

## **VOTERS PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PREFERRED GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE: A STUDY OF THE 2023 POLLS IN RIVERS STATE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The study examined the perception of Rivers State indigene on the influence of political advertisement on voter preference for gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election. To guide the study three objectives and research question were used, the study was anchored on Framing theory. The survey research design was used for the study, with a population 7,304,196 and a sample size of 384. Questionnaire was used as instrument to elicit response from respondents. The data generated through the questionnaire was categorized and represented in frequency tables, which was thereafter analyzed, using weighted mean score. The study found out that Rivers State voters' perception of political advertisement varies from one person to another. Voter's believability of political advertisement in Rivers State is high in the 2023 gubernatorial election. The level of importance voters' attach to political advertisement is moderate in the 2023 gubernatorial election in Rivers State. Political advertisement was seen as one of the factors that influenced voters' preference in the 2023 gubernatorial election in Rivers State and factors like tribe and god-fatherism were seen as some of the elements that influence voters' preference in the 2023 general election. The study recommends that Voters in Rivers States are entitled to their perception on political advertisement. Voters should always look at the antecedents of any political candidate before believing in whatever they have to say on their political advertisement. Voters should attach less importance to political advertisement and focus on the integrity of the candidate. Voters in Rivers has a right to be influenced by political advertisement and finally voters in Rivers State should grow above tribal, religion and god-fatherism, but rather focus on the pedigree of candidates.*

**Keywords: Political Advertisement, Perception, Voters, Rivers State, 2023 Elections**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number and style of political advertising in the last national and state elections held in 2023. Most of the political parties in the land mounted one form of political advertising or the other, to bring to the attention of the voting public, the parties' political philosophy (manifesto) as well as the parties' contestants for the various elective offices in the country. Many political office seekers also used political advertising to market themselves to the prospective voters. Several media of political advertising were employed during the electioneering campaigns. Most notable of these media include radio, television, Internet, newspapers, magazines, billboards, posters and others. Political parties and their flag bearers used these media, particularly the

television, to their advantage in a bid to out-witting one another in the 2023 elections battle.

Since the introduction of democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria conducts general election every four years, just recently Nigeria through the Independent National Electoral Commission conducted the 2023 general elections and citizens were allowed to make their choice of preferred candidates through the ballot, more especially at the federal and state levels. The media helps in the formation of political ideas and attitudes, and thus represents a major determinant of a nation's political culture. An individual's political ideas are influenced by all the groups of which he or she is a member, as well as by social categories, such as race and income level, and larger historical events and political issues. The traditional and commonest platforms for the formation of political views and ideas include the family, the school and peer group. However, in recent decades, the media have proven to powerfully influence the socialization process in both direct ways and in more subtle indirect ways. An individual's social class and occupation may also provide strong signals about political party membership, as will race and religion. Additionally, the area where an individual life and the political events that a person experiences (or that simply occur during that person's lifetime) can strongly influence his/her opinions on political issues.

The mass media have emerged as the most common source of information about election campaigns in democracies and societies in transition around the world (Macnamara, 2008). In terms of the sheer volume of information available to citizens via the media on issues - political parties and leaders - electioneering campaigns often represents a high point for political communications. Concerns about political bias in the mass media are at the heart of debates about the roles and responsibilities of the media at election time. Behind these concerns is the assumption that there may be effects, intended or unintended, on public opinion and political behaviour and, ultimately, electoral outcomes (BBC, 2008).

Elections in Nigeria have always been characterized by dissatisfaction exhibited by candidates, voters and observers. Outcomes of elections have always been trailed by complaints of irregularities such as disenfranchisement of prospective voters, snatching of ballot boxes from election officials and stuffing of the boxes with invalid ballot papers, as well as allegations of collusion between election officials and politicians to alter election results and subvert popular mandate (Ibrahim and Ibeanu, 2009, p.6). The flaws that characterized the conduct of elections in Nigeria have severely dented the integrity of the elections and triggered demands for freer, fairer, and more transparent elections.

