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Our city our crew: sense of place, cultural entrepreneurship and ‘thick’ cultural resistance in the #SaveTheCrew movement

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined the Twitter (now X, but hereafter still referred to as Twitter) hashtag #Savethecrew, a hashtag and movement created and maintained by Columbus Crew SC supporters in their attempt to prevent the relocation of their soccer team, from Columbus, Ohio, to Austin, Texas. We used two constructs – Sense of place and cultural entrepreneurship – as the basis for a critical exploration and thematic analysis. We analysed over 4000 Tweets and relevant media documents (eg local newspapers, club press statements) to explicate and frame the culturally resonant narratives and resistance strategies of Crew supporters. The case study emphasizes the ongoing importance of place and associated meanings, such as community, as strategically and culturally relevant resources that can be used to craft powerful and persuasive narratives. Ultimately, this culturally resonant narrative was used to resist ownership led activities that do not align with supporter ideals for what is best for soccer clubs and their surrounding communities.



I've shown my commitment to Columbus. We wore the city's colors this year on the pitch. We put Columbus back in our badge. I'm tired of the insecurities. We're playing for Columbus.

- Anthony Precourt, owner of the Columbus Crew, October, 2016

'Your City, Your Crew' - Columbus Crew Billboard, downtown Columbus, July, 2017

Football clubs are simultaneously carefully managed business entities and institutions infused with local-historical values and meanings.¹ However, rather than resting in easy symbiosis, the sometimes-antithetical values of business and locality frequently clash. Such conflict often manifests in tensions between club owners – who typically govern by market centred ideals and rationality – and fans, who more clearly embody values associated with local identity, community, tradition, and heritage.²

In an era of globalization, where the commodification of football has been described as inevitable and hyper, it is unsurprising that commercial obsession has therefore encroached on the traditional values, ethos and culture of 'the game'.³ Several researchers have documented how supporters have become (willing) participants in the commodification of football.⁴ Thus, commercial activities that generate revenue and that are seen as essential for club survival, success, and increased professionalism (eg the acquiring of new players and better facilities) are accepted as common sense and welcomed as part of the movement towards professionalism.⁵

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Such complicity of supporters in their club's commercial activities could demonstrate how local meanings are on the wane or are at least considered flexible (by many fans) when weighed against the practical necessities that are required to keep up with the extreme commodification of sport.⁶ Similarly, the de-centralization of local meanings may support the argument that a fixation with locality is arguably implicitly privileged and romanticized in some analyses of sport culture.⁷

Yet, there are numerous examples of fans, striving, at critical moments, to reject the capitalistic machinations of owners and obvious commercial activities of their club, for instance, in relation to the takeover, ownership, closure or relocation of a club.⁸ In such examples, capitalist progress is seemingly pitted against local values and club ethos.⁹ This implies, that for many fans at least, there exists a metaphorical battle line which can be drawn when the sanctity, or existence, of their club is perceived as threatened, 'placing limits on the capitalist endeavours of the clubs'.¹⁰ Thus, while football may exist within a state of hyper-commodification, ensuring that fan culture has become increasingly intertwined with the commercial aspects of the game, 'fans still act as auteurs in many respects, from local political resistance to transnational networking and activism'.¹¹

In examining the resources that fans draw upon to construct meanings about their club, and to act accordingly in modes and movements of resistance, researchers have drawn upon theorizing, constructs, and language that show football as a cultural phenomenon with a community base and local rootedness. For example, football is seen as a moral economy and football fandom is as a key source of collective identity.¹² Kennedy notes that one of the most important 'selling points' to fans is that football clubs are "more than a business" and that owners are, in reality, mere custodians looking after a 'community asset' for fans who 'really' own the club and its heritage".¹³ Along similar lines and observing the spatial turn and how clubs are formed within localities, cities, and nations, historians of football have promoted the importance of 'place' as units of analysis and sites for the formation of collective identities and place-based loyalties.¹⁴

Taking into account the topophilic, some scholars have detailed how home grounds are central to fan heritage and identity, with stadiums viewed in largely emotional terms and in ways that are typically reserved for places of religious worship.¹⁵ As part of particular locales, stadiums can therefore be seen as sites that embody and produce important cultural and symbolic meanings.¹⁶ Thus, although under threat, football arguably has, at least historically, been endowed with a suite of culturally resonant 'local' and place-based norms, values, and traditions, which according to Kennedy (drawing upon Bourdieu) provides supporters with a social habitus that frames their attitudes and loyalty towards each other and their clubs.¹⁷ Kennedy has outlined how this social habitus reconfigures the arrangement and priorities between, what Bourdieu terms economic, social, and cultural capitals, and how, historically, in the context of football, economic priorities have often (but not always) been subservient to social and cultural capital in the eyes of supporters. Following that, the suite of culturally meaningful resources available to football fans, and the possibility for them to be used to in societal re-arrangements, make them vital to examinations of fan movements and wider societal transformation.

However, while football is a global phenomenon, meaning that such cultural resources may be endemic, 'the story of football's commodification unfolds in particular historical "realm of opportunities" and is therefore subject to the major economic, political and cultural parameters that shape the structure of the relevant society'.¹⁸ This means it is essential to examine fan movements in their particular contexts. Noting the UK-Eurocentric focus of research in this research area, in this article, we use a case study approach to examine the case of Columbus Crew SC, placing it within the particular context of US sport/soccer and the more global game of soccer more broadly. Placed in the context of the #SaveTheCrew movement, the aims of the study were:

- (1) To explore how fans draw on the ideas and meanings surrounding 'place' to mobilize resistance against the relocation of their team.

