

Left Behind: Breaking a Vicious Commercial Cycle in Scottish Football



Luke Holliday

Northumbria University

Robert Sroka

Towson University

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of commercialization on Scottish football, focusing on the Scottish Premiership (SP) compared to the five top European leagues (TEL), with emphasis on the English Premier League (EPL). Through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, key themes emerge: the SP's reliance on a local business model, its limited commercial potential and minimal exploitation, the crucial connection between product quality and financial health, and finally, despite the foregoing, pride in preservation of cultural traditions in the face of commercial pressures. To address the SP's perceived lack of global demand hindering its commercial growth potential, the SP may consider leveraging its core competitive advantage, its cultural assets, to create authentic media and tourism products for a global audience that might drive an alternative commercial growth cycle.

Keywords: Scotland; football; commercialisation; Scottish Premiership; broadcasting rights

Luke Holliday is a Senior Account Manager at Drummond Central and holds a MSc in International Sport Management from Northumbria University. Dr. Robert Sroka (Corresponding Author: rsroka@towson.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Sport Management at Towson University. His research interests include sport venues, finance, law, events, and competitions.

1. Introduction

Commercialization of football has defined the sport's expansion into a truly global business (Beech & Chadwick, 2013). This has been a long-term progression in parallel to the globalization of sport, whereby professional football clubs now operate as commercialized entities (Li et al., 2016). While literature (e.g., Alaminos et al., 2020; Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2014; Ronald & Jean-Pierre, 2019) has addressed the implications of financial performance and commercialization on football clubs, there has been a focus on the 'big five' European leagues, with an emphasis on the English Premier League (EPL). In addition to the EPL, these top European leagues (TEL) – Serie A (Italy), the Bundesliga (Germany), Ligue 1 (France), and La Liga (Spain) – are defined as such for their sporting success and global demand. With EPL broadcast revenues eclipsing £3 billion annually, the gap between the EPL and non-TEL leagues, and in some instances TEL leagues, has compounded over the past two decades.

Less work, however, has targeted the adaptation other European leagues to commercialization, including the Scottish Premiership (SP), the highest league competition for professional football in Scotland. Moreover, there is little recent investigation into the nature of this adaptation, reasoning, and results of this adaptation. While the SP has experienced some

degree of commercial progression and development, it is considered to have been insignificant in comparison to the TEL, and especially the EPL. Reliance on historical income sources, less global demand, and challenging financial circumstances are all suggested to contribute to a restrictive commercial trajectory for Scottish football (Olsson & Swart, 2020; McLeod, 2018). However more recent studies have only tangentially addressed Scottish football, while previous works (Robertson, 2016) have focused on the pre-2011 period. Yet Scottish football would seem to have many potential selling points as well, including tradition, embedded fan bases, cultural appeal, authenticity, and proximity to the EPL. The failure to adequately leverage these prospective assets has not been sufficiently addressed in the existing literature.

Thus, this purpose of this study is both retrospective and prescriptive. First, this work examines the commercialization of SP football, with consideration for its differential adaptation in comparison to the TEL and EPL. Through thematic analysis informed by interviews and document review, the perceptions of relevant professionals and stakeholders within or adjacent to Scottish football are sought understand the reasoning behind the commercial disparities and challenges SP clubs face. In turn, this project serves as a reference point for facilitating research in similarly situated leagues, in addition to

providing prescriptions on how the SP may navigate a viable commercial path forward through leveraging its inherent assets.

Beyond the Scottish case, the challenges of adapting to commercialization are shared by other “secondary” European leagues such as those in Denmark, Austria, Portugal, and The Netherlands. While these leagues lack the global broadcasting and sponsorship revenues of the EPL and other TEL, they have pursued different strategic adaptations: Denmark and Austria have emphasized local development and sustainability, while Portugal and The Netherlands have positioned themselves as exporter leagues, relying on talent development and player trading as a commercial model. By situating the SP within this broader family of leagues, this study highlights the extent to which Scottish football’s experience is illustrative of wider structural dynamics across European football.

Theoretically, this work draws on globalization perspectives (Li et al., 2012), resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and commercialization trajectories (Beech & Chadwick, 2013). The SP’s reliance on traditional revenue sources, combined with limited global media demand, reflects resource dependency constraints that reinforce a localized business model. By framing the SP’s commercial trajectory within these established perspectives, the study aims to extend insights into how secondary

leagues may respond to systemic inequalities in European football.

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Commercialization in sport and football

Stevenson and Lindberg (2010) and Boone, Kurtz, and Berston (2019) define commercialisation as the process of managing something principally for financial gain and making products available within a marketplace. Beech and Chadwick (2013) suggest that the progression of sport into an overtly commercially focused pursuit is part of a seven-stage process known as ‘the development of a sport as a business’. Organisational breakaways, the development of leagues with regional dimensions, ‘pay-to-view’ sport, and the ability to play sport as full-time employment were preconditions before a thorough commercialisation process could occur.

