

**ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE VIEWERSHIP AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS ON LOCAL LEAGUE ATTENDANCE: A
SURVEY OF PORT HARCOURT RESIDENTS**

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ABSTRACT: This study examines Port Harcourt city viewership of the English Premier League and its implications on the local league attendance in Nigeria. The objectives were to: identify the percentage of those who prefer to watch the English Premier League compared to those who watch the Nigeria Premier League; find out if they derive certain benefits by watching the EPL; ascertain the implications of the EPL on viewership of local league football. The selective exposure theory was selected for this work. The Survey research method was adopted for this investigation while the population of the study was 3,793,780. The survey method was employed, with 400 questionnaires distributed and 380 successfully filled retrieved from the respondents. The weighted mean score and simple percentage were used for data presentation. Based on the objectives, this paper was able to establish that: Port Harcourt city residents prefer the EPL to the NPL; Nigerians derive certain benefits by watching the EPL; the EPL has an effect on the match attendance of the local league matches. Based on the findings, the following recommendations among others were suggested: There should be incentives for media broadcasters willing to transmit local league matches live.

Keywords: English Premier League (EPL), Nigerian Professional Football League (NPFL), Sports Viewership, Local League Attendance, Selective Exposure Theory

INTRODUCTION

The English Premier League is a very popular league that operates on a system of promotion and relegation within a tournament season. The league has been dominant among football fans in Nigeria since the seventies. It originated as a source of betting through pool agencies and later gained popularity due to the inroads made by notable African footballers, such as Salako, Owubokiri, Kanu Nwankwo, and Jay-Jay Okocha (Ademowo, n.d.).

During this period, Nigeria had one of the most vibrant and strongest football leagues in Africa, attracting players outside the shores of the country. The local league enjoyed widespread followership, prompting the league management to invest heavily in the league owing to the pressure from excited spectators and the immense popularity of Nigeria's league (Onwudinor, 2024).

Today, the Nigerian Football League seems to have been overshadowed by the English Premier League (subsequently referred to as the EPL), and to some extent, the Spanish La Liga and Serie A. However, the one enjoying the largest followership is the English Premier League (Oke, 2021). From Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Onitsha, and to the oil-rich city of Port Harcourt, Nigerians are in love with the Premiership. It is no surprise that every weekend, millions of EPL fans in Nigeria stay glued to their television sets to watch their respective clubs play. Those who cannot afford to own a decoder set would rather trot to the viewing centre closest to them to watch their respective club play (Bobmanuel, Umunnah, & Ochia, 2023).

Consequently, while the number of supporters for respective clubs in the EPL in Nigeria is increasing day by day, the number of spectators for the local league is in decline. According to Walker (2007), “about 30,000 Nigerians took advantage of a rare chance to watch the friendly match between Manchester United and Portsmouth clubs in the capital, Abuja. The attendance was higher than for many games between local teams, and while the popularity of the Premier League grows in Nigeria, it seems to be at the expense of the domestic league” (p.10)

In a follow-up report, Tony Collins, cited by Walker (2007), pointed out that “when you look at the stadiums, you will find out that the stands are virtually empty, while the bars and the points that have satellite TV are full. People will pay to watch the Premier League on TV but not to watch Nigerian football live” (p.13)

This does not portray a good image for the local league. The implications of all these are that the amount that would have been generated from spectators who come to watch the local clubs play is rather spent watching the EPL. This means poor revenue generation, which would have been used to manage, maintain sports (football) facilities, and take care of the welfare of the Nigerian league players. Therefore, it is no surprise that many homegrown players prefer to play abroad where they will be paid well.

Unfortunately, the Nigerian market is gradually and steadily turning into a cash cow for the EPL. In 2007, the indigenous cable television company HiTV spent millions of dollars in a bold move to secure exclusive rights to broadcast Premier League matches from the South African Pay-TV giant, DSTV. The company relied on the Premier League rights, which elevated its sports channel to premium status. They won the broadcasting right over DSTV with an impressive offer of \$130 million, surpassing DSTV’s \$100 million bid (Raji, 2013).

