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INTRACTABLE HURDLES TO FREE AND FAIR ELECTION AND AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PETITION TRIAL IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Previous general elections in Nigeria have been fraught with different kinds of electoral malpractices. The February 2023 presidential election was not an exception. This study examined the challenges impeding conduct of free and fair election and audience perception of how the media covered presidential election petition hearing. The study was anchored on media dependency theory. In-depth interview and survey research design were used to administer instruments of data collection to 386 respondents. Findings indicate that institutional malfeasance, vote buying, violence, voter intimidation, stealing of ballot boxes, etc. are major factors bedeviling conduct of elections in Nigeria. This ultimately leads to seeking redress in law court. Moreover, findings show that the mass media provided extensive coverage of the key events of the 2023 presidential election petition trial while social media platforms were audience's main sources of information. In addition, the media influenced audiences' opinion, however, it did not align with the tribunal's final judgments. This paper recommends among other things that urgent reform be carried out in both election body (INEC) and judiciary in order to arrest post-election crisis and uncertainties in Nigeria.

Keywords: Election, Media Coverage, Audience Perception, Election Petition, Judiciary, Nigeria.

Introduction

Election is the bedrock of democracy. It is the means by which people choose their leaders. Similarly, it can mean a process through which citizens in the society choose their representatives and political leaders. In the contemporary society, election has become most appropriate and recognized means of changing government in a political system. It has been universally acknowledged that the best form of democracy is to allow people choose their leaders through free, fair, and credible electoral processes (Aneke 2021).

Oboh (2016) argued that the crisis arising from elections seems to be the major problem confronting the development of African democracy. Notably, although Africa comprises sovereign nations, not all the countries in the region are able to organize credible elections.

The major problem we face in Nigeria is not that elections are not held but those elections are marred and characterized by irregularities ranging from over voting, ballot box snatching and other electoral malpractices (Aneke 2021). Expectedly, constitution makes provisions for the ways of seeking redress in court for candidates who are dissatisfied with the outcomes of presidential elections or other elections, instead of resorting to violence and self-help, as it is believed that the judiciary is the last hope of the common man (Aneke 2021).

In Nigeria, election petitions are commonly presented before election petition tribunals like the National and Legislative Houses Election Petition Tribunal, the Governorship Election Petition Tribunal, the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal and the local government council election petitions tribunal either established pursuant to the provisions of the constitution or pursuant to the Electoral laws of the respective states of the federation (Oluwadayisi&Olowononi, 2021). An election petition is a process by which the outcome of any election is legally challenged. The applicable laws currently guiding election petitions in Nigeria include the Electoral Act 2022, Rules of Procedure for Election Petition, the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), and the extant Court/Tribunal Practice Direction. These laws have made adequate provisions concerning persons who can file election petitions and the grounds upon which the petition may be presented (Olaosebikan 2023).

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election was the most keenly contested in the country's modern history. Presidential election held on 25th February, 2023 was a three-horse race between the Candidates of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), Asiwaju Bola Tinubu, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar and that of Peter Obi of the Labour Party. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) had on 1st March, 2023 declared Mr. Asiwaju Bola Tinubu the winner of the election and returned him as duly elected. He polled 8.8 million votes while Atiku polled a total of 6,984,520 votes in the election to come second, and Mr. Obi came behind with a total vote of 6,101,533 according to INEC. Dissatisfied with the INEC declaration and pronouncement, the PDP candidate, Atiku Abubakar and Labour Party candidate, Peter Obi approached the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal with their petition against the election and return of President Tinubu.

In the petition, the parties challenged that the outcome of the election purportedly won by Asiwaju Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) on several grounds ranging from; INEC breaking the electoral law in its haphazard electronic transmission of results, election being marred with irregularities, including violence at the pools and logistical and procedural shortcoming to allegation that Mr. Tinubu was not qualified to contest the election", on the grounds that he was fined $460,000 for an offence involving narcotics trafficking. In addition, the petition questioned the qualification of Mr. Tinubu's running mate, Mr. Shettima, citing the nomination for two separate constituencies-as Borno Central senatorial candidate and vice-presidential candidate for the whole Nigeria in the same election cycle, Tinubu's academic records and APC's failure to secure 25 percent of votes cast in the federal capital territory (FCT).

This study became imperative owing to the current global movement towards improved electoral process that is devoid of violence and irregularities. To achieve this objective, the roles of the mass media are critical. The media, both in specific and general terms (the

Newspapers, Television, Magazine, radio, social media and the internet as a whole) have always played and are still playing very prominent role in national electoral growth and development. In the nature of modern politics, it is impossible for politicians to reach all the voters in their constituencies and to solicit their support to win elections without the help of the media Oboh (2016).

