International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure (2026) 9:47–67
https://doi.org/10.1007/s41978-025-00193-5

RESEARCH

The Leisure Interdependencies: A Case Study on the National Football League's Expansion to Europe

Jochem Kotthaus[1]

Received: 18 April 2025 / Accepted: 13 October 2025 / Published online: 20 November 2025
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Abstract
This paper uses Niklas Luhmann's systems theory to examine leisure as an operational form. It emphasizes the intricate interdependencies between leisure and various societal domains, such as sports, media, the economy, and politics. Contested interdependencies result in divergent social practices and understandings of what constitutes leisure. The following investigation will explore the National Football League's (NFL) expansion into Europe and the resulting interdependencies.

Keywords American football · Multi-sited ethnography · Localization · System theory · London · Spectator's experience.

1 Introduction

"For half a century, football has gotten bigger and bigger," states American sportswriter Easterbrook (2013: 327). Crepeau (2014: 92) posits that, beginning in the 1960s, television emerged as the primary catalyst for the emergence of the new National Football League, thereby complicating the identification of the "senior partner" in this dynamic arrangement. American football, in particular, has been the epitome of this interdependency, yet it holds true for virtually all professional sports, including soccer, baseball, basketball, and ice hockey. In 2024, the National Football League (NFL) generated revenue amounting to over US$ 23 billion (Carp, 2025). The organization has set a revenue target of US$ 25 billion for 2027, representing an increase from the US$ 8 billion recorded in 2008 of over 300%. It is evident that American football has changed into a multifaceted commercial enterprise, boasting significant economic potential that was previously unanticipated. It has transcended its traditional role as a sport and evolved into a continuous media spectacle, capti-

✉ Jochem Kotthaus
jochem.kotthaus@fh-dortmund.de

[1] Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Dortmund, Germany

vating hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide. Undoubtedly, it has firmly established itself as America's favorite pastime. The nexus is a confounding one. Hyper-commercialization and hyper-mediatization, which were instrumental in establishing the NFL as a prominent sport in today's society, may ultimately prove to be its downfall as factors have led to a transformation in the sport's character (Serazio, 2019; Crepeau, 2014). These discourses ultimately argue the very essence of sports, economy, media, and leisure. The intensity of these discussions has increased as professional sports have transformed into a global phenomenon. The contemporary landscape of American football has evolved beyond the confines of appealing to and appeasing American territories. The sport is poised to reach a state of saturation within its existing market, necessitating the strategic development of new territories (Maguire, 2013).

The objective of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the experience of American football as a leisure activity, examining its multifaceted relationship with it being a sporting event, a commercial entity, and a media spectacle. I aim to demonstrate that leisure functions as a "system" in modern society, characterized by a distinct set of tasks and operations. This is not an exploration of the "nature" of American football but rather the interdependencies that constitute a system in the first place. Due to their historical nature, slow-moving character, and existing institutionalization, these phenomena are challenging to observe empirically. Consequently, the focus will be directed towards a particular selection of these interdependencies, namely the NFL's European expansion. It can be argued that the nexus of sports, commercial, media, and leisure events in Europe is not entirely congruent with domestic American structure. However, the differences resulting from the less institutionalized adaptation to the environment are prone to examining the relationship between culture and system(s). I will trace the NFL's (financial) losses and its success in expanding its operations into the European market. To this end, the case study of a 2022 London game will be utilized as a pertinent example.

2 The Concept of Leisure Within the Framework of New Systems Theory

For German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, entities are not defined by a particular property or characteristic but rather by the process of establishing a difference. This effectively ends the normative inquiry concerning the nature of the transformations undergone by American football over the past fifty years. It redirects attention to the transformation of the system in relation to its environment as a process of system-environment interaction. Systems differentiate themselves from their environment, i.e., all other systems, by "operating," as Luhmann asserts, in a distinct mode that is not evident in any other system (Luhmann, 1995: 176–209). Systems are conceptualized as communicational forms of preselections; therefore, they should not be regarded as encompassing spaces. According to Luhmann, the functionality of modern societies is constituted by a number of overarching systems, among them economy, politics, law, science (in Luhmann's European understanding, academic discourse), religion, art, education, family, and love.

The omission of "leisure" from the list of major societal systems must be considered an unfortunate oversight. Luhmann offers some indication that he conceptualizes leisure as a "public contingency" (1987: 169), a state of communication that is reliant upon or constituted by the individual actor rather than society. Egner (2002) proposes a synthesis of system theory and interactionism, conceptualizing leisure as a "platform for individualization," a facet of the social that facilitates identity formation. Nevertheless, the aforementioned examples appear to be an approach in opposition to the comprehensive mechanisms through which society is structured. Given that all communication and action is at least informed, if not constituted and generated, by society (Luhmann even posits that communication communicates—not individuals—stressing his idea of systems as a form of pre-selection), it seems difficult to conceptualize communication truly outside the framework of being public. If leisure time is deemed a public concern, akin to loneliness or boredom, these phenomena must be examined through the lens of functional differentiation. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics underlying these concepts, thereby facilitating informed interventions and policies (Baraldi & Corsi, 2017).

