



Research Article

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Evaluating the Travelling inequality and final positions of teams in a European Polycentric Tournament: Euro 2020

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Abstract

In June and July 2021, eleven cities across Europe hosted a month-long polycentric event. This tournament, known as Euro 2020, witnessed Italy winning the championship after defeating England. One of the criticisms made before, during and after the tournament was on the travelling inequalities as some teams had to travel extensively compared to others. Travelling inequality could have potentially impacted some of the teams' performance and possibly led to unfair competition. Hence, the purpose of this study is to compare the final positions of Euro 2020 teams to their distance travelled per match. All 24 teams that participated in the 2020 Euro were analysed via descriptive statistics. The -0.0846 correlation indicates there are negative relations between both variables. The Spearman's Rank Correlation Test findings -0.0802 revealed no significant difference between the final positions and the distance travel per match of teams in the Euro 2020.

Keywords: Football, Euro 2020, Polycentric Tournament, Travelling Inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Sports have evolved beyond a measure of athletic excellence, and winning trophies, medals, and financial prizes have become a source of national and individual pride. Sports also has educated society about hard work, dedication, and fair play ^[1]. Football is the most famous sport in the world. This beautiful game is loved and watched by 3.5 billion supporters worldwide, including women and children ^[2]. The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) is the governing body for football, futsal and beach soccer in the European continent. UEFA is one of the six continental confederations of FIFA's world football regulatory body and at present, it has 55 full members' national associations. UEFA represents Europe's national football associations, organises national and club championships, including the UEFA European Championship, and manages prizes, regulations, and media rights ^[3]. Garcia ^[4] stated UEFA had been forced to acknowledge the significance of European law and its application to the activities of football organisations. As a result, UEFA has adapted to the impact of European law and policies on its operations, resulting in a relationship of "supervised" autonomy between UEFA and European Union (EU) institutions. Since its establishment in 1954, UEFA's strategic vision has been towards retaining its position within football's governance structures. However, with collaboration with the EU, UEFA increases its legitimacy within football's governing structures by collaborating on policy with EU authorities. Since 2009, the EU has been seen as a partner by UEFA. Consequently, the EU and UEFA have been promoting rules antimonopoly activities, free movement of cross-border and prohibition of nationality discrimination. Polycentric tournaments within various countries are promoted instead of traditional and single country events. The EU and UEFA worked together collectively and have pursued integrated sporting events associating the European socioeconomic and cultural characteristics ^[5].

On 18 April 2021 European Super League (ESL), a new tournament, was proposed, including the participation of 20 European football clubs. ESL was meant to replace the UEFA Champions League, which UEFA has organised since 1955. Just a few hours after the announcement of ESL, UEFA and EU countries openly criticised ESL. ESL was accused of favouring top 20 football teams, which could lead European football to elitism and discrimination. The ESL project was suspended following severe criticism, including protests by football players and fans. Most importantly, in the fight for power in European football, UEFA's brief clash with the ESL addressed the importance of UEFA strategic value in relying on the partnership with the EU. Their associations can also be seen in the major tournament organised by UEFA ^[6].

Besides the UEFA Champions League that focus on football clubs, the UEFA European Football Championship, known as the Euros, is a significant European football competition between the senior men's national teams from the UEFA. This competition has been held every four years since 1960.

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However, in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic and with the EU and World Health Organisation (WHO) advice, the event was postponed to 2021^[7]. As the official name of the tournament didn't change, the tournament is still referred to as Euro 2020. Due to the restricted number of teams allowed to participate in the final tournament, UEFA national teams are always required to compete and secure a qualifying spot in the qualifying stages. Since 2016, former championship winners have been required to compete in the qualifying rounds rather than receiving automatic qualification. The host nations, except for the 2020 event, are usually provided with automatic qualifications. During the 2020 tournament, only 24 out of the 55 national football teams were qualified to play in the final tournament. Since its inception in 1960, there have been 16 European championship events that have been staged to date, and during this period, a total of ten national teams have won. From the 16 European Championship events that have been staged to date, ten national teams have won. With three titles each, Spain and Germany have won the most. Also, after defeating England at Wembley Stadium, London, in 2021, Italy won the competition for the second time^[8]. The Euro tournaments have been consistently regarded as competitive tournaments that promote fair play.

