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The Role of Playing Positions in the Rise to Captainship in Male Football Teams: Communication Perspective

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between players' on-field positions and their emergence as team captains in elite national men's football teams, with the specific objectives to (1) identify the dominant playing positions of captains among top FIFA-ranked male national teams, (2) explore cross-continental variation in captaincy appointments by position, and (3) detect recurrent positional trends in national-team captain selection; anchored on Symbolic Interactionism and Leadership Communication Theory, the research used a descriptive comparative design and quantitative content analysis of archival team lists for the top five FIFA-ranked men's teams per continent for September 18, 2025, coding captains as goalkeepers, defenders, midfielders, or forwards. The principal findings indicate that forwards constitute the plurality of captains (47%), defenders account for 27%, midfielders 20%, and goalkeepers 6%; UEFA and CONMEBOL show strong forward prevalence while CAF and parts of AFC display greater defender representation, and recurrently forwards occupy symbolic leadership roles across regions. The researchers concluded that captaincy is frequently a symbolic appointment shaped by cultural narratives, institutional traditions and status hierarchies rather than a straightforward marker of communicative or tactical leadership capacity. Consequently, the researchers recommended that national federations institutionalise structured leadership-assessment protocols prioritizing communicative competence, that continental confederations develop culturally sensitive leadership frameworks to align selection with local identities and transparency, and that FIFA promote hybrid captaincy models combining symbolic figureheads with empowered vice-captains or leadership councils.

Keywords: Captainship, Communication, Football Teams, Playing Position



Introduction

Football, often described as the world's most popular sport, is a social and communicative performance as much as it is a contest of skill and tactics. Central to the organisation of any football team is the figure of the captain, the player formally entrusted with the armband and the symbolic weight it carries. The captain's role is not limited to ceremonial functions; it extends to on-field communication, coordination, and the representation of team identity. In national teams, captaincy is often a position of remarkable significance, carrying not just sporting expectations but also layers of cultural and national symbolism (Giulianotti, 2018). The process by which a player rises to this role, however, is shaped by multiple factors.

Each position on the football field entails distinctive communicative demands, tactical responsibilities, and interactional visibility. The goalkeeper, positioned at the rear of the formation, occupies a vantage point that allows a panoramic view of the pitch. From this position, the player is required to issue instructions, organise the defensive line, and react quickly to evolving match situations. The goalkeeper's communicative exchanges are often intense, functional, and continuous, especially during defensive phases of play (Wilson, 2019). This vantage point situates the goalkeeper within a unique communicative framework, making their positional role one that is closely tied to verbal and gestural exchanges with teammates. How this translates into leadership trajectories within teams remains a subject worthy of systematic investigation.

The defensive line, particularly central defenders, operates at the strategic intersection of protection and build-up play. Defenders are tasked with reading the opponent's attacking moves, maintaining shape, intercepting plays, and supporting ball circulation. Their position demands tactical discipline and frequent communication with both the goalkeeper and midfield players. They often engage in situational decision-making that affects team structure, tempo, and transitions (Lago-Peñas & Gómez, 2014). This role places defenders in close proximity to moments that require collective adjustment and structured verbal direction. The communicative work of defenders is embedded within the game's rhythm, though how this may relate to leadership recognition is not predetermined.

Midfielders, traditionally regarded as the engine room of football, function at the heart of tactical execution. Their task involves linking defense and attack, dictating pace, initiating offensive plays, and providing defensive cover when needed. Because they operate in a zone that demands constant awareness of teammates and opponents alike, midfielders frequently engage in dialogue, both verbal and non-verbal, with virtually every segment of the team (Carling, 2015). Their communicative networks are extensive, touching multiple positional lines during the match. This structural embeddedness within the team's flow of play makes midfielders integral to on-field coordination, although the implications of this for pathways to leadership remain open to empirical determination rather than assumption.

Forwards, often the most visible figures in a team, occupy positions oriented toward finishing and offensive play. Their primary task is to convert chances into goals, apply pressure on defenders, and influence the tempo of attack. While their position involves high levels of movement, anticipation, and tactical responsiveness, the forward's communicative engagements tend to be oriented toward specific moments in the attacking phase (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Their role is crucial to a team's performance, and their visibility to spectators and media is often disproportionately high. However, their positional communicative networks differ significantly from those of goalkeepers, defenders, or midfielders, particularly in the density and breadth of on-field exchanges.

