



# The impact of cultural distance on the migration of professional athletes as high-skilled employees

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## Abstract

Global migration creates both challenges and opportunities for employees and employers. An important issue in international business and human resource management is the integration of employees into a culturally different working industrial environment because focusing on cultural differences, integration, and mitigating culture shock can provide a competitive advantage. Our research examined the global migration involving the Hofstede cultural dimensions in the sports industry, especially in the football transfer market. The paper aims to find a relationship between cultural distance as an expression of cultural differences and international transfers of professional footballers as high-skilled and talented employees. Our study is based on a substantial quantitative examination of processing 34,430 international transfers. Our research question is: What kind of relationship can be detected between cultural distance and the migration of professional footballers? The results of a linear regression model show a significant negative correlation between the number of transfers and cultural distance. However, we believe that the country's economic performance and professional sports standards or quality are essential in addition to the cultural distance. Therefore, as a next step, the analysis involved both factors in getting a more sophisticated result. The results of the multiple regression model confirm the attitude of professional athletes; besides cultural distance, the impact of other factors (economic and/or professional aspects) is also important. Therefore, we recommend that companies pay close attention to their particularly valuable human resources.

**Keywords** Hofstede cultural model · Cultural distance · Individualism-collectivism dimension · Professional football · High-skilled migration

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## 1 Introduction

Already in the 2000s, the arrival of Brazilian football players in the Portuguese football league was typical, and the most talented ones could reach the top European clubs within a few years (Alvito, 2007). According to a recent analysis by Poli et al. (2023), Brazilian footballers are still the most employed worldwide (1289 expatriate players), and Portugal remains the preferred destination (213 players). In the case of global football migration, cultural closeness between countries can be a guiding factor. Global migration creates both challenges and opportunities for workers and employers. A special focus on cultural differences, integration, and mitigating culture shock can provide a competitive advantage, especially in a knowledge-intensive industry like football (Nolasco, 2019). Indeed, the “culture shock” expresses the recognition of fundamentally different cultural differences and the high risk of the resulting inability to adapt in generally (Ward et al., 2005; Winkelman, 1994) and also especially in sport (Glos, 2012; Lovin et al., 2023). The paper provides original perspectives and empirical research related to the migration of professional athletes. The research question is: what kind of relationship can be detected between cultural distance and the migration of professional footballers? The research helps to understand the nature and impact of labour migration in professional football for home- and/or host countries at the professional sports industry level.

Integrating professional footballers in a foreign team and a new country is particularly relevant in an industry where the player is the most important and valuable resource/value creator for companies (clubs). They are not only employees but can also be seen as an investment, as their playing rights are often included in the club’s fixed assets (immaterial assets) (Trequatrini et al., 2012). As in the case of multinational companies in other industries, a football club needs to select the best professionals from the most global pool possible, so they must pay close attention to their integration. Cultural differences and fear of the resulting culture shock can influence the choice of country for professional athletes (Hem et al., 2022). In our research, we have examined the usage of the Hofstede model to a particularly relevant industry (football transfer market). We assume a significant relationship exists between cultural distance and international transfers of professional footballers since they are high-skilled employees and the talent flow is very global in this field. It is true of them that they generate social and cultural change at various scales (King & Skeldon, 2010). Cooperation is especially important in a team sport, as it can impact sporting performance. International cooperation and integration of employees into a culturally different working environment is an important issue in international business and international human resource management in general (Berry, 1998; Deresky, 2014; Jarjabka, 2001; Lewis, 2006; Ronen & Shenkar, 2013; Schwartz & Sortheix, 2018 etc.). One of the most widely accepted models for measuring the national-organisational cultural diversity worldwide is Geert ’Hofstede’s 6D national-organisational world model (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010). ’Hofstede’s national cultural model (after this Hofstede model) examines the relative

