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# **“The Tale of Three Cities: Place branding, scalar complexity and football”**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter aims to address the relative neglect of scalar tensions between the local and global, and the glocal and grobal, within place branding literature and practice. Accordingly, the chapter more specifically explores the interconnections between place, place branding, and football branding through a longitudinal analysis of the entwined branding strategies deployed by Manchester City Football Club, the City of Manchester, and the City Football Group. We suggest football branding provides a useful context through which to reveal often-neglected concerns in place branding by drawing attention to the dynamic, entangled, and leaky boundaries between geographical scales. We demonstrate how geographical associations thwart efforts of place and football brands to go fully ‘grobal’. The chapter concludes by suggesting future research focuses on scalar tensions and interrelations in place branding.

**Keywords:** branding; football; glocal; grobal; place; scale

## **Introduction**

This chapter explores the intertwining of place, branding, and football through telling *The Tale of Three Cities* – Manchester City Football Club (MCFC), the City of Manchester, and City Football Group (CFG). More specifically, through exploring the branding strategies of MCFC over time, this chapter unravels the porous, dynamic, and sometimes reverse trajectories between the global and local, and glocal and grobal, which are central to place and football branding. Building on earlier work (Edensor and Millington, 2008), we demonstrate how close associations to place thwart efforts of brands to go fully ‘grobal’.

Initial academic interrogation of the complex relations between global-local spatial scales uncritically produced binary and static oppositions between the global and local (Cox, 1993), with the local 'fetishized' as something to be rescued from the homogenising clutches of globalisation (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007). However, more recent literature provides multi-layered, dynamic, and porous accounts of geographical scales (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007; Brenner, 1998). For instance, 'glocal' is now regularly deployed to capture the leaky boundaries between the global and local (Robertson, 1995); whilst, to deepen this analysis, 'grobal' - an amalgamation of 'growth' and 'global' - has been added to the growing lexicon of concepts examining the complex spatialities of globalisation (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007). The term 'grobal' thus explains how global processes can sometimes overwhelm the local, rather than the global and local always slotting seamlessly together as implied by the bridging concept 'glocal' (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007; Medway et al., 2019; Ritzer, 2007), due to a focus on continuous growth across global borders without consideration of preserving local values, identities, or cultures.

However, discussions of scalar entanglements are limited in place branding literature. This is surprising given well-rehearsed anxieties about globalisation producing a dystopic end-state of 'nothingness' (Ritzer, 2007), with localities becoming standardised, 'placeless' (Relph, 1976) and 'non-places' (Augé, 1992). A further concern is how the appropriation of place branding by policy-makers might also contribute to the homogenisation of places, through place marketing and placemaking designed to appeal to international target markets (Rantisi and Leslie, 2006). To counter anxiety about the flattening of place, emergent research focuses on attempts to reconnect consumers with local cultures. This encompasses craft produce (Sjolander-Lindqvist et al., 2020), how local distinction and perceived 'authenticity' could regenerate high streets (Hubbard, 2019), and concerns about over-tourism in relation to destination branding (Séraphin et al., 2019). Such work amplifies the importance of addressing the relative neglect of spatial scales and tensions within place branding, for which this chapter addresses and contributes an emergent research agenda.

### **The complexity of spatial scales**

Since the mid-1970s, globalisation has become a popular term (Kelly, 1999) used to reflect the time-space compression, intensified social and cultural connectivity, and sense of the

‘world as a single place’ associated with contemporary developed societies (Kelly, 1999; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004). Traditionally, geographical scales (e.g. local, regional, national, global etc.) were presented as relatively bounded, static, and hierarchical; for example, the perceived binaried distinctions between the global and local (Andrews and Ritzer 2007; Brenner, 1998; Cox, 1993). It led to what Kelly (1999: 382) refers to as a ‘caricature’ of the world, with culture no longer seen as meaningfully connected to place. This reflects the ‘narrative of loss’ (Arefi, 1999: 179) found in much place-based literature, which argues globalisation has led to places becoming homogenised, inauthentic, and disembedded from the local. However, for Brenner (1998: 464; *original emphasis*), geographical scales are:

. . . complex, socially contested territorial scaffolding upon which multiple overlapping *forms of territorial organization* converge, coalesce, and interpenetrate.