The above revelation justifies how lucrative the Nigerian market has become for the EPL. “The craze for the English Premier League has gone to the extent that a duel/derby match between Arsenal and Manchester United is likely to command more viewership than a match involving the Super Eagles and the Ghana Black Stars” (Tunji, 2007).

The popularity of this league has risen to the extent that today we read of street fights between fans of opposition clubs, people dying of heart attack after betting heavily on their favourite clubs, stabbing in the head and arm, all in the name of blind support for one English club or the other (Archibong & Ogande, 2023). The future, according to sports observers, is bleak for Nigerian football, with all its brightest stars being drawn to Europe, while its own clubs wither and die,

watched by fewer and fewer people. It is therefore the purview of this study to look at the viewership of the English Premier League and its implications on the local league attendance in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, Nigeria has witnessed an upsurge in the number of people who watch the English Premier League (EPL). Unfortunately, while the EPL rating is increasing in Nigeria, that of the Nigerian League is decreasing. Lending his voice to this, Omake (2013) observed that:

Many would rather spend their weekends in tight corners in a jam-packed hall with poor ventilation, watching the EPL, than go watch the Nigeria Premier League (NPL) at a nearby stadium. Soccer fans often times do not know the names of the clubs in the NPL, not even the league leaders. Nevertheless, they would name as many players in the EPL (p.3)

Surprisingly, Fuludu, cited by Orkula (2011), revealed that “playing in the Nigerian League in the 80s was enjoyable. People came to the stadium to watch us. It was a big deal and people came to the stadium to watch matches” (para 12). Today, NPL has suffered a demise of colours. Fans have kept away from the stadiums, and a coterie of them can now be found Saturday evening watching European League Football in a television viewing centre. (Adewuyi, 2011).

Based on this revelation, the popularity of the EPL in Nigeria is no longer in doubt. However, the question seeking an answer is: how have the residents of Port Harcourt city evaluated the impact of the EPL on viewership of local league attendance in Nigeria? This forms the thrust of this study.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the percentage of those who prefer to watch the English Premier League compared to those who watch the Nigeria Premier League.
2. Find out if they derive certain benefits by watching the EPL
3. Ascertain the implications of the EPL on viewership of local league attendance.

Research Questions

1. To what extent is the English Premier League popular among football fans in Nigeria in comparison to the Nigeria Premier League?
2. Do Nigerians derive certain benefits by watching the English Premier League?
3. What are the implications of EPL on the viewership of local league attendance?

Theoretical Framework

Selective Exposure Theory

The selective exposure theory is a psychological concept that attempts to explain individuals' tendency to align with media content that conforms to their existing beliefs and attitudes. According to the theory, people tend to expose themselves to those media messages that conform or validate their existing ideas, values, beliefs (Mercadal, 2025). It is the "process by which people expose themselves to or attend to only those messages consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs" (Baran, 2004, p.435).

It occurs when people tend to expose themselves selectively only to communications that are in general accordance with their established convictions and avoid communications that seem to challenge their beliefs. (Seema, 2013:166). "People tend to select specific aspects of exposed information that they incorporate into their mindset. These selections are made based on their perspectives, beliefs (Sullivan, 2009, p.465).

From this explanation, we can say that the selective exposure theory simply states that the audience tends to expose themselves to those messages that are in line with their pre-existing values and beliefs. According to Nwabueze (2014), "it is premised on the notion that mass communications do not directly influence people but reinforce people's predispositions as a result of which they decide what media contents to select, perceive, and retain" (page 49)

The theory was first introduced by Joseph Klappner in 1960. According to him, mass communication does not directly influence people, but just reinforces people's predisposition. Mass communications play a role as a mediator in persuasive communication (Klappner, 1960). He went on to prescribe five mediating factors and conditions that affect people. They are:

- Predispositions and the related processes of selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention.
- Interpersonal dissemination of the content of communication.
- The exercise of opinion leadership.
- The nature of mass media in a free enterprise society.