differences between nationally based cultures along six dimensions. Hofstede characterized the differences between national cultures by using empirical surveys between 0 and 100, which can be used to detect relative cultural distances between cultures. So, cultural distance is an expression of the degree of cultural differences in all six cultural dimensions (Maderer et al., 2014). The dimension of individualism versus collectivism is the most important in the case of this research, given our focus on team sports. In professional team sports and the European men's football industry in particular, a growing proportion of players are coming from abroad and are moving to other countries at younger and younger ages. The football transfer market is a global one. Poli et al. (2022b) examined 31 European top football championships between 2009 and 2022, and according to their results, 36.1% of players were foreign between 2010 and 2013, and 42.3% were foreign in 2022. The study highlights that 'the intensification of international mobility of players is also illustrated by the evolution of the average age of the first migration, which went down from 21.98 between 2010 and 2013 to a minimum of 21.52 in 2022'' (Poti et al., 2022a, p. 2). The English Premier League is the highest-ranked league in the international rankings of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA, 2023). In the Premier League, most foreign players in the 2023/2024 season (8.4% of all foreigners) came from Brazil (Transfermarkt, 2023). However, Brazilian players often do not directly arrive at UEFA's most successful European (English, Spanish, Italian, French and German) leagues, but most start their European career in Portugal. We give an illustrative example of using the Hofstede model for player transfers between Brazil and Portugal. We present the scores of the six dimensions of the Hofstede model for Brazil, Portugal, and the five strongest European football championship countries (UEFA, 2023).

In Table 1, we can see that the Brazilian score (38) in the Individualism/Collectivism dimension is much closer to the Portuguese score (27) than to the scores of the other five countries (between 51 and 89). In Table 1, we highlight in bold italics the Individualism/Collectivism dimension scores for Brazil and Portugal, which are the focus of the research. The scores in the other dimensions are much more diverse. The common language (Tanaka, 2021) and the small differences in the Individualism/Collectivism dimension make integrating Brazilian players into Portugal

**Table 1** Examples of Hofstede-indexes. Source: Hofstede Insights (2022, January 22)

Country	Power distance	Individualism/collectivism	Masculinity/femininity	Uncertainty avoidance	Long/short-term orientation	Indulgence/restraint
Brazil	69	<b>38</b>	49	76	44	59
Portugal	63	<b>27</b>	31	99	28	33
France	68	71	43	86	63	48
Germany	35	67	66	65	83	40
Italy	50	76	70	75	61	30
Spain	57	51	42	86	48	44
United Kingdom	35	89	66	35	51	69

teams easier. A large-sample analysis of the values of the Individualism/Collectivism dimension, also used by Maderer et al. (2014), is the essence of our research. The "long" distances warn of fundamental cultural differences that can cause culture shock to those trying to fit in. In contrast, relatively "small" distances can mean faster and smoother integration and more likely success. The main reason for this could be the cultural closeness of Brazil and Portugal (Alvito, 2007; Tanaka, 2021).

The substantial quantitative examination of high-skilled employees' global migration is an important novelty of our study. In other industries, a small share of the total international movement and migration of employees is observed. However, in football, expatriation can only happen with the permission of the World Federation (FIFA—Fédération Internationale de Football Association) through the Transfer Matching System (FIFA, 2022). Since illegal employment is not possible this way, the football transfer system can be considered a kind of laboratory for other fields. Football generates high social interest, so many fans follow the movements of their favourite teams and players. Transfermarkt.de is one of the most accepted sites for research related to the football transfer market (Müller et al., 2017). This recorded all foreign transfers in the latest decades, so the transfers that can be found here represent a complete sample of the industry, and we used this as the starting point for our research. Consequently, we can therefore talk about a rarely transparent industry. Based on the previous line of thought, this study aims to test the following hypotheses:

H1. There is a significant negative relationship between labour migration (football players) and cultural distance.

As a first step, we assumed that the number of arriving players in a given country depends on the cultural distance between the sending and receiving countries. This study defines the cultural distance by the most relevant Hofstede dimension, the Individualism-Collectivism index (see the case of the Brazil–Portugal example in the Introduction).

H2. Economic and professional factors influence the relationship between labour migration and cultural distance.

As the former relationship cannot be investigated in itself, other potential factors were taken into account. Besides the impact of cultural distance, the two most relevant features were also examined. We assume that professional and economic factors impact employees' (professional football players) decision. Consequently, the GDP per capita and the FIFA World Ranking position of the given countries were also used in the analyses (see details in the methodology and results chapters).

