PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENT TELEVISION "DEMOCRACY TODAY" PROGRAMME ON THE PROMOTION OF NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

Bassey Andrew Ubong

Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Social Science,

Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

Email: ubongresearch@gmail.com; Tel.: +2347025126422

ABSTRACT: *The significance of television as a mobilisation medium is widely acknowledged on a global scale. African Independent Television's (AIT) "Democracy Today" programme holds a prominent position as a political, social, and economic show and is considered one of the flagship programs on Nigerian television. This study aims to explore the public perception of AIT's "Democracy Today" programme in its role in promoting Nigeria's democracy. Drawing on media dependency theory, agenda setting theory, and the psychological theory of perception, the research used a survey research design, employing an availability sampling technique to distribute 400 questionnaires among residents of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. The findings revealed that participants were familiar with and exposed to the "Democracy Today" programme, and data indicated that they believed the programme had a positive impact on Nigeria's democratic development. Moreover, the study found that a majority of participants comprehended the content aired on the "Democracy Today" programme. The research in conclusion posits that the opinions of Abuja residents regarding the development of the country's democracy have been significantly influenced by AIT's "Democracy Today" programme. The study recommends the initiation of more programmes similar to "Democracy Today" by broadcast stations in Nigeria, emphasising the potential for broadening Nigerians' knowledge about the country's democratic journey.*

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Television, Programme, Perception, Promotion.

INTRODUCTION

The media, encompassing radio, television, newspapers, magazines and Internet media, has been referred to as the Fourth Estate of the Realm or Fourth Branch of government by Walter Bagehot, a former British Parliamentarian. Recognising the crucial role that the media plays in any society, Thomas Jefferson, a former President of the United States of America, USA, asserts that given the choice between government without newspapers or newspapers without government, he would unhesitatingly prefer the latter. This statement aligns with John Merrill's perspective on press responsibility, which includes the self-imposed duty of being a watchdog on society. Harod Lasswell, a communication scholar, concurs further by stating that the media in any society performs three critical functions, which include surveillance, interpretation, and social mobilisation. The manner in which these interconnected responsibilities are carried out significantly impacts the socio-political landscape of the state in which the media operates.

The unique ability of television is that it appeals to both sense of sight and sound and meets the needs of both the illiterate (less educated) and literate classes. Television, with its appeal, plays an important role in disseminating messages about a democratic system. This role has enabled it to make significant contributions to the political, economic and social education of the general public, through enlightenment, awareness, consciousness, and, in some cases, a space for political, economic and social debate.

"*Democracy Today*" is a programme on AIT that discusses political, economic, social, educational and other issues aimed at promoting Nigeria's democracy. The programme is aired Monday to Friday every week from 7pm to 8pm.

As argued earlier, broadcast media, as well as the media in general, aim to educate and inform their audience about democracy while also exposing them to political, social and economic spheres and equipping them with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions in their communities. Because these programmes have an impact on citizens, media organisations must constantly report on and analyse these issues to boost democratic ideals among the people. This implies that citizens in a democratic setting, especially adults, would most likely turn to the media to gain information, learn about political aspirants or candidates, share political, economic, social and other relevant information, and be active participants in the practice of democratic activities in their domain (Olaniru, Olatunji, Ayandele & Popoola, 2020; Alade, 2022).

Volumes of studies on broadcast programmes and advancement of democracy have been conducted (Sale, Bappayo & Abubakar, 2018; Arede& Orji, 2022; Bappayo, Abubakar & Kirfi, 2021; Fadeyi & Onijamowo, 2023; Bebenimibo, 2023). However, none of the authors above focused on public (residents of Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria) perception of African Independent Television (AIT) "*Democracy Today*" programme on the promotion of Nigeria's democracy. This is the gap in knowledge that this study bridged.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

i. Find out whether residents of Federal Capital Territory, Abuja watch *Democracy Today* programme on AIT.

ii. Determine the extent to which residents of Federal Capital Territory, Abuja are exposed to *Democracy Today* programme on AIT.

iii. Find out Federal Capital Territory, Abuja residents' perception of *Democracy Today* programme on AIT.

iv. Determine the influence of AIT's *Democracy Today* programme on the promotion of Nigeria's democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Mass Media

The term "mass media" has been given many different definitions, connotations and attributes. According to Auwal (2014) and Asemah (2011b), mass media refers to a group of communication channels, broadly classified as print and electronic, that informs the public about events occurring on a daily basis in society. Stated differently, it refers to the entirety of information-dissemination structures and organisations that operate in a political, economic and social system. The public is informed about all facets and acts of the state and government by the media (Utor, 2000 as quoted in Abagen, 2009).

