Newspaper Coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement

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Abstract

The researchers investigated the coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal (PEPT) judgement by two major Nigerian newspapers- *The Nation* and *This Day*. The key research objectives of this study were to ascertain the level of coverage given to 2023 PEPT judgement, find out what prominence was given to 2023 PEPT judgement, ascertain the possible position of the select newspapers in their coverage of 2023 PEPT judgement, determine the pattern of reports given to the reportage of 2023 PEPT judgement and to ascertain the frequency of publication of stories on the 2023 PEPT judgement by the select newspapers. The study was anchored on the agenda-setting theory and the framing theory. The methodology adopted was the content analysis, while coding sheet was employed as the instrument of data collection. The findings revealed that the select newspapers provided substantial level of coverage. It was also found that the coverage was balanced, with a mix of positive, neutral and negative stories, while straight news was found to be the most common format, among others. The researchers concluded that both newspapers successfully fulfilled their role as watchdogs and informants, contributing to the democratic process by ensuring transparency and accountability in reporting the PEPT judgement. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended that newspapers organisations should maintain consistent follow-up coverage on major events even after the initial peak to keep the public informed about ongoing developments and long-term implications.

Keywords: Newspaper, Coverage, Presidential Elections, Petition, Judgement

Introduction

The mass media serve as conduits for transmitting information between individuals and across various platforms. They play a pivotal role in facilitating public access to vital information and fostering active engagement in the cultural, economic and socio-political development of society (Asemah, 2022). Media channels include newspapers, television, online platforms, radio, magazines, cinema and comics, functioning as public institutions tasked with reporting and disseminating information. These entities generate messages imbued with specific values, conveying essential information to target audiences. In every society, the press is crucial in shaping events and disseminating information

concerning conflicts, disorders and violence (Nwaoboli, Chukwu, Arijeniwa & Asemah, 2021; Asemah & Nwaoboli, 2023).

The media's essence and significance lie in ensuring the upholding of individuals' rights and privileges (Santas, Inobemhe & Asemah, 2023). The media provide comprehensive information about societal events, addressing fundamental human needs by furnishing details on significant occurrences. Information serves as the lifeblood of any community and the global populace, acting as a catalyst for cohesion. Journalists, as public stewards, disseminate updates on current and pressing societal issues, functioning as vigilant guardians over societal institutions (Asemah & Ekerikevwe, 2015). Newspapers, in particular, garner significant attention during elections, as transparency in elections is challenging without media coverage. The media serve as channels for monitoring, correlation, education and information dissemination to voters, fostering behavioral and attitudinal shifts.

Furthermore, the media shape public interpretations of politics and provide a primary platform for politicians to disseminate their speeches and actions. This relationship between media and political development is tense yet symbiotic, with political entities relying on the media to engage the public, advocate for their agendas and earn trust. Conversely, the media hold politicians accountable for their actions. This interdependence underscores their mutual reliance and reciprocal advantages, as the media would lack substantive content without current affairs, and politicians would struggle to connect with constituents without media platforms. Historically, the Nigerian press has shaped the country's political landscape, facilitating advocacy and fostering effective political leadership (Omoera, 2010). This highlights the pivotal role of mass media in the electoral processes of democratic governments. However, the extent to which the media cover the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal (PEPT) judgement remains uncertain. This study aims to determine the extent of newspaper coverage of the PEPT judgement by select Nigerian newspapers.

Statement of the Problem
In Nigeria, the democratic process involves periodic elections to determine leaders, with the 2023 Presidential Election being a critical event. The democratic process extends beyond the announcement of election results to include mechanisms for addressing disputes and ensuring electoral legitimacy. The Election Petition Tribunal plays a pivotal role in this post-election phase, upholding democratic principles. Following the 2023 Presidential Election, the focus shifted to the Tribunal, where disputes over the results were addressed. Allegations of electoral malpractices and voter intimidation were prominent. Media outlets played a key role in disseminating information and shaping public opinion on these issues.