To put it in another way, the media have always served as a valuable tool for influencing the political climate of the nation. Consequently, there is a higher reliance on the media to provide information about the political process. Citizens closely monitor the parties and campaigns in the media to make voting decisions (Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023).Scholars like Ogunleye (2018) argue that media coverage of political events can significantly influence public opinion and political discourse. In the case of election petition trials, Asemah and Aliyu (2019) elucidate the media's impact in framing narratives can sway public perception, potentially affecting the legitimacy of the legal process and the involved parties. Also, Ibrahim et al. (2021) emphasize the role of media in shaping public opinion during political crises, highlighting its potential to amplify diverse viewpoints and misinformation, thus impacting audience perceptions.

Given the unique and strategic importance of the mass media, this study sought to understand from the respondents, challenges to smooth conduct of free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria and also analyze the overall audience' perceptions regarding the protracted legal tussle that characterised the post Nigerian presidential election in 2023. Previous studies like (Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023; Asemah & Aliyu, 2019;Ogunleye, 2018, etc,) have paid much attention to use the mass media to spread political campaign messages, woo voters and influence their opinion towards candidates. This current study went beyond this to elicit media audience's pulse, views, opinions and feelings regarding conduct of elections election tribunal hearings in Nigeria. Moreover, previous studies (Kurfi, 2010; Omoera, 2010, etc.) used secondary data as research design while some are old and can hardly stand as fresh literature for current discussion of the subject matter. Therefore, studying the hurdles impeding conduct of credible elections and audience perception of media coverage of election petition trials in 2023 would be an important guide to policy makers, media workers and their audiences for an improved democratic process.

Literature Review

Election in Nigeria and its Intractable Hurdles

Election is not merely a condition for democracy, it is a necessary process. As a result of this, a system of government cannot be regarded as democratic if it does not result from the choices of parties, politicians and policies made by citizens through free and fair electoral rules, processes and administration (Omilusi, 2014).Elections serve as the conduit not only for appointing public officeholders but also for various roles within private sectors. Chibuike and Fafiolu (2015) underscore this when they defined elections as the means by which communities or organizations empower individuals to act on their behalf. Whether in selecting representatives for organizations or leaders in democratic settings, the essence of elections lies in ensuring governance aligns with the will of the governed (Chibuike&Fafiolu, 2015).

In Nigeria, elections over the years have faced tremendous hurdles and challenges that free, fair and credible elections seem alien in this clime. Idowu, (2022) aptly captures it when he avers that in Africa, and indeed in Nigeria, the quality of elections is compromised, raising questions about the critical role of the election management body (EMB) and other electoral stakeholders, including the electorate. These have a compelling negative effect on the quality of elections. This negative effect is emblematized in often controversial and contested elections, post-election violence, and voter suppression and intimidation, among others. Idowu, (2022) further argues that in Nigeria, incidents such as voter intimidation, voter inducement, low citizen participation, partisanship by security personnel, abuse of incumbency, journalists' harassment, and operational deficiencies still beset the country's elections. Other malfeasances with Nigerian elections include: lack of public communication and information (citizen engagement); violence; systematically muffling the judiciary; and conflicting and late rulings on electoral disputes, among others.

The above scenario is not a case for instance, in the United States of America as the bastion of democracy and other developed democracies. Onwuka (2024) avers that one factor that manifests in the American election was its transparency. He explains that everything concerning the just concluded US 2024 election was visible to people. TV stations beamed live voting, collation of votes and release of results. There was no record of vote buying and snatching of ballot boxes. Campbell, (2019) attributed high level of vote buying in Nigeria to extreme poverty which is on the rise providing a bevy of people willing to vote the way someone tells them in exchange for cash.

However, with reference to 2023 general election in Nigeria, certain steps were put in place to curb or prevent electoral malpractices and other hurdles affecting free, fair and credible elections. One of those steps was a legal framework known as *Electoral Act 2022* which provided for the digitalization of the election by introducing the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Request viewing (IREV) Portal. Despite the introduction of these technologies and the assurances from Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to conduct a free and fair election, Balogun and Ajiya (2024) bemoan that the 2023 general Elections were not without challenges ranging from vote buying, fraud, snatching of ballot boxes, suppression of people's right to vote, breakdown of the BVAS, violence, and so on. This literally translated that INEC once again, failed to deliver a credible and fair election as promised earlier, which raised uncertainty about its credibility and the sustenance of representative governance. Now, the serial failure of the election umpire in Nigeria to conduct free and fairs elections and the attendant violence, voter suppression and other electoral vices are the real enablers of election litigations and subsequent barrage of court hearings.