Democracy

Democracy comes from the Greek term demokratia, meaning people's rule. Abraham Lincoln's famous dictum goes thus: "Democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Although opinions on democracy differ, it may be assessed from two perspectives: as a process and as a concept. Idemudia (2008) claims that democracy is seen as a notion from a theoretical standpoint. Democracy thus lends itself more to theoretical interpretation than to actual application, suggesting that nation-states claiming democratic rights are not genuinely engaging in democratic practices (Idemudia, 2008). Okunade (2001) submits that democracy is thought of as a long-term process that involves restructuring a civil society's institutions. In addition, the Human Development Report (1993), which is quoted in Okunade (2001), describes democracy as a way of life; it is more than just creating new election methods, drafting constitutions, or having one-time elections. Democracy is only a process when all of its fundamental principles, which include freedom of choice, speech, and opinion, as well as fair opportunity for everyone are fully upheld and applied in a community. It should monitor the deeds and inactions of governmental institutions, work to combat corruption, and advance accountability and openness in the governing process.

Perception

Perception is the interpretation attached to cognitions. According to Schacter (2011) in Sale, Bappayo and Abubakar (2018), perception refers to the identification, arrangement and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the environment. Pickens (2005) in Sale *et al.* (2018) asserts that perception is the process by which organisms interpret and organise sensations to produce a meaningful experience of the world. Thus, perception within the realm of this study refers to the process of interpreting AIT's "*Democracy Today*" programme by its audience and how this programme is promoting Nigeria's democracy.

The Relationship between Mass Media and Promotion of Democratic Values: The Nigerian Experience

An institution like the media is necessary to help these values become ingrained in society because democracy is understood as a system that functions on the principles of equality, participation, majority rule and minority rights, rule of law and due process, respect for human rights, and free and fair elections. It is also possible for the public to actively participate in governance, which represents the exercise of their sovereignty as outlined in the constitution, thanks to the media, which offers a free exchange of information and strong avenues for the expression of ideas and opinions. In order for democracy to flourish in any given community, people need to have access to all the knowledge required to protect and steer their electoral choices (Jega, 2014). In a democracy, then, the media acts as a conduit between the people and the government. Ate (2007) argues that in a democratic context, the media establishes a connection between the electorate and the candidate, as well as the government. The main takeaway about the media and government is that the former shapes the latter in society and that both have complementary functions in the interest of the general public. The fundamental link between the media, democracy, and government is established by this.

The political and communication processes are peculiarly intimately linked, and no organisation as large and powerful as the media can avoid being involved in politics and government. In addition to serving as platforms for the dissemination of political discourse and information, the media is an important actor directly involved in the formulation of economic and regulatory policies, as well as the way in which the government views dissent and free speech. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the mass media, the fourth estate of the realm, will serve as a catalyst for the tripartite relationship, which embraces democracy, politics and development (Idemudia, 2008; Tivlumu & Terlumun, 2010).

The mass media's prominent position as the fourth estate of the realm underpins their function in a democratic society, such as Nigeria. To support this, Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution states that the press, radio, television and other mass media agencies shall always be free to uphold the basic goals outlined in this Chapter and hold the government accountable to the people. This clause in the constitution makes it very clear what the mass media is expected to do in a democracy. The media's role in a democratic setting goes beyond providing information, entertainment and education (Olusola, 2008). The media is also accountable for upholding and promoting the values of the democratic ethos and for continuously ensuring and guaranteeing the protection of individual freedoms as well as media freedoms, which are fundamental to the public's engagement in liberal democracies. Nwagbara (2010) affirms that the media, often referred to as the watchdog of the society, helps in highlighting the

shortcomings of those in positions of power and acts as a check and balance on the powers of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. By performing the role stated above, the media in Nigeria sets the agenda, coordinates public discussions and debates, and contextualises problems so that Nigerians can understand them (Sambe, 2008). The media, whether print or electronic, according to Asemah (2011) has obligations to the politica, social, educational and religious spheres of a society like Nigeria. Akinwale (2008) corroborates that the responsibility of the mass media to individuals and society as a whole is immense. Indeed, the media can be a useful tool for socioeconomic and political development when used appropriately; it is a valuable asset to society (Utor, 2000 cited in Abagen, 2009). Therefore, by informing voters, defending human rights, encouraging tolerance between different social groups, making sure that the government is open and accountable, and other measures, the mass media can advance Nigeria's democracy.