Civic and political participation is an important element of contemporary democracy (Bernard et al, 2011). It is generally assumed that within a democratic political system, citizens should have sufficient opportunities to communicate their preferences toward political decision makers. Of equal importance, however, is the mobilization aspect. Citizens have to be mobilized and recruited in order to be able to participate in the electoral process. Political advertising is one of such way people wanting to occupy political offices communicate to electorates in Rivers State. The 2023 election in the state saw a lot of political advertisement display on all media platforms from different political actors during the built up of the gubernatorial election. Some appeared in Indigenous languages, Pidgin English while majority appear in Standard English. This was done by the political gladiators to communicate their manifesto to the citizen. Alawode and Adesanya (2016) described political advertising as a form of campaign used by political candidates to reach and influence voters. It is a subset of advertising described by Arens (2008) as a structured and composed non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually

persuasive in nature, about products, services and ideas by identified sponsors, through various mass media.

However, in Rivers State just like it is in any other democracy, during electioneering politicians work round the clock to ensure total victory in the poll. There are a lot of alignment and realignment between political heavy weights in other to build a consensus, mend fences and forge a common front. These processes make the political atmosphere to be very charge and tense, which makes the state one of the hot spots in gubernatorial election in Nigeria.

Political advertising campaigns are communication packaged by identified sponsors - politicians, political parties, campaigns offices and their third parties targeted at the electorates to persuade and influence them to take favourable action, to win their votes and seize power. The ultimate goal of every political advertising campaign and advertisements is to persuade and influence constituency votes and to win elections (Aduradola & Ojukwu, 2013; Nkamnebe 2003; Nwosu, 2003; Opara, Anuforo & Achor, 2016; Osunbiyi, 2012; Tejuoso, 2011).

Media campaign is designed to encourage and sustain positive behavioural change. Apart from being an avenue to create awareness, its messages are created to reach a specific targeted or particular audience with the intent to influence the behaviour of this audience in a desired way. Since, the mass media allows for simultaneity to reach heterogeneous audience the focus is on creating a persuasive message that is capable of producing the end result through the medium selected to carry out the campaign (source) There are different types of campaigns: political campaign, advertising, public information, fund-raising and public campaigns etc. A political campaign, according to Lexicon Webster Dictionary (1981) is "any course of aggressive action...intended to influence voters in an election" (p.143). Etika, Nyong, Opusunju and Agbor (2018) note that "political campaign is the avenue in which political aspirants market themselves before the electorates during general elections" (p.1). Political campaign offers the opportunity for political parties and their candidates to sell their candidature to the electorate. Etika et al (2018) aver that "during this time, different gimmicks are employed to ensure that their campaign messages are effectively packaged to convince the electorates so as to gain their mandates" (p.1). Therefore, this study examines influence of political advertisement on voter preference for gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election in Rivers State.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In a democratic system, the sovereign power in the state rests with the people and the beauty of any democracy lies in the political participation of majority of the people. One way of mobilizing the people towards political participation is during general elections when voters make informed choices of who to govern them following the presentation of manifestoes by the candidates. When voters participate fully in the electioneering processes, power tend to reside with the people, but in situation where there is voters' apathy, a few individuals could manipulate the process and enthrone a government that does not emerge from collective participation.

The ideologies of political parties could easily be disseminated to the electorate through political advertisement in the media. Thus, the crux of this research centres on ascertaining how political advertisement influenced voter preference in the 2023 gubernatorial election in Rivers State. The problem of the study is stated thus: how did the use of political

advertisement influenced voter preference in the 2023 gubernatorial elections in Rivers State?

### **Objectives of the Study:**

1. ascertain the perception of Rivers State voters on political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in 2023 election.
2. examine if voters in Rivers State believe in political advertising messages of the gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election.
3. examine the level of importance voters attached to political advertisement of the gubernatorial candidate in the 2023 election.

### **Research Question**

1. what is the perception of Rivers State voters on political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in 2023 election?
2. What is the extent to which voters in Rivers State believe in political advertising messages of the gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election?
3. What is the level of importance voters attached to political advertisement of the gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election?