- (2) Subsequently, to investigate how these place-based meanings were integrated into cultural entrepreneurship endeavours to legitimize and craft a culturally resonant narrative that persuaded audiences and key stakeholders that the Crew should stay in Columbus.

In addressing these two research aims, we make the key argument that meanings assigned to place can be central discursive tools to mobilize resistance, showing that fans are not mere passive consumers but agentic cultural entrepreneurs who can play a significant role in shaping decisions that are made concerning their teams.

Fan movements

The mobilization of football fans is not a new phenomenon.¹⁹ Football fans across the globe have long engaged in collective action to express discontent: from radical discontent like hooliganism to organization in the form of petitions, protests, campaigns, workshops, and political lobbying.²⁰ There has been an observed increase in the mobilization of football fans observed to coincide with significant transformations and modernization of the game, positioned as a fan response to these changes and the growing commodification, securitization, globalization, and mediatization of football.²¹

Correspondingly, there has been increased academic attention to football fan-based movements over the past ten years in Europe, particularly Britain. Several researchers have documented the tensions and contrasts between the political and economic orientation of football, on the one hand, and its traditional cultural and community base on the other.²² Research has documented this juxtaposition from several angles, including, but not limited to, fan opposition to: financial mismanagement and difficulties,²³ dissatisfaction with new/foreign owners and profiteering; new methods of policing and securitization²⁴; stadium and team relocation,²⁵ re-branding and challenges to club identity.²⁶

Together, this body of literature shows that football fans have been inspired within and across national boundaries by a range of salient issues and that fans, in response, are reflexive and capable of successfully protecting their clubs traditional symbolic base, defending their own civic rights, and in gaining access to the governance of football clubs.²⁷ At the same time, it is noted that expressions of discontent and associated mobilization of fans is now more sophisticated and professionalized than ever, with fans deploying technology, social media, transnational networks and a range of professional skills and expertise to shape public opinion, policy, and action.²⁸

Conceptual framing

To make sense of the Crew Case Study, we used two concepts that are comparatively novel in sport research – sense of place and cultural entrepreneurship – to explicate and frame the analysis.

Sense of place

Interest in place-people relations is substantial, continues to grow, and a myriad of place-based concepts (eg place identity, place, attachment, placemaking, sense of place) have emerged to show how place is central to how we understand group life and ourselves. We live in a place, we experience place, and the places we live, work, are from, and move to and within, can be part of our identity. Whereas location refers to a geographical marker (telling you where A is in relation to B) and space is more abstract, referring to the geographical environment and can be described in various ways, place is arguably, and ultimately, about meaning.²⁹ As the humanistic geographer Tuan described:

Place . . . has more substance than the word location suggests: it is a unique entity, a 'special ensemble' . . . it has history and meaning. Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspective of the people who have given it meaning.³⁰

Similarly, the sociology of place literature suggests that places are far more than just geographic locations but signifiers of symbolic meaning that are culturally constructed, and not only 'built or in some way physically carved out [. . . but] also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined'.³¹

Although sense of place has been defined in various ways and from multiple perspectives in several disciplines, we draw on these key theoretical underpinnings to refer to Sense of Place as the collection of meanings assigned to a place, and the place values, or the underlying feelings of importance connected to certain features of place.³² It is what infuses place with meaning, that people (both personally and collectively) use to make sense of how they come to understand and perceive place. Subsequently, and in relation to the present study, we assume that sense of place meanings can be significant levers in either the preservation or transformation of places because they are central to people's social practices that ultimately support or resist change.³³

Cultural entrepreneurship

Cultural entrepreneurship has emerged as a strong research programme, orientated towards the exploration of how entrepreneurial actors draw from and harness the cultural milieu to gain favour and support for their ideas and ventures.³⁴ Centralizing cultural dynamics, cultural entrepreneurship researchers focus on the range of meaning-making activities (eg framing, storytelling, symbolic action) used to make their endeavours culturally resonant and get key actors onside and willing to provide resources and support.³⁵ Skilfully crafted and emotionally resonant narratives are therefore a central means through which entrepreneurs gain legitimacy and support.³⁶ Such theorizing and research has built on Swidler's seminal cultural repertoires work,³⁷ whereby culture is 'a flexible set of tools that can be actively and strategically created and deployed as actors struggle to make sense of the world'.³⁸ To be successful, entrepreneurs must therefore become skilled cultural operators; their 'entrepreneurial' stories must have narrative fidelity, claim a distinct identity which is mindful of and located within broader socio-cultural understandings.³⁹ Mindful of recent developments in the broader application of cultural entrepreneurship²⁵ and based in the theorizing that place has both materiality and symbolic meaning that is relevant to entrepreneurial storytelling^{26, 40} we centralize the premise that places 'can become resources and sources of legitimacy for entrepreneurs'.^{41, 27}

The case and context of the study: the proposed relocation of the Columbus Crew Soccer Club

Much of the extant literature on American soccer has in some way coalesced around a story of potential and possibility, on the one hand, and unfulfilled promise on the other.⁴² This narrative has been investigated from several angles by researchers, often targeting the sporting, social, historical, economic, and even ideological tensions that have occurred as American soccer and Major League Soccer (MLS), America's premier soccer league, have strived for legitimacy.⁴³ Although not extensive, this body of literature has charted a story of growth and expansion from a popular amateur base yet conveyed how the MLS has been still ultimately unable to penetrate either the domestic sport fan market (due to dominance of traditional 'American' sports: baseball, basketball, American Football, ice hockey) or the global football fraternity (due to perceptions of low quality standard of, 'gimmicky' differences and a fundamental lack of understanding of the game).⁴⁴ It has been noted how even today, with a growing fan base and an influx of star players, the MLS has several features that mark it as different to most top-tier national soccer leagues and that hinder its

quest for global credibility, such as a franchise system, which is ubiquitous in American sports but unacceptable globally.⁴⁵