The ugly implication of these electoral malfeasances is that it has caused many Nigerians to lose faith and confidence in the government and their interest in continuing to participate in elections. This is even made worse that over the years, Nigeria has continued to witness growing disappointments and apprehension about the inability of INEC to conduct peaceful, free, fair, open elections whose results are widely accepted and respected across the country (Igbuzor, 2010; Osumah, & Aghemelo, 2010). These and more are the key challenges and major hurdles militating against smooth, free, fair, credible and violence free elections in Nigeria.

In order to arrest this protracted ugly trend, concerted effort must stem from the government, relevant stakeholders, judiciary, electorates, etc. Judging from the weakness of electoral institutions, such as INEC which in turn, hinders their ability to conduct elections impartially, Nzereogu and Nnolum (2024) recommended that it is important to enhance institutional capacity through comprehensive training programs, financial autonomy, and increased collaboration with international electoral bodies for the exchange of knowledge and best practices. In addition, the researchers argue that addressing voter intimidation which involves enhancing security measures at polling stations, strict enforcement of laws against intimidation and creating an environment that ensures voters feel safe to cast their ballots is also crucial. Civic education campaigns on the other hand, that empower voters with knowledge about their rights and the consequences of intimidation, further foster a more informed electorate (Nzereogu & Nnolum, 2024).

Election and Enablers of Election Litigations in Nigeria

The popular aphorisms by Joseph Stalin; "It's not who votes that counts, it's who counts the votes and "those who count the vote decide everything" aptly capture the practical outcomes of the 2023 presidential election and previous elections being conducted in Nigeria by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This is true to the extent that INEC has demonstrated on several occasions, incapability and unwillingness to conduct free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria. Therefore, such pithy statements by Joseph Stalin resonate with average Nigerians. Ibeanu (2022) affirms that apart from suffering from 'legitimacy and credibility' crises embedded in its 'institutional history', 'INEC has not been able to engender public confidence in the electoral process or organise transparent and credible elections. Understandably, the election umpire, INEC, is not really independent as he who pays the piper, dictates the tune. Akinbode (2023) explains that the president appoints INEC's senior officials, including its chairman and commissioners. Even if their appointments are approved by the parliament, in a country where the majority of lawmakers belong to the ruling party and have tendency to rubberstamp the president's requests, legislative approval hardly increases the Commission's integrity before the public.

Consequent upon the widespread view that INEC is compromised and cannot be trusted to conduct credible elections; those who lose in elections do not hesitate to channel their hope of recovering their assumed victories to court of law through litigations. Fair enough, former President Muhammadu Buhari in 2022, at the twilight of his administration assented to the popular electoral Act which was touted to be a panacea to electoral manipulations and huge confidence to approach the court to retrieve "stolen mandate". The new law among other things legitimizes e-voting and result transmission (Sections 47 and 50(2), allowing the use of smart card readers and at the same time, granting INEC the power to determine the method of result transmission.

Sequel to the outcome of the election results as announced by the INEC, the candidates of the Peoples Democratic Party and Labour Party, alongside their party members headed to tribunal to legally reject the results announced by the INEC and presents other issues they feel disqualified APC candidate, Ahmed Bola Tinubu from becoming the President. In their petitions, the parties challenged that the outcome of the election purportedly won by Asiwaju Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) on several major grounds: That INEC broke the electoral law in its transmission of results electronically; The election was marred

with irregularities, including violence at the pools and logistical and procedural shortcoming; Mr. Tinubu, "at the time of the presidential election, was not qualified to contest the election", on the grounds that Mr. Tinubu was fined $460,000 for an offence involving dishonest, namely narcotics trafficking; The non-qualification of Mr. Tinubu's running mate, Mr. Shettima, citing the nomination for two separate constituencies-as Borno Central senatorial candidate and vice-presidential candidate in the same election cycle; Tinubu's academic records were fraught with discrepancies and forgeries; Tinubu's failure to secure 25 percent of votes cast in the federal capital territory (FCT), etc.

Regrettably, resorting to litigation and endless herculean legal battle has not done any tangible good to our electoral system. This is partly because our court and court judges have been arm-twisted and bought over by every incumbent government and ruling class, therefore, those who win elections through fraudulent means are not perturbed about going to court. In fact, it is often this set of people who rigged themselves in power that would boldly advice the losers to go to court knowing well how buyable the Nigerian court system is.

