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Entry

# COVID-19's Financial Impact on UK Football Clubs

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**Definition:** This entry explores the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the football industry, highlighting the challenges, adaptations, and long-term implications for clubs across all levels. It examines the industry's financial fragility, particularly for clubs reliant on matchday revenue, while showcasing adaptive strategies such as digital engagement, government support, and revenue diversification that sustained operations during the crisis. The pandemic exposed structural vulnerabilities within football, from elite clubs to grassroots teams, through revenue shortfalls caused by closed stadiums, cancelled matches, and reduced sponsorships. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the pandemic's effects on revenue streams, fixed costs, player contracts, and stakeholder roles, offering insights into strategies that promote financial resilience. Case studies illustrate how elite, semi-professional, and grassroots clubs responded to financial and operational challenges, emphasising the importance of diversified income sources, proactive financial planning, and community support. By identifying lessons from the pandemic, the entry underscores the critical need for sustainable practises and resilient models to prepare the football industry for future disruptions.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; football industry; financial resilience; digital engagement; government assistance; revenue streams; adaptation strategies; semi-professional clubs



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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruption to the global sports industry, halting live events, closing stadiums, and causing significant financial instability across organisations [1]. Football, as the world's most popular sport, was profoundly affected. Matches were postponed, leagues suspended, and revenue streams drastically reduced, underscoring the structural vulnerabilities within the industry [2]. Traditionally reliant on diverse income sources such as matchday revenues, broadcasting rights, sponsorships, and merchandise, the pandemic highlighted football clubs' financial fragility, especially for those heavily dependent on live audience participation [3].

In the United Kingdom, where football holds both immense cultural significance and economic weight, the pandemic's impact was particularly severe. UK football is a microcosm of global football challenges, reflecting a stratified ecosystem that spans elite Premier League clubs with diversified income streams to semi-professional and grassroots clubs reliant on matchday earnings and local support [4]. While elite clubs mitigated losses through established broadcasting deals and global sponsorships, lower-tier and grassroots clubs faced existential threats due to limited financial reserves and greater dependence on community engagement [5]. These disparities within the UK football industry highlighted the urgent need for adaptive financial strategies and sustainable operational models [6].

Football's socio-economic importance in the UK is unparalleled and deeply embedded in community life and the national identity [7]. The UK football industry, valued at billions of pounds annually, offers unique insights into the challenges faced by sports organisations worldwide [8]. From elite Premier League clubs to grassroots teams, the pandemic's impact was far-reaching, with clubs experiencing sharp declines in matchday revenues, sponsorship deals, and merchandise sales [9]. Semi-professional and lower-tier clubs, which rely heavily on matchday earnings and local support, faced existential threats, while top-tier clubs navigated losses through diversified revenue streams and global media rights [10].

This study investigates the financial resilience of UK football clubs during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the strategies employed to adapt to pandemic-related disruptions and their effectiveness in maintaining financial stability and operational continuity [11]. By examining these adaptive measures, the research identifies critical lessons from the UK football industry that can inform global sports organisations on enhancing resilience in future crises. Through this analysis, the study highlights both short-term financial adjustments and long-term strategies that address the structural vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic, offering insights into sustainable practises for the broader sports ecosystem.

The dual significance of this research lies in its focus on the UK as a representative case of global challenges. Football's socio-economic importance in the UK is unparalleled, with clubs acting as cultural institutions and community hubs [12]. Moreover, the UK's distinctive football ecosystem, with pronounced financial disparities between elite and grassroots levels, provides a valuable context for exploring the pandemic's broader implications for global sports resilience [13]. Previous studies have underscored the UK's unique blend of commercial success and local reliance, making it a compelling case for examining financial strategies and crisis adaptation [1].

This research highlights critical insights into resilience-building measures by framing the UK football industry within the broader global context of pandemic disruptions. The findings emphasise the importance of revenue diversification, digital transformation, and collaborative support among stakeholders to sustain football operations during crises and prepare for future uncertainties.

## 2. Financial Structures in Football, Pre-COVID-19

Football clubs across elite, semi-professional, and grassroots levels have distinct financial frameworks, each with varying dependencies on revenue sources [10]. Elite clubs enjoy diversified revenue streams from broadcasting rights, sponsorships, and merchandise [14]. Semi-professional and grassroots clubs, however, rely primarily on matchday revenue, local sponsorships, and community funding [15]. These differing structures underscored unique vulnerabilities laid bare by the pandemic's disruptions.

