

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF BRAZILIAN PLAYERS AND THE DECLINE IN NATIONAL FOOTBALL PERFORMANCE: PARADOX OR RESULT?

La internacionalización de los jugadores brasileños y el descenso del rendimiento del fútbol nacional: ¿paradoja o resultado?

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between the internationalization of top Brazilian football players and the decline in the performance of the Brazilian national team and clubs in international competitions. The objective is to understand whether the export of talent affects the competitive capacity of Brazilian football. The method adopted is documentary, using data extracted from FIFA, Transfermarkt, the World Bank, and academic databases to test the formulated hypotheses. The hypotheses were classified according to specific variables, dimensions, and indicators to evaluate the proposed relationships. A comparison with the Argentine case was also made. The research reveals a relationship in which early export of talent contributes to the decline in the performance of the Brazilian national team and clubs in international competitions. The results suggest reconsidering talent management strategies in Brazilian football, indicating that talent retention can increase clubs' and national teams' competitive capacity. By highlighting the impact of internationalization on national football performance, this study provides data for future research and discussion on the globalization of football. The study offers a broader perspective on the implications of the internationalization of Brazilian players, contributing to understanding how globalization affects sports performance and the challenges of maintaining competitiveness.

Keywords: football, Brazilian national team, football clubs, player exportation, sports economics.

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Resumen

Este estudio investiga la relación entre la internacionalización de los mejores jugadores de fútbol brasileños y la disminución del desempeño de la selección nacional y de los clubes brasileños en competiciones internacionales. El objetivo es comprender si la exportación de talentos afecta la capacidad competitiva del fútbol brasileño. El método adoptado es documental, utilizando datos extraídos de la FIFA, Transfermarkt, el Banco Mundial y bases de datos académicas para explorar las hipótesis formuladas. Las hipótesis se clasificaron según variables, dimensiones e indicadores específicos para evaluar las relaciones propuestas. Además, se realizó una comparación con el caso argentino. La investigación revela una relación en la que la exportación temprana de talentos se identifica como un factor que contribuye al descenso del desempeño de la selección brasileña y de los clubes en las competiciones internacionales. Los resultados sugieren reconsiderar las estrategias de gestión de talentos en el fútbol brasileño, indicando que la retención de talentos puede aumentar la capacidad competitiva de los clubes y de la selección nacional. Al destacar el impacto de la internacionalización de los jugadores en el desempeño del fútbol nacional, este estudio proporciona datos para futuros estudios y debates sobre la globalización del fútbol. El estudio ofrece una perspectiva más amplia sobre las implicaciones de la internacionalización de los jugadores brasileños, contribuyendo a la comprensión de cómo la globalización afecta el rendimiento deportivo y los desafíos que se enfrentan para mantener la competitividad.

Palabras clave: fútbol, selección brasileña, clubes de fútbol, exportación de jugadores, economía del deporte .

Introduction

The renowned 20th-century historian Eric Hobsbawm (1994) considered social history a field that should encompass economic and cultural aspects, exemplified by Shakespeare and football. For Hobsbawm, football was an essential theme for historians. Along the same lines, the German writer Ror Wolf (1990) argued that, although the world cannot be reduced to football, a substantial part of the world is reflected in this sport.

From an anthropological-historical perspective, the internationalization of athletes is not merely an economic phenomenon, but also involves processes of migration, identity formation, and power asymmetries in global sport, as analyzed by Besnier et al. (2018) in *The Anthropology of Sport*.

Brazilian football has historically been a privileged space for observing the tensions between national identity and globalization. As Mário Filho (2003) showed in *O Negro no Futebol Brasileiro* — with a preface by Gilberto Freyre — the sport represented a field of cultural resistance in which "street smarts" and individual creativity confronted European tactical discipline. However, from the 1990s onwards, this model entered a crisis: the internationalization of players ceased to be an isolated phenomenon and became an asymmetrical global structure.

The globalization of football has reconfigured not only economic flows but also cultural values. As Appadurai (1996) observes in *Modernity at Large*, the circulation of players between centers (Europe) and peripheries (Brazil) creates a "global division of sporting labor," in which countries like Brazil specialize in producing talent for export. This dynamic, however, is not neutral: it weakens local leagues and transforms players into "products" (Kuper and Szymanski 2018).

This article investigates how the internationalization of Brazilian players has impacted the performance of national football, combining quantitative data with a historical-anthropological analysis of cultural changes. The central hypothesis is that the recent decline is not only economic but also the result of a reconfiguration of values that prioritizes the global market over local development.

Methods

Procedure

This study adopts a mixed-method documentary approach. Quantitatively, it draws on secondary data extracted from FIFA, Transfermarkt, the World Bank, and academic databases to test the formulated hypotheses. Qualitatively, it integrates a historical-anthropological analysis based on key works in the sociology and anthropology of Brazilian sport (DaMatta 1982; Rodrigues Filho 2003; Lopes 1994), allowing the interpretation of cultural transformations in the identity of the Brazilian player from "artist" to "product" within global production networks. The hypotheses were classified according to the typology proposed by Dieterich (1999).

Definition and classification of hypotheses and variables

To achieve this objective, one basic hypothesis and four secondary hypotheses were formulated and analyzed based on specific variables, dimensions, and their indicators. The study's hypotheses are summarized in Table 1.

Type of Hypothesis	Hypothesis Detail
Basic Hypothesis (BH)	The internationalization of top Brazilian players, characterized by their increasing presence in foreign clubs, is directly associated with the decline in the performance of the Brazilian national team and Brazilian clubs in international competitions.
Secondary Hypothesis 1 (SH1)	Brazil remains one of the leading football powerhouses globally, but does not have an uncontested hegemony.
Secondary Hypothesis 2 (SH2)	The increasingly early export of talent to foreign clubs has reduced Brazil's ability to compete effectively on the global club scene.
Secondary Hypothesis 3 (SH3)	The decline in the global prominence of Brazilian players is linked to the Brazilian national team's less impressive results in recent years.
Secondary Hypothesis 4 (SH4)	The tradition in football – measured by the results of national teams – and the economic strength of countries – measured by GDP and GDP per capita – are related to the rise of football leagues.

Table 1. Study Hypotheses. Source: Own authorship.

The classification and variables contained in the basic hypothesis (BH) and secondary hypotheses (SHs) are structured according to the typology proposed by Dieterich (1999). Table 2 presents the classification of the basic and secondary hypotheses and their respective variables.

Hypothesis	Type of Hypothesis	Variables
BH	Causal relationship (second degree)	Independent variable: internationalization of Brazilian players
SH1	Observation (first degree)	Dependent variable: decline in the performance of the Brazilian national team and clubs
SH2	Causal relationship (second degree)	Variable: strength of Brazilian football
SH3	Observation (first degree)	Independent variable: early export of talents
SH4	Statistical relationship (third degree)	Dependent variable: competitive capacity of Brazilian clubs

Table 2. Classification of hypotheses and their variables in the study. Source: Own authorship.

Specific indices and indicators were defined for each variable identified in the hypotheses and used to evaluate the proposed relationships (Table 3).

Hypothesis	Variable	Indicator	Index
BH	Independent variable	Percentage of Brazilian national team players playing abroad in each World Cup.	Percentage of national team players playing abroad in each World Cup. Distribution of players by country and league. Origin clubs of the starting players in the last five World Cups.
SH1	Dependent variable	Results of the Brazilian national team and clubs in the World Cups and Club World Cup.	Results of the Brazilian national team in the World Cups. Performance of Brazilian clubs in the Club World Cup.
SH2	Variable	Titles won by the Brazilian national team and performance in international competitions.	The number of World Cup, Copa America, and Copa Libertadores titles. Recent performance in international competitions.
SH3	Independent variable	Early export of Brazilian players to foreign clubs.	Number of transfers abroad. Transfers of the leading Brazilian football prospects.
	Dependent variable	Competitiveness of Brazilian clubs on the world stage.	Results of Brazilian clubs in international competitions. Performance of the Brazilian national team in international competitions.
BH	Variable	Presence of Brazilian players in global awards.	Number of nominations and awards received.
SH1	Variable 1	National team results reflect each country's football traditions.	Rankings in World Cups since 1930, considering the top three places.
	Variable 2	The economic strength of countries is assessed by GDP and GDP per capita.	Official data on Gross Domestic Product and Gross Domestic Product per capita.

Table 3. Indicators and Indices of the Variables Identified in the Study Hypotheses. Source: Own authorship.

