

## **Gender Perspective to Assessing Football Fandom Participation, Team Identification and Socialization Factors among Undergraduate Students of Universities in Enugu State**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined football fandom participation, team identification and socialisation factors among undergraduate students of two universities in Enugu State. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey of 600 students selected through simple random sampling technique in multi-stages. Three objectives and three hypotheses guided the study. Sports Fandom Questionnaire, Sport Spectator Identification Scale and a structured questionnaire were used for data collection. Data analyses were performed with IBM-SPSS application, version 23, using frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation statistics. Chi square and independent sample t-test were used to test the hypotheses. The study found that many of the respondents were fans of football clubs mostly in favour of the European league. A greater proportion of females (61.5%) than males (59.8%) identified as football fans. However, male fans showed higher levels of fandom participation, but did not differ much in the level team identification than female fans. Club performance, and personal admiration of players were the major factors motivating students to become football fans. Football fandom therefore is a popular culture and an integral part of young people's lives. It is considered an important leisure activity, plays a crucial role in the attainment of social identity and offers strong basis for digital connection with peers around the world.

**Keywords:** Football fandom; Team identification; Socialisation factors; Undergraduate students; Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Football is one of the most popular games all over the world. The Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) estimated that there are approximately 250 million football players and over 1.3 billion people who identify with football in various ways (Bernard et al., 2018). Football identification does not only involve

being a player in national or international teams, but could also involve being an individual football fan or part of a fan community known as football fandom (Onwumechili & Akindes, 2014).

Football fandom refers to the group of people who identify as fans and passionately devote themselves to a particular football team to the degree

that they feel the team belongs to them (Givi & Turkmani, 2018). Porat (2010) stated that football fans have high regard for the game of football such that they could relate personally with the losses and victories of their preferred teams. They are willing to spend a significant portion of their daily time and energy with activities involved in football experiencing a wide range of the pleasant and painful emotions evoked by football matches (Silva & Casas, 2017). Rationis (2020) opined that true fans identify with their favourite teams by living the experiences of football matches, cooperate with other fan members and participate in club rituals.

Identifying various factors that could attract fans towards a particular team or club, Agbonna, Nnajieta and Anyakoha (2016) named brilliant performance of the club manager or captain, extraordinary goal scoring skills of the players, and the personality of a particular manager or player as key. In their study, Melnick and Wann (2011) found that friends, parents, and schools were the major factors influencing fan socialisation. As further observed by Parry, Jones and Wann (2014a), family members', especially fathers' involvement in fan activities, was the major socialisation factor. Lloyd Slogan identified six motivating reasons for participating in fandom, namely a sense of belonging by identifying with a team, leisure or break from routine, stimulation, therapeutic relief from tension and aggression, entertainment and vicarious achievement (Dogari, Apuke, & Idi, 2018; Onyebueke, 2015).

Football fandom manifests in specific behaviours that is beyond being an ordinary spectator. Football fans actively engage various available means to

participate in the activities of their favourite clubs or teams. They engage with other fans in getting up to date information on their team and specific players. Rationis (2019) explained that the process is like apprenticeship involving years of instruction, practice of dedication and of demonstrating one's knowledge of team statistics among other fans. According to Theodorakis, Al-emadi and Wann (2017), being a fan involves attending live football events, watching football matches on television, listening to football matches and programmes on the radio, following football events on the internet, discussing football via social media, and discussing football with friends and relatives. Other behaviours include buying items representing one's favourite football club, organising and participating in a special day celebration of the club (Adegoke, 2017). Absten (2011) observed that individuals who identify highly with a team would likely attend more matches, pay for more tickets, and spend more money on club branded items and remain loyal irrespective of the team's performance than those with low identification. Football fandom is generally a life-long venture undertaken by people during the youthful years and continues well into old age (Porat, 2010).