Euro 2020: European Polycentric Event

Unlike other tournaments, the Euro 2020 tournament was held in 11 cities from 11 different countries for the first time. France hosted the first Euros in 1960, and the first co-host nations that hosted Euros were Belgium and Netherlands in 2000. However, the 2021 competition was scheduled for 13 countries^[9]. Two countries were eventually removed from the host list. After the city's Euro stadium construction in Brussels was abandoned in December 2017, Belgium was removed by UEFA from hosting the event. Meanwhile, Dublin, Republic of Ireland, was also removed in April 2021 since there was no certainty of having spectators due to the pandemic. Spain had to shift their venue from Bilbao to Seville to accommodate attendees. The opening match was held in Rome, Italy, with the tournament's semi-final and final game in London, England^[10]. Rather than adopting a more traditional monocentric model of hosting, this multi-venue event was organised through a polycentric hosting model using existing facilities such as football stadiums, airports, railway stations, and highways over the European continent^[11]. The polycentric approach adopts the strategy of having more than one centre of development of control and allows greater autonomy to the host countries^[12]. According to Ostrom, other advantages of the approach include greater levels of cooperation and trustworthiness between the participants, as well as more sustainable results.

Another purpose of this polycentric event was to commemorate the tournament's 60th anniversary on a grand scale. Chaplin^[13] stated the idea was to establish "EURO for Europe," in which the organisers hoped to bring the tournament to the people. The next facet that influenced the decision of holding an event such as this was shifting the financial burden from one host country to many. This 2020 tournament was expected to allow numerous countries and cities to host even just a portion of a EURO, potentially bringing in sponsorship money, match ticket revenues, and also boosting the regional and domestic tourism and the economy.

Europe consists of several small countries that lack the financial resources and high-capacity venues to host the European Championship on their own. Hence, spreading the tournament across various countries potentially solved the economic problem. It also allowed smaller countries to participate as a host in this huge event. For example, the tourism incentive was shared with smaller nations and benefited their economies. In addition, neutral fans who rarely get the opportunity to participate in such tournaments could travel to neighbouring countries to watch the matches. Since the cost will be split through this innovative polycentric concept, small cities such as

Copenhagen and Glasgow would have the opportunity to host these events^[14]. According to Baade & Matheson^[15], this polycentric model would increase destination brand and loyalty if permanent locations are used as the host is allocated to two or more consecutive games and less venues being rotated throughout the tournament. Evidently, Euro 2020 had 51 matches with Wembley Stadium in London, England hosted eight games, followed by seven games by Krestovsky Stadium in Saint Petersburg, Russia. The other hosts were given the opportunity to host four matches.

For many fans, the Euro is an essential element of their summer vacations. However, this polycentric event required them to travel significantly to multiple nations. Distance between cities London and Rome requires fans to travel by air, contributing to the regional economy, such as the aviation and tourism industries, but overall has intentionally created additional travelling cost and time for the fans. So, travelling has been a significant issue, unlike the traditional model, fans who could previously fly into the host country and then travel via local transport to several venues^[11].

It is understandable that in 2012 when this event was first envisioned, UEFA had no idea the Covid-19 pandemic would potentially create severe problems to the multi-venue event system. Travelling during a pandemic increases the risk of infection for everyone, including players, fans, administrators, organisers, and broadcasters. The Covid-19 protocols differed from one country to the next, making logistics a nightmare. All of the venues operated at reduced capacities and had a significant impact on stadium attendance. The 90,000-seater Wembley Stadium in London, for example, opened up 25% of its capacity to supporters for most of the matches. Meanwhile, fans had only 22% of the 70,000 seat access at Munich's Allianz Arena. Puskas Arena in Budapest was the only venue that allowed 100% fan capacity. However, the semi-finals and final match held at Wembley had above 70% capacity. The final match between Italy and England had 67,173 attendances^[16].

Distance has also been a significant drawback on players. After a tiring football 2020/2021 season, players arrived at this competition with extensive travel. The 2020/2021 season was extraordinary. For example, the 2020–21^[15] English Premier League season was originally planned to begin on 8 August 2020, but due to the postponement of the previous season's finale due to the COVID-19 epidemic, it was pushed back to 12 September 2020. Resultantly, the winter break was dropped, making the season five weeks shorter than usual, and there were no FA Cup replays. The FA Cup final was held on 15 May, 2021, before the Premier League season's final weekend. Furthermore, since the EFL Cup was introduced in 1960-61, the semi-finals have been played as one-off games rather than two-legged events^[17]. Consequently, players from England's team had played an average of 4,442 minutes of games before the commencement of Euro 2020, since the COVID-19 lockdown and following break-in European soccer in spring 2020. Portugal and Germany came in second and third, respectively, with players from the Netherlands averaging 3,927 minutes and those from Belgium averaging 3,399 minutes^[18].