These positional distinctions highlight how communication is distributed unevenly across the field. Some positions are structurally placed to observe, organise, or initiate collective movement, while others are



situated to execute specific tactical roles. This structural arrangement gives each position a distinctive communicative architecture that may influence how leadership is perceived, enacted, or recognised within teams (Okhueleigbe, 2019). Yet, it would be premature to attribute leadership potential to any single role without rigorous comparative examination. The communicative attributes of positions do not automatically translate into leadership status; rather, they could, perhaps, form part of a broader ecology in which captaincy emerges through multiple interacting factors, including culture, tactics, and institutional norms (Northouse, 2018).

Football's increasing tactical sophistication further deepens the communicative demands placed on different positions. Modern formations and styles of play require more coordinated communication than ever before, with strategic adjustments occurring constantly during matches (Sarmiento et al., 2018). As tactical systems evolve, so do the communicative roles embedded within each position. A goalkeeper in a high-pressing team, for instance, may function almost as an auxiliary defender, while a deep-lying midfielder may serve as a tactical pivot in orchestrating transitions. Such changes make any straightforward assumptions about leadership trajectories from positional roles increasingly inadequate. Only systematic, comparative analysis can clarify how positional communication aligns with captaincy appointments across football cultures.

Globalisation has further complicated these dynamics by diffusing tactical philosophies and leadership expectations across continents. Coaching strategies developed in one region are rapidly adopted elsewhere, sometimes blending with local cultural expectations to produce hybrid models of leadership. National teams now embody both tactical and symbolic elements that transcend borders (Hassan, 2017). In this transnational context, positional roles may carry similar tactical functions but different symbolic or leadership implications depending on the cultural and institutional frameworks that surround the game.

Football captaincy remains one of the most enviable, visible and symbolically loaded leadership roles in global sport, yet the factors that shape how players rise to this position are often assumed rather than empirically examined. While seniority, skill level, and personal charisma are frequently discussed, the influence of a player's *on-field position* as a communicative and tactical determinant remains underexplored. Each position—goalkeeper, defender, midfielder, or forward, carries distinct tactical responsibilities and communicative demands, which may influence how leadership is enacted and perceived within teams. However, current literature is largely anecdotal and context-specific, lacking systematic, cross-continental analysis that connects positional functions to captaincy appointments. Without such evidence, discussions about leadership emergence in football risk being built on conjecture rather than data. This gap emphasizes the need for a structured, comparative investigation into how playing positions may shape pathways to captaincy in elite national teams across continents.

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between soccer players' on-field positions and their emergence as team captains in elite national teams across different continents. The specific objectives were to:

1. search for the dominant playing positions of captains in the top FIFA-ranked male national teams across the footballing world,
2. explore cross-continental variations in captaincy appointments based on playing positions;
3. identify positional trends, if any, that are recurrent in the selection of national team captains.



Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two key communication theories: Symbolic Interactionism and Leadership Communication Theory. Symbolic Interactionism, advanced by Mead (1934), emphasizes that meaning is created and negotiated through social interaction. Within a football team, each playing position is not only tactical but also symbolic, players enact roles that carry communicative weight, shaping how they are perceived by teammates, coaches, and spectators. The goalkeeper, for example, often bears control and surveillance; defenders signify stability; midfielders, coordination and linkage; and forwards, aggression and ambition. These position-linked meanings can influence how leadership is recognized and conferred within the team structure. Complementing this is Leadership Communication Theory, which views leadership as emerging from communicative competence, influence, and interaction rather than mere formal authority (Hackman & Johnson, 2018). In team sports, leaders are often those who can effectively communicate strategy, motivate peers, and mediate pressure during critical moments. Integrating these two theories provides a lens through which to analyze how positional functions and their communicative symbolism may shape the trajectory to captaincy across elite national teams.

Method

This study adopted a descriptive and comparative research design, employing a quantitative content analysis of team data across the six FIFA-recognised continents. The focus was on the top five FIFA-ranked male national teams per continent over a defined 15-year period (2010–2025). Archival records, official team lists, and verified match reports will be analysed to determine the playing positions of captains during this period. Data were categorized according to four primary field positions: goalkeeper, defender, midfielder, and forward. Cross-tabulation and trend analysis was used to identify positional patterns and variations across continents.