However, the relationship between the Nigerian government and the media has historically been characterised by a number of factors, including mutual mistrust, excessive secrecy particularly when it comes to matters of national interest, undue restrictions imposed on the media through obnoxious legislation, and extrajudicial actions, among others. This is similar to what Abone and Kur (2014) characterise as a game of cat and mouse.

Notwithstanding the obstacles that affect this relationship, the media are essential to the endeavours of upholding democratic principles and encouraging responsible leadership in Nigeria. Since gaining independence, the mass media has made every effort to keep an eye on governance and maintain the public's right to hold the government accountable (Bamidele, 2012). The degree of media freedom in the political sphere has been a clear indicator of democracy's success since the democratic dispensation began on May 29, 1999. Therefore, a free media is necessary for democracy (Baran, 2004). Nonetheless, it is instructive to deduce that the media's role in sustaining democracy cannot be if it is to endure and be a fruitful concept. Additionally, the media must be free from excessive government control if it is to play any meaningful role in democracy and governance (Ayoola, 2008 quoted in Sowunmi et al., 2010). Since serving the public interest is the media's primary objective in any society, there is a clear nexus between the media, democracy, and the political system.

Empirical Review

Researchers have worked in tandem with attempts to media and the promotion of democratic ideals. As a result, this study's section here covers a few of these studies that are pertinent to the main idea of the current study. To begin with, Sale, Bappayo and Abubakar (2018) carried out a study on the topic, "Comparative Analysis of Audience Perception of Globe FM (98.5) and Bauchi Radio Corporation's (BRC) Political Programmes During the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria." The objectives of the study were to find out the frequency of exposure to the political programmes from Globe FM and Bauchi Radio Corporation during the 2015 presidential election among residents of Bauchi, and Yobe States, as well as to examine which political programme (between *Ga fili ga doki* of Globe FM and *Maji ma gani* of BRC) audience perceive as more informative during the 2015 presidential campaigns. Survey research design was deployed to collect data. The research established that those who participated in the study were exposed to political programmes from Globe FM than they were to those from BRC. The results also indicated that respondents perceived political programmes from both Globe and BRC as very informative. The study concluded Globe FM was perceived to have done better than BRC in the area of political programmes. It was suggested that radio political programmes

should provide adequate information on the candidates that can guide the public in their political decisions.

In Nigeria's South-South zone, Arede and Orji (2022) looked at the effect of radio broadcasting on political participation. Four hundred (400) people were surveyed for the study, which had cross-sectional research design as its foundation. The study supported academics' positions on the topic of inquiry, showing that radio broadcasts have a significant impact on South-South peoples' attitudes toward political activities. The study recommended that more work was required to guarantee that information was disseminated via radio in order to favourably affect people's behaviour and perspectives on Nigerian election procedures.

Bappayo, Abubakar and Kirfi (2021) assessed "The Impact of Mass Media on Political Mobilization Process in Plateau State Radio Television Corporation, Jos (PRTVC), Nigeria." The objective of the study was to determine the level at which interference of the government in the activities of mass media affects the political mobilization process. Data was collected through the use of the survey research method. Agenda Setting Theory was employed to further explain the crux of the study. Findings revealed that without the mass media, the government cannot perform its functions effectively. Data from the study equally indicated that freedom of the media remained an important aspect for the promotion of democratic values in Nigeria. The study suggested that for effective and impartial political mobilisation through the mass media, it is crucial to establish complete autonomy. The autonomy will subsequently guarantee a mass media that is free and independent.

The thrust of Fadeyi and Onijamowo (2023) study was on "Influence of Fresh FM Ocean of Politics Programme on Political Participation among Oshogbo Residents." The researcher made use of the survey research technique, while anchoring the investigation on Agenda setting theory and Media dependency theory. The study found that the programme had a positive influence on the audience's political participation in the state. It was suggested that balance and fairness should be taken into consideration by broadcast stations airing political programmes.

