a marca nacional de Portugal, bem como explorar as diferenças entre as narrativas domésticas e estrangeiras relativamente ao valor simbólico do futebol. Foi utilizada uma metodologia qualitativa, descritivo-interpretativa, recorrendo a entrevistas semiestruturadas com agentes nacionais e internacionais do futebol. A análise temática revelou que a nacionalidade portuguesa é percecionada globalmente como um rótulo de elevado valor, associado à competência e ao talento, embora persistam alguns enviesamentos. Os resultados confirmam ainda o papel positivo do futebol português no reforço da identidade nacional e da reputação global, mas evidenciam uma dicotomia narrativa entre o orgulho emocional interno e as perspetivas internacionais baseadas no desempenho.

Palavras-chave: efeitos do país de origem, marca-país, futebol português, identidade nacional

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates Country of Origin (COO) effects and their interaction with Nation Branding within the context of Portuguese football. The research problem lies in the underexplored connection between national identity, international perception, and value in the global football industry, where Portugal stands out as a small yet relevant nation. This study provides insights into how national reputation and soft power are developed through sport, contributing to the academic understanding and practice of sport management and branding. The primary objective is to analyze how Portuguese nationality influences perceptions of players, coaches, and clubs, evaluating its contribution to Portugal's national brand, as well as exploring differences between domestic and foreign narratives regarding football's symbolic value. A qualitative, descriptive-interpretative methodology was employed, using semi-structured interviews with domestic and international agents in football. Thematic analysis revealed that Portuguese nationality is perceived globally as a high-value label associated with competence and talent, though some biases persist. Results further confirm the positive role of Portuguese football in strengthening national identity and global reputation but highlight a narrative dichotomy between emotional domestic pride and performance-based international perspectives.

Key-words: Country of origin effects, nation branding, Portuguese football, national identity

Jel-codes: M31 (Marketing), Z20 (Sports Economics)

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INTRODUCTION

In a globalized sports economy, football operates as both an entertainment industry and a platform to project national identity. For a smaller nation like Portugal, the sport has become a sign of visibility, economic development, and soft power. However, despite Portugal's recent and consistent international achievements and the export of world-class players and coaches, limited academic attention has been devoted to understanding how the Country of origin influences the perception of Portuguese football around the world. The gap in the literature concerns the link between COO, nation branding, and cultural identity within football. As highlighted in other studies (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Anholt, 2021; Gok & Karatas, 2024; Supino & Marano, 2024), both COO and nation branding serve as tools that influence market reputation and emotional connection. This dissertation builds on this framework to examine how the "Made in Portugal" label works as a quality and credibility signal in football. Each chapter reflects this logic: the literature review examines COO theory, nation branding, and the Portuguese football environment; the methodology details semi-structured interviews aimed at gathering qualitative information; data analysis and discussion interpret the results through thematic comparison; and the conclusion summarizes the key findings and implications. By examining national identity and market perception, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how countries can utilize sport as a nation-branding tool in the 21st century.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Country of Origin Effects

The concept of Country of Origin (COO) is a crucial factor in analyzing consumer behavior, especially in an increasingly globalized market. It serves as an intangible signal that can influence purchasing decisions and product evaluations, playing a key role in competitive positioning and brand success in international trade (Chacko, 2024). Research has also shown COO's significant and widespread influence, conveyed through mechanisms such as "made in" labels, brand names, and advertising that directly or indirectly reference a product's origin (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

Consumers' engagement with COO often manifests as "home country bias," which refers to a positive preference for domestic products linked to consumer ethnocentrism and national identification. The former indicates a desire to protect the local economy, while the latter involves affirming national identity (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Although these two concepts are related, both independently increase the willingness to purchase domestic products. Country images also play a significant role by influencing cognitive elements, including geographic factors such as climate, and human factors like competence, as well as affective elements like positive or negative emotions. Their impact varies depending on the product type: geographic factors are more significant for food-related products, while perceived competence is often key for technology-based products. Past experiences with a country's products can also reinforce attitudes and beliefs. National identification may further strengthen perceptions of domestic products, diminish views of foreign ones, and mediate their effects on product evaluations (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

COO functions both as an information source and a credibility factor. Regarding the first, COO offers general insights into a country's products within a specific category, guiding consumer evaluations. Concerning the second, it influences the credibility of marketing messages: an unfavorable country image reduces the believability of advertising claims, especially highly favorable ones, with the impact moderated by the level of consumer involvement (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). The diagnosticity of COO depends on the evaluation context: it has a more substantial influence in separate assessments but can be overshadowed by intrinsic product cues when evaluated together (Insch & McBride, 2017).

Beyond cognitive processes, incidental emotions can also influence COO effects. Research shows that emotions such as anger, which is linked to perceptions of human control, amplify the impact of COO, unlike sadness. These findings support the notion of “nation equity,” a parallel to brand equity, using both performance and emotional dimensions (Maheswaran & Chen, 2006).

Despite COO’s relevance, brand image often predicts consumer perceptions and attitudes more strongly than ethnocentrism, remaining vital to business success. However, COO generally explains consumer perceptions better when comparing developed and developing countries (Bawa & Soni, 2017). Therefore, a strong brand image is essential.