Football has been recognised as a game that unites diverse people, providing them with a common ground for interaction, shared identity and a feeling of camaraderie (Rahmati et al., 2014). This is mostly evident among fans who identify and support a particular team of players. A report of various studies in U.K by COPA90 Media (2018) showed that football fandom has undergone revolution in recent times

due to the proliferation of social media platforms, producing “a new generation of fans who are relating to and changing the game of football in many new ways”. These youths mostly between 16-24 years of age, have more access than the previous generations to current activities of football clubs across geographical boundaries. Watching live football matches through You tube, and discussing football matters via Facebook, twitter and other social media have replaced much of live attendance to football stadia or the traditional television broadcast among youths (COPA90 Media, 2018). This digital revolution in football spectatorship, has facilitated more convenient participation in football related matters and consequently has made fandom a crucial part of growing up among youths in the twenty first century.

Scientific enquiries into the patterns and dynamics of football fandom among youths often adopts the social identity theory developed by Tajfel and his colleagues in the 1970s. The theory espouses that individuals form their self-concept and identity from the expectations of the groups they belong to, thus providing people with connectedness to in-groups while differentiating them from out-groups (Goodlad, 2018). According to the theory, individuals’ attachment to a group especially a successful one, boosts their self-esteem and helps them sustain their social identity (Leaper, 2011). In the process of football identification, individual fans develop strong emotional ties with other fans of their favoured team, forming what is similar to ethnic or religious groups. The achievement of the team becomes their personal achievement and what Slogan

Lloyd termed vicarious achievement; and the loss of their team is also considered their personal loss (Dogari et al., 2018). This has led to the two popular theories of emotional coping mechanisms known as BIRGing and CORFing. BIRGing refers to basking in reflected glory in which fans enhance their ego by transferring the success of their favourite team to themselves; CORFing (cutting of reflected failure) on the other hand is an ego protection strategy whereby fans dissociates themselves from the losses of their clubs (Dwyer et al., 2016). Studies reveal that fans that identify more strongly with their teams were likely to appropriate the victories of their favourite team, while less identified fans were more likely to dissociate from their teams’ poor performances (Ashlock, 2012). However, highly identified fans could also CORF by blaming their team’s loss on outside factors such as referee bias, and administrative loopholes instead of players’ poor performance. Ashlock (2012) referred to this mechanism as quasi BIRGing. It is not yet certain if there is gender disparity in the ego enhancement or ego protection function of football fandom among youths.

Until recently, the game of football had been widely a male-dominated game, both in participation as players and as fans. However, the demographics in which men were more frequently involved in fandom is rapidly changing (Wolensky, 2018). Chemi (2014) similarly observed a growing trend of women fans of the U.S national football league. The Nigerian population is not left out in the trend. With the influx of digital communication devices, viewing football activities at the comfort of one’s home instead of stadium and

commercial viewing centres has become more favourable. This has increased the opportunity for more women to actively participate in soccer fandom (Tade, 2020). Various studies observed that males had significantly higher levels of fandom and team identification than females (Theodorakis et al., 2017; Parry et al., 2014a; Melnick & Wann, 2011). However, female football fans are gradually on the increase in recent times as observed by Chemi (2014). Hence, researchers are of the opinion that it is imperative to explore the dynamics of football fandom within the context of gender (Eskandari, 2022). The imports of these scientific inquiries are to highlight the prospects for increased female involvement in football related careers, given the recent economic benefits attached to the football profession.