Bebenimibo (2023) investigated "Audience Perception of African Independent Television's Focus Nigeria Programme." Using agenda setting theory, the study drew on academic knowledge about the role broadcast media plays in sustaining long-term democracy as well as the ways in which broadcasting can be used to advance political ideas such as accountability, integrity, honesty, justice, and equality. The research employed a cross-sectional design and a survey as its main methods of data collection. The results revealed that the electorate and political class in Nigeria are aware of the AIT Focus Nigeria initiative. Over two-thirds of the participants believed that it was worthwhile to keep up the initiative. The study therefore advocated that more avenues should be initiated for viewers to engage with the programme more.

Oluwatoyin (2013) assessed "Role of Independent Television, Benin, in Political Mobilisation of Rural Areas: A Study of Uziare L.G.A in Edo State." The objectives of the study were to know the extent to which the independent Television Benin Programs have gone in mobilising voters in rural areas during elections, and to find out the responses of the rural areas surrounding ITV and programmes of Independent Television Benin that promotes political mobilisation. The objective was also to examine the strategies employed by Independent Television Benin to achieve political mobilisation in Uziare and surrounding areas. Survey research method was deployed to gather data from the respondents while social responsibility

theory was adopted as the theoretical framework. The results of the study indicated that the impact of television is not yet fully enjoyed by many in the Uziare zone because of the high cost of television and electricity supply for those who own television sets. The study thus suggested that the government improves the economy of the nation to enable many people to own television sets. In addition, television stations should have more programmes to carry rural dwellers along.

Oluwatosin, Olusoji, Olusola and Olugbenga (2020) studied "The Influence of Media on Political Knowledge amongst Undergraduate Students in Ibadan, Nigeria." The aims of the research were to find out the frequency of the forms of media accessed and level of political knowledge among Nigerian students. Another objective was to examine the nexus between political knowledge and access to radio, television, newspaper, and social media. Lastly, the study set out to assess the predictive influence of the frequency of media access on Nigerian students' political knowledge. Uses and gratification theory was adopted to further explain the focus of the study. Information from respondents was collected via the use of cross-sectional survey research design. The researchers found that social media was the most frequently used media. Next were radio, then television and newspaper. More than 30% of the participants had very high political knowledge. It was concluded that radio is the foremost source of political knowledge amongst undergraduate students in Ibadan, Nigeria. The study advocated that various media institutions and political analysts should take advantage of social media to make more audiences politically knowledgeable.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Media Dependency Theory, Psychological Theory of Perception and Agenda Setting Theory.

Media Dependency Theory

Melvin Defleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach are the brains behind the Media Dependency Theory, which they developed in 1976. According to the theory, media consumers actively participate in the communication process. In addition to long-standing concerns about the content of media messages, the theory integrates psychological elements from the theory of social categories, elements from causal interference theories, and perspectives from the theory of uses and gratification. This agrees with the standpoint of Syallow (2015) that the central idea of the theory is the necessity of analysing audiences and media within the context of larger social systems. When people are looking for more information or want to accomplish a variety of goals, they look to the media, which always has an answer (Oji, 2018).

The degree to which we rely on media and its content, according to Hmielowski (2014), is a significant factor in determining when and why media messages alter the audience's beliefs or behaviours. The ability of the media to best meet an individual's needs, social stability, its function as an active participant in communication, and the psychological characteristics of a "Can You Individual" are all found to be directly connected with an individual's level of media dependence (Syallow, 2015). Put differently, an individual will depend on a medium for information if it satisfies their need for personal data. People will therefore become more dependent on media that meets a variety of needs compared to the ones that do not meet their needs.

The nature of media dependency theory is relatively scientific. Although each person uses the media in a different way, it predicts a correlation between media dependence and the significance and influence of the media. The point being emphasised is that everyone is impacted by the media in a unique way (Syallow, 2015). It does, however, provide a convincing justification for why, at a particular point in their social lives, people depend on the media for information. The theory's applicability to the study is predicated on the idea that individuals with a keen interest in political or development processes require media information, such as the *Democracy Today* programme on AIT, in order to engage in those processes. In instances where the audiences are exposed to a lot of this kind of media content, there will be a greater degree of political, economic and social awareness and participation of the people because of messages that the media produces.

Psychological Theory of Perception

According to Nelson and Quick (1997) in Unumeri (2009), social perception, also known as perception, is the process of interpreting information about another person, event or issues in the society. In simple terms, this definition suggests that the way we perceive people, events, or issues is influenced by the amount of information we have and our ability to accurately understand that information. Therefore, even if multiple individuals have access to the same information about a situation, person, or group, they may still come to different conclusions due to their individual differences in interpreting the information.