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 The importance of culture and the impact of cultural distance

Culture is the determinative factor of our individual, group, and social behaviour (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), often identified as "software of the mind", which is

acquired during the process of our socialisation (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2008). Personality is developed like this at an individual level; however, if a pattern of thinking can be generalised concerning a social group or organisation, we can speak about a subculture and an organisational culture in a business sense (Berry, 1998). Different social and organisational problems and tasks are handled and managed differently based on diverse cultural conditioning since culture is nothing other than how groups solve their problems (Schein, 1985). The smaller part of the culture can be recognised and perceived easily (visible level); however, it is difficult to interpret the bigger part (invisible or deep culture level) (Schein, 2004; Trompenaars, 1993). This is why the iceberg model was created as a metaphor for perceiving culture (Daft, 1992). To serve a better understanding and measurement of national and organisational behaviour, several different criteria can be applied (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Robbins, 1993; Schwartz & Sortheix, 2018).

The world models of organisational culture based on national cultures can also be used to distinguish cultural clusters with the help of the above criteria (Hofstede et al., 2010; House et al., 2004; Lewis, 2006; Ronen & Shenkar, 2013; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). One of the biggest challenges of our globalised world is how organisations can operate successfully in a multicultural/multinational environment. Holt and Wigginton (2002) state that success is based on the competence of cultural sensibility, which is due to understanding and empathy and should be developed first in their own organisational culture. The competence of cultural sensibility can adapt organisations to environmental changes (Chandler et al., 2017). The bigger the cultural diversity between the members of an organisation or a company and the social environment or country, the bigger the challenge for the management to bridge it (Borgulya & Vető, 2014). With the help of their flexible behaviour organisations can adapt to their special cultural environment and manage cultural diversities instead of using confrontational and, thus, inefficient methods (Deresky, 2014).

## 2.2 The measurement of cultural distance: the Hofstede's 6D model

Geert Hofstede composed a questionnaire methodology used worldwide to identify the elements of norm systems existing in parallel both in national and organisational cultures and to create clusters of national cultures (Hofstede, 1980). He enlarged the circle of countries participating in the research and the number of samples. He developed his original model with four dimensions (Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity-Feminity, and Individualism-Collectivism indexes) and extended it to five (Long Term Orientation index) (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Finally, a model of six dimensions (Indulgence vs. Restraint index) was developed in the 2000s (Hofstede et al., 2010), so the number of countries mapped in the 6D model can be considered the highest compared to similar world models.

As the subject of our research is the most famous team sport, football, we have obviously chosen the cultural dimension of Individualism–Collectivism as a tool among Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Additionally, this is the best-known and best-validated dimension of national culture (Minkov & Kaasa, 2022). Indeed, in team sports, success is based on a common mindset and cooperation across national

cultures, whose internal cohesion is assumed to be facilitated by cultural similarity and interoperability and may be at risk due to the large-scale difference, cultural gap. Triandis (1995), for example, identifies the dimension of Individualism–Collectivism as the only appropriate factor in typologising cultures. The Individualism–Collectivism (IND) characteristics measure how much a society and its organisations accept individual and group activities. This cultural dimension is present in almost all world models (e.g., House et al., (GLOBE), 2004; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, etc.), and this research area has been addressed by a large number of researchers, including Kim et al. (1994), Schwartz (1994), Triandis (1995) and Romani et al. (1988).

This factor measures the extent to which members of society and a (football) team accept individual and group action. Thus, this characteristic functions as a measure of the degree of embeddedness of the individual in the community, both at the societal and organisational level. We speak of individualism when members of a society describe themselves as individual actors. This also implies loose, contingent forms of social relations, in which, for example, the concept of family is interpreted in the narrow sense of the word. At the same time, collectivism, at the other end of the interpretative axis, is the opposite of these basic characteristics. Chen et al. (1998), based on the work of Triandis (1995), defined the main attributes of this characteristic, such as the image of oneself, the connection to individual or group goals, the acceptance of social and group norms, the adaptation to them, and finally the emphasis on task versus relationship orientation in the individual's behaviour in the group.

The system of global cultural typology outlined by Hofstede can be criticised from several points, for example, from the side of Chinese meaning of the dimensions of Hofstede (Fang, 2003), or the dynamic view of culture, and the mono-deterministic approach (McSweeney, 2009, 2013). In their joint work, Harzing and Hofstede (1996) have summarised several criticism points in the literature. On the methodological side, it was raised that the questionnaire survey method used was only partially suitable for measuring cultural differences, as the conditions under which the data were collected could bias the responses (Romani et al., 1988). It was also questioned how well the research instrument, originally designed to map cultural differences in the subsidiaries of an international company, could be used for general research. However, Schwartz (1994) asks the question: can national culture be captured through the responses of individuals? Looking at the issue from another side, Smith (1996) believes that knowledge of culture does not allow us to infer individual behaviour.

