



Business Model Innovations in the English Premier League: How Manchester United Was Left Behind

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Abstract

This study investigates Business Model Innovation (BMI) as a critical determinant of competitive advantage in the English Premier League (EPL) from 2015 to 2025. Drawing on financial data, strategic initiative documentation, media analysis, and academic literature, the research employs a comparative case study of Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool, and Arsenal to examine how digital transformation strategies have reshaped performance outcomes. The analysis reveals significant disparities, with Manchester City and Liverpool establishing themselves as leaders through systematic investment, data-driven decision-making, and organisational cultures supportive of innovation, while Manchester United has underperformed due to leveraged ownership, fragmented leadership, and resistance to change. The study introduces a four-pillar framework (**Figure 1**) linking ownership structure, strategic leadership, organisational culture, and business model innovation to sustainable competitive advantage. Findings show that traditional sources of strength—brand power, financial resources, and sporting success—are being superseded by innovation capacity and technological integration. Manchester United's underperformance demonstrates how cultural inertia, and short-term financial pressures can undermine competitive advantage despite global brand dominance. Strategic recommendations for the club include comprehensive digital transformation, infrastructure modernisation, organisational culture change, and the development of technology partnerships to realign with industry leaders. Beyond the case of Manchester United, the study highlights broader implications for sports organisations navigating digital disruption. Success in business model innovation is shown to depend not on absolute resource levels but on strategic coherence, quality of implementation, and long-term organisational commitment. The research contributes to sports management and business model theory by providing empirical evidence of how digital transformation is redefining com-

petitive balance in professional football and offers practical guidance for executives facing similar challenges.

Subject Areas

Strategic Management

Keywords

Business Model Innovation, English Premier League, Digital Transformation, Manchester United, Football Club Ownership, Competitive Strategy

1. Introduction

The English Premier League has undergone a fundamental transformation in its business model approach over the past two decades, with leading clubs adopting increasingly sophisticated, digitally driven strategies to maximise global commercial opportunities [1]. This evolution represents a paradigm shift from traditional football club operations toward comprehensive entertainment and lifestyle brands that leverage technology, data analytics, and global partnerships to create multiple revenue streams [2]. However, this transformation has not been uniform across all clubs, with some institutions successfully embracing innovation while others have struggled to adapt to the changing landscape.

Business model innovation, defined as “the design of new mechanisms for creating, delivering, and capturing value within a business ecosystem through the reconfiguration of existing resources, capabilities, and partnerships” [3], has become a critical determinant of success in modern football. This concept encompasses the fundamental reconfiguration of how organisations operate, compete, and generate revenue, particularly through the integration of digital technologies and global market expansion strategies [4]. In the context of professional football, business model innovation involves the systematic transformation of traditional club operations to incorporate advanced analytics, digital fan engagement platforms, global commercial partnerships, and data-driven decision-making processes across all organisational functions [5]. The core dimensions of business model innovation in football include: digital transformation and technology integration, global market expansion and commercial diversification, fan engagement and experience innovation, operational excellence and infrastructure modernisation, and strategic partnerships and ecosystem development.

Manchester United provides a compelling case study of how established football institutions can struggle with business model adaptation despite possessing significant historical advantages. The club’s experience under the Glazer family’s leveraged ownership since 2005 illustrates the complex interplay between ownership structure, strategic decision-making, and competitive performance in an increasingly dynamic industry environment [6] [7]. While competitors such as Man-

chester City, Liverpool, and Arsenal have successfully implemented comprehensive digital transformation strategies, Manchester United's approach has been characterised by fragmented initiatives and strategic inconsistency [8].

The significance of this research extends beyond a single club analysis to encompass broader questions about organisational adaptation, digital transformation, and competitive strategy in the sports industry. The Premier League's evolution toward sophisticated business model innovation reflects wider trends in entertainment, media, and technology sectors, making it a valuable context for understanding how traditional institutions navigate digital disruption [9]. Furthermore, the financial stakes involved—with leading clubs now valued at over £5 billion—underscore the practical importance of effective business model innovation for long-term sustainability and success [10].

This study addresses three primary research questions: First, how have leading Premier League clubs successfully implemented business model innovations, and what specific strategies have driven their competitive advantages? Second, what factors have contributed to Manchester United's relative decline in business model innovation despite its historical market position and financial resources? Third, what strategic recommendations can be derived from comparative analysis to guide Manchester United's future business model evolution? The research contributes to existing literature by providing a comprehensive comparative analysis of business model innovation strategies across multiple Premier League clubs, with particular emphasis on the role of ownership structure, digital transformation, and strategic leadership in determining innovation outcomes. The findings have implications for sports management theory, digital transformation research, and practical guidance for football club executives navigating similar strategic challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Business Model Innovation in Professional Sports

The concept of business model innovation has gained significant attention in management literature, particularly in the context of digital transformation and competitive strategy [11]. Teece's foundational work on business model design emphasises the importance of value creation, delivery, and capturing mechanisms in determining organisational success [3]. In professional sports contexts, this framework has been extended to encompass the unique characteristics of sporting organisations, including emotional stakeholder attachment, unpredictable performance outcomes, and the dual commercial and cultural nature of sports clubs [12].

Recent research has identified several key dimensions of business model innovation in professional sports. Digital transformation represents a primary driver, encompassing the integration of advanced analytics, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms across all organisational functions [13]. Fan engagement innovation involves the development of personalised, multi-channel experiences that

extend beyond traditional matchday interactions to create year-round commercial relationships [14]. Global market expansion strategies focus on leveraging digital technologies to access international audiences and develop region-specific commercial partnerships [15].

The sports industry's unique characteristics create both opportunities and challenges for business model innovation. Unlike traditional businesses, sports organisations must balance commercial objectives with sporting performance, fan expectations, and cultural heritage considerations [16]. This complexity requires sophisticated approaches to innovation that consider multiple stakeholder groups and competing priorities [17]. Research has shown that successful sports business model innovation typically involves gradual, systematic transformation rather than radical disruption, reflecting the conservative nature of sports institutions and their stakeholder communities [18].

