

Forbidden fruits? Institutional rules, agency and structure in European football

Abstract: This paper investigates the contested regulation of alcohol, standing and pyrotechnics in European men's football, utilizing Giddens' structuration theory. Specifically, we analyse how the regulation of these three practices – representing key expressions of football supporter culture inside the stadia – reveals the making of a spatio-historically significant structure that is constantly 'on-the-move' and co-produced by processes of institutional control, fan agency and acts of micro-resistance. The structuring power of European football's governing body (UEFA), therefore, constrains and unleashes new dimensions of supporters' agency that, again, reveal how attempts to regulate cultural practices and spaces are characterized by new sites of (non)compliance, resistance and (non)negotiated practices. The conceptual article extends our sociological knowledge on structure and agency within spaces of consumption, culture and sport.

Key words: agency, Giddens, football supporters, cultural practices, structure.

Introduction

Over the last few years, several important policy developments, with significant consequences for football supporter cultures, spectatorship and their regulation, have taken place in European football. Some of these relate to three of the most contentious football fandom practices inside the football stadium historically and presently: standing, the ban on alcohol and the use of pyrotechnics (Numerato, 2018; Turner, 2023). Whilst the (il)legality of these practices differ in *national* leagues and countries, they have since the 1980s been tightly regulated on the European level, notably in UEFA-owned competitions, for safety and security reasons. However, far from passively received, the regulation of standing, alcohol and pyrotechnics has been contested by many critical, or politically engaged supporters, some who argue that this criminalizes football fan behaviours and sanitizes the carnivalesque, transgressive, and spontaneous atmospheres created and desired by certain types of supporters (Pearson, 2012). Crucially, the restrictions on these three areas touch upon the fundamental principles of some supporters' understanding of fan cultures (Doidge et al. 2020).

Whereas UEFA (2017) have remained adamant that 'there is no such thing as safe use of pyrotechnics in such confined spaces', developments have occurred regarding alcohol sale and standing inside stadiums. In 2018, UEFA amended its safety regulations, allowing for alcohol sale inside stadiums subject to national or local laws. Before the 2022/23 season, UEFA's Executive Committee launched an observation programme for the introduction of standing

facilities in European competitions for games taking place in Germany, France and England. This programme's objective was to 'assess if and under what conditions standing may be reintroduced in UEFA competitions in a safe manner' (UEFA, 2022). In May 2024, an extension of this programme to fixtures in the Netherlands, Belgium, Scotland, Portugal and Austria was confirmed (FSE, 2024). We contend that the decisions to permit the sale of alcohol and standing sections on a country-to-country basis (and the firm stance regarding pyrotechnics) invite sociological analysis that uncovers how precisely the current configuration was arrived at. This includes the stages of escalating conflict and claim-making activities, waves of political reactions and fan protests and measures implemented to address the issues (Jasny & Lenartowicz, 2022).

By analysing the contestations over standing, pyrotechnics and alcohol in European men's football, this article addresses a broader puzzle. Namely, the question of how spaces of consumption and cultural practices are subjected to evolving legal and security-related regulative mechanisms and how these regulations evolve as a consequence of interactions between political and football authorities, and supporters; the latter who often consider these practices as integral to their immediate stadium experience and, more widely, football supporter cultures. Indeed, as Turner (2021, 2023) demonstrates regarding the removal of standing terraces in UK stadia following the Hillsborough disaster in Sheffield in 1989 – where 97 Liverpool FC supporters died in a crowd crush – we observe here, in Habermasian terms, how the inhibitors of a 'lifeworld' characterized by distinct rituals and traditions stand up for, or react to, top-down attempts to colonize that same lifeworld. The lifeworld, accordingly, can be understood as the shared day-to-day relationships, feelings and interactions that individuals share with others in their social and personal life (Habermas, 1984).

However, in this paper we focus on the European level and, specifically, UEFA-owned competitions. Whereas UEFA is the governing body of *European football*, it can likewise be approached as a 'global governor' (Włoch, 2013) and supranational decision-maker (Tsoukala, 2009a), which articulates and possesses its own safety and security regulations that competing clubs, or countries hosting tournaments must adhere to. Thus, UEFA possesses the power to introduce globally recognized rules that mould stadium spaces, supporter cultures and rituals associated with football fandom (Włoch, 2013), although these rules may occasionally clash with supporters' ideas of football, or even national laws, as the case of alcohol sale demonstrates. Hence, we seek to contribute with an improved sociological understanding of the regulation of standing, pyrotechnics and alcohol sale, by asking: (1) How has the regulation

of these practices in Europe has evolved? (2) How have supporters' agency in the contestations over these institutional rules co-created contemporary football's structure. We argue that supporters' agency – while constrained by UEFA's structuring power – unleashes new dimensions of the said agency that inform new outcomes, and spontaneous acts of resistance

Our justification for choosing pyrotechnics, alcohol, and standing as *exemplars of contestation* is threefold. It is underpinned by the importance of fandom rituals, activism, and football's political economy. First, these are all practices that may be considered rituals when occurring inside the stadiums, where they are regulated. Indeed, while the use of pyrotechnics and alcohol consumption of course also occurs *outside* the stadium, for instance, before a match, and also is part of fan culture, it is not an end in itself (Dixon, 2013); it does not constitute a primary dimension of supporter culture but rather serves as a prelude to what happens inside the stadium. It should also be remembered that not all fans engage in the three practices mentioned above to the same extent. According to Richard Giulianotti's taxonomy (2002), some fans ('cold' ones) adopt a more detached approach to supporter culture and rituals, focusing on consuming the football spectacle. According to Giulianotti's approach, 'hot' supporters are the fans most involved in supporter culture and its rituals.

