

The Effect of Human Resource Management Practices on Player Retention in the Ethiopian Male Premier League.

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ABSTRACT

Retaining players is one of the key performance measures of stability & strategic planning in modern football clubs. Through the lens of social exchange theory, this research aimed to explore the variables that affect player retention within the Ethiopian Premier League, which experiences a high player turnover rate and limited financial resources. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data from 242 players selected via census sampling were analyzed with multiple regression, while qualitative interview data from 18 stakeholders were analyzed via thematic analysis to enhance the study's contextual depth. The regression analysis revealed a highly significant $F(5,236) = 84.11, p < .001$, indicating 64.10% of the variance in player retention ($R^2 = .64$). Compensation and Benefits emerged as the overwhelmingly dominant predictor ($\beta = .597, p < .001$), far surpassing other factors. Technology Integration ($\beta = .177, p = .002$) was also a significant, though secondary, contributor. Training, Performance Management, and Health and Safety were not significant direct predictors of retention. As well as, the qualitative data revealed that while players value respect and progress, consistent and fair compensation is the non-negotiable foundation of their loyalty. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, this study concluded that in the Ethiopian football economic environment, financial fairness is the primary factor of loyalty. Further, the study offered important policy implications and strategy directions. ..

Keywords: : Player Retention, Compensation and Benefits, Social Exchange Theory, and Ethiopian Football Premier League

How to cite this article: Gebremedhin DT, Legesse K, Alemu AE, Berhanu T. The Effect of Human Resource Management Practices on Player Retention in the Ethiopian Male Premier League. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026;16(60s):1084-1086. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.60s.119

Source of support: Nil.

Conflict of interest: Nil.

INTRODUCTION

Player turnover is a fundamental threat to the sporting and financial viability of football clubs, to team chemistry and long-term strategic goals (Frick, 2007; De Menezes & Wood, 2017). This issue appears to be more serious in the developing leagues (E.g., the Ethiopian Premier League (ETHPL), where informal contracts, payment delays, and shortages of relevant resources are the norms of operation (Tadesse, Asgedom, & Taddese, 2023; Darby, 2017). Although the global sport literature describes a multitude of factors that influence athlete retention, such as coaching leadership, playing career development, and organizational culture (Taylor et al., 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2017), their relative importance in economically constrained professional football environments remains insufficiently explored.

Accordingly, the goal of this study is to address this gap by examining the impact of specific HRM practices on predicting player retention in the ETHPL. The study assumes that a player's decision to remain with a club is a rational evaluation driven by the balance between benefits

received and costs endured, particularly under conditions of financial insecurity (Kuvaas et al., 2017).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory (SET), which underpins this study, provides the main theoretical framework for this study. According to SET, human relationships are based on a subjective cost-benefit analysis and the principle of reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When players perceive that clubs provide valued resources, they are more likely to reciprocate with loyalty, commitment, and reduced turnover intentions (Blau, 1964; De Menezes & Wood, 2017). Prior research in sport has successfully applied this perspective to sponsorship, employment relations, and athlete commitment, emphasizing the exchange-based nature of player-club relationships (Bang and Ross, 2019). In European contexts prior work has suggested that a bundle of HRM practices, including training and performance management, can support retention by increasing commitment (Lepak and Snell, 2002; García-del-Barrio & Pujol, 2020). Nonetheless, the satisfaction-weighted hierarchy of benefits probably varies with context. The

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'Two-Factor Theory' outlined by Herzberg (1968) proposes that pay frequently serves as a 'hygiene factor,' where the consequences of its absence are severe, yet the mere presence of which might not be a sustainable motivator. Even in countries with relatively low average wages and limited financial security, the impact of the 'hygiene factor' of pay can be so significant that it transcends every other factor in the exchange relationship (Kuvaas et al., 2017; Agyemang et al., 2017).

Within African professional football, structural weaknesses such as delayed salary payments, limited contractual enforcement, and governance gaps further intensify the centrality of compensation in the social exchange relationship (Darby, 2017; FIFA, 2023). This study therefore, hypothesizes that compensation and benefits will emerge as the dominant predictors of player retention in the ETHPL, potentially overshadowing developmental and relational HRM practices.

Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods design to the extent that the quantitative is complemented by the qualitative. The

quantitative part of the research involved administering a cross-sectional questionnaire to 242 ETHPL players using census sampling. Player retention is the dependent variable measured by a reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.71$), and five HRM practices are the independent variables. Multiple regression was employed to analyze the quantitative data set obtained using a 5-point Likert Scale questionnaire to determine the significant predictors of retention.