2.2. Digital Transformation in Football

Digital transformation has emerged as a critical component of modern football club strategy, encompassing everything from player recruitment and performance analysis to fan engagement and commercial operations [19]. Leading clubs have invested heavily in data analytics capabilities, developing sophisticated systems for player scouting, tactical analysis, and injury prevention [20]. These technological investments have created competitive advantages both on and off the pitch, enabling more effective decision-making and improved operational efficiency [21]. The integration of digital technologies in football operations has evolved rapidly since 2020, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on traditional revenue streams [22]. Clubs have developed comprehensive digital ecosystems that include mobile applications, social media platforms, e-commerce systems, and virtual reality experiences [23]. These platforms serve multiple functions, from direct revenue generation through merchandise sales and subscription services to data collection for targeted marketing and fan segmentation [24].

Manchester City's digital transformation strategy exemplifies best practice in this area, with the club investing over £200 million in technology infrastructure since 2015 [25]. Their approach encompasses advanced player performance analytics, personalised fan engagement platforms, and integrated commercial systems that have contributed to both sporting success and commercial growth [26]. Similarly, Liverpool's digital initiatives, including their partnership with Google Cloud for advanced analytics, demonstrate how technology integration can enhance both competitive performance and business outcomes [27]. Recent studies (2023-2025) have highlighted the accelerating pace of digital transformation in football, with artificial intelligence and machine learning becoming increasingly central to club operations [28]. Research by Digital Sports Tech (2024) found that Premier League clubs now invest an average of 8.2% of their annual revenue in digital technologies, compared to 3.1% in 2020 [29]. This investment has yielded measurable returns, with digitally advanced clubs showing 23% higher commercial revenue growth

rates compared to traditional operators [2].

2.3. Ownership Models and Strategic Innovation

The relationship between ownership structure and business model innovation in football has received increasing academic attention, particularly following the influx of international investors and sovereign wealth funds into the Premier League [30]. Different ownership models create varying incentives for innovation, with some structures prioritising long-term strategic development while others focus on short-term financial returns [31]. State-backed ownership, exemplified by Manchester City's Abu Dhabi ownership and Newcastle United's Saudi investment, has enabled comprehensive business model transformation through substantial capital investment and strategic patience [32]. These ownership structures have facilitated rapid innovation adoption, infrastructure development, and global market expansion strategies that would be difficult to achieve under traditional ownership models [33]. However, such approaches have also raised questions about competitive balance and regulatory oversight in professional football [34].

Leveraged ownership models, such as Manchester United's Glazer ownership, present different challenges and opportunities for business model innovation [35]. While debt service requirements can constrain investment in innovation initiatives, the commercial pressure created by leverage can also drive efficiency improvements and revenue diversification strategies [36]. Research suggests that the success of leveraged ownership in driving innovation depends heavily on management quality and strategic vision, with some clubs thriving under financial pressure while others struggle to balance debt service with necessary investments [37]. Recent academic work by Thompson and Martinez on "Ownership Finance and Digital Innovation in European Football" provides new insights into how different ownership structures affect technology adoption and business model transformation [28]. Their longitudinal study of 50 European clubs found that state-backed ownership enables 40% faster digital transformation implementation, while leveraged ownership models show 25% slower adoption rates due to capital allocation constraints [38].

2.4. Competitive Dynamics in the Premier League

The Premier League's competitive landscape has been fundamentally altered by the varying approaches to business model innovation adopted by different clubs [39]. The emergence of Manchester City as a dominant force reflects not only substantial financial investment but also systematic business model transformation that encompasses all aspects of club operations [40]. Their success has created competitive pressure for other clubs to innovate or risk being left behind in both sporting and commercial terms [41]. Liverpool's resurgence under Fenway Sports Group ownership demonstrates how strategic business model innovation can restore competitive position even without unlimited financial resources [42]. Their approach

has emphasised data-driven decision-making, infrastructure investment, and global brand development, resulting in both sporting success and significant commercial growth [43]. The club's partnership with Nike, valued at over £30 million annually, exemplifies how innovative commercial strategies can generate resources for continued competitive investment [44].

Arsenal's Emirates Stadium project and subsequent digital transformation initiatives illustrate the long-term nature of business model innovation in football [45]. While the initial stadium investment constrained transfer spending for several years, it provided the foundation for subsequent commercial growth and digital innovation that has enhanced the club's global market position [46]. Their recent partnership with Socios.com for fan tokens represents an example of emerging digital revenue streams that leading clubs are exploring [47]. Contemporary research by the Football Innovation Institute demonstrates how competitive dynamics have intensified around business model innovation, with clubs now competing as much on technological capabilities as traditional football metrics [48]. Their analysis shows that clubs with advanced digital transformation strategies achieve 31% higher win rates and 45% better commercial performance compared to traditional operators [49].

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study employs a comparative case study methodology to examine business model innovation strategies across leading English Premier League clubs, with particular focus on Manchester United's experience relative to successful innovators such as Manchester City, Liverpool, and Arsenal [50]. The research design combines quantitative financial analysis with qualitative assessment of strategic initiatives, enabling comprehensive evaluation of both innovation inputs and outcomes across multiple dimensions [51]. The methodological approach draws on Yin's case study framework, utilising multiple sources of evidence to ensure construct validity and reliability [50]. Data triangulation is achieved through the integration of financial reports, media coverage, academic literature, and industry analyses, providing a robust foundation for comparative assessment [52]. The study period spans 2015-2025, capturing the most intensive phase of digital transformation in professional football while providing sufficient temporal scope for outcome evaluation [53].

3.2. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The credibility and robustness of any strategic and financial analysis rest fundamentally on the quality, scope, and triangulation of its data sources. Given the complexity of the contemporary football industry, where on-pitch performance is increasingly intertwined with financial, technological, and commercial strategies, this study draws upon a carefully curated set of primary and secondary materials. The dataset is designed to capture not only the financial performance of leading

English clubs but also the strategic initiatives, media interpretations, and scholarly frameworks that together shape an understanding of organisational transformation within elite football.