### 2.1. Matchday Revenue

Matchday revenue—ticket sales, concessions, and in-stadium merchandise—was a vital income source for clubs at all levels. Elite clubs supplement this with broadcasting and sponsorship, but matchday revenue still forms a substantial portion of their financial ecosystem. Semi-professional clubs, dependent on local audiences, faced increased financial risk without matchday revenue, as did grassroots clubs, which rely heavily on local community attendance and engagement [16].

### 2.2. Sponsorships and Broadcasting Rights

Broadcasting rights have become increasingly lucrative for elite clubs, providing a steady income independent of stadium attendance [17]. Sponsorship deals further bol-

ster these clubs, often including in-stadium advertising, events, and merchandise provisions [18]. While semi-professional and grassroots clubs attract smaller, community-focused sponsorships, elite clubs' diversified revenue structures gave them more financial resilience than lower-level clubs when the pandemic struck [19].

### 3. Financial Impact of COVID-19 on Football

The pandemic brought immediate financial strain across all levels of football, with elite clubs enduring moderate setbacks while semi-professional and grassroots clubs faced existential threats. Cancelling live matches and empty stadiums forced clubs to adapt quickly to mitigate financial losses [20].

#### 3.1. Revenue Losses and Financial Strain

With stadiums closed, clubs lost primary revenue from matchdays, affecting income levels. Elite clubs experienced reductions in broadcasting income and sponsorships but were partially cushioned by pre-existing diversification in revenue streams. Semi-professional clubs, reliant on matchday earnings, encountered severe financial strain, with few alternative sources of income. Grassroots clubs, deeply dependent on local support, faced high closure risks. The summary is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Financial Impact of COVID-19 on Different Club Levels.

Club Level	Major Revenue Sources	COVID-19 Impact	Adaptive Strategies
Elite Clubs	Broadcasting, sponsorship, merchandise	Moderate; managed with diversified income	Deferred contracts, enhanced digital engagement
Semi-Professional	Matchday revenue, local sponsorships	Severe; limited alternatives	Government support, digital streaming
Grassroots Clubs	Community support, local funds	Extreme; high risk of closure	League assistance, community fundraising

#### 3.2. Financial Challenges and Fixed Costs

Across all levels, clubs continued to incur fixed costs, including salaries, facility maintenance, and operating expenses, even as revenue streams dried up. The elite clubs maintained these costs by negotiating temporary deferrals or restructuring financial obligations [9]. Semi-professional clubs were forced to rely heavily on government furlough schemes and community support to manage these costs. Grassroots clubs often resorted to local fundraising to sustain operations with minimal reserves [19].

#### 3.3. Impact on Player Contracts and Sponsorship Deals

The pandemic forced many clubs to modify player contracts, resulting in salary reductions and deferred payments [21]. Elite clubs, while able to retain star players, had to adjust contracts to match the financial landscape. Semi-professional clubs faced more profound impacts, with some players experiencing contract suspensions or job loss. Grassroots clubs faced substantial challenges in honouring contracts, as their sponsorship deals often depended on in-person matchdays and community events.

### 4. Impact of COVID-19 on Key Football Stakeholders

This section adopts a qualitative approach to analyse the wide-ranging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on UK football clubs and their stakeholders. Data were collected through financial reports, policy documents, case studies, and interviews conducted with key stakeholders—including club executives, players, and staff—from February to April 2024. The research captures the breadth and depth of the pandemic's effects across

different tiers of the football ecosystem, with clubs from elite, semi-professional, and grassroots levels selected to provide a comprehensive perspective on financial and operational challenges [22].

The pandemic profoundly disrupted the football ecosystem, creating unprecedented challenges for players, staff, officials, management, and fans [23]. As clubs and leagues grappled with health risks, financial instability, and operational disruptions, each stakeholder group faced unique hardships, from financial insecurity and job uncertainty to the strain on mental health and community connections [24]. These impacts revealed systemic vulnerabilities within the industry while highlighting the interdependence of all involved in sustaining football operations [25]. This section examines the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic on key stakeholders, drawing insights from the qualitative analysis and stakeholder interviews. The findings emphasise the interconnected nature of the football ecosystem and underscore the critical need for strategies that enhance financial and operational stability across all levels, preparing the industry for future crises.