Therefore, whilst the ‘serious leakage’ (Cox, 1993: 436) between spatial scales was initially overlooked, since the 1990s an emergent stream of critical literature has considered geographical scales as dynamic, porous, unbounded, relational, and dialectical (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007; Brenner, 1998; Cox, 1993; Kelly, 1999; Medway et al., 2019). Thus, ‘glocal’ and ‘glocalisation’ have been coined to capture the fluid, dialectical, and interpenetrative relationship between the global and local (Robertson, 1995), including the adaptation of global products to suit local audiences. Andrews and Ritzer (2007), however, argue discussions of glocalisation often neglect a critical appreciation of how the ‘grobal’ - the continuous expansionist aims of nations and organisations – can overwhelm the ‘glocal’, as explained in the introduction. Rather than the global and local neatly slotting together, they suggest researchers should examine the underexplored interplays between the ‘glocal’ and ‘grobal’ (cf. Hoogenboom et al., 2010). Reflecting the challenges places might face in terms of appealing to both the local catchment and visitors, user perceptions of (in)authenticity, and over-tourism, the above reveals the importance of considering the complexity of spatial scales within place branding, in order for places to retain character, vitality, and viability in today’s competitive globalised environment.

## **Scalar tensions in place branding**

Place branding literature has burgeoned over the last three decades, with an exponential year-on-year increase in the number of articles from 1988-2009 (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011). This proliferation can be understood through the lens of an increasingly neo-liberal environment (Rantisi and Leslie, 2006), and resultant competition between places. As Boisen (2007) suggests, if policymakers perceive their places as being in competition, they are likely to embark on policies designed to improve the competitive position of their places. It follows that branding can be seen as a hegemonic, widely adopted strategy employed by different places to ensure they can compete in this environment (Kornberger and Carter, 2010).

Yet, whilst Dinnie (2008: 15) defines place branding as 'the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide (places) with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences', concerns continue to surround homogenous 'top-down' branding strategies (Ntounis and Kavaratzis, 2017). In this regard, Omholt (2013) indicates place branding needs to develop a collective capacity for genuine stakeholder engagement. Thus, as research and practice has evolved, top-down place branding has been eschewed in favour of participatory, 'bottom-up' branding that is embedded in interactive processes with local stakeholders (Eshuis and Edwards, 2013; Omholt, 2013; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). As Zenker (2011) suggests, the greater the depth of participation, the higher the level of satisfaction, commitment and trust people have with the place brand created.

Despite the shift towards participatory branding - which arguably favours the local - constituting a key aspect of progression in the field, there has been little conceptual development in respect of associated scalar tensions. Boisen et al. (2011: 138) contend places are not distinct entities but part of a scalar hierarchy through which identities at different scales are selectively layered. Warnaby and Medway (2013: 348) suggest this manifests both in terms of administrative jurisdictions, as well as in the physical spaces they occupy, as 'such spatial identities as perceived by audiences may overlap, contradict or complement places defined in territorial-administrative terms'. Likewise, Giovanardi (2015: 611) argues place branding '...can no longer be viewed as nested in a static hierarchy, but instead must co-exist and interpenetrate in a tangled and sometimes surprising manner'. As such, the typical scales of place branding activity - city/region/nation (Herstein, 2012) - can

no longer be considered binaried or static. Cities for example, are an aggregate of other places and spaces within their boundaries, with this scalar disaggregation applying within and across each of these 'traditional' spatial scales (Boisen, 2007). The 'porous' accounts of geographical scales described above, therefore, have implications for 'inter-scalar' (Giovanardi, 2015) place brand formation and consumption, and should be taken into account to avoid what Lucarelli (2018: 261) has termed the 'territorial trap'.

