

PERCEPTION OF CUSTOMERS IN MANAGEMENT OF FOOTBALL CLUB: INSIGHT FROM MANCHESTER UNITED FANS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of customers regarding the management strategies of Manchester United Football Club (MUFC) in Nigeria. The research focuses on Nigerian MUFC fanbase and how various management practices, including marketing, customer relationship management, and community engagement, influence customer satisfaction and brand perception in Nigerian market. A quantitative research methods was adopted to peruse the study. Findings reveal that Manchester United's management strategies are generally perceived positively by Nigerian fans, and its success was achieved with marketing efforts, fan engagement, and customer service being key factors in cultivating strong fan loyalty. However, there are challenges in communication and local relevance that the club needs to address to further solidify its position in the Nigerian sports market.

Keywords: *Perception, Management Strategies, Manchester United, Customer Engagement, Nigeria, Sports Marketing, Fan Loyalty.*

Introduction

In recent years, football clubs have evolved into global brands, with their management strategies focusing not only on sporting success but also on building strong fan-bases and customer loyalty across various international markets. Manchester United Football Club (MUFC), one of the world's most prominent football clubs, has achieved substantial international recognition, including a significant following in Nigeria (Huang, 2024). As sports organizations expand globally, understanding customer perceptions becomes crucial in tailoring management strategies to enhance fan loyalty, improve engagement, and boost brand image in diverse markets.

International football clubs, with their vast global reach and large consumer bases, face the challenge of growing competition. According to Iqbal (2017), the perceptions and expectations of football consumers have become a vital consideration for management when making decisions. Football, as a performance-oriented business, operates in a high-pressure environment where the success or failure of a club directly impacts the relationship between the consumers and management. When desired results are achieved, the manager is lauded and celebrated. However, when results are unsatisfactory or the club experiences a decline in form, the demand for managerial changes often grows. This creates a paradox in professional football: while improvements can be made, not every team can ultimately succeed (Garelsater, 2017). The elevated expectations inherent in a performance-driven culture contribute to the frequent turnover of managerial positions (Kelly, 2018). Although no consumer wants

to witness their team lose, such outcomes remain an unavoidable reality within the sport's competitive landscape.

Manchester United Football Club offers a clear example of how consumer pressure, driven by their perceptions of the club's management, can influence the club's strategic direction. Since Sir Alex Ferguson's retirement in 2013, the club has experienced significant managerial instability, having appointed five managers, among them was José Mourinho hired in 2016 to address the instability within the club during this period. These consumers sought immediate success and an attractive style of play, but their expectations were not fully met under Mourinho's leadership. As Hossein (2019) highlights, the manager's role is central, making them the focal point of attention within the team.

The foundation of a football club's growth lies in the development of a strong consumer base, as their engagement fuels the demand for televised matches and the associated broadcasting rights. (Udukwe, 2017). Consumer engagement not only drives attendance, but also plays a vital role in media viewership, merchandise sales, and the securing of sponsorship deals (Yoshida, 2017). In modern football, consumers are increasingly regarded as more than just spectators; they are now seen as key stakeholders whose opinions and perceptions must be considered in managerial decision-making. Regardless of a manager's previous achievements, once consumer perceptions of that manager change, recovery becomes exceedingly difficult.

Given these factors, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of football consumers regarding the management of international football clubs, with a particular focus on Manchester United Football Club. Thus, this study serve as a key performance indicator showing where managers of football clubs need to improve, strategies to employ and leadership style that guarantee success both on and off the field.

Literature Review

Customers Perception in Sport Management

Management is the process of organizing and coordinating resources to achieve defined objectives. It involves strategic planning, setting goals, managing human resources, and deploying financial and material assets to attain these goals while measuring outcomes (Haidar Mustafa, 2020). Management can be described as the art of designing and maintaining an environment where individuals, working in groups, can efficiently accomplish their chosen objectives (Shankara, 2018). Effective management is critical for organizational success (Robbins & Judge, 2018), as it serves as the foundation for influencing employee behaviour. Hussein and da-Costa (2018) highlighted that, irrespective of the type of organization; be it government agencies, institutions, or small enterprises the central and most effective factor for enhancing the utilization of human resources is effective management.