#### *4.1. Football Players*

The COVID-19 lockdown brought significant challenges for players, particularly health and safety. Despite strict measures, many players contracted the virus, leading to concerns about their well-being and their families [26]. Alongside health risks, economic pressures forced many clubs to renegotiate contracts and reduce salaries, creating job insecurity. This financial strain was especially acute for lower-league players with limited financial security. Additionally, the lockdown took a toll on players' mental health, as isolation and the uncertainty of their careers generated stress and anxiety. The disruption in regular training routines affected players' fitness and match readiness, ultimately impacting their performance when competitions resumed.

#### *4.2. Club Staff*

Non-playing staff were severely affected, as many clubs furloughed employees to cut costs, resulting in job insecurity and financial stress. Staff who retained their roles often faced an increased workload as clubs operated with fewer resources, intensifying the pressure on those remaining. Essential staff, such as those involved in stadium operations or medical support, encountered additional health risks by working in environments where social distancing was challenging. The situation for staff highlighted a broader issue of economic vulnerability and personal safety concerns for those behind the scenes in football.

#### *4.3. Football Officials*

Referees and match officials also faced unique challenges during the pandemic. Referees lost significant income and professional development opportunities, and numerous games were cancelled or postponed. Health concerns mirrored those of players and staff, as officials required physical presence to perform their roles, exposing them to potential infection. Lockdowns further disrupted their regular training routines, impacting their readiness for when competitions resumed. For lower-level referees, whose earnings often depend on part-time officiating, the decrease in match opportunities led to notable financial strain.

#### *4.4. Club Management and Executives*

The pandemic posed immense challenges for club executives, particularly in managing declining revenue. With matchday income halted, sponsorships withdrawn, and commercial earnings reduced, many clubs—especially lower-league ones—struggled to sustain financial viability [27]. Club management faced difficult decisions around salary cuts, restructuring, and cost-saving measures under heightened public scrutiny. Additionally, ex-

executives were pressured to innovate, finding digital engagement strategies and alternative revenue streams essential to maintaining fan connection and club operations. The crisis underscored the need for adaptability and financial resilience at the managerial level.

#### *4.5. Fans and the Wider Community*

Fans experienced a profound loss of social engagement due to the pandemic, as in-person games—a central aspect of fan identity and loyalty—were suspended [28]. This disruption affected local economies, too, as small businesses that relied on matchday sales faced reduced income. The economic importance of football clubs extends beyond the sport itself, especially in communities where clubs play a central role. The absence of football also impacted fans' mental health, as the game provides not only entertainment but also a vital source of community and an emotional outlet, underscoring its role in the social fabric.

### **5. Discussion: Evolution and Future Directions**

Clubs across all tiers faced immense challenges, exposing the heavy reliance on matchday revenue, particularly among semi-professional and grassroots clubs [29]. At the same time, the crisis prompted an industry-wide reimagining of fan engagement and revenue generation, underscoring the importance of flexibility and resilience [30]. By examining structural vulnerabilities, digital advancements, and strategic implications, this discussion provides insights into how football can evolve to withstand future disruptions better and maintain stability.

#### *5.1. Structural Vulnerabilities and Financial Lessons*

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant disparities in financial resilience across the football ecosystem. Elite clubs, with diversified revenue streams from broadcasting rights, sponsorships, and merchandise, were better equipped to absorb financial shocks. In contrast, semi-professional and grassroots clubs, heavily reliant on matchday income and community support, faced severe financial strain. These disparities underscored the importance of financial contingency planning and revenue diversification to mitigate future crises.

Clubs employed various survival strategies, such as renegotiating player contracts, salary reductions, and government furlough schemes. While these measures provided temporary relief, they highlighted the need for long-term financial sustainability tailored to each tier of the football hierarchy. The findings emphasise embedding resilience into operational and financial structures, creating a foundation to withstand future disruptions.