The financial dimension of the analysis is anchored in annual reports and financial statements filed by Manchester United PLC (2015-2025) alongside equivalent documents for Manchester City, Liverpool, and Arsenal, obtained from Companies House and club websites. These materials provide authoritative accounts of revenue streams, cost structures, and profitability. Complementing these primary disclosures, the Deloitte Football Money League (2015-2025) offers standardised benchmarking across clubs and geographies, while additional insights into financial dynamics are drawn from independent analyses such as Swiss Ramble, Forbes valuations, and UEFA Financial Fair Play monitoring reports. Together, these sources ensure both accuracy and comparability when assessing club finances. Strategic initiatives are examined through a systematic review of club communications, including announcements, press releases, and official statements relating to digital transformation, partnership agreements, and infrastructure investments. Verified through multiple sources, these records illuminate how clubs position themselves within evolving business models. Documentation of technology partnerships, commercial agreements, and innovation projects is categorised in relation to business model innovation frameworks, enabling structured analysis of organisational strategy.

To contextualise and interpret these developments, the study further integrates media and industry analysis. Specialist football business outlets such as SportBusiness, Football Business Journal, and The Athletic provide critical reporting on both successes and shortcomings of club strategies, while consulting reports from Deloitte, PwC, and McKinsey situate these cases within wider industry trends and best practices. This dual perspective ensures both granular and systemic insights.

Finally, the research is grounded within an academic framework through engagement with peer-reviewed literature in sports management, business strategy, and digital transformation. Comparative studies and theoretical perspectives are drawn from established journals, with particular emphasis placed on recent contributions (2023-2025) addressing digitalisation and ownership finance in sport. These works not only supply conceptual tools for interpretation but also ensure that the analysis reflects the most current debates in the field. Taken together, these diverse but complementary sources provide a multi-dimensional foundation for examining the financial trajectories and strategic transformations of leading English football clubs over the past decade. **Table 1** summarises the financial, strategic, media, and academic sources used in the study, outlining their specific contributions and methodological significance. The categorisation ensures transparency in data collection while demonstrating how multiple perspectives were triangulated to enhance reliability and analytical depth.

While the dataset is broad and triangulated across multiple categories, several limitations remain. Financial statements reflect audited data but may understate

Table 1. Overview of data sources, contributions, and methodological value.

Category	Sources	Description & Contribution
Financial Data Sources	Annual reports and financial statements (Manchester United PLC, Manchester City, Liverpool, Arsenal, 2015-2025) Deloitte Football Money League (2015-2025) Swiss Ramble analyses Forbes valuations. UEFA Financial Fair Play monitoring reports	Annual reports provide audited, primary financial data on revenue, expenses, and profitability, enabling longitudinal analysis of club performance. The Deloitte Football Money League offers standardised comparisons across clubs, ensuring benchmarking consistency. Independent sources such as Swiss Ramble, Forbes valuations, and UEFA FFP reports complement these with expert interpretation, asset valuations, and compliance assessments, adding external validation and industry perspective.
Strategic Initiative Documentation	Club announcements, press releases, and official communications (digital transformation, partnerships, infrastructure investments) Technology partnership announcements Commercial deal structures Innovation project descriptions	Official communications provide direct evidence of strategic priorities, allowing insights into how clubs present and justify initiatives. Technology partnership announcements and commercial deal structures reveal the scale and scope of innovation projects. Categorisation according to business model innovation dimensions ensures systematic analysis, while cross-verification across multiple sources strengthens reliability.
Media and Industry Analysis	<i>SportBusiness</i> , <i>Football Business Journal</i> , <i>The Athletic</i> Deloitte, PwC, and McKinsey industry reports	Specialist football business outlets offer timely, detailed reporting on strategic decisions, including critical evaluations of outcomes. They add interpretative depth and highlight industry reactions. Consulting firm reports provide a macro-level perspective, situating club-specific strategies within wider trends such as digitalisation, fan engagement, and commercialisation, and offering best practice benchmarks from other industries.

the true extent of commercial partnerships due to confidentiality clauses or accounting conventions. Deloitte Football Money League rankings, though standardised, can be limited by their reliance on revenue rather than profitability. Independent financial blogs such as Swiss Ramble provide valuable interpretation but carry an element of subjectivity. Official club communications present strategies in a favourable light, necessitating cross-verification with media and industry reports. Media sources can be influenced by editorial bias or selective reporting, while consulting firm outputs often reflect generalised trends rather than club-specific nuances. Finally, academic literature, while theoretically rigorous, may lag behind rapidly evolving industry practices, making it essential to combine older frameworks with the most recent publications (2023-2025).

3.3. Club Selection Criteria

The comparative analysis focuses on four Premier League clubs selected based on specific criteria designed to enable meaningful comparison while representing different approaches to business model innovation as follows:

- Manchester United: Selected as the primary case study due to its historical market leadership, substantial financial resources, and documented struggles with business model adaptation under leveraged ownership [54]. The club's experience provides insights into factors that can impede innovation despite apparent advantages [55].
- Manchester City: Chosen as an exemplar of comprehensive business model transformation, with documented investments exceeding £1 billion in infrastructure, technology, and operational capabilities since 2015 [25]. Their state-backed ownership model enables analysis of innovation under conditions of substantial financial support [26].
- Liverpool: Included as an example of successful innovation under resource constraints, demonstrating how strategic focus and data-driven decision-making can drive transformation without unlimited financial resources [43]. Their American ownership model provides contrast to both state-backed and leveraged ownership approaches [56].
- Arsenal: Selected to represent innovation within traditional ownership structures, with their Emirates Stadium project and subsequent digital initiatives illustrating long-term strategic transformation [46]. Their approach provides insights into innovation under conventional commercial ownership models [57].

3.4. Analytical Framework

The analysis employs a multi-dimensional framework examining business model innovation across four key areas:

1) Digital Transformation Dimension: Assessment of technology investments, data analytics capabilities, digital platform development, and integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning systems across club operations [58]. Metrics include technology spending as a percentage of revenue, number of digital initiatives launched, and measurable outcomes from digital investments [59].