In the context of the culture–country correspondence problem, it is questionable whether countries are an accurate unit of analysis for studying cultures, given the existence of subcultures and the differences in country borders and cultural boundaries. In the context of the problem of the dynamics of cultural change, it may be relevant that the data collected since the 1960s, which goes back several decades, may be outdated, so the cultural values of each dimension need to be updated periodically. Therefore, the model operators update, complete, and confirm the values of countries annually based on the results of new surveys (Geert Hofstede, 2023; Hofstede Insights, 2023).

Finally, the number and importance of the cultural dimensions have also been questioned despite their statistical independence, as other world models have created partially different categories of analysis. Nevertheless, the dataset of this world model is acknowledged to be the largest and involving the largest number of countries compared to other models. Consequently, we applied it in our research in the international football business, which is also globally extensive.

### 3 Literature review

#### 3.1 The application of 'Hofstede's cultural dimensions in professional football

Concerning the aim of our study, the literature review focuses on previous research on the relationship between cultural distances and player migration. We first review the literature related to culture and the application of the Hofstede model in sports to support the usage of the model (organisational level). In his article, Hofstede (1984) highlights the importance of cultural dimensions in management because management is a socio-technical activity that involves dealing with people (human side) and non-human resources (technical side). As an example of the focus on the human side, Hofstede highlighted the management of football clubs.

The importance of culture in sport management research is fundamental (Girginov, 2010), and different cultures have dominant value orientations. The paper by Girginov et al. (2006) investigates the role of sports 'managers' cultural orientations in management interpretation. The cultural profiles of 15 sports managers from 7 countries were studied, using the Hofstede model, among other things. They suggest that developing cross-cultural competencies and learning from each other can improve the success of a sports organisation.

Maderer et al. (2014) investigated the impact of cultural diversity on team performance in the five major European football leagues. The study could not confirm that collectivism has a positive effect on team success and could not confirm the impact of the intercultural experience of coaches on the relationship between cultural distance and team success. However, their literature review found both a positive significant and a non-significant effect that cultural closeness within a team positively influences performance. They point out that multicultural teams have previously been investigated primarily because of racism and discrimination issues (Szymanski, 2000) and found less research related to performance. In the German Bundesliga, a significant positive relationship (e.g., Andresen & Altmann, 2006) and no significant impact (e.g., Fritz, 2006) have been found between cultural diversity and sporting success. Bullough and Coleman (2019) examined player development in six prominent European championships through the situation of home-grown players. They did not focus on players of different nationalities but mentioned the importance of cultural differences in club behaviour (based on Hofstede, 1984).

Jagielski and Zhang (2021) showed an empirical relationship between players based on cultural differences. Their research was conducted in a single country, the Polish first-division championship. Using data from 2009 to 2020, they examined how the number of foreign coaches and players from each country evolved and how



much the distance from Polish cultural values explains this. Using the Hofstede dimensions, they found that clubs often choose coaches and players from the same country and that cultural distance is a significant factor. Using the Hofstede dimensions, Foroughi et al. (2018) investigated the frequency of replacement of national team coaches based on cultural background. Their results show that the change of coaches is lower in countries with similar cultural values. The article, which analyses results from 90 countries, confirms the usability of Hofstede's cultural dimensions to professional football.

Peeters et al. (2019), analysing managerial migration, investigated how international managerial know-how flows with coaches. According to their results, hiring a foreign manager hailing from a "high know-how" country benefits the host country's performance. 'Larger cultural distance between the migrant manager and destination country reduces the effectiveness of learning-by-hiring, but this effect is moderated by the migrant manager's prior international experience' (Peeters et al., 2019, p 494.). Smith (2019) also looked at the role of talented foreign coaches coming into English football. Based on semi-structured interviews, the results show that British coaches are averse to overseas professionals.

On the one hand, they accept their innovative practices, but on the other, they resist their arrival. Zaytseva and Polischuk (2015) analysed the effect of country-level social capital on national football team success. The role of national cooperative culture positively affects the success of national football teams. They used the Hofstede Individualism-Collectivism dimension to measure national social capital.