If 'supporter cultures' refer broadly to the norms, conduct, expression and practices of supporting (Koskelainen, 2024), then standing, alcohol consumption and flares have been integral to many supporter cultures for decades. Far from fading away, debates about these three fandom practices remain ever-pressing, and – as illustrated above – have done so since the 1980s. Recently, following EURO 2024 in Germany, it was reported that UEFA had handed out over €1 million in fines over fireworks, pyrotechnics and disorder *inside* stadiums (Twigg, 2024). Second, and relatedly, pyrotechnics and safe standing are both located within Numerato's (2018) 'football fan activism complex' as those atmospheric elements that supporters in Europe regularly contest. Yet, alcohol restrictions are also a site of contestation in football (Pearson & Sale, 2011). Pyrotechnics, standing and alcohol consumption, thus, is not only viewed as central to football's carnivalesque atmospheres, but central point of contention between supporter activists and authorities. Finally, the three exemplars remain intriguing because, whilst they are historically regulated or prohibited practices, they are also deeply intertwined with football's political economy. Not only do UEFA competitions often have alcohol sponsors (Pearson & Sale, 2011), but broadcasted *images* of visible fan performances, including standing fans, flares and coloured smoke could elevate the brand of

football's competitions, transmitting signals of vibrant and spectacular atmospheres generated by supporters (Pearson, 2012).

It appears, therefore, that the regulation of alcohol, standing and pyrotechnics uncover the contestations over the 'last bastion' of supporter culture expressions within stadiums. The institutional rules and confrontations lying beneath these, we argue, can be theorized with insights from Giddens' (1979, 1984) theory, which we unpack next.

Theoretical considerations: Giddens, structure and agency

This section maps out the key tenets of Giddens' structuration theory, with a focus upon structure and agency. The analysis of the relationship between organizations such as UEFA and fans can encompass various components, as this relationship is multi-dimensional. However, one of the crucial—even fundamental—aspects is the consideration of fan agency, since fans are *social actors* within the context of structural and institutional solutions introduced by football's authorities (Cleland et al., 2018; Allison, 2023). Supporters' pivotal position within the structural field of football, requires us to take seriously and analyse fans' agency in this context.

However, our analysis deliberately focuses on three specific dimensions of fan behaviour, as we are not concerned with basic agency (i.e., fans simply deciding whether to attend a match). As a starting point, we approach fan agency broadly, as fan culture is encompassing. Thus, if elements such as carnivalesque behaviour based on alcohol consumption, standing during matches, or igniting pyrotechnics compose parts of fan culture — in many ways, they can be called as 'structural principles' — axes relating tradition, values, belonging and particular sense of kinship (Giddens, 1984, p. 183); then a key question is how fans' agency in this context navigates the institutional imperatives imposed by another actor operating within the football structure—in this case, UEFA. By positioning the research problem in this manner, we situate our analysis within the theoretical framework of Giddens' structuration theory. This approach stems from the fact that our article's subject matter directly relates to *changing rules* and *normative orders*, as well as the role of social actors in negotiating and reproducing the structure of social world. This approach allows for the incorporation of practices through which social life is produced (Cohen, 1989).

One of the main propositions of Giddens' theory is the 'duality of structure', which means that 'the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the

practices that constitute those systems' (Giddens, 1979, p. 69). This theory offers considerable scope for analysing the structuring of social interactions across temporal, spatial (for an example of implementing into football research, see Dixon, [2015]), cultural-identity, economic and political dimensions (Walters, 2003). Structuration theory posits that social actors forming a structure (and simultaneously being influenced by it) hold equal status – at least on an *ontological level*. In principle, therefore, UEFA and fans can be perceived as social actors of an equal ontological status, though not necessarily institutional status. The process of structuration, understood as the interaction of social actors with a system of rules and norms, is a process in which actors influence the structure. The structure conditions the space for interaction with rules while simultaneously being the outcome of how individual actors behave within that interaction. Structure is not fixed, however, as it depends on the power of actors engaged in the interactions with the institutional rules.

Notwithstanding, the issue of power and domination is crucial for analysing the process of structuration and for avoiding the naïve assumption that all actors are equal in their interaction with institutional rules. In his approach, Giddens (1984) noted that the dominance of one actor increases if they possess power in mobilizing two types of resources: allocative and authoritative resources. Conceptually, the structural rules (and the possibility of their introduction) cannot be separated from the resources, and, as result, structural completeness includes dominance and power.

As the next section unpacks, UEFA is the dominant actor in this context. UEFA possesses material resources beyond the reach of fans. Most importantly, it governs institutional rules that clubs, national federations, and even states – for example, upon staging European competitions – must commit to (Włoch, 2013). UEFA can also implement penalizing procedures if other actors violate their imposed rules. Fans, as social actors primarily entering a world of rules structurally established by UEFA, can strive to influence the structuration process in a way that reshapes the field of football, or at least attempts to preserve the most crucial pillars of their culture.