Additionally, a comparative analysis was conducted between Brazil and Argentina, focusing on player transfers and football results, contributing to the debate on globalization and competitiveness in the sport. The comparison incorporates the average age of transfer, the retention rate of young talents, and performance in World Cups, which were integrated, allowing a comparative evaluation of the hypotheses formulated in the contexts of Brazil and Argentina.

Modeling and respective sections of the structure

The article's structure adopts the IMRaD model, a classic approach to organizing academic and scientific texts. This organization, with its well-defined sections, not only logically guides the reader but also enhances the presentation's fluidity, making it more pleasant and accessible (Pilatti et al. 2023).

Results and Discussion

The Internationalization of Brazilian Football and Its Competitive Impacts

The evolution of football shows that current results are largely influenced by collective, physical, and tactical factors, as demonstrated by the tactical revolution of the last three decades (Wilson 2013; Cox 2019). This trend has limited space for pure individualism, yet without diminishing the decisive role of individual talent within well-organized collective structures (Cox 2019). This shift is shaped by the strategies of the leading European national teams and clubs, especially in the World Cups and the Champions League, and by participation in the major European leagues — Premier League, La Liga, Bundesliga, Serie A, and Ligue 1 — which attract a significant proportion of the world's best players (Kuper and Szymanski 2018), reflecting the strength of their national teams. In other words, modern football rewards tactical discipline and physical intensity more than the isolated individual "genius" that once defined Brazilian football, helping explain the relative decline in the aesthetic impact of the Brazilian national team since 1982.

The 1982 Brazilian national team, known for its offensive and creative style, was the last true manifestation of the traditional essence of Brazilian football (DaMatta 1982). Since then, Brazil has adopted more pragmatic playing styles, influenced by European football, resulting in the World Cup victory in 1994 (Soares and Lovisolo 2003).

The internationalization of football players has significantly influenced national teams. In Brazil, this trend has manifested in three distinct periods of change in the national team's composition. Until 1986, the teams were composed exclusively of players playing in Brazil, a period in which the country won three titles and finished as World Cup runner-up, characterized by a football deeply rooted in Brazilian cultural characteristics. Between 1990 and 2002, there was a balance between players who played domestically and those who played abroad, with two titles and one runner-up. In 1998, there was a shift towards players from abroad, a trend that would consolidate in the years that followed. Table 4 and Figure 1 show this historical trajectory.

World Cup	In Brazil	Abroad
1930	16 (100%)	0 (0%)
1934	17 (100%)	0 (0%)
1938; 1950; 1954; 1958; 1962; 1966; 1970; 1974; 1978	22 (100%)	0 (0%)
1982; 1986	20 (100%)	0 (0%)
1990	10 (45,5%)	12 (54,5%)
1994	11 (50%)	11 (50%)
1998	8 (36,4%)	14 (63,6%)
2002	13 (56,5%)	10 (43,5%)
2006	3 (13%)	20 (87%)
2010	3 (13%)	20 (87%)
2014	4 (17,4%)	19 (82,6%)
2018	3 (13%)	20 (87%)
2022	3 (11,5%)	23 (88,5%)

Table 4. Brazilian National Team Players Playing in Brazil and Abroad in Each World Cup. Source: Data compiled from Transfermarkt and CBF reports.

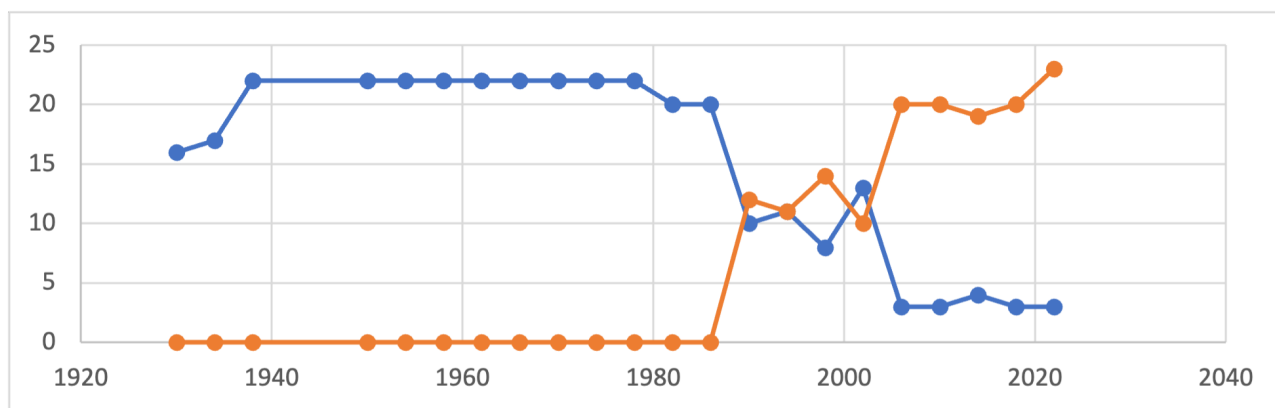


Figura 1. Distribution of Brazilian National Team Players Playing in Brazil and Abroad by World Cup (1930-2022). Source: Own authorship.

Since 2006, the Brazilian national team has been performing below fans' expectations. In the last five World Cups, it reached the semi-finals in 2014 – in a World Cup held in Brazil, where it was defeated by Germany 7-1 – and was eliminated four times in the quarter-finals (2006, 2010, 2018, 2022).

The creation of the UEFA Nations League in 2018, with biennial matches, adjusted the calendar of European teams, reducing the viability of matches against South American teams. This fact tends to reduce the competitive capacity of South American teams, especially Brazil and Argentina, which have a history of greater competitive strength, favoring European dominance.

This drop in performance coincides with the fact that the leading Brazilian players are playing in the main European leagues (Table 5). Initially, the predominance was in the Italian Serie A. However, Brazilian players have recently concentrated on the English Premier League and maintained a significant presence in the Spanish La Liga.

Country	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022	Total
England	1	1	6 (3)	6 (3)	12 (5)	26 (11)
Italy	6 (5)	8 (5)	3	3 (1)	3 (1)	23 (12)
Spain	5 (3)	4 (3)	3 (3)	4 (3)	5 (3)	21 (15)
Brazil	3	3 (1)	4 (1)	3 (1)	3	16 (3)
France	3	1 (1)	2 (1)	3 (2)	2 (2)	11 (6)
Germany	4 (3)	2	2 (1)	0	0	8 (4)
Portugal	1	2	0	0	0	3
Ukraine	0	0	1	2	0	3
China	0	0	0	2 (1)	0	2 (1)
Turkey	0	1	0	0	0	1
Greece	0	1 (1)	0	0	0	1 (1)
Canada	0	0	1 (1)	0	0	1 (1)
Russia	0	0	1 (1)	0	0	1 (1)
Mexico	0	0	0	0	1	1

Table 5. Distribution of Brazilian National Team Players by Country of Play in the World Cups (2006-2022). Source: Data compiled from Transfermarkt and CBF reports. Note: The number of players highlighted in parentheses corresponds to those who played most of the matches as starters.

Based on the analyzed data, two groups are identified: the first, consisting of the five most traditional European leagues and the Brazilian Championship, representing 83.1% of the players; the second, with emerging leagues, representing 16.9%. Among the players who were starters in most of the World Cup matches, 92.8% played in the first group and 7.2% in the second. The starters in the second group are players at the end of their careers who chose to finish their careers in less competitive but financially attractive leagues.

Figure 2 illustrates the leagues in which the starting players of the Brazilian national team played in the last five World Cups. The results highlight the five main leagues in the world. Although initially less prominent than the Italian league and currently less prominent than the English league, the Spanish league has housed more Brazilian national team starters. The current trend indicates a growing concentration in the Premier League, widely regarded as the most commercially powerful league in world football (Deloitte 2026).

