

“It is coming home to Rome” – social engagement and creativity in reactions to England national football team losing Euro 2020

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this commentary paper is to analyze the burst of joy experienced by global football fans when England lost the final match during the Euro 2020 against Italy.

Design/methodology/approach – The author worked with netnography (Internet ethnography), gathering material from the internet.

Findings – The author would consider the emotional explosion as a creative expression that was possible to happen through football. Football is not only a part of popular culture, it also creates it. It acted as a platform allowing for emotional engagement and covering different issues connected to global politics.

Research limitations/implications – It is just a small study based on very limited material (Internet sources). However, it highlights every-day use of Internet and the possible amplification of certain sentiments if allowed.

Practical implications – Methodologically, it shows how Internet sources might be used when connected to football. It also provides an insight how Internet users can exchange opinions using sports (e.g. football) as a background.

Social implications – This text highlights that football can be used as a platform to express/discuss difficult issues and that average citizens can be heard just because the platform is football.

Originality/value – To the author’s knowledge there is no academic text with this issue in focus yet.

Keywords Italy, Football, England, Brexit, Emotionality, Euro 2020

Paper type Commentary

Introduction

The UEFA European Football Championship (Euro) tends to be an intense and captivating football tournament. Here, I focus on the perceived unification of international fans against England’s national team and the outspoken joy when England lost the final to Italy on penalties in 2021 during the Euro 2020. The sentiment best described by an ongoing joke: “I do not want Italy to win, I just want England to lose”.

When unable to participate in person, an ethnographer, like myself, can turn to the next best thing – the Internet. The Internet has become a storage of folklore, where folk share their lore (Blank, 2012). The late-night defeat suffered by England in 2021 resulted in a flood of memes and comments, becoming a textbook example of Schadenfreude, the joy of seeing someone suffer, fail or experience humiliation. The collective emotion resulted in a creative engagement and exploded on the Internet.

This is a commentary, presenting a view from a narrow perspective and not exploring the nuanced realities of football rivalries. Using netnography only presents additional problems

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as it might result in “echo chambers” and one-sided picture of a complex phenomenon. Even though it is a valid and accepted research method, netnography requires reflexivity and awareness of floods of information online that is affected by algorithms, personal bubbles and trends (Jeacle, 2021; Kozinets, 2019). However, the limited focus allows for exploration of everyday digital practice. This is the strength and weakness of the ethnographic approach. This paper, then, ponders a phenomenon that has emerged in limited digital space, but was accessible to millions of users interested in football.

The European championships of 2016 and 2021

The championship (Euro, 2020) was supposed to happen in 2020. It was postponed until 2021 due to the global pandemic of COVID-19 (Coronavirus). It became a celebration of football and return to pre-pandemic reality. As such, it was closely followed and gained a lot of attention.

The previous Euro in 2016 featured the Icelandic football team. Already an achievement for Icelanders to be in the tournament, but they surpassed all the expectations by qualifying from their group and even defeated England 2-1. I happened to be in Iceland during that time. The national airport at Keflavík showed the game against England on repeat on every screen. It was amusing. David won against Goliath, the giant was slain and tiny Iceland could celebrate a historic victory. Already then, July 2016, the international football sentiments were on the side of the underdog. Who would have imagined Iceland beating England? Not only did they deliver a show on the pitch, they also left the world with a specific chant, a “huu”, with a slow slap and a tantalizing sound. It was referred to as the volcano and performed after Iceland’s matches.

What one remembers best from 2016, Iceland’s victory, is also by default England’s defeat. Even though a trivial game, sport carries sentiments present in a society. As cultural scholar Tara Brabazon put it:

Sport is not an isolated social and political phenomenon: it is part of popular culture. While popular culture is too often dismissed as trash, study reveals the relativity of aesthetic values, the implications of technological change, the political conflicts of daily life and the role of economics in the production of culture (2006, p. 2).

Sentiments run high in football, allowing for “reflexive anti-reflexivity” (Herd, 2018, pp. 249–250). Fans are aware, more often than not, of a broader picture and nuanced interpretations of the game. They just choose to ignore it. The emotions connected to the game are complex and open for interpretations (see Armstrong, 1998; Feldman Barrett, 2011; Herd, 2018; Baxter *et al.*, 2019).

Societal implications of sports activities

Despite calls to separate sport and politics (or sport and full-scale armed conflicts), these are not in isolation from each other. Something else has been slipping into the image of English football team, namely Brexit. The Brexit referendum that resulted in a decision to leave the European Union happened in June 2016. Since then, the European citizens could hear on the news how bad EU was for Great Britain, and that they were unwanted migrants, an obstacle for England’s greatness. The oft-repeated narrative stated that finally Britain was going to free itself. In 2021, still in the midst of the pandemic, the separation began.