On the other hand, the preservation of the core tenets of fan culture is possible because the duality of structure is essentially a feedback-feedforward process. This is because both social actors and structures mutually create social systems, and social systems in turn become part of this duality. Structuration therefore recognises a social cycle in which (albeit not on equal terms) fans, for example, can influence institutional change. A feedback-feedforward process

is therefore based on continuous cycles of exchange, interaction, and sometimes pressure, which over time affect the institutional order. Thus, the evolution of rules and regulations, and the entire structure are not permanently determined. From the perspective of UEFA's dominant power over the institutional order within the structure of football, it is easy to underestimate the role and significance of fans. However, Giddens (1984, p. 24) emphasized the importance of 'a dialectic of presence and absence which ties the most minor or trivial forms of social action to structural properties of the overall society, and to the coalescence of institutions over long stretches of historical time'. As we demonstrate, fan activism, in the context of reinstating standing areas or loosening restrictions on alcohol availability, yields results, even when discussing a temporal process that unfolds over several years (Turner, 2023). Fan practices, and in a broader historical perspective, changes in structural rules, are based on what Giddens (1984, p.33) described as 'trivial encounters'. A potent example of the impact of a local, 'trivial encounter' is the ritual known as 'the Poznań', which involves fans celebrating by standing with their backs to the pitch and jumping together while linking arms. It has entered the canon of fan behaviors in many European countries, and its creators are supporters of the Polish club, Lech Poznań. The phrase 'the Poznań' even has its own definition in the *Cambridge Dictionary*. It remains challenging to ascertain whether this specific, local 'Poznań encounter' became a significant element in a larger feedback-forward process within the system, prompting UEFA to engage in discussions about standing terraces. However, as we contend, even the smallest social actions must be ascribed a sociological importance and contribute to the modification of social systems. Actors—even through local encounters—always possess the possibility to implement the dialectic of control, allowing them to break normative actions and introduce new rules.

Overall, we argue that structuration theory provides an analytical framework for examining fan agency in *confrontation* with institutional rules imposed by other actors co-creating the structure of contemporary football. As demonstrated, especially the post-Heysel context of European football reveals this. At the Heysel stadium, in Brussels, May 1985, 39 Juventus supporters died following a charge by Liverpool supporters and the collapse of a stadium wall. As unpacked next, the tragedy's aftermath, crucially, was characterized by an array of new national and European-wide regulative, legal, and security frameworks. The duality of structure allows us to view the structural framework of football in *statu nascendi*, where power and domination, though not equally distributed, involve rules that are negotiated and reproduced through the interaction of individual actors. The paper's subsequent sections are dedicated to

analysing how fans renegotiate—and what tactics of agency they employ—the meaning of their cultural pillars in the context of institutional rules established by UEFA.

The regulation of football spectatorship and stadia in Europe

It remains imperative to position the regulation of football supporters and stadiums in Europe in a socio-historical context, focusing specifically on UEFA. As a starting point, these regulative regimes have not been insulated or unaffected by a set of internal and external processes (Author B, 2025). Regarding the former, this includes, *inter alia*, historical issues with football-related violence and disorder from the 1970s onwards and the profitable desire of clubs, leagues and sports organizations that favoured controlled and consumable spaces. More standardized restrictions also emerged responsively in light of stadium tragedies in Europe, including the Bradford stadium fire (1985), and the mentioned disasters at Heysel and Hillsborough, which highlighted the unsafe nature of many stadia. Meanwhile, external forces, in terms of global governance systems, the politicization of security, and the turn towards a risk logic of crime control have similarly shaped the present-day regulation of football spectatorship (Tsoukala, 2009a, 2009b; Author B, 2025). These forces affirmed the necessity of transnational coordination in face of fluid social problems, and attached a transnational layer to the new penology that was consolidated throughout the 1980s, which, rather than punishing or rehabilitating individuals, was principally concerned with the identification and long-term management of ‘unruly’ or ‘risky’ social groups (Tsoukala, 2009b).

As Tsoukala (2009b) demonstrates, early traces of a supranational frame in the regulation of football crowds in Europe may be found in the form of UEFA’s 1983 binding instructions and recommendations for avoiding crowd disturbances, which contained situational prevention strategies and had been drafted in cooperation with the German and English Football Associations (FAs). These instructions updated UEFA’s earlier guidelines that entered force in 1976 and contained different disciplinary sanctions including disqualification (of teams), fines and stadium bans (Vieli, 2015). The case of European football, therefore, composes an intriguing case where changing patterns of crime control emerged from the private sphere (i.e., sporting organizations) but matured as new security actors, law enforcers and international organizations entered the field. In this respect, it is well-established that the 1985 Heysel tragedy opened up a new chapter in the regulation of football crowds, much in accordance with the new penology preoccupied with the identification of future risks. The Heysel tragedy – where 39 supporters died following a crowd crush – affirmed the necessity of pan-European

responses, rules and information exchange that could guide national level responses in the battle against ‘football hooliganism’ (Tsoukala, 2009b).

Whilst UEFA initially responded in sporting terms by banning English teams from participating in European competitions for five seasons, Heysel also transformed the ways in which football crowds were publicly framed, and increasingly subjected to a raft of new regulative and social control measures. Crucially, the tragedy accelerated the securitization of European football, and the criminalization of football fans (Numerato, 2018; Author A, 2024). Not long after Heysel, Council of Europe (1985) also adapted the ‘Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour at Sports Events and in particular at Football Matches’. UEFA was granted a permanent observer status on the Convention’s Standing Committee (Vieli, 2015).

The Convention, *inter alia*, actively encouraged cross-country collaboration between law enforcers and sporting bodies, and oppressive modes of surveillance and segregation of supporters. The latter was helped by the Convention’s wording which was characterized by a vagueness (Tsoukala, 2009b), and encouraged signatory states to: ‘exclude from or forbid access to matches and stadia, insofar as it is legally possible, *known or potential trouble-makers*, or people who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs’ (Council of Europe, 1985: 2, emphasis added). The unclear boundaries between criminal and deviant acts, including their vague meanings in the football context (Tsoukala, 2009b) were extended by UEFA’s revised guidelines from 1985 which, importantly, divided UEFA competition fixtures into ‘high-risk’ and ‘normal-risk’ matches (Vieli, 2015).