It is in light of this that Salahu (2022) in Akinbode, (2023) bemoaned that the transfer of the resolution of the election dispute to the judiciary is problematic in Nigeria where the judiciary is believed to be heavily compromised. Similarly, Ibeanu (2022) observes that the neutrality of the judiciary in electoral matters has been routinely questioned as the Nigerian judiciary – from the bar to the bench - suffers from its own peculiar problems. This view was echoed by the former president of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Yakubu Maikyau, when he admitted and apologised on behalf of all lawyers to Nigerians for letting the country down and pleaded with the bar and the bench to do better (Agency Report 2023). Like INEC officials, judges in Nigeria's courts are not independent of political influences, including their appointment by politicians. Moreover, many judges have ethnic, religious, regional and political affiliations that make them lean toward the ruling parties.

Mass Media Coverage of 2023 Presidential Election Petition in Nigeria

Election petition tribunals are vital in democratic societies for resolving disputes and grievances from elections, ensuring the integrity, fairness and legitimacy of the electoral process by providing a forum for aggrieved parties to seek redress for perceived electoral irregularities and violations (Izzi, 2019). This process ensures that disputes related to elections are addressed in a structured and transparent manner, contributing to the integrity of the electoral system. It makes more sense when Kerr and Wahman, (2019) cited in Okhuarobo and Asemah (2024) explain further that an election petition allows individuals or parties to challenge the validity, conduct, or outcome of an election, addressing grievances related to irregularities, fraud, or law violations. These petitions are filed with specialised judicial bodies like election tribunals or courts to seek remedies for perceived injustices. Election petitions are grounded in principles of electoral accountability, transparency, and the rule of law, providing a means for citizens to hold electoral authorities accountable for free, fair, and credible elections (Okhuarobo & Asemah 2024).

The widespread perception that the 2023 presidential election was marred by massive rigging, voter intimidation, vote buying, and other form of electoral malpractices in addition to the palpable lack of confidence in the judiciary to deliver judgement without fear or favour made the 2023 presidential election petition trial everybody's business. All eyes were on the

judiciary from the civil society organizations, international organizations, teeming Nigerians, the media and indeed several other interested parties. Undoubtedly, the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal (PETP) received massive media coverage.

The mass media as a very important institution has functioned as a tool for shaping thoughts and means of controlling economic and political power. Megwa, (2021) opines that the importance of the media in the development of politics cannot be emphasized. The media are mass communication channels that are actively involved in obtaining, evaluating, and disseminating information about politics and political issues. Therefore, the media institution is extremely significant and central to people's lives and the democratic process. Not only in Nigeria, but around the world, the media play an important part in the growth and development of politics, governance, and democracy (Nwagbo, Okafor, & Obiorah, 2016).

It is worth noting that the press plays a pivotal role in gathering and shaping public opinion and influencing the democratic process by providing information and perspectives on significant political events; this may come during or after the election (Ugo et al., 2023). Similarly, Santas and Ogoshi (2017) insist that given the fact that the election period is characterized by intense political communication via the mass media, they(mass media) must report thoroughly and accurately what the contestants stand for as the modern politics cannot function without the mass media (Ohaja, Nwogbo, Akata & Caius).

Ogunsola and Yusuf (2024) write that in the context of the 2023 Presidential Election Petitions Tribunal in Nigeria, which commenced from the Federal Court of Appeal and ended at the Supreme Court as enshrined in section 130 subsection 2(a) of the 2022 Electoral Act, the role of the press in disseminating information, framing issues, and contributing to public understanding of the tribunal's proceedings is of paramount importance.

At this point, it's important to remember that the media is a part of society's political structure and operates within certain economic and political parameters; thus, owes the society of adequate coverage of the presidential election petition tribunal hearings in view to educate and inform the citizens of the daily outcomes of the trials, harmonize divergent opinions and articulate agenda for informed discourse. Therefore, any discussion of what the media can do to help facilitate and strengthen the process of election petition tribunal proceedings should be viewed in the context of the country's Fourth Estate of the Realm's commitment to enthroning long-term peace, accountable leadership, and overall development.

The mass media channels were rife with torrents of messages emanating from different quarters before, during and after presidential election petition hearings. Before the hearing started, group of Nigerians under the aegis of civil society organization and concerned citizens mounted gigantic billboards in strategic locations in the nation’s capital city, Abuja, with the inscription “all eyes on the justices of Appeal Court”, to warn judges against miscarriage of justice as they believed Bola Ahmed Tinubu did win the election. Critics believe that these individuals are working for the opposition political parties just as Ogunsola and Yusuf (2024) infer that the controversial billboard was an imaginary attempt to manipulate the justices of the tribunal.