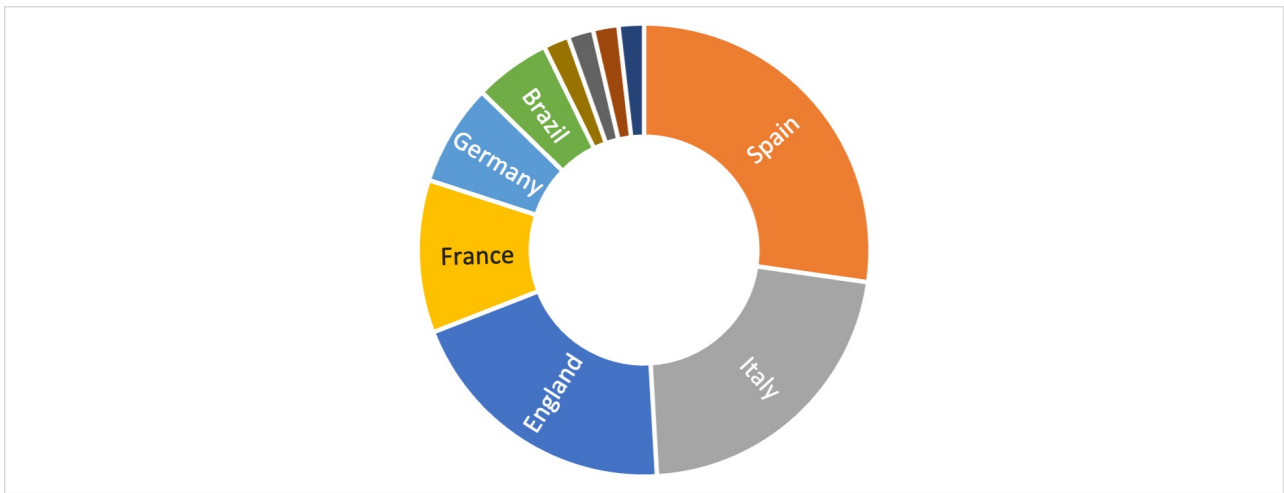


Figura 2. Leagues Where the Starting Players of the Brazilian National Team Played in the Last Five World Cups (2006-2022). Source: Own authorship.

The clubs the starting players played for are also relevant. Of the 55 starters in the last five World Cups, eight played for Real Madrid, six for Barcelona, five for PSG and Inter Milan, four for Chelsea, three for Tottenham, Juventus, and Milan, and two for Bayern Munich. All these clubs have global prominence and have been Champions League winners or finalists. These 39 players represent 70.9% of the Brazilian national team starters. Including clubs with Club World Cup titles, the percentage rises to 83.6% (46 players).

Since 2006, the Brazilian national team has been composed of players from the world football elite. However, this composition has not translated into satisfactory results. After 1982, even with the titles in 1994 and 2002, no Brazilian team has delivered a comparably dominant World Cup performance. Thus, the BH, which proposes a relationship between players' internationalization and the decline in the national team's historically distinctive style, is partially confirmed.

Brazil as a Football Powerhouse: Between Symbolic Prestige and Competitive Limits

The cliché "Brazil, the country of football" is supported by the country's status as the most successful World Cup winner, the most prestigious competition in world football. Among the eight countries that have won the title – five from Europe and three from South America – Brazil stands out as the only one to have won five (Table 6).

Country	Year(s)	Title(s)
Brazil	1958; 1962; 1970; 1994; 2002	5
Italy	1934; 1938; 1982; 2006	4
Germany	1954; 1974; 1990; 2014	4
Argentina	1978; 1986; 2022	3
Uruguay	1930; 1950	2
France	1998; 2018	2
England	1966	1
Spain	2010	1

Table 6. Distribution of Brazilian National Team Players by Country of Play in the World Cups (2006-2022). Source: Own authorship.

Despite Brazil's titles, Europe has the most overall titles. Only European and South American countries have won the World Cup. Europe has 12 titles, 16 runner-up finishes, and 17 third-place finishes, while South America has 10 titles, 6 runner-up finishes, and 4 third-place finishes. North America has only one-third place. Although this association should not be overstated, it can be inferred that Europe and South America have greater cultural capital in football.

Europe and South America have always alternated as the continents with the most World Cup victories. This alternation occurs because countries from these continents usually win Cups held in their territories, with exceptions like Brazil, which won in Sweden in 1958. Until 2010, no continent led the other by more than one title. In 2018, Europe had three more victories than South America, the widest margin of dominance. With Argentina's victory in 2022, the difference decreased to two (Figure 3).

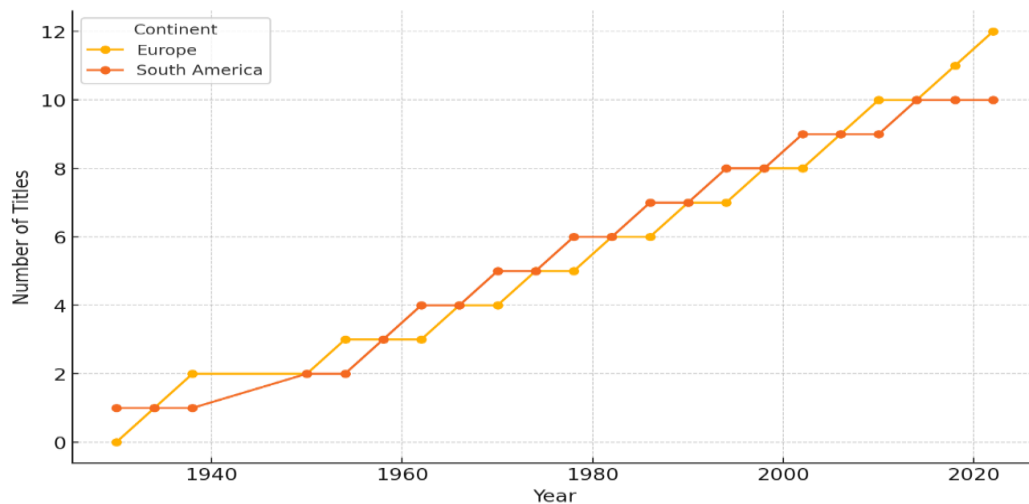


Figura 3. Number of World Cup titles by continent. Source: Own authorship.

Despite the cliché "Brazil, the country of football," there are important nuances to consider. Brazil does not exercise uncontested supremacy in South American football at the national and club levels. Since the Copa America was renamed in 1975, Brazil has had fewer titles than Argentina and Uruguay (Table 7). This lack of regional hegemony contrasts with Brazil's superior global performance, which has no parallel in its Copa America history.

Country	Year(s)	Title(s)
Argentina	1921; 1925; 1927; 1929; 1937; 1941; 1945; 1946; 1947; 1955; 1957; 1959 (Special); 1991; 1993; 2022	15
Uruguay	1916; 1917; 1920; 1923; 1924; 1926; 1935; 1942; 1956; 1959; 1967; 1983; 1987	13
Brazil	1919; 1922; 1949; 1989; 1997; 1999; 2004; 2007; 2019	9
Peru	1939; 1975	2
Paraguay	1953; 1979	2
Chile	2015; 2016	2
Colombia	2001	1

Table 7. *Copa America winning countries and their titles over the years. Source: Own authorship.*

In the South American scenario, the lack of supremacy is also evident among clubs. However, unlike the history of national team competitions, the achievement discrepancy is less pronounced (Table 8). Additionally, an analysis of recent years reveals a reversal trend. Since 2017, economically stronger Brazilian clubs have won the Copa Libertadores title in six of the last seven editions (Figure 4). This reversal may be explained by the combination of two structural factors: the implementation of the Football Corporation model, which attracted significant private investment, and improvements in club management practices, which enabled greater financial stability and the retention of key players for longer periods. These changes enabled Brazilian clubs to compete on more equal terms with the traditional Argentine and Colombian powerhouses, reversing the downward trend observed until 2016.