Apart from these mediating factors/conditions, he also listed three basic concepts. They are:

- **Selective exposure:** It is the process by which people expose themselves to those messages consistent with their pre-existing beliefs. According to Ogbuoshi (2004), "it is only natural that people seek out information that caters to their own interests, confirms their beliefs, and boosts their own ego, while avoiding those that are contrary to their own predisposition and attack their self-image (page 355).
- **Selective Perception:** "People do not deliberately perceive or accept unsympathetic communication, i.e., messages that are contrary to their perceptions and beliefs, i.e., messages that are contrary to their perceptions and beliefs". (Nwabueze, 2014; p. 49).

- **Selective retention:** It simply assumes that people retain those messages that are consistent with their pre-existing beliefs. Television viewers, according to Baran (2004), remember much more detail from the convention broadcasts of the political party to which they are philosophically closer than they do the broadcasts of competing parties (p. 435).

This theory is relevant to understanding Port Harcourt city's viewership of the English Premier League and its implications on the viewership of the local league in Nigeria. It explains why the audience actively seeks media content or messages that conform with their interest, beliefs, and gratification while avoiding those that do not appeal to them. In this case, many lovers of football in Port Harcourt tend to align with the EPL as more appealing, organised, and entertaining owing to its global hype and high-quality broadcasting alongside star players, which aligns with their aspirations and social identity.

The English Premier League: History and Reasons for its Success

What we now know today as the English Premier League (EPL) started in the year 1888 (known then as the Football League). It is an English professional league for association football clubs and it is the oldest such competition in the world. Contested by 20 clubs, it operates on a system of promotion and relegation with the Football League. It is a corporation in which the 20-member club acts as shareholders. Here, they act as shareholders because all the revenue generated from league sponsors and the issuance of TV rights to broadcasters to cover the events is collectively bargained for and shared among them (Archibong & Ogande, 2023).

It was marred by one controversy or the other in the late 80s. The stadia were crumbling, supporters endured poor facilities, hooliganism was rife, and English clubs were banned from European competition for five years following the Heysel stadium disaster and the Hillsborough disaster, which resulted in the death of many. The Football League division that had been the top level of English soccer since 1988 was well behind leagues like Italy's Serie A and Spain's La Liga in attendance and revenue, and several top English players had moved abroad (Mullen, 2025).

As a measure to curtail and prevent the recurrence of such incidents in the future, a panel was set up with Lord Taylor of Gosforth appointed as its head. The panel was charged with the responsibility of investigating and making necessary recommendations on the cause and ways to prevent such ugly incidents from repeating themselves. Part of the recommendations by the Taylor-led panel was that all major stadia should be converted to an all-seater model, and that all ticketed spectators should have seats, as opposed to some or all being obliged to stand.

With these recommendations, the Football League in England introduced regulations compelling clubs in the highest divisions to abide by these recommendations by August 1994. As a result of this, most clubs refurbished their stadia while others sought completely new stadia.

However, in 1992, the First Division clubs resigned from the Football League to take advantage of a lucrative television rights deal. Thus, on May 27, 1992, the Premier League as we know it today was formed. This led to the break-up of the 104-year-old Football League that had operated

until then with four divisions; the Premier League would operate with a single division (Murray, 2024).

Today, the English Premier League is contested by 20 clubs, which operate on a system of promotion and relegation. The season runs from August to May, with teams playing 38 matches each, totalling 380 matches in the season. Most games are played in the afternoons, Saturdays, and Sundays, and the other games are played during weekdays in the evenings.

The Nigeria Premier League: History and Factors Responsible for its Unpopularity

Football is one of the most effective instruments for social empowerment and integration, mobilization, and transformation of the socio-economic system for national development. It is an important tool for 'social mobilization, harmony and national integration, provides entertainment, enhances our international image, creates employment opportunities, enhances education, and promotes tourism and culture (Efebeh, 2020).