Furthermore, other major issues that dominated the reportage of the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal are legal arguments, certificate forgery against the candidate of the All Progressives Congress, who was declared winner and President of Nigeria, Bola Tinubu, and the alleged manipulation of the Justices of the tribunal. The outcome here empirically validated the sectional biases rented the air while the tribunal lasted; for instance, the issue of alleged certificate forgery against the APC candidate Bola Tinubu was so fixated by one of the parties in the tribunal to the extent that its verification was dragged up to Chicago, in the USA (Ogunsola & Yusuf 2024).

Finally, we can agree at this juncture, that media platforms as it should, facilitated debate and discussion about the presidential election petition tribunal through letters, op-eds and guest commentaries thereby, allowing various stakeholders to express their views on the tribunals' significance. However, biases, sensationalism and religious cum ethnic predilection in coverage and reporting of issues are capable of polarizing public opinion and undermine electoral integrity. This, therefore, is why upholding journalistic standards of accuracy, fairness and impartiality is crucial for maintaining democratic norms and ensuring responsible media contribution to the electoral process.

Theoretical Framework

Media Dependency Theory

This study is anchored on media dependency theory. The theory focuses on the unequal power relationships between media institutions, audiences, and societal structures as proposed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur in 1976. Media dependency theory suggests that audiences rely on the media for information, shaping their perceptions and understanding of events. In relation to the work under study, election petition trial, this theory provides veritable platform to investigate how audiences depend on media coverage as their primary source of information about the trial proceedings. It can analyze the extent to which audiences rely on specific media outlets or platforms for updates and how this dependency influences their perceptions of the electoral events.

The theory emphasizes the vulnerability of audiences to the information provided by the media. Research could examine how certain media narratives or biases affect the audience's perception of the trial, considering the power dynamics between the media and its audience. It can also explore whether audiences are aware of these biases and how they navigate and interpret the information presented to them. It also acknowledges that audiences might seek alternative sources of information when they perceive a lack of credibility or bias in mainstream media. Research could explore how audiences actively seek out alternative sources or platforms to validate or challenge the information presented by mainstream media regarding the election petition trial. This investigation can highlight the degree of counter-dependency that audiences develop in response to perceived biases or limitations in media coverage.

In general, the extent of the media's influence on audience is related to the degree of media content and information dependency of individuals on the media. While the basic propositions put forward by studies on media dependency; states that there are social functions performed for an audience by the media and there is greater potential influence of the media on the audience. Moreover, there are potentially three types of effects that will

result from regular audience's dependency on the media: These effects include; cognitive, effective and behavioural outcomes. Cognitive concept explains the changes in audience's attitudes, value and beliefs; also considering changes brought about the media in its role in political agenda setting. Affective concept explains the development of feelings of fear or anxiety about living as a result of over-exposure and dependent to media reports or contents; while the behavioural concept focuses on the discourse of "deactivation" which occurs when audience refrain from taking certain decision or actions that would have been taken had he/she not been exposed to certain media messages of communication (Afulike & Ekwueme, 2018).

Method

The general objective of this study was hinged on the imperativeness of interrogating the palpable intractable hurdles to conduct of free and fair election in Nigeria and audience perception of media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition hearing. This study was guided by the following research questions; (i) what are the major challenges impeding conduct of free and fair election in Nigeria? (ii) what are the channels of communication mostly used in accessing information about presidential election petition trial? (iii) to what extent did the mass media cover 2023 presidential election petition trial in Nigeria? and (iv) did the media coverage of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election petition trial influence audience opinion?

Mixed method in dept-interview and survey research design were adopted where the population of the study comprised residents of five states (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo) in South-East, Nigeria with a total figure of 25,268,416.92. Sample size of 386 was obtained using the Australian National Statistical Service (NSS) online sample size calculator. Multi-stage sampling technique was used to select respondents for the research. At the first stage, purposive sampling was used to select South-East zone from the existing six geopolitical zones in Nigeria which are; North West, North East, North Central, South-East, South South, and South West. The choice of South-East zone among other thing is the seeming fact that they are the politically disadvantaged and deprived zone in Nigeria. Stage two used systematic sampling technique to select three (3) local government areas from each state for easy reach and administration. The third stage employed Bowley's proportionate sampling to allocate copies of questionnaire to these local government areas based on their population strength. Lastly, the accidental sampling technique was used in the administration of the questionnaire to the respondents.