The growing role of customer perception in sports management has attracted significant academic attention in recent years. According to Agyemang and Yeboah (2020), customer engagement strategies, such as fan clubs and interactive media, play a crucial role in strengthening the relationship between football clubs and their supporters. In the context of Nigeria, Ogbeide and Ogbu (2021) highlight that football clubs must tailor their management strategies to fit local cultural preferences, which can enhance fan loyalty and engagement. Furthermore, customer satisfaction in sports is often linked to personalized experiences, as discussed by Khatab, Esmaeel, and Othman (2019), who found that the quality of service in fan interactions significantly impacts overall brand loyalty.

Moreover, football clubs' marketing strategies play a pivotal role in fostering brand loyalty. Manchester United's global brand positioning, built on its historic success, has allowed the club to expand its reach

far beyond its home base in England (Yao et al., 2020). However, as identified by Siripipathanakul and Bhandar (2021), brands must continuously adapt to the needs of diverse markets, taking into account the cultural context and consumer expectations. This is especially true in countries like Nigeria, where football is deeply ingrained in the national culture.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

Effective customer relationship management (CRM) plays a crucial role in the sports industry, influencing fan loyalty and satisfaction. Payne and Frow (2013) define CRM as a strategic approach that integrates relationship marketing to foster long-term relationships with customers. Research by Popp and Woratschek (2016) emphasized the importance of branded communities in sports, where clubs engage with their fans through social media platforms, fostering stronger brand relations and improving the fan experience. Schijns, Caniëls, and Conté (2016) further examined the role of perceived service quality in sports clubs, finding that effective CRM practices significantly contribute to customer loyalty. These CRM practices are especially important in an era where fans demand personalized interactions and localized experiences. Despite the overall success of CRM strategies in sports, there remains a challenge in providing individualized service to fans, as highlighted by Girsang (2022), who notes that while CRM efforts are generally effective, more localized and personalized fan engagement is needed to enhance fan loyalty, particularly in diverse markets like Nigeria

Marketing Strategies related to Football Consumers as stakeholders, Fan Loyalty and satisfaction

Georgio (2020) defines a consumer as someone with a deep, positive emotional connection to a particular brand, individual, or entity. Michael (2017) further elaborates that a consumer is someone who develops an obsession with a specific star, celebrity, or football club. In contrast to spectators, who simply watch football matches directly (in person) or indirectly (via media), consumers not only engage in watching matches but also form an affiliation, where aspects of their identity, emotional significance, and values are closely tied to their membership with a club.

Consumers have a direct impact on a football club's revenue by purchasing tickets, merchandise, and paying to watch games, either online or on television (Babiak & Wolfe, 2019). Additionally, they indirectly influence the club's financial prospects by generating interest among sponsors and local governments (Biscaia, 2018). Additionally, consumers remain loyal "in both good and bad times." Merging loyalty as an attachment to the team with social integration, Fillis and Mackay (2016) identified three types of consumers:

- i. Casual followers:* These consumers have a limited attachment to the club in terms of match attendance and social connections. While they may not actively engage in attending matches or purchasing merchandise, their involvement is limited to the periphery of the club's culture.
- ii. Social devotees:* These consumers show attachment to both the club and its social aspects, with a focus on social connections and engagement with other consumers.
- iii. Committed supporters:* These consumers exhibit deep loyalty to the club, even to the point of personal sacrifice, and maintain strong social connections within the consumer community.

Researchers have increasingly recognised that football consumers are genuine stakeholders of their clubs (Biscaia, 2018). Consequently, their perceptions and opinions are not disregarded by football club management.

Fan Loyalty

Fan loyalty is a central concept in sports marketing, and a considerable body of literature explores the factors influencing it. Kościółek (2019) investigates the variations in consumer loyalty across different sports disciplines, noting that fans' emotional connection to their teams is a key driver of loyalty. However, as Girsang (2022) points out, while a significant portion of football fans express strong loyalty to clubs like Manchester United, there are still disparities in satisfaction levels, particularly in non-local markets. In line with this, Popp and Woratschek (2016) argue that social media and branded communities are key in fostering deeper relationships between clubs and fans, ultimately enhancing fan loyalty.

Theoretical Review

Trait Theory

The trait theory, which was widely popular until the 1940s, posits that effective leaders share common traits. This approach assumes that leaders are born, not made. The theory focuses on three main areas, as outlined by Turner and Muller (2005): the abilities traits, which demonstrate essential management skills; personality traits, which address emotional variables such as self-confidence; and physical appearance, including size and overall appearance. The trait theory is useful for examining whether a coach is naturally endowed with the talent and ability to make the right decisions for the team, based on the assumption that effective leaders possess inherent qualities.

