



The role of salary cap, fan support, and club administration in football club performance

El rol del tope salarial, el apoyo de la afición y la administración del club en el rendimiento de los clubes de fútbol

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Abstract

Introduction. Football is a globally significant industry, yet clubs face diverse operational challenges that affect performance. While extensive research has focused on European leagues, evidence from emerging football markets, such as Ethiopia, remains limited.

Objective: This study investigates the effects of Salary Cap, fan support, and club administration on the performance of Ethiopian Premier League (EPL) clubs.

Method: A quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using reliability and validity tests, correlation, and regression analyses.

Results: Salary Cap ($r = -0.348, p < 0.001$) and club administration ($r = -0.626, p < 0.001$) had significant negative effects on club performance, whereas fan support showed no significant association ($r = 0.074, p > 0.05$). Regression analysis indicated that the three variables together explained 45.4% of the variance in performance, with Salary Cap ($\beta = -0.192, p < 0.001$) and club administration ($\beta = -0.290, p < 0.001$) identified as key predictors.

Discussion: The findings highlight that financial regulation and governance critically shape club success, while fan support alone does not significantly influence performance in the Ethiopian context.

Conclusion: Effective management of financial policies and club administration is essential for improving performance in emerging football leagues, offering actionable insights for strategic management and policy development.

Keywords

Club administration; fan support; football club performance; salary cap.

Resumen

Introducción: El fútbol es una industria de gran relevancia global, pero los clubes enfrentan diversos desafíos operativos que afectan su desempeño. Aunque se ha investigado ampliamente sobre las ligas europeas, la evidencia de mercados futbolísticos emergentes, como Etiopía, sigue siendo limitada.

Objetivo: Este estudio investiga los efectos del tope salarial, el apoyo de los aficionados y la administración del club sobre el desempeño de los clubes de la Premier League etíope (EPL). **Método:** Se empleó un diseño de investigación cuantitativo. Los datos se recopilaban mediante cuestionarios estructurados y se analizaron utilizando pruebas de confiabilidad y validez, correlación y análisis de regresión.

Resultados: El tope salarial ($r = -0,348, p < 0,001$) y la administración del club ($r = -0,626, p < 0,001$) tuvieron efectos negativos significativos sobre el desempeño, mientras que el apoyo de los aficionados no mostró una asociación significativa ($r = 0,074, p > 0,05$). El análisis de regresión indicó que las tres variables explicaron conjuntamente el 45,4 % de la varianza en el desempeño, con el tope salarial ($\beta = -0,192, p < 0,001$) y la administración del club ($\beta = -0,290, p < 0,001$) como predictores clave.

Discusión: Los hallazgos destacan que la regulación financiera y la gobernanza son determinantes críticos del éxito del club, mientras que el apoyo de los aficionados por sí solo no influye significativamente en el desempeño en el contexto etíope.

Conclusión: La gestión efectiva de las políticas financieras y la administración del club es esencial para mejorar el desempeño en ligas de fútbol emergentes, ofreciendo perspectivas prácticas para la gestión estratégica y el desarrollo de políticas.

Palabras clave

Administración del club; apoyo de los aficionados; rendimiento del club de fútbol; límite salarial.

Introduction

Football is the most globally popular sport and represents a multi-billion-dollar industry that integrates athletic competition with economic activity, social identity, and cultural influence (Miragaia et al., 2019). The performance of professional football clubs is shaped by multiple interacting factors, most notably financial resources, fan support, and the quality of club administration. These elements influence not only on-field results but also organizational stability and long-term sustainability (Zambom-Ferraresi et al., 2017; Lozano & Villa, 2023).

One of the most frequently examined determinants of club performance is player remuneration. Empirical studies conducted in major European leagues consistently report a strong association between wage expenditure and sporting success, suggesting that financial investment enables clubs to attract and retain high-quality talent (Llorca & Teste, 2015). For example, Yaldo and Shamir (2017) found a strong positive relationship between salary expenditure and league performance. However, this relationship is not universal. In leagues operating under financial regulation or budgetary constraints, such as Major League Soccer, salary caps may alter or weaken the association between wages and performance (Scarfe et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2023). These findings indicate that the role of player salaries heavily depends on contextual and administrative conditions.

Fan support represents another important dimension of football performance. Research shows that spectator presence can influence player motivation, referee decisions, and home-field advantage (Cross et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic provided strong evidence of this effect, with significant declines in home advantage observed in the absence of fans. Beyond psychological support, fans contribute economically through ticket sales, merchandise, and sponsorship appeal. However, the extent to which fan support translates into performance outcomes varies across leagues and depends on commercialization levels and organizational structures (Colella et al., 2023; Sarstedt et al., 2012).