The NPL is the highest level of domestic football in Nigeria. The league was founded in 1972 with six teams. On Saturday, 12 May 1990, at the Onikan Stadium, Lagos, the league was christened the 'Professional League' with a goal to modernize the game and make clubs self-sufficient. The Premier League is managed by the Nigerian Professional League Board (Soccernowng, n.d).

Media Coverage of the EPL and Its Implications on Viewership of Local Leagues in Nigeria

Viewership is a term used to refer to a television viewer who watches a particular program, channel, or streaming service, serving as an essential benchmark for measuring audience engagement and popularity. In Nigeria, football viewership manifests in several ways: from fans attending NPFL matches in stadiums, to groups watching games in viewing centres, to millions following live broadcasts and highlights of international competitions. However, media globalisation has significantly reshaped these viewing habits, with the English Premier League (EPL) now commanding far greater attention than Nigeria's own domestic league (Onyebueke, 2019).

The English Premier League has become the most widely consumed football league globally, due in large part to its sophisticated media strategies. In Nigeria, where football has long been a central part of cultural life, the EPL dominates the sporting landscape through extensive television coverage, digital streaming, and constant promotion on social media. Digital broadcasters such as SuperSport, alongside international media outlets, transmit live matches, pre-game and post analysis directly into Nigerian homes. This unrivalled visibility has redefined football consumption in the country, while at the same time marginalizing the Nigeria Professional Football League (NPFL) (Oladipo, 2022).

One major consequence of EPL coverage is the sharp decline in live attendance at NPFL matches. In earlier decades, Nigerian football stadiums were vibrant hubs filled with supporters cheering on clubs like Enyimba, Shooting Stars, or Kano Pillars. Today, however, with the convenience of high-quality EPL broadcasts, many fans choose to watch international matches instead of attending

local games. The superior production values, commentary, and storytelling surrounding the EPL reduce the incentive to watch NPFL fixtures, leaving local stadiums underpopulated and weakening the once-festive atmosphere of domestic football (Eludini, 2024).

The overwhelming media presence of the EPL has also reshaped fan loyalty and identity. Nigerian audiences are constantly exposed to the stories of English clubs, their rivalries, and their star players, making them household names across the country. Fans proudly wear jerseys of Manchester United, Arsenal, or Chelsea, while local clubs remain relatively unknown outside their immediate communities. This lack of visibility undermines the NPFL, as emotional investment and cultural pride shift from domestic teams to international clubs thousands of miles away.

The financial consequences of this trend are equally significant. Because Nigerian audiences overwhelmingly follow EPL matches, advertisers and sponsors concentrate their investments on international football, where they are assured of higher visibility and engagement. Media houses, too, allocate more airtime to EPL content, further sidelining the NPFL. This deprives Nigerian clubs of much-needed revenue, limiting their ability to upgrade facilities, attract sponsors, or professionalize their operations. The result is a widening gap between the media spectacle of the EPL and the struggling domestic league.

Cultural implications also arise from EPL-dominated media coverage. Nigerian youths increasingly idolize foreign stars, such as Mohamed Salah, Kevin De Bruyne, or Marcus Rashford, while struggling to identify top scorers or standout players in the NPFL. This shift in role models reduces the visibility and recognition of homegrown talent, weakening their influence as community icons and reducing the cultural pride once attached to domestic football. Over time, this imbalance risks eroding Nigeria's football identity, as global superstars overshadow local heroes.

The marginalization of the NPFL in the media also highlights the absence of compelling narratives around local football. The EPL thrives not only on live match coverage but also on the stories told around clubs, managers, and players. Documentaries, interviews, and feature programs ensure that fans remain engaged beyond match days. By contrast, NPFL players and teams rarely receive such coverage, making it difficult to build strong identities and fan bases. Without consistent storytelling, the domestic league struggles to maintain relevance in the face of global competition.