The implications of the new European level policies’ vague target populations remain significant to this day (Author A, 2025). Indeed, supporter cultures in Europe still contain and remain characterized by behaviours that could easily be defined from the outside as potentially troublesome, for example, public alcohol consumption, offensive chanting or shouting or standing in seated areas. Yet, when interpreted in the context of supporter culture, these remain situationally normalized (Pearson, 2012; Jack, 2024). Indeed, in some local contexts, fans utilize the label of ‘deviant’ in the process of creating their own identity – embracing this publicly assigned stigma as part of their self-narrative (Author B, 2021). They internalize and embrace negative societal labels, potentially leading to a deviant lifestyle or identity. This allows them to achieve at least two goals: they blunt the edge of public discourse directed at them and liberate themselves from the stigma of being someone they would not want to be. Thus, their agency extends beyond practical activities, such as protests, and intervenes in the

symbolic, interpretive, and identity-related spheres. Consequently, this also broadens the scope of patterns and norms-shaping fan culture (they can e.g., consume more alcohol or use more sophisticated flares and pyrotechnics). It turns out, therefore, that the pressure of external institutionalized norms and dominant structures fuels the culture and identity-forming processes of the actors against whom these external norms were directed. This illustrates how, through the duality of structure, cultural practices are renegotiated and reproduced.

As argued, UEFA's power is underpinned by how their regulations and policies must be adhered to in national contexts, and thus spread from the supranational, to the national or local levels. Hence, since UEFA can be approached as a global governor that develops and imposes institutional norms and rules, clubs participating in UEFA competitions like the Champions League, or nations staging the European Championships have also had to oblige to UEFA's standards, to avoid, for example, fines, sanctions or a withdrawal of hosting rights (Włoch, 2013). As such, while UEFA is no security agency *per se*, it has, since its 1976 guidelines, held the power to dictate and define and dictate risk and security in football stadiums across Europe. It possesses the historically-grounded power to designate what constitutes (un)acceptable or (il)legal behaviours in football. States and private actors like clubs or football associations must subsequently attend to these. Currently, this is accurately illustrated by UEFA's (2019) own safety and security regulations that apply to competitions played under the auspices of UEFA; and co-exists with other global guidelines issued by the Council of Europe, and the EU.

These normative orders and rules are not constant. As demonstrated, this regulatory context is also characterized by a set of negotiated outcomes, between supporter groups, clubs, police forces, football and political authorities. Here, we position the contestations over standing, alcohol and pyrotechnics. As outlined next, it was within this context that the three practices of centrality for supporter cultures became prohibited, criminalized, or characterized as deviant, and later reintroduced (i.e., standing, alcohol sale), although these processes were far from passively received by fans.

Indeed, as several scholars recognize, supporters across national, and European-wide contexts have, since the 1980s, regularly contested policing, legal and security regimes that criminalize football fandom, securitize stadiums, and sterilize atmospheric elements, performances and rituals (Cleland et al., 2018; Numerato, 2018; Turner, 2021, 2023; Author B, 2023). For this reason, the regulation of, and longstanding resistance, in the contexts of standing, alcohol sale and pyrotechnics demand analyses of not just their top-down processes seeking to prohibit,

criminalize or legalize. Following Giddens, they should be approached as the co-created structure of European football's regulation. The next sections produce three exemplars that reveal how the dynamics of these practices' evolution can be more holistically understood by recognizing the interactive reactions by supporters who respond, challenge, accept, or reject the attempts to make football a tightly regulated social consumption space.

Questioning the assumptions surrounding the alcohol ban

Even prior to Heysel, the ban of alcohol around football matches was considered on a game-by-game basis. Ahead of the European Cup final at Heysel in 1985, the Belgian FA had suggested an alcohol ban 'within a certain radius of the stadium', but these were rejected by the authorities (Vieli, 2015, p. 76). The Convention that passed shortly after the tragedy, whether deliberately or not, paved way for a raft of national legislation and European level regulations aiming to curb the threat of 'potential troublemakers' under the influence of alcohol or drugs in football contexts (Council of Europe, 1985). Whilst the 'football industry' has a long history of alcohol sponsorships, and whilst the role of alcohol consumption is often viewed as integral to football supporter cultures (in Germany, DFL Deutsche Fußball Liga GmbH, the organization that manages the Bundesliga competition, mentions on its official website the consumption of beer as an integral part of the stadium experience, see Bundesliga [2025]), political and football authorities, proceeding on the unverified basis that alcohol is a causal factor for crowd disorder, have commonly implemented restrictive legislation and restrictions on supporters' alcohol consumption in order to curb football-related violence, disorder and anti-social behaviour in national contexts (Pearson & Sale, 2011; Buso et al., 2025). Moreover, media discourses surrounding 'football hooliganism', typically, emphasize the role played of alcohol and drunkenness (Tsoukala, 2009b), although this type of discourse is considered 'outdated' by many football stakeholders (Bandura et al. 2023).

As for European competitions, UEFA prohibited the sale of alcohol at Champions League or Europa League fixtures between 2006-2018 via Article 36 of its safety and security regulations (Buso et al., 2025). Though, this article did not cover the full stadium:

UEFA also bans the sale of alcohol from stadiums for its competitions, although executive sections remain exempt from this ban. This leads to a situation where Heineken beer sponsors the UEFA 'Champions League' tournament under the slogan, Heineken and the Champions League: Great Together but at which their product is not permitted to be consumed by non-executive supporters (Pearson & Sale, 2011, p. 155).