Findings

Table 1: Comprehensive Matrix of Highest Ranked FIFA Men's Teams by Confederation (September 18, 2025)

Region (Confederation)	Global Rank	Country	Team Captain	Captain's Position
UEFA	1	Spain	Álvaro Morata	Forward
UEFA	2	France	Kylian Mbappé	Forward
UEFA	4	England	Harry Kane	Forward
UEFA	5	Portugal	Cristiano Ronaldo	Forward
UEFA	7	Netherlands	Virgil van Dijk	Defender
CONMEBOL	3	Argentina	Lionel Messi	Forward
CONMEBOL	6	Brazil	Marquinhos	Defender
CONMEBOL	13	Colombia	James Rodríguez	Attacking Midfielder
CONMEBOL	15	Uruguay	José Giménez	Defender
CONMEBOL	24	Ecuador	Enner Valencia	Forward



CAF	11	Morocco	RomainSaïss	Defender
CAF	18	Senegal	KalidouKoulibaly	Defender
CAF	35	Egypt	Mohamed Salah	Forward / Winger
CAF	38	Algeria	RiyadMahrez	Forward / Winger
CAF	44	Côte d'Ivoire	Serge Aurier	Defender
Concacaf	14	Mexico	Edson Álvarez	Defensive Midfielder
Concacaf	16	United States	Tyler Adams	Defensive Midfielder
Concacaf	26	Canada	Alphonso Davies	Left Back / Winger
Concacaf	33	Panama	Aníbal Godoy	Midfielder
Concacaf	40	Costa Rica	KeylorNavas	Goalkeeper
AFC	19	Japan	Wataru Endo	Defensive Midfielder
AFC	21	Iran	EhsanHajsafi	Left Back / Midfielder
AFC	23	South Korea	Son Heung-min	Forward / Winger
AFC	25	Australia	Mathew Ryan	Goalkeeper
AFC	45	Qatar	Hassan Al-Haydos	Forward / Winger
OFC	\$\sim\$103	New Zealand	Chris Wood	Centre-Forward
OFC	148	Solomon Islands	JosesNawo	Forward
OFC	150	New Caledonia	JoëlDaké	Midfielder
OFC	152	Fiji	Roy Krishna	Forward
OFC	156	Tahiti	TeaonuiTehau	Forward

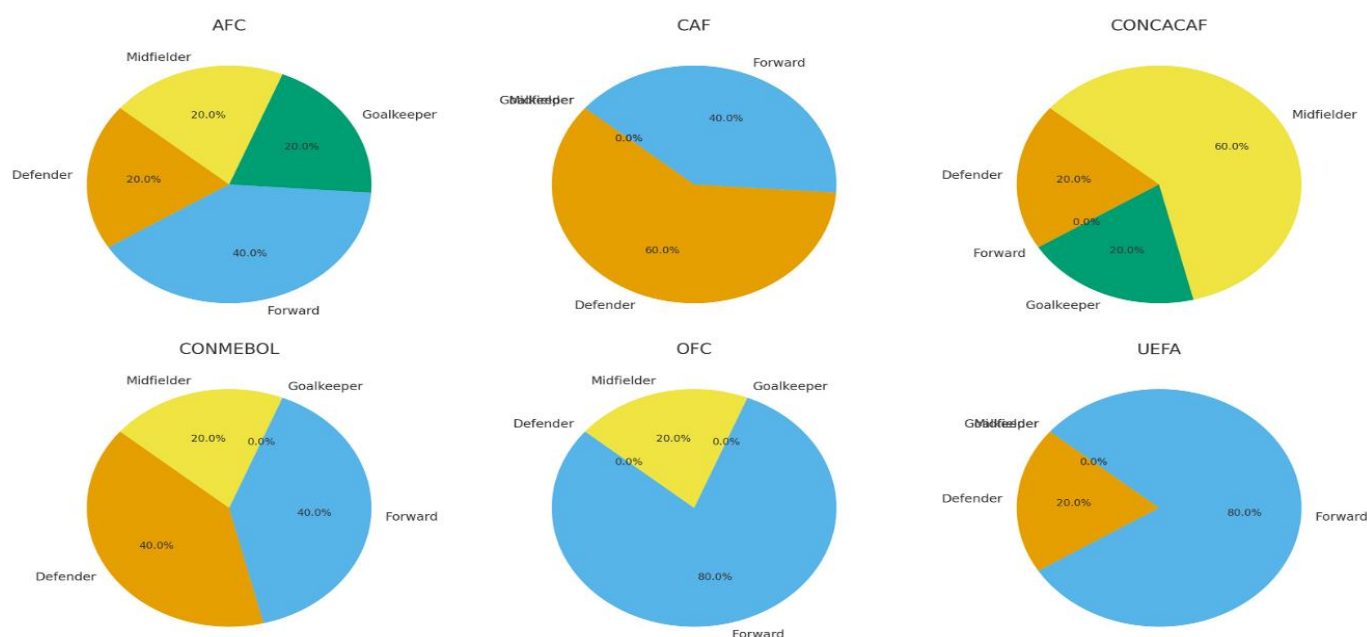
Data Analysis

RQ. 1. What are the dominant playing positions of captains in the top FIFA-ranked male national teams across the footballing world?

