

News Coverage and Perception of 2023 Elections by Academic Staff of Select Universities in South-South, Nigeria

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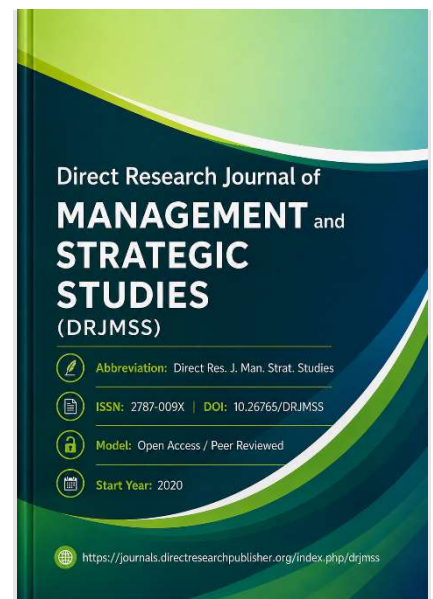
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ABSTRACT

This study examined how academic staff at select universities in Nigeria's South-South region reported on and perceived the 2023 elections. The key goals were to determine academic staff's exposure to election news, identify their favorite sources of information, assess their impression of the credibility and quality of news coverage, and assess their perceived influence of media coverage on election results. Based on the Uses and Gratifications, Agenda-Setting, and Perception Theories, the study used a quantitative research approach, with standardized questionnaire forms distributed to 318 academic staff from selected universities. The data were examined using descriptive statistics and chi-square testing to assess the hypotheses. The findings demonstrated that academic personnel were significantly exposed to election-related news coverage and had strong preferences for specific media sources. However, the majority of respondents thought the news coverage was untrustworthy, and they considered that media coverage had little influence on election results. These findings emphasize the importance of media literacy and the limitations of news coverage in molding political opinions among a highly educated population. Based on these conclusions, the study advises media outlets to improve journalistic credibility, offer impartial and balanced reporting, and create plans to successfully engage informed audiences. In addition to providing insights for policymakers, media practitioners, and academics interested in the relationship between media coverage and political processes, the study advances knowledge of media consumption and perception among Nigerian academic audiences.

Keywords: News Coverage, 2023 Elections, Academic Staff, Universities, South-South Nigeria



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INTRODUCTION

Across the world, elections are a critical part of the institutional framework and remain the cornerstone of a nation's democracy. As Nwakpoke (2019) observes, periodic elections in Nigeria, as elsewhere, provide a platform for orderly leadership succession and help legitimize political authority. Elections are prerequisites of democratic governance, offering citizens a legitimate

platform to choose their representatives and influence the direction of public policy. Credible electoral processes are vital for ensuring political stability, promoting public confidence in democratic institutions, and enhancing the legitimacy of elected governments (Dahl, 1998; Norris, 2014). In Nigeria, the 2023 general elections, held on February 25 for presidential and National Assembly positions and on March 11 for gubernatorial and State Houses of Assembly elections, were highly anticipated,

particularly with the adoption of new electoral technologies such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) (INEC, 2023). Despite these innovations, the elections were marred by logistical challenges, technical failures in result transmission, electoral violence, voter suppression, and allegations that key provisions of the Electoral Act 2022 were not adequately upheld (EU EOM, 2023; CDD, 2023). These developments generated widespread concerns about the credibility of the electoral process and influenced citizens' understanding of and reactions to the elections.

In democratic systems, the media serve as a platform for information dissemination, public discourse, and accountability, while also influencing how political events are interpreted through agenda-setting, framing, and priming (Entman, 1993; McNair, 2011; Asuquo et al., 2016). Nigeria's media landscape comprises state-owned and privately-owned outlets alongside an expansive social media environment, including X, WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, which have expanded access to political information and enabled real-time engagement with electoral issues (Olagunju & Idowu, 2022; Uford et al., 2022; Chilwa & Samoilenko, 2020; Umoren, 2023). However, these platforms have also facilitated the spread of fake news, disinformation, and politically motivated narratives, especially during elections (Adebanwi, 2016; Ifukor, 2010). Studies indicate that media coverage in Nigeria often reflects ownership interests, regional affiliations, and partisan leanings, thereby shaping public perceptions of electoral integrity and affecting trust in both electoral institutions and election outcomes (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2019; Oso, 2012; Raji & Raufu, 2023). Specifically, an empirical assessment of the 2023 general election reportage revealed a notably low compliance with ethical precepts of objectivity and balance among journalists due to personal interests and external pressures (Alaekwe et al., 2024). As a result, citizens increasingly rely on media reports to evaluate electoral credibility, particularly when discrepancies arise between official announcements and media portrayals. During the 2023 elections, INEC collaborated with the media to educate voters on the use of BVAS, voter accreditation procedures, registration verification, and the reporting of electoral irregularities (Olusola, 2019). Political parties and candidates also relied heavily on both traditional and social media platforms to engage voters, particularly young people in urban centres. Media organisations such as The Guardian, Premium Times, Sahara Reporters, Channels Television, TVC, and NTA provided real-time election coverage, updates on voter turnout, reports of irregularities, and analyses of election outcomes.