As moderators of home country bias, consumer ethnocentrism, and national identification offer distinct insights. Although both influence preference for domestic products, their negative impact on foreign product purchases is less consistent (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). These factors also shape country images and strengthen brand equity aspects, such as loyalty and perceived quality. Specifically, consumer ethnocentrism is linked to consumers' cultural heritage, as demonstrated in the wine market (Menezes & Viana, 2024). While COO sometimes predicts consumer perceptions more accurately than ethnocentrism, the latter remains more significant in developing countries (Bawa & Soni, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to consider home country bias: it can be utilized in domestic markets but requires tailored strategies abroad to address resistance to imports (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

The COO effect, as previously discussed, explores how cues and typicality influence consumer perceptions and their willingness to try products. COO cues are therefore crucial for enhancing perceived product value, with effects that vary depending on product category and price levels (Pegan et al., 2022).

The relationship between COO and nation branding is mutually beneficial. Nation branding aims to cultivate a positive national image and reputation (Pegan et al., 2022), which in turn influences a favorable perception of products (Wienrawee, 2017). A strong, well-managed national brand boosts the credibility of the products associated with it, thereby enhancing the positive COO effect and making them more appealing to international stakeholders (Wienrawee, 2017). In summary, strategic nation branding efforts can significantly improve the

positive impact of the country of origin on consumer behavior and purchasing choices by creating a solid national brand image.

1.2 Nation branding

Nation branding is a crucial aspect of international relations, encompassing the strategic development and promotion of a nation's identity (Cull, 2019; Anholt, 2021). Like a brand, a nation represents its intangible resources across politics, economics, culture, history, and technology (Lee, 2012). Though modern, widespread campaigns have increased its popularity, nation branding has a more extended history (Cull, 2019).

This concept is complex, influenced by both internal and external factors, resulting in various outcomes (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2021). Six key factors—business, political, social, economic, international, and environmental—shape it. Economic aspects, such as tourism, exports, and foreign investment, as well as perceptions of a reputable brand, also influence the national brand (Lee, 2012).

On the other hand, competitiveness and attractiveness are also implied, shaped by processes within industries and firms, which help create a systemic approach to space and entrepreneurial activities, supporting a cohesive national branding policy (Anholt, 2021).

Nation branding is a multidimensional concept influenced by interconnected economic, political, social, cultural, environmental, and international factors (Lee, 2012; Gök & Karataş, 2024; Anholt, 2021). Economic performance and exports, political stability and diplomacy, social and cultural identity, and environmental sustainability all interact to create a cohesive national image. This holistic perspective highlights that competitiveness and identity support each other, as emphasized by Ali (2019), who considers nation branding a strategic necessity for sustainable market success.

Building on the factors discussed, nation branding has a significant impact on the economy, society, business, and politics, shaping a country's global stance and domestic well-being (Gök & Karatas, 2024). Nation branding, therefore, aims to boost economic growth through investment, exports, and tourism. Well-managed brands attract investors and tourists,

benefiting local communities (Ali, 2019). Studies have shown a positive correlation between nation branding and exports, FDI, and tourism (Gok & Karatas, 2024). Strong foreign trade and FDI improve a country's image (Gok & Karatas, 2024). A 2010-2020 study of ten nations highlights the roles of FDI, tourism, and exports in nation branding (Gok & Karatas, 2024). As such, developing a strong national brand improves a country's product and economic competitiveness (Gorska, 2012). As market complexity and national competitiveness ratings grow (Ali, 2019), nation branding becomes more important. Key factors include sustainable tourism elements such as culture, heritage, and the environment, involving both internal and external stakeholders from the public and private sectors (Ali, 2019). Nation branding also aids traditional economic policies by attracting FDI and increasing exports through improving the country's image (Gorska, 2012).

Soft power, expressed through public and digital diplomacy, represents a vital dimension of nation branding. It encompasses cultural, educational, and sporting expressions of national identity that can enhance trust and visibility among international audiences (Zaharna, 2021; Pamment, 2021; Petrenko, 2025). In an increasingly interconnected world, these tools serve to project a nation's values and build influence beyond traditional political or economic means.

To ensure effective public diplomacy, it is vital to promote coherence and coordination through a strategic, integrated approach by government agencies and stakeholders (Zaharna, 2021). Public diplomacy and nation branding require ongoing assessment and reactive strategies to protect national interests and identity internationally (Zaharna, 2021). Emotionally impactful storytelling and strategic narratives also help build trust and alliances (Petrenko, 2025). For example, following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, digital diplomacy and value-based communication significantly enhanced Ukraine's international image, rising from 56th to 22nd in global soft power rankings (Petrenko, 2025).

In contrast, critical approaches caution against oversimplifying the impact of nation branding on national identity. The Spanish example, often regarded as a successful branding case, demonstrates that its international image primarily grew due to geopolitical, economic, and social shifts, alongside historical efforts to gain global legitimacy—not solely because of explicit branding strategies (Aguilera, 2025). This highlights the importance of a historically grounded approach that questions marketing-focused explanations (Aguilera, 2025). Such an approach can help prevent the oversimplification of how national identities and reputations are

built in a transnational setting (Aguilera, 2025). Moreover, nation branding, especially when aligned with neoliberal ideals, may strengthen cultural and economic hierarchies and weaken democratic processes by standardizing identity narratives and blurring the lines between public and private interests (Aguilera, 2025). The acknowledged overlap among nation branding, public diplomacy, and soft power also urges caution when using broad international relations terms without critique (Aguilera, 2025). Viewing nation branding through the lens of state governance can further help to understand the underlying relations, structures, and processes behind its implementation and the roles played by institutional actors (Ivanov, 2019).