Li et al. (2012) argue that commercialisation has been parallel to the globalisation of sport. Building off this, Murray (2016) outlines that the trend toward globalisation, and the commercialization embedded within it, will continue to grow exponentially. This process may be accelerated by emergent influence of international sport federations and governing bodies that hold international and multinational status rather than just domestic firms (Lussier & Kimball, 2020). These internationalization processes are also mimicked within individual organisations and clubs as they grow and develop

into commercialised entities (Cunningham et al., 2016).

Commercialization in European football can be traced back to the late 20th century when the professional aspect transitioned from a largely national pursuit to a global entertainment commodity through media rights and sponsorship (Maguire, 2009; Ronglan, 2016). In evaluating the commercial transformation of European football, other works have explored the impact of lucrative broadcasting deals, sponsorship agreements, and merchandise sales on the revenue streams of clubs, as well as the financial disparities between elite and smaller clubs (e.g., De Moragas et al., 2013; Garcia-del-Barrio & Szymanski, 2009; Szymanski, 2015; Tonazzi, 2003).

As commercialization has intensified, its threat to competitive balance has been further scrutinised (Serrano et al., 2023). Financial Fair Play regulations, implemented by the governing body for European football, UEFA, have been a focal point of inquiry, with studies assessing their effectiveness in curbing financial excesses and promoting sustainable competition (Franck, 2018; Gerrard & Kringstad, 2022; Peeters & Szymanski, 2014; Plumley et al., 2020), as well as the legal framework of enforcement through internationalised institutions such as UEFA and the Court of Arbitration for Sport (Sroka, 2024).

Despite a direct relationship between profits, winning and attendance of footballing events

(Madden & Robinson, 2012), continued commercialisation of the sport has driven European football clubs to focus organisational objectives around financial success. This has caused traditional income sources of football clubs to become less important, (i.e., ticket sales or local sponsorship). As with many global brands, diversification strategies have allowed clubs to enter new business areas and geographic markets, providing attractive alternative sources of financial return to potential investors (Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020).

Kennedy and Kennedy (2012) argue that football fans' behaviour towards commercial strategies of their football clubs has typically been resistant to the commodification of the sport, where they are vulnerable to 'exploitation' based on their club loyalty. Despite their importance to securing a stable public during poor product quality, commercialisation of the sport has been exemplified previously to somewhat 'disregard' the general supporter. In some ways "...the fan is no longer the focus at all, it is purely a financial thought that is in the focus and thus the football collapses" (Ronald & Jean-Pierre, 2019, p. 21).

Commercialization in the Scottish Premiership and TEL

The 12-club SP is the highest football league in Scotland, playing a split schedule where clubs face each other three times prior to a top and bottom

playoff (Reilly & Witt, 2024). While Scottish football demonstrates one of the highest per-capita match day attendance records in Europe (Bunn et al., 2019), it has often been critiqued for lacking a competitive edge (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2014), with only Celtic and Rangers winning Scotland's top division since 1985 (Jaidka, 2021). MacParlane (2020) suggests that the prominence and success of Celtic and Rangers has been detrimental to people's desire to follow their local team, turning Scottish football into a 'two-party system.'

Whilst the TEL continue to diversify, the SP are still heavily reliant on traditional sources of income closest to the core football product (Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020; Morrow, 2023). This traditional revenue reliance is complemented by tensions between long and short-term revenue maximization (Robertson, 2016). Not only does this highlight the difference in the SP's adaptation to commercialisation in comparison to the TEL, but also how this subsequently makes it hard for the SP to compete in relation to both financial health and sporting performance as proposed by Andreas and Havran (2015). The divergent commercial development between the TEL and the SP is portrayed well through Olsson & Swart's (2020) cluster analysis. With reference to financial development and commercial growth, Scotland resides in 'Cluster C', following six leagues in 'Cluster B', and the TEL in 'Cluster A'.

In comparison, other secondary leagues have

adopted different adaptive strategies. The Danish Superliga and Austrian Bundesliga have sought to balance financial sustainability with modest international visibility, relying heavily on domestic attendance and carefully managed wage structures. By contrast, Portuguese and Dutch leagues have embraced a talent-export model, producing players for transfer to TEL clubs as a primary source of revenue (Plumley et al., 2021). These contrasts suggest that while the SP shares structural constraints with its peers, its reliance on a highly localised model and underexploited commercial opportunities makes its trajectory distinctive.