The already hurting pan-European reputation was reminded about another wish the English had – “It is coming home”. A song composed in 1996 entitled *Three Lions* (but known also as *its coming home*) that was adapted by English fans during the European Championship played in Britain that year [1]. It is also connected to the 1966 World Cup when England won against Germany at Wembley Stadium. In 2021 they played at home again,

Wembley stadium filled to the brim, fireworks prepared for the celebration. Europe in 2021 saw it as a cocky and unfair claim to a football victory. As the English team was playing good, solid football and advancing all the way to the final, the rest of the world trembled. They could have won.

Euro 2021: the outcome

On July 12 2021 Italy won against England in penalties. Shortly after, [Ultras-Tifo.net](https://www.ultras-tifo.net), a page for football fanatics, posted on their Facebook a compilation of images showing Italian cities celebrating in ecstasy. The comments under the post (around 400) were by far in favor of the Italian team:

Thank you for saving the world. The cup stays in Rome. Beautiful true football won

We can finally get some sound sleep tonight. Thank you Italy

Yeah that is true . . . English fans supported England, while the rest of the world supported Italy.

Trophy stayed within the EU Zone.

Thank God Italy save us. Or else you will hear the stupid “it is coming home” for the next 10 centuries.

It is coming home ☺ Lol, cry more English robbers ☺.

I am glad they denied happiness to the Nazi England fans.

Thank you Italy, Love from Poland!

Congratulations Azzurri, and a BIG thank you from Denmark.

Dear english people, learn from us how to play football and then go home.

It is coming to Rome. Congratulations Italy 🇮🇹🏆👍. Wherever you find these Brits, make sure they left the field with tears.

English tears = priceless

The world was not ready for the english media’s coverage if England won.

All of Europe was with Italy tonight. The English were not helped by the UEFA mafia to win either.

It’s coming home, but not in yours.

Fuck England!

Every normal European was celebrating last night. Not only the Italian fans.

The spelling above is original. The names have been removed here, but one could see comments like those from European countries, from the USA, Middle East, South America, South Asia and East Asia. Fans felt united in their dislike toward England’s football team. From every corner of the world came grievances that would refer to the history and geopolitics of the former British Empire: theft, colonization, self-righteousness and disregard of others. There was another layer of perceived justice that bubbled into the surface, namely the awareness of racial injustice and the English team taking the knee. Some comments were just plain racist:

f&ck BLM and the Queen

Bravo Italia, let the blacks kneel before the Italians

The English players wanted to communicate their awareness of racial inequality, but many fans turned racist on them. Black Lives Matter – BLM – made football fans react with unfiltered abuse. And here too, the English did something to infuriate the crowds. They were schooling everyone in good behavior, in awareness. Yet, the other immigrants, Eastern-European for example, were branded as bad migrants and the cause of Brexit. The direct exchanges, with football in the background, allowed this frustration to swell and show its ugly face. There is no intention here to justify racial abuse. Rather, I want to point out that the racial content takes a specific form and needs to be contextualized. The righteous English were trying to school the rest of the world, and some of the individuals out there used football to spell out a different point of view. The performance of hatred here is very specific, allowing for the “fantastic investment” referred to by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed:

Hatred works as a form of investment; it endows a particular other with meaning or power by locating them as a member of a group, which is then imagined as a form of positive residence (that is, as residing positively in the body of the individual. (. . .) but it does suggest that hate sustains the object through its mode of attachment, in a way that has a similar dynamic to love, but with a different orientation (2001, p. 349).

The perceived narrative of British/English domination (let us not forget that football thrives on totalities), could be symbolically punished. The allure of symbolic violence is that it has been well rehearsed within football, as any fan will tell you. We endowed football with a lot of meaning, and it can produce meaning as well while stretching the fabric of common sense. It became an arena of direct struggle that could be adorned with more specific and less playful elements. As an established element in our popular imagination, football mixes well with other forms of cultural expressions. Hence, memes flooded my Facebook, mocking England while using different motifs. *Django Unchained*, *Spiderman*, *Sixth Sense* and *Star Wars* were just some movies that served as a background for laughing at the English team.

Conclusion

Football, as it often happens, became much more than football (Herd, 2018). Exchanges that would be difficult to have in other contexts could take place. A direct confrontation, using football as a background, let everyone have their say. At the same time, football produced a meaning, which could be seen in emotional exchanges. Anthropologist Monique Scheer commented, “Emotions can be seen as the product of a meaningful intersection of socially situated concepts and bodies” (Scheer, 2012, p. 213). Ritualistic justice was delivered, and the entire world was watching. So when looking at what happens in football, what makes us gasp and feel uneasy, let us ponder what discussions and issues are taken from a hegemonic perspective and what is difficult to bring up on the public forum. As Brabazon summarized the role of sports,

While sport is trivial, it has a powerful symbolic significance and consequence. For disempowered communities, sport is able to carry popular memory from week to week, from season to season (2006, p. 35).

Note

1. Comedians Skinner and Baddiel feature on the song. The melody was composed by Ian Broudie and performed by his band The Lightning Seeds.

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