Despite these setbacks, EPL media dominance offers opportunities and lessons for the NPFL. The immense popularity of English football in Nigeria demonstrates the depth of passion for the sport. If NPFL management can improve broadcasting quality, secure reliable airtime, and encourage local clubs and players more effectively, they may redirect some of this enthusiasm back to domestic football. Partnerships between the NPFL, local broadcasters, and international media firms could raise production standards, while consistent storytelling about players and rivalries could help build stronger fan engagement (Eludini, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the survey method in obtaining data, while a questionnaire was an instrument for data collection. The population comprises residents of Port Harcourt city. According to the 2006 Nigerian census, which was conducted by the National Population Commission, Port Harcourt has a population of 1,382,592. The projected population, therefore, is 3,793,780. Based on this population size, a sample size of four hundred (400) was obtained using Taro Yamane's formula out of which 380 was successfully filled and returned. The purposive sampling technique was adopted in administering questionnaire to the residents of Port Harcourt city. The respondents were selected on the condition that they are football lovers and have adequate knowledge of the English Premier League and as well as the Nigeria Premier League. The data obtained were analysed using the Weighted Mean Score and simple percentage. The scores 5-1 are assigned points with strongly agree as 5 points, agree as 4 points, undecided 3 points, disagree 2 points and strongly disagree 1 point. This was instrumental in determining whether the responses from the respondents were positive, negative or undecided. It further stated that based on the above any responses that falls on 3.0 are classified as undecided, below 3.0 negative and above 3.0 positive after weighting and tabulation

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Respondents who watch the EPL

Options	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	289	76
No	91	24
Total	380	100

Table 1 shows that the majority of the respondents prefer to watch the EPL. This is justified by the percentage score of 76%.

Table 2: Frequency at which the Respondents watch the EPL

Options	Respondents	Percentage
Weekly	240	63
Bi-Weekly	59	16
Monthly	8	2
Occasionally	73	19
TOTAL	380	100

Table 2 shows that majority of the respondents (63%) watch EPL weekly.

Table 3: Viewership of EPL and Its Benefit

Item	Nature of Response	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD 1	Total	N	WMS	Decision
8	Viewers derive certain benefits by watching the EPL	875	540	81	36	25	1557	380	4.1	Affirm

In Table 3, the outcome indicates that viewers derive certain benefits by watching the EPL. This is justified by the weighted mean score of 4.1 which is positive.

Table 4: Respondents who watch the NPL

Options	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	107	28
No	273	72
Total	380	100

Table 4 shows that majority (72%) of the respondents do not watch NPL.

Table 5: Disposition of Nigerians towards the NPL

Item	Nature of Response	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD 1	Total	N	WMS	Decision
9	Certain factors discourage Nigerians from watching the NPL	625	296	123	28	19	1091	380	3.9	Affirm

Table 5 shows that certain factors discourage Nigerians from watching the NPL. This is justified by the weighted mean score of 3.9, which is positive.

Table 6: Factors that discourage Nigerians from watching the NPL

Options	Respondents	Percentage
Schedule of NPL games is the same time as the EPL	71	19
Poor management of the NPL	128	34
Poor officiating of the local league matches	77	20
Match fixing	50	13
Non-attractiveness compared to other leagues.	54	14
Total	380	100

Table 6 shows that the majority of the respondents (36%) were of the opinion that the non-attractiveness of the game compared to other leagues is responsible for their apathy towards the NPL.

Table 7: Viewership of EPL and Match Attendance

Item	Nature of Response	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD 1	Total	N	WMS	Decision
12	Viewership of the EPL has effects on the match attendance of the local league	695	536	87	116	20	1454	380	3.8	Affirm

In Table 7, the weighted mean score was 3.8, which is positive. This shows that the EPL has an effect on the match attendance of the local league.

Table 8: Disposition of Nigerians on Measures to Attract Spectators

Item	Nature of Response	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD 1	Total	N	WMS	Decision
12	Live coverage of local matches	800	312	68	20	3	1203	273	4.4	Affirm
13	Security should be provided	950	308	-	-	6	1264	273	4.6	Affirm
14	Good officiating of local matches	900	344	21	-	-	1265	273	4.6	Affirm
15	Good standard sport facilities	880	388	-	-	-	1268	273	4.6	Affirm
16	Quality of play/game	845	80	120	8	40	1093	273	4.0	Affirm

In Table 8, the weighted mean score for items 12,13,14,15, and 16 was positive. This indicates that all measures listed were necessary to encourage audience attendance at the local league matches.