In 2019, Article 36 was then revised, so match organizers (clubs) were allowed to sell or distribute alcohol in the stadiums as long as this was permitted by relevant national or local laws (e.g., Germany and Italy, see Pearson & Stott, [2022]). This followed evaluations of whether the previous policy prohibiting alcohol should be maintained or removed. Notwithstanding, UEFA's changed stance has had little impacts on some countries, such as England, where alcohol consumption inside stadiums is prohibited by the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol) Act 1985 which prohibits fans from consuming alcohol within the sight of a pitch. Crucially, this means that the relaxed regulations on the European level, therefore, directs supporters' contestation directly towards *national* laws in those countries where alcohol bans remain intact.

Welcoming UEFA's changed stance, the Chief Executive of Football Supporters Europe (FSE) – the umbrella organization for fans in Europe – commented that '[s]upporters felt that the alcohol banning policy was paternalistic', citing also the lack of evidence to suggest that 'banning alcohol in a stadium has any bearing whatsoever on preventing or curtailing football-related disorder in and around it' (quoted in FSA, 2018). It appears, thus, that supporters' claims for a stop on the alcohol ban have not been framed in terms of its cultural significance in football, but rather its (in)effectiveness. Indeed, some scholars suggests that alcohol restrictions may generate new risks, because supporters stock up on alcohol elsewhere and arrive to the stadium late, which may cause congestion around the turnstiles (Pearson & Sale, 2011).

However, unlike visual protests or longstanding campaigns against specific modes of social control (cf. next section), it may be argued that supporters' contestations over alcohol consumption inside the stadium in European competitions have been mostly embedded in the wider, and more general opposition against the representation of fans as troublemakers, and the criminalization of football fans which entails a suspicious stance taken towards them (Numerato, 2018). Potentially, this may be because alcohol bans rather have been contested by supporters within the context of the nation-state (Author A & B, 2025), as opposition or discontent with potential national laws, as UEFA competitions (and thus regulations) only apply to participating clubs. In certain contexts, like Scotland, supporters' attempts to question the alcohol ban have been linked to the logic lying beneath the ban – namely, that supporters as a social group compose potential troublemakers that must be subjected to special measures rarely found at other sporting events, like rugby or cricket (*Daily Record*, 2025). As such, the argumentation utilized by supporters matches that of some politicians who, similarly, have called for an end to alcohol restrictions on the basis that football fans should not be differently

treated than spectators attending other sporting events (Purves et al., 2022). We therefore see how supporters' contestations over the alcohol ban have been marked by a level of sophistication in fans' argumentation, consistent with Numerato's (2018) findings.

However, in the *absence* of a longstanding European-wide supporters' campaign, it remains impossible here to discount the importance of economic interests, given that the reversed alcohol ban is one that concurrently can benefit clubs, UEFA and sponsors alike, although the policy did not interfere with state sovereignty in form of extant national laws. The fact that, in many countries, alcohol is available in stadiums according to national regulations may be the reason why there has not yet been a transnational campaign by fans on this issue. FSE also does not currently have any initiatives targeting alcohol-related policies. Another pertinent factor is the opportunity for fans to consume alcohol immediately prior to a match. This often forms an integral part of the match-day ritual, with many countries having pubs and bars catering to fans located in the immediate vicinity of stadiums. Additionally, fans sometimes manage to smuggle alcohol into stadiums (Taylor et al. 2018), typically using small containers that evade detection by stadium security. Smuggling alcohol can also be seen as 'part of the game' in challenging systemic regulations, serving a similar function to the illicit introduction of pyrotechnics.

Overall, thus, even if the issue of alcohol was not subjected to large-scale 'official' protests, micro-consumption can be a form of micro-resistance against official discourses and institutional imperatives. In this scenario, the dualism of the structure would take a paradoxical form: where alcohol is legal in stadiums (but regulated by percentage and type), fans might consume it in a way that is 'anti-systemic' and non-compliant with imposed norms.

'Europe wants to stand'

Historically, standing inside the stadium, as opposed to sitting, has as Turner (2023a, 2023b) asserts, composed an important cultural practice. Standing on the terraces served not solely a ritualistic function but assisted the creation and preservation of social connections between supporters standing together on the terraces. Throughout the twentieth century, standing together on the stadiums' terraces:

football supporters and the social networks they formed, produced the atmosphere and spectacle which characterise the collective memories and social histories of generations of men, women, and children in Britain and Europe (2023a, p. 4).

However, following the Hillsborough tragedy, the Taylor report examining the tragedy's causes recommended that terraced stands should be converted into all-seated stadiums, suggesting that

the all-seated version would produce greater spectator comfort, safety and crowd control (Rigg, 2019). The ban on standing, first implemented in English football (1994/95), was reproduced on the European level ahead of the 1998/99 season. Though, already after Heysel, UEFA had devised plans to gradually reduce the use of standing areas in UEFA competitions (Vieli, 2015). Both reinforcing, and reinforced by, the overarching view of football crowds as potential troublemakers, the European level ban on standing thus marked not just an attempt to isolate and restrain supporters' movements and reactions, while easing stadium surveillance and monitoring (King, 2010); but it served to regulate and order the spontaneity and atmosphere produced by supporters inside stadiums (Numerato, 2018). Whilst all-seated stadiums quickly became the dominant paradigm in Europe (King, 2010), some national leagues like Germany and Norway continued to allow for standing sections in domestic football, although these would have to be converted into all-seated sections during UEFA competition fixtures (Turner, 2023).