Unlike in other football nations, such as the UK and in Europe, sports leagues in America do not operate their sporting systems in terms of promotion and relegation between leagues based on performance. Instead, the same teams, like The Columbus Crew Soccer Club (SC) (hereafter ‘the Crew’) compete in each league, year on year, within a franchise system. A place in a major sports league is therefore desirable and prestigious. Cities (often with backing from leagues), can compete for the right and privilege of hosting a franchise and a space in the league.⁴⁶ In the major sport leagues of America, franchise relocation has been commonplace and is reflective of the American spirit of entrepreneurship, progress and mobility as a necessary means to seek out better, capitalistic opportunities. However, in contrast to other American sports leagues, the MLS has managed to remain comparatively immune to franchise relocations, with only one previous relocation in 2006, when, the San Jose Earthquakes moved to Houston and were rebranded as the Houston Dynamo. One reason that the MLS has not subscribed to a culture of mobility and opportunism may be because soccer is viewed as somehow nobler and less beholden to the machinations of money and greed than other American sports, functioning as a ‘church’ of sorts.⁴⁷

It is argued that the MLS has carefully cultivated such communal tones as part of their overall mission and strategy.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, MLS leadership has also set ambitious strategic goals to transform soccer into one of the major sports in the US and the MLS into one of the most prestigious soccer leagues in the world.⁴⁹ Consequently, in recent years, there has been considerable growth in the MLS with more teams being added to the league roster, plans for league expansion (from 22 in 2017 to 29 in 2023), expensive new and foreign star signings such as Lionel Messi, more stadiums being built in attractive and accessible downtown areas, and an unprecedented interest in soccer from Americans and cities/new markets.

The Columbus Crew are a professional soccer club based in Columbus, Ohio, competing in the Eastern Conference of the MLS. As the inaugural member of the MLS (joining in 1994) – they played their first game in 1996 and moved into the first soccer-specific stadium ever built for an MLS team in 1999 – the Crew have an established history in the league and presence in Columbus. Despite these ties, on 16 October 2017, a news story broke that Anthony Precourt, the Crew’s owner and CEO of Precourt Sport Ventures (PSV) intended to move the team to Austin, Texas. The following evening, Precourt announced that he was indeed prepared to move the team to Austin if plans for a downtown location for a new stadium in Columbus could not be finalized.:

The MLS is experiencing unprecedented growth. Our league peers are improving on and off the field year over year. Precourt Sports Ventures has spent the last 4 ½ years committed to elevating the Columbus Crew SC into one of the top clubs in MLS, both on and off the field . . . Despite all the efforts . . . our business is struggling to keep pace with the rising standards of Major League Soccer . . . There’s a growing disparity in attendance and corporate support in comparing Crew SC with its MLS peers and with other MLS markets such as Kansas City, Orlando, Portland and Salt Lake City . . . This Club has ambition to be a standard bearer in MLS, therefore we have no choice but to expand and explore all of our options. This includes a possible move to Austin, which is the largest metropolitan area in North America without a major league sports franchise. Soccer is the world’s game, and with Austin’s growing presence as an international city, combined with its strong multicultural foundation, MLS in Austin could be an ideal fit.⁵⁰

Although Precourt was clear that no final decision had been made and clarified that he was not seeking public tax dollars to build a stadium in Columbus or Austin, there was an immediate groundswell of public opinion against Precourt. Crew fans had long harboured suspicions that Precourt was never entirely committed to Columbus. Precourt, in Austin, Texas (the day after the Crew playoff game against New York City) for a meeting with reporters blamed low attendance and general disinterest from the fans and local business community. MLS Commissioner, Don Garber, weighed in contrasting low Crew attendances with league-wide record attendances and

unprecedented interest from different markets across the country who sought to join the MLS. Garber claimed that while the MLS were always reluctant to allow teams to relocate, they would support Precourt's efforts to explore options outside of Columbus. With battle lines seemingly drawn, it was a script that would play out over a tumultuous 13 months.

Methodology

Theoretical positioning

While there are varied strands of critical theory, we refer to critical theory as an umbrella term applied to scholarly work that takes an essentially critical or radical stance on contemporary society and that is geared towards 'uncovering exploitation, repression, unfairness asymmetrical power relations ... distorted communication and false consciousness'.⁵¹ However, mindful that focusing too closely on the actions of those with the power to dominate and oppress, or being cynical to the possibility for change, can paint those with less power as victims or powerless – which is antithetical to critical emancipatory aims – we deliberately take on a more explicitly positive and hopeful tone. Practically, this meant focusing on how sense of place meanings were used strategically and entrepreneurially by Crew support to develop culturally resonant narratives that aided 'counter-power' and resistance practices.

Twitter and the #Savethecrew data Set

Just as Twitter has become a commonly accepted areas of social life, sport has become 'an immensely viable sphere for Twitter',⁵² and is one of the most widely used social media platforms in sport research.⁵³ It has also been argued that due to the instant updates and real-time participation of Twitter, it has the potential to facilitate considerable insight and awareness of others and 'to augment our spheres of knowledge', by linking us into a global network of individuals.⁵⁴ In short, Twitter has emerged as a powerful channel for communicating, organizing and tapping into the zeitgeist of the internet, its users, and society.⁵⁵ Hence, sport researchers have examined a variety of topics using Twitter, such as how athletes use Twitter⁵⁶; how sport organizations educate athletes about Twitter⁵⁷; Twitter as a communication tool⁵⁸; to study fan behaviour on Twitter⁵⁹; and as a means to examine complex formations such as culture and power.⁶⁰