Place branding and football are closely interwoven, thus making it a fruitful context for unravelling the complexities of spatial scales, and to avoid such territorial trappings. Football clubs, for example, can promote the place in which they are embedded (Bale, 2000); as van den Berg et al. (2016) observe, sports events are important to city marketing campaigns, since they enhance city competitiveness and attractiveness to local communities and tourists. The Visit Manchester (2020) website, for instance, promotes stadium tours and matches at Manchester United's Old Trafford ground and Manchester City's Etihad Stadium to attract visitors, proclaiming: 'Manchester is synonymous with football; it's written in our DNA'. Indeed, 10.8% of visits to the North West of England include seeing a live football match (Visit Britain, 2015), with Old Trafford attracting 109,000 overseas visitors and the Etihad Stadium 33,000 in 2014 (Brooks-Sykes, 2016). Football tourists are also likely to spend more on average per stay in the UK compared to the typical visitor, thus boosting local economies (Brooks-Sykes, 2016). The next section, therefore, explores how such associations between place, football, and branding involve intricate scalar interrelations and considerations.

### **Football branding and place**

The globalisation of football is now well-documented (Giulianotti, 2002). Once reliant on match-day attendance, the highest-performing clubs have diversified their commercial activity to include branded merchandise, hospitality packages, and sponsorship deals (Abosag et al., 2012). English Premier League (EPL) clubs, for example, currently share over £5billion from broadcasting rights (Buraimo, 2019), with match day revenue contributing a small percentage of total income. Indeed, these elite clubs aim to extend their brand through global media channels, augmented by lucrative tours of growing football markets, or 'friendly globalization' (Menary, 2018). Consequently, football markets are fragmenting

beyond the confines of longstanding local fans to geographically dispersed 'consumers', who perhaps do not share such a passionate relationship with the clubs themselves (Giulianotti, 2002; Tapp and Clowes, 2002).

However, geographical association or origin (Pike, 2011) remains an immutable core attribute of the world's leading global football brands, thus challenging processes of 'globalisation'. Unlike the franchise model in the USA, where sports club mobility is more commonplace, it is unthinkable, for example, that Barcelona FC would relocate to Madrid, no matter what the commercial benefits. There has been one attempt in English football, where Wimbledon FC relocated to Milton Keynes to form MK Dons; but this provoked such a backlash from Wimbledon supporters, they refused to follow the new club, and actually formed their own, Wimbledon AFC, to maintain the connection to their original locale (Cook and Anagnostopoulos, 2017). As this case exemplifies, within football fan cultural identity, the connection between club and place remains a prominent marker in claims of what it means to be a 'true' supporter (Davis, 2015). Hence, it is not surprising that the 'global' ambitions of football clubs can be resisted by local supporters who refuse to view their team as a dislocated brand (Abosag et al., 2012), and hold a generally negative view of supposedly detached touristic spectators during matches (Steadman et al., 2020).

Subsequently, whilst football is often considered the 'global game' (Richelieu and Desbordes, 2009; Rowe, 2003), football clubs remain intimately rooted in place; despite the geographical mobility of fans, players, and managers, they retain symbolic ties to 'home' (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004). Most English football clubs, for example, are named after a town or city (Bale, 2000; Medway et al., 2019), with club headquarters, home stadia, strip colours, and core supporters typically embedded in the place from which that club originates (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004). Whilst football brands are communicated through tangible elements such as merchandise and billboards, local supporters form a crucial aspect of the unpredictable and intangible 'core' product promoted, i.e. the match and its attendant atmospheres (Guschwan, 2015), with fans as 'pro-sumers' of match experiences (Couvlaere and Richelieu, 2005). Home stadia are important architectural repositories of supporter affects, emotions and memories, with stadium relocations potentially rupturing these topophilic connections fans form with their club (Bale, 2000; Giulianotti, 2002), and any associated matchday routines (Edensor and Millington, 2010;

Steadman et al., 2020), geographical memories and identities (Edensor and Millington, 2008; Guschwan, 2015; Hague and Mercer, 1998).

Whereas studies of football branding overwhelmingly focus on the global (Hinson et al, 2020), we draw on the notion of brands as ‘half-finished frames’ (Goffman, 1974) which cannot generate meanings to which people automatically subscribe, but must connect to spatially embedded identities, memories, and emotions (Edensor and Millington, 2008). Indeed, brands are not passively received; they are social texts co-produced between marketers and consumers (Hatch and Rubin, 2006; Holt, 2002). Fans interpret football brands from a ‘horizon of expectations’ (Hatch and Rubin, 2002) informed by their geographically-embedded experiences with the club. Thus, whilst brands might be conceptualised as complex and fluid (Lury, 2004), historical associations to place hinder the capacity of even the most powerful football brands to ever go fully ‘global’ - an argument we will now unravel further.