Position	Number of Captains	Percentage
Forward	14	46.7%
Defender	8	26.7%
Midfielder	6	20.0%
Goalkeeper	2	6.6%

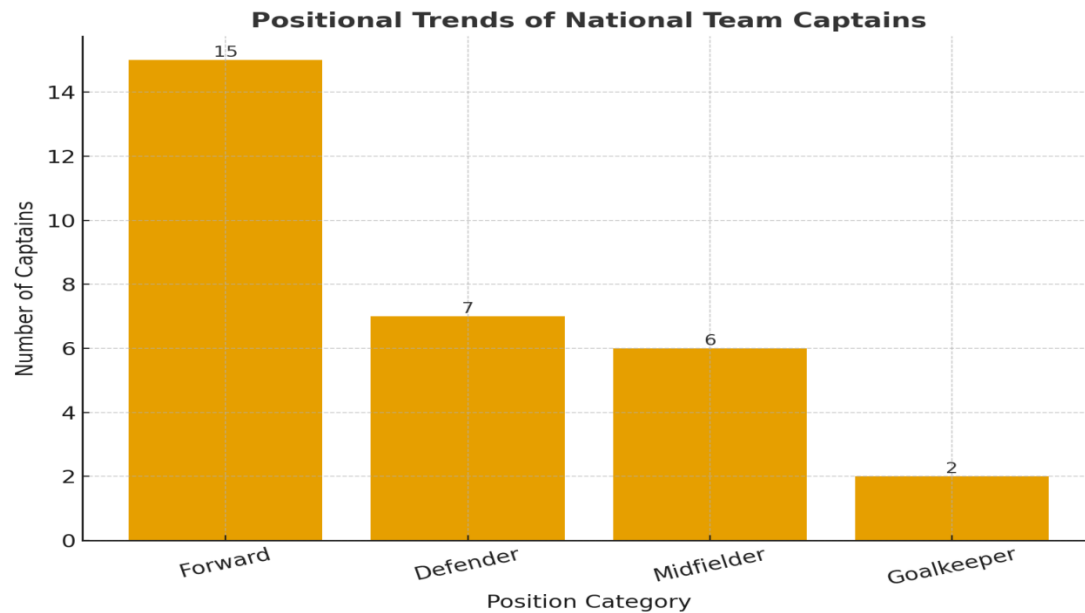
A majority of the selected captains—14 of the 30—play Forward or Winger positions. This category includes some of the world's most influential and iconic players: Lionel Messi (Argentina), Cristiano Ronaldo (Portugal), Harry Kane (England), KylianMbappé (France), and Mohamed Salah (Egypt). This phenomenon suggests that attacking potency and global visibility are key organizational criteria for captaincy in highly ranked teams. These players are typically the strategic and emotional focal points of their respective teams, responsible for goal production, communication and often serving as inspirational leaders whose performances directly dictate results. Their leadership style is often perceived as performance-based, relying on exemplary offensive contributions.

RQ.2.Cross-continental variations in captaincy appointments based on playing positions.



A comparative assessment shows differing strategic approaches to leadership across regions. UEFA and CONMEBOL frequently select iconic attacking players, reflecting their concentration of global superstardom and their teams' often dominant, attack-oriented philosophies. In contrast, CAF, AFC, and Concacaf—regions where tactical discipline is often paramount to overcoming opponents with superior technical resources—exhibit a more balanced distribution of captaincy. These confederations blend star attackers (Salah, Son Heung-min) with crucial deep-lying leaders (Saïss, Adams, Endo) who ensure tactical shape and communication are maintained. This balance is critical for nations seeking to transition from established regional powers to consistent global contenders, requiring comprehensive team structure and tactical maturity

RQ.3. What are positional trends, that are recurrent in the selection of national team captains.



The chart reveals that forwards dominate captaincy roles internationally, reflecting their status as high-impact players who often embody a team's public identity and competitive spirit. Defenders follow closely as the next most common captains, serving as tactical anchors and stabilizing figures on the field. Midfielders and goalkeepers appear less frequently, indicating that leadership is less concentrated in these positions. Overall, this pattern underscores a global tendency to assign captaincy to central and influential figures, particularly strikers and defensive leaders, whose visibility and authority naturally align with leadership responsibilities within national teams.