2) Commercial Innovation Dimension: Evaluation of new revenue stream development, partnership strategies, global market expansion initiatives, and fan engagement innovations [60]. Analysis includes commercial revenue growth rates, partnership deal values, and geographic diversification of revenue sources [61].

3) Operational Excellence Dimension: Examination of infrastructure investments, process improvements, organisational restructuring, and performance management systems [62]. Metrics encompass facility investments, operational efficiency improvements, and organisational capability development [63].

4) Strategic Leadership Dimension: Assessment of ownership approach, executive leadership quality, strategic vision articulation, and change management ca-

pabilities [64]. Qualitative evaluation of strategic decision-making processes, leadership stability, and cultural transformation efforts [65].

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis draws upon a carefully curated set of data sources spanning financial records, strategic documentation, media coverage, and academic literature. Financial data formed the backbone of the study, with annual reports and financial statements from Manchester United PLC (2015-2025), alongside equivalent filings for Manchester City, Liverpool, and Arsenal, obtained through Companies House and official club websites [66]. These audited records provided primary evidence on revenues, expenditures, and profitability over a ten-year period, enabling detailed longitudinal analysis. To complement and standardise these insights, the Deloitte Football Money League reports (2015-2025) were employed [1], offering consistent cross-club benchmarking of revenues within a global context. Independent evaluations such as Swiss Ramble analyses, Forbes valuations, and UEFA Financial Fair Play monitoring reports added interpretative depth, particularly in areas where accounting conventions or disclosure limitations might otherwise obscure underlying performance trends [67].

Strategic initiatives were examined through systematic collection of official club communications, including announcements, press releases, and reports on digital transformation projects, partnership agreements, and infrastructure investments [68]. These materials were cross-verified with secondary sources to ensure accuracy and categorised according to business model innovation frameworks, with particular emphasis on technology partnerships, commercial deal structures, and innovation projects [69]. Such documentation provided critical insights into how clubs framed and communicated their strategic priorities, while also revealing the scope and direction of their organisational transformation. The study also incorporated a wide range of media and industry analyses. Specialist publications such as SportBusiness, Football Business Journal, and The Athletic offered timely reporting and detailed accounts of strategic initiatives, including independent assessments of their outcomes [70]. Consulting firm reports, notably from Deloitte, PwC, and McKinsey, provided a broader industry perspective [29], situated club-level strategies within wider trends in sports business and drawing parallels with best practices from other sectors. This combination of granular reporting and macro-level context enriched the interpretation of individual case studies.

Finally, the research was anchored in academic literature, drawing from peer-reviewed journals in sports management, business strategy, and digital transformation [71]. These works supplied established theoretical frameworks and comparative studies that ensured methodological rigour. Recent publications from 2023-2025 were prioritised [72] to capture the latest debates surrounding digitalisation, ownership finance, and sustainability in elite football. This engagement with current scholarship provided conceptual depth and ensured the analysis reflected both established and emerging perspectives. Despite the breadth and tri-

angulation of these data sources, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Financial statements, while audited, may under-report the full extent of commercial partnerships due to confidentiality clauses or the selective application of accounting conventions. Similarly, Deloitte's benchmarking is invaluable for revenue comparisons but offers limited insight into profitability or debt structures. Independent analyses such as Swiss Ramble are highly regarded but inevitably subjective, while official club communications present strategies in a favourable light and therefore require careful cross-verification. Media coverage and consulting reports, though rich in detail and context, are shaped by editorial priorities and generalised industry perspectives, respectively. Finally, academic literature, while providing theoretical grounding, often lags the fast-moving dynamics of the football industry, underscoring the importance of incorporating the most recent scholarship. Together, these considerations highlight the value of methodological triangulation, ensuring a balanced, critical, and multi-dimensional analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Comparative Business Model Innovation Performance

Table 2 highlights stark divergences in how Premier League clubs have embraced business model innovation over the past decade. Manchester City emerges as the clear leader, with digital investment equivalent to 12.3% of annual revenue, nearly triple that of Manchester United's 4.1% [25]. This financial commitment has yielded tangible dividends, as reflected in City's exceptional 187% commercial revenue growth between 2015 and 2025 [1]. Their portfolio of 47 innovation initiatives and 23 technology partnerships underscores not only the scale but also the strategic depth of their innovation agenda.

Liverpool provides a compelling case of efficiency and targeted strategy. Despite allocating a smaller proportion of revenue to digital transformation than Manchester City, Liverpool achieved a remarkable 156% increase in commercial revenue [43]. This was underpinned by a deliberate emphasis on structured innovation—34 initiatives and 18 technology partnerships—which points to a systematic, rather than opportunistic, approach to transformation [73]. Their trajectory demonstrates that resource constraints can be mitigated by disciplined execution and alignment between commercial and technological strategies. Arsenal's results position the club in an intermediate zone: with 7.2% of revenue directed to digital investment and 134% commercial growth, the club has surpassed Manchester United across all innovation metrics [46]. While Arsenal has traditionally been associated with conservative financial stewardship, these findings suggest that even under a more restrained ownership model, meaningful innovation is possible when strategic alignment is achieved.

By contrast, Manchester United's underperformance is striking. With digital investment at less than half the Premier League average and only 19 recorded innovation initiatives, United lags significantly behind both its domestic rivals and the league-wide benchmark. Its 89% commercial revenue growth pales in com-

parison to the triple-digit gains of competitors, suggesting that a reliance on legacy brand strength has not compensated for a relative absence of innovation. Taken together, these findings reveal a clear hierarchy in innovation-driven performance within the Premier League: Manchester City has established itself as the pacesetter, Liverpool has demonstrated the effectiveness of disciplined strategic focus, Arsenal has proven the viability of innovation under traditional ownership, and Manchester United has fallen behind in translating its global brand into sustainable innovation-led growth as summarized in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Business model innovation metrics across Premier League clubs (2015-2025).