According to Folarin (2002), perception is influenced by various factors including psychological disposition, past experiences, cultural expectations, and social relationships. The process of media audience perception can be broken down into four stages: selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception and selective retention. Selective exposure refers to the act of seeking out and engaging with communications that align with one's existing attitudes, while disregarding those that do not. Selective attention involves focusing on specific information to avoid confusion. Selective perception emphasises that the interpretation of any message is dependent on the receiver. Lastly, selective retention pertains to the audience's ability to remember information that is relevant to their wants, needs and attitudes.

As it relates to the "*Democracy Today*" programme on AIT, after exposure, the audiences selectively pay attention or concentrate on certain aspects of the programme depending on the audience's needs and expectations. This selective attention transits to the next level of perception, where it is believed that the audience would form an opinion based on understanding of the content of "Democracy Today" programme. Psychological Theory of Perception thus assumes a significant signpost in this investigation as it explains how the audience perceives the programme.

Agenda Setting Theory

The concept of agenda setting refers to the media's ability to inform us about which topics are significant. It suggests that while the media may not always dictate our thoughts, they are quite effective in influencing the subjects we focus on. This theory helps explain why individuals with similar exposure tend to prioritise the same issues. McCombs and Shaw (1977), with the support of the National Association of Broadcasters, conducted research on the agenda setting function of the mass media during the 1968 presidential elections between Richard Nixon and

Hubert Humphrey. Their findings indicate that there is a strong correlation between the media's perception of importance and the public's awareness of salience.

Essentially, this means that what the media deems significant will eventually be reflected in the public's perception of importance. Shaw and McCombs (1977) argue that the mass media plays a crucial role in shaping our political culture and influencing the public's perception of political reality and current political issues. Building upon Shaw and McCombs' research, it is widely believed that through their traditional functions of surveillance, correlation, and transmission of socio-cultural heritage, the media establish a framework for political discussions, thereby aiding in the promotion of democratic values, as in the case of Nigeria and AIT's "*Democracy Today*" programme.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey design due to the fact that it is predominantly used to get a general idea of the views and perceptions of respondents on a subject of investigation. Olaoye, Enyindah and Asemah (2022) assert that "survey is an empirical study that uses questionnaires to discover descriptive characteristics of a phenomenon" (p.302). The population of this study comprises residents of the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects, the current metro area of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja population in 2023 is 3,839,646. For effective data handling, the researcher used a sample size of 400. The study adopted an availability sampling technique in the distribution of the questionnaire. Data was presented through the use of frequency and percentage charts.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Four hundred (400) copies of the questionnaire were distributed out of which 391 copies were returned as shown in the chart below:
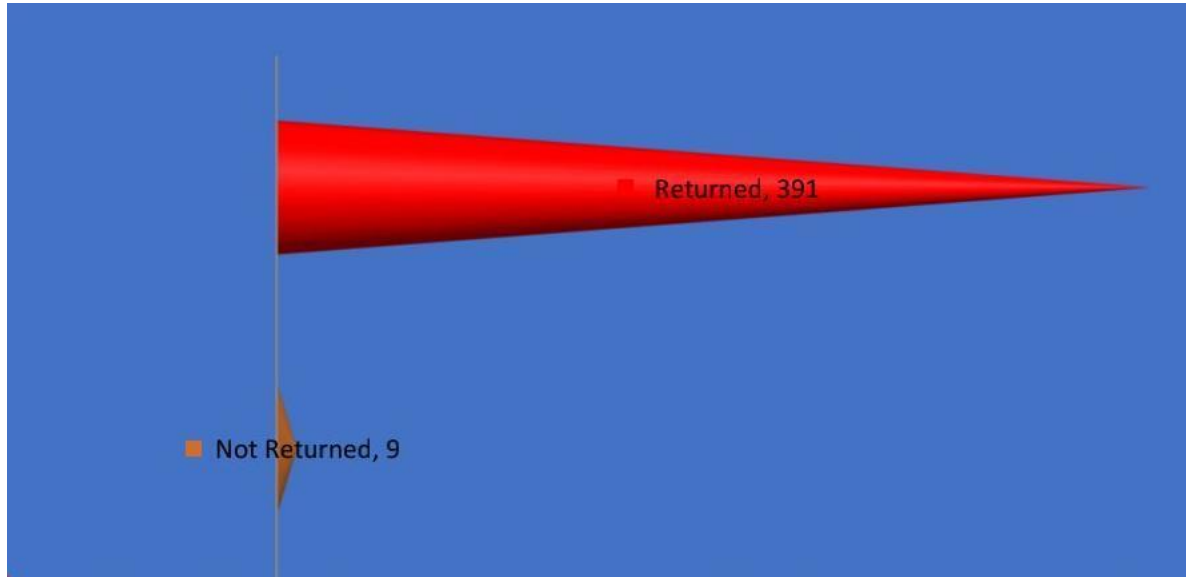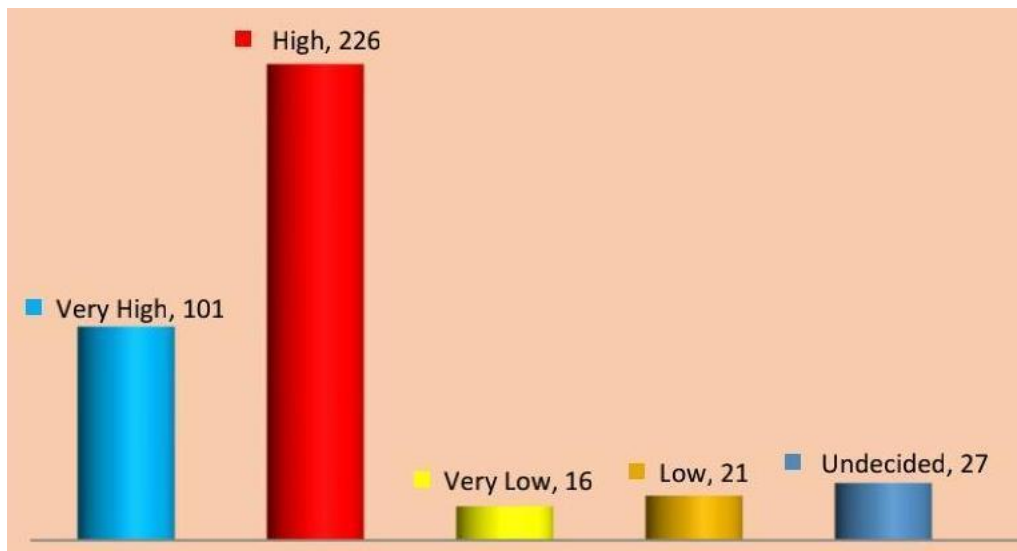