Of particular significance during the 2023 elections was the controversy surrounding INEC's failure to electronically transmit presidential election results to the IReV portal in real time as promised, leading to widespread criticism, media scrutiny, legal disputes, and allegations of electoral malpractice by major opposition parties.

These developments generated extensive debate among academics, civil society groups, and the general public. Academic staff in universities across the South-South zone, including the University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University, engaged in post-election discussions that critically examined the legitimacy of the elections and competing media narratives. As educators, researchers, and opinion leaders, academic staff possess the intellectual capacity to evaluate media performance and electoral processes critically (Ndaeyo et al., 2025; Akai & Uford, 2025). Despite their relevance, they have received limited attention in studies on media and electoral perception in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates the academic staff of selected universities' perception of news coverage of the 2023 general elections in South-South Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the introduction of technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) to enhance electoral credibility, the 2023 Nigerian general elections were characterised by allegations of electoral malpractice, voter intimidation, logistical failures, and challenges in result transmission, which generated widespread public scepticism. While several studies have examined voters' perceptions of the media coverage of these outcomes in Nigerian elections, little attention has been paid to how academic staff, as informed and critical stakeholders in political communication, perceived news coverage of the 2023 general elections.

This gap is particularly evident in the South-South geopolitical zone, a region with a complex electoral history and significant political relevance. It is as a result of this that there is a need to investigate the academic staff of selected universities' perception of news coverage of the 2023 general elections in South-South Nigeria in order to provide deeper insights into media credibility, electoral legitimacy, democratic accountability, and future electoral reforms.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research were to:

1. Ascertain the level of exposure to news coverage of the 2023 general elections by the Academic Staff of select Universities in the South-South zone in Nigeria.
2. Identify the preferred sources of information by the Academic Staff of Universities in the South-South, Nigeria, during the 2023 elections.
3. Ascertain the perception of news coverage of the 2023 general elections by the Academic Staff.
4. Determine whether news coverage of the 2023 elections has influenced election outcomes as perceived by Academic Staff.

Research Hypotheses

H01: Academic staff are not significantly exposed to news coverage of the 2023 elections

H02: Academic staff do not differ in their preferred sources of information about the 2023 elections

H03: Academic staff do not have a positive perception of the news coverage of the 2023 elections

H04: News coverage of the 2023 election has no influence on election outcomes as perceived by academic staff

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Framing of Elections in Nigeria

The media scramble to win more audiences by framing elections. Framing of the legitimacy of Nigeria's election refers to the journalistic approach of including some aspects of an event in reporting it while ignoring others. Jamieson et al. (2003) reflected on how news information is arranged and packaged and opined that framing determines what information is included and what is ignored. Framing is a mechanism purposively used to "direct attention and then to guide the processing of information so that a preferred reading of the facts comes to dominate public understanding" Gandy (2001: Akpan et al., 2016). The major idea of framing is to reveal that the information delivered to the audience influences people's choices concerning how they process such information. Frames normally operate in an abstract form to provide meaning to a specific message. Framing is increasingly connected to news and how the media emphasizes the information they deliver.

Media framing is carried out through three dimensions, such as active processing, reflective interrogation, and selective scanning (Kosicki et al., 1990). Active processing means seeking information about the election based on its incompleteness released by the media; reflective interrogation means thoughts on information collected from the media; while selective scanning means using the media to collect certain information about the election that is relevant to the audience. Thus, framing explores how the media attempt to influence the audience's opinion by stressing salient issues on how the audience thinks. The emphasis on certain issues can unconsciously influence the audience's thoughts, thereby molding their opinion through a structure.