Although nation branding aims to create and promote a clear national identity and uniqueness (Anholt, 2021), its effectiveness and ethical considerations are closely tied to the current historical context, the honesty of the identity-building process, and the involvement of both external and internal audiences. As part of explaining the theoretical framework, a critical review of recent literature emphasizes the main research directions, particularly focusing on competitiveness in relation to attractiveness (Anholt, 2021).

Even though the concept of nation branding is gaining increasing attention, it lacks a shared definition (Lucarelli & Brandle, 2019). It has evolved in a fragmented manner over the past twenty years (Lucarelli & Brandle, 2019). This underscores the need for synthesis and consolidation to guide future research (Lucarelli & Brandle, 2019).

One of these directions involves moving beyond fragmented, nation-centric views of competitiveness and attractiveness (Anholt, 2021). Scholars promote the theory of a multi-layered continuum as a new framework and systemic outline for understanding space, and it may serve as the foundation for developing a comprehensive approach to nation branding policy (Anholt, 2021). This systemic perspective must explicitly consider dynamic processes at co-evolving levels of spaces, industries, and firms (Anholt, 2021).

Finally, sustainable competitiveness in the market is a strategic necessity for nation brands (Ali, 2019). Future research should dig deeper into the "key determinants of market competitiveness" (Ali, 2019), which include "sustainable tourism factors including culture, heritage, environmental considerations, and the integration of internal and external stakeholder groups within the public and private sectors" (Ali, 2019). It is recommended that a multidisciplinary approach, examining a wider range of variables such as sustainability and market competitiveness, be developed to foster synergistic nation brands (Ali, 2019).

Sports play a vital role in nation branding and public diplomacy, mainly using soft power (Al-Hajri, 2025). Governments view sports as a means to shape perceptions and achieve their goals, as fans become emotionally invested (Al-Harbi, 2025). This section explores how sports, mega-events, and success enhance a country's global image, boost pride, foster cultural exchange, and promote tourism and investment.

Organizing mega-sports events is a crucial aspect of nation branding, providing opportunities to build soft power and enhance a country's international image (Al-Hajri, 2025). They facilitate internationalization, economic diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy (Vasilescu, 2024).

Qatar utilizes soft power by hosting major sports events, such as the FIFA World Cup, to enhance international recognition, foster cultural exchange, and stimulate tourism and investment (Al-Hajri, 2025). This strategy leverages global sports to foster national pride and support national branding and public diplomacy within a clear framework (Al-Hajri, 2025).

The use of mega-sports events to enhance a nation's soft power is examined through the cases of South Africa, Brazil, Russia, Germany, and Qatar, highlighting their connections to sports policies and geopolitical influence (Vasilescu, 2024). These studies help to understand the success of soft power and how major events shape perceptions of international relations and geopolitics (Vasilescu, 2024).

As part of Vision 2030 (Al-Harbi, 2025), Saudi Arabia uses major motorsport events to promote its nation and diversify the economy. These events positively influence the country's global image, portraying Saudi Arabia as innovative and progressive, boosting sports tourism and sponsorship.

In addition to the events, the country's sports successes and victories also help shape its international image (Chen, 2017). Over the decades, China has utilized sports to pursue political objectives, particularly by leveraging this influence to foster a positive international image (Chen, 2017). Sports performance is seen by the country as a valuable tool for enhancing its international image (Chen, 2017). Also, the creation of a thriving football culture in the country is regarded as an important aspect of the Chinese national brand (Zhao, 2021).

Utilizing strategic sports management to host mega-events or achieve athletic success enables nations to acquire practical tools that influence global perceptions, foster soft power, and achieve broader economic and political objectives (Al-Hajri, 2025; Al-Harbi, 2025).

1.3 Portuguese football

Football is by far the most popular sport in Portugal, deeply embedded in the country's social and cultural fabric. Structural weaknesses in its domestic competitions paradoxically characterize it, yet it often struggles to compete with larger European teams. However, it has a remarkable ability to project itself internationally through the development of quality coaches and significant players. As Mourão and Cima (2012) point out, football mobilizes nearly one-third of all federated athletes in the country, making it not only a sporting activity but also an important social and cultural phenomenon. However, the Portuguese football industry is marked by financial instability across its leagues and an intense concentration of power, resulting in disproportionate international recognition.

As mentioned earlier, Portugal's domestic football system is unbalanced, with the three biggest clubs (SL Benfica, FC Porto, and Sporting CP) controlling most titles and resources. Historically, only two clubs, CF Os Belenenses and Boavista FC, have broken the dominance of these Big Three, each winning the Portuguese league twice in its 91 seasons. This lack of competitive diversity indicates weak competitive balance, as a sport's appeal relies on the perception of unpredictability and parity among teams (Fort & Quirk, 1997; Szymanski & Kesenne, 2004). Compared to the top five European leagues (English, German, Spanish, Italian, and French), the Portuguese league is more similar to the German Bundesliga or the French Ligue 1, which are primarily dominated by FC Bayern Munchen and Paris Saint-Germain, respectively. However, financially, the gap between Portugal and these leagues is even wider.