### **Scope of the Study**

The study covered the influence of political advertisement on voter preference for the gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election in Rivers State. It focused on how political advertisement can influence voters' choice of candidate, so, this research studies Rivers State residents. The study was conducted in Rivers state, however, any other state cited in this study is just for reference purposes. The reason behind the study was to understand the influence of political advertisement on voters in Rivers State. The study considered a period from late 2022-2023 after the election and only adults from 18 and above will participate in the study

### **Literature Review**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was anchored on the Framing Theory. The Framing theory deals with media contents and effects, how media messages are presented (media frames), and the resultant influence of the presentation on interpretation and perception by the audience (audience frames). According to Reese (2008), framing theory is credited to Erving Goffman (1974) who defines frames as 'schemata of interpretation' that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences or life experiences. The major assumption here is that the media frame issues through presentation and placement techniques and the styles of presentation shape audience perception of the issues.

In his exposition on the theory, Oriola (2017) notes that Framing theory has become attractive to researchers in the area of political communication owing to its relevance in political discourse, which in turn determines the behaviour of citizens as voters in modern democracies. He argues that research attention on framing has been focused on electioneering activities such as political campaigns, election results, intra-party and inter-party relations, policy formation, voters' perception, opinions, and reactions in the political process. Musa (2017) explains that news framing is like inserting a photo into a frame. Like photo frames, news frames have a double effect; they can enhance or disfigure the news

presentation. A news report that is placed in a distorted frame can affect the frame of mind of the media audience for better or for worse. Outdoor advertising has always presented a big frame to display the politicians and their programmes during the electioneering period. Sandig (2015) asserts that frames with the capacity to motivate people towards a joint action have three-fold roles. According to him, these frames include identification of a problem and its source (diagnostic framing); the proffering of a solution to the problem, and concrete action plan (prognostic framing), and the call for followers to join and sustain the protest (motivational framing). Baran and Davis (2012) observe that in framing theory people use sets of expectations to make sense of their social world and media contribute to those expectations. According to Ardevol-Abreu (2015), there is only a thin line between Agenda Setting and the Framing Theory. The Agenda Setting Theory is about the amount of attention given to an event by the media while Framing Theory entails the way a news item is described or represented. Outdoor advertising constitutes a unique frame of presenting political parties and their candidates during the electioneering period and elections. Hence, Framing theory is apt in this study.

## **Concepts**

### **An Overview of the 2023 election in Nigeria**

According to Idaho and Momoh (2016, p. 67) anomalies including vote-rigging, multiple voting, ballot box stuffing, intimidation, and other vices are common in Nigerian presidential elections. Voters who are eligible to vote in presidential elections are hesitant to cast their ballots because they believe their votes don't count. This loss of confidence in the electoral system causes electoral apathy. Thus, free and fair elections are essential because they guarantee the realization of the electorate's will, which is the main goal of elections (Idaho and Momoh, 2016, p 68).

Isah (2023) explains that religion and ethnicity played a role in the Nigerian presidential elections in 2023. Majority of Nigerian voters placed a high value on the religious and ethnic connections of candidates contesting for public office; in fact, many observers noted that these two factors were the most crucial valid reasons on which Nigerians based their votes. Muslims vote for other Muslims while Christians vote for other Christians when given the option. Every political parties understand the importance of the confluence of religious identity and politics and this is clearly the rationale behind Muslim/Christian nexus running for the Presidential and Vice under the same political party in Nigeria, (Asaju, 2021). Politics, according to Hale (2021), has heavily influenced religious and ethnic beliefs in Nigeria.

These days, it is not uncommon to witness clergy and pastors participating in politics, even inside the church, nor is it uncommon to witness individuals endorsing a specific political candidate because of their ethnic and tribal affiliations. Politics has reportedly even impacted the appointment of important officials in Nigerian churches and mosques in certain instances. In Nigeria, religion and ethnicity have a positive impact on elections notwithstanding these unpleasant trends. Many people see and portray the APC as a Muslim coalition with a significant presence in the north. The APC has indeed been called the "Muslim Brotherhood" or "Janjaweed" ticket by opposition parties like the PDP and Labour Party, which have also accused some of its leaders of facilitating the Bokoharam insurgency and islamization of Nigeria (Amiebaho, Nwaoboli & Asemah, 2023). On the other hand, a lot of people perceive and portray 14 parties like the Labor party as a powerful Christian coalition in the South. The Labour Party's presidential nominee has been accused by many for caving in to Christian supporters. Many opposition expressed dissatisfaction in 2022

about His Excellency, Peter Obi's campaigning in churches around the nation to highlight his Christian faith, while APC candidate H.E. Bola Tinubu was advancing the Islamic agenda of the same faith ticket (Smith, 2023)