Situational or Contingency Theory

Fred Fiedler's leadership contingency model theory suggests that effective employee performance is dependent upon the alignment between a leader's abilities and the specific situational factors that influence their leadership. These factors include the leader's capabilities, preferred leadership style, the behavior of the leader, and the competence of the employees. Fiedler's theory posits that leaders should adapt their style to suit the situation at hand, in order to effectively motivate and enhance employee performance.

When applied to football, this theory provides insight into the rationale behind a coach's strategic decisions, such as player substitutions during a match or the choice of formation, which may vary depending on the specific opposition. The coach's decisions are influenced by the nature of the opposing team and how they are likely to set up, thus highlighting the need for flexibility and adaptability in response to different match conditions.

Empirical Review

Misaq *et al.* (2020) conducted a study on the "Impact of Stability on the Performance of Gulf Pro League Football". The objective of this study was to determine the impact of stability/instability on the performance of Persian Gulf Pro League football clubs. All the clubs that had participated in more than 3 seasons of the previous 17 seasons (2001-2019) of the Persian Gulf Pro League were analyzed in the study (n=26). The performance of each team (improvement or worsening in ranking) and their stability were analyzed year after year in the period 2001-2019. The stability was divided in four components: CEO, head coach, players and club. The statistical analysis was performed with the software SPSS. Stability significantly ($p<0.05$) increased performance and instability significantly ($p<0.05$) decreased performance of the clubs in the four components studied: CEO, head coach, players and club.

Markus (2020) conducted a study on “Fan Identity and Identification drivers”. The aim of the research was to enhance understanding about the relationship between the level of fan identification and the drivers of identification. A cross-sectional convenience sample of 517 Wellington Phoenix fans was surveyed using both online and researcher administered/respondent completed questionnaires. The Sports Spectator Identification Scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) was used to measure fan identification, and participants were categorized into five identification levels. Findings show that ten of 16 identification drivers are correlated with the identification level. Of particular interest are findings that indicate a mediating impact of the identification level on specific relationships. In contrast to that, the sense of belonging created by fellow fans is more important to those who are highly identified. A multivariate factor analysis revealed patterns among identification drivers that suggest fans can be categorized according functional, symbolic and interpersonal constructs that can be described as a live experience factor, an admiration factor and a social network factor.

Methodology

A descriptive research design was chosen for this study, as it best suited the objectives of the research. The population of the study consisted of 300 recognised Manchester United football club fans, who were distributed across ten football viewing Centres in Offa Local Government Area, Kwara State. To determine the sample size, Taro Yamani's formula (1964) was used. This formula helps calculate an appropriate sample size based on the population and tolerable margin of error. With a population of 300 and a sampling error of 5%, the formula was applied as follows: $N = n / (1 + n(e)^2)$. When calculated, the result was 171, meaning that 171 fans would form the sample for this study.

Simple random sampling method was employed to select participants. This technique ensures that every individual in the population has an equal chance of being included in the study, thereby promoting the representatives of the sample. Primary data collection was employed, as it ensures the reliability and validity of the information. Data were gathered directly from the respondents using a structured questionnaire of 4-Likert scale, which allowed respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a range of statements concerning fan opinions, club management, and performance. The scale consisted of the following options: strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). This type of scale was chosen to measure the strength of respondents' views on the subject matter.

To ensure the reliability of the instrument, the researcher sought the assistance of an expert in research methodology. The expert provided feedback on the questionnaire's structure and content, and a pilot test was conducted with a small group of fans to verify the instrument's effectiveness before the full survey was distributed. The validity of the research instrument was assessed using both face and content validity. The researcher worked with an expert in football management and research methodology to review the questionnaire. The expert evaluated the appropriateness of the questions in relation to the study's objectives.

Data collected for the study were analysed using Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software, version 23.0. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the demographic data and the participants' responses to the survey items. To test the hypotheses and explore the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, multiple regression analysis was applied. Additionally, Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was used to assess the strength and direction of these relationships.

The study included three hypotheses, each tested using multiple regression models to examine the effects of various factors on the management and performance of Manchester United Football Club.

The model specification for each hypothesis was as follows: In the first hypothesis, a multiple regression model was used to examine the relationship between the dependent variable, management of the football club, and the independent variables, which were the relationship between fans and the manager, team performance, and fans' opinions. The second hypothesis used a multiple regression model to assess the impact of fan opinion, team performance, and match attendance on managerial turnover at Manchester United. The third hypothesis explored the relationship between fan base, team performance, and match attendance on the club's on-field success using a similar multiple regression model.