I propose that there is a functionally differentiated part of society that should be called "system of leisure." Leisure is not a residual category of work, relegating its existence to recreation, recuperation, and the restoration of the capability to engage in gainful employment or—furthermore—the ability to be committed to family, education, and religion (Parker, 1976: 65–116). As it is empirically present in almost all forms of human activity, leisure is either a universal subsystem that is ubiquitous in forms and apparently necessary to ensure their functionality (recreation)—something that is theoretically hard to integrate—or it must be considered a system itself. As "leisure" as an operation is not covered by each system's own code or program (German: "Leitdifferenz"), e.g., economy (distinction between payment and non-payment), religion (immanence vs. transcendence), or family (exclusive vs. non-exclusive) (Luhmann, 2003: 43), it is more feasible to treat it as a system in its own right. With Stebbins (2009: 10), I propose that the central differentiation under which the system of leisure works is the difference between "unforced" and "coerced." Every communicational and interactional selection in the system of leisure is made under the auspices of the actor's volition. This idea seemingly was suggested before. Parker (1976: 20) suggested "voluntarism" as the key characteristic of leisure, for it is free and an "interlude in our daily lives." Rojek (2005: 39–41) criticizes the "ideology of voluntarism" as a worrisome antithesis to structural determinism and points out that any notion of a "free" activity hinges on the work of others, on the (infra)structure of a society and its culture. And indeed the differentiation between unforced and coerced does not rely on aspects of "atomistic individualism" (Gellner, 1998). The experience of the actor is one of authenticity, of being "in the moment," of freedom and self-fulfillment are specifically experienced as based on his or her own discretion. But that by no means implies that leisure is "uncharted territory." It does not exist outside of the social order. All actors engage with in modern society is institutionalized. There are no "original experiences" that have not been made by others before but only those habitualized and integrated in the canon of common knowledge.

This does not take away from the fact that these systems are connected to an environment by an intricate web of what Luhmann (1995) calls "interdependency." These couplings at least form the conditions under which the system operates: systems need resources, they need infrastructure, and they need conditions to police their functionality that lie beyond the borders of the realm of their actual operation. Producers and consumers need the law to codify and enforce contracts that generate stable relations between both parties. Yet the law does not produce anything and works to a different set of codes compared to the economy. And exactly this point I already hinted at, as experiencing American football is deeply embedded in a network of strong interdependencies. Leisure and economy, particularly consumption, are strongly connected up to the point where they become almost indistinguishable (Stebbins, 2009). Even non-commercial leisure like reading, walking, or watching the stars in solitude requires the purchase of books, shoes, and a car to drive to the mountains by oneself. Rojek (2005: 40) is maybe arguing too atomistically in assuming that interdependencies refer "to the economic, cultural, political, and social interconnections between individuals that make individual choice and self-determination subjectively meaningful." Instead, interdependencies should be treated as structural interrelations.

This is where the case of watching American football as a leisure activity becomes most interesting. Border maintenance is essential for the constitution and survival of any system. No system can assume the functionality of another, as no operation can be conducted outside the code of the system. While Luhmann's model of society could be understood as rigid and unable to theoretically cope with change, this is exactly not the case. Systems are empirically open, i.e., they are theoretically designed to withstand all transformations of modern societies. As it is the distinction between itself and its environment that constitutes a system in the first place, this process is entirely susceptible to all gradual social, political, and economic transformations. In other words, the events, actions, and communications that happen as part of a system are constantly contested. This becomes very evident when examining the tasks the education system, first and foremost schools and universities, had to absorb into its curriculum. It is not the political system (anymore) to deal with social inequality, mobility, climate change, and environmental pollution, promoting democracy, human rights, and a feeling of national belonging. It is not the medical system that is tasked with improving health, not the economy to enhance growth and promote basic consumer knowledge, and not religion(s) to teach about Gods and the supernatural, scripture, and their exegesis (Labaree, 2011). These endeavors have been relegated to the education system—not the family, the state, or the public, where in pre- and early modern times they had been located.

Again, without border management, a system dissolves either altogether or into the functionality of another. This is not uncommon. Authoritarian nation-states tend to bring all of society's functions under their control, in the end creating an all-absorbing political system that is sub-differentiated internally but has no extralogical environment. German fascism post-1933 functioned exactly this way: leisure (unforced activity) during German fascism was eradicated and replaced by state-indoctrinated and organized recreational programs. During the Nazi era, the National Socialist organization "Kraft durch Freude" (Strength Through Joy) nationalized and organized theater and music events, museum exhibitions, company outings, company and

club sports, community evenings, and package tours—basically the entire spectrum of possible off-work activities (Bavaj, 2003: 69–73). Combine this with an intricate system of control, oppression, and monitoring of non-compliance and possible dissent; none of this can still be considered "unforced."[1]

It is well known that the border between leisure and economy is porous to say the least. Leisure has always been commercialized, or, as Rojek (2005: 92) proposes, the "market has a strong tendency to turn leisure into a satellite of consumer culture." The epitome of this process probably is the McDonaldization of leisure in amusement parks (Ritzer, 1993), but mass and package tourism or even the commercialization of nature by turning them into parks and recreational areas as part of a leisure industry also come to mind (Jamieson, 2006). At the same time, professional sports are globally undergoing the same transformation and commercialization processes (Ritzer & Stillman, 2001; Dubal, 2010; Dodds, Heisey and Ahonen, 2020). Recursively, watching professional sports has increasingly become a leisure activity in its own right. Fueled by groundbreaking advancements in media coverage of sports events—as well as its acceptance and integration in everyday life—the understanding and self-concept of sports audiences has fundamentally changed over the last eight decades (Schirato, 2007). Thus, it is generally accepted that today commercialization and the acceptance of experiencing sports events as a leisure activity have changed the character of sports itself. It is accepted that "sports in the 21 st century function basically as a backdrop for commercial activity. Some see a 'hyper-commodification,' both quantitatively and qualitatively, the likes of which professional athletics have never before experienced: exploding revenues derived directly from the games themselves while related experiences and practices are co-opted off the field" (Serazio, 2019: 105). Another transformation accompanied this development: sports as a commercial enterprise, a media event, or a leisure activity has gone global. Professional sports have become transnational, with time and space impediments being dissolved by (digital) media. Yet, as Giulianotti (2015) emphasizes, while at least in theory today everybody can experience a sports game taking place everywhere in the world (as long as it is broadcast), local, regional, and national idiosyncrasies still apply. The structure of professional sports, its organization and commercialization, and the sociocultural dimensions of audiences in North America and Europe are quite specific. On the other hand, as sports promoters are perpetually exploring new markets, certain adaptations to local culture are in order.

