ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XIV, Issue XI, November 2025

The Role of FM Radio Stations in Promoting Local Sports in Kenema City, Eastern Sierra Leone

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2025.1411000007

Received: 15 November 2025; Accepted: 25 November 2025; Published: 01 December 2025

ABSTRACT:

Background: Local sports in Kenema City, Eastern Sierra Leone, often suffer from low visibility and limited institutional support. FM radio is the most accessible medium in the region, yet its specific role and effectiveness in promoting local sports remain under-examined.

Objectives: This study assessed the strategies used by FM radio stations in Kenema to promote local sports, examined listener perceptions and attitudes, and identified the challenges faced by sports presenters.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires from 120 listeners and stakeholders. Qualitative data were gathered through 10 interviews with sports presenters and 3 focus group discussions with community sports fans. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic content analysis.

Findings: Findings indicate that while most FM stations offer sports coverage, programming is often irregular and lacks depth. Key promotional strategies include discussions (33.3%), call-in shows (16.7%), and interviews (16.7%). Coverage is heavily dominated by international football (79.2%), with local sports receiving minimal attention. Listeners value sports programming for community cohesion but report dissatisfaction due to presentation quality and perceived bias. Presenters face significant constraints, including inadequate funding (33.3%), lack of training (33.3%), and poor equipment.

Conclusion: FM radio holds significant potential to enhance local sports promotion in Kenema. However, structural and capacity limitations hinder its effectiveness. Stations should establish regular, dedicated sports slots, improve presenter training, and actively engage with local sports associations. Diversifying coverage beyond football is critical for fostering a more inclusive local sports culture.

Keywords: FM Radio, Local Sports, Sports Promotion, Community Media, Kenema, Agenda-Setting, Uses and Gratifications.

INTRODUCTION

FM radio has been globally recognized as a key tool for community development and social promotion, including in the sports sector (UNESCO, 2014). In Sierra Leone, community radio serves as a vital grassroots communication platform (NFWA, 2021). Its affordability, accessibility, and wide reach, especially in semi-urban areas like Kenema City, make it a powerful medium (BBC Media Action, 2019). In contexts with limited sporting infrastructure and media resources, FM radio fills a critical gap left by national media, which often focuses on international or elite-level sports.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XIV, Issue XI, November 2025

Despite the proliferation of FM stations in Sierra Leone, their specific impact on local sports promotion remains under-researched. There is a particular lack of empirical data on how stations in Kenema structure their sports programming and how the audience perceives these programs. This study, therefore, aims to bridge this gap by investigating the role of FM radio in promoting local sports in Kenema City, examining the strategies used, assessing listener engagement, and evaluating the challenges faced by broadcasters.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973).

Agenda-Setting Theory posits that media do not tell people what to think but what to think about. By consistently featuring certain topics, media shape public perception of their importance. Applied here, frequent and prominent coverage of local sports on FM radio can elevate their status within the community, making them a matter of public interest and discussion.

Uses and Gratifications Theory, conversely, focuses on the active role of the audience in selecting media to fulfill specific needs. Listeners may tune into sports programs for entertainment, information about local events and teams, social interaction through shared experiences, or personal identity reinforcement by supporting local talent (Coakley, 2015). The success of sports programming hinges on its ability to meet these gratifications.

Existing literature shows that FM radio stations commonly use live commentaries, talk shows, and call-in segments to engage listeners (Meyer, 2017; Kawadza, 2020). However, in Sierra Leone and similar contexts, this potential is often hampered by financial constraints, inadequate training, and a documented bias towards international football, which marginalizes local sports and athletes (Conteh, 2021; Sesay, 2021). This study builds on this foundation by providing empirical data from Kenema to validate and contextualize these broader challenges.

METHODOLOGY

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed to provide a comprehensive analysis. The study was conducted in Kenema City, Eastern Sierra Leone.

Participants and Sampling: A total of 120 participants were recruited. This included 60 local sports fans, 22 sports organizers, 20 athletes, and 18 FM radio sports presenters. A combination of convenience sampling (for listeners and stakeholders) and purposive sampling (for presenters) was used.

Instruments and Data Collection:

- **Quantitative**: A structured questionnaire, pilot-tested for clarity and reliability (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.7 for key scales), was administered to all 120 participants.

- **Qualitative:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 sports presenters, and 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with community fans.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages). Qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Distribution of Questionnaires to FM Radio Stations

No	FM Radio Station	Location	Frequency (MHz)	Questionnaires Administered	Questionnaires Returned	%
1	SLBC	Maxwell Kobe St.	93.5	12	12	10
2	Star Line Radio	16 Bockari Gbay St.	98.5	12	12	10
3	Top Radio	IDA	103.7	12	12	10
4	Kamboi Radio	Sierratel Compound	92.5	12	12	10
5	Nyapui Radio	Reservation	106.1	12	12	10
6	Radio Nongowa	Nyandeyama	101.3	12	12	10
7	Gola Agri Radio	Maxwell Kobe St.	100.3	12	12	10
8	Voice of Islam	Nyandeyama	106.3	12	12	10
9	Rema Radio	Kpayama	| 92.5	12	12	10
10	Eastern Radio	Fonikoh	101.9	12	12	10
11	Vote FM	Plaza	88.5	12	12	10
Total				**132**	**132**	**110**

Note: The total number of questionnaires administered and returned was 132, representing 12 questionnaires for each of the 11 stations.