Additionally, the geographic distribution of competitive clubs relates to the patterns of regional development. According to Mourão (2008), clubs in Portugal's top division are more likely to be found in municipalities with higher per capita income, larger populations, and better infrastructure. Therefore, football is more concentrated in areas like Lisbon, Porto, Braga, and Guimarães, while inland regions mostly remain outside the top tiers. These findings primarily align with theories of regional development, which suggest that economic and infrastructural factors influence the sustainability of sporting organizations (Oliveira & Lima, 2003; Vasquez Barquero, 1995).

Meanwhile, the Portuguese football scene is shaped by other structural differences compared to the top five leagues. While in England, Spain, Germany, Italy, and France, most revenue comes from major broadcasting rights, commercial deals, and matchday income (Deloitte, 2020), Portuguese clubs mainly rely on developing and selling players. As Supino and Marano (2024) demonstrate, in Portugal, income from player transfers has become a regular and vital part of club finances, often accounting for approximately twenty percent of total revenues, unlike its smaller role in wealthier leagues.

1.3.1 Domestic Competitions

As previously mentioned, Portugal's top division is marked by low competitive balance, with only three clubs winning 89 of the 91 editions. The study by Downward and Dawson (1999) provides context for Portugal's situation, where a league's competitiveness depends on sporting and economic factors such as team quality, spectators' purchasing power, televised matches, and intense rivals. Hoffmann, Ging, and Ramasamy (2003) also emphasize how socio-economic factors like infrastructure and financial incentives are crucial for sport development. In Portugal, rivalries such as the Lisbon derby between SL Benfica and Sporting CP or the 'Clássico' between FC Porto and the other two clubs attract significant attention and boost attendance, indicating that ticket demand rises with rivalries, as also noted by Breuer (2009). However, unlike England's Premier League, where multiple rivalries involve many cities, Portugal's limited number of clubs restricts the number of exciting matches, which lessens the league's overall appeal.

As aforementioned, the country's purchasing power can also translate into the lack of domestic competition. Again, Portugal ranks lower than the top-5 leagues. In contrast, Germany, France, Italy and Spain have a purchasing power of 115, 99, 98 and 92 (the standard being 100), respectively, while Portugal has a purchasing power standard of 82, as per the Eurostat in 2024.

Building on previous ideas, such obstacles ultimately impact the classification of the Portuguese League in UEFA's ranking over the past 25 years: the highest position being 5th during the 2011/2012 and 2015/2016 seasons. Portugal is usually expected to finish either in 6th or 7th place, as has been the case 11 times in those same 25 years, with the seasons of 2000/2001 and

2008/2009 marking Portugal's lowest ranking since 2000 at 10th. It is important to note that a higher ranking allows more clubs from the same country to compete in European tournaments.

1.3.2 Clubs

Portuguese clubs operate differently compared to wealthier European leagues, specifically the top five. While clubs in England or Spain, for example, generate most of their revenue from broadcasting, commercial deals, and international markets (Scelles et al., 2013), Portuguese clubs rely more heavily on transfer revenues. As Mourão (2005) already argued, the funding of football in Portugal depends on a combination of state subsidies, sponsorships, merchandising, and, most importantly, player transfers.

While different, the Portuguese three big clubs contribute positively to the sport's competitiveness. FC Porto has won two European Cups (Champions League), with the most recent victory in 2004 under the legendary Portuguese coach José Mourinho, as well as other significant European competitions, including the UEFA Europa League in 2003 and 2011, solidifying its reputation as a European contender. SL Benfica has also won 2 European Cups (1961 and 1962), and more recently reached the finals of the UEFA Europa League in 2013 and 2014, further demonstrating not only its domestic competitiveness, as it is the club with the most championships won domestically, including other domestic competitions like the Portuguese Cup, but also its international competitiveness. Sporting CP has also reached a Europa League final in the early 2000s, but is better known for its youth academy, which produced two Ballon D'Or winners, Cristiano Ronaldo and Luís Figo, the highest honor in a football player's career.

It is also worth noting that at the academy level, both FC Porto and SL Benfica have won the UEFA Youth League in 2019 and 2022, respectively. This tournament was established in 2013 and has been contested by clubs qualified for the UEFA Champions League, although their Under-19 youth teams play it. With these two achievements, Portugal ranks second, tied with England, for the most wins in the competition, behind Spain, which has four victories. Regarding runners-up, the teams that finished second, Portugal leads the list with three final appearances that were ultimately lost.

Although Portuguese clubs are prominent in European competitions and produce world-class players, they rarely rank among the wealthiest clubs, as evidenced by the Deloitte Football Money League. When they do appear, it's usually because of extraordinary transfer revenues rather than operational income. However, this ability to sell players for large sums, like João Félix's €126 million transfer from SL Benfica to Manchester City, highlights the efficiency of the Portuguese model of player development and asset monetization. The Portuguese league has been the top generator of transfer fee revenue since 2015.