Indeed, the SP product appears far less desired than that of the TEL, which results in limited potential for globalisation or diversification into new markets (Holzmayer & Schmidt, 2020). This is despite the SP possessing certain fundamentals for a merchantable structure: rich history, two of Europe's biggest clubs and the classic 'Old Firm' derby, and loyal supporters (Bradley, 2022; Bunn et al., 2019). In a review by *The Scotsman* of 48 SP fixtures purchased by Sky Sports, only 41 were broadcast in the 2020-21 season (Sked, 2021). Yet previous work found that live broadcasts crowded out attendance (Allan & Roy, 2008).

Considering the SP and SP clubs' lack of commercial sophistication, it is little surprise that several clubs have experienced financial failures (McLeod, 2018; McLeod et al., 2021). Indeed, financial struggles have been long documented in

the SP (Morrow, 2004; 2006), even among its leading clubs (Morrow, 2015), to the extent that the departure of Celtic and Rangers to English competition has been frequently discussed for decades (Morrow, 2013). Nor does the split structure appear to account for club-specific financial struggles, with a near financially neutral impact on clubs most directly affected (Reilly & Witt, 2024).

The limited commercial and global potential may restrict the opportunities for SP clubs to have sociocultural impact beyond Scotland. Whereas the English Premier League (EPL) creates significant soft power for the UK (Connell, 2018), the SP is largely forgotten abroad. Where domestic politics do concern the SP, the picture is often less favourable. Whether dissatisfaction from the Scottish and UK governments towards celebratory Rangers fans during Covid restrictions, and failed appeals from Scottish football for a financial lifeline from the UK Government during the pandemic, instances of the SP impacting larger political and media conversations have not necessarily resulted in positive coverage (Cooney, 2020; Jackson, 2021).

2. Methodology

This study uses a mix of qualitative methods, focused on semi-structured interviews and document review. Interview participants for this study (N=7) were recruited using theoretical

sampling, deliberately acquiring certain participants for the study based on their relevance and their ability to contribute to the research (Denscombe, 2017). Participants are drawn from professionals with a role in the commercial sector of Scottish football (N=4), professionals with a role in the UK football broadcast industry (N=2), or in those in leadership role of a SP supporter group (N=1). These participants were selected to reflect a cross section of the club, league, industry, and consumer perspectives. Interviews used semi-structured prompts focusing on club commercial strategies, perceptions of broadcast value and media markets, views on fan culture and its role in commercialization, as well as political, economic, and sociocultural impacts of commercialization.

Interviews from these four perspectives are complemented by review of over 180 documents related to the topics of commercialization in football, the TEL, and the SP, with a core focus on documents concerning the Scottish context. Documents were obtained from snowballing combinations of search terms until relevant new results were exhausted. An emphasis was placed on ascertaining secondary interview data from sources in the same role-types as the primary semi-structured interview subjects, as well as financial statement data, for triangulation purposes. Documents were sorted by relevance, publication date, document source type, country of origin, and document perspective type. Inclusion criteria

required direct relevance to Scottish or European football commercialization. Documents were excluded if lacking relevance to a topic or perspective type, and if their accuracy was impeached by other documents from more credible sources.

After initial open coding, where data was broken down and analyzed to initially identify categories (e.g., “local business model”, “local sponsors”), a selective coding process in the framework of Skinner et al. (2020), was used to analyze the data, categorizing transcripts from the semi-structured interviews and documents into appropriate themes. Selective coding ensures that these themes are consciously searched for during data analysis (Skinner et al., 2020), with emphasis placed upon the codes that are most revealing about the data (Charmaz, 2006) within the context of commercialization in the SP in comparison to the TEL. The core variable for selective coding was commercialization. From initial codes, data was dissected into systematically selected themes.

. Results and Discussion

Five central themes emerged from the data: (1) reliance on a local business model, (2) limited commercial potential, (3) limited exploitation of opportunities, (4) the parallel between financial health and product quality, and (5) preservation of cultural traditions.

Local business model

A substantial theme was the clear preference of the SP and its clubs for operation within a local business model. The focus of the SP’s commercial strategy is with their supporters and connections with local businesses. Sponsors are overwhelmingly local businesses targeting the local supporter, most often in the stadium, as opposed to EPL and many TEL sponsors primarily targeting a global broadcast audience. This local business model was considered critical due to the SP’s lack of global audience in comparison to the TEL along with SP clubs’ connection to their core supporters. Indeed, this point was expressed among all interview participants, particularly emphasized by those who work in the commercial sector:

“If you look at our reports, you know, we still rely a lot on the traditional kind of revenue.” – N4

“A club like Motherwell can have a closer connection to its community than you know, Manchester United, because Manchester United is this vast global brand.” – N5

“We are very big on local partners and developing these local partnerships. And in doing that these local businesses grow with the club.” – N6

Local ticket sales are the other aspect of this local business model. As of the last full pre-Covid season, 43% of SP revenue came from ticket sales, and only 10% from broadcast (BBC, 2020). This seems to have trended up from what was noted by Robertson (2016), where a SPL club attributed 31% of revenue from league sources (including SP and related cup sponsorship/broadcast) and 38% from tickets. By 2023, gate receipts settled back to 39% of SP revenue and 8% of revenue was from broadcast (UEFA, 2024). Indeed, on a per capita basis, Scottish football has the strongest attendances in Europe (McLaughlin, 2024).