Table 9: Viewership of EPL and Its Implications on Football Viewership in Nigeria

Item	Nature of Response	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD 1	Total	N	WMS	Decision
19	Viewership of the EPL has a positive effect on football development in Nigeria.	310	160	258	232	76	1036	380	2.7	Negative
20	Viewership of the EPL has a negative effect on football development in Nigeria.	395	432	168	242	16	1253	380	3.2	Affirm

Table 9 of the study documents the results of research question four, which sought to find out whether the viewership of the EPL has any implications for the viewership of the local league in Nigeria. The weighted mean score for item 19 was 2.7, indicating a negative value. This suggests that the EPL has no positive impact on football development in Nigeria. In contrast, the weighted mean score of item 20 was 3.2, which is positive. This also indicates that the EPL has a negative impact on the viewership of local leagues in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In research question one, the question was to what extent is the EPL popular among the football fans in Nigeria in comparison to the NPL?" The data collated from the survey showed that Port Harcourt city residents prefer the EPL to the NPL. Table 1 shows that 76% of the respondents watch the EPL. This is in contrast with Table 4, where only 28% of the respondents watch the NPL. This data justifies the assertion by Omake (2013) that many would rather spend their weekends in tight corners in a jam-packed hall with poor ventilation, watching the English Premier League (EPL).

Meanwhile, research question two was on whether viewers derive certain benefits from watching the EPL. The data collated shows that Nigerians derive certain benefits by watching the EPL. This is affirmed by the weighted mean score of Table 2, which was positive. The above finding justifies Archibong and Ogande's (2023) assertion that every weekend, especially during football season and some weekdays, several football viewing centres get congested and filled to capacity as football supporters flock in their hundreds to go and watch their favourite clubs slug it out on the pitch.

On the other hand, research question three investigated whether the EPL has any implications for match attendance in local league matches. The results collected show that the EPL has an effect on the match attendance of the local league matches. This is justified by the weighted mean score of item 12 of Table 7, which was positive. The finding is a reaffirmation of the observation by Walker (2008) that "about 30,000 Nigerians took advantage of a rare chance to see their football heroes in action on Sunday, as Manchester United beat Portsmouth 2-1 in a friendly in the capital, Abuja. The attendance was higher than for many games between local teams, and while the popularity of the Premier League grows in Nigeria, it seems to be at the expense of the domestic league" (para 1). Lending his voice to this finding, Olufemi (2012), observed that "For a high-profile match, less than 1000 fans watch and most of them do not buy a ticket". (para 8)

Conclusion

Nigeria, no doubt, is a nation with huge supporters of the English Premier League. However, this massive admiration for the EPL has turned out to be at the expense of the Nigerian League and football development in Nigeria. This is contained in one of the findings of this study, which showed that viewership of the EPL by Nigerians has negative implications for football development in Nigeria. Therefore, to address these challenges, the government should take significant efforts, such as those recommended by the researcher, to tackle them.

Recommendations

The football industry in Nigeria, no doubt, is currently undergoing some major challenges. This is justified by one of the findings of this study, which shows that only 28% of the respondents prefer to watch the Nigeria Premier League. This is not good for Nigeria's image. Therefore, to address these problems, the researcher posits the following solutions. They include:

1. There should be incentives for media broadcasters willing to transmit local league matches live.
2. Provision of good sports facilities and proper management of such facilities. The latter is necessary to ensure effective use and maintenance of such facilities.
3. The Nigeria Premier League (NPL) should be privatized and monitored by the government to ensure transparency and accountability. This will go a long way in ensuring that the NPL is effectively and efficiently managed.
4. There should be a joint government/private partnership to promote and encourage grassroots football development, together with inter-school football competition for easy identification and promotion of local talent.
5. Safety of the spectators and referees should be ensured to encourage Nigerians to watch local league matches and, at the same time, instil confidence and trust in the games.

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