Undergraduate students are mostly youths who are in their active and impressionable stage of life. Group identification is a backbone for building and maintaining their self-concept and esteem (Leaper, 2011). Through collective fandom activities, they could draw strength to navigate their academic lives and therapeutically work through stresses and tensions (Dogari et al. 2018). Various studies have been carried out across the globe which highlighted cultural dynamics of sports and football fandom among youths. They include the study of U.S fans (D. L. Wann et al., 2001), Greek fans (Theodorakis & Wann, 2007), Australian fans (Melnick & Wann, 2011), U.K fans (Parry et al., 2014), Qatari fans (Theodorakis et al., 2017) and Iranian fans (Givi & Turkmani, 2018). The findings all suggest that fandom can have profound influence on modern societies and plays a central role in people's health and socialization,

especially among young people irrespective of gender. Therefore, this study is aimed at making an enquiry into the contribution of gender to the dynamics of football fandom participation, team identification and socialization factors among undergraduate youths in Enugu state, Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the study**

The study aims to identify the gender interaction in;

1. football fandom participation among the respondents;
2. the level of football team identification and
3. the football fandom socialising factors among the respondents.

### **Hypotheses**

- 1: There is no gender disparity in football fandom participation among the respondents.
- 2: Male and female participants will not significantly differ in their level of team identification.
- 3: The mean responses of male and female participants will not be significantly different on socialization factors of football fandom.

### **Methodology**

*Study design:* The study adopted descriptive cross-sectional survey research design.

*Population for the study:* The study population comprised all the students enrolled as at 2018/2019 session in the two public universities in Enugu state. This gave a total population of 45,576 students from 10 faculties in University of Nigeria and 20,884 students from 5 faculties in Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT).

**Sample selection:** The sample size for the study was a total of 600 undergraduate students comprising 326 from the University of Nigeria and 275 from ESUT. The selection was done in multi-stages; first by randomly selecting 30% of the faculties in the universities. This gave three out of ten faculties in the University of Nigeria and two out of five faculties in ESUT. The faculties selected were Agriculture, Arts and Engineering from University of Nigeria; faculties of Education and Engineering from ESUT. The next stage involved random selection of 10% of the student population in each faculty. Two departments were randomly selected from each faculty giving a total of ten departments. The sample for each faculty was then randomly selected in equal proportion from the two selected departments. The selected participants comprised 71% females and 29% males within average age range of 19-21 years. Nineteen percent were first year students, 29% final year students and 51.5% other year levels. Majority (91.7%) were single, 67.3% lived in the school hostels, 17.5% lived in off campus accommodations, and 15.2% came from home. A greater proportion (61.5%) of females than (59.8%) of males identified as football fans. The most preferred clubs were European league (68.3%) and the most favoured teams were Barcelona (24.9%), Juventus (16.9%) and Manchester United (16.7%).

**Instruments for data collection:** A set of pre validated survey questionnaires were used to obtain data for the study. The first section was structured to obtain data on the respondents' demographics such as gender, institution, and academic level. The second section was

a standardized instrument known as the Sports Fandom questionnaire (SFQ) by Wann (2002) which was adapted to obtain data on football fan status of the respondents. The SFQ contains five items rated on 8-point Likert-type scale of very strongly disagree to very strongly agree, but a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) was used for this study for easier administration and analysis. An example item is, "My friends consider me to be a football fan." Higher ratings for items indicate a more likelihood to be soccer fan. The overall total scores of the respondents were used to categorize them into fans and non-fans of football.

The third section contained items on football fandom participation and socialisation factors. The items were adapted from the questionnaire used by Theodorakis et al. (2017). Data on football fandom participation was rated on a 4-point scale of 1= never, 2 = rarely, 3 = occasionally and 4 = frequently. The items of the socialisation factors were rated on 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 - 5 which corresponded to strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher ratings indicate higher frequency of participation and agreement respectively.

The fourth section was the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) by Wann & Branscombe (1993). This was used to measure the level of team identification. It is a seven-item measure of identification with a team. Participants respond to items along an 8-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (low identification) to 8 (high identification). One of the items is, "How important to you is it that this team wins?" Higher ratings indicate a higher level of identification with a football team. The

overall mean responses of 1-3.4 were categorized as low team identification, 3.5-5.4 = moderate identification, while  $\geq 5.5$  = high identification. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for SFQ, SSIS and socialization factor questionnaire in this study were 0.926, 0.913 and 0.930 showing high levels of internal consistency.