I will now focus on the historical progression of the NFL's European expansion, a subject that significantly influences the corporation's contemporary decision-making processes. Subsequently, I will explore the contested interdependencies between system and environment based on a 2022 London game.

[1] Girginov (2017) points out that recreation policies and the education of the masses leaned heavily towards being an urban phenomenon. While gainful employment in the city was disconnected from seasonal and growth rhythms, the rural population, which remained tied to the demands of livestock and grain farming, structurally had less "free time."

3 Going to Europe in the Summer: The NFL's Attempts to Branch Out

The current success of American football in Europe is both striking and unexpected. Prior to the late 2010s, all attempts to establish a European branch of the NFL proved unsuccessful, resulting in substantial financial and reputational losses (Woo & Kim, 2010). From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the National Football League, as the preeminent business enterprise in American football, endeavored to establish a stronghold in the European sports market. Despite its marketing as an extension to the NFL, with all the associated glitz and glory, NFL Europe was chronically underfunded. The players received a weekly salary of $1,000. Hotels were located in less reputable areas, and travel arrangements were unreliable and stressful for both staff and athletes. As Anderson (2001) notes, live audiences and fans of NFL Europe, who embraced the league as a celebration of "real" American football at home without the overblown financial baggage, could not make up for the absence of extensive and profitable television deals. The failure of a European offshoot not only underscores the substandard quality of the teams and third-tier players but also highlights the inability to cultivate widespread interest in the product overseas beyond a dedicated fan base (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010: 96–98). The NFL anticipated that European players would successfully transition to the highest level of competition in the United States by demonstrating their abilities on the old continent. This expectation was predicated on the assumption that these players would subsequently become prominent figures in the European market. This proved to be a misconception. The career path in question was rendered unattractive for young players due to the presence of American rules and regulations. The decision to sign with the NFL Europe as a professional player effectively precluded the possibility of pursuing a college scholarship (Vollmer & Hechler, 2019). A select group of players who embarked on successful careers in the United States following stints with NFL Europe—Kurt Warner, Adam Vinatieri, and James Harrison—were American players returning home (Piper, 2025).

Subsequently, there were cultural differences. While soccer is firmly entrenched in European culture, encompassing athletic activities at all levels and representing a billion-dollar industry, American football was regarded as an interloper and failed to gain any foothold. From a globalization perspective, this phenomenon is indeed unusual. It is imperative to acknowledge the profound influence of the United States on virtually all aspects of the global market, particularly in Germany. Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of American brands and products, ranging from beverages to fast food, computers, movies, television programs, and literature, the audience for American football has remained relatively small (van Bottenburg, 2003; Markovits & Rensmann, 2010). Consequently, the NFL's Europe extension was discontinued in 2007.

Discussing American football as a leisure activity could have been concluded at this juncture. The integration of American football within a broader leisure framework has been demonstrated to be unsustainable in the absence of financial support from the economy, which is predominantly composed of media entities. As with Luhmann's proposal, this failure did not result in the termination of leisure itself; rather, it precipitated a transformation in the landscape of the system, affecting the leisure

activities of those who had formerly been involved with the NFL in Europe. The term "external differentiation" (in German, "Ausdifferenzierung") denotes the ongoing process of self-observation and evaluating the system's functionality in relation to its operation within the differentiation from its environment (Luhmann, 1990). Components losing their functionality are supplanted by other subsystems—or even excluded from the system itself. Empirically, the leisure activities pursued by local fans of NFL Europe after its dissolution remain unknown; however, it is reasonable to assume that they engaged in some other form of recreation. Once more, it can be posited that the dissolution of the NFL Europe was not attributable to the enthusiasm of in-person supporters but rather to the absence of lucrative television contracts.

However, during the 2010s, a significant surge in demand for American football was observed, particularly among a broader and more mainstream audience. This increase can be attributed to a revised marketing strategy (Delaney, 2015; Rowe, 2021). Instead of tailoring its products to align with the preferences of the European market, the NFL initiated an export strategy, offering its products in their purest form. Despite being scheduled at a time of day that proved inconvenient for a significant number of viewers in Europe, the Super Bowls consistently achieved substantial ratings. Media coverage of American regular-season games attained a high level of popularity and entered the mainstream TV and media market. The NFL has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly with regard to its integration into the digital revolution and its subsequent impact on television (Evans, 2011). This phenomenon was further enhanced by the surging popularity of the NFL Game Pass, an over-the-top streaming service that offers subscribers access to the full array of regular season and postseason games at a competitive price point, eliminating the need for reliance on legacy media or third-party streaming services. The platform offered those interested the opportunity to potentially view all games, which was not possible with the limited number of games broadcast on national legacy media. In addition, it provided the option to listen to the original broadcast. The advent of the "genuine product" marked a significant development, becoming both feasible and affordable. A consumer base that on a broader level was not inclined to support teams from Frankfurt, Berlin, Cologne, or Amsterdam became enthusiastic about the 32 American teams that comprised the NFL. It would appear that audiences have demonstrated a clear preference for the "pure experience" over a localized and ultimately watered-down imitation. The NFL's European revenue has reached approximately $500 million (despite the impact of the pandemic), with no significant growth projected in the forthcoming years (Statista, 2024). Although this figure constitutes merely a fraction of the $28.5 billion in revenue that the American market generates, it nevertheless serves to illustrate that a reliable interest and a substantial fan base have been successfully established on an international level.