1.3.3 Coaches

The internationalization of Portuguese coaches is one marker of the country's football reputation in recent years. José Mourinho stands out as one of the most influential figures, having won the Champions League with FC Porto in 2004 and again with Inter Milan in 2010, along with domestic league titles in England, Spain, and Italy. His trajectory, studied by Tiesler & Coelho (2008), is a clear example of leadership and management in sport, positioning Portugal on the global football map as a producer of tactical minds.

Other coaches have also found success abroad, such as Leonardo Jardim, who won France's Ligue 1 with AS Monaco and broke Paris Saint-Germain's dominance. Meanwhile, some Portuguese coaches have maintained a steady presence and achieved moderate success in England's prestigious Premier League, like Marco Silva, who managed Hull City, Watford, Everton, and Fulham. Additionally, Nuno Espírito Santo's leadership of Wolverhampton Wanderers resulted in their promotion from the Championship to the Premier League, along with notable success at Nottingham Forest, which finished 7th in the Premier League (earning a chance to play European football) after the club's 34-year absence in Europe. Furthermore, other Portuguese coaches have secured major trophies in South America, such as Abel Ferreira and Jorge Jesus, who have won the Copa Libertadores, the continent's most prestigious trophy.

Therefore, there has been an increasing demand for Portuguese coaches abroad, reflecting both the limited opportunities at home and the strong international reputation for tactical awareness, adaptability, and results in global competitions.

1.3.4 Players

Portugal has been one of the leading exporters of football talent. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Luís Figo and Rui Costa paved the way to international recognition, with the former winning the Ballon d'Or in 2000 while playing for the prestigious Real Madrid in Spain, and the latter becoming an important midfielder in Italian football with Fiorentina and AC Milan.

On the other hand, Cristiano Ronaldo exemplifies the peak of Portuguese football exports. He is considered one of the greatest footballers of all time, having won five Champions League titles and multiple domestic league titles in Spain, England, and Italy, as well as five Ballon d'Or awards, establishing himself as a global icon. Other Portuguese players have also made significant impacts: Eusébio won the Ballon d'Or in 1965 and the UEFA Golden Boot, which recognizes Europe's most prolific scorer; Pepe became a defensive cornerstone at Real Madrid, winning 3 Champions League titles; Bernardo Silva, Rúben Dias, and João Cancelo have also played key roles in Manchester City's numerous domestic titles in England, and helped the club achieve its first Champions League victory in 2023; Gonçalo Ramos, João Neves, Vitorinha, and Nuno Mendes contributed to Paris Saint-Germain's dominance in France, ultimately helping them secure their first Champions League title—these four highlight how Portuguese clubs develop talented players, as each of the three biggest clubs in Portugal has nurtured one of these players. Regarding young players, Portugal has won 2 Golden Boy awards, honoring the best Under-21 players in Europe, with Renato Sanches in 2016 and João Félix in 2019, both of whom played in SL Benfica's youth ranks and senior squad.

Research indicates that Portugal's success in producing world-class players results from the quality of its academies (with Benfica winning the best academy award in 2015), focus on both technical and tactical training, and the early professionalization of young athletes (Helsen et al., 2007; Williams, 2010). This developmental tradition, combined with the financial necessity of selling talent abroad, has made Portugal one of the world's leading exporters of football talent.

1.3.5 National team

The Portuguese national team has also strengthened its reputation as a consistent and competitive team in Europe over the past 25 years. Since 2000, Portugal has qualified for every major international tournament, including both the FIFA World Cup and UEFA European

Championship, unlike before the turn of the millennium. They were finalists at Euro 2004 on home soil and reached the semifinals at the 2006 World Cup held in Germany. In 2012, Portugal advanced to the semifinals of the European Championship again.

The most significant moment of this journey occurred in 2016, when Portugal won the Euros in France, defeating the host nation in the final. Three years later, in 2019, Portugal won the UEFA Nations League, and again in 2025, becoming a two-time champion of this more recent tournament among European countries.

As per the FIFA's national team rankings, since the 23rd of October 2014, Portugal has ranked among the top 10 teams, achieving the 3rd place in 2017.

In terms of non-senior tournaments, Portugal has also achieved success with its youngsters. Portugal has won two FIFA World Cups for Under-20 players, two UEFA European Championships for Under-19's, and seven UEFA European Championship for Under-17's (the last 4 having won in the last 25 years – 2000, 2003, 2016, 2025).

On the other hand, Portugal will host its first FIFA World Cup, alongside Spain and Morocco, in 2030, a unique opportunity to enhance the country's international image through the organization of such a tournament of worldwide interest (Bouchanine & Lahiala, 2025). This event presents a strategic opportunity for Portugal to strengthen its national brand and capitalize on its football heritage to increase global visibility.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter lays the foundation for the entire study by detailing the methodological approach selected to address the research questions surrounding the international perception of Portuguese football, the value of the “Made in Portugal” label, and the cultural aspects of national identification facilitated by the sport. Given that the research objective involves understanding subjective, intangible concepts, such as affective image, professional expectations, and cultural pride, a qualitative research design was essential. This approach provides the necessary depth and sensitivity to capture expert opinions, allowing for an interpretive exploration of cognitive and affective factors that contribute to the country of origin effect within the global football industry. This study employed a descriptive-interpretive qualitative methodology, focusing on gathering and analyzing interview transcripts to interpret the meanings and describe the complex cultural realities as perceived by the expert panel (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted, chosen for their ability to strike a balance between structure and flexibility. The reliance on the verbal accounts of ten key informants ensured a good level of knowledge of global football.