The coverage of the Tribunal's judgement by Nigerian newspapers, such as *The Nation* and *This Day*, is under scrutiny. The analysis includes aspects like prominence, frequency, pattern, direction, magnitude and framing of the coverage. Comprehensive media coverage of an issue typically results in prominent features across various platforms. This study aims to determine the extent of coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal judgement in *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Ascertain the level of coverage given to 2023 PEPT judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers.
2. Find out what prominence was given to 2023 PEPT judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers.
3. Ascertain the possible position of the select newspapers in their coverage of 2023 PEPT judgement.
4. Determine the pattern of reports given to the reportage of 2023 PEPT judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers.
5. Ascertain the frequency of publication of stories on the 2023 PEPT judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers.

Conceptualising Elections

Elections are a cornerstone of democratic governance, allowing citizens to exercise political rights, choose leaders and shape their societies. They serve as formal processes to select public officials or approve/reject political proposals through voting, establishing governmental legitimacy based on consent (Adibe, 2015). According to Dalton, Farrell & McAllister (2011), elections are dynamic, competitive events where populations decide between candidates or parties, expressing political preferences, debating policies and mobilising support. Diamond & Plattner (2009) state that elections facilitate the expression of popular will, the selection of representatives, and the legitimacy of governmental authority. However, not all elections uphold democratic principles. Authoritarian regimes may conduct elections to project legitimacy, often offering limited choices (Udeze & Uwem, 2013). True democratic elections are competitive, periodic, inclusive and definitive, allowing free criticism and alternative viewpoints (Udeze & Uwem, 2013).

Elections enable citizens to choose representatives, both nationally and locally, contributing to government formation and policy enactment. They legitimise elected officials' authority, holding leaders accountable and promoting transparency (Norris, 2015). Different types of elections serve distinct purposes: presidential elections select a head of state, parliamentary elections determine legislative composition, local elections address community issues, and referendums/initiatives allow direct voting on policies (Birch, 2020). Thus, elections embody principles of popular sovereignty, political equality, and civic engagement, promoting democracy and ensuring representation and participation of diverse voices in society. Their integrity depends on adherence to democratic principles, including freedom of expression, fair competition, and inclusion of diverse political voices.

Understanding Election Petition

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). 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 (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012; Monso, 2013; Kerr & Wahman, 2019).

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. Judicial review of electoral disputes through petitions enhances the integrity and legitimacy of democratic processes (Koge, 2017; Gathii & Akinkugbe, 2022). They often arise from allegations of malpractices like voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, vote buying, or result manipulation, or from perceived violations of electoral laws and procedures (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012; Monso, 2013; Thiankolu, 2013; Oyekami, 2013; Oni, 2020). The process involves gathering evidence, presenting legal arguments, and seeking judicial intervention to nullify results, order a recount or call for a new election, typically filed by candidates, political parties, or concerned citizens with standing to challenge election outcomes (Omotola & Owoeye, 2022). In many jurisdictions, election petitions follow specific legal procedures and timelines to ensure timely and orderly resolution, minimising disruptions and promoting public confidence in election legitimacy (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011). Thus, election petitions are essential for safeguarding electoral integrity and upholding democratic principles by addressing grievances, protecting voter rights, and ensuring elections reflect the electorate's will.

Overview of 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement
The 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election, held on February 25 alongside National Assembly polls, was marked by intense competition and significant controversy. After Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) was declared the winner with 8.8 million votes, opposition candidates Alhaji Atiku Abubakar and Mr. Peter Obi contested the results, alleging fraud and irregularities (Ejekwonyilo, 2023). The petitions questioned Tinubu's eligibility, the legality of his running mate's nomination and the election's integrity. Allegations included electoral manipulation and improper procedures. Despite some petitions being withdrawn, the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal heard the cases, leading to a judgement on September 6, 2023 (Ejekwonyilo, 2023).

The tribunal, in a session lasting over 12 hours, dismissed all three petitions unanimously. The five-member panel, led by Haruna Tsammani, upheld Tinubu's election and affirmed the electoral process's credibility due to insufficient evidence of irregularities and fraud. The tribunal's ruling emphasised adherence to legal principles and the rule of law (*Premium Times*, 2023). Despite the ruling, Atiku and Obi plan to appeal to the Supreme Court, demonstrating their commitment to exhaust all legal avenues to seek redress and uphold democratic principles (*Premium Times*, 2023). The tribunal's judgement underscores the judiciary's role in ensuring electoral integrity and democratic accountability in Nigeria.

