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Observational learning and sports development in Nigeria: challenges and prospects for sustainable growth

Okechukwu Iroechemma Okorie [1], Francis Chukwudi Akalazu [2]

[1] Department of Sport and Exercise Science, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Rivers State. Nigeria iroechemma_okechukwu@uniport.edu.ng
[2] Department of Sport and Exercise Science, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Rivers State. francis.akalazu@uniport.edu.ng

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of observational learning in sports development within the Nigerian context, highlighting its current application, challenges, and future prospects. Observational learning, rooted in Bandura's Social Learning Theory, emphasizes learning through the observation of others—making it particularly relevant in Nigeria, where formal sports training and coaching infrastructure are often inadequate. The study employed a descriptive survey design, with a sample of 300 respondents comprising athletes and coaches drawn from selected schools, academies, and sports institutions across three Nigerian states. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Findings revealed that majority of athletes rely heavily on observational learning for skill acquisition, often through watching elite athletes, peer modelling, and digital platforms such as YouTube and social media. However, challenges such as limited internet access, lack of structured feedback, and poor integration into coaching practices were identified as key barriers. Notably, athletes in urban areas had more access to digital tools, while those in rural areas were disadvantaged, indicating a digital divide. Despite these limitations, respondents recognized observational learning as a low-cost, scalable solution to bridge the gap in sports training and development. The study recommends the integration of observational learning techniques into formal coaching education, investment in digital infrastructure, and the development of locally relevant instructional content. These steps, if implemented, could significantly enhance athletic performance and promote inclusive sports development across Nigeria.

Keywords: Observational learning, sports development, Nigeria, digital access, coaching, athlete training, social learning theory.

Corresponding Author:
(Okechukwu Iroechemma Okorie)
- Affiliation: Department of Sport and Exercise Science, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Rivers State.
- Email: iroechemma_okechukwu@uniport.edu.ng

1. Introduction:

Observational learning, also known as modeling or social learning, plays a critical role in shaping athletic skills, attitudes, and performance, especially in developing nations like Nigeria. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, individuals, particularly young athletes, acquire new behaviors and skills by observing others, especially those considered role models (Bandura, 1977). In the Nigerian context, where access to formal coaching and structured training environments may be limited, observational learning becomes a vital mechanism through which upcoming athletes emulate elite performers, coaches, and peers. As sports continue to emerge as a significant tool for youth engagement and national development, understanding how observational learning contributes to athlete development becomes increasingly essential.

Key Concepts of Bandura's Observational Learning Theory:

1. **Modelling**: Learning occurs by observing the behavior of a model (another person). The model can be a parent, teacher, peer, celebrity, or even a character in media.
2. **Vicarious Reinforcement**: People are more likely to imitate behavior if they see the model being rewarded (reinforced) for it. Conversely, if the model is punished, observers are less likely to imitate the behavior (vicarious punishment).
3. **Cognitive Processes in Observational Learning**: Bandura emphasized that learning involves internal mental processes. He outlined four key stages:

- **Attention**: The observer must pay attention to the model: Influenced by the model's characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, status) and the observer's focus and interest.
- **Retention**: The observer must remember what was observed. This involves mental representation and memory.
- **Reproduction**: The observer must be physically and mentally able to reproduce the behaviour.

- **Motivation**: The observer must be motivated to perform the behavior. Motivation can be influenced by expected outcomes or observed consequences.

Example of Observational Learning: A child watches their older sibling get praised for doing homework on time. The child then starts doing their own homework promptly, hoping to receive similar praise.

Bandura's Famous Bobo Doll Experiment (1961): Bandura conducted an experiment where children observed adults interacting aggressively with a Bobo doll (e.g., hitting it with a hammer, yelling). Children who observed the aggressive behavior were more likely to imitate it especially when they saw the adult being rewarded (Bandura et al., 1961; Bandura, 1965).

This experiment demonstrated: Learning can occur through observation. Direct reinforcement isn't always necessary. Aggressive behavior can be learned by watching others.

Sports development in Nigeria has witnessed both commendable progress and persistent structural challenges. Despite producing globally recognized athletes in football, athletics, and boxing, the country faces issues such as inadequate grassroots development, poor infrastructure, and limited access to professional coaching (Diejomaoh et al., 2015; Elumaro, 2015). In such a landscape, observational learning serves as a bridge, compensating for some systemic deficiencies. Aspiring athletes often rely on media, local role models, and community-based sports to acquire techniques, mental toughness, and motivation. However, the unstructured nature of this form of learning may result in inconsistencies and limit the full realization of talent.