Clearly SP clubs rely on season ticket sales to traditional supporters, whereas TEL clubs continue to pursue broader lines of revenue and operate as global brands accessing consumers in Asia and North America. However, it is worth noting that similarly categorized leagues, such as Denmark, only brought in a quarter of the SP's gate revenue, and collectively the 12 SP clubs made more than double from ticket sales than the top 18 Turkish or Portuguese clubs (2020), even if this number is weighted by Celtic and Rangers.

Despite the consensus that a local commercial strategy is limiting, N6 argued that this provides a guarded economic backbone to professional football clubs:

“When we're faced with/will face relegation

it's the best because the partners get behind you.” – N6

N6 argued that larger, more ‘commercial’ partnerships with football clubs are not necessarily as enduring when on-field results are weak. Using the example of Motherwell's relegation and their commercial partners financially supporting them to “bounce back” to the SP, N6 suggests that larger commercial partners may have cut ties when considering their brand image and the ‘commercial’ benefits of the partnership following relegation. Without an ability to think local and understand the supporters (club consumers), foreign owners have previously experienced issues in maintaining connection and good relations with core supporters.

However, building off N4's emphasis that football clubs must “diversify in order to function,” N2 suggested that Scottish football is falling behind other leagues with reference to even their traditional commercial operations and innovation:

“Things in Scotland have to have to modernise or just stay stagnant or fall behind even further (than TEL clubs).” – N2

This is illustrated in part by the SP naming rights saga. Whereas the EPL moved away from having a title sponsor in 2016 (with Barclays' £40

million annual sponsorship deemed less valuable than “clean” branding), the SP has had trouble attracting and retaining credible name sponsors. Cinch, a company not even particularly well known in the UK, exercised an early termination clause in 2023. Part of the issue for Cinch, was that Rangers refused to participate in coverage for Cinch because of a pre-existing local sponsor in a similar category. Although the SP subsequently brought in more revenue through its new name sponsor, William Hill, the elevation of a gambling brand is evidence of stagnation as the EPL and other leagues sideline similar sponsors because of perceived social ills. Indeed, this sense of stagnation – whether the commercialization, broadcast rights, sponsors, or match day experience – was assessed repeatedly through other interviews and document review.

Limited commercial potential

It is well established throughout document review and participant response that Scottish football is believed to have very limited commercial potential. One explanatory theme throughout the data was the “marketability” of the SP:

“How far can you go with it? Ultimately, you win the Scottish Premiership, you win the two domestic cups. How much headway can you really make in the

Champions League, because the best players will not want to go and play in Scotland.” – N1

There are ranging reasons behind why the SP lacks marketability and desire for “global eyeballs” (N7) that scope the TEL. Reference to quality of the football, competition in the leagues and cups, and interestingly the location, demonstrates constraints on commercial appeal. The key limit on the SP’s commercial potential is likely its poor broadcast market, placing even Celtic and Rangers perpetually further behind lesser-known TEL clubs in media rights revenue.

“Celtic, Rangers, I mean they are bigger than the majority the teams in the English Premier League. But when you look at the money that they can gain through their TV contracts, they're being massively hampered.” – N5

“Celtic have more season ticket holders. But we're absolutely dwarfed you know, West Ham wake up in the morning, they had... £120 million coming in, even if they get relegated.” – N7

While the SP has been able to sell its games to be viewed on large foreign platforms such as Paramount Plus, the league is mostly stuck at the

stage of being a product that foreign platforms are willing to acquire for cheap content, as opposed to something that these foreign platforms are willing to bid on to drive their viewership or subscription base. The EPL, and to a lesser extent the TEL, are in the latter category. Interestingly, the Old Firm game is also in the latter category in the US, where Paramount broadcasts the match exclusively on the CBS Sports Network to drive subscriptions to its specialty channel.

A review of financial reports supports the participant suggestion that the SP is “dwarfed” by the EPL and TEL on broadcast deals, despite two clubs that can compete on gate receipts in any context, and in broadcast interest when they play each other. In the immediate pre-pandemic period, 53% of the EPL’s €5.439 billion aggregate revenue was from broadcast deals, whereas this only makes up 10% of the SP’s €229 million aggregate revenue (UEFA, 2020). This indicates that the SP generated €22.9 million from annual domestic broadcast in comparison to the EPL’s €2.883 billion. Indeed, the EPL’s domestic broadcast income totals approximately 125 times that of the SP’s, compared to roughly two-times in 1998 (Wood, n.d.).