Election Petition Tribunal and its Role in the Democratic Process
The Election Petition Tribunal is vital in resolving disputes from electoral contests, ensuring electoral integrity, fairness, and legitimacy (Omenma, Ibeanu & Onyishi, 2017; Burchard & Simati, 2019; Bribena, 2022). It adjudicates complaints of electoral malpractices, reviews petitions contesting election results, and ensures adherence to electoral laws and procedures (Burchard & Simati, 2019). By interpreting electoral laws and setting legal precedents, it safeguards electoral rights and addresses voter disenfranchisement and other violations (Nwagboso, 2011; Umegbolu & Bajela, 2022).

The Tribunal's transparent and impartial proceedings enhance public trust in the electoral system, preventing post-election violence and promoting political stability (Kerr & Wahman, 2019; Birch, Daxecker & Höglund, 2020). Swift dispute resolution minimizes uncertainty, allowing elected officials to focus on governance (Burchard & Simati, 2019). Ultimately, the Tribunal upholds democratic values, reinforcing the principles underpinning democratic governance (Umegbolu & Bajela, 2022).

Media in Elections: The Role of Newspapers
Media platforms play a crucial role in elections by informing voters, shaping public opinion, and facilitating political discourse. Newspapers, in particular, offer in-depth coverage and analysis of political developments, helping voters make informed decisions (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Prior, 2007; Asemah, 2017; Ajibulu & Nwaoboli, 2023). They provide insights into candidates' platforms, policies, and positions through investigative reporting, opinion pieces, and editorials (Graber, 2006; Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023). Newspaper endorsements and their framing of issues can influence voter behavior and public perception (Spenkuch & Toniatti, 2016; Ojekwe, 2016; Ijeh & Oghiagbepha, 2019).

Additionally, the media acts as a watchdog, scrutinising the actions and statements of political candidates and parties to foster transparency and accountability (Mutz, 2006; Asemah, 2022a; Patterson, 2013). Through investigative journalism and fact-checking, newspapers help uncover scandals, expose corruption, and scrutinise political claims, thereby maintaining electoral integrity (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). The media also serves as a platform for political advertising and campaign messaging, enabling candidates to reach a broad audience (Donsbach, 2008; Spenkuch & Toniatti, 2016). However, media bias and sensationalism can distort information and contribute to polarisation and misinformation within the electorate (Ojekwe, 2016). Despite challenges from digital media and changing consumer preferences, newspapers continue to play a vital role in informing voters, fostering political discourse, and holding candidates accountable in the electoral process (Gentzkow, Shapiro & Sinkinson, 2011; Asemah, 2017; Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023; Ajibulu & Nwaoboli, 2023). Hence, media outlets must adhere to principles of objectivity, accuracy and fairness to uphold the integrity of the electoral process and ensure an informed electorate.

Media Coverage of Election Petition Tribunals in Nigeria
Media coverage of election petition tribunals is essential in shaping public opinion and the narrative of contested election outcomes. Newspapers and other media outlets provide news, analysis, and interpretation of legal proceedings, helping voters understand the

intricacies and implications of tribunal hearings (Omotola & Owoeye, 2022; Adibe, 2015; Chibuike & Fafiolu, 2015). The tone and framing of this coverage significantly impact public perceptions and trust in the judicial system (Norris, Frank & Coma, 2015). Media platforms also facilitate debate and discussion through letters, op-eds and guest commentaries, allowing various stakeholders to express their views on the tribunals' significance (Adibe, 2015). However, biases and sensationalism in reporting can polarise public opinion and undermine electoral integrity (Umegbolu & Bajela, 2022). Upholding journalistic standards of accuracy, fairness and impartiality is crucial for maintaining democratic norms and ensuring responsible media contribution to the electoral process.