Maderer et al. (2014) list three important reasons why football is a good model for research related to cultural distance, compared to other industries: (1) professional clubs have very detailed public data on players and coaches; (2) much more data is available on player performance and nationality than in other fields; (3) football players are with a club for 1–6 years, so it is possible to take into account the time effect. Several studies have applied the Hofstede cultural model to professional football, but the analysis of the relationship between player migration and cultural distance on a large database has not yet been done.

### **3.2 The challenges of professional football players' transfer abroad and the way management can deal with them**

After introducing the Hofstede model, which is often used in professional sports, we focus on industry-specific (economic and sports professional) reasons for the international migration of professional athletes as high-skilled employees (athlete level). Therefore, in this section of our literature review, we have examined the culture shock caused by cultural distance in the case of professional sports. Numerous findings on the international mobility of professional football players can be found in reports from the International Centre for Sports Studies (CIES). According to CIES research (Poli et al., 2022a), in the 2021 autumn season, the Italian first league recorded the highest number of minutes played by foreigners (64.0%), followed by the English Premier League (59.5%) and Major League Soccer in the United States (58.8%). The analysis of 7617 players from 286 clubs shows that globally, Argentina



(246) provided the most foreign players, followed by Brazil (240), France (172), Uruguay (140), and Columbia (112). According to the CIES (Poli et al., 2021) report (145 leagues from 96 national associations worldwide), the countries with the highest number of foreign players were England (771), Italy (695), Spain (626), Turkey (626), and the USA (531). The CIES (Poli et al., 2021) map shows the most important international routes. These include geographical proximity: from Argentina to Chile (111 people), from England to Scotland (120) and Wales (96), from Belgium to the Netherlands (78), and so on. Cultural similarities may be behind the outstanding cross-continental trips: for example, from Brazil to Portugal (236 people) or from Argentina to Spain (84).

Dolles and Söderman (2005) examined the internationalisation of the Japanese league from an international business perspective. In addition to foreign capital and markets, human resources are especially important—the knowledge of foreign coaches, players, and staff. The increasing number of international transfers means many challenges: culture shock, adaptation, etc. Several studies have examined the issue of cultural adaptation from the players' perspective. The following are examples from countries and continents with very different cultural backgrounds. Novia and Anshari (2020) analyse the communication challenges, culture shock, and cultural adaptation of Brazilian, Argentinian, and Filipino football players who play for an Indonesian club. The methodology of their research was qualitative, using in-depth interviews. Their results show that there are five stages in a player's adaptation: learning the language of the host country, studying the host 'country's culture, interacting with the host country's people, trying to marry, and proposing themselves as a citizen.

Hem et al. (2022) analysed specifically the challenges faced by young footballers in English football academies. These young players have come to another country specifically for the higher sports professional reasons. In their qualitative research, they analysed the performance of 8 young Norwegian talents (16–18 years old) in English academies. The main challenges identified were very high-performance expectations and culture shock. The latter not only in a sporting sense but also at a social and emotional level. In their view, providing a society/community at a young age may be even more pronounced. Weedon (2012) also investigated the acculturation process of foreign youth arriving at English football academies, conducting interviews with players and academy staff with suggestions similar to those of Hem et al. (2022). In their study, Söderlund and Stambulova (2021) used qualitative methodology to investigate the foreign transfer of three Swedish footballers. When a player moves abroad, he must rebuild his social network, both within the team and in the host country. They divide adaptation into three phases: (1) pre-transition, when the football player is prepared, and contacts are established; (2) arriving at the host environment, when the player focuses on football, as he must maximise his sporting performance; (3) social-cultural adaptation, when the players also focus on civil integration, to be satisfied in the long term in their new home. Lago et al. (2023) analysed the new signings in the English, Italian, Spanish, German, and French first divisions for the 2021–2022 season. Their results show no significant effect of 'players' ethnic background on performance. However, foreign players do better in a host

country the younger they are. In all of the above cases, the cultural challenges were chosen because of a wish to join a stronger football league (for sporting reasons).

Acheampong (2021) explores the potential of an international career for talented African footballers through a personal story. They face many successes and challenges, but often, there is no other option for the player to break out of a difficult social situation. Onwumehili (2014), in his study on African football, refers to Hofstede and mentions that Nigerian culture ranked high on power distance, demonstrating that people expect inequality and largely accept it. Because of this, hierarchy and the status quo are strong in Nigerian football. In their qualitative research, Onwumehili and Akpan (2021) explored the reasons for migrating African players. The findings show six major reasons why players migrate (payment, playing time, club invitations, relationships, management disruptions, seeking bigger clubs) and four drawbacks (refusal of transfer requests, invitation deception, separation from family, and other regrets) from migration. In the case of African players, there are clear economic and sporting reasons. The relevance of our study is demonstrated by the fact that there have been quality publications not only on men's football on the pitch but also on futsal (Marques et al., 2022), women's football (Roberts & Rood, 2021), and referees (Webb et al., 2016).