Nigeria's electoral process has been described as corrupt, determined by stomach infrastructure. Stomach infrastructure refers to practices of persuading potential electorates to support a specific candidate in an election by offering them financial or material gifts in return (Oyelola, 2014). Stomach infrastructure during Nigeria's 2023 election accompanied a hidden agenda of vote-buying. Vote-buying violates Nigeria's electoral law and threatens the progress towards the consolidation and deepening of democracy (Osah, 2021). Vote buying comprises exchanging material or services for votes.

Stomach infrastructure is beyond financial or material inducement during an election. It often includes post-election inducements. Specifically, stomach infrastructure is aimed at satisfying voters' immediate needs instead of long-term needs. Stomach infrastructure appeared to be a long-term tradition in Nigeria. The problem related to the stomach infrastructure is characterized by corruption and intimidation within the political system. It includes various unethical practices, like wealthy politicians buying votes to secure their positions in office, and the presence of corrupt leaders.

The field of media framing studies is expanding as scholars look into how news stories portray people, events, policies, and concerns. Both academic research and the general public's imagination demonstrate the concept's growing appeal (Asiamah, 2022). Studies on framing are currently common in political science and journalism (Entman, et al., 2018). These research tackled media framing from two perspectives: evaluating the content of news (frame building) and identifying the influence of the news on the audience (frame setting) (Thankachan et al., 2021). Frame construction examines how the media frames topics such as politics, elections, social movements, wars, environmental issues, and more (Ogbodo et al., 2020).

Empirical Review

Based on the reviewed studies, scholars generally agree that the media play a significant role in promoting political participation, voter education, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria, although they differ in their assessment of media effectiveness and credibility. Guanah et al. (2017), Uzomah (2017), Udende (2011), and Ochnogor and Amadi (2019) found that exposure to media content, particularly television, newspapers, and radio, positively influenced voter awareness, electoral participation, and turnout. Similarly, Adekoya et al. (2015) and Nyekwere and Nyekwere (2012) concluded that the media effectively mobilized women for political participation, although the latter argued that women's poor electoral performance cannot be attributed solely to media coverage but also to cultural and societal barriers. While these studies collectively highlight the mobilizing capacity of traditional media, Nyekwere and Nyekwere (2012) differ by emphasizing broader structural factors beyond media influence. Several studies further underscore the media's contribution to democratic development and electoral accountability. Kadiri, Muhammed, and Sulaiman (2015) argued that the mass media are indispensable for sustainable democracy because they provide political information, identify societal problems, and create an environment conducive to democratic stability. In a similar vein, Edegoh et al. (2015) examined media ownership and found that privately owned media were more likely to report issues of free and fair elections objectively, whereas government-owned media often reported such issues

selectively. Their findings contrast with the more general optimism of Kadiri et al. (2015) by revealing that ownership interests can affect media objectivity and, consequently, public perceptions of electoral integrity. With the emergence of digital communication technologies, scholars have increasingly focused on the role of social media in electoral participation. Ezebuonyi, Ezegwu, and Onuigbo (2014), Akinlade, and Ajajaiye (2014) found that social media facilitate political mobilisation, voter engagement, and democratic participation by creating direct interaction between politicians and citizens. Likewise, Okoro and Nwafor (2014) observed that social media enhanced transparency, information sharing, and political participation during elections. However, unlike the largely positive assessments of Ezebuonyi et al. (2014) and Ajajaiye (2014), Okoro and Nwafor (2014) highlighted the negative consequences of social media, including the spread of false information, hate speech, cyber manipulation, and online fraud, thereby presenting a more balanced view of its impact on electoral processes.

Despite the valuable contributions of these studies, most focused on voter participation, political mobilisation, voter education, media ownership, or the influence of traditional and social media on electoral behaviour. While Alaekwe et al. (2024) evaluated journalists' ethical compliance, objectivity, and fair representation across political parties during the 2023 general elections, none specifically examined how academic staff perceive news coverage of elections, particularly the 2023 general elections in South-South Nigeria. While studies by Guanah et al. (2017), Uzomah (2017), and Edegoh et al. (2015) investigated audience responses to election coverage, they concentrated on the general electorate rather than highly educated groups such as university academics. Consequently, the present study differs from previous works by focusing on academic staff of selected universities in South-South Nigeria and their perceptions of news coverage of the 2023 general elections, thereby filling an important gap in the existing literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three theories, namely Agenda-Setting Theory and Perception Theory, which collectively explain the role of the media in shaping public discourse, facilitating democratic participation, and influencing audience interpretations of election-related information. Agenda-Setting Theory, propounded by McCombs and Shaw (1972), explains how the media influence public attention by determining the issues that people think about rather than what they think. The theory posits that issues receiving frequent and prominent media coverage are perceived by the public as more important. Through repeated reporting, headline placement, prominence, and sustained attention, the media shape public discourse and influence political perceptions and behaviour (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

In the context of elections, the theory suggests that media emphasis on particular candidates, electoral issues, or controversies can significantly affect how citizens evaluate the electoral process (Chadwick, 2017; McCombs, 2014).