*Procedure for data collection:* Six hundred copies of the questionnaire were hand distributed to the respondents with the aid of two research assistants. The respondents filled the questionnaires and they were collected back immediately. The participants gave their consent by signing a written consent form. The voluntary nature of participation and confidentiality of the data were clearly explained to the participants after which they signed the form.

*Data and statistical analysis:* Data were analysed with IBM-SPSS software, version 23. K-mean cluster analysis was used to classify the respondents into fans and non-fans. Data on football fandom participation were summarised in frequencies and percentages and overall mean score with the cut-off mean score of 2.5. Data on Socialisation factors were analysed using means and standard deviation with 3.5 as the cut-off mean

score for acceptability. Chi square and t-test were used to test the hypotheses. Significant levels were established at  $p < 0.05$ .

## Results

### Football fandom participation among the respondents

Table 1 shows football fandom participation among the participants according to gender. In general, the participants reported participating in football activities in all the listed ways (mean  $> 2.5$ ). They engaged mostly by viewing matches on television/viewing centres (mean =  $5.04 \pm 2.14$ ) and discussing football matters with friends and family (mean =  $5.03 \pm 2.48$ ). Males showed more frequent participation than the females in football matters; attendance to live matches (49.0% males, 40.8% females); watching football events on television/viewing centres (73.1% males, 55.0% females); listening to football news on radio (68.3% males, 56.9% females), social media (64.5% males, 58.4% females), and discussion with friends and relatives (71.4% males, 63.7% females). Hypothesis 1 was mostly rejected as male participants showed significantly higher participation in fandom than females except in the item of following football matches on the internet.