Our summary shows that professional athletes strongly fear culture shocks caused by cultural distance. In testing our second hypothesis, we included sports and economic variables accordingly. Overall, we can conclude that most of the research on this topic has been qualitative. Quantitative research (Maderer et al., 2014) focuses on the international team's performance or the 'coach's nationality. Our research can fill a gap in the literature by using a large international sample and a quantitative method to investigate the significance of cultural differences in professional football.

## 4 Data and methodology

### 4.1 Hofstede's indicator and football player transfers

Since the current paper aims to analyse the relationship between cultural distance and the number of migrants, as an initial step, we have investigated the two most relevant variables based on the data of the period between 2000 and 2022; a measure that represents cultural distances among countries and the number of football transfers into a given league or country.

Similar to the study of Maderer et al. (2014), which investigated the relationship between cultural diversity and sporting success, the Individualism-Collectivism index is chosen to measure the cultural distance since we also assume it is the most appropriate index for team sports athletes. Hofstede describes the individualism dimension in the following way: 'Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after their immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout 'people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning

loyalty’ (Hofstede et al., 2010: 225). In the theoretical background of the manuscript, we have also justified the use of the Individualism-Collectivism index in more detail.

The dataset originally includes 84,307 worldwide football player transfers between 2000 and 2022. Beugelsdijk et al. (2015) show that the relative cultural distance between country pairs is stable over multiple decades. Hence, we assume it is constant over the sample period. Considering the impact of cultural distances, we believe that the most relevant move is the first migration; thus, only the first transfers were evaluated for all players. As the migration regarding athletes does not depend on the type of transaction, free-, loan- and purchasing transfers were also considered. Since the Hofstede index is currently available for 122 (originally 119, but we’ve included the United Kingdom countries separately) countries (Hofstede Insights, 2023), the final dataset contains the transfers among these countries with at least 100 transfers (leaving from the given country); therefore, in sum, 34,430 transfers (108 countries) were analysed. Table 2 represents the summary statistics of the Individualism-Collectivism indicator and the number of transfers.

The maximum number of arrival players refers to Russia, while only one player transferred to Jamaica, Burkina Faso, and Nepal in the period examined. The countries involved had an average of 402 transactions (purchasing, loan, or free transfers) over the 23 years. About the index, it is worth mentioning that the highest value refers to the United States (91), while Guatemala and Ecuador have the lowest Individualism-Collectivism indicators. Table 3 shows the countries with the highest and lowest numbers of arrival transfers and Hofstede indicator values.

Unsurprisingly, regarding the ‘athletes’ migration, most players arrive in Europe, while African countries have the least arriving players. By considering the cultural characteristics, a similar feature can be seen; besides European countries (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Hungary, and the Netherlands), the United States, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand have the highest Individualism-Collectivism indicators. In contrast, countries mostly from South America have the lowest indices.

**Table 2** Summary statistics of the variables of interest

Descriptive statistics	Individualism- collectivism	Transfers (arrive)
Mean	39.2	402.1
Standard error	2.1	57.2
Median	31.5	220.5
Mode	20.0	1.0
Standard deviation	22.7	594.2
Range	85.0	3403.0
Minimum	6.0	1.0
Maximum	91.0	3404.0
Number of countries	122.0	108.0

**Table 3** Countries examined with the most- and least indicator values and transfers. Source: Based on dataset of Geert Hofstede (2022, January 22) and Hofstede Insights (2022, January 22)