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

No	Sex	No. of Respondents	%
1	Male	| 100	83.3
2	Female	20	16.7
Total		**120**	**100**

Table 3: Distribution of Respondent Stakeholders

No.	Stakeholder Category	Respondents	%
1	Sports Organizers/Administrators	22	18.3

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2	FM Radio Sports Presenters/Managers	18	15.0
3	Local Fans	60	50.0
4	Athletes/Players (Amateur & Semi-professional)	20	16.7
Total		**120**	**100**

Dominance of Football and Agenda-Setting

The findings reveal a stark imbalance in sports coverage.

Table 4: Strategies Used by FM Radio Stations to Promote Sports

No.	Role/Strategies	No. of Respondents	%
1	Discussion	40	33.3
2	Commentaries	6	5.0
3	Advocacy/Event Promotion	20	16.7
4	Coverage	10	8.3
5	Call-in Show	20	16.7
6	Interviews	20	16.7
7	Others	4	3.3
Total		**120**	**100**

Table 5: Forms of Sports Featured on FM Radio

No.	Forms of Sports	Number of Respondents	%
1	Football	80	66.7
2	Athletics	30	25.0
3	Others	10	8.3
Total		**120**	**100**

Table 6: Dominant Sporting Activities Featured

No.	Dominant Sports	Number of Respondents	%
1	International Football	**95**	**79.2**
2	Local Football	**15**	**12.5**
3	Others	**10**	**8.3**

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Total		**120**	**100**

Football constitutes 66.7% of featured sports, and within that, international football dominates (79.2%), while local football receives only 12.5% of attention (Table 5 & 6).

Discussion: This aligns with Agenda-Setting Theory. The overwhelming focus on international football, particularly European leagues, sets a public agenda that prioritizes foreign sports culture over local athletic endeavors. This marginalizes local sports, shaping community perception that they are less important or entertaining. Consequently, local athletes receive little recognition, and community pride remains untapped. This trend is consistent with findings from other West African cities where commercial pressures and listener demand for popular international content often overshadow local sports (Akindele, 2017; Conteh, 2021). In contrast, rural community stations with stronger local ties might offer more balanced coverage, suggesting that Kenema's stations are operating in a transitional space between commercial and community models.

Listener Engagement and Uses & Gratifications

Listener perception data shows a strong preference for accessible and relevant content.

Table 7: Factors Influencing Listener Perception and Engagement

No	Relevance & Language Familiarity	No. of Respondents	%
1	Relevance & Language Familiarity	100	83.3
2	Others	20	16.7
Total		**120**	**100**

Table 8: Challenges Faced by FM Radio Sports Journalists/Presenters

No.	Challenges/Problems	No. of Respondents	%
1	Funds	40	33.3
2	Electricity	20	16.7
3	Training	40	33.3
4	Intimidation	15	12.5
5	Others	5	4.2
Total		**120**	**100**

Table 9: Suggestions for Enhancing Local Sports Development

No.	Suggestions	No. of Respondents	%
1	More coverage to local sports	60	50.0
2	To cover other sports	40	33.3

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3	Design Local Sports Activities	20	16.7
Total		**120**	**100**

83.3% of respondents valued "Relevance & Language Familiarity." Furthermore, 85% believed sports programs are important for community cohesion, yet 40% reported perceived bias in coverage.

DISCUSSION:

From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, listeners actively seek content that is relevant and accessible in local languages to fulfill their needs for social integration and local identity. The high value placed on community cohesion indicates that sports programming serves as a virtual public square. However, the dissatisfaction with quality and perceived bias indicates a significant gap between audience expectations and the gratifications provided. When programs fail to deliver deep, unbiased local coverage, the potential for fostering strong local sports culture is diminished. The primary suggestion from respondents (50%) was for "more coverage to local sports" (Table 9), directly indicating an unmet need for localised content.

Strategies and Structural Challenges

The primary strategy for promotion was "Discussion" (33.3%), while more interactive formats like "Call-in shows" and "Interviews" accounted for 16.7% each (Table 4). Presenters cited "Funds" (33.3%) and "Training" (33.3%) as their most significant challenges (Table 8).

Discussion: The reliance on studio discussions over live, interactive, or on-the-ground reporting reflects the structural constraints faced by stations. Inadequate funding prevents travel for event coverage and investment in better equipment, while lack of training results in lower presentation quality. This creates a cycle of underperformance: limited resources lead to poor content, which fails to fully engage the audience or attract significant advertising, thereby perpetuating the resource gap. This situation is often more acute in mid-sized cities like Kenema compared to the capital, Freetown, where media houses may have better access to resources and training.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that FM radio stations in Kenema City are underutilizing their significant potential to promote local sports. While they serve as a primary information channel, their impact is curtailed by a heavy bias towards international football, inconsistent programming, and significant structural challenges related to funding and personnel training.

To address these issues, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Diversify Sports Coverage**: Stations should consciously apply Agenda-Setting principles by creating mandatory, scheduled weekly segments dedicated to non-football sports like athletics, volleyball, and traditional games. This can gradually shift public interest towards a more diverse local sports agenda.

2. **Enhance Listener Gratification:** To better meet audience needs (Uses & Gratifications), stations should invest in presenter training to improve content quality and depth. Incorporating more local language commentary and robust interactive segments (call-ins, SMS polls) can enhance entertainment and social integration values.

3. Forge Strategic Partnerships: Stations should actively partner with Local Sports Associations, schools, and community businesses. These partnerships can provide content (e.g., updates on school tournaments), co-sponsor coverage of local events, and create a sustainable model for promoting a wider array of sports.

4. Capacity Building: Media development organizations and policymakers should prioritize targeted training workshops for sports presenters in mid-sized cities like Kenema, focusing on journalistic ethics, local sports knowledge, and technical production skills.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XIV, Issue XI, November 2025

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author sincerely thanks all the FM Radio Stations, sports organizers, presenters, fans, and athletes in Kenema City for their invaluable participation and cooperation in this study.

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