



Press Release

Entertainment value of European soccer remains high despite top clubs' dominance

Study by Universities of Tübingen and Zurich measures entertainment value of five top European leagues and finds matches involving top clubs often being less suspenseful but still deliver surprises

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The appeal of soccer matches to spectators is a key factor in the success of professional sports leagues. League officials therefore seek to make competitions as interesting as possible. But how can the appeal of matches and competitions be measured?

It's widely believed that the smaller the performance gap between teams and the harder it is to predict the outcome of a match, the more appealing the match is. Researchers from the University of Tübingen and the University of Zurich have now collaborated to investigate whether the entertainment value of soccer matches can indeed be explained by the predictability of results. For this, they analyzed matches from the Premier League, Bundesliga, La Liga, Serie A, and Ligue 1. They found that entertainment value can be better assessed by considering two different aspects of the experience rather than a single metric: suspense and surprise contribute to a match's appeal, but often vary in their impact. The study has been published in the *European Journal of Operational Research*.

An uncertain outcome is only part of the attraction

"In sports economics, it is often assumed that greater uncertainty about the outcome of a match automatically makes competitions more appealing," says Professor Tim Pawlowski of the Institute of Sports Science at the University of Tübingen. "However, the empirical findings on this topic are inconsistent. So, we wanted to gain a better understanding of what determines the entertainment value of soccer games, in the moment and over time."

Previous studies show that suspense and surprise are closely linked to consumer interest. The researchers therefore used these two measures for their study. In this regard, a match is considered suspenseful when

multiple outcomes seem possible during play and it remains unclear for as long as possible which outcome it will be. Surprise, on the other hand, describes an unexpected event, such as an under-dog taking the lead.

Differences in team performance have a greater impact on suspense than on surprise

To evaluate suspense and surprise in real soccer matches, the researchers developed a benchmark. To do this, they simulated theoretically balanced matches, with both teams equally strong and differing only in the home-field advantage. From these simulations, the researchers drew reference values that indicate how much suspense and surprise can be expected in a balanced contest. They then compared these values with more than 25,000 matches from the Premier League, Bundesliga, La Liga, Serie A, and Ligue 1.

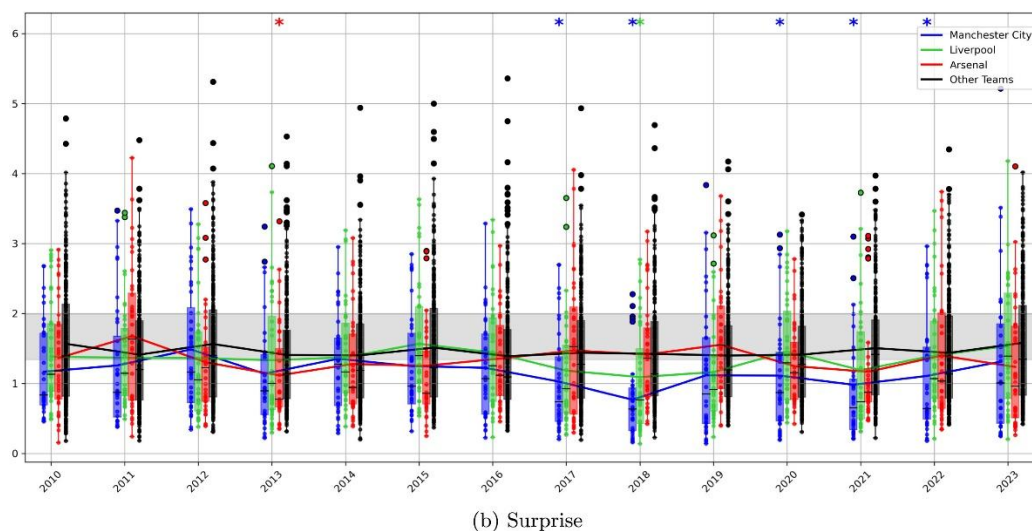
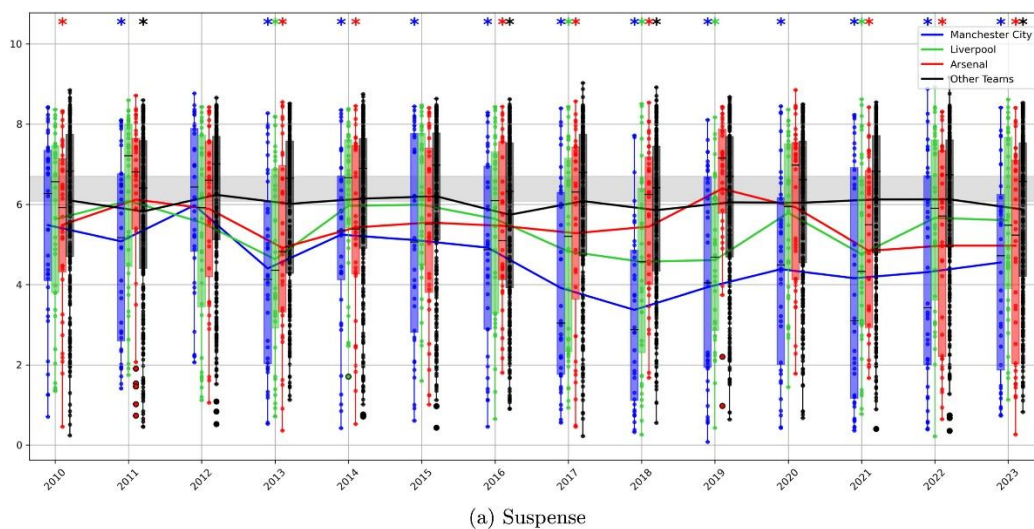
The simulations showed that suspense and surprise contribute to a match's entertainment value in different ways. In matches with few goals, the outcome often remains open longer and thus more suspense is generated. When scoring rates of both teams are high, however, the chances for unexpected twists increase, making the element of surprise greater throughout the game. And differences in team performance have a much stronger effect on suspense than on surprise.

A comparison of the reference data with real matches showed that the average suspense in many games was below the levels that would be expected for theoretically evenly matched contests. This was particularly evident in games involving top clubs. In terms of surprise, however, there were only minor deviations from the reference values. Unexpected developments and results thus occurred regularly even in matches where the teams were of differing strengths.

No general trends across leagues and clubs

In recent years, various studies have concluded that European professional soccer is becoming increasingly unbalanced and, as a result, less attractive. The current study paints a more nuanced picture. The researchers found no general decline in suspense and surprise across the five top leagues. In some leagues and clubs, these metrics declined, while in others they remained stable or even increased.

The researchers view suspense and surprise as a way to assess the appeal of soccer matches in a more nuanced manner. Their findings could help to more accurately assess the consequences of competition reforms in the future.



Average suspense and surprise values for a number of Premier League clubs. The graphic shows the club colors, with gray indicating the reference range for evenly matched games. Values for suspense are often below this range, while those for surprise are usually within it.

Figure: Flepp et al. (2026), Suspense and surprise in European football, *European Journal of Operational Research*

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