**Figure 1: Analysis of response rate**
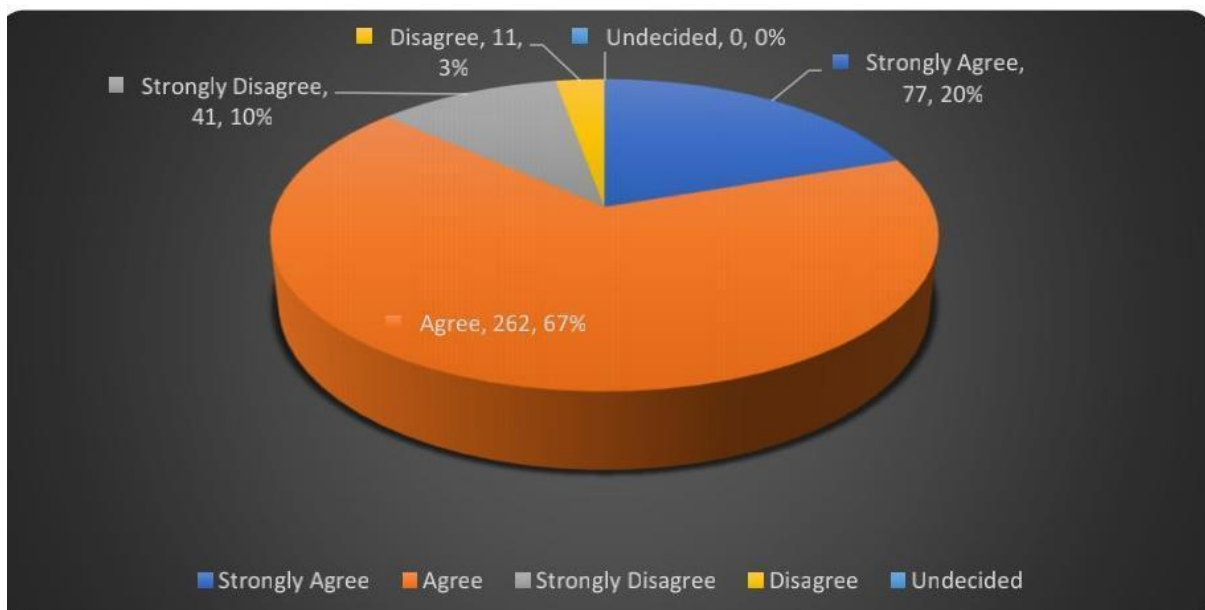
Figure 2: Respondents' knowledge of "*Democracy Today*" programme on AIT