Notwithstanding these patterns of normalization, patterns of resistance emerged, too. Whilst some supporters would persistently stand, or ignore their designated seat (Pearson, 2012), several supporter groups across Europe contested the policy since its inception, advocating for a return to (safe) standing terraces, and critiquing the seating policy as an extension of other repressive security and policing measures, and the regulation of traditional and spontaneous atmospheres which critical fans wanted to protect and preserve. Throughout the 1990s, supporters accordingly questioned the sustained view of fans as deviant through self-printed football fanzines and the creation of (national) campaigns against the all-seated stadium (Turner, 2022, 2023b). Here, in addition to the lack of fan consultation, the logic that all-seated stadiums were, by default, 'safer' than standing sections was questioned. For example, one Liverpool FC fanzine writer, recounted, following a trip to Marseille, France, how they: 'were sitting behind the goal on what appears to be a temporary seating. This "temporary" seating had been in place for 20 years. To say the stand was flimsy would be an understatement – I've seen more secure houses of cards. Suffice to say, you stamped your feet at your own risk' (*Saturday Afternoon and Sunday Morning*, 1991, p. 15). Acknowledging the modernization of stadiums and regulative changes in European football between 1991-1998, these depictions of contrast those within a report from UEFA's own publication, *UEFAflash*, in March 1999, suggesting that (all-seated) stadiums were becoming spaces where spectators could enjoy 'a comfortable seat and shelter from inclement weather conditions – maximum security, refreshment stands and even restaurants' (see Vieli, 2015, p. 107).

At the turn of the new millennium, nationally coordinated supporter activists nationally (and, increasingly on a European-wide scale) started to draw attention to possible, alternative solutions (Turner, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). One such solution, or ‘master frame’ (Turner, 2023a), included ‘rail seating’, which was viewed as a possible way to achieve ‘safe standing’ sections inside stadiums, whereby every supporter would still be allocated a separate and designated seat, though this seat ‘remains (often bolted) upright thus giving the spectator their own individual space in which to stand. Directly in front of this space is a barrier or rail running the entire length of the row that prevents the standing spectator from toppling forward’ (Webber & Turner, 2024, p. 392).

Given our focus on contestations within the context of UEFA competitions, it is therefore noticeable how, throughout the 2000s and 2010s, organizations like FSE, Football Action Network (promoting the installation of safe standing areas) and campaigns like ‘Europe wants to stand’ emerged (Numerato, 2018). Here, the ‘Europe wants to stand’ campaign started in 2019 with protests at the Champions League fixture between Borussia Dortmund and Tottenham Hotspurs and utilized in-game protests, lobbying, meetings with UEFA officials, and open letters in their attempt to get UEFA to revert on their ban on standing. The campaign’s position was that fans should be able to decide whether they want to stand or sit at European fixtures; and that the aforementioned changes to alcohol sale ‘[had] shown that it is possible to provide more fan friendly rules through solutions at a national level’ (FSE, 2019).

Whilst the campaign’s open letter argued that a relaxation of an ‘outdated’ all-seater policy would improve Champions League and Europa League atmospheres, and give clubs more flexibility *vis-à-vis* ticket pricing due to the possibility of ticket prices more accessible to low-income and younger supporters, ‘Europe wants to stand’, again citing successful national examples, also underlined that standing did not necessarily contribute towards unsafe stadiums:

The fact that it is possible to provide standing sections without safety or security risks at football matches is clearly evident in Germany [...] Where approximately 100,000 fans stand up every weekend to support their team, contributing to the much-vaunted atmosphere at Bundesliga matches. In several countries, such as Scotland, the Netherlands or France, the strict ban on standing has been lifted in recent years and the same currently is being considered in other countries (quoted in FSE, 2019).

The campaign continued, and in June 2022, a banner at a UEFA Nations League fixture at Allianz Arena in Munich concisely summed up the campaign’s desire, stating: ‘Dear Mr. Ceferin [UEFA President], Europe wants to stand!’. In July 2022, UEFA then declared that it would launch an observed programme for standing facilities in stadiums ahead of the

forthcoming 2022/23 season. UEFA (2022) noted that this followed both an ‘increasing interest’ expressed by supporters across Europe (who regularly stand in their domestic leagues), and a commissioned feasibility study that determined the domestic regulatory frameworks, technologies and safety management of standing areas in national contexts.

It remains remarkable that, from the perspectives of UEFA and supporters, the outcome (a policy change on standing) was declared as a desirable outcome. The ‘Europe wants to stand’ coordinator labelled it a ‘historic victory’ (FSE, 2022), while UEFA’s own *Champions Journal* reported how it now was possible to observe ‘something new’ in European football this season with supporters finally being able to enjoy the full effects of the audio and visual spectacle produced by standing sections in European competitions, including the ‘full effect of the Yellow Wall’s [at Borussia Dortmund’s stadium] awesome power on the Champions League stage’ (Poole, n.d.). Accordingly, the contestations over the once-banned and now (conditionally) approved practice of standing in European competitions reveal how arguments put forward by supporters, over decades, regarding choice, atmospheres, supporter culture and fan consultation, may be co-opted (cf. Numerato, 2018), realigned to match UEFA’s interests, and undergone a changed narrative that positions standing not as deviant or threatening; but as an ingredient to the image of spectacle associated with UEFA competitions’ marketable brand.