Discussion

The analysis for the first objective—identifying the dominant playing positions of captains in the top FIFA-ranked national sides—shows a clear empirical result in the table: forwards account for 14 of the 30 captains (47%), defenders 8 (27%), midfielders 6 (20%) and goalkeepers 2 (6%). This distribution is a concrete finding from the study sample and demonstrates that attacking players form the largest single category of appointed captains among elite national teams on 18 September 2025. That empirical pattern is consistent with research that emphasises the representational and status benefits of appointing high-profile attackers: Kocsoy's (2024) quasi-experimental work suggests that formal captaincy produces measurable positive peer spillovers principally when the title is held by an informal superstar, and many of the forwards in the present list (e.g., Messi, Mbappé, Kane, Ronaldo, Morata) precisely occupy that superstar niche. Archetti's (2019) ethnographic claims about cultural valorisation of creative, expressive players in certain footballing cultures also fit the forward concentration, because forwards frequently carry cultural meanings of heroism and national representation that Symbolic Interactionism predicts will shape role nomination.

At the same time, this substantive forward bias diverges from what Leadership Communication Theory and functional performance analyses would predict: Bloomfield et al. documented that midfielders have the greatest tactical visibility and workload (hence the communicative and coordination affordances that typically underpin leadership communication), yet midfielders are under-represented in the present captain sample. Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper & Boen, (2015) empirical findings complicate any direct mapping from formal title to functional leadership by showing that captains are often not the principal on-field leaders; their mixed-method results therefore support an interpretation that



the present forward dominance may be driven more by symbolic, tenure or selection politics than by documented communicative competence. In theoretical terms, Symbolic Interactionism explains why forwards are chosen (position-as-symbol), while Leadership Communication Theory raises a normative tension, if communicative competence mattered most, midfielders would feature more—thus the data align with the symbolic explanations and only partially with the communicative/functional expectations.

With respect to the second objective, exploring cross-continental variation, the dataset displays notable geographic heterogeneity that can be read directly from the table. UEFA and CONMEBOL entries in this top-ranked sample show a heavy forward presence: Spain, France, England and Portugal list forwards as captains, while Argentina is also represented by a forward; Netherlands and Brazil are exceptions in those confederations with defenders as captains. CAF displays a contrasting pattern in which defenders are frequently chosen (Morocco, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire) alongside some forward captains (Egypt, Algeria). Concacaf and AFC produce a more defensive/midfield tilt: Mexico and the USA have defensive midfielders as captains, Canada lists a fullback/winger, and Asia mixes defensive midfielders, goalkeepers and forwards. These continental patterns accord with Archetti's (2019) cultural argument and with Gökdoğan et al.'s qualitative work showing that captain selection is embedded in local cultural scripts and organizational practices; both studies explain how national and institutional narratives can privilege particular positional archetypes (heroic forwards in some Euro/Latin contexts, stable elder defenders in parts of Africa, or representational/tenure choices in other regions). Conversely, Bloomfield's performance-analysis logic would predict more uniformity toward midfield centrality because of information flow and workload; the observed continental variation therefore does not align with a pure performance/affordance model. Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper & Boen, (2015) cross-sport findings that formal captains often do not match the team's perceived best leaders also bear on continental variation: if appointments are coach-driven, tenure-based or symbolic, continental differences may reflect divergent institutional norms rather than differences in who actually performs leadership functions in practice. From the theoretical vantage, Symbolic Interactionism helps explain why confederation-specific narratives produce different positional outcomes, while Leadership Communication Theory is only partially supported because the functional communicative advantages of certain positions are not consistently reflected in appointment patterns across continents.

The third objective, that is, identifying recurrent positional trends, yields a clear recurrent tendency and several contingent patterns when read against the empirical literature. The recurrent tendency is a forward-heavy appointment pattern among the highest-ranked teams in this snapshot, with defenders forming a secondary recurrent category and midfielders and goalkeepers occurring less frequently. Kocsoy's finding that captaincy is effective only when combined with informal superstar status supplies a mechanism that reconciles the recurrence: teams may repeatedly choose forwards because forwards are more often the internationally visible superstars whose formal elevation amplifies influence; that mechanism explains why recurrent forward appointments survive despite theoretical reasons to prefer midfielders for communicative leadership. Fransen (2015) repeated observation of distributed leadership and selection for non-leadership factors supports the idea that the recurrence is structural and symbolic, not purely functional, the captaincy mould repeats because federations and coaches habitually select for representation, tenure or public status, yielding the observed pattern.