### **The Tale of Three Cities: MCFC branding story**

Giulianotti and Robertson (2004: 555) assert that football provides a revealing context to analyse the ‘complex interplay of universalizing and localizing forces’. To move beyond static and binaried accounts of the global-local nexus, and account for fluid, shifting and complex flows intertwining the global and local, Hoogenboom et al. (2010) adopt a longitudinal approach. They thereby illustrate how, over time, brands might follow non-linear and multidirectional trajectories spanning multiple spatial scales. We take inspiration from their framework to analyse how football brands negotiate tensions between their indispensable geographical associations with place, and expansionist global ambitions (Edensor and Millington, 2008). We will now explore four of what we call ‘transects’<sup>1</sup> of MCFC branding strategies over time, alongside considerations of the entangled global-local and global-local scalar interplays.

#### **Transect 1: From the global to the local - *This is Our City***

The first branding transect emphasises MCFC’s locally-embedded connections to the city of Manchester in the UK. Following decades of on-field and off-field calamities, whilst local rivals Manchester United enjoyed unprecedented success, MCFC started the 2003 season in



the new City of Manchester Stadium (now the Etihad Stadium), having spent 80 years at their previous home ground, Maine Road (Edensor and Millington, 2010; Steadman et al., 2020). The move was supposed to mark MCFC's rebirth; however, reflecting a long absence from the top-flight, the club initially suffered from poor results, with fan expectations quickly dropping. This raised the question of: how do you brand a mediocre team? Local fans also experienced a lingering sense of dislocation following the disruptive stadium move (Edensor and Millington, 2010; Steadman et al., 2020). In response, the club hired an advertising agency in 2005 to develop a new branding campaign - *This is Our City* - which knowingly constructed MCFC as Manchester's embedded 'local team', in opposition to its disembedded 'global other', Manchester United (Edensor and Millington, 2008). Despite simultaneously trying to globalise the brand during this time, through an international network of supporter clubs and online media, and growing the club's presence in China through the calculated signing of international player Sun Jihai - the club's first Asian player - this campaign aimed to cultivate the loyalty and passion of *existing* local supporters. As Matt Lowery (Assistant Club Secretary) explained:

We simply can't afford to be complacent. We enjoy a tremendous loyalty from our core fans ... if this really is Manchester's club we should be spreading that message around the city (*The Guardian*, 2005).

The campaign, therefore, drew on slogans, imagery and narratives associated with club and fan histories within the city of Manchester. Online advertising for a new kit, for example, made geographical and temporal associations with the working class terraced housing and alleyways of Moss Side, the neighbourhood in which the former Maine Road ground was embedded. This landscape deliberately resonated with sentiments expressed by fans comparing their experiences between the old and new stadia (Edensor and Millington, 2010). Another online advert featured a photograph by Shirley Baker, famous for recording working class life in 1960s Manchester. Overlaying the image, depicting young boys playing football against a backdrop of terraced streets, was the slogan 'Always was ... Always will be'. The deployment of these nostalgic sites and spaces of Maine Road tapped into myths around MCFC fans as working class and locally-rooted Mancunians, in contrast with the new embourgeoised, and increasingly geographically-dispersed, football 'consumer' (Giulianotti, 2002).

As well as drawing on historical imagery of places such as Maine Road, the campaign sprawled into the city of Manchester itself, reaffirming the club's local-rootedness. For example, 48 billboards in MCFC colours were strategically placed around central Manchester, proclaiming *This is Our City* and using slogans such as *Pure* or *Réal* Manchester. As Edensor and Millington (2008) suggest, the play on Real/*Réal* not only undergirds notions of authenticity, but also makes playful reference to a time when MCFC regularly played in European club competition in their 1970s 'glory days', prior to more recent successes. This word play also conceivably signals the club's wider global ambitions, thus revealing the complex scalar paradoxes involved in the campaign. Graffiti-style adverts for MCFC matches also began to appear in Manchester's trendy Northern Quarter cultural district. Such interventions were designed not only to appeal to MCFC fans' Mancunian embeddedness and sense of rooted cosmopolitanism, but to also brazenly antagonise fans of rivals Manchester United.