**Table 1: Percentage Responses on Football Fandom Participation by Gender**

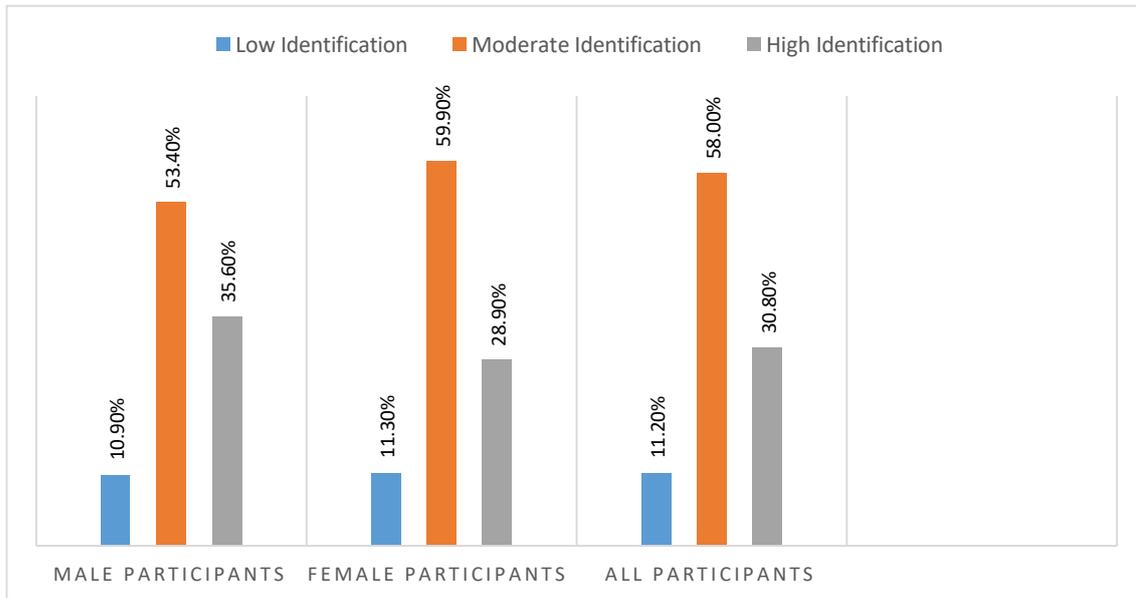
	Never F (%)	Rarely F (%)	Occasionally F (%)	Frequently F (%)	Chi- square values	Mean (SD)
Attendance to live football matches						
Males	8 (7.7)	12(11.5)	33 (31.7)	51(49.0)		
Females	20 (7.6)	77 (29.4)	58 (22.1)	107 (40.8)	13.67*	3.94 (2.40)
All participants	28 (7.7)	89 (24.3)	91 (24.9)	158 (43.2)		
Watching matches on television/viewing centres						
Males	0 (0.0)	10 (9.6)	18 (17.3)	76 (73.1)		
Females	7 (2.7%)	53 (20.2)	58 (22.1)	144 (55.0)	12.55*	5.04 (2.14)
All participants	7 (1.9)	63 (17.2)	76 (20.8)	220 (60.1)		
Listening to football news on radio						
Males	7 (6.7)	4 (3.8)	22 (21.2)	71 (68.3)		
Females	49 (18.7)	5 (1.9)	59 (22.5)	149 (56.9)	9.78*	4.36 (2.60)
All participants	56 (15.3)	9 (2.5)	81 (22.1)	220 (60.1)		
Follow football events on internet						
Males	0 (0.0)	18 (17.3)	14 (13.5)	72 (69.2)		
Females	0 (0.0)	73 (27.9)	35 (13.4)	154 (58.8)	4.65	4.39 (2.65)
All participants	0 (0.0)	91(24.9)	49 (13.4)	226 (61.7)		
Discuss matches on social media						
Males	2 (1.9)	12 (11.5)	23 (22.1)	67 (64.5)		
Females	12 (4.6)	65 (24.8)	32 (12.2)	153 (58.4)	12.91*	4.42 (2.58)
All participants	14 (3.8)	77 (21.0)	55 (15.0)	220 (60.2)		
Discuss matches with friends and family						
Males	0 (0.0)	14 (13.5)	16 (15.4)	74 (71.2)		
Females	0 (0.0)	70 (26.7)	25 (9.5)	167 (63.7)	8.59*	5.03 (2.48)
All participants	0 (0.0)	84 (23.0)	41 (11.2)	241 (65.8)		

F; frequency, \*, values are significant at  $p < 0.05$

**Level of team identification among the respondents**

Data on figure 1 shows that there was generally a moderate level (58.0%) of team identification among the respondents. About a third (30.8%) of the participants identified highly with their favourite teams and a few (11.2%) had

low level of identification with their teams. Male and female participants showed no significant difference in the level of team identification (Chi square value = 2.72,  $p > 0.05$ ), therefore hypothesis 2 was not rejected.



**Fig. 1:** Level of team identification among the respondents by gender; Chi square value = 2.72,  $p = 0.26$

### Socialisation factors of football fandom among the respondents

Table 2 shows data on the socialisation factors influencing football fandom among the respondents by gender. Among the males, major factors were admiration for players (mean = 3.99), club performance (3.97), means of leisure and recreation (3.78), sense of belonging (3.73) and personal love for football (3.71). Factor identified among females were club performance (4.06), admiration for player/players (4.04), means of leisure and recreation (3.89)

sense of belonging (3.73) and personal love for football (3.72). Among all participants, club performance (4.03) and admiration of a particular player/players in the club (4.3) were the two highest ranking factors. Mother as a fan (2.71) and club representing one's country or continent (2.69) were not factors. The female participants disagreed more strongly on the item; "the club represents my country/continent" than the male participants. Hypothesis 3 therefore is rejected only on this item.