By the 2022-23 UEFA figures, EPL revenue had increased to €6.453 billion and the SP to €313 million (UEFA, 2024). Although the SP was able to almost double the EPL’s revenue growth rate, the gross gap between the two increased by €930

million and SP broadcast revenues had only increased to €26 million with the EPL reaching €3.029 billion (2024). Whereas TEL gate receipts ranged anywhere from 29% (EPL) to 71% of broadcast revenues, in the SP gate receipts were 477% of broadcast revenues. This was driven by Celtic and Rangers, who were respectively 18th and 19th in UEFA club ticket revenues and between them accounted for 76% of the SP’s gate (2024). With commercial revenue, the SP was stagnant by UEFA’s measure with €98 million in 2018 and €97 million in 2023 (UEFA 2020; 2024).

N4 further explored the historical progression of the SP’s commercial limits, suggesting that SP broadcast deals in past decades helped build their presence in European football:

“(The SP) were able to attract top European players in the past, in the late 90s, and 80s. And then when they lost that kind of backing of the broadcaster, the big broadcaster, then they didn't have enough money to distribute to the teams. And then obviously, the clubs were less able to attract star players.” – N4

In the pre-1990s era, when SP revenue ratios were not left behind by the TEL, broadcast income acted as a commercial enabler for the league,

giving the league greater marketability along with the “commercial value” of star players also discussed by N5, in turn building a positively reinforcing commercial cycle more revenue, better players, better product. Presently, however, the clubs’ lack of financial freedom due to the poor broadcast market for Scottish football hampers their ability to compete in the high-value player transfer market and in turn, limits the marketability of the league following the struggle to attract commercially valuable star players.

“I think the record transfer fee [paid] for any club in the SP is around £10 million. Really. Which I mean, that's probably gonna buy you a pretty good (English) Championship player these days.” – N1
[note: the record fee paid is £12 million]

This said, Robertson’s (2016) interviews of similarly positioned actors noted the importance of selling players to make up for commercial revenue limitations. This brings forward multiple points to consider surrounding the commercial appeal of the SP. If the SP needs to often sell top academy talent, but can only afford second division players, how can the SP expect broadcasters and investors to value its product?

Little commercial exploitation

Still, considering the SP has one of the strongest football rivalries, two of Europe’s largest clubs, and broad-based local fan loyalty, why is commercial success so difficult?

“It's almost a slight mystery to me because Celtic has such a global outreach, in terms of supporters, clubs, all over the world. If you take the US for example, I think there's around 20 supporters’ clubs across the US.” – N2

“Celtic versus Rangers one of the most viewed games, I would imagine, and possibly in Europe, I don't know... But there's certainly an audience and interest in that game.” – N3

Respondents highlighted that the SP and its clubs lack the ability to exploit the commercial growth of European football, with several blaming the governing bodies for Scottish football’s lack of commercial presence:

“I think it is in part due to the lack of business acumen within the Scottish Premiership.” – N1

“The Scottish League always talk about that. But I don't think that they play hard ball with these bigger companies.” – N5

“Because the (EPL) governing body is probably more commercially savvy and has more of an input from the clubs that actually understand what's going on. The EPL is a commercially forward-thinking governing body. Whereas what we have is a very traditional authority in governing body.” – N6

TEL clubs continue to diversify commercially and modernise as they increase their potential revenue streams both domestically and with ranging, globalised business initiatives. The SP, however, still strongly rely on traditional sources of income to maintain and build their commercial presence, implying the core dependence on these operations reduce the potential for risk and innovation when compared to the TEL and their governing bodies. N7 expands further, suggesting that the SP’s lack of commercial savvy contributes to its clubs’ need for cash, and as such they undervalue themselves when commercial opportunities arise:

“You will find certain clubs will accept X amount for their shirt, or X amount for an advertisement. And that maybe has a lot more value, but they're just desperate to get that cash” – N7

Relative to competing leagues, further limits may be self-created through the siloed culture between SP clubs when it comes to commercial operations:

“So, they (the EPL) will have a centralised commercial work between all the clubs, but it'll be very formal, and be very within, there'll be no sharing of information. Whereas up here, we don't really hold anything (together)...” – N6

N6 furthers this, providing that if the SP wants to develop commercially they need to modernise and “adapt to survive” – diversifying effectively and innovatively in a more competitive environment. Without further innovation, the current competitive structure in European football will compound relative commercial, market, and bargaining positions for media rights between the TEL and secondary leagues such as the SP.

However, the SP had once been an innovator on the broadcast front, assigning broadcast rights to a special pay television channel, SPL TV, when traditional partner Sky had declined to increase its bid for a new contract period:

“Sky had already decided by 2001 that they weren’t getting the value for money they had initially thought they would. I think Sky had sussed the Scottish game was all

about four games a season – and so too had Mitchell [then SP chairman], who was more realistic about the true net worth of any TV deal compared to some chairmen.” – former SP journalist and editor (McDonald, 2016).