Empirical Review

This section provides an empirical review of relevant literature in the field of media studies, focusing on previous empirical studies. Okoro & Odoemelam (2013) examined news coverage patterns and framing of Boko Haram activities by Nigerian newspapers using content analysis. They focused on 146 issues from four newspapers over a year, identifying ten frames, including political, economic, religious, and ethnic. The study highlighted the prevalence of these frames but did not explore media effects on the audience. Odoemelam, Ebeze & Okwudiogor (2015) investigated visual framing of Boko Haram coverage in Nigerian newspapers, analysing 120 issues. They identified ten frames and assessed visual techniques used, achieving an intercoder reliability of 0.80. Like the previous study, it did not link media content to audience perception.

Ngwu, Ekwe & Chiaha (2015) studied the framing of the Chibok abduction in Nigerian newspapers and its influence on audiences. They used content analysis and surveys, focusing on 120 issues from four newspapers, and identified seven frames. The study linked media content to audience perception, achieving an intercoder reliability of 84.75%. Amenaghawon (2015) analysed the framing of a Boko Haram bombing by two Nigerian newspapers, examining story placement, sources and frames. The study covered issues from December 2011 to January 2012, identifying frames such as Islamic militants and political miscreants. It did not explore the audience's perception.

Asemah (2015) conducted a content analysis on health issue coverage in Nigerian newspapers, assessing the extent and prominence of coverage. The study emphasised the media's role in promoting health information and suggested collaborations to enhance coverage, especially in rural areas. Obaje (2017) examined news framing patterns in Nigerian newspapers' coverage of Boko Haram attacks from April 2011 to March 2013. Using content analysis, the study found a focus on inflammatory aspects of the attacks and recommended more critical engagement in crisis reporting.

Okocha & Tochi (2021) assessed public perception of newspaper coverage of Herder-Farmer conflicts, focusing on The Punch newspaper. The study found that the newspaper provided timely reports but emphasised the need for balanced coverage to prevent glorifying terrorism. It highlighted the media's role in shaping public perception and national security. Nwaoboli & Ajibulu (2023) analysed *Vanguard* newspaper's online coverage of the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, identifying the use of attack tones and strategy frames. They recommended more policy issue frames for informed electoral

decisions. Similarly, Ajibulu & Nwaoboli (2023) examined the framing of the Russian-Ukraine war in the *Nigerian Guardian*, finding a dominant politicisation frame and unfavourable news slant. Both studies used the framing theory and content analysis methodology. These studies, while diverse in focus, consistently highlight the role of framing in media coverage and its implications for public perception and discourse. The present study addresses the gap in research on the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal's Judgment, employing similar theoretical frameworks and methodologies.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting Theory
The agenda-setting theory explores how mass media shape the public agenda by emphasising certain issues over others. First introduced by McCombs & Shaw in 1972, it delves into the dynamic relationship between media emphasis on issues and the audience's subsequent reactions (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2022; Yaroson & Asemah, 2008; Asemah *et al* 2022). Originally, the theory aimed to explain how media influenced political behaviour during elections (Cohen, cited in Asemah *et al* 2022) and has since expanded to include studies on how media primes and frames issues for audiences (Asemah & Asogwa, 2012; Asemah, Edegoh & Nwammuo, 2013; Edegoh, Asemah & Udeh-Akpe, 2013; Ogwo, Nnaemeka & Asemah, 2013; Santas, Asemah & Jumbo, 2020; Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023; Anwumabelem & Asemah, 2021; David & Asemah, 2021; Omoevah, Oladele & Asemah, 2022). Consequently, individuals tend to prioritise issues the media emphasise over their personal concerns (Asemah *et al* 2022). In the context of the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement, the agenda-setting theory is particularly relevant. Media outlets, through repeated news updates on the tribunal's verdict, played a significant role in shaping public perceptions of the outcomes.

Framing Theory
Framing theory, introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman in the 1970s, posits that individuals use ingrained expectations to make sense of life and events. This theory suggests that the media strategically presents reports to promote certain aspects of perceived reality, aligning public interpretation with the media's agenda (Asemah *et al* 2022). Funderburk (2019) supports this by illustrating how media professionals use adjectives, pictures, words, headlines and tone to shape audience perceptions. Frames highlight specific aspects of an issue while obscuring others, influencing societal views of facts or importance (Koon, Hawkins & Mayhew, 2016). Wallington *et al* (2010) further assert that framing shapes societal thinking by drawing attention to specific points and defining issues over time.