**Table 2: Socializing factors of football fandom among the respondents by gender**

Variables	Males Mean (SD)	Females Mean (SD)	Total Mean (SD)	Remark	t-value
The club's success/performance	3.97 (1.21)	4.06 (1.08)	4.03 (1.12)	Agree	0.92
Admiration for a particular player or players in the club	3.99 (1.18)	4.04 (1.01)	4.03 (1.06)	Agree	0.50
Means of leisure and recreation	3.78 (1.28)	3.94 (1.04)	3.89 (1.12)	Agree	1.65
Football fandom offers me a sense of belonging	3.73 (1.44)	3.73 (1.31)	3.72 (1.35)	Agree	0.04
Personal love for football game	3.71 (1.29)	3.72 (1.23)	3.71 (1.18)	Agree	0.09
Enjoy the atmosphere of the stadium	3.50 (1.32)	3.58 (1.26)	3.56 (1.28)	Agree	0.67
Admiration for the coach of the club	3.41 (1.21)	3.36 (1.45)	3.37 (1.16)	Agree	0.42
My sibling is a fan of the club	3.22 (1.37)	3.19 (1.38)	3.19 (1.38)	Agree	0.29
My father supports the club	3.20 (1.29)	3.03 (1.32)	3.08 (1.30)	Agree	1.43
My friends/roommates are fans of the club	3.11 (1.35)	2.96 (1.23)	3.01 (1.26)	Agree	1.34
My mother is a fan of the club	2.74 (1.34)	2.70 (1.36)	2.71 (1.35)	Disagree	0.32
The club represents my country/continent	2.87 (1.44)	2.60 (1.35)	2.69 (1.38)	Disagree	2.19*

SD; standard deviation, \*; values are significant at  $p < 0.05$

### Discussion

The study showed that there were more female than male football fans among the study participants. The most preferred clubs in this study were the European Premier's League, such as Barcelona, Juventus and Manchester United, thus highlighting the low patronage of local football teams, as previously observed by Dogari et al. (2018) and Onyebueke (2018). This preference to European clubs has been attributed to media popularity given to European league matches across countries (Onyebueke, 2015). Onwe (2019) observed that Nigerian football lovers prefer to be fans of European clubs not only because they claim that European league matches are more intriguing and entertaining than Nigerian league matches, but also that identifying with them serves as a means of self-extension and improvement of young people's self-image. Thus,

football fandom could be serving the purpose of vicarious achievement among young people, as observed by Slogan Lloyd (Dogari et al., 2018).

This study also found that majority of the participants engaged with their club activities through televisions and viewing centres, discussing football activities and news with friends and families both offline, on the internet and on social media as well as listening to matches and football news on radios. This finding buttresses the impact of digital technology in redefining the ways football fans practice their fandom activities. Given the fact that the most favoured club base was the European league, Nigerian-based fans especially undergraduate students, have the more convenient options of following up the activities and news of their favourite clubs using available communication gadgets and media. Exploring the gender perspective of soccer fandom,

similar to the findings of Theodorakis et al. (2017), Parry et al. (2014a), and Melnick and Wann (2011), male fans were found to participate in football activities more than male fans in the aspects of attendance to live matches, watching football events on television/viewing centres, listening to football news on radio, social media interaction and discussion with friends and relatives. The gender difference may be associated with the fact that males show greater interest to engage in more public display of football activities than females in the society. This situation may not be surprising given the fact that public football spectatorship had hitherto been in the masculine domain. However, with the changing trend of increased female involvement in soccer fandom, gender balance may soon be achieved in overall football participation in the near future. This balance is hoped to encourage more women to show interest and pursue a career in any aspect of professional football; as players, referees and even club administrators.