Perception Theory, as advanced by Klapper (1960), explains that individuals interpret media messages differently based on their existing beliefs, values, attitudes, experiences, and cognitive structures. According to the theory, people selectively expose themselves to, attend to, and retain information that aligns with their predispositions, resulting in varied interpretations of the same media content (Klapper, 1960). Consequently, audiences do not react uniformly to media messages, as their perceptions are influenced by personal and social factors. More recent communication research on selective exposure and motivated reasoning further supports this position, showing that political audiences filter information through prior ideological and contextual frames (Stroud, 2011; Zaller, 1992).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach using a survey design. The population of the study comprised 1,825 academic staff from Akwa Ibom State University (388), University of Port Harcourt (1,348), and Edwin Clark University (89), covering both public and private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The sample size of 328 was determined using Taro Yamane's formula at a 0.05 margin of error. The proportionate sampling was used to distribute respondents across the institutions, resulting in 70 from AKSU, 242 from UNIPORT, and 16 from Edwin Clark University, while simple random sampling was used to select questionnaire respondents to ensure an equal chance of participation. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed on a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Reliability of the instrument was established using a test-retest method and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients, all of which exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency of the measurement items. Data analysis for the quantitative aspect involved the use of frequency tables, simple percentages, and mean scores with a decision point of 2.5 to determine acceptance or rejection of items, while inferential statistics such as ANOVA and t-test were employed using SPSS version 20 to test hypotheses.

Data Presentation and Analysis Forms

Out of 328 questionnaire analysis forms distributed (200 printed copies and 128 Google Forms), 318 were correctly filled and returned, giving a 97% response rate. Based on the results from Table 1, the level of exposure to news coverage, the weighted mean of respondents of each of the statements is greater than the mean benchmark of 2.5; therefore, the staff agreed with the statements.

Table 1: Level of Exposure to News Coverage

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Weighted Total	Weighted Mean
1.	I followed media reports about the 2023 elections regularly	138	150	21	9	318	1053	3.31
2.	I accessed election news from multiple media platforms (TV, Radio, Online, Newspaper)	147	155	10	6	318	1079	3.39
3.	I spent a significant amount of time consuming election-related news	131	171	11	5	318	1064	3.35
4.	I preferred online media sites for updates on the 2023 elections.	114	100	79	25	318	939	2.95
5.	I frequently discussed election news with colleagues and students	66	109	91	52	318	825	2.59
6.	My exposure to election news influenced my understanding of political development	194	120	4	0	318	1144	3.60

Table 3: Channels of News Exposure

S/N	Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Weighted Total	Weighted Mean
1.	I prefer online news platform for daily updates	55	47	130	86	318	707	2.22
2.	Television remains my most reliable source of news	123	93	62	40	318	935	2.94
3.	I got most of the news from social media platforms	26	32	181	79	318	641	2.02
4.	I trust traditional media (TV, radio, print) more than online sources	164	78	49	27	318	1015	3.19
5.	University news letter or bulletins	8	14	104	92	318	374	1.18

Table 4: News Coverage of the 2023 Elections

S/N	Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Weighted Total	Weighted Mean
1.	The Nigerian media provided adequate coverage of the 2023 elections	26	40	87	165	318	563	1.77
2.	The news reports on the election were timely and accurate	49	26	102	141	318	619	1.95
3.	Television and online media gave more detailed coverage than newspaper	99	108	63	48	318	894	2.81
4.	Media ownership influenced the tone of election news reports	117	98	56	47	318	921	2.90
5.	News coverage focused more on political parties than on issues affecting Nigerians	32	47	185	54	318	693	2.18
6.	Election coverage was generally fair and balanced	21	30	78	189	318	519	1.63

Table 2 shows respondents' daily exposure to election news. Few respondents 19% spend less than 30 minutes on election news, most respondents (66%) spend 30 minutes – 1 hour, while 1-2 hours represents (14%) of respondents. This indicates that the majority engage highly with the election news, while a smaller group consumes very little.