‘Pyro is not a crime’

Among the structural principles of fan culture in Europe, the use of pyrotechnics represents the most radical and anti-systemic form of identity expression. It is also the most locally conditioned, as it does not characterize fan culture across the entire European continent to the same degree. While standing in the stands and alcohol consumption can be considered universal characteristics of fan support in Europe, pyrotechnics are primarily prevalent in the landscape of continental Europe and are virtually unused in the British Isles. This is linked to the tradition of ultras culture, which is based on a strong performative dimension (where pyrotechnics accompany flags, banners, and choreographies), a dimension that did not develop, for example, in England (this does not mean that there are no attributes of ultras culture in the British Isles, as flags, for example, do appear in some stadiums). The culture and mentality of ultras originated in Italy, from where it spread to other European countries (Doidge et al. 2020). Therefore, the key to understanding the ultras tradition is its anti-establishment mentality, as well as a firm emphasis on the choreographic and performative aspects of supporting. Ultras do not limit themselves to cheers or chants, which characterize the behavior of non-ultras

supporters. They devote considerable resources (time, money, human) to making their support a spectacle based on flags, large-scale banners displaying images and slogans, and pyrotechnics. This makes the ultras culture unique compared to that of ‘cold’ fans.

Pyrotechnics are thus part of what is known in ultras culture as *‘mentalità ultras’* (Doidge, 2017) —a set of rules and values that shape a specific lifestyle and the life world of fans. Pyrotechnics play a role in creating the spectacle during a match and are used to build atmosphere, and fans in many European countries compete in using pyrotechnics to enrich the aesthetic form of their choreographies. They also serve as a unifying element even for rival fans, who see in the use of pyrotechnics a space for expressing unity, solidarity, and brotherhood (Merkelbach et al. 2021). The use of pyrotechnics also necessitates greater trust and the implementation of communal organizational strategies, owing to the illegal nature of the entire endeavour. Smuggling flares into the stadium, and the ritual of igniting them, resembles a ‘secret’ operation involving only a select few, the most trusted representatives of fandom culture. The act of igniting pyrotechnics is thus the culmination of tactical maneuvers, and its success serves as proof of overcoming the institutional ‘barricades’ erected by football authorities.

While football authorities can negotiate institutional rules regarding alcohol consumption and standing sections, their stance on pyrotechnics is unequivocally negative. Based on its own analyses and experiences, UEFA (2017) sends a clear message to fans on this matter, noting there can be no safe use of pyrotechnics inside stadiums. In its report, UEFA clearly indicates that pyrotechnics pose a threat not only to fans, but also to players, officials, and staff. In subsequent years, UEFA implemented various solutions aimed at preventing the use of pyrotechnics during events organized by the association. In documents dedicated to the organization of specific competitions, UEFA prohibits the bringing and using of ‘fireworks, flares, smoke powder, smoke bombs or other pyrotechnics’ (these fall under the category of ‘Prohibited Items’, see e.g. Stadium Rules for the 2025 UEFA Champions League Final, UEFA 2025). Beyond strict regulations, UEFA also implements punitive measures for the use of pyrotechnics during its competitions, primarily imposing financial penalties and occasionally ordering the closure of ultras sections (decisions are made by the UEFA Disciplinary Committee). The issue of pyrotechnics is also recognized by national football organizations and clubs, and other European organizations. Already in 1985, the Council of Europe (1985) encouraged states to enforce controls so that supporters would not bring ‘fireworks’ into the stadia. In Scotland, a specific law was introduced on 6 June 2023, dedicated to counteracting

the use of pyrotechnics. This legislation empowers the police to search fans, and possession of pyrotechnics during matches is treated as a criminal offense (BBC, 2023). Similar legislation is in effect at matches in England, where the possession and bringing of pyrotechnics is treated as a criminal offence under the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol etc) Act 1985. In Belgium, penalties for the use of pyrotechnics during matches have been increased, encompassing both financial sanctions and stadium bans (The Brussels Times, 2021). In Sweden, where pyrotechnics remain an exceptionally significant aspect of fandom culture (particularly during Stockholm derbies), clubs have appealed for an expansion of legal provisions, specifically allowing for full body searches and the deployment of new technologies to prevent fans from smuggling pyrotechnics into football grounds (SverigesRadio, 2024). In Poland, the *Act on the Safety of Mass Events* is particularly restrictive regarding pyrotechnics. It stipulates that bringing in and using pyrotechnics constitutes a criminal offense punishable by restriction of liberty or imprisonment from 3 months to 5 years (Author B, 2024). This is one of the most restrictive regulations in Europe. Institutionally, therefore, actors possessing the most significant resources (material, and primarily in terms of establishing institutional rules) strive to minimize the dualistic properties of the structure by implementing solutions so substantial as to effectively prevent fans from expressing their culture through pyrotechnic performances.

This structural assertiveness by dominant actors in the field of football, however, transforms pyrotechnics not so much into a tool for influencing the duality of structure (as that is virtually impossible), but rather into a space for rebellion and resistance. Perhaps, then, the use of pyrotechnics becomes the strongest form of legitimizing fan culture—the associated risk is so immense that its practice must hold profound significance for fans. It thus becomes an anti-systemic and anti-structural practice. In a literal sense, it can disrupt football's operational structure, particularly when illegally brought in and used, leading to match suspensions or necessitating extended play. In the case of standing sections and alcohol, the expression of fan culture is mediated by a structural compromise—achieved through dialogue with other actors (e.g., UEFA). In both instances, this therefore represents the practical application of the duality of structure. With pyrotechnics, however, the anti-systemic agency of fans constitutes a 'breaking away' from this dualism, providing evidence of an (albeit short-lived) intervention of an unofficial, undesirable structure into the officially defined one.