Country	Year(s)	Title(s)
Argentina	1964; 1965; 1967; 1968; 1969; 1970; 1972; 1973; 1974; 1975; 1977; 1978; 1984; 1985; 1986; 1994; 1996; 2000; 2001; 2003; 2007; 2009; 2014; 2015; 2018	25
Brazil	1962; 1963; 1976; 1981; 1983; 1992; 1993; 1995; 1997; 1998; 1999; 2005; 2006; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2017; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023	23
Uruguay	1960; 1961; 1966; 1971; 1980; 1982; 1987; 1988	8
Paraguay	1979; 1990; 2002	3
Colombia	1989; 2004; 2016	3
Chile	1991	1
Ecuador	2008	1

Table 8. *Copa Libertadores winning countries and their titles over the years. Source: Own authorship.*

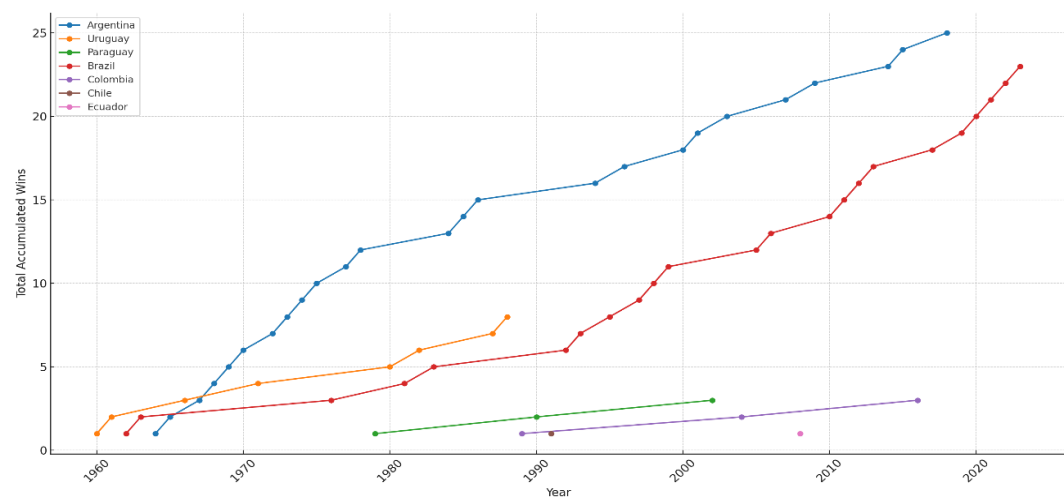


Figure 4. Recent *Copa Libertadores* Titles Won by Brazilian Clubs (2017-2023). Source: Own authorship.

Brazil is the second-most successful country in the Club World Cup, with 11 titles, behind Spain, which has 12. Argentina and Italy each have nine titles, followed by Uruguay with 6, England and Germany with 5, the Netherlands with 3, Portugal with 2, and Paraguay and Serbia with 1 title each. Until 2008, South American teams led in titles. However, since 2012, when Corinthians won, no South American team has won, with the last previous victory occurring in 2006 by Internacional. This fact highlights European dominance in the event. As of 2023, European teams have accumulated 36 titles, while South American teams have 27, including an 11-consecutive-victory streak by European teams (Figure 5).

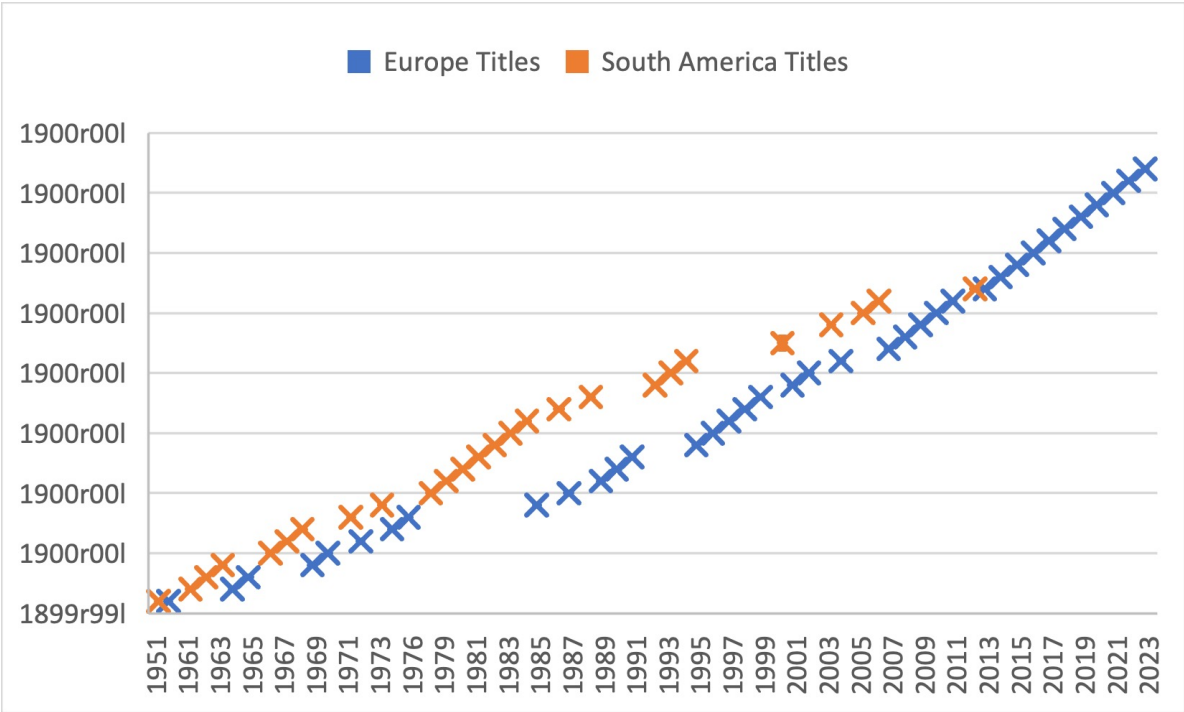


Figure 5. Club World Cup titles by continent. Source: Own authorship.

The participation of Brazilian clubs in the three analyzed periods (up to 1986, 1987-2002, and since 2003) shows a significant downward trend. Brazilian clubs won 19.2% of the titles in Period 1,

18.8% in Period 2, and 14.3% in Period 3. In terms of continents, European clubs increased their victories from 26.9% in Period 1 to 68.8% in Period 2 and 81.0% in Period 3, while the victories of other South American clubs dropped drastically (Table 9).

Titles	Club (Years)
8	Real Madrid (1960, 1998, 2002, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2022)
4	Milan (1969, 1989, 1990, 2007); Bayern Munich (1976, 2001, 2013, 2020)
3	Peñarol (1961, 1966, 1982); Internazionale (1964, 1965, 2010); Nacional (1971, 1980, 1988); Boca Juniors (1977, 2000, 2003); São Paulo (1992, 1993, 2005); Barcelona (2009, 2011, 2015)
2	Santos (1962; 1963); Ajax (1972, 1995); Independiente (1973, 1984); Juventus (1985, 1996); Porto (1987; 2004); Manchester United (1999, 2008); Corinthians (2000, 2012)
1	Palmeiras (1951); Racing Club (1967); Estudiantes (1968); Feyenoord (1970); Atlético de Madrid (1974); Olimpia (1979); Flamengo (1981); Grêmio (1983); River Plate (1986); Red Star Belgrade (1991); Vélez Sarsfield (1994); Borussia Dortmund (1997); Internacional (2006); Liverpool (2019); Chelsea (2021); Manchester City (2023)

Table 9. Winners of the Intercontinental Cup (1960-2004) and the FIFA Club World Cup (since 2000). Source: Own authorship. Note: (i) The matches between Bayern Munich and Independiente in 1975 and between Liverpool and Boca Juniors in 1978 did not occur because the teams could not agree on a date. Therefore, there were no winners in those years. (ii) In 2000, two separate world competitions were recognized later by FIFA: the 2000 Intercontinental Cup and the 2000 FIFA Club World Cup

Although the cliché of Brazilian football's supremacy is not unfounded, this superiority has become less evident in recent times. In this century, at the World Cup level, Brazil has won only one World Cup, in 2002. At the continental level, Brazil has not consistently been the dominant force in South America. Despite recent dominance in the Copa Libertadores at the club level, the results in world competitions have been modest, with only four titles, the most recent in 2012.

The passion of Brazilians for football is fuelled by multiple factors, but primarily by achievements that become symbols of pride and excellence in the popular imagination. These victories have had the power to unify the country in glorious moments, transcending social and economic barriers and fuelling dreams and hopes for a bright future. However, the scarcity of significant titles on the international stage points to substantial problems Brazilian football faces, challenging its ability to maintain tradition and competitiveness.

The data presented confirm hypothesis SH1 that Brazil continues to be one of the major football powers in the world, but without uncontested hegemony. However, these data also indicate the need for a longitudinal study to monitor whether the current condition will stabilize, whether the decline curve will continue to steepen, or whether there will be a positive change.

Early Export and the Future of Brazilian Football

The premature export of Brazilian football players to international teams is a phenomenon rooted in the contemporary economic context, characterized by substantial investments in the football market (Campa 2021; Garcia-del-Barrio and Pujol 2021; Rohde and Breuer 2017; Schatz and Espíndola 2022). This phenomenon impacts various facets of Brazilian football and is linked to the sustainability of the country's leading clubs (Silva and Campos Filho 2006). It also reflects the "winner takes all" effect in the sports entertainment industry (Frank and Cook 1995), where economically strong European clubs seek the best players from weaker clubs.