The instrument of data collection (questionnaire) went through pretest stages where it was ascertained to be strong and reliable for the current study. The study was conducted in strict accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka Research Ethics Committee. Data gathered were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), computer-based statistical software while the demographic data were calculated using frequency and percentage.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents

SN	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male	110	28.5%
2	Female	276	71.5%
	Total	**386**	**100.0%**
SN	**Age Range**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	16-20 Years	43	11.1%
2	21-25 Years	231	59.8%
3	26-30 Years	71	18.4%
4	Above 30 years	41	10.6%
	Total	**386**	**100.0%**
	Religion	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Christianity	353	91.5%
2	Islam	17	4.4%
3	African Traditional Religion	16	4.1%
	Total	**386**	**100.0%**
SN	**Marital Status**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Single	281	72.8%
2	Married	89	23.1%
3	Divorced	5	1.3%
4	Separated	7	1.8%
5	Widowed	4	1.0%
	Total	**386**	**100.0%**
SN	**Occupation**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Unemployed	13	3.4%
2	Student	256	66.3%
3	Self-Employed	73	18.9%
4	Civil Servant	44	11.4%
	Total	**386**	**100.0%**

The result of the study as presented on table 1 shows the demographic information of respondents by gender, age range, religion, marital status, and occupation. Result shows that there were 110 male respondents representing 28.5% while the female respondents were 276 representing 71.5%. All the respondents, both male and female were given equal chance of responding to the questionnaire, therefore their responses were not influence by their gender. Table 1 also shows the age range of respondents. Result shows that majority of the respondents were within 21-25 years of age representing 59.8% of the total respondents. On religion of the respondents, result shows that 353 were Christians representing 91.5%, while 17 were Muslims (4.4%) and 4.1% practiced African Traditional Religion. Result on marital status shows that majority of the respondents were single representing 71.8%, while 23.1% of the respondents were married. This implies that majority of the respondents were single.

Result in Table 1 also shows that 256 of the respondents were students representing 66.3%, and 73 of the respondents representing 18.9% were self-employed. Only 3.4% and 11.4% of the respondents were unemployed and civil servants respectively.

Research Question One: what are the major challenges impeding conduct of free and fair election in Nigeria?

In-depth interview was used to illicit answers to research question one. Findings brought to fore varied degrees of factors responsible for undemocratic conduct of elections in Nigeria. corrupt electoral body who collude with politicians to mutilate and announce fake results and compromised legal system that upholds electoral illegality are the key institutional disfunction and malfeasance that has encouraged continued rigging in in Nigeria's elections. Moreover, findings established link with poverty, religious and ethnic leanings to instances where citizens engage in all forms of electoral malpractices. Hunger and joblessness compelled individuals to accept steal votes, snatch ballot boxes, intimidate supporters of opposition candidates and even kill political opponents. All these increased the chances of approaching the court of law after an unfavourable election outcome in a bid to get justice. Regrettably, majority of those interviewed believe that Nigerian judges are not independent from the ruling government and thus, can hardly deliver justice without fear or favour.

Citizens' unwillingness to participate in electoral process, voter apathy, voting along tribe, religious and ethnic lines instead of capacity and based on merit are other serious hurdles to conduct of free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria.

Research Question Two: Which channels of communication were mostly used by the audience to get information during 2023 presidential election petition trial?
Table 2: Frequencies, Mean and Standard Deviation on the channels of communication audience were exposed to most during 2023 presidential election petition trial.

SN	Item Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Criteria	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec
1	I primarily received information about the 2023 presidential election petition trial from television news broadcasts.	107	137	73	58	11	**+3.0**	3.70	1.11	A
2	I relied on online news websites or apps to stay updated on the developments of the 2023 presidential election petition trial.	152	150	49	28	7	**+3.0**	4.06	0.98	A
3	I frequently tuned in to radio programs that covered discussions or updates regarding the 2023 presidential election petition trial.	58	98	97	104	29	**+3.0**	3.13	1.18	A
4	Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram were my main sources of information about the 2023 presidential election petition trial.	172	143	42	22	7	**+3.0**	4.16	0.95	A
	Cluster Mean						**+3.0**	**3.76**	**0.65**	**A**

Note: $\bar{X}$ = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, Dec = Decision, SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

The result of the study as presented in table 2 shows the channels of communication audience were exposed to during 2023 presidential election petition trial. Result shows that audience

primarily received information about the 2023 presidential election petition trial from television news broadcasts($\bar{x}$ =3.70, SD = 1.11), audience relied on online news websites or apps to stay updated on the developments of the 2023 presidential election petition trial($\bar{x}$ =4.06, SD = 0.98), audience frequently tuned in to radio programs that covered discussions or updates regarding the 2023 presidential election petition trial($\bar{x}$ =3.13, SD = 1.18, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram were audience's main sources of information about the 2023 presidential election petition trial($\bar{x}$ =4.16, SD = 0.95). The cluster mean of 3.76 with a standard deviation of 0.65 shows that audience were exposed to different channels of communication during 2023 presidential election petition trial.