Specifically, we examined #Savethecrew data; the official hashtag of the Columbus soccer community's advocacy group, established with the aim of keeping the team in Columbus.⁶¹ Spearheaded by local fans, the #Savethecrew hashtag was used the day after Precourt's announcement that Crew may be leaving the city. Specifically, we focus on the #Savethecrew hashtag and Tweets between 17 October 2017 (one day after Anthony Precourt's announcement about potential Crew relocation) until 28 December 2018 (the day the Crews' fate was officially decided). This comprised over 4000 original Tweets (not inclusive of replies to Tweets). We also analysed associated images, videos, website links to images, media and online articles that were embedded within Tweets and replies. Moreover, we attended to other media documents that were associated with the Crew story (eg articles, MLS press releases, sport media coverage, fan-made videos and documentaries) so that the analysis of #Savethecrew Tweets occurred alongside a more informed understanding of the wider social context and events.⁶²

Data analysis and representation

Much of the challenge of handling such a large data set involved dealing with the volume and the speed with which Tweets and related content was posted. To keep up with this 'moving feast' and changes in the wider narrative, the first phase of analysis involved the first author following the hashtag over a 13-month period through frequent (typically

weekly or bi-weekly) ‘check-ins’. Sometimes these would be more regular if a significant event occurred, such as an announcement from key stakeholders or a featured news story. This facilitated familiarization with the timeline of events and also allowed for the first author to experience the Tweets as they might have been read by others. At this stage, preliminary and general notes about key events, people and themes within the Tweets and related content. In the next phase of analysis (after the Crew’s fate had been decided), the first author used the advanced search option to search for all #Savethecrew Tweets within small (one week) increments and repeated this step a number of times until all displayed Tweets over the 13-month period had been read and examined.⁶³ Although these searches did not show *all* Tweets within the time period, they did comprise the eventual data set, ensured further immersion into the data and reduced the chance that key or illuminative Tweets might have been missed.

Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA) was used to analyse everyday talk/texts (in the form of Tweets) and surrounding media documents (in the form of media and news articles) within a critical epistemology.⁶⁴ Infused with a critical awareness, extensive notes about key events, people and themes within the Tweets were made and the six basic steps of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), were followed.⁶⁵ The analysis was theory driven and data driven meaning that although analysis was informed by our theoretical positioning and framing concepts, we also looked for new insights and adhered to the CTA principle of trying to uncover what was silent, implicit, less obvious, hidden, or underlying patterns in the data. The themes were ultimately arranged in a flowing narrative showing two main ideas - *Place as community, local and as belonging* (showcasing key meanings assigned to place) and *Fighting for the Soul of Soccer* (the central and culturally resonant narrative tying together several cultural entrepreneurship strategies). The bulk of the analysis was undertaken by the first author,⁶⁶ with the other authors acting as critical friends and supporting the arrangement of the final narrative.

While Twitter is public domain content⁶⁷ and there was no interaction with human subjects in order to obtain data that could be considered private,⁶⁸ a number of steps were taken to address potential ethical concerns.⁶⁹ The Tweets selected and showcased throughout the narrative were not considered sensitive, embarrassing, or revealing of personal information. Similarly, care was applied in regard to the images selected, for example, choosing images of crowds, and where individual people were unidentifiable. In representation of the Tweets, we used user ID’s to occasionally identify organizations and high-profile individuals (eg key figures in the unfolding events, media figures) as either Tweeters or targets of the Tweets. This helped to contextualize Tweets, events, intent of posts, and the strategies of resistance enacted, therefore aiding the representation of the data.

Results and discussion

The sense of place that developers and users of #Savethecrew experienced and constructed in the aftermath of the news about Crew relocation centralized around meanings of community. Concurrently, community – embodied by #Savethecrew – served as a rich and symbolic cultural centre-point and resource for meaning-making. Crucially, ideas and sense of community made tweets more than a random and incoherent assemblage. Rather, the community provided a narrative structure and in the language of cultural entrepreneurship, enabled entrepreneurial actors to craft a culturally resonant narrative and compelling identity. Resonance is achieved when meaning-making activities ‘match or align with the audiences beliefs, values, aspirations, or ideas’ and users of the hashtag were able to use community, in various ways to align with targeted audiences’ understandings of community, thereby gaining the support of key and influential stakeholders.⁷⁰ As such, the community provided the ongoing means for organizing, informing, and engendering support, not just locally (local community; key city figures), but

nationally and globally (the global community and fraternity of soccer). Moreover, in the continuous enactment, construction, and re-construction of place meanings through twitter **#Savethecrew**, as a community, supported the cultivation and acquiring of resources and the creation of a compelling culturally driven and entrepreneurial narrative that sustained Crew fans. Ultimately, it was this narrative that providing them not merely with the capacity to resist power, but the means to reclaim it.⁷¹

Place as community, local and as belonging

"Listen REAL hard to these words @thesoccerdon and remind yourself what you're trying to take away. Community. Passion. History".

Integral to the sense of place conveyed by users of the hashtag was 'community spirit' and a sense of localized *belonging* that people feel in relation to social or cultural entity.³⁴ From the beginning, #Savethecrew Tweets were regularly and clearly embedded in the traditional, symbolic, and culturally resonant language of place and community: "history, 'home', 'family', 'tribe', 'us', 'sacred' 'culture'. The consistent appearance of this type of language in Tweets framed place, the city of Columbus and the communities they housed (soccer, wider sport, businesses) as culturally meaningful resources for Crew fans; indicating that, at least for fans, 'local' remains an important distinction, and that authentic community and constructed local meanings constructed are not fully eroded by globalization and extreme commercialization of the sport.⁷² Moreover, it affirms soccer suggest from a sociological perspective that suggests that soccer clubs remain integral to local communities and can facilitate locally rooted belonging and identity in supporters of a club.⁷³ In this regard, the Crew may be seen as a locally rooted cultural object that people used to interpret the world around them.