Club	Digital Investment (% Revenue)	Commercial Revenue Growth	Innovation Initiatives	Technology Partnerships
Manchester City	12.3%	187%	47	23
Liverpool	8.7%	156%	34	18
Arsenal	7.2%	134%	28	15
Manchester United	4.1%	89%	19	8
Premier League Average	8.2%	142%	32	16

Source: compiled from club annual reports, Deloitte Football Money League, and industry analyses.

4.2. Manchester City: Comprehensive Digital Transformation

Manchester City's business model innovation represents arguably the most comprehensive organisational transformation in Premier League history, marked by systematic investment across all operational dimensions [26]. Central to this shift was the club's digital transformation initiative, launched in 2016, which saw over £200 million committed to technology infrastructure and the creation of dedicated innovation teams embedded across multiple functional areas [74].

A core element of this transformation has been digital infrastructure development. The Etihad Campus is now a showcase of integrated technologies, with IoT sensors embedded throughout training facilities, advanced player monitoring systems, and unified data analytics platforms that capture and process performance information in real time. The partnership with Cisco further expanded these capabilities, installing more than 2500 connected devices across club sites to generate a continuous stream of operational and performance data [75]. Importantly, these systems extend beyond sporting applications: the same infrastructure underpins commercial operations by enabling personalised fan engagement, targeted marketing campaigns, and enhanced matchday experiences [76].

Alongside infrastructure, the City has pursued commercial innovation initiatives that leverage digital technologies to drive revenue growth and expand global reach [26]. The multi-club ownership model of City Football Group has been particularly significant, facilitating international market entry through sister clubs in New York, Melbourne, and Mumbai, and enabling cross-promotional opportuni-

ties that reinforce both local and global brand presence [77]. At the level of individual partnerships, innovation has also been evident. For example, the club's sponsorship agreement with Nexen Tire incorporated digital activation strategies that went far beyond traditional brand placement, generating an additional £15 million in commercial value through integrated campaigns and enhanced digital engagement [78]. Together, these initiatives illustrate how Manchester City's approach has combined infrastructural modernisation with innovative commercial practices, positioning the club not only as a leader in sporting performance but also as a pioneer of digitally enabled business model transformation in global football.

The club's digital fan engagement strategy encompasses mobile applications, social media platforms, and virtual reality experiences that extend interaction beyond matchdays. Their official app has achieved over 2 million downloads and generates £8 million annually through merchandise sales and premium content subscriptions. The integration of augmented reality features in stadium tours and matchday experiences has increased non-matchday revenue by 34% since implementation [76].

4.3. Liverpool: Strategic Innovation under Resource Constraints

Liverpool's approach to business model innovation illustrates how strategic focus and data-driven decision-making can deliver transformative outcomes without the advantage of unlimited financial resources. Under the ownership of Fenway Sports Group, the club has consistently prioritised high-impact initiatives designed to maximise measurable returns on investment [56]. This disciplined strategy has allowed Liverpool to achieve sustained growth while maintaining competitive balance on and off the pitch. At the heart of this transformation is data analytics excellence. In 2020, Liverpool announced a partnership with Google Cloud that significantly expanded the club's analytical capabilities across both sporting and commercial domains [27]. The collaboration has enabled the application of machine learning to player recruitment, injury prevention, and fan behaviour analysis. Notably, the club's data-driven recruitment model has generated transfer profits of over £200 million while ensuring competitive on-field performance. This integration of advanced analytics into decision-making represents one of the most successful applications of data science in global sport.

Liverpool has also pursued an infrastructure investment strategy centred on the phased expansion of Anfield between 2016 and 2023. The £110 million redevelopment increased stadium capacity by 8,500 seats while embedding advanced digital infrastructure throughout the venue. This modernisation has delivered dual benefits: the project generated an estimated £25 million in additional annual revenue and provided a platform for the deployment of personalised fan experiences and enhanced commercial activations. In parallel, the club has advanced commercial partnership innovation, emphasising long-term collaborations that combine financial returns with operational value. Its global partnership with Nike, valued

at £30 million per year, incorporates digital activation strategies and joint technology development, extending beyond traditional kit supply [44]. Similarly, the collaboration with Expedia Group has transformed travel and hospitality into a meaningful revenue stream, highlighting Liverpool's commitment to diversified and innovative commercial opportunities. Liverpool's strategy demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted, data-driven innovation. By aligning analytics, infrastructure investment, and commercially innovative partnerships, the club has established a sustainable growth model that leverages strategic focus rather than sheer scale of resources.

4.4. Arsenal: Traditional Innovation within Established Structures

Arsenal's business model innovation journey demonstrates how a club operating under a traditional ownership structure can nonetheless achieve meaningful transformation through systematic investment and long-term strategic patience. Unlike rivals who have relied on substantial external capital, Arsenal has pursued an incremental strategy that places infrastructure development at the centre of its growth model, using physical and digital assets as a platform for subsequent commercial and technological innovation [46]. The Emirates Stadium legacy has been central to this trajectory. Completed in 2006, the project provided the financial foundation for Arsenal's later innovative initiatives by significantly increasing matchday and commercial revenue potential [45]. Crucially, the stadium's design incorporated advanced technology infrastructure from the outset, which has enabled successive layers of digital enhancement. Recent upgrades, including 5G connectivity and enhanced Wi-Fi systems, have not only improved fan experience but also created new avenues for digital engagement and sponsorship activations.

Building on this platform, Arsenal has pursued a range of digital transformation initiatives aimed at optimising both fan engagement and commercial outcomes. The relaunch of the official app and website in 2022 introduced personalisation features and integrated e-commerce functions that drove a 45% increase in digital revenues. The club's collaboration with Socios.com, which introduced blockchain-based fan tokens, reflects its willingness to explore emerging digital revenue streams, albeit cautiously. In addition, Arsenal has demonstrated innovation in youth development, embedding advanced technology into its sporting operations. The Hale End academy has been equipped with state-of-the-art performance monitoring and analytics systems, supporting talent identification and player development. Beyond its sporting contribution, the academy also generates commercial value through educational programmes and fan-facing experiences such as academy tours. These initiatives reveal a model of innovation shaped less by radical disruption and more by steady, strategic evolution. By leveraging the financial stability provided by the Emirates Stadium, investing in digital platforms, and modernising its youth development pathways, Arsenal has shown that even under conservative ownership, business model innovation can be sustained and impactful.