Research Question Three: To what extent did the mass media cover 2023 presidential election petition trial?

Table 3: Frequencies, Mean and Standard Deviation on the extent of the media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial

SN	Item Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Criteria	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec
1	The media provided extensive coverage of the key events and testimony of the 2023 presidential election petition trial	116	170	66	27	7	**+3.0**	3.93	0.95	A
2	The media coverage helped me understand the details and arguments on both sides of the election petition trial.	122	169	67	23	5	**+3.0**	3.98	0.92	A
3	The media focused too much on insignificant or trivial aspects of the trial instead of substantive issues.	42	94	143	89	18	**+3.0**	3.13	1.03	A
4	The media coverage was comprehensive and provided sufficient information to follow and understand the trial.	84	168	86	36	12	**+3.0**	3.71	1.00	A
	Cluster Mean						**+3.0**	**3.69**	**0.64**	**A**

Note: $\bar{X}$ = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, Dec = Decision, SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

The result of the study as presented in table 3 shows the extent of media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial. From the findings of the study, the respondents agreed that; the media provided extensive coverage of the key events and testimony of the 2023 presidential election petition trial($\bar{x}$ =3.93, SD = 0.95), the media coverage helped the audience to understand the details and arguments on both sides of the election petition trial($\bar{x}$ =3.98, SD = 0.92), the media focused too much on insignificant or trivial aspects of the trial instead of substantive issues($\bar{x}$ =3.13, SD = 1.03) and the media coverage was comprehensive and provided sufficient information to follow and understand the trial($\bar{x}$ =3.71, SD = 1.00). The cluster mean of 3.69 with a standard deviation of 0.64 shows the media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial was to a high extent. This is because the cluster mean rating was above the criterion of +3.00.

Research Question Four: Did the media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial influenced audience opinion?

Table 4: Frequencies, Mean and Standard Deviation on whether media coverage influencedaudience opinion during 2023 presidential election petition trial

SN	Item Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Criteria	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec
1	The media coverage shaped my opinion about the credibility of the election petition	80	171	69	50	16	**+3.0**	3.64	1.07	A
2	The media portrayal influenced my view on which side should prevail in the trial.	74	159	75	62	16	**+3.0**	3.55	1.09	A
3	My opinions based on media coverage aligned with the tribunal's final judgments.	51	107	85	79	64	**+3.0**	3.00	1.29	A
4	The tribunal's decisions were independent of public opinion shaped by media narratives	74	131	92	52	37	**+3.0**	3.39	1.21	A
	Cluster Mean						**+3.0**	**3.39**	**0.79**	**A**

Note: $\bar{X}$ = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, Dec = Decision, SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

The result of the study in table 4 shows the mean and standard deviation of respondents on whether audience opinions were influenced by media coverage during 2023 presidential election petition trial. Result shows that the media coverage shaped audiences' opinion about the credibility of the election petition ($\bar{x}$ =3.64, SD = 1.07), the media portrayal influenced audiences' view on which side should prevail in the trial ($\bar{x}$ =3.55, SD = 1.09), audiences' opinions based on media coverage did not align with the tribunal's final judgments ($\bar{x}$ =3.00, SD = 1.29) and the tribunal's decisions were independent of public opinion shaped by media narratives($\bar{x}$ =3.39, SD = 1.21). In the same vein, the cluster mean of 3.39 with a standard deviation of 0.79 shows that audience opinion such as feedback and reactions did not influence tribunal decision during 2023 presidential election petition trial.

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to examine the seemingly unending challenges besetting conduct of Free, fair, credible and peaceful elections and audience perception of media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial in Nigeria. This study is germane given that a lot of resources in terms of human and materials are expended to conduct elections every four years only for the candidates to move ahead to continue the battle for political offices in the court of law, popularly known as election petition tribunal. Apart from the financial implications, high dependence on the court to pronounce a candidate winner in an election throws the entire country into a state of political turmoil and uncertainty while it also serves as one of the fasted ways politicians bribe and corrupt court judges. In addition, this study established that poverty, religious and ethnic leanings are some of the factors that spur citizens to engage in electoral malpractices. Results indicate that why it has become popular to seek justice in the court of law after an unfavourable election outcome is the obvious lack of faith and trust in the election umpire, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). It is the failure of INEC to conduct free, fair, credible and peaceful elections that has given rise to unusual impetus for politicians who feel robbed in the election to seek legal justice. This

affirms the findings of Ibeanu (2022) who maintained that apart from suffering from 'legitimacy and credibility' crises embedded in its 'institutional history', 'INEC has not been able to engender public confidence in the electoral process or organise transparent and credible elections.