Thus, far from place and community as being redundant, reflective only of emotional attachment and sentiment, or indicative of an ethereal, elusive and 'feel good' concept *place-as-belonging* was useful.⁷⁴ Conceptually, it provided the bedrock for practical ways of resisting the systemic power that threatened to dismantle it. Furthermore, belonging is strongly associated with feelings of community and was repeatedly used to emphasize and cement the meaning-laden and symbiotic relationship between fan, club, and city; aligning with research that shows the connective significance of place (information flows, social ties, networks) that entrepreneurs can leverage to indicate trustworthiness and legitimacy of their ideas.⁷⁵

There was a pervasive sense that the Crew belonged to Columbus and its inhabitants. Yet this belonging extended beyond physical and geographic space (i.e. possession of the Crew, by virtue of their location within city boundaries) and the material, (i.e. 'Anthony Precourt owns the Columbus Crew, but it's not his, it's ours. He can't take it. We're not going to let him'.) to something more sacred and spiritual. Kennedy similarly described it as a sense of 'moral ownership' that supporters often feel towards their club.⁷⁶ As an inaugural member of MLS, Crew fans argued that they (and the city) had had nourished and cultivated the team since the inception of the league ('Keep the Crew in the city that built it!'). For the people of Columbus and Crew fans, the bond was meaningfully experiential, reinforcing the idea that soccer clubs, through the places they exist in, are sites of memory and nostalgia for urban communities.⁷⁷ It also conferred a temporal quality to place and community (shown by [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) and the Tweets below) that was grounded in the matchday rituals passed from one generation to the next, and in the memories, personal identities and collective consciousness of fans:

My dad and grandpa have been season ticket holders for 22 years! There's so much love for soccer in our city!
KEEP THE CREW IN COLUMBUS

The father/daughter #Crew96 tradition is a special one. Growing up, my dad and I had our matchday routine worked down to the minute. I'll be damned if that's ruined for future generations



Figure 1. Example images shared on #Savethecrew.



Figure 2. Example images shared on #Savethecrew.

Here, the users of the hashtags, through their Tweets, are acting as culture-bearers and as protectors of established meanings and practices.⁷⁸ The skilful deployment of these cultural resources by hashtag users has helped provoke instantaneous and strong support from various facets of local community. This included engendering support from other established sport institutions ('We need to come together as a community'. A message from #CEFC ownership: <http://www.columbuseaglesfc.com/wp/2017/10/20/eagles-support-savethecrew/>) and, perhaps most importantly, the wider civic and business community. Led by visible community leaders such as Alex Fischer of the influential Columbus Business Partnership group and a number of local businesses and Crew partners/sponsors (some with national and international presences) it was clear from Tweets that the Crew and Crew fans were valued for their civic and social contributions: 'This movement is about people and community. It's about boys and girls and their heroes. It's beautiful. And it's worth all of our effort'. (Jeni Britton Bauer – Owner, Jeni's Ice Cream).

Yet in spite of mobilizing themes of community to rally support, #Savethecrew Tweets also indicated that Crew fans were far from naive on important matters of economy, and moreover did not see community and economy as entirely distinct. Research has suggested that soccer fans recognize the widespread commercialization of their sport and correspondingly Crew fans understood deeply that there was an inevitable commercial aspect to soccer and MLS plans for expansion and growth.⁷⁹ In the first few days following Precourt's announcement, detailed information about MLS ownership, Crew corporate sponsors and local businesses was gathered and shared at the #Savethecrew hashtag. Followers of the hashtag were encouraged to utilize contacts ('email', 'write', 'tell', 'call', 'Tweet', 'send carrier pigeon') to enlist support and express their dissatisfaction that the Crew might have to leave town. Crew fans responded, with Twitter as a primary medium to engage businesses: 'If I was @Acura I would cancel all sponsorship with @ColumbusCrewSC As well as @LandGrantBeer @OhioHealth @ScottsLawnCare scot #SaveTheCrew'. In turn, the business community responded with more than just moral support. Elevator Brewing Company provided a strategic Headquarters where Save the Crew Leadership would meet and plan, local businesses –

spreading the word via #Savethecrew – organized initiatives, fundraisers, and donated proceeds to Save the Crew efforts.

While #Savethecrew users were communicating in the language of commerce and economy as a means of strategic resistance, paradoxically it was also evident that local business owners were using the traditional language (and communal practices) of the community to engage with Crew fans and citizens of Columbus. Words like ‘identity’, ‘loyalty’ and ‘local’ appeared regularly in their Tweets to #Savethecrew and is not *only* the language of community and soccer but of business, brand marketing and customer relations. Crew fans seemed acutely aware of this nuance of language and applied it when seeking support from their business allies: ‘At @AEPOhio, they say, “Our business is about making connections – to communities and to people”. We love that – and now, our community and our people are being threatened with the loss of our soccer team. Please sign on as a #STCally to #SaveTheCrew! <https://savethecrew.com/allies>’. Supporting the symbiotic relationship, they had promised in their mission statement Crew fans deliberately patronized supporting businesses, which through focused, persistent engagement and utilization of #Savethecrew as an informational and organizing medium, eventually totalled more than 300 businesses.