Individualism-collectivism			Incoming players		
Rank	Country	Index	Rank	Country	No. of transfers
1	United States	91	1	Russia	3404
2	Australia	90	2	England	2974
3	England*	89	3	Germany	2634
4	Northern Ireland*	89	4	Uruguay	2252
5	Scotland*	89	5	Czech Republic	1631
6	Wales*	89	6	Italy	1517
7	Canada	80	7	Algeria	1343
8	Hungary	80	8	Portugal	1297
9	Netherlands	80	9	Spain	1213
10	New Zealand	79	10	Belgium	1091
...	...	...	...	...	...
113	Fiji	14	99	Ghana	7
114	Indonesia	14	100	Jordan	7
115	Pakistan	14	101	Tanzania	6
116	Colombia	13	102	Fiji	3
117	Paraguay	12	103	Mozambique	3
118	Venezuela	12	104	Kenya	2
119	Panama	11	105	Puerto Rico	2
120	Bolivia	10	106	Burkina Faso	1
121	Ecuador	8	107	Jamaica	1
122	Guatemala	6	108	Nepal	1

\*Countries represent the value of the United Kingdom in the Hofstede model

## 4.2 Linear regression model of 'athletes' migration on cultural distance

After reviewing the variables and countries first analysed, this section aims to test the two previously formulated hypotheses based on the relationship between the migration of employees (football players) and the cultural distance of the sending and receiving countries.

To measure the cultural distance, we calculated the difference of the Individualism-Collectivism indices in the case of the receiving and sending countries. For instance, if a player arrives from England (89) to the United States (91), the cultural distance is two. Regarding the aim of the study, the 'difference's sign is irrelevant; thus, the absolute value of cultural distance has been considered. To test H1, as an initial step, the relationship was investigated in itself; consequently, a simple linear regression was run, where the dependent variable is the number of incoming transfers, while the regressor is the cultural distance. Then, as a final model, to test H2, a multiple linear regression was applied by including other relevant factors as regressors. The next section shows the estimation and result of the regression models.

## 5 Results

As we have mentioned previously, Table 4 shows the results of the simple linear regression model of incoming transfers.

It can be seen that the results confirm H1 since the parameter related to the regressor is significant at the 1% significance level. In addition, the negative parameter of the regressor suggests that the greater the cultural distance, the fewer employees (players) arrive in a given country. This latter fact can be interpreted as football players (employees) not preferring to face culture shock; in contrast, they try to avoid it by selecting a similar country regarding the cultural aspects. However, to get a more sophisticated result, it is worth considering other potential factors. To investigate H2, the initial model was extended by economic and professional sports measures.

### 5.1 Multiple regression of athletes' migration by controlling for the economic and professional factors

After examining the relationship, it is also worth considering other factors that may influence the previous results. Presumably, when an employee (athlete) has decided to change country, the 'country's economic performance and sports professional standards or quality are essential in addition to the cultural distance. Therefore, the analysis involved both factors in getting a more realistic result. The economic performance is represented by GDP per capita, while the FIFA World Ranking position measures the 'country's professional quality. Similarly to the cultural distance, the economic and professional distance is measured by the difference between the sending and receiving countries.

To see the "unbiased" relationship between the transfers and cultural distance, we have extended the previous regression by controlling for the confounding variables (economic and professional distances). Table 5 presents the estimation results of the multiple linear regression model, which considers the impact of cultural distance and other relevant factors that may influence the number of athletes migrating.

It can be seen that the estimation results confirm H2 since, besides the parameter related to cultural distance, control variables are also statistically significant. However, it is also worth mentioning that, when controlling for confounding factors, the parameter of cultural distance hasn't changed a lot.

**Table 4** The impact of cultural distance on 'athletes' migration

Dependent variable: no. of incoming transfers	
Cultural distance	– 0.249*** (0.056)
Constant	20.375*** (1.789)
R-squared	0.007
Adjusted R-squared	0.006
No. of observations	3042

Standard errors are reported in parentheses, and \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* indicates significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively

**Table 5** Estimation results of multiple linear regression model

Dependent variable: no. of incoming transfers	
Cultural distance (absolute value)	−0.145** (0.062)
Control variables	
Economic distance	0.215*** (0.055)
Professional distance	−0.111*** (0.028)
Constant	27.935*** (2.306)
R-squared	0.016
Adjusted R-squared	0.015
No. of observations	3042

Standard errors are reported in parentheses, and \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* indicates significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

Football as a global business area is an active field of international movement, cultural uniqueness, and interactions. However, the 6D model of Hofstede can be criticised from several points (see in the theoretical background). However, the Individualism-Collectivism dimension of this model is fit for analysis of the territory of the sport, mainly team sport. Our analysis of a full sample of professional football players (34,430 worldwide transfers between 2020 and 2022) shows a significant negative relationship between labour migration and cultural distance (H1). Furthermore, we have confirmed a significant effect of industry-specific (economic and sports professional) variables (H2). These results suggest that players fear cultural distance. For future quantitative and qualitative research, we recommend including these aspects as well. Previous research (Novia & Anshari 2020; Söderlund & Stambulova 2021; Weedon, 2012) did not focus on fears related to the change of country but on the consequences of culture shock. Still, our point of view needs to find specific variables of every other business area. Our research included economic and sport-specific control variables in the case of football.