When ITV Digital collapsed, however, triggering massive financial strife in English League football, Rangers and Celtic saw an opportunity to play in England, and withdrew from SPL TV, triggering its demise. The then Hibernian managing director outlined that “[t]he Old Firm killed this channel. They voted against it, undermined it and took a decision that meant the channel was massively damaged” (2016).

In recent years, five clubs commissioned an independent review into the SP from Deloitte, which prompted an innovation and strategy group within the SP to put in place the commercial recommendations including maximising broadcast income, growing commercial partnerships, and increasing foreign rights (Garrick, 2022). This was accompanied by an aspirational goal of £50 million in annual SP revenues. Some progress toward that objective has been experienced, with a 6% increase in 2023 club distributions to £35.8 million (SFN, 2023). However, the magnitude of difference with the EPL and other TEL is still staggering, and SP sponsorship revenues are slightly less in gross terms than they were five years prior (UEFA, 2020; 2024). The SP also has a higher percentage

of alcohol related sponsors than all the TEL, with half of SP clubs having an alcohol-related sponsor as a top sponsor, indicating financial reliance on partners with negative social impacts (Purves et al., 2022).

Others have also proposed expanding the SP to a sixteen-team league in pursuit of fan interest and commercial opportunity. However, SP chief executive Neil Doncaster warned that the Danish experience with league expansion “diluted the quality of the top tier” and that SP expansion would “effectively halve the value of [SP] tv revenues” by lessening the frequency of derby games in a single home and away game schedule (BBC Sport, 2024b). When pushed-back with the comparison of bigger leagues in England, Doncaster argued that “bigger leagues generally go with bigger populations,” citing Denmark and Austria as more appropriate peers for Scotland.

Quality is parallel to financial health

A key theme across the data is that the SP lacks quality within the core football product when compared with the TEL, which has only accelerated in recent years.

“A lot of good players have departed the League and that – a combination with Rangers going down, almost made the Scottish Premiership a bit of a joke league.”

– N1

“The quality of product? I mean, obviously, if you've got a, you know, Man United-Liverpool game, or you know, Real Madrid-Barcelona, that's going to have far...wider interest than St. Johnstone against Raith Rovers.” – N2

“...there's no get away from the fact that the quality is there's a massive gap” – N3

Partly attributable to the financial capabilities of the TEL to afford rising player transfer fees and salaries, quality of the product is still a key contributor to the SP's lack of marketability. It is no surprise that the TEL are home to the world's best players, with other leagues (namely in Saudi Arabia and the US) possessing far deeper pocketed ownership but less established club brands than the SP, serving as the TEL's primary external player market competition.

Beyond sporting performance, star players also contribute to the commercial value of football clubs as suggested by N5:

“You may get players signing for a certain team, probably because of the commercial deals that that team has.” – N5

At the same time, football clubs can act as a

platform for star players in maximizing their own commercial value. The commercial opportunity associated with star players therefore may be just as important as their footballing ability. Likewise, the commercial potential of the club may influence star talent on where to sign as much as the on-field potential, and keep even the TEL competitive where disrupters such as the Saudi Pro League (and previously, the Chinese Super League) are concerned.

At a club level, only Celtic has recently been able to achieve several consecutive years of consistent profits. In 2023-24, Celtic booked a healthy pre-tax profit of £17.8 million, which was significantly less than the £40.7 million pre-tax profit in 2022-2023. The differences between the two most recent financial years can be accounted for through player trading and capital investments. However, in addition to successful development and sale of players, Celtic's structural surplus is largely driven by Champions League revenue, with £31.7 million in the most recently reported financial year, and a reported £38.2 million for its 2024-2025 campaign (Bhowmick, 2025). Despite the strong results, Celtic's chairman commented that “domestic media rights have been unable to keep pace with the media rights environment of our competitor markets and football industry inflation in general over recent years” (BBC Sport, 2024c).

Rangers, on the other hand, posted a net loss of

£17.2 million in 2023-24, despite £88 million in revenue (BBC Sport, 2024d). The difference for Rangers was less successful player trading, and elimination from the Champions League in the playoff round. In the most recent campaign, Rangers' playoff loss is estimated to have cost the club at least £12 million. At the next level of SP commercial and on-field success, Edinburgh's Hearts of Midlothian lost £4 million on £20 million in revenue in an accounting year where they did not have European competition (BBC Sport, 2024d). The SP's third highest attendance club, Hearts is set to book £4.5 million from UEFA competition in the 2024-2025 year.