Additionally, socio-cultural influences, including traditional beliefs, family expectations, and community support, affect the ways in which observational learning is facilitated or hindered in Nigeria. Media platforms like television, YouTube, and social media now play a growing role in transmitting sports-related content, giving athletes more opportunities to learn from international standards. Nevertheless, disparities in digital access across regions mean that such learning opportunities are unevenly distributed, further widening the gap in talent development between urban and rural areas.

Therefore, Understanding the challenges and prospects of observational learning within Nigeria's sporting ecosystem is crucial for policy development, coaching education, and institutional planning. Acknowledging the dual nature of observational learning—as both a tool of empowerment and a reflection of systemic gaps—can guide stakeholders in creating strategic interventions. This paper explores the theoretical basis, real-world implications, and future potential of observational learning in Nigeria's sports development, with a focus on addressing its limitations while harnessing its strengths for sustainable athletic progress.

2. Literature Review

- ***Concept of Observational Learning***
- ***Role of Observational Learning in Sports Development***

Studies have shown that observational learning plays a significant role in skill acquisition and performance improvement across various sports disciplines. For instance, in environments lacking qualified coaches or structured programs, athletes often rely heavily on peer modeling and video analysis to develop competence (Coker, 2018). In Nigeria, where institutional support for sports is often inconsistent, informal learning environments such as local football fields, street tournaments, and online sports videos become critical spaces for observational learning (Elumaro, 2015). This approach enables young athletes to mimic movements, strategies, and mental conditioning of their role models without the need for direct instruction, thus promoting skill transmission in resource-poor settings.

- **Limitations and Challenges of observational learning in the Nigerian Context**

While observational learning offers valuable developmental opportunities, it also presents several limitations, particularly in the Nigerian sports landscape. The absence of structured mentoring systems, lack of media access in rural areas, and limited exposure to professional-level sports hinder the effectiveness of this learning method. Athletes who learn by imitation alone may copy the outcome of a movement without understanding the technique or the contextual factors behind it, leading to poor skill execution or injury (Hodges et al., 2007). Furthermore, without proper coaching feedback, these athletes may develop bad habits that become difficult to correct over time. The inconsistent

integration of observational learning into official training frameworks has resulted in fragmented sports development efforts.

- **Technological Influence and Future Prospects**

With the growing penetration of smartphones and internet access, digital media has become a powerful platform for observational learning. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram provide vast repositories of sports tutorials, match replays, and motivational content that athletes can observe and emulate (Collins et al., 2022). This trend presents a significant opportunity for improving sports development in Nigeria, provided that access and digital literacy gaps are addressed. Moreover, incorporating structured video analysis and observational learning techniques into coaching curricula could professionalize the approach and lead to more effective athlete development. As Nigeria continues to invest in youth sports, recognizing and enhancing the role of observational learning can help bridge gaps in formal training systems.

- **Limited Access to Digital Resources**

One of the major barriers to effective observational learning in Nigeria is unequal access to digital tools and internet services. In many rural and semi-urban areas, athletes lack consistent access to smartphones, laptops, or internet connectivity needed to watch instructional videos, live matches, or online tutorials. This digital divide restricts athletes' ability to observe and learn from high-level performance models, further widening the development gap between urban and rural athletes (Odufuwa et al., 2025).

- **Absence of Structured Guidance and Feedback**

Observational learning, when done in isolation, may lead to improper imitation of techniques. The absence of expert feedback or instructional correction means athletes may adopt incorrect form, posture, or tactical approaches, which can negatively affect performance or cause injuries. Without trained coaches or mentors to provide reinforcement and correction, observational learning risks becoming superficial or even counterproductive (Boyer et al., 2009; Hodges et al., 2007).

- **Over-Reliance on Unverified Sources**

Another challenge is the tendency of athletes to imitate techniques from unverified or inappropriate sources, especially from social media platforms. While platforms like YouTube and TikTok provide an abundance of sports

content, not all of it is suitable or context-specific. Athletes may model behaviors not aligned with their sport level, body type, or training environment, leading to unrealistic expectations or poor technique development.

- **Lack of Policy Integration and Institutional Support**

Despite its growing relevance, observational learning is rarely included in formal coaching curricula or government-supported sports programs in Nigeria. There is limited institutional effort to harness observational learning as a recognized method for athlete development. As a result, athletes and coaches often rely on it informally, without systemic support, quality control, or monitoring, which reduces its long-term impact on national sports development (Elumaro, 2015).