Thus, the tournament provided other challenges, such as an inequality of travelling distance for the players. Only one nation in each of the six groups played all of their matches at home, but the other teams were required to travel. Those teams were the Netherlands, Italy, Denmark, England, Spain and Germany. Meanwhile, other teams, namely Scotland, Hungary and Russia, had a mix of home games and away games. Hence, the remaining 15 teams had to travel for each match and this placed them at a huge disadvantage. For instance, when the group schedule was announced, it was noted that the Switzerland national football team would be travelling at least 10,012 kilometres compared to Italy 0 kilometres to play the three group matches. Research has proven that players who travel during tournaments experience travel fatigue, even if it was short-haul travel with minimal

time zones being crossed [19]. Waterhouse, Reilly and Edwards [20] reported players with travel fatigue might experience disorientation, general weariness and an increased occurrence of headaches that could influence their performance especially speed and agility. Agility refers to the body's capacity to shift direction swiftly from one location to another, as well as speed in sports for muscle reflexes characterised by maximum quick contraction and relaxation [21]. Hence, extensive travel during this Euro 2020 tournament undoubtedly prove disadvantages for the teams and unfair added advantages for the opposing teams.

METHODOLOGY

For this quantitative non-experimental research, the researchers explored correlational study to measure the two variables: the team's final positions and average distance travel. The researchers considered no extraneous variables able to influence the statistical relationship between these two variables. The data collected was not normally distributed. Thus, to examine the relationship between teams' final positions and average distance travel, the Spearman rank correlation test was applied to test the degree of association between two variables [22,23]. The final positions include the final position of each team in the Euro 2020. Italy won the tournament and was ranked first, followed by England as the second ranked. Denmark and Spain, who lost in the semifinals, were ranked third. Teams that lost in the quarterfinals and round of 16 were ranked fifth and ninth. Finally, teams that failed to qualify to the knockout stages were ranked 17.

Specifically, for this study, the distance was calculated using kilometres with Google maps used to calculate the precise length. The researchers recorded the variables in an Excel spreadsheet, and there were no interventions or manipulation made on the data. However, limited control was applied. For instance, only the distance between capitals cities to each stadium was calculated. For example, Poland played three matches, and the distance was calculated from Warsaw, the

capital of Poland to Krestovsky Stadium in Saint Petersburg (1st match) to La Cartuja, Seville (2nd match), and their return trip to Krestovsky Stadium (3rd match). The total distance then was divided into three as the total matches played by Poland was 3. England played six out of seven games at Wembley, London and played one match, their fifth match in Stadio Olimpico, Rome. Hence, the only distance was calculated from Wembley to Stadio Olimpico and the return match at Wembley. As England played seven games thus, the total length was divided into 7. As teams did not play the same number of matches, the average distance was used to add validity. Overall, this research study aims to provide external validity as the aim of the researcher was to generalize their findings to other sport settings. It is anticipated the conclusions of this research can be applied for future and similar mega polycentric events.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results compared between the final position of Euro 2020 teams to their distance travelled per match will be presented. The polycentric tournament Euro 2020 offered both opportunities and challenges. The challenge from multi-venue events was that certain teams had to travel. Travel distances have contributed to travelling inequality and unfair tournament. Data revealed Switzerland did not host any of the matches and had to play all their five games away. Switzerland travelled 17,259 km (average 3,452km for each game) compared to Germany with 1,156km (average 289 km) with four matches. England hosted most of the matches and played six out of their seven games in London. The English national football team only travelled 3,604km (average 515 km per match). The scatter graph below highlights the differences between teams. The x-axis indicates distance travelled per match and the y-axis shows the final positions. There is a significant gap between distance travel per match by each team. For instance, Poland travelled 3,452km for each game compared to Hungary with 659km. Both teams failed to qualify to the round of 16.