Major clubs use forecasting models to evaluate sports talent based on transfer values and rates, using econometric models to predict "market value" (Garcia-del-Barrio and Pujol 2021; Leifheit and Follert 2021; Poli et al. 2022). These models consider visibility, individual quality, titles, age, achievements, global experience, goals, assists, passes, dribbles, and participation in national team

games. Empirical studies confirm that transfer value increases until ages 26-27 and decreases after age 32 (Garcia-del-Barrio and Pujol 2021). This strategy has changed the pattern of Brazilian players' transfers.

This strategy has changed the pattern of Brazilian players' transfers abroad, especially to European clubs. Until the first half of the 20th century, transfers of Brazilian players to foreign clubs were rare and involved experienced athletes nearing the end of their careers, such as Vavá, Garrincha, and Pelé, who left at ages 34, 35, and 35, respectively (Transfermarkt 2024). Of the 22 players in the 1958 squad, 11 did not transfer to foreign clubs (Transfermarkt 2024).

From the 1980s onwards, with the globalization of sports, there was a significant increase in players migrating to European clubs in search of better pay and professional exposure. From the 1982 squad, 16 out of 22 players (72.7%) transferred to foreign clubs, and from the 1986 squad, 18 out of 22 players (81.8%) (Transfermarkt 2024). Despite the increase, these transfers were not premature, with players like Sócrates, Zico, and Paulo Roberto Falcão leaving at ages 30, 30, and 27, respectively (Transfermarkt 2024).

The pattern has changed, with Brazilian players leaving early to play for teams in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (FIFA 2024a; 2022; 2021; 2020; 2019; 2018b; 2018a; 2017). Transfers have become more frequent and involve large sums of money. Table 10 lists the highest-value transfers of Brazilian athletes abroad, highlighting the players' young ages at the time of the transfers (Transfermarkt 2024).

Player	Origin	Destination	Value	Age	Year
Neymar	Santos	Barcelona	€ 88,4 millions	21	2013
Vitor Roque	Athletico Paranaense	Barcelona	€ 74 millions	19	2024
Endrick	Palmeiras	Real Madrid	€ 72 millions	17	2024
Vinícius Júnior	Flamengo	Real Madrid	€ 45 millions	18	2018
Rodrygo	Santos	Real Madrid	€ 45 millions	18	2019
Estevão	Palmeiras	Chelsea	€ 45 millions	17	2024
Lucas Moura	São Paulo	Paris Saint-Germain	€ 40 millions	20	2012
Lucas Paquetá	Flamengo	Milan	€ 38,4 millions	21	2018
Gabriel Jesus	Palmeiras	Manchester City	€ 32 millions	19	2016
Oscar	Internacional	Chelsea	€ 32 millions	21	2012

Table 10. *Highest Value Transfers Involving Brazilian Athletes Abroad. Source: Own authorship.*

The dynamics of Brazilian player transfers to international clubs go beyond the top athletes. In 2016, FIFA launched the "Global Transfer Market Report," providing detailed information on player transfers to foreign clubs. Analysis of FIFA data from 2016 to 2023 shows Brazil as the world's largest exporter of players (Figure 6). Brazil ranked first each year, with 15,331 players transferred abroad, more than double the second-place Argentina, with 7,489 players. England (6,234), France (5,824), and Colombia (4,989) followed. The number of Brazilian player transfers has generally increased, except during the pandemic, from 1,642 in 2016 to 2,375 in 2023, with transactions totaling approximately \$935.3 million in the latter year (FIFA 2024a).

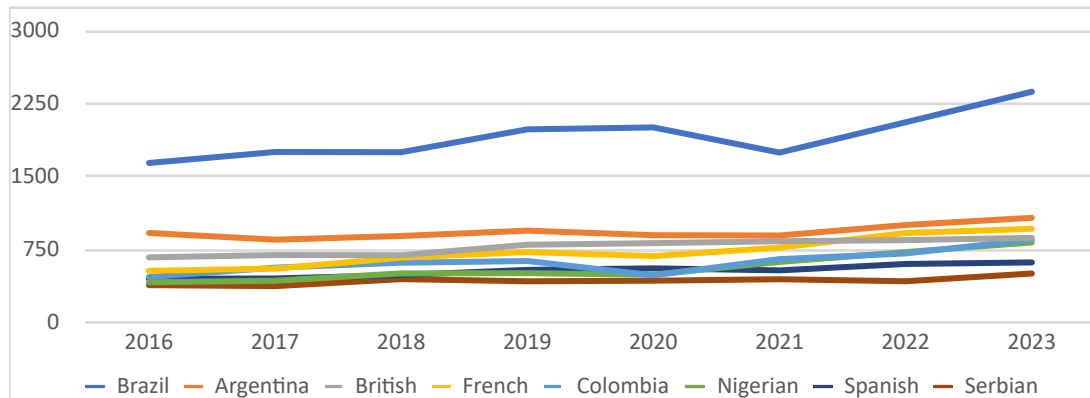


Figure 6. *International Player Transfers per Year (2016-2023)*. Source: Own authorship.

Alvito (2006), when shedding light on the effects of globalization on Brazilian football back in the 2000s, already considered that the prosperity generated by the football business in the most important European centers could have the opposite effect in Brazil. The author, however, considered that such an effect would depend on the very structures of Brazilian football, which predate the intensification of globalization's transformations and are not good. However, it is essential to highlight that Alvito (2006) has already emphasized that the sale of Brazilian players abroad has decreased the quality of the football spectacle and weakened the clubs. To emphasize this fact, he highlights that in 2004, according to official data from the Brazilian Football Confederation, 857 football players transferred abroad. These figures are substantially lower than the 2,375 transfers recorded in 2023.

Exporting Brazilian athletes is a significant and profitable part of football (Schatz and Espíndola 2022). However, this reality shows only one side of the coin: most players do not secure lucrative contracts and face financial hardships, reflecting inequality in Brazilian society (Ceratti 2014).

In the 2023-2024 season, the top young talents in Brazilian football were transferred to European teams. Endrick and Estevão from Palmeiras, both 17 years old, went to Real Madrid and Chelsea; Vitor Roque from Athletico Paranaense, 18, went to Barcelona; Pedro and Moscardo, both 18, went to Zenit and PSG; Murillo from Corinthians, 21, went to Nottingham Forest; and Beraldo from São Paulo, 20, went to PSG. The contracts of 17-year-olds Endrick and Estevão were made with the condition of transfer after they turned 18, in compliance with Article 19 of FIFA's "Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players," which prohibits international transfers of any player under that age (FIFA 2024b).

This practice reflects a transfer-value asymmetry in which Brazilian clubs sell young players for lower prices than European clubs later sell them for. This pattern is based on the variables included in the econometric models used to assess transfer rates and estimate players' market values.

These variables explain why Brazilian football talents are sold for high values relative to the Brazilian market but provide substantial profits to European clubs once they establish themselves. This scenario also helps explain why Brazilian clubs recruit more experienced – and therefore less expensive – players returning from major markets (Monteiro et al. 2023).

The analysis of data and trends partially supports SH2, namely that early player exports reduce Brazil's ability to compete effectively in the global club scene. While there is a clear trend of early export and a correlation with declining competitive results, other factors, such as the evolution of game tactics and the organization of international competitions, can also influence these results. Even with Brazilian players in elite clubs, the results of the Brazilian national team and Brazilian clubs in international competitions have not met expectations.

Brazilian Players and Global Individual Recognition

A player's global prominence is indicated by winning major global awards. The Ballon d'Or, created by France Football magazine in 1956, is among the most prestigious in world football. Initially restricted to European players, the award began to include non-European players playing in Europe from 1994 and, since 2007, players from anywhere in the world.

Between 2010 and 2015, the award was presented in collaboration with FIFA under the name FIFA Ballon d'Or. In 2016, France Football regained exclusive control of the award, and FIFA launched The Best FIFA Football Awards. In response to criticism, France Football adjusted the evaluation period to the European season, starting with the 2022 award, and moved it from August to July.

Lionel Messi holds the record with eight Ballon d'Or awards. Other notable winners include Cristiano Ronaldo (five titles), Johan Cruyff, Marco van Basten, and Michel Platini (three titles each). Brazilian winners include Ronaldo (1997, 2002), Rivaldo (1999), Ronaldinho (2005), and Kaká (2007).

Since including non-European players in 1994, Argentina has won eight awards, Brazil seven, Portugal six, France two, Germany, Bulgaria, Liberia, England, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Croatia, each with one. France Football also reviewed historical records and awarded honorary titles to Pelé (7) and Diego Maradona (2).