In the context of the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement, framing theory is particularly significant. The media's portrayal of the Tribunal's Judgements involves strategic framing, influencing how the public interprets and understands the PEPT verdict.

Methodology

The researcher employed quantitative content analysis as its methodology. Content analysis allows researchers to systematically and quantitatively study written or recorded materials, encompassing various forms such as texts, videos, music or images (Akoji, Asemah & Ogwo, 2012; Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafo & Okpananchi, 2022). This involves selecting units of analysis and categorising them using well-defined criteria. Given these strengths, the researchers chose to adopt the content analysis approach for this study. The population of study, as defined by Egbulefu & Nwaoboli (2023), refers to the variables or items that the researcher aims to investigate. The researchers examined the content of select newspapers during the period from September 1, 2023, to October 31, 2023. During this timeframe, the publications consist of 61 editions from one national newspaper and a combined total of 122 editions when considering both *The Nation* and *This Day*. The sample size, determined through the application of the Cochran sample size calculation formula, comprises 55 editions, serving as a representative dataset to collect data for the broader population. Formula: n=N/1+N(e)^2, margin of error used for solving is 10%, which is 0.1 Where n represents sample size, N represents Population, 1 is constant, e represents margin of error Solution: n=122/1+122(0.1)^2 =122/1+122(0.01) =122/1+1.2 =122/2.2 =55.45. Therefore n=55.45. Systematic Formula: K=N/n. K=122/55. Therefore, K = 2.2. To this end, a sample size of 55 editions will be systematically sampled.

In the selection of an appropriate sample size for this study, purposive sampling was employed. The data collection instrument employed in this study is the coding sheet. This study employed a quantitative approach for data analysis, utilising descriptive statistical tools to evaluate the collected data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Level of Coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers

Variables	*The Nation*	*This Day*	Frequency (No. of Stories)	Percentage (%)
September	48	35	83	76.1%
October	15	11	26	23.9%
Total	**63**	**46**	**109**	**100%**

The table shows a clear spike in coverage in September (76.1%), suggesting that major events or critical phases of the tribunal judgement occurred during this month. This indicates that select newspapers in Nigeria did well in the reportage of issues relating to the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement.

Table 2: Prominence given to the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers

Variables	*The Nation*	*This Day*	Frequency (No. of Stories)	Percentage (%)
Front page lead	31	27	58	53.2%
Front page	8	5	13	11.9%

Inside page	22	13	35	32.1%
Back page	2	1	3	2.8%
Total	**63**	**46**	**109**	**100%**

The table shows that front page lead stories accounted for 58 stories (53.2%), indicating that a significant portion of the coverage featured as the main story on the front page. This shows a strong emphasis on highlighting the tribunal judgement as a major news item.

Table 3: Format used for the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers

Variables	*The Nation*	*This Day*	Frequency (No. of Stories)	Percentage (%)
Features	11	8	19	17.4%
Interviews	9	6	15	13.8%
Editorials or columns	13	8	21	19.3%
Cartoons	6	3	9	8.3%
Straight news	16	13	29	26.6%
Opinions	8	8	16	14.7%
Total	**63**	**46**	**109**	**100%**

The table above shows that straight news has the highest frequency, with 29 stories (26.61%). This suggests that both newspapers focused heavily on providing factual and timely updates about the tribunal judgement.

Table 4: Directions used for the coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers

Variables	*The Nation*	*This Day*	Frequency (No. of Stories)	Percentage (%)
Positive	25	17	42	38.53%
Neutral	15	11	26	23.85%
Negative	23	18	41	37.61%
Total	**63**	**46**	**109**	**100%**

The table above indicates a fairly balanced coverage of the tribunal judgement by both newspapers, with a slight leaning towards negative stories.

Table 5: Magnitude used for the coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers

Variables	*The Nation*	*This Day*	Frequency (No. of Stories)	Percentage (%)
Full page	23	18	41	37.6%
Half page	14	10	24	22.0%
Quarter page	15	10	25	22.9%
Less than quarter page	11	8	19	17.4%
Total	**63**	**46**	**109**	**100%**

The table shows that full-page stories account for majority of the total coverage (37.6%), indicating potentially more extensive coverage or a greater emphasis on the event by the select newspapers.