#### *5.2. Digital Transformation and Fan Engagement*

The pandemic accelerated digital innovation across the football industry, reshaping fan engagement and revenue generation. Elite clubs capitalised on their established broadcasting and sponsorship capabilities to offer digital content such as live-streamed matches, behind-the-scenes footage, and interactive experiences. These strategies allowed clubs to maintain revenue streams and engage global fan bases, setting a precedent for future fan interaction beyond traditional matchday experiences [31].

Semi-professional and grassroots clubs, with fewer resources, leveraged social media platforms and virtual community initiatives to sustain fan loyalty and local sponsorship. These clubs used digital tools for match updates, live Q&A sessions, and online fundraising campaigns, fostering a sense of community despite the absence of in-person engagement. The digital transformation demonstrated the importance of innovation at all levels, showcasing scalable solutions to enhance fan engagement and financial stability.



### 5.3. Strategic Implications for Future Resilience

The broader implications of the pandemic underscore the importance of building a resilient operational model within football that can withstand disruptions and adapt to an evolving industry landscape. The pandemic highlighted that crisis management is a shared responsibility, with crucial support from governments, leagues, and communities helping to stabilise clubs during challenging periods. However, clubs must strengthen their internal financial and operational structures to ensure sustainable resilience. Developing a balanced approach to fan engagement that integrates digital and in-person interactions, strengthening local community ties, and diversifying income sources are all essential strategies for future stability [31]. By adopting these proactive financial planning and community-oriented strategies, clubs can recover from the disruptions caused by the pandemic and emerge more robust and adaptable. This approach ensures they can continue to fulfil their cultural and economic roles within communities, providing long-term stability for the entire football ecosystem.

## 6. Case Studies: Adaptive Strategies in Action

While major league clubs leveraged established media channels to monetise digital access, semi-professional and grassroots clubs turned to virtual community engagement and local fundraising initiatives [32]. These case studies illustrate how clubs across different tiers navigated financial challenges through digital adaptation, showcasing varying approaches based on resources, fan bases, and community reliance. The following subsections explore the digital strategies employed by elite, semi-professional, and grassroots clubs, highlighting their innovative responses to sustain fan engagement and financial stability.

### 6.1. Elite Club Case: The Digital Shift of Major League Clubs

Elite clubs with international branding exposures, such as Manchester United [6] and Liverpool FC [33], adapted quickly to the pandemic's financial pressures through digital innovation and diversified revenue streams. Manchester United enhanced its global fan engagement by expanding its digital offerings, including live-streamed matches, exclusive player content, and virtual meet-and-greet sessions. These initiatives allowed the club to offset losses from matchday revenues by tapping into its extensive global fan base.

Similarly, Liverpool FC capitalised on its strong digital presence by launching a subscription-based platform for match highlights, tactical analysis, and exclusive interviews. The club also introduced e-commerce initiatives, such as selling merchandise bundles tied to live-streaming packages, which provided an alternative revenue stream during the absence of matchday income.

Both clubs negotiated temporary wage deferrals with players and staff, maintaining financial stability while protecting jobs. Their actions highlight the resilience of top-tier clubs in leveraging global reach and financial resources to weather the pandemic.

### 6.2. Semi-Professional Club Case: Virtual Engagement for Local Fans

Altrincham FC, a semi-professional club in Greater Manchester, faced significant challenges due to its reliance on matchday revenue and local sponsorships [34]. The club implemented creative digital strategies to address the financial shortfall, including live-streaming home matches on YouTube and charging a modest fee for access. This approach allowed fans to stay connected with the team while generating much-needed income. The club also launched a crowdfunding campaign, raising over GBP 40,000 through overwhelming support from fans and local businesses. These funds were used to cover player wages and essential facility maintenance, ensuring the club could continue operations. Additionally, Altrincham FC partnered with local sponsors to host virtual

community events, such as Q&A sessions with players and coaches, reinforcing its strong community ties.

Similarly, Tranmere Rovers, a professional club based in Birkenhead, also faced severe financial pressures during the pandemic, particularly from the suspension of matches and the absence of spectators, which resulted in estimated losses of up to GBP 500,000. The club responded by reducing operational costs, making approximately 20 staff members redundant. However, Tranmere Rovers demonstrated a strong commitment to their community by partnering with Liverpool FC to assist vulnerable residents in the Wirral area. Initiatives included distributing food parcels, preparing meals, and providing befriending services to older adults. Despite their challenges, Tranmere Rovers also explored innovative revenue opportunities, such as planning to establish a specialist esports centre to engage youth and diversify their income streams [35].