In 2020, due to the pandemic, the Ballon d'Or was not awarded. Since 2021, only four Brazilians have been nominated: Neymar (2021), Fabinho (2022), Casemiro (2022), and Vinícius Júnior (2022, 2023, 2024).

Lionel Messi has won three of the six editions at The Best FIFA Football Awards. Cristiano Ronaldo, Luka Modrić, and Robert Lewandowski each won once. In 2024, the award was given to Vinícius Júnior. (Tabla 11)

	Nacionality	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
1	France	3	4	4	4	15
2	England	4	3	3	3	13
3	Portugal	3	4	2	2	11
4	Argentina	2	0	4	4	10
5	Italy	5	0	1	1	7
6	Croatia	1	1	2	2	6
7	Norway	1	1	2	2	6
8	Germany	0	2	2	2	6
9	Brazil	1	3	1	1	6
10	Belgium	2	2	1	1	6
11	Spain	3	0	1	1	5
12	Egypt	1	1	1	1	4
13	Poland	1	1	1	1	4
14	South Korea	0	1	1	1	3
15	Morocco	0	0	1	1	2
16	Algeria	1	1	0	0	2
17	Nigeria	0	0	1	1	2

18	Uruguay	1	1	0	0	2
19	Cameroon	0	0	1	1	2
20	Georgia	0	0	1	1	2
21	Netherlands	0	1	0	0	1
22	Colombia	0	1	0	0	1
23	Denmark	1	0	0	0	1
24	Senegal	0	1	0	0	1
25	Serbia	0	1	0	0	1
26	Ivory Coast	0	1	0	0	1

Table 11. Number of Players Nominated by Nationality (2021-2024). Source: Own authorship.

The 16-year period in which no Brazilian player was named the best in the world (from Kaká in 2007 to Vinícius Junior in 2024) reflects a decline in the production of exceptional talent capable of making a difference at the highest international level. This reality regarding individual recognition of athletes coincides with Brazilian football's decline in collective achievements. However, it is feasible to interpret SH3 as partially refuted. Despite a negative trend, Brazil still places many players in the world's top clubs and leagues.

The Influence of Economic Power in Football

A relatively small share of the world's population captures a disproportionate share of value generated by global labor flows. In global production networks, specific functions are assigned to each region, creating an asymmetric global (Pérez-Sánchez et al. 2021). Applied to football, this means that peripheral countries such as Brazil specialize in the "raw material" (young talents). In contrast, central countries capture the higher value-added stages (development, marketing, and final assembly). Central countries compete to build a higher-value-added economic structure. This structural asymmetry helps explain why, despite producing large numbers of players, Brazilian clubs and the national team have lost ground in global competitions.

The active participation of these countries in global value chains reflects a development strategy that seeks to leverage their comparative advantages, such as players with attractive and abundant prices, despite the continuous and increasingly rapid transformations in football, to participate in competitive international spectacles. However, this participation often occurs on terms that perpetuate the clubs' economic dependencies and can limit their involvement in higher-value-added spectacles.

This scenario, illustrated by the experience of these countries, highlights the complexity of power dynamics in global sports, where challenges often accompany economic development. SH4 aims to correlate these economic aspects with performance in sports, particularly football.

Regarding the variable of football tradition, Table 12 presents the top three finishers in the World Cups since 1930. The table allows for visualizing the continuity and consistency of the leading teams over the decades, reflecting their tradition and legacy in the global football scene.

Team	Title(s)	Runner-up(s)	Third place(s)
Brazil	5 (1958, 1962, 1970, 1994, 2002)	2 (1950, 1998)	2 (1938 and 1978)
Germany	4 (1954, 1974, 1990, 2014)	4 (1966, 1982, 1968, 2002)	4 (1934, 1970, 2006, 2010)
Italy	4 (1934, 1938, 1982, 2006)	2 (1970, 1994)	1 (1990)

Argentina	3 (1978, 1986, 2022)	3 (1930, 1990, 2014)	-
France	2 (1998, 2018)	2 (2006, 2022)	2 (1958, 1986)
Uruguay	2 (1930, 1950)	-	-
United Kingdom	1 (1966)	-	-
Spain	1 (2010)	-	-
Netherlands	-	3 (1974, 1978, 2010)	1 (2014)
Hungary	-	2 (1938, 1954)	-
Czech Republic	-	2 (1934, 1962)	-
Sweden	-	1 (1958)	2 (1950, 1994)
Croatia	-	1 (2018)	2 (1998, 2022)
Poland	-	-	2 (1974, 1982)
United States	-	-	1 (1930)
Austria	-	-	1 (1954)
Chile	-	-	1 (1962)
Portugal	-	-	1 (1966)
Turkey	-	-	1 (2002)
Belgium	-	-	1 (2018)

Table 12. Country Rankings in the FIEA World Cups (1930-2022). Source: Own authorship.

Using an objective scoring criterion based on titles, runner-up finishes, and third places in World Cups, football teams were ranked to reflect tradition and excellence in the most prestigious international football event. Three points were awarded for each title, two points for each runner-up finish, and one point for each third place. A cutoff line of 3 points was established. This method generated a list of 11 countries (Table 13).

Position	Team	Points
1	Germany	24
2	Brazil	21
3	Italy	17
4	Argentina	15
5	France	12
6	Netherlands	7
7	Uruguay	6
8	Sweden; Croatia	4
9	United Kingdom; Spain	3

Table 13. Countries Selected for the Study. Source: Own authorship.

For the selected countries, GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and GDP per capita (GDPpc) data were collected from various sources. Due to variations in methods and units of measurement, data from the World Bank were used, as they apply uniform criteria for all countries. Additionally, GDP per capita adjusted by purchasing power parity (GDPpc PPP) was also used, which accounts for differences in the cost of living and purchasing power across countries, providing a more accurate comparison. The World Bank data are presented in Figures 7, 8, and 9.

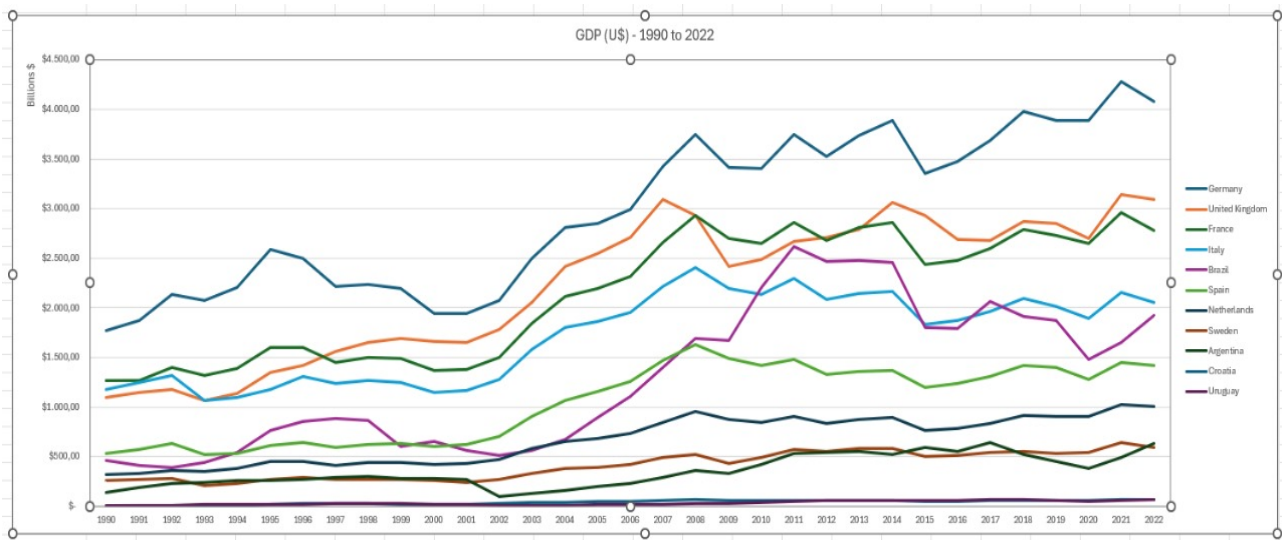


Figure 7. GDP of the Countries Participating in the Study from 1990 to 2022. Source: Own authorship.