In gauging the dominant media channels the audience conveniently used to access information relating to 2023 presidential election tribunal proceedings, data indicated a cluster mean of 3.76 with a standard deviation of 0.65 shows that audience were exposed to different channels of communication during 2023 presidential election petition trial. However, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram were audience's main sources of information about the 2023 presidential election petition trial. This finding corroborates the views of previous studies on audience preferred media channels for political communication. For instance, Ezema and Ezema (2023) found out that social media is the best method of reaching many electorates and the general public than the print and the broadcast media just as face-to-face communication is no longer feasible for mass population of people who are not from the same cultural background and state. The implication is that the large majority of the media audience found social media most attractive as it is convenient, cheap, easily accessible and just as it has the capacity to instantaneously reach millions of people across the globe.

Similarly, our findings as presented in table 3 shows the extent of media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial. It revealed that the media provided extensive coverage of the key events and testimony of the 2023 presidential election petition trial. The cluster mean of 3.69 with a standard deviation of 0.64 shows the media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial was to a high extent. This outcome resonates with the previous findings of (Megwa, 2021; Santas & Ogoshi2017; Ohaja, Nwogbo, Akata & Caius; Ogunsola & Yusuf 2024) which established the crucial role media play in entrenching democratic values and political stability. It is obviously a testament to how vibrant and active the Nigerian mass media have become especially when it comes to politics and election petition hearings. This high extent of media coverage was comprehensive and provided sufficient information to follow and understand the intricacies of the trial as well as it helped the audience to understand the details and arguments on different sides of the election petition trial.

Arising from the extensive and deep coverage of the subject matter, this paper ascertained as presented in table 4, that the media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial, shaped audiences' opinion about the credibility and plausibility of the election petitions, providing them with a forecast or predictive analysis of which side should prevail in the trial. This is in line with findings of Okhuarobo and Asemah(2024)that concluded that the level of detailed and prominent coverage reflects the judgement's significance, potentially influencing public opinion and understanding of the event. However, audiences' opinions based on media coverage did not align with the tribunal's final judgments and therefore, the tribunal's decisions were independent of the public opinion shaped by media narratives. Also, the cluster mean of 3.39 with a standard deviation of 0.79 shows that audience opinion such as feedback and reactions did not influence tribunal decision during 2023 presidential election petition trial.

This proves that against the original plan or intention of wide media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial with strong and vocal opinions emanating from different quarters, judges and justices were unfazed, detached and immune themselves from peoples' views and expectations as echoed through the mass media. Although their detachment from the public sentiments maybe unconnected to professionalism and of neutrality but sense of loyalty. For instance, Ibeanu (2022) observed that the neutrality of the judiciary in electoral matters has been routinely questioned as the Nigerian judiciary – from the bar to the bench - suffers from its own peculiar problems. Therefore, it is safe to say that absolute neutrality of the judiciary cannot be guaranteed in election petitions as President and the ruling party appoints the Chief Justice of Nigeria, while appointment of judges in Nigeria is based on political connection and favouritism more than it is on merit.

Conclusion

This study examined the hurdles to free and fair election, and audience perception of media coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial in Nigeria. The predominant uneasy and unsettling atmosphere that characterize the mood before, during and after general elections in Nigeria usually attract high magnitude of media attention. This also includes after the political battleground has moved from polling booth to law court for affirmation or invalidation of election results. In this instance, 2023 presidential election petition trial in Nigeria was remarkably different from the previous episodes in the sense that the masses openly expressed their lack of faith and trust in the judiciary even before hearing started just like they did not attach credibility to the election umpire, INEC.

This study concludes that the failure of INEC to conduct free, fair, credible and peaceful elections is the major motivator to seek redress in law court. During the period under review, the mass media provided extensive coverage of key events and testimony of the 2023 presidential election petition trial while social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram were audience's main sources of information. This shows how social media have become most attractive media channel for political communication. Given the puissant effect of the mass media, the coverage of 2023 presidential election petition trial indeed, influenced audiences' opinion about the credibility and plausibility of the election petitions, providing them with a forecast or predictive analysis of what would likely be the outcome. However, audiences' opinions based on media coverage did not align with the tribunal's final judgments. This paper recommends institutional reform especially in Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the judiciary system. A rebirth of these two critical electoral institutions would definitely save the country from pre and post-election crisis.

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