2.1. Research hypothesis

The study was guided by four core hypotheses, derived from established literature on country of origin effects and nation branding, which the qualitative data collection aimed to explore:

- Hypothesis 1 (Country of origin effects): The country of origin influences the perceived quality and credibility of Portuguese football agents (players, coaches, clubs)
- Hypothesis 2 (Nation branding): The international success of Portuguese players, coaches, and the national team strengthens Portugal’s global reputation and contributes positively to its nation branding.
- Hypothesis 3 (Cultural stereotypes/media): Cultural stereotypes, historical reputation, and media representations positively shape foreign perceptions of Portuguese football.
- Hypothesis 4 (Narrative difference): There is a significant difference between domestic (Portuguese) and foreign perceptions regarding football’s symbolic value as an identity and branding tool for Portugal.

Hypothesis 4a (Domestic): Domestic narratives often emphasize football as a source of national pride, collective identity, and cultural achievement, reflecting internal nation branding through emotional attachment and ethnocentric pride.

Hypothesis 4b (Foreign): Foreign narratives, in contrast, often frame Portugal's football through performance-based components, highlighting the exportability of talent and global competitiveness rather than national identity.

The identification of appropriate participants was ensured through a purposive sampling strategy, resulting in a final sample of ten individuals with diverse international perspectives for comparative analysis. The sample was divided into two dimensions: nationality and football background. In terms of nationality, four participants were Portuguese nationals (interviewees 1, 2, 3, and 4), providing domestic perspectives regarding the cultural narrative and national identity. On the other hand, six foreign nationals (French, Mexican, Turkish, American, Dutch, and Brazilian – interviewees 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10) were selected to offer objective external perspectives on the image of the "Made in Portugal" label. In terms of football background, the participants represented essential roles in the global football industry, including two football coaches involved in youth development (interviewees 1 and 2), a business developer for the Portuguese Football Federation (interviewee 3), a sales specialist for a major club (interviewee 4), strategists, consultants, and a CEO with Master's degree in Football Business (interviewees 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). This intentional diversity enables a direct and nuanced comparison of internal pride versus external market assessment.

Data collection involved ten individual semi-structured interviews. The interview guide consisted of a set of ten identical questions (addressing H1, H2, and H3) asked to all ten participants, structured around three thematic areas: the influence of Portuguese nationality on international market perception, the value and characteristics of the "made in Portugal" label, and the profound cultural role of football in Portuguese national identity and unity. To address the distinct aspect of Hypothesis 4, the three final questions of the interview guide were differentiated, ensuring that Portuguese interviewees were asked about domestic narratives. In contrast, foreign interviewees were asked about foreign narratives. The interviews' data were transcribed.

A thematic analysis was employed, following the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved: familiarization, through intensive readings of all ten interviews; coding, which helps to identifying tag key phrases related to research questions, such as interviewee 9's specific critique of "divers and actors" or interviewee 2's description of a "phase pre-Cristiano Ronaldo and post-Cristiano Ronaldo"; theme generation, where codes were grouped into

distinctive themes, such as football as unifying identity vehicle); and reviewing and defining themes, ensuring the finding accurately reflected the data's complexity, supported by quotations.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis confirmed a consensus among all interviewees: that Portuguese nationality is highly valued internationally, aligning with the country of origin's component of competence. This consensus comes from the historical success and improvement of the football structure. Interviewee 3, stated that the nationality is now perceived as a "ativo valioso" (valuable asset) for coaches, citing the path of figures by José Mourinho and Jorge Jesus "os dois treinadores que abriram caminho e que claramente ajudaram a que a nacionalidade portuguesa fosse um ativo valioso para os treinadores que estão no mercado" (the two coaches who opened the way and helped the Portuguese nationality to be a valuable asset for coaches who are in the market). Foreign interviewees also share this opinion, whereas interviewee 5 (French) noted that Portugal is now perceived as the "sixth nation in Europe" and commonly produces "top quality players, top quality talent, and top quality coaches". Interviewee 6 (Mexican) further corroborates that Portugal is "seen like a very strong football country which makes uh... their players like more valuable". This high valuation translates into scrutiny and elevated expectations, whereas interviewee 7 (Turkish) states "there is a higher expectation from a Portuguese player, coach or the national team to perform at a higher level". Interviewee 10 (Brazilian) further confirms this high standard "it would be fair to say that Portugal is expected to be one of the greatest national teams in the world", also due to the presence of Cristiano Ronaldo and major silverware. Furthermore, interviewee 8 (American) captured how nationality acts as an immediate, sometimes limiting, descriptor "certain preconceived notion about how that player plays based on where the position is".