This counterpower strategy reaffirms suggestions in soccer literature that issues of economy are integral to constructions of place and community, not outwith or apart from it.⁸⁰ However, unlike other soccer studies that involved, for example, relocation of a stadium, the language of commerce did not replace or come to dominate the traditional language of community, but rather was intertwined and constitutive of it. Crew fans spoke of market rhetoric from the beginning as opposed to being driven to it by forces of commercialism and understood how it was/could be fused with traditional ties between community and civic bonds to garner support. Local businesses also used community laden language in their demonstrations of support, suggesting that the traditional, symbolic language of place is neither antiquated or redundant, but powerful, persuasive and flexible. Supporters are therefore not only consumers and at the mercy of the commodification⁴⁴ of their sport but are able to transform the language and meanings of consumer culture in ways that were community infused and advantageous to efforts of resisting.⁸¹

With community and economy were seemingly working in tandem, and with a shared sense of place, there was a spirit of resistance within the city, and even with the Crew’s fate very much hanging in the balance.

Those who want to rip our team away from our community are counting on you falling into a spiral of silence. They think they can ignore you & you’ll go away. Do not be silent. Be louder than you’ve ever been before. This is not over. Tell everyone you know.

Following directions provided via #Savethecrew by Save the Crew leadership to stay positive, loud and visible, Crew fans hustled. They engaged with community members and institutions, encouraged new fans to support and attend Crew matches (even organizing transport for them), spoke to city councils, petitioned the MLS, and staged protests that attracted both dedicated and casual fans. They harangued Don Garber at MLS events, photobombed televised sport events such as Columbus Blue Jacket (the NHL team in Columbus) games and appeared at widely watched sporting events such as College Game Day with #Savethecrew banners. Columbus citizens who were not Crew or even soccer fans got involved, as did high profile and visible members of the wider Columbus community, ensuring that the movement had strength in numbers and a variety of support.

Local and state governments became involved with these pragmatic, community and place-centric and visible modes of resisting and provided the movement with hope and additional teeth. On 5 March 2018, Columbus City and Ohio State Attorneys filed a joint lawsuit against Precourt Sport Ventures, invoking the 1996 Art Modell law that stated no professional team that gets public assistance or uses public facilities could leave town without giving six months' notice and providing locals with an opportunity to buy the team. While this order was temporary (and the outcome uncertain), it created a legal quagmire that jeopardized Precourt's proposed timelines for relocation to Austin. Crew fans were in no doubt of the role that the *system* - one embedded in the community and working on its behalf - played in fighting *the system*:

Thank you @MayorGinther for your support during this SaveTheCrew SavedTheCrew saga. And @ColumbusCouncil @FranklinCoOhio and the city attorneys, @CityAttyKlein as well as the attorney general's office @MikeDeWine and @mikeduffey. Together, we showed the world the Columbus Way.

Fighting for the soul of soccer

In their seminal paper on cultural entrepreneurship, Lounsbury and Glynn (2001), outlined storytelling as a first and critical mechanism by which actors could deploy culture to make their endeavours relatable and favourable to important audiences, such as those with resources.⁸² However, gaining such support is never predicated on actors' efforts alone, but rather on the actor-audience interface and therefore shaped by both actors' and audiences' meaning-making. In the case of the proposed Crew relocation, there was an alternative narrative competing for stakeholder attention. For proponents of the move, relocation was framed as necessary progress that Crew fans themselves, according to Garber and media figures like Alexi Lalas (former US soccer player and ESPN media analyst) ('It's just business. Nothing personal. Recognize the ambition. #SaveTheCrew'), were, in a sense, resisting. Such 'progress' can be viewed as part of a wider process of *hypercommodification*. Many within the US soccer community viewed commodification as pragmatic, inevitable and essential to the continued growth of the MLS. Michael Bradley (US soccer player and Captain of MLS team Toronto FC), for example, expressed sympathy for Crew supporters, but felt the Crew had fallen behind other markets in terms of the quality of the Crew stadium, the atmosphere and what it is like to play there. He was a persistent voice that suggested soccer in the US must keep advancing to find its place in the modern game.⁸³ The business argument - while economically sensible on the surface - was antithetical to (and therefore susceptible) to the localized understandings of place and community previously described. Fans of other MLS clubs also understood these culturally resonant meanings because as part of the wider soccer community, they are likely to hold overlapping cultural repertoires (eg identities, vocabularies, habits) whereby the meaning making of Crew and other fan groups sufficiently align.⁸⁴ As soccer fans, many Tweets demonstrated knowledge and appreciation for the Crew's contribution, as a founding MLS team, to the construction of the league and their own club: ('The only reason we're here is because of them'). While there were some dissenting voices, en-masse fans of other MLS teams supported the narrative that was being crafted.

We stand with the entire @Nordecke as they are facing betrayal from their 'owner' @APrecourt #sCREWed #savethecrew #crewvolution

So, every team in #MLS (at least on Twitter tonight) has changed their colors to Black & Gold in support of the Columbus Crew. Very cool. #SaveTheCrew (See [Figure 3](#))



Figure 3. MLS team logos changed to crew colours and shared via Twitter as a show of solidarity.

Framed against the machinations of capitalism and the American sport model and armed with traditional meanings of community, club culture and the romantic language that often typifies resistance, #Savethecrew was able to deliberately craft ‘their’ narrative as the ‘good fight’: ‘Only in the money-grubbing world of American sports is this not good enough’. (See [Figure 4](#), for the linked image)

Linked to this image of a sell-out game, one user Tweeted the following message:



Figure 4. A sell-out crowd at the Mapfre Stadium.

Do you know why the #SaveTheCrew movement is so important to me? Because at this point, especially given the current state in our country, instead of corporations who do not care about us, i'd like to see the people win one for a change. Good needs to conquer more often.