The study further found moderate to high level of team identification among the participants in general. In congruence with the social identity theory, identifying with a group especially successful one, is very critical for developing self-identity and boosting the self-esteem of young people (Leaper, 2011). In addition, young people find inner strength and morale to go through academic and personal stress as they engage in collective fandom activities (Dogari et al. 2018). Parry et al. (2014b) also observed high level of team identification and fandom among UK fans of English Premier League, although at a lower level than the findings of this study, suggesting that

Nigerians could be patronising the European football clubs much more than the owners of the clubs. Further finding showed that gender was not found to be associated with the level of team identification. This indicates that young people irrespective of gender, are emotionally connected to their favourite clubs, sharing in the victories and losses of the clubs. This finding suggests that there might be no gender disparity in the theory of BIRGing and CORFing as it concerns enhancement and protection of fans' self-esteem. When fans, notwithstanding the gender, identify with their favourite teams strongly enough, they feel emotionally attached to the team. The fans tend to personalize the team's victories and deal with losses by dissociating themselves from the failure or making excuses for the team (Ashlock, 2012).

Club performance and admiration of particular player/players were found to be the two major factors that motivated young people to become football fans. The findings undermined the influence of family members, friends and community as major socialisation agents of football fandom observed in other cultures (Parry et al., 2014; Theodorakis et al., 2017). The pattern of fandom among Nigerian audience was mostly performance-based and therefore could be dynamic. This implies that if a favourite club stops performing expectedly, they might gradually lose the patronage of their fans. The findings are in consonance with that of Akanle and Fageyinbo (2015) who opined that in Nigeria, the fan base of football clubs is flexible depending on the overall performance of the clubs over time. Similarly, Agbonna et al. (2016) observed that fans are attracted to a particular

team because of brilliant performance of the club manager or captain, extraordinary goal scoring skills of the players, and the personality of a particular manager or player. Hence, as team achieves success in the field, fans become more emotionally connected to them.

Further finding showed that leisure and recreation, sense of belonging, personal love for football, were among the factors that influenced the participants to become fans, thus highlighting social identity and connectedness as benefits of football fandom among young people (Rationis, 2020). The finding suggests that engaging in football activities could be an avenue through which young undergraduate students relax themselves mentally and physically in between demanding academic activities. They also tend to find a social bearing as they connect with other lovers of football, particularly members of their football “tribe.” This finding corroborates the views of Lloyd that individuals could participate in football fandom for sense of belonging, relief from tension and stress, and for leisure and entertainment (Dogari et al., 2018). Influence of father, siblings, friends and roommates were also observed as socialising factors of football fandom, though not as much as were observed by Parry et al. (2014), Melnick and Wann (2011) and Theodorakis et al., (2017). Influence of family and friends as traditional socialisation agents have long been established; it is therefore not surprising that they also play a role, though minimal in this context, in shaping how young people get connected with football teams and engage in soccer related activities.

## **Conclusion**

Football fandom is a popular culture and an integral part of young people’s lives. It is considered an important leisure activity, plays a crucial role in the attainment of social identity and offers strong basis for digital connection with peers around the world. As a possible representative sample of other Nigerian youths, the undergraduate students prefer European league clubs to local football clubs. They invest a lot of time and resources discussing the activities of their favourite clubs with friends and relatives and follow up with other fans on the internet and social media. Identification with a football team was not only observed among the male students but also the female students at a remarkable rate. However, the level of team identification and participation in fandom activities was higher among male students. This is reflected in more frequent attendance to live matches and discussion with friends and relatives. Factors that influenced the respondents’ football fandom behaviours were not predominantly the traditional socialisation agents such as family, school and community. Rather, they were mostly based on the admiration of the performance and personality of the players and clubs as well as for the personal benefits derived from the game of football such as leisure and recreation, attainment of sense of belonging and personal love for football. This implies that identifying with the game of football as fans is a suitable leisure activity which improves the young people’s social capital and could be of emotional, psychological and social benefit to them while pursuing their academic endeavours. Football fandom practices could offer students safe avenues for

relieving the tensions and stresses of academic life and has the potential to keep them off dangerous indulgences such as cultism, drugs and other social vices.

### Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study it was recommended that Ministry of sports should collaborate with organization and individuals interested in the promotion of local clubs in the country as this will not only promote the nation's economy but will assist in personal development of her citizens.

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