At the same time, Bloomfield's positional workload results and Gökdoğan et al. (2023) contextual interviews together show why the recurrence is not deterministic: midfielders' centrality and defensive leaders' experience are both defensible bases for captaincy in particular contexts, which is why defenders recur in CAF and defensive midfielders appear in Concacaf/AFC. The two theoretical frames used in this study intersect here, Symbolic Interactionism explains the persistence of culturally meaningful captain archetypes (the forward as national symbol), while Leadership Communication Theory provides the



normative benchmark by which those appointments can be judged (i.e., are the appointed captains those who actually communicate, coordinate and influence?). The empirical literature thus both supports and constrains the interpretation of the recurrent trends: it supports the explanatory primacy of status and culture (Kocsoy et al.) and it highlights the theoretical gap between symbolic appointment and communicative effectiveness (Bloomfield, Leadership Communication Theory), which should inform any policy recommendation that federations adopt more competency-based and context-sensitive selection procedures

Conclusion and Recommendations

The evidence compellingly affirms that captaincy in elite men's football is less a neutral reflection of functional leadership capacity than a deliberate symbolic act shaped by cultural narratives, institutional traditions, and status hierarchies. This reality stresses the enduring power of positional symbolism and its entanglement with the communicative dynamics of leadership in sport. When viewed through the lenses of Symbolic Interactionism and Leadership Communication Theory, captaincy becomes a strategic site where meaning, performance, and authority intersect. The verdict is clear: without a recalibration of how leadership is formally conferred, captaincy in soccer will continue to reflect cultural preference more than communicative competence, leaving a gap between representation and real influence.

Recommendations

- a. National federations should adopt structured leadership assessment protocols that prioritize communicative competence and tactical visibility over mere symbolic status when appointing captains.
- b. Continental confederations should develop culturally sensitive leadership frameworks that align captaincy selection with local football identities while ensuring transparency and best practices.
- c. FIFA should promote hybrid captaincy structures that combine symbolic captaincy with shared leadership models through empowered vice-captains or leadership councils.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in several ways. First, it focused exclusively on elite men's football and on the appointed captains of the top FIFA-ranked national sides as of 18 September 2025, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to other levels of play, women's football, or club-level competitions. Second, the research relied primarily on desk-based methods, including secondary data analysis of publicly available records, which precluded the collection of firsthand observational or interview data from players, coaches, or federations. Third, the study examined captaincy largely through the lenses of Symbolic Interactionism and Leadership Communication Theory; while these frameworks illuminate cultural and communicative dimensions of leadership, they do not fully capture other potential determinants such as psychological traits, team cohesion, or situational contingencies. Finally, although positional trends were analyzed, the study did not directly measure on-field leadership effectiveness, leaving open the question of whether appointed captains function as actual communicative or tactical leaders in practice.

Practical Implications

The study's findings have several practical implications for football federations, coaches, and team managers. Recognizing that captaincy often reflects symbolic, cultural, or status-driven considerations rather than purely functional leadership can help federations adopt more deliberate selection processes. Structured assessment of players' communicative competence, tactical awareness, and influence on



teammates could ensure that captains are not only symbolic figures but also effective coordinators on the field. Additionally, awareness of continental or cultural variations in captain selection can guide coaches to tailor leadership development programs that respect local football identities while enhancing team performance.

Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, national and continental football governing bodies could benefit from codifying transparent and competency-based criteria for captain selection. Policies that encourage hybrid leadership structures, such as vice-captains or leadership councils, would allow federations to maintain symbolic representation while distributing functional leadership responsibilities more equitably. FIFA could promote guidelines that balance cultural traditions with evidence-based leadership selection, thereby fostering consistency across competitions and promoting fairness in appointments.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study reinforces the explanatory power of Symbolic Interactionism in understanding leadership appointments in sport, demonstrating how cultural narratives and positional symbolism shape captaincy decisions. At the same time, it highlights the partial applicability of Leadership Communication Theory: functional communication and coordination advantages do not consistently drive selection, creating a normative gap between symbolic appointment and actual leadership performance. Future research could integrate additional frameworks, such as social identity theory or distributed leadership models, to better account for the interaction between symbolic status, functional competence, and team dynamics.

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Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research (AJCSR), Vol. 2(1), 59-69, 2026.

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