Given consumers sometimes resist branding efforts (Holt, 2006), fans acknowledged *This is Our City* as a deliberative campaign instigated by the club's management. However, by tapping into '...pre-existing structures of feeling, belief, and identity...' (Edensor and Millington, 2008: 174), through which individuals both 'locate themselves and define their locality' (Hague and Mercer, 1998: 113), supporters were largely acquiescent (Edensor and Millington, 2008). The campaign remained locally-embedded and sensitive to the club and fans' geographical context, positioning the MCFC brand as 'locally authentic', distinguished from the 'inauthentic global'. The MCFC brand at this time was thus less promiscuously available to global audiences. *This is Our City*, therefore, illustrates how sports branding can provide a sense of locality and differentiation in a globalizing world (Guschwan, 2015). Yet, whilst cultivating the loyalty of local fans may make commercial sense for a struggling team, things rapidly changed for MCFC in 2008, with a takeover by the wealthy Sheikh Mansour family of Abu Dhabi, which held ambitions to grow MCFC into a global football brand. This development is now explored further.

## **Transect 2: From the local to the global - Branding the city of Manchester through football**

The second branding transect examines the repositioning of a 'local' brand within a global network, reflective of how branding can involve 'jumping' between multiple scales (Ntounis

and Kanellopoulou, 2017). Scott (2000) describes the interweaving of significant cultural and social institutions and spaces into broader place branding narratives. We might also consider football clubs as cultural assets within a milieu of local features projecting images that function as branding devices for a place's capabilities, ambitions and aspirations (Giulianotti, 1999; van den Berg et al., 2016). Since the 1970s, sports-led development has become a key feature of cities' regeneration strategies, such as Birmingham, Glasgow and Sheffield (Gratton, et al., 2005). Building on Peck and Ward (2002), we focus on the transformation of poverty-stricken East Manchester into an international sporting destination following MCFC's 2008 takeover and changing fortunes.

More specifically, the 2008 investment from Abu Dhabi accelerated the development of the area around MCFC's home stadium to accommodate new training facilities; a second football stadium for the youth and women's teams; a complex of community football pitches; sports science research facilities; and a school and college, together with MCFC's administrative base. The new owners expanded the main stadium and sold naming rights to Etihad Airways. This deal extended to the entire site, subsequently renamed The Etihad Campus, to replace its previous incarnations of SportsCity and Eastlands – an advanced example of toponymic commodification (Medway et al., 2019). Consequently, the Etihad brand has become embedded and synonymous with Manchester, reflecting the city's neoliberal 'entrepreneurial script' (Peck and Ward, 2002). Sir Richard Leese, leader of Manchester City Council, has celebrated such developments:

The relationship between Etihad Airways and MCFC further supports Manchester's international profile and global connectivity and the city's ability to attract leading brands to invest and create job opportunities. It is great news for Manchester, reinforcing our sporting, transport and economic growth priorities and is particularly welcome news for east Manchester (*The Manchester Evening News*, 2011).

We suggest, therefore, the repositioning of MCFC as a global club aligns with the strategic desires of the city's political elite, seeking to portray Manchester as a future global city, and is a key driver of a global strategy for both club and local authority. The above reaffirms the interweaving of place, place branding and football (van den Berg et al., 2016).

The connection between the city of Manchester and Abu Dhabi, however, is not necessarily a one-way process. Middle-eastern brands, such as Etihad and Emirates, are notable for exploiting the global exposure of football teams (Al Masari and O'Connor, 2013),

committing \$1.4 billion between 2006 and 2021 in sponsorship deals with MCFC and several others, including Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain and Real Madrid (Thani and Heenan, 2017). However, as Thani and Heenan suggest, both airlines act as proxies for national state authority, with these deals being more about repositioning the UAE, rather than promoting those places where the clubs receiving this sponsorship are embedded. Etihad, for instance, established direct plane routes between Manchester and Abu Dhabi, and MCFC fans can take advantage of discounted holidays promoted to them through in-stadium adverts by the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism. The creation of the Etihad Campus, therefore, demonstrates the interwoven nature of football, place and place branding; and, as we reveal in the next section, such interrelationships are further complicated by the multiple glocalities and cities, which might be a target of the global ambitions of Abu Dhabi.