- **Socio-Cultural Barriers and Gender Disparities**

Cultural perceptions and gender stereotypes can also limit observational learning. In some communities, female athletes may face restrictions on accessing public sports facilities or participating in co-educational training sessions, reducing their opportunities to observe and learn from others. Additionally, societal pressures and lack of role models—especially for girls—can discourage observational engagement altogether (Akinniyi, 2024).

- **Prospects of Observational Learning in Sports Development in Nigeria**

Despite the challenges associated with observational learning, it holds significant promise for advancing sports development in Nigeria, particularly if integrated strategically into athlete training systems and national sports policies in the following ways:

1. **Bridging Gaps in Coaching and Infrastructure:** In many parts of Nigeria where there is a shortage of qualified coaches or standard training facilities, observational learning offers a practical alternative for skill acquisition. Through exposure to televised games, online tutorials, and local role models, young athletes can learn fundamental techniques, tactics, and mental skills without formal instruction. This makes it a valuable tool for developing talent in resource-constrained environments (Coker, 2018).
2. **Integration into Digital and Media-Based Learning**: The rise of digital media and mobile technology offers a scalable platform for structured

observational learning. With increasing internet penetration, athletes across Nigeria can now access global sports content, instructional videos, and coaching platforms. If harnessed properly—through partnerships with educational platforms or sports ministries—this could revolutionize informal training practices and promote self-directed learning (Collins et al., 2022).

3. **Enhancing Coaching Effectiveness and Athlete Engagement:** Coaches who incorporate observational learning strategies—such as video playback, model demonstrations, and peer observation—can enhance athlete understanding and engagement. Research shows that combining observational techniques with verbal feedback and physical practice accelerates skill development. Encouraging coaches to adopt these practices could professionalize training and improve performance outcomes (Schunk, 2012).
4. **Promoting Role Model Visibility and Motivation:** Observational learning also plays a motivational role, especially when young athletes can identify with successful sports figures. The visibility of Nigerian stars like Tobi Amusan or Victor Osimhen can inspire young talents to persist in their training, emulate success pathways, and develop positive sporting attitudes. As more local success stories emerge, the motivational power of role models through observational learning is expected to grow.
5. **Support for Inclusive and Community-Based Sports Programs:** Finally, observational learning can be embedded into inclusive, grassroots programs that rely on peer modeling and local mentorship. By creating environments where athletes observe and support each other—such as community football leagues or school-based sports clubs—learning becomes more collaborative and sustainable. This approach is especially beneficial in low-income areas, where formal resources are scarce but community bonds are strong.

3. Conclusion:

For Nigeria to harness the full benefits of observational learning, stakeholders must recognize its significance and work collaboratively to overcome its challenges. Doing so will ensure that athletes—regardless of their background—can develop their talents effectively, contributing to a more inclusive and competitive sports environment nationwide.

4. Suggestions:

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of observational learning as a tool for sports development in Nigeria:

1. The Ministry of Sports and relevant sports governing bodies should revise coaching curricula to include observational learning techniques. This includes training coaches on how to use video analysis, model demonstrations, and guided observation as part of structured athlete development programs.
2. Government and private stakeholders should invest in digital infrastructure—such as community viewing centers, data subsidies, and mobile learning hubs—to ensure equitable access to sports content across urban and rural communities. This will bridge the digital divide and allow more athletes to benefit from online learning platforms.
3. National and state-level sports organizations should develop mentorship initiatives where elite athletes and coaches provide structured observational learning opportunities to younger athletes. These programs can be facilitated through in-person clinics or virtual sessions to promote positive modeling and skill development.
4. To improve context-specific learning, local sports bodies and media houses should produce and distribute instructional videos featuring Nigerian athletes, coaches, and training methods. This ensures that athletes are exposed to culturally relevant techniques and strategies that suit their development stage and environment.
5. Grassroots sports organizations should create opportunities for athletes to observe and learn from peers through local tournaments, inter-school competitions, and skill-sharing workshops. Peer modeling, when combined with guided feedback, enhances retention and motivation, especially in informal settings.
6. Researchers, educational institutions, and policymakers should conduct ongoing studies to evaluate the effectiveness of observational learning interventions. Such research will help in refining strategies, identifying gaps, and formulating evidence-based policies for sports development in Nigeria.

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