In some contexts, pyrotechnics as an act of resistance become so integral to fan identity that they transform into a specific narrative and a history essential as a cultural conduit for the fan community. This is particularly crucial where resistance has little chance of success in

achieving social and structural change (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). Here, it is easier to understand why fans in many countries have reversed the narrative and oppose the legalization of pyrotechnics. It has become too vital as a narrative element in establishing a sense of authenticity to be incorporated into the official structure. Legalizing this practice would deprive supporter culture of its ‘authenticity’ and ‘peculiarity’. The illegal nature of pyrotechnics allows this culture to retain an aura of mystery and a certain anti-establishment exclusivity. Setting off pyrotechnics outside the law makes them more desirable, giving them a kind of ‘taste of the unknown’ and allowing fans to create an important distinction between their culture and the outside world. Paradoxically, then, institutional restrictions imposed by other actors have become the source for the emergence of a specific ‘anti-structure’, indispensable for maintaining the cultural narrative of fans.

Conclusions

This article addresses the regulation of expressions of football supporter culture, exploring the contentious regulation of alcohol sale, standing and pyrotechnics in European football. We have sought to contribute towards a sociological understanding of how the regulations of these expressions, situated within a sports and consumption context, are characterized by being constantly in movement, and a fluidity that stems from the intersections between institutional rules and supporters’ agency that collectively make-up European football’s structure. Here, we approach the regulation of alcohol, standing and pyrotechnics as the institutional and state-driven *colonization of a lifeworld* (Turner, 2023a). This article’s three exemplars demonstrate the importance of this lifeworld’s inhibitors, and their inter-linked, but separate forms of resistance. This resistance, again, is defined by the importance supporters place upon a certain expression, as partly reflected by the presence or absence of long-term campaigns, and conditioned by institutional and structural coercion.

As elaborated on by Giddens, the process of structuration unfolds – within the structure of football – on a spatio-historical plane, where have UEFA introduced various rules and institutional solutions, compelling an adaptive response from fans. This is not a strategy based on small, cyclical performance of routine encounters, but rather a strategy of imposing an authoritative system of rules that serve UEFA’s interests. The imposed rules directly impact fan culture and their structural ‘principles’, which in turn is a factor actualizing fans’ agency. Hence, as the article argues, fans’ agency, while constrained by the structuring power of UEFA, simultaneously unleashes new dimensions of the said agency. These emerging dimensions stem

from the foundations of fan culture—its traditions and established patterns—but also from spontaneous acts of resistance, sometimes manifesting as ‘micro-resistances’. However, fan responses were not solely directed towards UEFA, but, in some instances, against political authorities, national FAs, or clubs. The evolving institutional context influences the very structuration process of fan culture itself, which serves as a living laboratory. Within this space, supporters’ responses to systemic imperatives are transformed into ‘trivial encounters’ that eventually solidify the structure of the ‘supporter lifeworld’.

Though, the consequences of this transformation are not fixed. In other words, ‘forced agency’, implemented due to structural pressures, transforms into ‘anti-system agency’, laying the groundwork for something structurally new—a fan culture whose structural framework is in a permanent *in statu nascendi* mode. We argue that the case of European football remains sociologically important since it reveals how cultural practices open up arenas where power is negotiated and moulded by both institutional control and the mobilization of agency. This, in turn, create new spaces of (non)compliance, resistance and (non)negotiated practices that contribute to ensuring the regulation of cultural practices and spaces are constantly *in-the-making*.

Therefore, if our applied analysis seeks to re-conceptualize Giddens’ theory, we must acknowledge that the consequence of the duality of structure is not merely a perpetual ‘struggle’ between agency and structuring power. It also involves the emergence of new ‘micro-structures’ resulting from structuration processes. Consequently, this gives rise to new ways of legitimizing the existing order, new strategies of resistance, and new forms for the community to realize its agentic power. It appears that Giddens’ theory is not only validated by our analysis but also serves as a platform for mapping new phenomena related to the cultural dimensions of football fan behaviour. The theoretical framework employed allows for investigating future changes in fan culture. Key questions regarding the future of the three analysed pillars of fan culture (as well as others) pertain to the extent to which individual pillars will become subjects of institutional pressures and to what extent they will remain an unthreatened space. Consequently, one must ask which of these pillars will survive, which will undergo significant transformation, and which will cease to exist. Their fate will also be a testament to the strength of fan agency, to what extent they will be able to defend their identity, and to what extent they will engage in the structuration process not so much to halt it, but to redirect it towards their most desired outcome. It will also be important to observe changes in the narratives and discourses that fans will produce regarding the significance of their culture and structural

pressures. Examining these discourses will be crucial for deciphering structural transformations that, at first glance, appear elusive. A key aspect of future research will be to measure the importance of gender-related issues in supporter culture. It remains male-centric in Europe, which raises questions about whether the contesting quality of this culture relates to securing and maintaining the power of men among fans. Would greater access for female supporters influence fans' attitudes towards the three practices discussed in the article? This is a question that needs to be addressed in future research. Finally, we also contend that the regulation of supporter cultures in other contexts, also remain important to tackle in future work. Beyond Europe, club-specific and 'umbrella' organizations (e.g., Independent Supporters Council [North America]) seek to promote the expression of supporter cultures. As such, cross-country and comparative research is both possible and desirable.

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