### **Transect 3: Entangling the global with multiple locals - *The City Way***

The third transect traces how football branding can play out in multiple glocalities, to occupy both the global and the glocal (Hinson et al., 2020). It maps the construction of *City* as a global umbrella brand encompassing multiple international football brands and cities, including - but extending far beyond - MCFC and the city of Manchester. The relative simplicity of football matches renders the game particularly open to consumption by global audiences (Giulianotti, 2012); and thus the global flow of media and money that are hallmarks of the 21st century (Guschwan, 2015: 374). However, as Evans and Norcliffe (2016) explain, cultivating football supporters at club level remains dependent on how branding appeals to specific national and local cultural contexts. Indeed, as Andrews and Ritzer (2007) note, global brands can appeal to multiple locals, whereby the product is customised for different national markets. We also see this in sport: mega-events such as the Olympic Games provide an example of multiplicity in sports branding as they involve numerous glocalities (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007). This multiplicity is also evidenced by football brands.

In 2013, MCFC's owners established a holding company, the City Football Group (CFG), jointly owned by the Abu Dhabi United Group, together with Chinese media and American financial interests. Central to this global strategy is multiple club ownership (MCO), whereby CFG now owns majority shares in MCFC, New York City, and Melbourne City; has acquired

six further clubs (Montevideo City Torque, Girona FC, Lommel SK, Mumbai City, Sichuan Jiuniu FC, and Yokohama F. Marinos); and established player development agreements with two further clubs (NAC Breda and Atlético Venezuela C.F.). In total, CFG now incorporate 25 men's, women's and youth teams, as well as establishing a further 25 subsidiary companies, with operations in 12 countries. They have also invested in:

- Sapphire Sports - a US-based sport venture capital fund;
- Global Soccer Centres - a network of recreational football centres across North America; and
- Professional ESports teams in Manchester, New York, Melbourne, and China.

CFG's overarching mission is 'creating globally connected football communities', and it has established the brand - *City* - to achieve this. Here, *City* is constructed as a global umbrella brand that connects multiple clubs and cities around the world. Although the *City* in question might be the one playing in Manchester, New York, or Melbourne, nevertheless they are all *City*. In a competitive global market, brand distinction rests on *The City Way*, summarised by Omar Berrada in 2015 (Commercial Director, City Football Marketing):

...One of our key objectives is to win – and to win not just at Manchester City, but at all of our clubs. The other aspect is how you win. We want to play a very specific type of football – a classy, beautiful style of football that we believe resonates with football fans around the world. It allows brands to have the best of both worlds: a consistent global marketing platform... as well as the ability to deliver messages that are very specific to the local markets of our clubs around the world (*Marketing Week*, 2015).

Clubs in New York, Montevideo, Melbourne, and Girona have been subject to name changes, new colours and badges to align with the *City* brand. Whilst retaining some local distinctions, therefore, each club is recognisably linked to *City*. Although the Manchester version of *City* remains prominent, the deployment of *City* to signify a winning attitude and particular style is a more fluid and globally available brand concept. The MCO model, therefore, enables CFG to establish multiple brands in the world's core and expanding football markets.

Regardless of accusations of financial irregularity levelled at the club by European governing body UEFA (The Guardian, 2020), which once threatened to dent their ambitions, under Sheikh Mansour's ownership, MFC has become one of the world's most valuable clubs and brands (Deloitte, 2020), and remains core to CFG's global ambitions as a parent brand to be

consumed both at home and across the world. However, as the position of MCFC within the glocal-grobal nexus becomes increasingly complex, not all of MCFC's core supporters appear to be buying into the club's new elevated position.