To date, the interdependencies between sport, media, and leisure have undergone a shift in favor of the NFL and the interested parties who consume their product. This shift can be attributed to the advancements in technology and the increased accessibility of these products. However, I must mention local and on-site supporters. A notable aspect of NFL Europe's engagement with its local fan base was the strong emotional connection many fans developed with their respective teams and the cities they represented. This phenomenon, as Anderson (2001) notes, underscores the

profound sense of loyalty and community among these fans. Local fans exhibited a strong affinity for their local culture, regional particularities, and the socio-economic structure of the city. The dissolution of local teams has led to a loss of opportunities for individuals to engage with authentic "home teams" or, more optimally, with "hometown heroes." While there is a consensus that advancements in media accessibility, improved modes of travel, and a "cosmopolitan mindset" have transformed fandom in soccer from a highly localized phenomenon to a more widespread community-based activity (Linden & Linden, 2017: 42), it is evident that clubs, teams, and players maintain a physical presence, often aligning themselves with the clubs' public image and identity. From 2013 to 2017, the NFL increased its visibility in the United Kingdom significantly, transitioning from a single game played annually to a series of four. Beginning in 2023, annual regular season games were held in Germany, with Spain following suit in 2025. While this is not tantamount to being a follower or even a supporter of a home team, it facilitates access for those interested in the NFL version of American football at a more general level. European spectators do not attend a game to support a particular team; rather, their interest lies in the sport itself, the spectacle, and the novelty. A notable aspect of this strategy is the dissolution of the "home team," which has been effectively phased out by the NFL. This is the practical realization of a concept formulated three decades ago by Eric Leifer (1995: 300): a direct correlation has been demonstrated between multinationality, the globalization of products, and the dissolution of emotional attachment to domestic teams. This is the current state of affairs regarding the NFL's presence in Europe.

4 The London Game

To a certain extent, I was the ideal test subject for the NFL's revamped European marketing strategy. My initial exposure to American football occurred during a time as an exchange student in the 1980s, when the game was introduced to me by my host family. Subsequently, I remember watching highlight reels on German television in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At approximately 2015, I began to experience a deepening interest in the sport, both in my personal life and in a sociological sense. This attraction can be attributed to the intensive global marketing efforts, its pervasiveness on television, and the mounting enthusiasm within the media and among some of my male students. In 2018, I had the opportunity to attend a regular season game in Pittsburgh and found the experience thoroughly captivating. As I was residing in the city with two of my graduate students for a conference, we immediately rolled out plans for a cross-cultural exploration on experiencing American football. This could have ended the following morning by achieving a more sober state of mind; however, it did not.

I began to visit games more frequently and to take notes and pictures when visiting the United States, primarily during business for the university. Over time this evolved into long-term, multi-sited ethnographic investigation of the global dimensions of professional sporting events (Marcus, 1995). It entailed attending football games and engaging in discourse with fans across multiple countries and cities, with a primary focus on the United States. Comprehensive documentation was compiled,

comprising extensive logs, notes, and photographic evidence on 26 field engagements.[2] Professional sporting events are characterized by elevated levels of noise, activity, and, at times, sensory overload. A substantial collection of photographs captured on game days was utilized to document my experiences. This methodological approach enabled me to (a) revisit my experience, (b) retrace memories that might have otherwise been lost, and (c) identify details that had initially eluded me. My experience with professional sports encompasses a variety of settings, including sports bars across the United States, particularly in Brooklyn for Super Bowl LIII (2019). For context, I have attended major league baseball, hockey, and soccer games in the United States as well as in Germany. The data analysis process, which encompassed coding, conceptualization, and typification, was guided by a Grounded Theory Approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strübing, 2004).

On Sunday, October 30, 2022, I attended a regular season week 8 game in London featuring the Denver Broncos and the Jacksonville Jaguars. Compared to other games played in American territory, this particular one had very distinctive characteristics. It felt different. American football venues, even when they are not situated in the periphery of urban areas, are characterized by expansive open spaces, parking lots situated in proximity to the stadium, and unconventional forms of entertainment, as well as overt invitations to consumers to spend their money. My fascination with tailgating, defined as the social practice of consuming food and beverages from the tailgate of one's vehicle prior to the game, started way back in Pittsburgh. It intensified in Denver, Colorado, as Empower Field at Mile High is situated between less populated neighborhoods, industrial areas, and parks, and extensive parking lots adjacent to the venue provide the necessary space to facilitate tailgating on a larger scale. The noise, the thronging masses, the musical performances, and the palpable enthusiasm were intense. Despite the inclement weather, a crowd had gathered outside the stadium in Chicago, Illinois, to participate in a series of small competitions, and drinking games were hosted by the National Football League and local contractors on the steps of the Field Museum. Prior to a collegiate-level competition in Boulder, a friend and I sat on the patio of a bar and observed the town's vibrant atmosphere for hours.

The spectacle, intensity, chaos, exhilaration, and the pervasive music and noise, along with the presence of marching bands, cheerleaders, and various games, prior to an American football game on-site is a very unique experience (Kohan, 2017). As a rather seasoned researcher who has introduced numerous students to ethnography and Grounded Theory, I frequently found myself being profoundly fascinated and enjoying as well as aiming to adhere to a more serious and rigorous research approach. I was trying to find a balance between leisure and academic pursuits.

[2] One American football game each in Pittsburgh, Chicago, and New Jersey; three American football games in Denver; one American football game in London (all NFL); one American football game in Boulder at the college level (NCAA Division 1); one American football game in Duisburg, Germany (ELF); one soccer game in Denver (MLS); and one visit to soccer games in Bochum, Bielefeld, and Hamburg, Germany (2. Bundesliga), three visits to soccer games in Dortmund, Germany, thereof one with an American friend (1. Bundesliga), one visit to an ice hockey game in Denver (NHL), one baseball game each in St. Louis and Denver (MLB), one visit to a sports bar for Super Bowl LIII in Brooklyn, one visit to a sports bar for post-season games in San Francisco (NFL), three visits to sports bars for regular season games in New York, Chicago, and Denver (NFL), and two stays at friends' homes for Sunday NFL football media coverage (Denver).