Figure 2 reveals that most (67%) of the respondents are aware of AIT's "*Democracy Today"* programme. It could be deduced from the data that more Nigerians are taking part in media programmes and this is a good move towards the advancement of the nation's democracy.

Figure 3: Extent of exposure to AIT's "*Democracy Today*" programme

Data in the above chart is an indication that viewership of the "*Democracy Today*" programme on AIT is high. Thus, it could be inferred that more Nigerians are becoming consumers of media programmes, and this could have a positive impact on the nation's democracy.
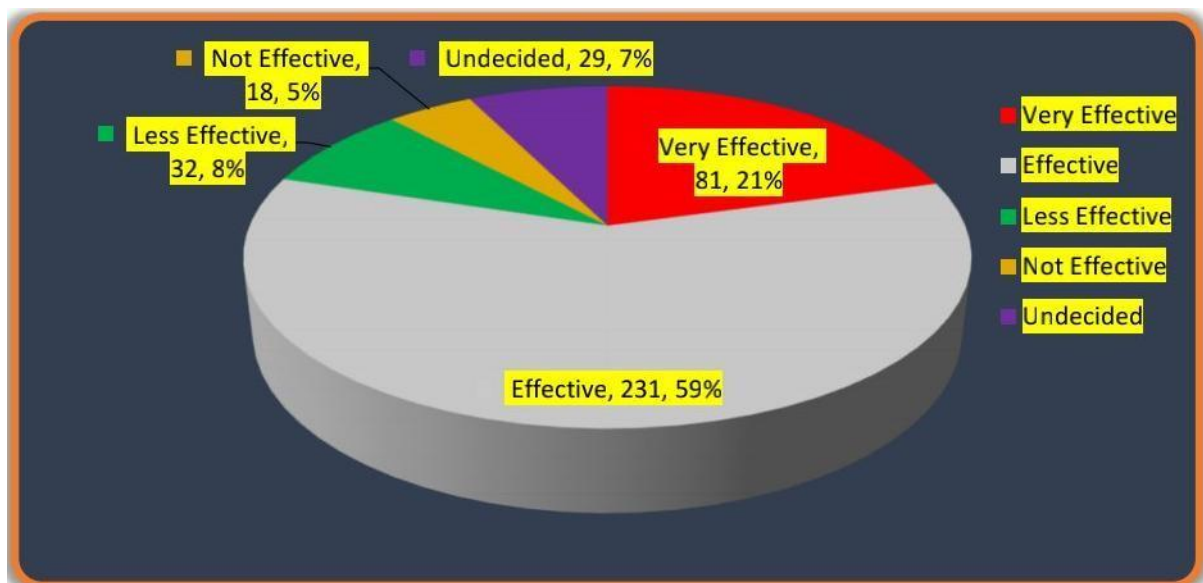
Figure 4: Perception of AIT's "*Democracy Today*" programme effectiveness