#### **Transect 4: From multiple glocals back to the local - Reclaiming the local**

The final transect reveals how fan disenchantment with commercialisation is driving MCFC's (re)emphasis on the local. Andrews and Ritzer (2007: 142) draw attention to the potential loss of control of the parent brand as 'the fundamental grobal-glocal problematic...', a particularly heightened concern in the context of sports branding, which can 'frequently be subject to forms of defensive resistance by glocal constituencies' (ibid: 147). Indeed, football 'consumers' can be reflexive (Edensor, 2015) and reticent to see their club as a 'brand' (Abosag et al., 2012). As Edensor and Millington (2008) demonstrate, football branding can generate fan anxieties that clubs will become detached from local roots to lure global audiences, resonating with Arefi's (1999: 179) 'narrative of loss'. Despite increasing global reach and an unprecedented period of success, local MCFC supporters appear to be experiencing a growing sense of disconnection to the club. As Steadman et al. (2020) find, local core supporters are beginning to feel *overwhelmed* by the grobal, and increasingly detached from the club which they believe is becoming a disconnected 'brand'. Due to MCFC's grobal strategy, supporters are also becoming sensitised to the presence of new spectators during matches, rehearsing a common trope within fan culture which positions 'real fans' against glory-hunters, tourists, or 'plastic fans' (Edensor, 2015). To exemplify, as one fan in Steadman et al.'s (2020: 12) study of football match atmospheres remarked:

...People who don't really have the passion for the club, who just come here for a day out. That's the 'un-real' fans... Selfie sticks and spend two hundred pounds in the shop and... then fly off wherever... The club is pandering for those types of fans [John; Group discussion 1].

MCFC is facing related challenges around core local fans lacking feelings of topophilic connectedness at the club's new Etihad Stadium (Edensor and Millington, 2010; Steadman et al., 2020), reflecting Relph's (1976) notion of placelessness, and wider concerns around the 'disenchanted homeliness' (Ritzer and Stillman, 2001: 101) of contemporary sports stadia. Whereas Maine Road, and its wider neighbourhood, comprised variegated, loose,

complex spaces, the Etihad Campus confronts fans with a smoother and more regulated environment in danger of becoming a 'non-place' (Augé, 1992). As one fan opines:

Park up near a pub, then have a couple of pints. Go to the ground [Maine Road] and buy some Bovril and maybe a Wagon Wheel. At half time grab a pie and a cup of tea. After the match go to the pub again – usually a different one – or a local curry house and talk about the match... Where do you go for a decent pint near Eastlands [The Etihad]? (*Manchester Confidential*, quoted in Edensor and Millington, 2010: 152).

The above has together contributed to issues around atmosphere at the Etihad Stadium - a crucial intangible element of football brands (Guschwan, 2015), which fans 'pro-sume' (Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005). Indeed, Steadman et al. (2020) draw attention to the term *The Emptihad* - a jibe regularly deployed by rival fans and critics concerning the swathes of empty seats at MFCFC home matches. During match days there is concern shared by both supporters and management that the atmosphere is poor, and that fans are quiet and do not come to games ready to spur the team on, often arriving late and leaving early:

It was not full. I don't know why. [Wednesday] gives a chance to go back to Wembley. Hopefully they will support us more (Pep Guardiola, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2020, *BBC Sport*).

With the broader objective to win competitions and leagues, whilst promoting MFCFC to a global multimedia audience, empty seats and dispassionate crowds challenge the parent brand attributes of *The City Way*, as well as the brand image of MFCFC. Atmosphere in this case is an emotional and performative extension of the *City* brand, with certain expectations about how fans should display their loyalty.

Despite atmosphere being unpredictable, unlike other brand attributes (Guschwan, 2015), the club is currently enacting material and sensory placemaking strategies in the sites and spaces surrounding the Etihad. It is hoped this will (re)foster a sense of local fan belonging and enhance atmosphere (Edensor, 2015), in turn improving brand image. The main intervention is focused on the introduction of *City Square*, a permanent fan zone incorporating bars, eateries, and a main stage at the centre for live music and onstage interviews. Place activation has also been stimulated through buskers and a plethora of activities for younger people, in addition to enhancing the walking routes from the city centre, with strategic positioning of activities and parades en route. Further illustrating a re-orientation back to the local, the stadium exterior has been adorned with huge photographs

depicting the history of the club from its humble 19<sup>th</sup> century origins to the present day successes, alongside narratives expressing local fans' match-day memories. Moreover, in a development which echoes the previous *This is Our City* campaign, the club's new home shirt, launched in July 2020, incorporates a design which acknowledges creative mosaics found in Manchester's Northern Quarter cultural district in an attempt to reinscribe MCFC's embeddedness in place, whilst appealing to the local capital of MCFC supporters.