Hofstede's world-famous model has been used in many economic approaches to explain economic phenomena based on cultural uniqueness. We have added a special field of sport to this multifaceted aspect, which may offer further exciting analysis opportunities in the future. While previous quantitative research (Andresen & Altmann, 2006; Bullough & Coleman, 2019; Fritz, 2006; Maderer et al., 2014) on the topic has investigated the relationship between cultural distance and performance in the case of a few leagues, we have shown significant results between footballers' mobility and cultural distance over a long time series and in a large sample. We used Hofstede's model for football leagues in 108 countries, which is significantly more than previous quantitative research (five leagues in Maderer et al. (2014), six leagues in Bullough and Coleman (2019)). There was a study covering 90 countries related to coaches (Foroughi et al. (2018), but the number of subjects was much lower (as there is one coach per club). Globalisation is also affecting football, which can be observed in other industries. More and more data and information are becoming available, and internet broadcasting is reducing the distance—including cultural

distance. Nowadays, talents can play in more and more foreign leagues and at younger and younger ages (Poli et al., 2022b). For a professional athlete, economic and sporting aspects may take similar priority as cultural ones. If a better sporting and/or economic location is available, cultural distance may become less of a factor in the decision. In this case, the clubs should focus more on integration into the team and the country. This attention is in line with the resources presented in the literature review on the identification and management of culture shocks (among others, Novia & Anshari 2020; Hem et al., 2022; Weedon, 2012).

The study also has management implications for clubs and agents. We propose that transfers should also take cultural distance into account. A particular emphasis should be placed on integrating players into a new club and host country. We recommend supporting expatriates from different cultural backgrounds. If a football club needs better team performance in the short term, it may be more beneficial to sign players from a closer cultural distance or to emphasize integrating new players. A transfer is always made in the hope of team success. Culturally, the assumption behind this is that those who can fit in more easily and quickly can perform well faster, contributing to team success. Any club that plans to sell its players abroad should focus on player development. Players should be able to manage culture shock (Acheampong, 2021; Roberts & Rood, 2021), be open to other cultures, and receive skills training (foreign language, integration, etc.). Agents should also pay attention to emotional/cultural factors.

The results of our research can also be useful for other industries. In particular, international companies in knowledge-intensive industries employ high-skilled workers from a wide cultural distance in close teamwork. As in the case of professional football players, in the case of other industries, the cultural distance can be overtaken by the strategic goal of an international company and the financial and professional challenge of its employees. We recommend that companies pay close attention to their particularly valuable human resources. When outsourcing to a distant culture, consider the distance between cultural dimensions. And when working in international teams, focus specifically on the Individualism-Collectivism dimension. Professional footballers often have to join their new club in a matter of days, so clubs can accumulate considerable knowledge about integrating new players from other cultures (both successfully and unsuccessfully).

As well as practical results, this represents an opportunity for future research. Further research opportunities identified the inclusion of additional Hofstede dimensions and the analysis of regionality and change over time. There are also future research opportunities to expand on economic and sports professional variables such as club revenue data, club rivalries, etc. Of course, the dataset can also be tested with the interaction of the dimensions, or we can compare it with other world models, such as the World Values Survey (Minkov & Kaasa, 2022), based on which new correlations can be revealed. We can also use the qualitative interview method to support our quantitative results. Besides professional sports, we believe results can be generalised in other industries or may provide an opportunity to show similarities or differences among the fields. Future research could be to study the migration of coaches (Peeters et al., 2019; Smith, 2019) or to analyse women's football (Roberts & Rood, 2021) in more detail and compare it with men's football.



Nevertheless, the limitations of the paper are also worth mentioning. On the one hand, countries with fewer transfers were dropped from the analysis; thus, including more countries may improve the research. On the other hand, since the Hofstede index is currently available for 122 countries, the extension of countries may also increase the value of the study.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organisation or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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