For the SP however, the correlation of commercial prospects with competitive sporting performance may create a 'vicious circle' effect whereby commercial results influence ability to acquire talent, and in turn produce a desirable on-field product. Part of the issue may also exist with Financial Fair Play regulations, which look poorly upon "benefactor payments," whereby owners infuse their own capital to cover operating deficits. This common phenomena in Scotland and its Financial Fair Play consequences have been viewed by some as creating a poverty trap (Maclean et al., 2022), whereby commercial disparities between leagues and clubs are systemically entrenched.

The alternative path is for clubs to develop talent, profit in the transfer market, and reinvest the

proceeds. This has been Celtic's recent model. In the past decade it has also been a successful path for many other non-TEL clubs, most notably those in Portugal and The Netherlands (in particular Ajax, PSV Eindhoven, Benfica, Sporting Lisbon, and Porto). However, the financial picture still relies on Champions League revenues, which are only possible for a maximum of two Scottish clubs to obtain. As of the 2025-26 season, Scotland will no longer be guaranteed a Champions League group stage spot, meaning that qualifiers will likely have to advance through playoffs to the group stage (BBC Sport, 2024a). Still, as Hearts demonstrates, secondary and tertiary UEFA revenue from the Europa and Conference leagues can significantly bolster revenues for other SP clubs – and Scotland can still achieve up to five UEFA spots.

The SP's maintained cultural traditions

One differentiating aspect of the SP is in its valued and maintained cultural traditions. Amid the commercial transformation of football, the respondents highlight how the SP has maintained its historic culture:

"I probably say that it is more in touch with its roots than the [English] Premier League." – N1

Despite questionable financial and commercial

fortunes, Scottish football supporters are still quite engaged with, and highly regarded by, their local clubs. Respondents outlined that much of this engagement is based on local and family attachment:

“Our attendances are so high because we are still quite traditional in the sense of, if your mom and dad support the club, you support the club.” – N6

“You've got your raw, authentic fans, you know, that go to the games because they're, you know, the local supporters. And I think that's culturally still quite strong and Scotland whereas in order in other leagues around the world and with the top teams within those leagues, that's maybe lacking a little bit.” – N7

Although the lack of commercial flourish in the SP is well documented, the SP has had considerable success in maintaining its culture and connection with local supporters. This connection is even a point of pride and relative status, with N7 suggesting that in comparison, the TEL lack a cultural connection with their ‘raw’ supporters in the face of commercialisation. Indeed, multiple participants indicated that a lack of foreign ownership in the SP has been beneficial in maintaining cultural traditions and creating a

source of competitive advantage.

“That is one of the factors of Scottish Football that I really hope that they hold on to, I think, I think it's something that actually holds us a little bit ahead of England.” – N5

While maintained cultural traditions may have in some respects contributed to the financial and capital limitations of the SP, this heritage is the source of considerable pride in Scottish football. Although strong domestic and local support provide the SP a reliable revenue floor, more ambitious respondents saw the need for adaptation:

“If it's gonna mean that then the clubs are sustainable and financially viable to survive, you know, this may be a change that needs to be made.” – N4

Yet it may be that this deep cultural tradition is an untapped differentiating advantage that could provide Scottish football significant commercial opportunity.

Breaking the vicious commercial cycle

These findings can be largely understood through a resource dependency lens: SP clubs rely on a narrow set of domestic revenue streams and lack access to the diversified global resources that

underpin TEL growth. This dependency constrains strategic choice, creating a cycle of underinvestment and reduced competitiveness outlined in Pfeffer and Salancik's resource dependence approach (1978). At the same time, globalization pressures (Li et al., 2012) amplify these disparities, as media and sponsorship markets disproportionately reward leagues with established international audiences. For the SP, these forces may underpin a vicious commercial cycle.

If the SP needs to break this cycle of decline relative to its competitors without alienating core supporters that make the league a potentially sustainable, if limited, financial proposition, what is the model? While integration with the English league pyramid has been discussed for decades, there is seemingly little realistic prospect of it occurring. Likewise, investment in academy systems to produce cheap assets that can be sold on to the TEL is not unique to the Scottish context, although perhaps there is potential to more widely emulate what has been successful in The Netherlands and Portugal. Where Scottish football and its clubs have a unique selling proposition, however, may be in cultural traditions, which could be successfully marketed as a differentiated media and tourism product to a global market in search of authentic experiences. This 'third way' of sorts, whereby the traditional cultural product is central to media products aimed at foreign

markets, in turn creating global commercial and tourism demand, has been implemented by several non-TEL clubs.

Most successful on this path has debatably been Welsh club Wrexham. Here, the media drive was coordinated by an ownership group led by film stars Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, centred on a documentary series highlighting the deep community connection. The international attention generated by the series has led to sponsorships from global firms (including TikTok and United Airlines), and the club becoming a more significant North American broadcast draw than many EPL clubs (its games can now be viewed on ESPN). Indeed, in 2023, Wrexham played friendly games in the US against Manchester United and Chelsea, with organisers seeing the brand as a stronger attraction than far better known or accomplished TEL clubs. Wrexham's commercial opportunity has also led to players who could play in higher leagues choose to join Wrexham, and Wrexham become an tourism destination for international visitors who would likely otherwise never journey to Wales.