Table 6: Frames used for the coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers

Variables	*The Nation*	*This Day*	Frequency (No. of Stories)	Percentage (%)
Legal frame	29	21	50	45.9%
Political frame	11	9	20	18.4%
Public opinion Frame	7	5	12	11%
Historical Cntext frame	8	6	14	12.8%
Media Accountability Frame	5	4	9	8.3%
Visual frame	3	1	4	3.7%
Total	**63**	**46**	**109**	**100%**

The table reveals that the highest number of stories, 50 (45.9%), focused on the legal aspects of the judgement. This indicates that both newspapers emphasised the legal implications and proceedings of the tribunal's decision amongst other aspects of the tribunal's judgement.

Discussion of Findings

This study was conducted to determine newspaper coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal Judgement, with a sample of 55 editions of two mainstream newspapers in Nigeria. The findings revealed that substantial number of full-page stories underscores the high level of importance attributed to the PEPT judgement by both newspapers. Full-page coverage ensures maximum visibility and impact, suggesting comprehensive and detailed reporting, reflecting the event's significance in the national discourse. Also, the notable presence of half-page stories indicates a strong focus on the PEPT judgement. This format allows for substantial detail and analysis, maintaining significant visibility while balancing with other news items. The findings revealed that both *The Nation* and *This Day* provided substantial coverage of the 2023 PEPT judgement, with a significant portion dedicated to full-page and half-page stories. This indicates a high level of commitment to reporting on the judgement, reflecting its perceived importance and relevance. *The Nation* exhibited a slightly higher tendency towards full-page and half-page stories compared to *This Day*, suggesting a marginally greater emphasis on the PEPT judgement. The extent of coverage by both newspapers underscores the critical role of the PEPT judgement in the national political landscape. The extensive use of full-page and half-page stories highlights the newspapers' efforts to ensure that their readers are thoroughly informed about the judgement and its implications. This level of detailed and prominent coverage reflects the judgement's significance, potentially influencing public opinion and understanding of the event.

The level of coverage given to the 2023 PEPT judgement by *The Nation* and *This Day* newspapers was substantial and varied, with significant emphasis on full-page and half-page stories. This pattern of coverage reflects the importance attributed to the

judgement, ensuring that it remained highly visible and thoroughly reported. The balanced approach, incorporating various levels of coverage, highlights the newspapers' efforts to provide comprehensive yet diverse reporting, catering to the informational needs of their readership. This is in line with the agenda-setting theory, which posits that the public takes cognisance of topical issues in society through their constant coverage by the media. This aligns with the findings of studies by Asemah (2015); Obaje (2017); Okocha & Tochi (2021), which revealed that newspapers cover specific issues in society to varied extents and prominence.

The findings showed that both newspapers allocated significant coverage to front-page lead stories, with *The Nation* publishing 31 and *This Day* 27, making up 53.2% of the total coverage. This indicates a high visibility and importance placed on the PEPT judgement. *The Nation* featured 22 inside-page stories and *This Day* 13, totalling 35 stories or 32.1% of the coverage. Additionally, *The Nation* published 8 regular front-page stories and *This Day* 5, totalling 13 stories or 11.9%. The prominence given to the PEPT judgement reflects editorial decisions on its significance. Front-page lead stories suggest high importance, while inside-page stories provide in-depth analysis. *The Nation* exhibited a slightly higher frequency of front-page leads, indicating a marginally greater emphasis on the event. This extensive coverage highlights the event's significance in Nigeria's political landscape. This is in line with Asemah *et al* (2022) who gave one of the assumptions of the agenda setting theory, which states that the media can provide, sustain and do prominent coverage of an issue and marginalise others and the status conferral theory which suggests that the level of prominence given to an issue can shape and influence the perception of the audience on such issue. Hence the agenda setting and status conferral power of the media lies in their ranking and coverage of stories. This finding is also in tandem with Nwaoboli & Ajibulu (2023) and Ajibulu & Nwaoboli (2023) who found that the predominance coverage of an issue can influence the perception of the audience.