Club administration constitutes the third critical factor shaping football performance. Effective administration includes strategic leadership, financial management, governance transparency, and operational efficiency. Well-governed clubs consistently outperform poorly managed ones in both sporting and financial terms (Getnet, Melkamu, & Mengistu, 2025, Silva & Carvalho, 2008; Hamil et al., 2021). Conversely, weak administrative systems, frequent leadership changes, and lack of accountability often undermine performance, particularly in emerging football markets (Ballor, 2006).

Although these factors have been extensively studied in European and other developed football contexts, empirical evidence from African leagues remains limited. The Ethiopian Premier League (EPL) operates under distinct economic, institutional, and organizational conditions, characterized by financial instability, developing governance structures, and evolving fan engagement models. The lack of context-specific research limits the applicability of existing theoretical models to Ethiopian football.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of salary cap, fan support, and club administration in football club performance within the Ethiopian Premier League. In addition, the study aims to develop a predictive equation that explains club performance based on these variables, thereby contributing empirical evidence from an under-researched football context.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of salary cap, fan support, and club administration in football club performance in the Ethiopian Premier League. Specifically, the study aims:

- To examine the role of player salaries in football club performance in the Ethiopian Premier League.
- To analyze the role of fan support in football club performance
- To assess the role of club administration in football club performance.
- To develop a predictive equation for football club performance based on salary cap, fan support, and club administration.

Hypotheses

H1: Higher Salary Cap has a positive effect on football club performance.

H2: Greater fan support positively affects football club performance.

H3: Effective club administration positively affects football club performance.

H4: Salary Cap, fan support, and club administration jointly have a significant effect on football club performance.

Method

Research design

This study adopts a positivist research paradigm, emphasizing objective reality that can be observed and quantified (Evans et al., 2021). A deductive approach underpins the research, utilizing psychometric testing to establish relationships between variables. A correlational design was chosen to investigate the relationships between key factors influencing football club performance, facilitating a comprehensive examination of how these variables interact within the context of the Ethiopian Premier League (Morse, 2020).

The study strictly followed the ethical principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration (2013 revision) and received formal ethical approval from Bahir Dar University's sport academy Research Ethics Review Committee (IRERC21-2025). Informed consent, both written and oral, was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Participants

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

		Frequency	Percentage
Age of the Participants	18–22	12	3.90
	23–27	125	40.71
	28–32	153	49.83
	33–38	17	5.53
Citizenship Status	Ethiopian	252	82.08
	Non-Ethiopian	55	17.91
Playing Experience in the Ethiopian Primer League	1-3 years	12	3.90
	4-6 years	72	23.45
	7-9 years	199	64.82
	<-10 years	24	7.81

The target population included 480 male first-team players from 16 Ethiopian Premier League clubs during the 2023/24 season, comprising 390 Ethiopian and 90 non-Ethiopian players. Using proportionate stratified sampling with simple random selection, 20 players per club were invited to participate, and 307 returned completed questionnaires (99.4% response rate). Most participants were aged 23–32 years (23–27: 40.71%; 28–32: 49.83%). The majority were Ethiopian nationals (82.08%), with 17.91% non-Ethiopian. Regarding EPL experience, most had 7–9 years (64.82%), followed by 4–6 years (23.45%), with few players reporting less than three or more than ten years of experience.

Instrumentation and Data Sources

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising 21 items adapted from Getnet, Melkamu, and Mengistu (2025), targeting players' payment, fan support, and club administration. These items were validated through expert review by panels of linguists, statisticians, management scholars, pedagogues, and sport professionals to ensure content validity, clarity, and cultural appropriateness. The questionnaire was translated into Amharic and back-translated to English by language experts to maintain linguistic consistency.

A pilot study involving 45 EPL players was conducted to assess instrument clarity and reliability. The finalized questionnaire includes three subscales (seven items each) rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Measurement of Club Performance

Club performance, the dependent variable, was operationalized using two objective quantitative indicators:

- Total league points scored during the 2023/24 season
- Final league ranking at the end of the season
- These metrics are widely recognized as valid measures of club success in football and allow for comparability with other studies.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted face-to-face between February 8 and 21, 2024, in a controlled hotel setting to facilitate respondent understanding and minimize errors.

Data Analysis

Data preprocessing included checks for reliability and normality. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the instrument exceeded 0.933, indicating excellent internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test confirmed normal data distribution ($p > 0.05$). Analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics. Exploratory factor analysis was used to confirm underlying factor structures. Pearson correlation coefficients assessed relationships among variables interpreted according to Hopkins et al. (2009) guidelines.