Data also suggests that the value of the "Portuguese label" has been redefined by the individual success of Cristiano Ronaldo "fase pré-Cristiano Ronaldo e pós-Cristiano Ronaldo" (pre-Cristiano and post-Cristiano phase), articulated by interviewee 2. This distinction comes also from modern transfer values: "a forma como os olham lá para for a acaba por ser mais valorizada do que foram Eusébio, Figo, Futre, Deco" (the way they look at them abroad ends up being more valued than Eusébio, Figo, Futre, Deco were), with the same interviewee referencing players such as Vitorinha and João Neves as high-value benchmarks. Interviewee 4 quantified this impact: "Sem dúvida, o impacto do Cristiano Ronaldo foi bastante significativo para elevar o valor desse rótulo" (without a doubt, the impact of Ronaldo was quite significant in raising the value of that label). Such value is anchored also on the youth development system. Interviewee 1 asserts that Portugal is consistently well-positioned in global academy rankings:

“Em termos de youth development, nós somos iguais ou melhores do que os top 5”. Interviewee 8 (American) confirms this: “the talent is probably the biggest factor when it comes to people paying attention internationally”. This further translates into an excellence of creating and selling players “Portugal right now has this idea... like to get players and sell them... so it gives them this identity of selling players”.

This research also uncovered some tension in the affective component of the country of origin effects image, demonstrating that competence can be contradicted by negative emotional and cultural biases in specific environments. While interviewee 7 (Turkish) stated the reputation is “quite positive”, expecting that Portuguese players to “play the game of football the right way”, interviewee 9 (Dutch) present a counter-narrative, labeling the perception of nationality as “rather negative” due to theatrics: “we as Dutch people see lots of Portuguese players as divers and actors if you get what I mean, like exaggerating things and a bit of foul play”. Such finding might undermine the overall positive image of Portuguese football and consumer preference.

Regarding the comparison of narratives, all four Portuguese interviewees unanimously confirmed that the national teams act as a vehicle for national identification, surpassing intense and destructive domestic club rivalries. Interviewee 2 described the national team as an essential moment of truce: “são os momentos em que os benfiquistas, sportinguistas, portistas, etc., se podem abraçar por ver um jogo, se podem unir” (these are the moments when Benfica, Sporting, Porto, and other supporters can hug each other to watch a game, uniting them). This effect is deeply emotional, as interviewee 4 described the Euro 2016 victory as “algo inexplicável o que sentimos no Euro 2016, em que uma nação se uniu ao longo de um mês” (something inexplicable what we felt, where a nation united over the course of a month). Interviewee 3 further confirms, “sinto claramente que nos sentimos mais portugueses e mais orgulhosos de ser portugueses” (I clearly feel that we feel more Portuguese and more proud to be Portuguese). Such pride is so intense that, as interviewee 4 stated, it allows the Portuguese to “esquecer algumas coisas menos positivas do nosso país” (to forget some less positive things about our country), highlighting the societal role of sport. This sense of solidarity extends beyond club football, as interviewee 1 said, “um jogador português a jogar uma partida da Champions, independentemente de ser do meu clube ou não, quero que ele tenha sucesso por ser português” (a Portuguese player playing a Champions League match, regardless of whether he belongs to my club or not, I want him to succeed because he’s Portuguese).

Parallely, data, framed by foreign observers, revealed a significant difference, validating H4b. Interviewee 10 (Brazilian) highlighted the pervasive Ronaldo effect in the foreign narrative: “they always get like Cristiano Ronaldo in the spotlight, where Ronaldo plus ten other people won the Euro”, which results in the failure “to give credit that other players deserve as well”. Such contrasts with the domestic narrative, which interviewee 5 (French) observed “often emphasized national pride, resilience, and unity of the country. They talk a lot about the emotional and cultural sides of their success”. The international narrative, as pointed by interviewee 6 (Mexican), often approaches Portuguese success with surprise, saying “Whenever Portugal performs well, people are usually surprised.”. Interviewee 8 (American) concurred that the foreign narrative can be “critical if certain players like Ronaldo if he didn’t perform”, tying success, or lack of it, with individual performance. This is countered by interviewee 9 (Dutch), who speculated that the Portuguese view of success as “more or less expected”, contrasting the foreign perception of Portugal being merely “the lucky one who ran away with it”.

Such dichotomy reveals a challenge for the Portuguese brand: while individual focus drives immediate value, it downplays the competence and collective cultural traits that assure long-term resilience.

4. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The evidence derived from the interviews presents a complex picture of the Portuguese football brand, confirming the core hypothesis of this study within the context of country of origin effects (COO) and nation branding. The research unequivocally confirms Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that Portuguese nationality acts as a high-value COO signal in the international market. Such perception is rooted in the cognitive element of the COO literature, specifically human factors of competence (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). This is supported by the perspectives of Portuguese youth development coaches (Interviewees 1 and 2), who rate the Portuguese youth system as “equal to or better than the top 5”. This competence, paired with the high market valuation of players in the “post-Cristiano Ronaldo phase” (interviewee 2), justifies “Made in Portugal” As a “valuable asset” (interviewee 3), a perception shared by international football participants and executives (interviewees 5, 6, 7, and 10), solidifying its position as a good product in the global talent export economy.

While a strong cognitive image allows the study to confirm Hypothesis 2 (that international success contributes positively to nation branding), the data proposes a refinement regarding the third hypothesis. The finding that Portuguese players can be perceived as “divers and actors” (interviewee 9) is partially contradictory to Hypothesis 3’s expectation of positive stereotypes. While the cognitive image (talent) is globally recognized, the affective image (emotional response) is vulnerable to cultural biases and historic rivalry, in this case between Portugal and the Netherlands. This fragmented image demonstrates that even a brand with undisputed quality may face residual negative stereotypes, requiring targeted brand management to overcome these perceptions, despite the player’s economic value remaining high. This discrepancy is also noted by interviewee 7, who expects Portuguese players to embody the “right way” of playing football.