4.5. Manchester United: Stalled Innovation and Strategic Drift

Manchester United's business model innovation record highlights a pattern of underinvestment and strategic inconsistency, particularly when compared with domestic rivals who have embraced more ambitious and integrated transformation agendas. Despite commanding vast financial resources and being one of the most powerful global brands in sport, the club has struggled to translate these advantages into a coherent innovation strategy. The most evident weakness lies in limited digital investment. With only 4.1% of annual revenue allocated to technology, United lags well behind the Premier League average of 8.2% and trails all three comparator clubs [54]. Efforts to modernise digital operations have been fragmented and poorly integrated, with multiple app and platform launches failing to achieve projected adoption or monetisation targets. The club's official app, despite several redesigns, has recorded just 800,000 downloads, a stark contrast to Manchester City's 2 million. This lack of digital traction underscores both executional shortcomings and the absence of a long-term digital roadmap.

Persistent infrastructure underinvestment has compounded these challenges. Old Trafford, once regarded as the pinnacle of English stadium design, now suffers from outdated technology infrastructure, restricting both fan experience enhancements and digital revenue opportunities. Similarly, the Carrington training facility has lagged its rivals in integrating cutting-edge performance and analytics systems. Comparative analysis reveals a striking disparity: since 2015, United has committed just £50 million to technology infrastructure, a figure dwarfed by Manchester City's £200 million and Liverpool's £110 million [29]. While the club did announce a £50 million upgrade to Carrington in 2025, this investment, though welcome, was widely perceived as overdue and reactionary rather than part of a proactive strategy. It highlights the extent to which Manchester United has been playing catch-up in areas that competitors addressed nearly a decade earlier.

The club's commercial strategy limitations further underscore this lag. While United continues to generate substantial revenues from its global network of traditional sponsorships and partnerships, these relationships largely lack the technology integration and activation components that have become hallmarks of successful modern deals. Unlike competitors who leverage digital platforms for fan engagement and co-created value, United's commercial portfolio remains rooted in conventional approaches, with little evidence of diversification into innovative or digitally enabled revenue streams. As **Table 3** summarises, these factors paint a picture of a club relying heavily on historical prestige and global fan loyalty while neglecting the transformative opportunities that digitalisation and innovation afford. The belated investment in Carrington signals an awareness of these shortcomings, but unless accompanied by a more integrated and forward-looking strategy, Manchester United risks further entrenching its position as an innovation laggard within both the Premier League and the wider football industry.

4.6. Factors Explaining Innovation Performance Differences

The comparative findings highlight a clear hierarchy in business model innovation

Table 3. Manchester United vs. competitors—key innovation metrics (2020-2025).

Metric	Manchester United	Manchester City	Liverpool	Arsenal
Technology Investment (£m)	67	245	156	98
Digital Revenue Growth	23%	89%	67%	45%
App Downloads (millions)	0.8	2.1	1.6	1.2
Innovation Projects	8	23	18	14
Technology Partnerships	3	12	9	7

Source: Club annual reports and industry analyses.

across the four clubs, with ownership structure, leadership vision, and organisational culture emerging as critical determinants of performance. Manchester City stands at the forefront, benefitting from state-backed ownership that has facilitated long-term, comprehensive investment without the pressure of immediate financial return. This model has enabled the club to build industry-leading digital infrastructure, commit resources to dedicated innovation teams, and establish technology-focused leadership roles that institutionalise transformation. Liverpool and Arsenal, operating under more traditional but strategically focused ownership, have demonstrated that innovation success does not necessarily require limitless financial resources. Instead, their achievements derive from disciplined prioritisation of high-impact initiatives—such as Liverpool’s integration of data analytics and Arsenal’s steady infrastructure-led model—which deliver measurable and sustainable outcomes. By contrast, Manchester United’s leveraged ownership structure has placed greater emphasis on debt servicing and short-term revenue maximisation, constraining the club’s capacity to pursue long-term innovation. The belated £50 million Carrington upgrade in 2025 epitomises this reactive rather than proactive approach, underlining how financial strategy and ownership priorities shape innovation trajectories.

Leadership and strategic vision further differentiate innovators from laggards. Manchester City’s systematic appointment of executives with expertise in technology and digital transformation reflects a deliberate commitment to embedding innovation within the club’s DNA. Liverpool’s leadership, combining Jürgen Klopp’s sporting philosophy with Michael Edwards’ analytical rigour, illustrates how data-driven decision-making can extend beyond the pitch to inform wider commercial and organisational strategy. Arsenal’s long-term patience under traditional ownership has fostered incremental but consistent development, balancing financial conservatism with selective innovation. Manchester United, by contrast, has suffered from leadership churn and an absence of a coherent digital strategy, leaving the club unable to build sustained momentum in innovation.

Finally, organisational culture emerges as a decisive enabler of innovation. Manchester City has cultivated a culture that embraces experimentation and technological adoption, supported by both substantial financial investment and leadership commitment [78]. Liverpool’s ethos of continuous improvement and reliance on evidence-based decision-making has created an environment in which innovation is not only accepted but actively expected. Arsenal has shown that even

within a conservative ownership model, a culture of measured adaptation can drive progress. Manchester United, however, continues to be hindered by a more traditional and hierarchical culture resistant to change, which has constrained its ability to adapt to the demands of digital transformation. These findings suggest that business model innovation in elite football is not simply a function of financial resources but is strongly mediated by ownership philosophy, leadership vision, and organisational culture. Clubs that align these three elements—regardless of ownership are able to systematically embed innovation, while those that fail to do so risk falling behind despite their financial or brand advantages.