Users of the #Savethecrew hashtag often juxtaposed what they found culturally and personally meaningful (as shown by the above Tweet) against the negative aspects of the capitalist system. Supporting this tactic, and further providing their own account with a narrative fidelity that is essential to cultural entrepreneurial storytelling in order to mobilize audiences.⁴⁸ Save the Crew members cloaked the antagonists and powers behind the potential move in the language of deceit, conspiracy, and betrayal. They were 'liars', 'back-stabbers', 'cowards', 'snake oil salesman' and 'thieves'. They were 'othered' cast as the 'outsiders' and 'men in suits'; 'asshole businessmen' who were driven by values and motivations based in economy. Voices from within the soccer community that lent the business case for relocation credibility such as Lalas and Bradly were met with derision and labelled as 'sell-outs', 'trolls' 'corporate stooges' and 'anti-soccer'. From a cultural entrepreneurship perspective, what matters is whether a narrative is believable and metaphorically, these figures were blacklisted, expelled from the soccer fan fraternity, their credibility with real fans diminished.⁸⁵

Cultural entrepreneurship is also an intertemporal, rather than one-off process.⁸⁶ As such, it is affected by the way in which actors, artefacts, and events unfold over time, and correspondingly, how cultural entrepreneurs are able to make and re-make their story.⁸⁷ In the present case, #Savethecrew users quickly attuned to and perpetuated a narrative that this was about 'more than the Crew' ('#SaveTheCrew is bigger than the Crew the soul of the league is at stake'). Key to this narrative was that *all* MLS clubs could conceivably be at risk of owner-league conspiring and metric-driven relocation in the future:

Most MLS 1.0 teams attendance is suffering. It's a league-wide issue, yet @MLS has Columbus in its crosshairs. What makes you think @thesoccerdon will stop here? Anyone could be next.

The plausibility of this existential and decidedly corporate threat to established MLS teams and fan bases was lent further credibility by a number of seemingly 'underhanded' 'goings on'. Publicly distilled, these provided the optic that Precourt – aided by the MLS – had through various back-channels, secretly courted the city of Austin as a site for Crew relocation for years, as Columbus reporter Michael Arace conveyed:

Whatever happens, this Austin episode is already the single most shameful event in MLS history – worse than the San Jose/Houston row, and even worse than the Chivas Debacle. According to Don Garber himself, Precourt has been trying in some fashion to relocate the Crew to Austin since he bought the team in 2013, though of course the public wasn't made aware of his machinations until late last year.

With a strong whiff of conspiracy following Precourt, the MLS and Austin city officials, Tweets were not simply the echoes from fans unwilling to face up to the march of progress, but increasingly seemed like the language of truth. #Savethecrew users used this informational power, and Twitter as an interface to control and re-make their narrative as events changed and alleged instances of deceitful manoeuvring by Precourt and the MLS emerged, to forcefully challenge the legitimacy and authority of market-based rhetoric. They confronted the authenticity of the data itself and suggested that Precourt had been deliberately trying to sabotage brand growth and had wilfully neglected the upkeep of the Crew stadium. Many Twitter users suggested Precourt had even taken measures to reduce and misreport attendance (see [Figure 5](#)) ('Couldn't confirm it myself, but spoke to three different Crew fans who said gates normally open for ingress were closed off when they entered the stadium tonight. Big crowds still outside').



Figure 5. Crowds before a play-off game at the gate and struggling to get inside the stadium before kick-off.

The #SaveTheCrew folks have been saying PSV wasn't being truthful about this whole move. Now it comes out on court documents that PSV wasn't being truthful about this whole move. What else is necessary to get people to believe that the attendance figures aren't true, either?

#Savethecrew users also skilfully used concepts of place and community, the very ideas that had provided their own narrative with fidelity, to undermine key figures behind the move, therefore compromising the believability of the pro-relocation narrative. While American sport fans are no strangers to the rule of economy, Commissioner Don Garber had frequently referred to the important place of community in MLS strategy and plans for the growth and popularization of the league.⁸⁸ Similarly, Precourt had previously referred to the Crew as authentically Columbus, one big family and had focused on the City name in a recent club re-brand. Now, in openly pursuing the profit-based American sport model at the expense of community ideals, the espoused culture of the MLS, and the image they were trying to project seemed to be incongruent with their actual espoused culture and actions; a hypocrisy that #Savethecrew tweets regularly and mercilessly pointed out:

Without a hint of irony, Don Garber said in an interview with @TaylorTwellman that part of what makes #FCCincy work so well is a local owner with commitment to the community.

This is so surreal. Just two seasons ago @APrecourt was tweeting about how @ColumbusCrewSC team and supporters are a family. Now he is speaking at #atxcouncil like we never even existed. So much for family.

This apparent change in strategy placed the MLS at risk of being just like other American sport leagues and exposed the MLS's adoption of the concept of community as casual, convenient and inauthentic: '@thesoccerdon So MLS only cares about fans/cities/community when it's profitable? Letting the Crew leave is a pretty NFL move'. The sentiment within the #Savethecrew community was that adopting this position to gain access to new markets such as Austin risked alienating the existing market and loyal supporters who had been drawn to soccer precisely because they were looking for a different, less commercialized, and more meaningful fan experience. A common assertion was that the Crew situation represented a critical juncture in the league's history:

Irreparable harm will be done to @MLS. Fans here may never forgive the league no matter what happens. This is abhorrent. "Community"? Please ... 😞 #SaveTheCrew

For me this is a defining moment for the league. Is MLS really in it for love of the game and community? If it turns out to be no different than the NHL and NFL, ripping away teams that people put their heart and soul into, I'm done. Choose wisely @thesoccerdon #DCU