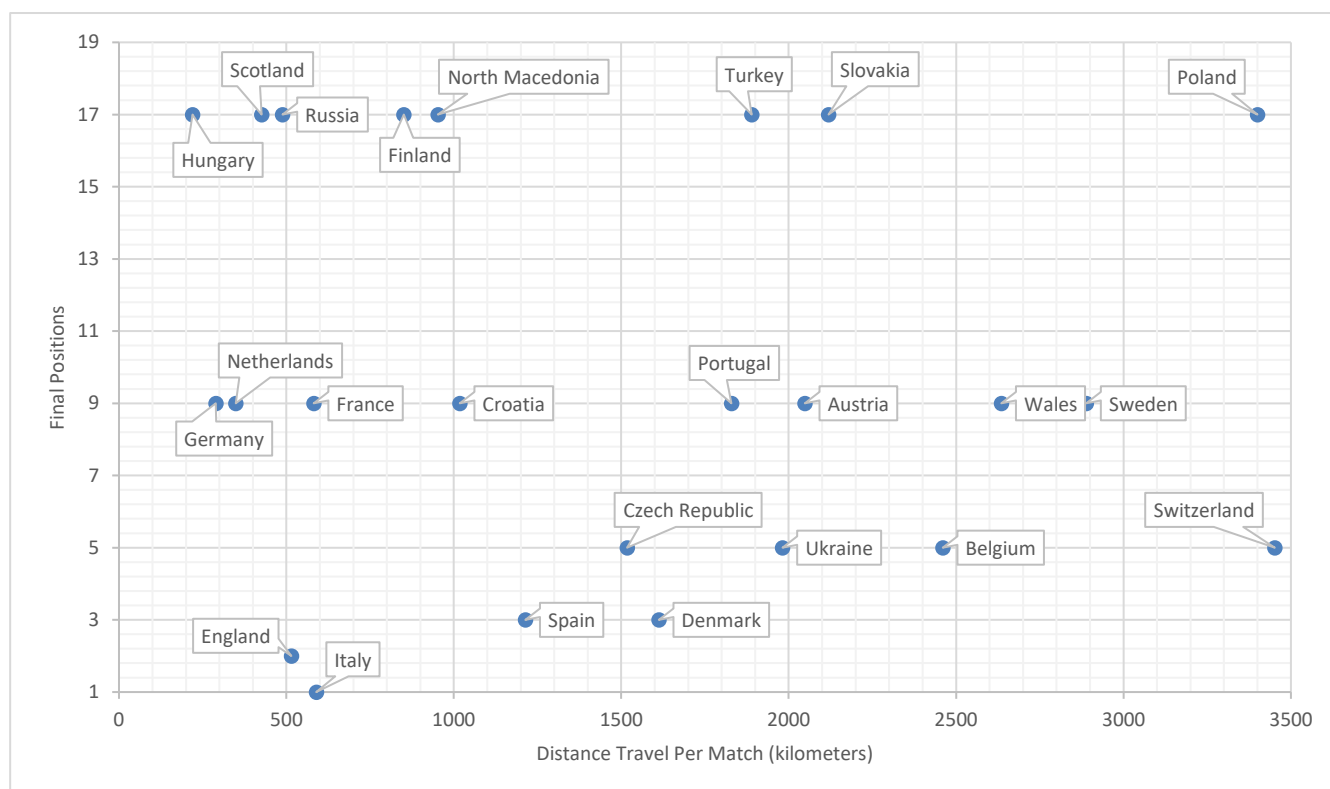


Figure 1: Euro 2020 Distance Travelled and Final Positions of Participating Countries

Seven out of 24 teams (29%) travelled more than 2,000km for each game. For those seven teams, five teams played at least four matches. Meanwhile, ten out of 24 teams (42%) travelled less than 1,000km for

each game. Five from the ten teams played at least four matches. The graphs and data indicate that there is a considerable travelling distance between teams that potentially led to travel inequality. However, the

data does not reveal that teams which travelled more had a disadvantage than the teams that travelled less. Thus, a basic correlation was analysed via Microsoft excel and the findings indicate that there was a -0.0846 correlation between both variables. To triangulate the correlation findings, the two data sets were examined further with Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient via Spearman Rank Calculator ^[24]. Triangulation is applied to add credibility in quantitative and qualitative studies that include using various approaches to validate the findings ^[25]. The *n* value is set as 24, *p*-value as $p > 0.50$ with the degrees of freedom of 2. Results of the Spearman correlation indicated ($r_s [24] = -0.0802$) appears to be a weak negative correlation. Hence, the researcher concluded that there was no correlation and statistically significant difference between the final positions and the distance travelled per match of teams in the Euro 2020.

CONCLUSION

Although polycentric event hosting can place enormous demands on the organizational prowess of those hosting, it seems without a doubt that Euro 2020 was a success in enhancing a continent-wide sports mega event. These types of polycentric events are not new and are a method for countries to share the costs and to improve collaborations between countries. For this paper, the researcher investigated to what extent, if any did the travelling of the teams in the Euro 2020 football tournament affect team performance, and influence the final standings. Instead of just using a basic correlation between the two variables, the focus was extended using the Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient. According to the findings, the resulting schedule for the Euro soccer tournament signified that no teams appeared to be disadvantaged through excessive travel distances. However, it is not straightforward to presume that the organisation of the tournament was optimal in terms of fairness and effectiveness. In other words, for the future it may be more equitable to consider a more uniform travel distance across teams by the UEFA. With this in mind, any future studies may want to focus on further factors such as the influence of jet lag and tiredness on team travel and performances. This is relevant as in 2026 for the first time, the World Cup will be jointly held across three countries; Canada, USA and Mexico. Thus, it could be said that Euro 2020 is an important case study for this forthcoming event. Also, further investigated could be the effect on fans who also had to travel long distances to support their country's teams and how they managed to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. Significantly, because of the Covid-19 crisis and the initial postponing of Euro 2020 alongside the Olympics, the hosting of this polycentric event has proven an interesting test case looking at impacts of the postponement and the subsequent re-holding. As a result of a focus on the more historically traditional sporting events such as the Olympics, this paper has looked to add to the limited scholarly literature on Euro 2020.

Conflicts of interest

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