Table 2: Duration of Daily Exposure to Election News

S/N	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Less than 30 minutes	62	19%
2.	30 Minutes – 1 Hour	210	66%
3.	1 Hour – 2 Hours	46	14%
	TOTAL	318	100%

Based on the results from Table 3, channels of news

exposure, the weighted mean of respondents' statements 2 and 4 is greater than the mean benchmark of 2.5; therefore, the staff agreed with the statements. While the weighted mean of respondents of statements 1, 3, and 5 is less than the mean benchmark of 2.5, the staff disagrees with the statements. From the results from Table 4, news coverage of the 2023 elections, the weighted mean of respondents of statement 3 and 4 is greater than the mean benchmark 2.5, therefore, the staffs agreed with the statements. While the weighted mean of respondents of statement 1, 2, 5 and 6 is less than the mean benchmark 2.5, therefore, the staffs disagrees with statements. From the results from Table 5, perception of media credibility, the weighted mean of respondents of statement 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 is greater than the mean benchmark 2.5, therefore,

Table 6: Determine the Influence of Election Outcomes Perceived by Academic Staff

S/N	Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Weighted Total	Weighted Mean
1.	Media coverage improved my understanding of the 2023 electoral process	211	92	10	5	318	1145	3.60
2.	Election news influenced my opinion about certain political candidates or parties	37	54	133	94	318	670	2.11
3.	Media coverage increased my confidence in the electoral process	14	27	80	197	318	494	1.55
4.	Media reports encouraged civic participation among Nigerians	174	93	22	29	318	1048	3.30
5.	The way elections were reported shaped my trust in Nigerian democracy	15	24	102	177	318	513	1.61
6.	Bias news coverage contributed to the popularity of certain political parties	163	111	25	19	318	1054	3.31

the staffs agreed with the statements. While the weighted mean of respondents of statement 1 is less than the mean benchmark 2.5, therefore, the staffs disagrees with statement. Considering the results from Table 6, determine the influence of election outcomes perceived by academic staff, the weighted mean of respondents of statement 1, 4 and 6 is greater than the mean benchmark 2.5, therefore, the staffs agreed with the statements. While the weighted mean of respondents of statement 2, 3 and 5 is less than the mean benchmark 2.5, therefore, the staffs disagrees with statements.

Test of Hypothesis

Hypothesis One

Academic staffs are not significantly exposed to news coverage of the 2023 elections.

Statistical Test Statistic: Chi-Square Test of Independency

From the result obtained in the Chi-Square test of independence in Table 7 shows that at 0.05 level of significance, the p-value (.000) is less than 0.05, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, academic staffs are significantly exposed to news coverage of the 2023 elections.

Table 7: Chi-Square Tests Result for Hypothesis One

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	420.780 ^a	15	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	410.880	15	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.128	1	0.000
N of Valid Cases	1908		

Hypothesis Two

Academic staffs do not differ in their preferred sources of information about the 2023 elections.

Statistical Test Statistic: One-Way ANOVA

From the result obtained in the One-Way ANOVA in Table 8 shows that at 0.05 level of significance, the p-value (.000) is less than 0.05, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, academic staffs differ in their preferred sources of information about the 2023 elections.

Table 8: ANOVA Result for Hypothesis Two

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	472472.914	3	157490.971	75.477	.000
Within Groups	3267623.551	1566	2086.605		
Total	3740096.464	1569			

Hypothesis Three

Academic staffs have no positive perception of news coverage of the 2023 elections.

Statistical Test Statistic: Chi-Square Test of Independency

From the result obtained in the Chi-Square Test of Independence in Table 9 shows that at 0.05 level of significance, the p-value (.000) is less than 0.05, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, academic staffs have a positive perception of news coverage of the 2023 elections.

Table 9: Chi-Square Tests Results for Hypothesis Three

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	561.121 ^a	15	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	549.095	15	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.031	1	0.859
N of Valid Cases	1908		

Hypothesis Four

News coverage of the 2023 elections has no influence on election outcomes as perceived by academic staff.

Statistical Test Statistic: One-Way ANOVA

From the result obtained in the One-Way ANOVA in Table 10 shows that at 0.05 level of significance, the p-value (.000) is less than 0.05, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, news coverage of the 2023 elections has an influence on election outcomes as perceived by academic staff.