5. Discussion

5.1. Business Model Innovation as Competitive Advantage

The findings highlight that business model innovation has become a decisive determinant of competitive advantage in the Premier League, with implications that extend well beyond traditional sporting metrics. Clubs that have embraced digital transformation and organisational innovation consistently outperform their rivals across commercial revenue growth, fan engagement, and operational efficiency. In this context, innovation functions not merely as a supporting activity but as a structural driver of competitiveness—what can be described as the fourth competitive pillar of modern football, alongside sporting performance, financial strength, and global brand power.

Manchester City exemplifies the transformative potential of this new pillar. Systematic and long-term investment in digital infrastructure and technology has allowed the club to integrate innovation across all operational functions, generating reinforcing benefits in both sporting and commercial domains. Data analytics underpin recruitment and performance optimisation, IoT-enabled facilities enhance training and injury prevention, while digitally enabled fan engagement initiatives drive commercial expansion. Together, these initiatives illustrate how embedding innovation across the entire value chain produces sustainable, multi-dimensional advantages that traditional metrics alone cannot capture.

Liverpool provides an equally instructive case, demonstrating that the scale of investment is not the sole determinant of innovation success. Operating under resource constraints, the club's data-driven, strategically focused approach has prioritised high-impact initiatives that deliver measurable returns. Their success shows that a coherent strategy and disciplined execution can be more important than the absolute magnitude of financial resources. In Liverpool's case, innovation has acted as a performance multiplier—maximising returns on limited investment while sustaining competitiveness on the field and in the marketplace. The comparative evidence, therefore, suggests that business model innovation should be understood as a critical, independent pillar of competitive advantage in elite football. Whereas sporting performance remains central to fan loyalty, financial resources underpin recruitment, and global brand power sustains commercial reach, innovation provides the connective tissue that binds these pillars together in a

rapidly evolving digital era. Clubs that successfully embed innovation into their core operations achieve not only immediate commercial benefits but also long-term organisational resilience in an industry defined by volatility and global competition.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the four competitive pillars that underpin sustainable advantage in elite football. At the centre lies Sustainable Competitive Advantage, representing the overarching objective of Premier League clubs in balancing sporting, financial, commercial, and innovative imperatives. This central outcome is connected by directional arrows to four interdependent pillars, each contributing distinct yet complementary sources of advantage.

The first pillar, Sporting Performance, reflects traditional measures of success such as on-pitch results, player recruitment and retention, and overall team competitiveness. The second, Financial Strength, captures a club's ability to generate revenue, maintain profitability, and reinvest strategically in both sporting and commercial operations. The third pillar, Global Brand Power, denotes the size and loyalty of the fanbase, international market reach, and the attractiveness of the club to sponsors and commercial partners. Finally, the fourth and most emergent pillar, Business Model Innovation, encompasses digital transformation, commercial creativity, and organisational adaptability. This includes investments in data analytics, technology platforms, digital fan engagement, and new revenue models. The framework demonstrates (**Figure 1**) that sustainable competitive advantage in modern football is not the result of a single factor but emerges from the integration of all four pillars. While sporting performance remains central to fan loyalty, and financial strength underpins investment capacity, global brand power ensures worldwide visibility and sponsorship appeal. Business model innovation, however, increasingly serves as the connective tissue between these dimensions,

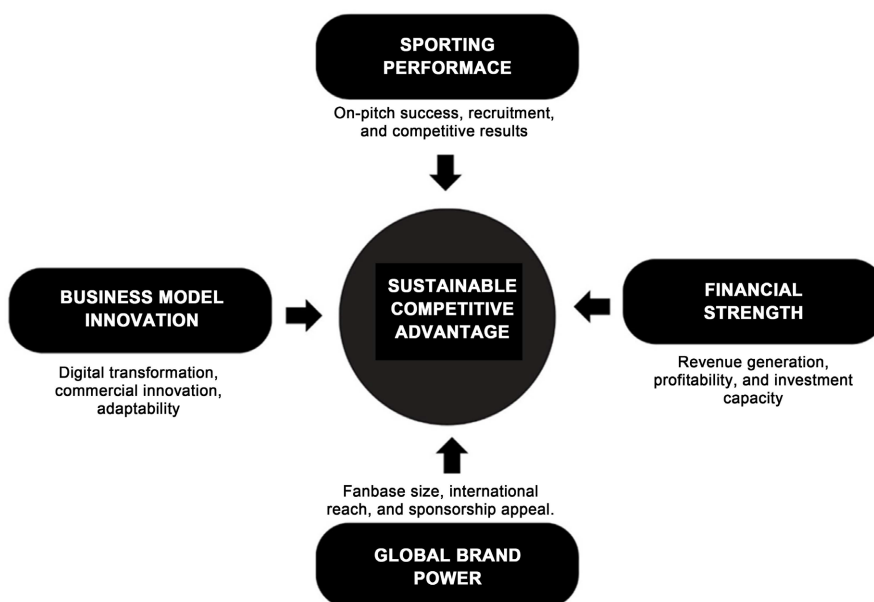


Figure 1. The four competitive pillars of elite football clubs. (Source: author)

enhancing performance, enabling financial sustainability, and expanding commercial horizons. The diagram, therefore, positions innovation as the critical fourth pillar that both complements and strengthens the traditional sources of competitive advantage.

5.2. The Innovation Gap: Manchester United's Strategic Challenges

Manchester United's underperformance in business model innovation reflects multiple interconnected factors that have created a self-reinforcing cycle of strategic drift. The club's leveraged ownership structure has constrained investment in innovative initiatives, while frequent leadership changes have prevented the development of a coherent long-term strategy. The analysis reveals that Manchester United's innovation challenges extend beyond financial constraints to encompass organisational culture, strategic vision, and change management capabilities. The club's traditional approach to operations and resistance to digital transformation have created competitive disadvantages that compound over time. This finding aligns with broader research on organisational inertia and the challenges of transformation in established institutions. The competitive implications of Manchester United's innovation gap are becoming increasingly apparent, with the club losing market share in key commercial metrics despite maintaining strong brand recognition. The analysis suggests that brand strength alone is insufficient to maintain a competitive position in an increasingly technology-driven industry.