The implication of this data is that since most of the respondents viewed the programme, there is a tendency that television and other media programmes that deal with democracy are having a positive effect on Nigeria, as these media programmes help them to participate in the democratic development of the country.
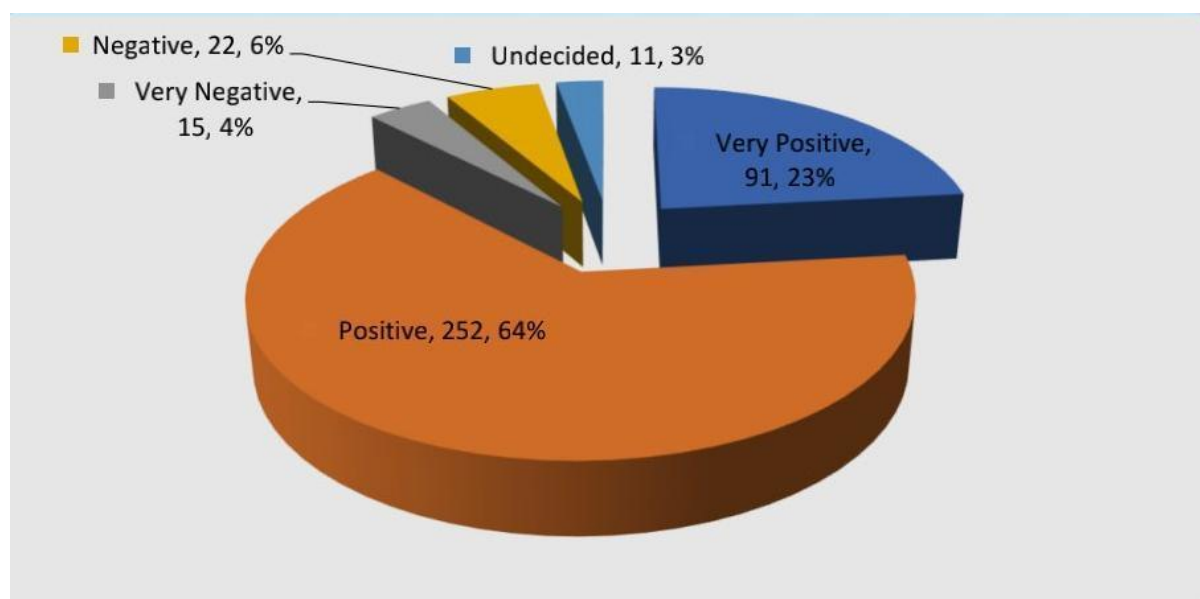
Figure 5: Impact of AIT's "*Democracy Today*" programme on participation in Nigeria's democracy

It could be inferred in the result in the chart above that media programmes remain a major catalyst in affecting people's decisions in taking part in the democratic development of their country.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study revealed that participants were familiar with and had exposure to AIT's "Democracy Today" programme. The data indicated that participants believed the programme had a positive impact on Nigeria's democratic development. This aligns with Charles, David, and Olusola's (2013) assertions, as cited in Murkthar (2017), emphasising the media's role in shaping public perception through enlightenment, education, and information dissemination. Such influence enables individuals to make informed decisions that contribute to societal improvement.

Furthermore, the research found that the majority of participants understood the content of the "Democracy Today" programme. This finding is consistent with Sale, Bappayo and Abubakar's (2018) study, supporting the idea that individuals who are uncertain about societal issues often turn to the media to gain knowledge and make informed choices. Additionally, the study aligns with Fadeyi and Onijamowo's (2023) research, highlighting the positive impact of political programs on Fresh FM Osogbo on audience political participation in the state. The finding also upholds Olaoye, Enyindah and Asemah's (2022) assertion that the media serves as a valuable tool for political mobilisation. The study's findings align with the agenda-setting theory, illustrating how the media, through its traditional functions, establishes a framework for political discussions and promotes democratic values. Moreover, the results are in line with the psychological theory of perception, emphasizing that our understanding of people, events, or issues is influenced by the amount of information available and our ability to accurately interpret it.

The study's results are consistent with the media dependency theory, which posits that individuals turn to the media for information and to achieve various goals. This highlights the role of the media as a reliable source of information and guidance for individuals seeking to stay informed and achieve diverse objectives.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, this research has focused on how the public perceives the impact of African Independent Television's (AIT) "Democracy Today" programme on Nigeria's democracy. The findings suggest that the opinions of Abuja residents regarding the development of the country's democracy are significantly shaped by AIT's Democracy Today programme. In light of this, it is recommended that other broadcast stations in Nigeria introduce similar programmes to enhance the understanding of Nigerians about the nation's democratic progress.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The researcher puts forward the following as areas that further studies should be conducted:
1. Further research should be conducted to analyse the impact of Channels Television programme "Politics Today" on Nigeria's democratic journey.
2. A content analytical study on the contributions of print media such as *The Punch* and *The Guardian* newspapers to Nigeria's democracy would be thought-provoking.
3. Further studies should also be expanded to more media organisations compared to only one used by this researcher.

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