Table 10: ANOVA Result for Hypothesis Four

	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1983471.07	3	661157.023	273.193 .000
Within Groups	4607882.513	1904	2420.106	
Total	6591353.583	1907		

Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate a consistently high level of engagement with election-related media content among academic staff, alongside nuanced perceptions of credibility and influence. Specifically, results show that 61% of respondents reported frequent or very frequent exposure to 2023 election news, while 66% spent at least one hour daily following election-related coverage (Tables 1 and 2). This confirms a strong informational orientation among the sample and supports the Agenda-Setting proposition that sustained media exposure increases issue salience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004). It also aligns with prior evidence that highly educated audiences demonstrate elevated political news consumption patterns due to professional and civic engagement demands (Nwabueze & Eze, 2021). In this context, the data suggest that election coverage in Nigeria achieved high penetration among intellectually engaged publics, reinforcing the media's agenda-setting role during electoral cycles.

With respect to information sources, 52% of respondents identified television as their primary source of election news, while 25% relied on other traditional media, with online platforms also featuring prominently in supplementary use patterns. Credibility was the dominant determinant of preference, accounting for 42% of responses, particularly in relation to television news consumption. This indicates a hybridized media environment in which audiences combine traditional broadcast credibility with the immediacy of digital platforms. Such findings are consistent with Ojebode (2019) and Nwammuo and Nwafor (2020), who argue that contemporary media users engage in complementary consumption patterns across platforms. The results also reflect a critical trust hierarchy in which television retains institutional authority, while online sources are used for verification and immediacy, consistent with media convergence dynamics described in hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017).

Regarding perception of election coverage, the findings reveal a mixed but generally moderate evaluation.

Approximately 51% of respondents considered the coverage credible and professional, although 37% perceived varying degrees of bias in reporting. Additionally, a small but notable proportion (about 5%) expressed strong scepticism regarding credibility. Qualitative data reinforced this ambivalence, with respondents acknowledging professional reporting from outlets such as Channels TV and Arise News, while criticizing perceived political bias and sensational framing in some media organizations. This pattern supports Klapper's (1960) Perception Theory, which explains differential interpretation of media messages based on prior beliefs and cognitive dispositions. It also resonates with Stroud (2011), who emphasizes that perceptions of media bias are often shaped by audience predispositions rather than purely objective content evaluation. Within Habermas' (1989) Public Sphere framework, these findings suggest that while the media facilitated electoral discourse, perceived partiality may have weakened its normative function as a fully balanced deliberative space. Also, findings on perceived media influence indicate that 66% of respondents believed that election coverage significantly influenced voter behaviour, party image formation, and public confidence in electoral credibility. This strong perception of media influence supports Agenda-Setting Theory and its extension into framing effects, which argue that media prominence shapes both salience and interpretation of political issues (McCombs, 2014). It also aligns with empirical studies in the Nigerian context that highlight the media's role in shaping political awareness and electoral attitudes (Asemah, 2019; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). However, the findings also implicitly acknowledge competing determinants of electoral behaviour, suggesting that media influence operates alongside structural factors such as ethnicity and political patronage, as noted by Onabajo (2019). Overall, the results demonstrate that media coverage of the 2023 elections exerted a measurable perceived influence on political cognition, even within a complex multi-factorial electoral environment.

Conclusion

Media coverage significantly influenced the level of awareness, perception, and trust among academic staff during the 2023 general elections. Television remained the most credible and widely trusted platform for election information due to its professionalism, live updates, and analytical depth. Online news platforms, on the other hand, provided speed and accessibility, while social media served as a supplementary source for immediate updates despite concerns about misinformation. It was perceived the election coverage as generally credible and informative but expressed concern about bias and political influence in some media reports. The study therefore concludes that although Nigeria's media landscape has evolved with digital innovations, the fundamental

determinants of audience trust remain rooted in accuracy, fairness, and ethical reporting. Furthermore, the study confirms that the media played a crucial role in shaping electoral perceptions, influencing voter behavior, and fostering democratic engagement among academics in South-South Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) should ensure strict adherence to professional codes that promote fairness, accuracy, and objectivity in news coverage.
2. Universities and civil society organizations should enlighten audience, especially, young voters, on how to critically assess information sources and detect misinformation.
3. Media practitioners should receive specialized training in investigative and data-driven journalism, conflict-sensitive reporting, and digital verification tools to ensure accuracy and balance in their reportage.
4. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should foster closer collaboration with reputable media organizations for timely and transparent dissemination of electoral information.

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