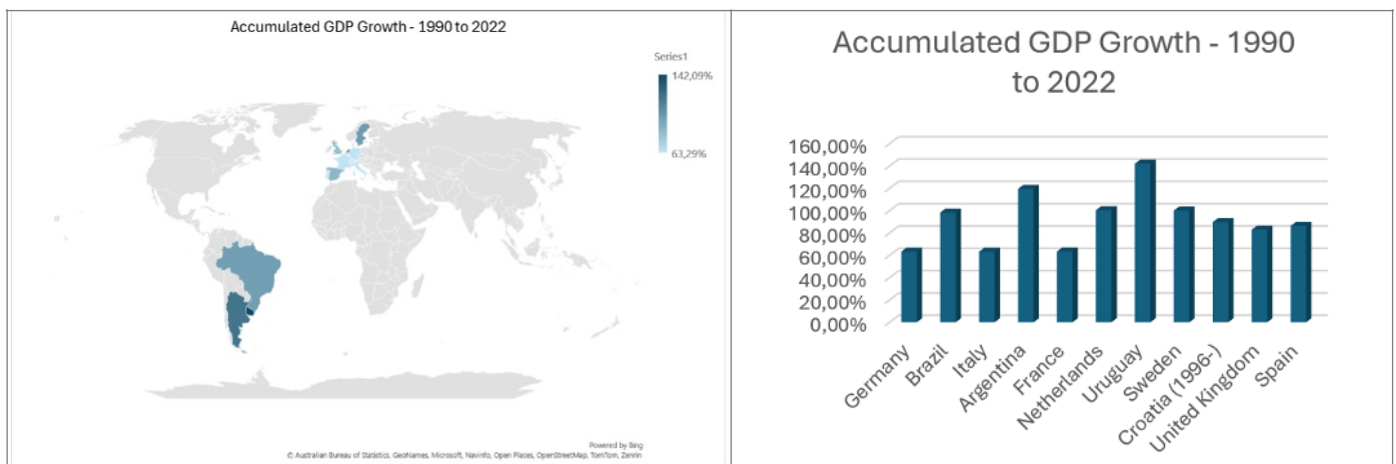


Figure 8. Cumulative GDP Growth from 1990 to 2022. Source: Own authorship.

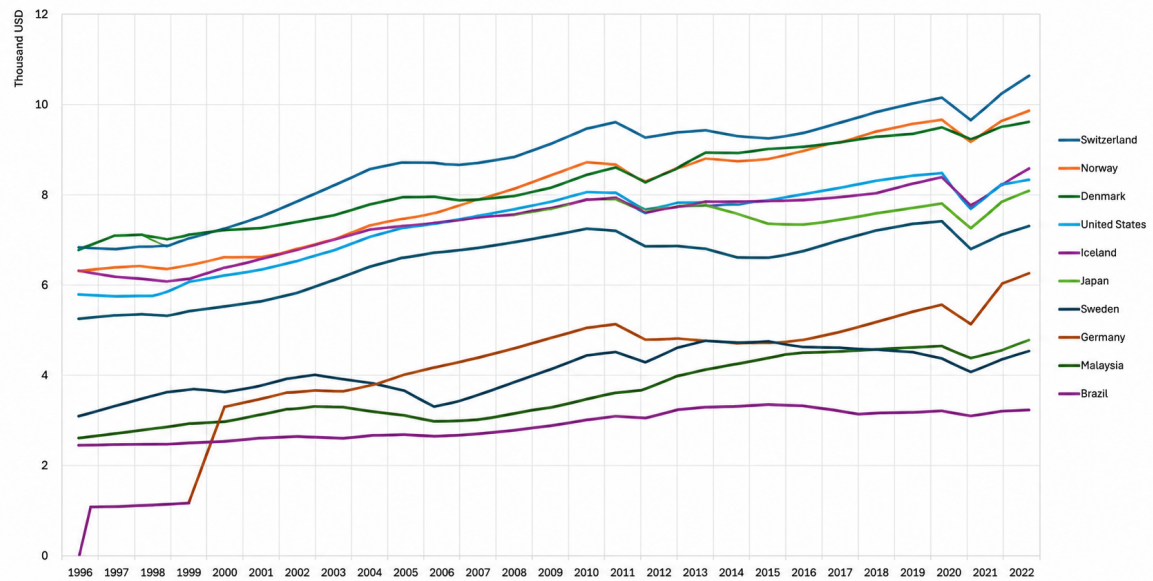


Figure 9. GDP per capita PPP for the period 1990 to 2022. Source: Own authorship

The correlation between the measure of football tradition (Table 13) and each country's GDP/GDPpc (Figure 9) was evaluated using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The measurements were taken at four points: 1992, 2002, 2012, and 2022 (Table 14).

Year	Pearson Coefficient Tradition vs. GDP	Pearson Coefficient Tradition vs. GDPpc PPP
2022	0.527718469 (moderate)	-0.20998 (negligible)
2012	0.605278823 (moderate)	-0.07441 (negligible)
2002	0.298143958 (weak)	-0.18608 (negligible)
1992	0.408657266 (moderate)	-0.02332 (negligible)

Table 14. Correlation between Tradition, GDP, and GDPpc PPP. Source: Own authorship.

The results indicate a relationship between football tradition, countries' economic strength, and the rise of their football leagues. The data show a moderate positive correlation between football tradition and GDP, but no significant correlation with GDP per capita (PPP).

The analysis of the top-ranked football leagues today reveals that the five leading leagues in the world — the Premier League (England), the Bundesliga (Germany), La Liga (Spain), Serie A (Italy), and Ligue 1 (France) — are in countries with high GDPs and strong football traditions. Other significant leagues include the Eredivisie (Netherlands), Serie A (Brazil), Primeira Liga (Portugal), Liga MX (Mexico), and the Russian Premier League (Global Football Rankings 2024).

Therefore, the relationship between football tradition and GDP is partially confirmed, with a weak-to-moderate correlation. The relationship between football tradition and GDP per capita (PPP) is rejected due to a negligible correlation. Thus, hypothesis SH4 is partially confirmed, as there is a weak to moderate correlation between football tradition and GDP, but no significant correlation with GDP per capita (PPP).

From "Art" to "Product": The Reconfiguration of the Brazilian Player's Identity

The Brazilian player has historically been constructed as an "artist," whose individual genius transcended tactics. This identity, discussed by Roberto DaMatta (1982) in *Universo do Futebol*, was linked to an ethos of "street smarts" and improvisation, opposed to the "disciplined" European football. However, from the 1990s onwards, three factors redefined this identity:

1. The commodification of talent:
 - Before: Players like Pelé and Garrincha were local idols before becoming global (e.g., Pelé at Santos until age 30) (Transfermarkt, 2024).
 - After: Neymar was sold to Barcelona at age 21, and Vinícius Júnior had a pre-contract with Real Madrid at age 16. The early sale of young talents became the main economic strategy of Brazilian clubs. Players from youth categories are already being recruited and represented by European agents while still under-17 or under-19, often even before their professional debut.
 - Consequence: Local training loses ground to European academies (e.g., Barcelona's La Masia), which standardize the style of play.
2. The era of social media:
 - Before: The player's image was created by the clubs (e.g., a Coca-Cola advertisement featuring Pelé).
 - After: Players such as Rodrygo and Endrick manage their own personal brands on Instagram (e.g., Nike, Red Bull).
 - Consequence: "Success" is now also measured by digital visibility and engagement. According to Statista (2023), Neymar, while playing in Europe, was the third-most-followed football player in the world in 2023, with 369 million followers — a level of global reach unthinkable for most athletes who remain exclusively in the Brazilian Serie A.
3. The end of the "maturation phase" in smaller leagues:
 - Before: Players like Romário (PSV Eindhoven, 1988–1993) and Ronaldo (1994–1996) adapted to European football in leagues such as the Dutch and Portuguese leagues (Transfermarkt 2024).
 - After: Today, 80% of Brazilians in Europe go directly to the "Big Five" (Premier League, La Liga, etc.), without passing through intermediate leagues (FIFA 2024a).
 - Consequence: Lack of experience in high-level competitions before the age of 23, weakening the Brazilian national team.

This reconfiguration is not only economic, but also cultural. As Lopes (1994) observes in *"A Vitória do Futebol que Incorporou a Pelada"*, Brazilian football has ceased to be a space of resistance. It has become a link in the global chain of player production, with Brazil as the "breeding ground" and Europe as the "market".