Multiple linear regression analysis examined the predictive power of players' payment, fan support, and club administration on club performance. The regression model was specified as

$$PSC = \alpha + \beta_1 (PSP) + \beta_2 (FS) + \beta_3 (CA) + \varepsilon$$

Where PSC = football club performance, PSP = players' salary payments, FS = fan support, CA = club administration, and ε is the error term. Significance was assessed at $p < 0.05$. Standardized beta coefficients, confidence intervals, and significance levels were examined to determine the unique contribution of each predictor.

Results

Table 2 presents the reliability and exploratory factor analysis of the 21 items used to assess the three independent variables. All constructs exhibited excellent internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .844 to .964. The KMO values were above the acceptable threshold of .60, indicating sampling adequacy for factor analysis. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant for all constructs ($p < .001$), confirming the appropriateness of factor analysis. Average communalities exceeded .74, and anti-image correlations were above .50, supporting construct validity and factorability of the items.

Table 2. Reliability and Exploratory Factor Analysis

No	Items	A	KMO	Bartlett's test of sphericity	Average communality	Anti-image correlations
1	Salary cap (SC)	.844	.706	.000	74.3	>.005
2	Fan support (FS)	.954	.842	.000	80.33	>.005
3	Club administration (CA)	.964	.712	.000	81.23	>.005

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha; KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin.

Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics for the independent variables. Fan support had the highest mean ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.28$), followed by club administration ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.62$), and Salary cap ($M =$

3.74, SD = 1.31). These results provide an initial indication of the perceived influence of each factor on soccer club success.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Items	N	M	SD
Salary cap (SC)	307	3.74	1.31
Fan Support (FS)	307	5.44	1.28
Club Administration (CA)	307	5.21	1.62

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among the variables. Club administration ($r = .626$, $p < .01$) and fan support ($r = .348$, $p < .01$) were positively and significantly correlated with soccer club performance. Players' payment showed a weak, non-significant correlation ($r = .074$, $p > .05$). These bivariate relationships offer initial insights into how the independent variables relate to club performance without controlling for confounding factors.

Table 4. Pearson Correlations between Variables

	PP	FS	CA	PSC
Salary cap (SC)	1			
Fan support (FS)	.520**	1		
Club administration (CA)	.199**	.527**	1	
Performance of soccer clubs (PSC)	.074	.348**	.626**	1

Note. $p < .01$ (2-tailed). PSC = Performance of Soccer Clubs

Table 5 summarizes the cumulative model predicting soccer club performance. The combined predictors explained 51.9% of the variance in performance ($R^2 = .519$, $p < .001$), indicating a strong model fit.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Model Summaries

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate	P
1	.720 ^a	.519	.509	3.03199	.001

a. Predictors: (Constant), PP, FS, CA

b. Dependent Variable: PSC

Table 6 shows the individual contributions of each predictor. Salary cap did not significantly predict club performance independently ($p = .194$). However, both fan support and club administration significantly predicted performance, with club administration showing the strongest effect ($R^2 = .392$, $p < .001$).

Table 6. Individual Regression Models

	Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	P
Salary cap (SC)	1	.074*	.006	.002	.194
Fan Support (FS)	2	.348*	.121	.118	.000
Club Administration (CA)	3	.626*	.392	.390	.000

Note. Each model includes only one predictor and the dependent variable (PSC).

Table 7 presents the standardized beta coefficients from the multiple regression analysis predicting soccer club performance. Notably, while both fan support and club administration demonstrated positive bivariate correlations with performance, they exhibited significant negative beta values in the multivariate model: fan support ($\beta = -.192$, $p = .001$) and club administration ($\beta = -.583$, $p = .001$). In contrast, Salary cap emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .290$, $p = .001$).

Table 7. Standardized Beta Coefficients from Multiple Regression

	β	T	P
Salary cap (SC)	.290	5.806	.001**
Fan Support (FS)	-.192	-3.324	.001**
Club Administration (CA)	-.583	-11.613	.001**

a. Dependent Variable: PSC



These discrepancies suggest the presence of suppression effects or potential multicollinearity, where the inclusion of additional predictors alters the observed direction of influence. To assess this, multicollinearity diagnostics were performed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. All VIF scores were below the commonly accepted threshold of 5.0, indicating that multicollinearity was not a substantial concern (Hair et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the reversal of the beta directions for fan support and club administration compared to their bivariate correlations underscores the complexity of multivariate analyses. These findings highlight the importance of interpreting regression models cautiously and considering the influence of co-variables. Future research is encouraged to explore potential mediators or moderators that may further clarify these relationships.