Nevertheless, the most profound finding lies in the strong confirmation of Hypothesis 4, highlighting a particular narrative dichotomy between domestic and foreign perceptions. The domestic narrative (H4a) frames the national team as a transcendent vehicle of national belonging, overriding “unhealthy rivalries” (Interviewee 2) of club football. That phenomenon is recognized by club business professionals (interviewee 4) and the FPF business developer (interviewee 3) as a valuable internal nation-branding asset. This emotional charge is so important that national success serves as a social function, allowing citizens to “forget bad

things about our country” (interviewee 4), turning sporting achievement into a moment of collective affirmation and soft power projection, which aligns with the literature on ethnocentrism. Conversely, the foreign narrative (H4b) is driven by a market-oriented focus, influenced by the Ronaldo effect (interviewee 10). Such a critique is shared by the CEO of an athlete management company (interviewee 10, Brazilian) and the Partnership Development Manager (Interviewee 8, American), indicating that individualization of the brand may cause concern for international partners. By tying national achievement to a single figure, international media risks overlooking other decisive factors (coaching, academies, collective, resilience) that ensure this brand’s long-term sustainability, leading to a feeling of surprise when Portugal performs well (interviewee 6). It is therefore clear for Portuguese football stakeholders that it is necessary to shift the international view of Portuguese football from focusing on individual stars to recognizing the country’s overall skill, organization, and shared values, so that Portugal’s strong football image endures over time instead of relying on one generation of talent.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Portuguese football plays a significant role in country-of-origin effects and nation branding, validating all the proposed hypotheses. This study finds that the Portuguese nationality acts as a strong credibility cue in the global football market, associated with competence and talent. Nevertheless, some negative stereotypes persist, explaining the complexity of COO. The analysis also reveals contrasting narratives: domestically, football unifies and is part of national pride and identity, whereas internationally, it is perceived through individual performance, notably associated with Cristiano Ronaldo. These findings confirm that football enhances Portugal's international image and contributes to its brand equity. Theoretically, this dissertation expands the concepts of COO and nation branding into the domain of sport, integrating cultural and emotional dimensions. In practice, it provides insights for clubs and sport marketers on how to leverage national identity for sustainable competitiveness and influence. Future research should adopt a mixed-method to quantify these effects, compare Portugal with other mid-sized football nations, and further explore how soft power can be consolidated through collective rather than individual branding narratives.

LIMITATIONS

This study has had several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, it is an exploratory investigation into an entirely new research domain, the intersection between country of origin effects and football. No previous academic work has directly combined the two concepts; the study had limited theoretical frameworks and empirical benchmarks to rely on. As such, it constrained the ability to compare results with established findings or to validate outcomes through other replications. Consequently, the conclusions are interpretative and context-dependent rather than generalizable, reflecting the specificity of the Portuguese case within the broader football industry.

While COO has been extensively studied in consumer goods, tourism, and national branding, its application to a cultural and emotional product such as football (where perception, identity, and national symbolism intersect) represents an entirely new field of study. Furthermore, the absence of prior empirical studies made it difficult to measure any patterns specific to the football industry. Therefore, the findings of this dissertation should be understood as theory-building rather than confirmatory, serving as a possible initial foundation for future academic research.

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ANNEXES

Appendix A: Interview script

H1 - COUNTRY OF ORIGIN EFFECTS

1. Do you believe that nationality influences how Portuguese players, coaches, or the national team are perceived internationally?
2. How would you describe the value of the “Portuguese label” (Made in Portugal)? Positive, neutral, or negative? And how does it compare to other football nations?
3. Can you think of situations where the country of origin has affected opportunities or reputation (positively or negatively)?

H2 - NATION BRANDING AND IDENTITY

1. To what extent does football contribute to Portugal’s international image?
2. Do you think the international success of Portuguese players/coaches/national team affects the country’s reputation? How so?
3. Do you think Portugal’s football success has spillover effects in non-sporting areas such as tourism, culture, or investment?
4. Can sporting achievements like Euro 2016 or Nations League victories influence Portugal’s national brand or global competitiveness?

H3 – CULTURAL STEREOTYPES/MEDIA

1. How would you describe the international image of Portuguese football?
2. In your opinion, what are the main strengths and weaknesses of Portuguese football?
3. Do you think stereotypes play a role in shaping foreign opinions of Portuguese football? Are those stereotypes generally positive or negative?

H4a – DOMESTIC NARRATIVES

1. Within Portugal, how do fans, media, or institutions talk about football as part of the country’s identity?
2. Do you think football serves as a unifying symbol of Portuguese pride or culture domestically?
3. How do Portuguese people relate football success to national identity?

H4b – FOREIGN NARRATIVES

1. How do foreign media and audiences perceive Portuguese football compared to other nations?
2. Do you think international observers focus more on Portugal's identity or on its exportable talent and professional success?
3. Can you identify the differences in how Portuguese and foreign narratives describe Portugal's football achievements?