Although such interventions might be viewed cynically as an attempt to encourage fans to spend more time and money at the stadium, MCFC thus appears to have embarked on an innovative placemaking programme to enhance brand image. Nevertheless, there is always the underlying challenge that atmosphere cannot be easily and corporately manufactured in football, but must be carefully co-produced (Edensor, 2015; Steadman et al., 2020). Thus, drawing on marketing messages which explicitly call on fan loyalty, attempts by MCFC to improve atmosphere chimes with well-established notions within fan culture – notably, celebrating passion and the trope of 'real' fans getting behind their team. This final transect, therefore, reveals a broader challenge to football branding, as it seems stretching too far from their geographical associations continues to restrain the global ambitions of clubs.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter explored the branding strategies deployed by MCFC, the City of Manchester, and CFG to reveal the interweaving, shifting, and multi-directional flows between geographical scales (Hoogenboom et al., 2010). First, we explored MCFC's *This is Our City* campaign, branding which played upon the club's and supporters' locally-embedded connections to Manchester (Edensor and Millington, 2008), which demonstrates how sports branding can provide a sense of locality and differentiation in a globalising world (Guschwan, 2015). Second, we mapped MCFC's rising 'global' ambitions following the 2008 takeover by the Abu Dhabi United Group, and subsequent sponsorship deals with Etihad Airways and development of the Etihad Campus. This illustrates complex interplays between Manchester's global branding aspirations, and attempts by the United Arab Emirates to reposition itself as a global destination. Third, we focused on the creation of *City* as a global umbrella brand for multiple football clubs and cities, including MCFC and Manchester. It unravels how a once-locally embedded brand can be positioned within multiple glocalities



through the adoption of a more fluid and globally available product concept. Finally, we explored concerns expressed by core supporters in Manchester about feeling overwhelmed by the global, which has provoked attempts to reconnect fans and 'reclaim' the local.

Subsequently, this chapter makes two key contributions to place branding. First, building on Rowe (2003) and Edensor and Millington (2008), we demonstrate how place embeddedness restrains football brands from ever going fully 'global'. We further suggest there are limits to how much a *place* brand can stretch away from its locally-embedded roots before disenfranchisement results. Much research has been conducted into the requirement for 'authenticity' in place branding (Anholt, 2004; Murray, 2001); yet, little attention has been paid to the *implications* of extending a place brand too far, however authentic it is deemed to be. We suggest, therefore, there is fruitful ground to explore, beyond football, the complexity of the global-glocal nexus. For example, 'locals' in a given place may experience similar levels of resultant disconnection, and erosion of embedded place attachments, as place branding might strip away depth to render the qualities of place more amenable to non-localised place consumers.

Second, whilst existing literature discusses how sports teams help to promote the place from which they originate (e.g. Bale, 2000; van den Berg et al., 2016), we found in the case of MFCFC that not only is the City of Manchester thereby promoted, but also the UAE and other cities under the *City* umbrella brand. Such findings demonstrate how places cannot be considered bounded objects to be neatly packaged for consumers; nor should the 'local' be fetishized, as arguably occurs in participatory place branding (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). Rather, extending geographical insights into the realm of place branding, spatial scales must be considered as interpenetrative, overlapping, and ever-shifting, with the attendant porosity and multiplicity of places considered during the branding process.

To conclude, future work could challenge literature which demonises the 'global' for its associations with placelessness, as well as that which enthusiastically celebrates the 'local'. Specifically, we call for additional work regarding scalar tensions within place branding. Researchers in this field are, therefore, encouraged to explore further the leaky boundaries between spatial scales in place branding contexts, rather than accepting the traditional view of places as neat and bounded objects for promotion.

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<sup>i</sup> Transect is a geographical term denoting a line of enquiry. However, unlike trajectory which suggests unstoppable linearity, transect conveys that one can cut across, or move around in multiple directions, such lines of enquiry to detect changes over time and space.