The qualitative part of the study was designed to complement the quantitative one in its rigorous interpretation. It therefore involved conducting 18 semi-structured interviews that took 30 minutes on average with senior players, team managers, and coaches to investigate retention factors and turnover in football players. The data from these were thematically analyzed.

Results

The multiple regression result for player retention was statistically significant, $F(5, 236) = 84.11, p < .001$, and accounted for a sizable 64.10% of the variance, $R^2 = .64$. The findings, as cited in Table 1, also indicate that there was a hierarchical order in the predictors.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Predictor	B	SE B	β	T	P	95% CI	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	.45	.24	—	1.83	.07	[-0.033, 0.93]	—	—
Training and Development	-.01	.06	-.01	-1.10	.27	[-0.131, 0.118]	.630	1.587
Performance Management	.15	.09	.11	1.79	.08	[-0.016, 0.323]	.404	2.474
Health and Safety	.04	.06	.04	.75	.46	[-0.070, 0.156]	.427	2.342
Compensation and Benefits	.53	.04	.60	12.46	.001	[0.446, 0.613]	.663	1.508
Technology Integration	.17	.06	.18	3.07	.002	[0.062, 0.285]	.460	2.172

Model Fit: $R = .80, R^2 = .64, Adjusted R^2 = 0.63, F(5,236) = 84.11, p < .001$

As indicated by the data shown in Table 1, it appears that compensation and benefits are the most prominent factor as the predictor ($\beta = .60$ & $p = .001$), followed by the slightly less significant influence of technology integration as the predictor ($\beta = .18$ & $p = .01$), whereas the effects of training and development, performance management, and health and safety are not statistically significant factors.

However, the qualitative data provided an additional dimension to this unambiguous result. For example, though "retention isn't just about money; it's about respect and progress. Players stay when they feel valued." However, this sentiment was consistently tempered by the player's lived experience. One senior player expressed a sentiment shared by nearly all his colleagues: "How can I feel respected when my salary is delayed for months? The bonus matters, yes, but first, we need to trust that our basic contract will be honored."

The dominance of compensation and benefits as a predictor of player retention is consistent with research demonstrating that financial reliability is a primary

determinant of commitment in professional sport labor markets (Kahn, 2018; Kuvaas et al., 2017).

Discussion

This study demonstrates Social Exchange Theory in operation within a financially constrained professional football context. The magnitude of the compensation coefficient ($\beta = .60$) indicates that in the ETHPL, financial fairness constitutes the primary resource offered by clubs, for which player loyalty becomes the principal form of reciprocation. Similar findings have been reported in professional sport and organizational contexts where financial insecurity heightens employees' sensitivity to pay consistency (De Menezes & Wood, 2017; Kahn, 2018).

From Herzberg's perspective, compensation operates as a hygiene factor—when unmet, dissatisfaction overwhelms any potential motivational influence of other HRM practices (Herzberg, 1968).

The significant role of technology integration suggests that non-financial resources can enhance retention by signaling professionalism, ambition, and organizational legitimacy.

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Previous research indicates that modern infrastructure and professional systems serve as symbolic resources that strengthen organizational identification in sport settings (Relvas et al., 2010; Wagstaff et al., 2017; Garcia-del-Barrio & Pujol, 2020). However, as demonstrated in this study, such signals cannot substitute for the foundational exchange of pay for labor.

The non-significant effects of training, performance management, and health and safety do not imply their irrelevance but rather reflect their secondary status in the retention calculus of players facing persistent financial instability. Similar patterns have been observed among professional footballers experiencing payment uncertainty, where stress, anxiety, and reduced well-being undermine long-term developmental considerations (Gouttebarga et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2016). Thus, HRM practices aimed at development and welfare may only become effective retention tools once financial obligations are reliably fulfilled.

Conclusion and Implications

From the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that loyalty or retention in the ETHPL is unequivocal, i.e., consistent and fair compensation is the non-negotiable currency. From this conclusion, in particular, the results of the study, at large, two key implications are constructed. Firstly, the study demonstrates that, at policy level, the resources valued by the players, hence for retention, are shaped by the socioeconomic factor. This means that huge investment in economic condition is more productive than in socio-emotional conditions.

Secondly, and practically, the message for ETHPL club owners and the Ethiopian Football Federation is very clear and actionable. That is the single most effective retention strategy is to ensure players are paid fairly and on time. Governance mechanisms such as making regular payment, a strategy of club licensing, are essential. Clubs must solve this foundational issue before other retention strategies, such as leadership development or cultural programs, which can potentially yield significant returns. Without fiscal reliability, the clubs' attempts to build loyalty are only built on shaky grounds..

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