Equation Specification

Equation 1

A multiple regression Equation was used to link the independent variable to the dependent variable

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3$$

Where: **Y**=Management of international football club (Dependent Variable)

β_0 =Constant (Intercept)

X1=Relationship between club fans and club manager

X2=Team performance

X3= Fans opinion

E= Error term which capture the unexplained variation in the model

Equation 2

A multiple regression model was used to link the independent variable to the dependent variable

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3$$

Where

Y= Managerial turnover at Manchester United Football Club (Dependent Variable)

β_0 = Constant (Intercept)

X1 = Fans Opinion

X2 = Team Performance

X3 = Match attendance

E= Error term which capture the unexplained variation in the model

Equation 3

A multiple regression model was used to link the independent variable to the independent variable

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3$$

Where

Y = on field Success of Manchester United Football Club

β_0 = Constant (Intercept)

X1= Fan Base

X2 =Team Performance

X3 = Match attendance

E= Error term which capture the unexplained variation in the model

Results

Analyses and Findings

This section presented the result analysis and the findings obtained from the study on perception of customers in management of Football Club given insight from Manchester United Fans in Nigeria. Hence, the respondent demographic data and hypotheses results were discussed under the section below as follows:

Demographic Variables of the Respondents

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents Demographical Information

Variable	Class of Data	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18 – 25	35	21.5
	26 – 40	83	50.9
	41 – 60	27	16.6
	61 and above	18	11.0
	Total	163	100%
Gender	Male	139	85.3
	Female	24	14.7
	Total	163	100%
Educational Qualification	SSCE	31	19.0
	NCE/OND	38	23.3
	HND/BSC	72	44.2
	MBA/MSC	22	13.5
	Total	163	100%

Source: (Researcher's Fieldwork, 2024)

As shown in this table above, 21.5% of this respondents are within the age range of 18 and 25%, 50.9% are within this age range of 26-40 16.6% are within this age range of 41.60 which 61% and above are within the range of 61 and above. This implies that majority of Manchester united football club fans are young people this might be due to the fact that football the favorite sport of most young people.

As shown in the table above, 85.3% of the respondents were male and the other 14.7% were female this implies that majority of Manchester united football club fans are male

A possible explanation to this is that football is a game of sport which is popular among male though recently there has been an upsurge in interest in female football

As shown the table above 19% of respondents were SSCE holders 23.3% were NCE/OND certificate holders, 44.2% were HND/BSC holder while 44.2% were MBA/MSC holders

As shown in the table above fans of Manchester united football club possess differed educational qualifications.

Hypothesis one

H_01 : there is no significance relationship between perception of fans and management of international football clubs

Table 2 model summary

Model	R	R –square	Adjusted r R – square	s.t.d error of the estimate
1	.766 ^a	.586	.575	.24044

Predictors (constant), relationship between club fans and clubs manager, team performance and result, Fans Opinion.

Source: SPSS printout 2024

The co-efficient of determination (R- square) 0.586 in the table above showed that the model has a good fit the implies that relationship between club fans managers, team performance and result and fans opinion account for 58.6% variation in the perception of fans on the management of international football clubs. While the remaining 41.1% aims enplaned by other factors that are not captured in this study this is further testified by the 57.5% result of this adjusted R – squares. It can be said from this that relationship between club manager and club fans, team performances and result, and fans opinion are key, determinants of the managements of the perception of fans on the management of international football clubs.

Table 3 ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	D.F	Mean of squares	F	SIG
Regression	11.642	4	2.911	50.345	.000 ^b
Residual	8.209	155	.058		
Total	19.852	159			

Dependent variable: management of international football

Predictors (constant) club fans, relationship with club manager, team performance and result, fans opinion.

Sources: S.P.S.S printout 2024

The f –test result in the above shows that there is a joint significant relationship between relationship of club fans and managers, team performance and result, and fans opinion in and the management of international football clubs.

Since the p –values which is 0.000 is less than 0.05 (critical value) the null hypothesis is then rejected therefore, perception of fans have a significant effect on the management of international football clubs.

Hypothesis two

H_0 : perception of fans has no effect on managerial turnover at Manchester united football club

Table 5: Model

Model	R	R –square	Adjusted R square	std. error of the estimate
1	923 ^a	851	847	25037

Predictors (constant) fans opinion team performance and result match attendance

Source: SPSS printout 2024

The co-efficient of determination (R square) 0.851 in the table above showed that the model has a good fit. This implies that fans opinion, team performance and result, match attendance account for 85.1% variation in the rate of managerial turnover at Manchester united football club.