These examples illustrate how clubs at different levels leveraged digital innovation, community support, and adaptive strategies to navigate the financial and operational difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 6.3. Grassroots Club Case: Community-Based Fundraising

Marine FC, a grassroots club in Merseyside, faced significant financial challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic as matchday revenues disappeared. Through its “Marine in the Community” campaign, the club raised over GBP 30,000 via crowdfunding and local donations to sustain operations and youth programmes. Virtual events like raffles and trivia nights kept fans engaged, highlighting the club’s deep community ties [36].

The Premier League also played a crucial role in Marine’s survival. Grants from the Football Stadia Improvement Fund and Matchday Support Fund helped upgrade facilities and implement safety measures. Such support allowed Marine to remain operational during a prolonged shutdown. The club’s historic FA Cup tie against Tottenham Hotspur further rallied support, with Spurs fans raising GBP 15,000 via virtual ticket sales.

Marine’s ability to secure community and external backing showcases the resilience of grassroots clubs. However, not all clubs are as fortunate. Many struggle without similar access to funding or a strong support network, underscoring the need for broader assistance to sustain grassroots football.

## 7. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant vulnerabilities in the financial structures of UK football, highlighting the importance of resilience through diversified revenue streams, digital transformation, and proactive crisis management [37]. These challenges and systemic issues have driven reforms such as the Government’s Football Governance Bill to ensure financial sustainability in elite men’s football. This legislation establishes robust governance practises, protects clubs, and supports fans, laying a foundation for long-term stability.

Financial accountability frameworks, like the Premier League’s profit and sustainability rules, provide some stability by limiting club losses to GBP 105 million over three seasons [38]. However, these measures are not enough for all clubs. For example, Everton has faced ongoing financial difficulties exacerbated by the pandemic and global challenges, such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict [39]. This situation highlights the need for additional support, not just for grassroots and semi-professional clubs, but also for struggling professional teams.

The pandemic accelerated digital transformation in football, with clubs adopting live-streaming, e-commerce, and subscription-based models to engage fans and generate revenue. These innovations have reduced dependence on matchday income, offering



sustainable solutions for clubs across all tiers. Investments in emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and advanced fan platforms, could further enhance engagement and financial stability, benefiting the sport at every level.

Grassroots and semi-professional football remain vital to the UK's football ecosystem. Clubs like Marine FC have demonstrated how strong community ties can sustain operations during crises. However, these clubs need excellent institutional support, including better financial redistribution and emergency funding mechanisms. Strengthened community engagement, youth development, and partnerships are essential for their survival and relevance.

The Football Governance Bill represents progress in addressing financial mismanagement and inequities, but more is needed to foster a competitive and resilient football landscape. The dominance of a few clubs at the top levels underlines the importance of creating opportunities for more contenders to challenge for major honours. This bill would promote a healthier and more dynamic ecosystem.

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on football clubs' financial resilience, operational strategies, and roles within their communities, providing valuable insights for managing future disruptions. Studies should also evaluate the potential of digital technologies, such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence, to enhance fan engagement, diversify revenue streams, and improve operational efficiency in football's tourism and entertainment sectors. Comparative analyses across regions and leagues could shed light on varied adaptation strategies, while an in-depth examination of governance reforms, financial redistribution mechanisms, and grassroots support systems could address issues of equity and sustainability within the football ecosystem.

Moreover, exploring the socio-economic contributions of football, the integration of climate-conscious adaptation strategies, and evolving fan expectations could help create a more inclusive and resilient framework for the sport. Research into pandemic preparedness, mental health support systems, and cultural variations in resilience planning would provide actionable recommendations for strengthening the industry's ability to navigate future challenges. These areas of study would collectively contribute to building a sustainable, inclusive, and robust football ecosystem.

Looking ahead, combining digital innovation, community engagement, and strengthened governance offers a path to resilience for UK football. Support must extend across all tiers to address vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic and ensure the sport's long-term growth. The lessons learned in the UK provide a model for global football, emphasising the need for equitable resource distribution and competitive balance. By prioritising these principles, the football community can build a financially sustainable, inclusive system and be prepared for future challenges.

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