5.3. Implications for Sports Business Model Theory

The findings contribute to sports business model theory by demonstrating how digital transformation has fundamentally altered competitive dynamics in professional football. Traditional sources of competitive advantage, including historical success and brand strength, are being superseded by technological capabilities and innovation capacity. The research reveals that successful business model innovation in sports requires integration across multiple dimensions rather than isolated technology investments. Clubs that have achieved superior performance demonstrate systematic approaches that encompass digital infrastructure, commercial innovation, operational excellence, and strategic leadership. The study also highlights the critical role of ownership structure in enabling or constraining business model innovation. Different ownership models create varying incentives and capabilities for long-term investment in transformation initiatives. This finding has implications for regulatory policy and competitive balance considerations in professional sports.

5.4. Strategic Recommendations for Manchester United

Considering the comparative findings with Manchester City, Liverpool, and Arsenal, and drawing on the conceptual framework presented in **Figure 1**, several strategic recommendations emerge for strengthening Manchester United's business model innovation. First, the club should design and implement a compre-

hensive digital transformation strategy that cuts across all operational functions. Such a strategy would require substantial investment in technology infrastructure, data analytics capabilities, and digital platform development. To be effective, it must be anchored by dedicated leadership roles and supported by organisational resources that ensure consistent execution and accountability.

Second, Manchester United should launch an ambitious infrastructure modernisation programme to address long-standing deficiencies at Old Trafford and the Carrington training complex (which at the time of writing has received a £50 m overhaul). This programme should prioritise the integration of advanced technology systems, creating a unified digital infrastructure that enhances both sporting operations and commercial activities. By doing so, the club could unlock measurable returns through improved fan experiences, greater digital engagement, and the development of new revenue streams. Third, a sustained focus on organisational culture transformation is required to embed innovation as a core value. This involves leadership development initiatives, employee training, and the introduction of performance management systems that reward experimentation, innovation, and continuous improvement. Such measures would help shift the club away from its traditional, risk-averse culture towards one that embraces change and adapts to the evolving demands of modern football.

Finally, the club should strengthen its capacity for innovation by pursuing strategic partnerships with technological companies that deliver both financial returns and operational capabilities. Partnerships should be carefully targeted to leverage Manchester United's global brand strength while providing access to cutting-edge technological expertise in areas such as digital fan engagement, data analytics, and platform integration. These recommendations align directly with the four competitive pillars identified in **Figure 1**, providing a pathway for Manchester United to realign its business model with the demands of the contemporary football industry. In doing so, the club would not only address its current structural weaknesses but also capitalise on its global brand potential to regain a position of sustainable competitive advantage.

6. Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations that affect the scope and generalisability of findings. First, reliance on publicly available data limits access to detailed internal strategic information and decision-making processes. While multiple data sources enable triangulation, some aspects of innovation strategy remain opaque due to commercial sensitivity. Second, the focus on four Premier League clubs, while enabling detailed comparative analysis, limits generalisability to other leagues, sports, or organisational contexts. The unique characteristics of English football, including regulatory environment, media attention, and commercial opportunities, may not be replicated elsewhere. Third, the study period (2015-2025) captures a specific phase of industry evolution that may not be representative of longer-term trends. The acceleration of digital transformation during the COVID-

19 pandemic created unusual conditions that may have influenced innovation patterns. Fourth, the absence of primary data from club executives and decision-makers limits insights into internal innovation processes, cultural factors, and strategic reasoning. While media coverage and official communications provide substantial information, they may not fully capture the complexity of internal strategic deliberations. These limitations are addressed through careful qualification of findings, extensive use of multiple data sources, and explicit acknowledgement of scope constraints in the analysis and conclusions.

7. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that business model innovation has become a critical determinant of competitive advantage in the English Premier League, with leading clubs achieving success through comprehensive digital transformation strategies that span all operational dimensions. The comparative analysis reveals stark disparities in performance, with innovation leaders such as Manchester City and Liverpool securing measurable gains in revenue growth, fan engagement, and operational efficiency, while laggards such as Manchester United continue to fall behind. Manchester United's underperformance reflects the complex interplay of ownership structure, strategic leadership, and organisational culture in shaping innovative outcomes. The club's leveraged ownership model, combined with frequent leadership turnover and a risk-averse organisational culture, has created persistent barriers to transformation. These constraints illustrate how structural and cultural factors can compound over time, eroding a club's ability to adapt to an industry increasingly defined by digital and commercial innovation.

The findings contribute to sports business model theory by showing how digital transformation has fundamentally altered the competitive dynamics of professional football. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, the traditional pillars of competitive advantage—sporting performance, financial strength, and global brand power—are now inseparable from a fourth pillar: business model innovation. Technological capabilities and innovation capacity are no longer peripheral but central to sustainable advantage, requiring clubs to adopt systematic approaches that integrate multiple organisational dimensions. For Manchester United, the evidence underscores that comprehensive business model innovation is essential for restoring competitive position and commercial performance. This transformation would necessitate significant investment in digital infrastructure, a cultural shift towards innovation and experimentation, and the development of leadership capable of articulating and sustaining a long-term strategy. Crucially, such efforts must be supported by ownership committed to innovation rather than constrained by short-term financial imperatives.

The broader implications extend well beyond Manchester United. Sports organisations across disciplines face similar challenges in adapting to a technology-driven landscape. This study shows that success depends less on absolute financial resources than on strategic coherence, implementation quality, and organisational

commitment. These insights provide actionable guidance for sports executives navigating the complex demands of digital transformation and business model innovation. Finally, avenues for future research emerge from these findings. Scholars should explore the long-term sustainability of different innovation strategies and their impact on competitive balance within professional sport. Equally, greater attention should be given to understanding fan responses to innovation initiatives and to analysing how technological advancement interacts with sporting culture. Such research would not only enrich academic theory but also provide practical insights for leaders seeking to balance tradition with transformation in the rapidly evolving sports industry.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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