I was looking forward to attending a game in London, but it soon turned in a different experience. In contrast to the aforementioned examples, I experienced distinctive architectural features and social practices. Wembley Stadium is situated in the inner city, in proximity to a railway line to the south, 15-story apartment buildings to the east, and factory outlets to the west. The arena is primarily served by public transport, with limited parking space and hence, no tailgating. Olympic Way serves as the primary access route, connecting Wembley Park Station to the arena. In contrast to the outgoing nature of American game days, a digital sign spanning the length of an overpass issued a warning in all capitals to arriving visitors: "DRINKING ALCOHOL IS NOT PERMITTED ON STREET".

This is not to suggest that the attendees of the London Games were perturbed by the local conditions. People were visibly excited, donning various jerseys and costumes. It appeared that they had been anticipating the opportunity to attend a regular-season American football game for a considerable time, and this was a realistic chance to do so. On my flight in from Düsseldorf, four young Germans were seated right next to me, dressed in black Jacksonville jerseys. Their discussion centered on the forthcoming game in London, encompassing their aspirations and anticipations regarding an authentic experience. It appears reasonable to hypothesize that the majority of spectators shared this expectation, anticipating a genuine contest between two prominent American franchises. The real experience.

5 Men, Machines, and Symbols: Localizing the Game

Although the London Game 2022 was largely a "regular" NFL game, deliberate efforts had been made to imbue the experience with a distinctly local flavor. This was to be expected: In line with the concepts of "cosmopolitanization" (Beck, 2000, 2002; Beck & Sznaider, 2010) and "glocalization" (Robertson, 1992, 1995; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006), products are adapted to meet the demands of specific local markets. Conversely, local consumers will experience goods on the basis of their own knowledge. This phenomenon has been widely acknowledged for its role in the global dissemination of sports (Doidge, 2015; De Waele et al., 2018), particularly in the context of soccer's globalization (Maguire et al., 2021). The NFL's strategic decision to localize the game can be understood as a rational response to these expectations. Most notably, immediately prior to commencing the game, the Union Jack was displayed alongside the Stars and Stripes. Furthermore, the British national anthem was performed.[3] In the United States even to me as a foreigner, the presentation of the Stars and Stripes and the rendition of the National Anthem are a crucial moment in the pre-game liturgy. There is a certain decorum present at the stadium that is mostly absent in European countries: the audience standing, most placing their hands over their hearts, and veterans saluting. Such representations of "Americanism" reinforce national identity and provide a unifying moment irrespective of an individual's specific political, religious, or ideological orientation (Andrews & Car-

[3] The equivalent occurred prior to the NFL's Munich game that year, when the German flag was being shown and the German national anthem was being performed.

rington, 2021: 192). Flyovers by Air Force fighter jets have constituted a further tradition, pointing to a deep connection between professional sports, the military, and national identity (Maguire, 2013).[4] Schimmel (2017) emphasizes this relation's evolution and intensification post the 9/11-attacks on the United States. The presentation of men, machines, and symbols of the military prior to the commencement of the game serves two primary functions. First, it reinforces the alliance between the state and its armed forces. Second, it promotes their public's acceptance as a protective wall against domestic and foreign enemies. It is also the expression of a concrete policy and procedures that exists beyond a mere symbolic representation. Schimmel (2010) references initiatives such as "If you see something, say something," which places the responsibility for averting danger in the hands of private spectators as "citizen-soldiers." It can be argued that feelings of strong patriotism and the desire to defend one's nation are less pronounced among Britons (Hochschild & Lang, 2011). However, even if this were not the case, it should be noted that displays of national pride are not easily applicable or transferable to other nations. Consequently, the argument is made that, from a European point of view, the localization of pre-game procedures did not elicit the same emotional responses it would have had the game been played in the United States.

The absence of a home crowd also impacted the overall experience of the game. This is not to discuss the effects home crowds have on the actual win/loss ration of a team but the rather the way vocal encouragement, screaming, cussing and booing add to the emotional involvement in the game. In London, there were no season ticket holders or more rabid fans in attendance who, under typical circumstances, exhibit a strong connection to their team and their city. It can be assumed that the presence of a small flag in Jacksonville's colors and with their logo situated on every seat was supposed to compensate for the absence of a predominantly home team's crowd. Spectators waved these flags throughout the course of the game, instigated by the stadium announcer, potentially in an effort to evoke a routine reminiscent of the "terrible towel" tradition observed in Pittsburgh. I witnessed the fervor, enthusiasm, noise, and more often than not hostility directed towards the opposing team at Heinz Field first-hand and the experience at Wembley Stadium fell significantly short of the intensity and passion exhibited in Pittsburgh - or any US venue for that matter. I have been handed merchandise and promotional material frequently, from simple posters with the athlete's names to a towel with the number 92 for the New York Giants' retirement ceremony of Michael Strahan to, for reasons still unknown to me, light bulbs at a baseball game. However, all this material and memorabilia in question were given to me by members of the home team's staff. It appears that the rather impersonal way of affixing the flag to every seat was a consequence of the architectural design of Wembley Stadium, a topic that will be discussed in greater detail subsequently. I presume that first-time international visitors to Wembley were quite content with these minor alterations to the NFL's usual proceedings. They catered to a distinct British audience, and given that a lot of British comprised the audience, they seemed to welcome the alterations. Judging by their reaction, this was localization done well.

[4] The 2024 edition of the spring-seasoned United Football League was sponsored by the US Army, further illustrating this profound connection.

It is challenging to ascertain the extent of the spectators' reflections on these changes to the product, particularly since it is reasonable to assume that a majority of them had never previously attended an American football game in the United States before. Consequently, they lacked a point of reference in the first place. This was an NFL regular-season game featuring established franchises playing each other—not some third-tier imitation. I would assume that even with the addition of dedicated British elements to the game day proceedings, localization of the game did not reach a level of adjustments that alienated the audience in light of a significantly altered product. However, from the perspective of an individual intent on watching an American football game, these modifications already resulted in a significant alteration to the fundamental nature of the game.