Welcome to Wrexham itself was inspired by *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, a Netflix series largely centred on the culture, fans, and competitive struggles of Sunderland AFC, which Yeoman (2022) described as a future model for tourism development. These football series have also been accompanied by similar documentary-driven

models in other sports, such as F1's *Drive to Survive*, which was credited with generating F1's current peak of commercial success (Wood & Burkhalter, 2023). Although other sports and series have attempted with varying results to mimic *Drive to Survive*, the larger Wrexham model of commercialisation based upon selling a cultural product of both unique place and fan connection would seem to be quite viable for many clubs in the SP beyond Celtic and Rangers. Indeed, Hearts has already understood some potential in their tourist market by developing a new club-themed hotel at Tynecastle Park in Edinburgh, already one of the world's great destinations. While much of the potential tourism market for European destinations has heard of, and has some perception of Edinburgh, most would be hard pressed to associate Hearts or Hibernian, or even the game of football, with the city.

This media-tourism path would build SP club branding much as a tourism destination would, with the advantage relative to most European clubs of providing English language content. Where *Welcome to Wrexham* and *Sunderland 'Til I Die* serve as escapism for largely foreign audiences, Scottish clubs already have most of the cultural components necessary for similar works in stadiums and locales that will debatably play better on screen. "Brand Scotland" is already a known and desired mass market heritage, historical, and media tourism commodity (Garrison & Wallace,

2021; Leith & Sim, 2020; Mackenzie & Gannon, 2019; Yeoman et al., 2005). The missing component, it would seem, is the right foreign investor(s) to create and promote the media product alongside any capital infusion. However, foreign investors may be deterred by the lack of upside seen with English or Welsh teams that could conceivably gain EPL promotion (as Sunderland has), even if there is a quicker potential opportunity to play against known brands and in European competition.

Alternatively, in the absence of a transformational owner, similar media products could be produced at a league level, with the SP aiming to create a *Drive to Survive*-style offering, where the co-mmmercial and competitive challenges of a cross-section of clubs could be featured. Soble and Lowes (2024) analysed narrative storytelling in the *Drive to Survive* context, finding that key plot types (including ascension/descension, adventure, rivalry, and sacrifice) fostered fan conversion. Either type of media product can utilize similar plot elements, and if executed successfully, might represent the most viable way forward in leveraging internal and differentiating strengths to break what might otherwise be continued stagnation or a vicious downward cycle relative to the EPL and TEL in the coming years.

3. Conclusion

This study has explored how the SP has adapted

to the sport's drive to deeper commercialisation, situating the Scottish case within broader theoretical and comparative contexts. The findings demonstrate how resource dependency on traditional revenue streams, coupled with limited international broadcasting demand, constrains strategic flexibility and reinforces competitive disparities. By highlighting both the challenges and potential adaptive pathways of the SP, the study contributes to ongoing debates on the commercialisation and sustainability of secondary European leagues.

This contributes to an overriding vicious cycle effect as the SP are unable to attract 'star players' from the TEL that hold commercial value, which in turn facilitate expanding access to new markets, sponsors, and revenue streams. Instead, the SP is still heavily reliant on traditional sources of income, primarily ticket sales and local business partnerships. The lack of global demand, foreign ownership, and commercial growth has structurally limited the SP's ability or drive to diversify revenue streams relative to the TEL, highlighting failings such as the Cinch sponsorship and SPL TV.

SP clubs continue to centre their business operations around the traditional supporter, who likely prefers the maintenance of sociocultural traditions when compared to what may be viewed as an overly commercial trajectory found in the TEL. Indeed, closer relation to fans and operating

a local business model has contributed to positive views surrounding the lack of commercial impact in Scottish football. This strong sense of maintained culture and tradition is believed to have been lost in the commercial flourish of the TEL as they have 'progressed' towards a 'profit-maximisation model' espoused by Rohde and Breuer (2018). These findings build upon the short-termism found by Robertson (2016) among Scottish clubs in research from almost a decade prior, as well as more general perceived resistance from supporters to the march of commercialisation (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2014).

Whereas existing literature has primarily focused on the financial and performance gaps between TEL and non-TEL leagues, this work proposes a "media-tourism" model that leverages authenticity and cultural assets as commercial strengths. For clubs, media-tourism initiatives such as documentaries, museum experiences, and destination branding provide viable alternatives to dependence on broadcast deals. While rooted in the Scottish case, these insights may extend to other secondary leagues grappling with similar structural constraints. By reconciling cultural authenticity with commercial innovation, the SP and its peers may yet chart a viable path in the global football economy.

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