Discussion

This study examined the role of salary cap, fan support, and club administration in the performance of football clubs competing in the Ethiopian Premier League. In line with the reviewer's recommendation, the discussion is organized according to the degree of contribution of the independent variables.

The findings indicate that club administration represents the strongest predictor of football club performance. Although the regression analysis produced a negative beta coefficient, this result should not be interpreted as evidence that effective administration diminishes performance. Rather, it suggests that administrative inefficiencies exert a substantial negative influence when considered alongside other factors. This outcome aligns with governance-focused research emphasizing that weak leadership, lack of transparency, and poor strategic planning undermine on-field performance (Hamil et al., 2021; Morrow, 2021). In emerging football contexts such as Ethiopia, administrative weaknesses may outweigh financial and social advantages, highlighting the central role of governance quality.

Player salaries also demonstrated a significant positive effect on club performance, supporting existing literature that identifies financial investment as a key driver of competitiveness (Klein et al., 2023). Competitive wages enable clubs to attract and retain skilled players, which contributes to improved match outcomes. However, the contrasting bivariate and multivariate results suggest that salary effectiveness depends on complementary factors such as performance-based incentives, contractual accountability, and administrative oversight. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that financial investment alone is insufficient to guarantee success (Andreff & Scelles, 2022).

Fan support, while positively correlated with club performance at the bivariate level, exhibited a weaker and negative effect in the regression model. This result may reflect the Ethiopian football context, where limited commercialization and low purchasing power restrict the financial contribution of fans. Although fan enthusiasm can provide psychological motivation, its impact on performance may remain limited without structured revenue generation and engagement strategies. Similar findings have been reported in lower-income leagues where fan support is not effectively monetized (Meier, 2024; Martín-Magdalena et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings suggest that football club performance in the Ethiopian Premier League is shaped primarily by organizational and administrative capacity, followed by financial investment, with fan support playing a secondary role. This hierarchy differs from patterns commonly observed in highly commercialized leagues, reinforcing the importance of contextualized analysis.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the need for policymakers, federations, and club executives to prioritize governance reform and administrative capacity building. Strengthening leadership structures, enforcing licensing requirements, and professionalizing management practices are likely to yield significant performance improvements. Additionally, aligning salary structures with accountability mechanisms and developing sustainable fan engagement models could enhance long-term competitiveness.

Conclusions

This study sought to examine the influence of players' wages, fan support, and club administration on the performance of football clubs in the Ethiopian Premier League (EPL). The findings provide valuable insight into the relative contributions of these three key factors and advance our understanding of professional football performance within an emerging football context.

The results confirmed that all three variables have a statistically significant relationship with club performance. Among them, club administration emerged as the strongest predictor, underscoring the central role of organizational leadership, governance, and institutional effectiveness in shaping outcomes on the field. While the negative beta coefficient may initially appear contradictory, it likely reflects the detrimental effects of poor administration, highlighting that inadequate management structures can undermine even well-funded or supported clubs. These findings support the conclusion that strategic leadership and transparent management are essential to sustainable performance in professional football.

Player compensation also showed a positive and significant effect, reinforcing the idea that competitive salaries can attract and retain skilled talent. However, the relationship is not purely linear; as previous literature suggests, financial investment alone is insufficient without complementary systems such as performance-based incentives, athlete development programs, and cohesive team dynamics.

Fan support, while statistically significant, exhibited the weakest predictive power in the regression model. The unexpected negative coefficient may be explained by economic constraints, low levels of commercial engagement, or inconsistent fan attendance. In the Ethiopian context where football commercialization is still developing fan engagement might not yet exert the motivational or financial leverage seen in more mature leagues. This suggests that improving fan participation and building stronger community ties may represent untapped potential for clubs.

Importantly, this study contributes to the limited empirical literature on African football by offering data driven insights specific to Ethiopia. It demonstrates that club performance is multifactorial and contingent upon the interplay between financial investment, community support, and, most critically, administrative competence.

From a practical standpoint, these results suggest that stakeholders club executives, federations, and policymakers should prioritize reforms in club governance and administration. Strengthening organizational capacity, enforcing licensing requirements, and investing in leadership development are likely to yield substantial performance dividends. Furthermore, balancing salary structures with accountability, and adopting strategic fan engagement models, could enhance both competitiveness and sustainability.

Future research should explore mediating and moderating variables such as coaching quality, infrastructure, or institutional cultura that may clarify the causal pathways behind these associations. Longitudinal and comparative studies across other African or emerging football leagues could further contextualize these findings and inform evidence-based interventions for football development.

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