The subsequent discussion will address the more clandestine alterations to the product. The majority of these events can be attributed to a distinct set of urban planning principles that have been implemented in the United States and the United Kingdom. These disparities originate with the mode of transportation, pertain predominantly to the architectural design of the venue and its inherent significance, manifest in the entrance configuration, and culminate in the stadium's interior layout.

6 Getting to the Game

The experience of attending a game does not begin with the initial kickoff; rather, it commences with commuting to the venue. Wembley Stadium is primarily served by a single underground station: Wembley Park. We exited the overcrowded subway and went up to ground level, waiting in long lines in front of the turnstiles in order to have our tickets scanned and be able to leave the station. Upon exiting the station, we proceeded to traverse under an overpass to Olympic Way. Congestion persisted due to the sheer number of visitors as well as the peculiarities of Olympic Way. The route to the venue was lined with walls approximately ten feet high, effectively confining the curb to the side. The crowd was bottlenecked and proceeded in a single direction. This was not an environment conducive to leisure activities, lingering, strolling, partying or grabbing a bite to eat or drink.

Those familiar with game days in the United States must have found this to be peculiar. Prior to games, it is easy to get immersed in the carnival-like atmosphere around the arena, which includes tailgating (the social practice of consuming food and drink out of a motor vehicle's trunk or cargo bed), games conducted by the NFL's sponsors (e.g., Coca-Cola or Budweiser), short performances by marching bands and the home team's cheerleader squad, as well as high-volume music from giant speakers. Tailgate parties imbue the audience with a vibrant and occasionally euphoric mood and facilitate community among the like-minded (Gems & Pfister, 2009: 355; Delaney & Madigan, 2021: 94). Most of these events take place in extensive parking lots adjacent to the stadium, which, on non-game days, appear rather deserted but are nothing short of pandemonium prior to kickoff.[5] Extensive activities in the

[5] I became aware of Rafi Kohan's (2017) book on pre-game activities outside the arena only after I finished analyzing data and drafting this paper. Not academic in any way, Kohan conducted his own "multi-sited

venue's parking lots represent an American tradition, dating back to the late 1800s, and are closely linked to American football (Coche & Guerra, 2017: 227). Space is a structural necessity to tailgating. In the case of venues in the periphery of urban areas (such as Empower Field at Mile High in Denver or MetLife Stadium in New Jersey), it constitutes the sole social activity possible in proximity to the stadium—compensating for the absence of sports bars nearby. However, it should be noted that stadiums close to the inner city (Heinz Field in Pittsburgh or Lambeau Field in Green Bay) do not eschew this tradition. There is an extensive supply of sports bars situated in the access roads to both venues, while tailgating still persists.

While tailgating and the structure of sports facilities are closely linked as a social activity, extensive ground-level parking in proximity to the venue is necessitated by an underdeveloped public transportation system. There are locations within the United States accessible only by automobile. Moreover, the American automobile is imbued with symbolic meaning, maybe even an embodiment of American individualism (Jones, 2021). The act of driving to a sports event in one's own car is widely regarded as a manifestation of autonomy. Europeans, on the other hand, are accustomed to taking public transportation to an event venue. In some cases the ticket is bundled with a ride on mass transportation (Simpson, 2003: 92).

The absence of tailgating and, consequently, community building in London indicates a different culture in pre-game festivities as well as dialectically entwined distinct urban planning. Conversely, the absence of the suitable space for tailgating in Europe is entwined with an idiosyncratic understanding of mass transportation as well as different forms of pre-game festivities. The United Kingdom, particularly London, is known for its rich and distinctive pub culture. Pubs in Britain serve as a primary venue for social interaction and community building (Knight & Monteiro, 2021). This is true in regard to soccer as well. Attendance at a game is frequently accompanied by visits to public houses, both before and after the event (Collins & Vamplew, 2002). However, due to our unfamiliarity with the relevant locations in London and the fact that the evident route to the stadium did not lead past them (unlike, for example, on Dortmund's Lindemannstraße on route from the main station to the Westfalen Stadion), the sites of the pubs in the proximity of Wembley Stadium remained unknown to us.

7 "Thank You For Coming"[6]: Access to and Consumption at the Venue as Contested Interdependencies

What is true for the nexus of modes of transportation, the development of urban space, and tailgating (or the lack thereof) can also be said for the design of the venue. The entrance situation I encountered in most sports venues in the United States is characterized by an open design that blurs the boundary between interior and exterior spaces, as well as by a concourse that prioritizes social interaction over crowd control.

ethnography" and is able to bring the intensity, the bedlam, and the utter enjoyment of the audience to paper in the most palpable way.

[6] Sign suspended from the ceiling in the entrance area of MetLife Stadium during a New York Giants game.

American football and baseball venues are conventionally characterized by a perimeter fence situated at a considerable distance from the stadiums, with gates strategically positioned at various points along the enclosure. Here the audience is security and ticket checked (Kohan, 2017: 280–282). At times there is another, outer perimeter for the audience to be inspected for non-compliance bags and other prohibited items (soda cans come to mind). All spectators are required to pass through mobile metal detectors. In the event that a metal detector is set off, visitors are (mostly) politely requested to step aside to be patted down without any impediment to the smooth progression of the audience entering the venue. The configuration bears a resemblance to airport security measures, albeit with the objective of cultivating a more welcoming atmosphere and minimizing entrance congestion. Upon entering the actual venue the audience is almost immediately gaining access to the concourse, the center of consumption at all NFL arenas I have visited so far. The main concourse is conceived as an expansive social space, replete with catering and entertainment opportunities, evocative of an extensive hallway that circumscribes the entire venue. Regardless of one's seat location, returning here is always an option to purchase food and beverages or to take a brief respite from the game. In general, American venues are designed to facilitate unobstructed movement by spectators, allowing them to traverse the entire expanse from the periphery of the field to the elevated seating sections. The arenas I visited were constructed with only a limited number of dead ends, constraints, or barriers restricting movement. Those interested in pre-game broadcasting have the opportunity to observe media personnel at work on the field. Additionally, spectators are able to observe players and coaches engaging in warm-ups and drills in proximity. These elements are intricately intertwined with the concept of hospitality, evoking a sense of autonomy and flexibility concurrently. In essence, American audiences at NFL stadiums are not constrained by boundaries, and they are accustomed to experiencing a sense of freedom.