Crew fans also strategically used Twitter to draw attention to the possibility that a firm commitment to the American sport model could actually compromise and delegitimise the important MLS strategy of becoming a respected league in the global game: 'Anthony Precourt is testing the compatibility of #MLS's dual visions: to be a world-class soccer league AND a major North American sports business, writes @jeffrueter ...' The story, aided significantly by #Savethecrew garnered international attention, for example, featuring on Chelsea FC's website: "This is on @ChelseaFC's official website. Is this what @MLS wants to be known for across the world?". The story was also covered by a BBC article (*Columbus Crew: Two US cities fight over one football team*).⁸⁹ Crew captain Federico Higuain, conducted a TV interview in which he declared that a team leaving their home city would be unthinkable in his native Argentina, contrasting the American sport model with how soccer is conducted in the rest of the world. Soccer fans labelled the whole debacle a public relations nightmare for Garber and the MLS and Crew fans summed up in a number of Tweets, such as 'MLS must #SaveTheCrew to be taken seriously internationally' and 'Either we have a soccer system that might one day take its place alongside other respected leagues around the world, or MLS is just another North American Sport business operation'.

Concluding reflections

On 28 December 2018, the Columbus Crew were sold to Jimmy and Dee Haslam (owners of Cleveland Browns, one of Ohio's two NFL teams) and Pete Edwards (a former Crew physician, Columbus native and prominent local investor). The role of the Save the Crew campaign was widely recognized (the campaign won the 2019 Spirit of Columbus award) and was also lauded by news, media outlets and reporters on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/BenWSYX6> 'I've been incredibly impressed by the dedication of @ColumbusCrewSC fans. They stepped up and made this a team investors wanted' (Ben Garbarek, reporter and Columbus resident). In what must have been a particularly sweet moment, Crew fans Tweeted Don Garber's praise for the campaign: '#SaveTheCrew: "You inspired all of us to rediscover what the Crew means to the city, to soccer in America..." Says without it, he doesn't think this would have gotten done. #crew96'.

Soccer clubs (and the MLS) are ultimately part of a wider capitalist system, so once the Crew no longer served the purpose of profit maximization, relocation became a viable option consistent with the hegemonic pulse of America and the high capitalism principles of the American sports model.⁹⁰ While prepared to work within and leverage the capitalist order, in their deliberately crafted and culturally resonant narrative, #Savethecrew users and supporters of the Crew were telling MLS leadership and the Crew ownership that their sense of place and associated meanings (such as loyalty and community) matter more than dollars and cents. Consequently, members of the campaign, through using place as a resource, were urging ownership to do the opposite of what is demanded by the capitalist system and therefore represent the bearers of cultural resistance and keepers of community ideals and values associated with locality, belonging and tradition.⁹¹

In closing, we see this study as contributing to existing literature in two main ways. Firstly, it contributes to soccer research in relation to fan movements. As stated previously, most of this work has to date has focused on movements in the UK and European football, and our American-focused case study makes a unique contribution to this body of work. Complimenting existing research, it shows that football fans in the US see their club and clubs' culture much like soccer fans in other parts of the world do; as locally rooted, as part of their identity, and worth protecting. Secondly, our

research adds to football and sport research more generally by emphasizing that ideas of place and community are much more resilient than many scholars have intimated.⁹² Conversely, place and community (and consequently, the cultural values and the value they represent) were significant organizing concepts that provided both the context for, and site of hegemonic struggle between the owners of the Crew and MLS and attempts to save the Crew. Because culture, community, and place are embedded in local meanings, they act against the homogenizing logic of structures such as economy and rational planned change, attacking their base while rebuilding their own boundaries on symbolic and meaningful foundations.⁹³ Hence, it is suggested that there is a need, still, in modern society for a resurgence in interest and attention to place and community as concepts of interest and value within sport.⁹⁴ Moreover, when deployed skilfully, by actors who are competent cultural operators, they are valuable cultural resources that can imbibe transformation efforts and change with respect for meanings already held by fans and the communities that house them.

Notes

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2. Hognestad, 'Split Loyalties: Football is a Community Business'.
3. For the inevitability of commodification see, Ben Porat, 'From Community to Commodity: The Commodification of Football in Israel'. For hyper-commodification see, Walsh and Giulianotti, 'This Sporting Mammon: A Normative Critique of the Commodification of Sport'.
4. Gruneau, *Class, Sports, and Social Development*.
5. Kennedy, 'Football Stadium Relocation and the Commodification of Football: The Case of Everton Supporters and Their Adoption of the Language of Commerce'.
6. Ibid.
7. Andrews and Ritzer, 'The Grobal in the Sporting Glocal'.
8. See note 5 above.
9. Ibid.
10. See note 1 above.
11. See note 2 above.
12. Fitzpatrick, 'The Moral Economy of the English Football Crowd: The European Super League and the Contingency of Football Fan activism'.
13. Kennedy, '"Left Wing" Supporter Movements and the Political Economy of Football', p. 286.
14. Taylor, 'History and Football'.
15. Botiková, '"Stand up, if You're a Zbrojovka Fan!": Collective Memory, Fan Engagement and One Football Stadium'.
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28. Ibid.
29. Chen et al., *Sense of Place and Place Attachment in Tourism*.
30. Tuan, *Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective*.

31. Gieryn, 'A Space for Place in Sociology'.
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66. See note 49 above.
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80. See note 5 above.
81. For fans, soccer, and commoditization see, See not 79 above.
82. See note 36 above.
83. Prince-Wright, 'Michael Bradley has Strong Views on the Crew's Relocation'.
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85. Lounsbury and Glynn, *Cultural Entrepreneurship: A New Agenda for the Study of Entrepreneurial Processes and Possibilities*.
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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the first author, upon a reasonable request.

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