It is a well-known fact that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation state, with sociocultural distinctions among its constituent ethnic groups leading to cultural dissimilarities. In actuality, religion and ethnicity have a role in all political elections in Nigeria and it is especially noticeable when there are presidential elections (Amiebaho, Nwaoboli & Asemah, 2023). Nigeria has remained the same with its political issues mostly unaddressed despite a number of absurd notions that the country will fall apart during the previous presidential elections in 2011 and 2015 due to fear of religion and ethnicity (Adobe, 2014).

### **Overview of Political Campaign in Nigeria**

Since Nigeria gained independence in the year 1960, political campaigns have become an essential part of the democratic electoral process in the country (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023a). The objective of a political campaign is to promote a political party and its candidate and to influence and persuade voters to vote for them. During campaigns, candidates and their political parties present their ideas and knowledge on issues and their propositions on how they are going to help solve the problems, and how they intend to govern if elected.

It is no news that the 2023 general elections is very crucial for the country. This is because Nigeria is confronted with a multitude of problems ranging from; poverty, corruption and also serious crisis in the social sector like education and health. Despite repeated promises and failing to keep the promises by past leaders in government, majority of young graduates are unemployed and even the few who are employed are being paid peanuts. These menaces and more, are what should be addressed by candidates contesting for election during their campaigns. To this end, it is seen that political campaign is essential activity to be carried out before election.

It is during campaigns that candidates can give accounts of their credibility in government. This was seen during the Presidential aspirant of the labour party, Peter Obi campaign at a town hall series by Channels Television where he said "I have challenged everyone, go and see whether there is anywhere a Kobo (coin) of Anambra state money missing." A credible candidate should be able to boast of such without an iota of fear. This is why the importance of political campaign cannot be overruled. As it is when a candidate can show to its public the reasons, they deserve to get the support and votes they campaign for.

### **Appeals in Political Advertising**

The appeal is something in an advertising message that moves people, speaks to their wants or needs, and ignites their interest. Fill (2009) posits that message framing works on the hedonic principles of our motivation to seek happiness and to avoid pain. Belch and Belch (2001) see advertising appeal as the approach used to attract the attention of the consumers and to influence their feelings in favour of the product, service, or cause. Ebitu (2012) opines that advertising copy should make claims that are desirable, believable, exclusive, and distinctive. There are two broad types of appeals. These are the rational and the emotional appeals.

Bovee and Arens (1994) explain that rational appeals consist of those messages that touch the consumers' practical and functional needs for the product or service. Belch and Belch (2001) describe rational appeals as the informational approach to advertising emphasizing the features of the product or service and the benefits or reasons for owning and using the

products. They explain that the objective of this appeal is to persuade the target audience to buy the brand because it is the best available or does a better job of meeting consumers' needs. The particular features, benefits, or evaluative criteria that are important to consumers and can serve as the basis of an informational/rational appeal vary from one product or service category to another as well as among various market segments. Gupta (2015) notes that rational appeals are those directed at the thinking of the audience. Some features include an appeal for comfort, convenience, economy, health, and sensory benefits such as touch, taste, and smell. Other rational motives or purchase criteria commonly used in advertising copy include quality, dependability, durability, efficiency, price, efficacy, and performance.