All this is not to suggest that security at NFL games is somewhat lax or even remotely relegated to a side note. Far from it. But in contrast to the way the British go about this matter, which will be addressed shortly, the United States' approach to crowd control is not significantly influenced by a shared history of disaster of crowd collapse and crush incidents (Spaaij, 2006). As posited by Masteralexis, Barr, and Hums (2019: 366), the primary function rather is the prevention of potential individual threats of violence and domestic terrorism. The current development's origin is widely considered to be the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. Since that day, the surveillance of visitors to NFL games (and other potential high-value targets) has increased significantly, successively through the (covert) use of facial recognition, biometric scans, high-resolution camera images of the audience, as well as software for monitoring social media apps and visitors' cell phones. There is close collaborative effort between the NFL, the Department of Homeland Security, and the military, actively engaged in monitoring airspace (Schimmel, 2012, 2017). Armed law enforcement is present throughout sports venues, at times positioned on the field during the game. According to Kohan (2017: 193), there are snipers stationed within the stadium. However, it should be noted that most of the aforementioned security measures are essentially invisible. While visitors to sporting events overwhelmingly support visible safety and security measures such as metal detectors, digital ticket

scanners, and visible cameras (Allen & Hall, 2025), there still seems to be a critical threshold of the amount of hardware being publicly employed prior to raising a sense of insecurity. Hall et al. (2023: 70) propose a synthesis of consumerism and the prevention of threats. The presence of ample spatial dimensions, sufficient illumination, a diverse array of commercial establishments, entertainment venues, dining options, and a designated performance area contributes to an increased sense of security. An integration of clear signage and more generally, welcoming design elements further reinforces this perception, fostering a comfortable and inviting atmosphere. What is being described here are the arena's concourse and general layout with minimal isolated routes and an emphasis on avoiding entrapment areas.

There is an evident contrast to the structure of Wembley Stadium. The experience here mostly adheres to crowd control measures. Wembley is divided into four color-coded zones, which spectators are bound to. Access to the stadium is granted via narrow and confined passageways to man-high metal turnstiles, which present a challenge for more heavy-set individuals. The turnstiles are not situated along the perimeter of the stadium; rather, they are incorporated into the stadium's exterior walls. Consequently, challenges in operating the automated ticket scanner result in protracted waiting periods for subsequent visitors. Once the ticket is validated, the turnstile opens, thereby permitting the spectator to enter a corridor composed of bare concrete. This design changes the experience of attending a game and also speaks to the potential security interests: it is not the individual that concerns security, it is the ability to control the crowd itself.

We gained access to the stadium via the designated "E" entrance and were promptly directed to our seats, situated in the nosebleeds of the stands on Level 5. Due to our lack of familiarity with Wembley Arena, we had anticipated that we would have access to the lower levels of the facility, which would in turn provide us a way to get to the main concourse. From there we planned to observe the players engaged in drills and the media crews involved in their final preparations on the field. It just was not possible. Neither could we gain access to the main concourse or descend to the lower levels. Staff members were strategically positioned at the exits that were closed during the game but opened afterward to facilitate the swift egress of the audience. For us, they kept being shut. The stadium's division into four distinct zones added to these restrictions. Rather than being afforded the opportunity to move freely within the stadium, each attempt to get places resulted in ending up in front of a concrete wall.

It is evident that these occurrences must be attributed to the attempts at effectively controlling and managing the crowds. Europe and Great Britain have experienced very different trajectories of crowd violence and disasters than the United States. This phenomenon is particularly evident in soccer, as opposed to American football. Since the 1960s, there has been a history of competitive violence perpetrated by fan groups, primarily against supporters of opposing teams (Spaaij, 2006). This is exemplified by the Heysel tragedy in Brussels, Belgium, in which Liverpool fans charged a section occupied by Juventus supporters, resulting in the tragic deaths of 39 individuals prior to the 1985 European Cup final (Chisari, 2005). The incident has become inextricably linked in the collective memory with hooliganism, violence, and the absence of effective crowd control. However, hooliganism is not exclusive to soccer in the United

Kingdom; it has been adapted and localized in virtually every nation's soccer culture, taking on different and distinct forms. Contrary to the predominant perspective, the magnitude and intensity of organized violence may be exaggerated due to the pervasive and sometimes sensationalist media coverage (Frosdick & Marsh, 2005). The Hillsborough Disaster and the death of 96 individuals prior to the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest have deepened the aforementioned connection further (Scraton, 2005), even if it remains a misconception to associate the incident with hooligan violence, as rather the majority of responsibility lies with the inadequate security measures being put in place (Scraton, 2009). An argument can be made that the endeavor to regulate the behavior of crowds is exemplified in the architectural design of professional soccer stadiums that have undergone refurbishment, remodeling, or rebuilding over the past decades.