Comparison of key data from Brazil and Argentina

Brazil and Argentina are historical football powers and are the primary American references. Despite its cultural and economic characteristics, football occupies a central place in the identity of Brazil and Argentina. This section investigates how the internationalization of talent impacts the two countries differently.

The main comparative data between Brazil and Argentina are summarized in Table 15, while Table 16 presents the age at transfer of the leading talents exported since 2016. These tables allow a

clearer visualization of the contrasting talent management strategies adopted by the two countries and serve as the basis for the analysis that follows.

Data	Brazil	Argentina
Player Exports (2016-2023):	15,331 international transfers (1st in the global ranking)	7,489 transfers (2nd in the ranking)
Performance in International Competitions	World Cup 5 titles (last in 2002)	World Cup 3 titles (last in 2022)
	Copa America 9 titles (last in 2019)	Copa America 15 titles (last in 2022)
	Copa Libertadores (2000-2023) 12 titles (7 since 2017)	Copa Libertadores (2000-2023) 6 titles (last in 2018)
	Club World Cup (2000-2023) Brazilian clubs: 4 titles (last in 2012, Corinthians)	Club World Cup (2000-2023) Argentine clubs: 0 titles (last victory in 2003, Boca Juniors)
Presence of Players in Foreign Leagues (World Cups 2006-2022)	87-88% of players played abroad	82-85% of players played abroad
Economic Indicators	GDP (US\$ billions) US\$ 1.920	GDP (US\$ billions) US\$ 630
	GDP per capita (PPP) US\$ 17,200	GDP per capita (PPP) US\$ 25,000

Table 15. Main data for Brazil and Argentina. Source: Own authorship.

Player	Origin	Destination	Year	Age
Vinícius Júnior	Flamengo (BRA)	Real Madrid (ESP)	2018	18
Rodrygo	Santos (BRA)	Real Madrid (ESP)	2019	18
Endrick	Palmeiras (BRA)	Real Madrid (ESP)	2024	17*
Vitor Roque	Athletico-PR (BRA)	Barcelona (ESP)	2024	19
Gabriel Jesus	Palmeiras (BRA)	Manchester City (ING)	2016	19
Lucas Paquetá	Flamengo (BRA)	Milan (ITA)	2018	21
Antony	São Paulo (BRA)	Ajax (HOL)	2020	20
Julián Álvarez	River Plate (ARG)	Manchester City (ING)	2022	22
Enzo Fernández	River Plate (ARG)	Benfica (POR) → Chelsea (ING)	2022	21
Lautaro Martínez	Racing Club (ARG)	Inter Milan (ITA)	2018	21
Exequiel Palacios	River Plate (ARG)	Bayer Leverkusen (ALE)	2020	22
Giovani Lo Celso	Rosario Central (ARG)	PSG (FRA)	2016	20
Nahuel Molina	Boca Juniors (ARG)	Udinese (ITA)	2020	22
Thiago Almada	Vélez Sarsfield (ARG)	Atlanta United (EUA)	2022	21

Table 16. Main players from Brazil and Argentina who transferred since 2016, with their ages at the time of transfer. Source: Own authorship.

*Note: Endrick: Transfer agreed in 2022 (at age 16), but finalized in 2024 after he turned 18 (in compliance with FIFA Article 19).

A comparative analysis of Brazil and Argentina reveals distinct patterns in the export of football players, reflecting opposing talent-management strategies. Brazilian players are transferred, on average, at 18.7 years of age, with 85% of transactions occurring before the age of 21. The average age of transfers for Argentine players is significantly higher: 21.4 years, with only 14% of transfers involving players under 21. This 2.7-year difference represents roughly three additional seasons of competition for their home clubs. Regarding transfer values, the sale of "early talents" generates higher average values (€23.5 million) for Brazilian clubs than those achieved by Argentine clubs (€18.2 million) (FIFA 2024a; 2022; 2021; 2020; 2019; 2018b; 2018a; 2017). However, the difference observed between Brazil and Argentina in the average age of transfers may reflect different development and integration strategies into the international market. While Brazilian clubs prioritize the early sale of athletes, often driven by immediate financial needs, Argentine clubs tend to retain their top talents for longer, favoring greater exposure in local and continental competitions before exporting. The longer stay in their countries of origin allows Argentine athletes to accumulate competitive experience and develop tactical and physical aspects in familiar environments, with less pressure to adapt immediately. Thus, it is not just a question of "technical maturity," but also of structural, economic, and sporting factors that help Argentine players arrive in European football better prepared to compete at a high level. On the other hand, many Brazilian players are transferred while still in the developmental stage, which can hinder their consolidation in their destination clubs and compromise their full development as elite athletes.

The data show that a key difference lies in the historical "maturation phase" of young talents. In the 1980s and 1990s, Brazilian players could still develop gradually in intermediate European leagues, such as the Dutch Eredivisie. Notable examples include Romário (PSV Eindhoven, 1988–1993), Ronaldo (PSV Eindhoven, 1994–1996), and Vampeta (PSV Eindhoven, 1994–1998) (Transfermarkt 2024). This intermediate step allowed them to adapt to European tactical and physical demands while retaining their Brazilian creativity before reaching the elite clubs. In today's era of globalization and hyper-capitalization, this developmental bridge has become largely obsolete: Brazilian talents are transferred directly to the "Big Five" leagues at increasingly younger ages.

Based on the collected data, it is possible to identify intriguing paradoxes in the paths these countries have taken. While Brazil has established itself as the world's largest exporter of players, with more than 15,000 international transfers between 2016 and 2023, its national team and clubs face a relative decline in elite competitions. On the other hand, Argentina, which ranks second in the export rankings (7,489 transfers in the same period), boasts notable recent achievements, including the 2022 World Cup and three Copa America titles in the last decade. Although Brazil leads in terms of transfer volume and value, the recent success of the Argentine national team in international competitions cannot be taken as unequivocal evidence of superiority in strategies for balancing market and sports performance. On the contrary, the dominance of Brazilian clubs in continental competitions since 2017, combined with the greater economic capacity of national clubs, demonstrates significant structural strength. In the Argentine case, it is plausible to assume that the results obtained – especially the 2022 World Cup title – are more associated with the occurrence of a technically exceptional generation led by Lionel Messi, an exceptional player at the center of world football in the last decade, than with a model of planned talent retention. The phenomenon, therefore, appears less as the result of a sustainable policy model and more as a virtuous cycle anchored in exceptional leadership.

Limitations

This study uses historical and statistical data to assess the relationship between the internationalization of Brazilian football players and the performance of the national team and clubs. While this approach provides valuable insights, it may not fully capture the dynamic and evolving nature of contemporary football. Because the study is based on documentary and correlational evidence, causal claims should be interpreted cautiously.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a complex and non-linear relationship between the internationalization of Brazilian football players and the decline in the performance of Brazil's national teams and clubs in international competitions. The growing presence of Brazilian players in foreign clubs is partially linked to this decline, but not in a deterministic way. The early export of talent may weaken domestic club performance and the national team's tactical cohesion and collective identity, while simultaneously exposing players to higher technical and physical standards.

The moderate positive correlation between football tradition and GDP (but not with GDP per capita PPP) suggests that economic strength supports the rise of football leagues, yet structural factors—such as talent retention policies and the organization of domestic competitions—play a more decisive role than individual economic prosperity. The 16-year gap without a Brazilian Ballon d'Or winner (from Kaká in 2007 to Vinícius Júnior in 2024) further indicates a decline in the production of exceptional talents capable of transcending highly organized collective systems.

This dynamic is not purely economic. As the historical-anthropological analysis developed in this article shows, Brazilian football has moved from a model based on "art" and cultural resistance to one of "product" inserted into asymmetric global production networks. The comparison with Argentina reinforces this reading: while Brazil leads in volume and speed of exports, Argentina's longer retention of talents in the domestic environment appears to favor greater readiness upon arrival in Europe. However, recent Argentine success is also strongly associated with an exceptional generation led by Messi.

Thus, the basic hypothesis (BH) is partially confirmed: internationalization is associated with the decline, but the relationship is mediated by cultural, tactical, and structural factors rather than being a direct cause. Hypotheses SH1, SH2, and SH4 are also partially supported, while SH3 can be considered partially refuted, given the continued presence of Brazilian players in elite clubs. These results open new avenues for longitudinal studies that integrate quantitative data with ethnographic approaches on the lived experience of young players in the global transfer market.

Even in a context in which peripheral countries continue to export talent rather than retain it, Brazil's symbolic status as the 'country of football' remains grounded in a historically unparalleled record of achievement.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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