The findings further showed that the stories were positive, neutral and negative, indicating a balanced distribution with a slight tilt towards positive stories. Nearly a quarter of the coverage was neutral, suggesting efforts at objective reporting. The emphasis on the legal frame reflects a focus on judicial aspects, while the political frame addresses the judgement's political implications. The use of public opinion and historical frames indicates efforts to present diverse perspectives and context, respectively. Media accountability frames highlight the media's role in scrutiny, and visual frames enhance reader engagement.

The findings suggested both newspapers maintained a balanced approach, providing a mix of positive, neutral and negative stories and using diverse framing strategies to offer a comprehensive view of the PEPT judgement. This finding aligns with the framing theory and studies by Amenaghawon (2015), Okoro & Odoemelam (2013), Odoemelam, Ebeze & Okwudiogor (2015), and Ngwu, Ekwe & Chiaha (2015), which highlight the prevalence of political framing in newspaper reportage.

It was observed that straight news stories were the most prevalent, thereby prioritising factual reporting. Editorials and columns followed closely, offering

interpretative perspectives (19.3%). Features provided detailed examination (17.4%), while opinion pieces fostered diverse viewpoints (14.7%). Interviews offered direct insights (13.8%) and cartoons, although less frequent, offered a satirical angle (8.3%). This diverse approach ensures comprehensive coverage, catering to various reader preferences. Straight news stories deliver timely updates, while editorials and features provide analysis and context. Opinion pieces and interviews offer diverse perspectives, enriching the discourse. Cartoons add a creative dimension, engaging readers through visual storytelling. Overall, the reportage pattern is balanced and comprehensive, aligning with Alfred, Ogwo & Ekwueme (2017), which highlights the importance of interpretative journalism. This approach encourages informed public discourse, as noted by Obaje (2017), who emphasises the need for diverse viewpoints on topical issues.

It was discovered that in September and October, *The Nation* published 63 stories, while *This Day* published 46 stories, indicating a higher frequency of coverage by *The Nation*. In September, both newspapers prioritised the PEPT judgement, with *The Nation* reporting 48 stories (76.1%) and *This Day* 35 stories (76.1%). However, in October, coverage significantly declined for both newspapers, with *The Nation* publishing 15 stories (23.9%) and *This Day* 11 stories (23.9%). This drop suggests a decreased interest or relevance of the PEPT judgement over time. Several factors could explain this trend: initial heightened media attention due to the novelty of the judgement, other events overshadowing the judgement in the news cycle, and a lack of new developments related to the PEPT judgement. Editorial decisions and audience interests may also have influenced coverage patterns. The findings demonstrated that the coverage of the 2023 PEPT judgement was high, particularly in September. This supports the agenda-setting theory, which posits that media influences public perception by focusing on specific issues. It aligns with Okocha & Tochi (2021), who emphasised the media's role in shaping public discourse and the need for balanced, objective reporting on contentious issues.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers concluded that both newspapers successfully fulfilled their role as watchdogs and informants, contributing to the democratic process by ensuring transparency and accountability in the reporting of the PEPT judgement. Their extensive coverage likely influenced public opinion and contributed to the national dialogue on electoral justice and political accountability in Nigeria. Therefore, the coverage of the 2023 PEPT judgement by *The Nation and This Day* serves can be acclaimed to be an effective and responsible journalism, highlighting the essential role of the media in democratic societies. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Newspapers organisations should maintain consistent follow-up coverage on major events even after the initial peak to keep the public informed about ongoing developments and long-term implications.
2. Media organisation should invest in continuous training for journalists on investigative reporting and legal journalism to enhance the quality of coverage on judicial and political matters.

3. Newspapers organisations should implement robust reader feedback mechanisms to gauge audience interest and perspectives, allowing them to tailor their coverage more effectively.

4. There is need for encouraged collaboration between different media houses for comprehensive coverage of national significance events, leveraging collective resources and expertise.

5. Enhance digital platforms to provide real-time updates, interactive features and multimedia content, ensuring wider reach and engagement in an increasingly digital media landscape.

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