One potential explanation for these differences could be found by referring to the concept of "culture." However, it is argued that Luhmann's system theory offers a more effective framework for elucidating such discrepancies. Security measures employed in American football and soccer in England are widely uncontested. The primary objective of the entrance situation is to regulate individuals and guarantee that incidents of a violent or otherwise undesirable nature are prevented. Admission to a stadium constitutes a critical component of a leisure activity; however, the event producers have elected to delete security matters from the sport event as a leisure activity program and default them to police or security staff. Although event producers are responsible for marketing a sport interdependent with economy and leisure, the code of selling/not selling or unforced/coerced is superseded by the program of trust/suspicion (Luhmann, 1968). Speaking with Luhmann, in the context of professional sports events, every member of the crowd is a potential security threat. But security measures are not directed at specific individuals; rather, the audience itself is regarded as a problem primarily by law enforcement, the media, and politics. This perception is, in essence, disconnected from real-life events (Best, 2021; Weißmann, 2022: 41–43). The prevailing discourse has effectively taken over observing and analyzing what is actually empirically evident. In England, this phenomenon is exemplified by stadium architecture. The use of narrow steel doors and turnstiles, the limitation of movement, and the prohibition of alcohol consumption collectively suggest an interpretation of the audience as a potential threat.

The situation in Germany is distinct from other countries with a plethora of organized and active supporters and fan clubs.[7] These are not only well connected to the media and politics but also deeply intertwined with the history and current politics

[7] As is often observed, empirical reality is complex. It is important to note that not all spectators possess an equal degree of agency. Occasional spectators, as well as those lacking affiliations with organized fan associations or a strong emotional connection to soccer, are unlikely to engage in collective actions against the sport's governing body or even adopt a distinct stance on contentious issues. Therefore, it can be argued that while some German soccer fans are indeed a formidable force, this is not the case for all of them. A recent example of this phenomenon in 2024 was the ongoing protest by the "active fan scene" against the introduction of an investor into the marketing of the Bundesliga. Following weeks of intense and visually compelling resistance from supporters, which was effectively utilized by the media, the German Football League (DFL) chose to suspend negotiations on the agreement. This was an exertion of influence by fan associations—and completely unthinkable for the NFL—but largely done so without the participation of the "ordinary fan."

of their respective clubs (Gabler, 2011). In the 1990s, measures to enhance security were implemented in the aftermath of the Heysel incident and Germany's own history of hooliganism and crowd violence. However, the subsequent responses have varied in their implementation and impact. In lieu of stringent and unwavering measures, the German Soccer Association, in conjunction with the states and professional clubs, initiated comprehensive educational initiatives (Kotthaus & Templin, 2022). The implementation of technical innovations aimed at enhancing security measures was only executed with a decade-long delay. Not until 2024 did Bayern Munich enact the use of metal detectors, marking a shift from the more prevalent pat-downs that are still present in other venues today. Therefore, the scene at the entrance to each professional soccer game is akin to a stampede, with hundreds of individuals being forcibly propelled from behind, attempting to force their way through narrow metal gates without establishing any orderly queue. These individuals are expeditiously herded forward and subsequently experience a sense of relief upon gaining entry to the stadium. Add a total lack of entertainment programs and the absence of a concourse in favor of a series of unrelated food stalls, and you have a very different leisure experience in the United States, England, and Germany.

8 Conclusion

Why Luhmann? Why inderdependencies? The underlying rationale for conceptualizing leisure as a distinct system merits some attention. In this article, I have avoided an "essential" definition of leisure in lieu of conceptualizing it in terms of form theory as a unique operative system. I posit that leisure operates under the auspices of the code of "unforced/coerced." All aspects of society that lie beyond the purview of this program must not be considered leisure activities but rather are inextricably linked to the economic system, media, political structures, and security concerns. This approach accomplishes two primary objectives: Firstly, a globalization phenomenon currently in the process, such as the Europeanization of the NFL, offers an excellent example for examining practices, routines, and also the inevitabilities of adaptation to local tastes. This is also because the history of the NFL in Europe is still very young and marked by failures and withdrawals. Secondly, the "content" of leisure changes significantly across different regions, countries, and continents, as well as across various social classes, religions, and genders. How "unforced" and "coerced" activities are employed varies, but can be determined more clearly by facilitating the code as a hermeneutic search grid.

Luhmann offers a theoretical framework that enables the conceptualization of these divergent interpretations, routines, and institutionalizations as a contested network of interdependencies. While his theoretical contributions may initially appear counterintuitive, their value becomes particularly evident when examining dynamic formations, social practices, and routines that vary significantly across nations. Despite Luhmann's characterization of systems as operationally "closed," this does not imply that they operate in a vacuum. The environment of a system is invariably comprised of other systems, as it is devoid of "random" communications or actions. This places interdependencies at the core of the question of the meaning of a communication or

action: It could be argued that the entire audience in England is perceived as a problem and subject to the logic of overt crowd control. In the United States, surveillance and vetting are carried out under the auspices of the prevention of terrorist attacks. The are established as well-known and established security protocols. However, security activities are increasingly conducted as background processes, which are invisible to the audience. The integration of advanced surveillance technology with consumerism plays a pivotal role in this paradigm, facilitating audience engagement and participation in the event. This engagement is orchestrated in accordance with the event's intended purpose: positioning spectators as consumers who are presented with the opportunity to experience a sporting event as a form of leisure and to purchase concessions and merchandise. In contrast, in Germany, spectators are at least to some degree regarded as stakeholders and influential prosumers (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) who have the privilege of actively shaping the politics and procedures of their respective clubs as well as entire sport governing bodies. Consequently, they occupy a middle ground between security risk and consumer, while also being regarded as somewhat more entitled and having fewer opportunities to consume. The findings presented in this study suggest, with appropriate caution, a departure from monolithic and essentialist thinking about factors influencing localization processes. Instead, leisure activities such as the one provided by the NFL must be conceptualized as embedded in contested interdependencies, connecting leisure to other systems. It remains to be researched within which system specific communications or actions are being employed. Only then we understand how and why certain routines, e.g. something simple as entering a sporting venue, are facilitated the way they are. In the event that further research were to be conducted, systems such as the economy or security could also be examined as fluid and contested—and thus in a state of constant change. This would then signal a programmatic shift towards an enormously dynamic understanding of leisure in its interdependence with other systems and subsystems.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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