Table 6: ANOVA

Model	Sum of squares	D.F	Mean squares	F	Sig
Regression	50.949	4	12.73	203.189	.000 ^b
Residual	8.901	155	.063		
Total	59.850	159			

Dependent variable: managerial turnover

Predictor (constant): fans opinion, team performance and result, match attendance

Source: SPSS printout 2024

Since the p- value which is 0.00 is less than 0.05 the null hypothesis is then rejected. Therefore fans opinion, team performance and result match attendance have a significant effect on managerial turnover at Manchester united football club the null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis three

Ho3: there is no significant relationship between on field success of Manchester united football club and perception of fans on management of Manchester united football club

Table 7: Model Summary

Model	R	R- square	Adjusted R-square	Std error of the estimate
	923 ^a	851	847	25037

Predictors (constant) fan base, team performance match attendance

Source: SPSS Printout 2024.

The co-efficient of determination (R square) 0.851 in the table above showed that the model has a good fit. This implies that fan base, team performance and match attendance account for 85.1% variation in the relation between on field success of Manchester united football club and perception of fans on the management of Manchester united football club. This is further justified by 84.7% result of the adjusted R- square.

Table 8: ANOVA

	Sum of square	D.F	Mean square	F	SIG
Regression	50.949	4	12.737	12.73	.000 ^b
Residual	8.901	155	.063		
Total	59.850	154			

Test Result

Dependent Variable: on Field Success

Predictor: Fan Base, Team Performance Match Attendances

The above Table Show that there is a joint significant relationship between on field success of Manchester united football club and the perception of fans on the management of Manchester united football club. Since the p –value is 0.000 which is less than 0.05 (critical value) the null hypothesis is then rejected.

Discussion of Findings

This study provide valuable insights into the relationship between perception of fans and the management of international football clubs. For instance, one of the primary objectives of the study was to examine the relationship between fan perception and the management of international football clubs. The findings revealed that fan perception is a crucial determinant of management decisions within football clubs. In support of this, studies by Agyemang & Yeboah (2020) and Anagnostopoulos (2020) emphasize the importance of consumer (fan) engagement and satisfaction in sports marketing.

Agyemang & Yeboah (2020) argue that the emotional connection between fans and football clubs is critical for the development of long-term loyalty and satisfaction.

Another key objective was to determine how the perception of fans impacts managerial turnover, specifically within a high-profile club such as Manchester United. The findings indicated that fans' opinions are indeed influential in decisions regarding managerial changes. This reflects the notion presented in Dickson & Naylor (2019), who explain that fans, as consumers and stakeholders, exert significant pressure on management to either retain or replace managers based on performance outcomes. Girsang (2022) also discussed how fan loyalty and engagement, particularly through social media, can shape perceptions of the club's leadership.

The third objective examined the relationship between on-field success and the managerial decisions made at Manchester United. It was found that there is a significant correlation between the performance of the team on the field and the strategies adopted by the manager. On-field success, defined in terms of match victories, league standings, and trophies won, strongly influences the perception of management effectiveness. This finding resonates with Biscaia's (2018) study, which suggested that consumer behavior in football directly correlates to the performance of the team, with football clubs seeing increased revenue and fan loyalty when on-field success is achieved.

Conclusion

The study examined the perceptions of consumers regarding the management of international football clubs, using Manchester United Football Club as a case study. The findings indicated that, to a large extent, consumer perceptions significantly influence the management of international football clubs. The study revealed that consumer opinions regarding the team's performance and results, as well as the relationship between club managers and consumers, play a key role in shaping perceptions of the effectiveness of the management team. This, in turn, affects the tenure of a manager.

Additionally, the study concluded that there is a significant relationship between on-field success and consumer perceptions of the management of the club. Consumers tend to rate the management of a club higher when the club enjoys considerable success on the field, while a club that fails to deliver positive results is likely to receive lower ratings from consumers regarding its management.

Recommendations

As drawn from the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made.

1. The management of football clubs should ensure that consumer opinions are considered before making critical decisions.
2. Club managers should strive to develop and maintain strong relationships with consumers, as their support is vital to the club's success.
3. Efforts should be made by club management to ensure on-field success, as this will significantly contribute to increased consumer support, expand the club's fan base, and ultimately boost the club's revenue.

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