Examples of rational appeal in the APC's political advertisement of its intended programmes included the granting of autonomy to Local Government Areas; payment of N25,000 bursary to students per year; recapitalization of Akwa Ibom Investment Corporation with N50 billion; creation of 24,000 transformational entrepreneurs; launching of the economic blueprint with a roadmap on reactivation of the moribund Akwa Palm industries among others. Thus the party's slogan, *Akwa Ibom deserves the best*. The PDP on the other hand showcased on the billboards erected all over the state the number of industries built by the incumbent governor and PDP governorship candidate such as Syringe manufacturing factory, Metering company, Flour Mill company and Toothpick and Pencil factory among others; the 1,700 kilometres of roads built across the state; the revamping of hospitals; peace and security experienced since 2015.

Emotional appeals refer to the strategy of evoking social and psychological needs as the basis of accepting the candidate and his party (product or service). According to Belch and Belch (2001), many of consumers' motives for their purchase decisions are emotional, and their feelings about a brand can be more important than knowledge of its features or attributes. They explain that emotional appeals are based on the psychological states or feelings directed to prospective buyers (such as pleasure or excitement), as well as those seeking to confer social status or recognition on the consumers.

Advertising copy could appeal emotionally to safety, security, fear, love, happiness, joy, nostalgia, sentiment, excitement, arousal or stimulation, sorrow or grief, pride, achievement or accomplishment, self-esteem, self-actualization, pressure, ambition, and comfort. Other aspects of emotional appeals include recognition, status, ego, involvement, embarrassment, affiliation or belonging, rejection, acceptance, and appeal. In the 2019 political campaigns in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, most messages were emotionally-laden communication. The APC in the state was boasting of parading all the prominent politicians in the state perhaps to create a bandwagon effect. The party also created the impression that the Federal Government controlled by APC (federal might) was interested in capturing Akwa Ibom State, which is one of the richest oil states in the country. The PDP on the other hand created the impression that it was like the Biblical David facing Goliath and as such its only hope was on God, hence the slogan, *Only God*. The two parties had combined the two appeals taking the electorate through the persuasion sequence of attention, holding the attention, creating desire, creating confidence, facilitating decision to act, and eliciting voting action.

### **Types of Political Advertising**

Political advertising as a tool of political campaigns is aimed at motivating the citizens to exercise their democratic rights of voting. According to Lilleker (2006), there are three types of advertising employed by political candidates: advocacy, comparative and negative. Early

advertisements concentrated on the positive qualities of the candidates and why they deserve votes from the electorate as the best people for the job. As pure advocacy began to fail, candidates began to think of ways of attacking their opponents in an advertisement, resulting in the contrast or issue advertisement where both candidates were compared on an issue and the sponsor, naturally, was given favourable spin. Negative advertisements simply focus on the frailty of opponents; usually, these are justified and open up the campaign to rebuttal and counter-rebuttal.

Okwechime (2011) identifies the following as categories of political advertising: (i) Talking Head Advertisements (ii) Concept Advertisements (iii) Negative Advertising (iv) Cinema Verite (v) Symbolism (vi) Power Signification (vii) Testimonials (viii) The Neutral Reporter Format.

(i) Talking head advertisements are issue-oriented messages designed to enable the candidate to present himself as one capable of handling the responsibilities that the office he is vying for demands. The focus is on the capacity to do the work. The 2023 APC governorship candidate in Rivers State was marketed as a successful businessman and astute manager of men and resources and God-fearing. His opponent in PDP was also advertised as a successful civil servant, God-fearing, and sincere professional in politics.

(ii) Concept advertisements on the other hand are ads crafted to give the impression of what the candidate represents. In the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari was elected on grounds of his integrity and ability to resist the cankerworm of corruption in Nigeria. In the 2023 election, the APC governorship candidate in Rivers State was painted as the quality of excellence that the state deserved. The PDP candidate on the other hand was presented as a sincere and humble person that can be trusted.

(iii) Negative advertising focuses on the perceived weaknesses of the opponent to make the electorate shun him or her. Johnston (2014) notes that some negative ads are mudslinging ads, which denigrate the opponent's character. It is usually a campaign of calumny that centres on the personality of the candidate in terms of performance, success story, honesty, integrity, and competency. Meirick (2002) observes that negative ads that compare two candidates on specific points can stimulate voters to think of counterarguments to the ads and of facts that contradict the ads and they can be more effective than ads that simply attack the opponent's stand on some issues or for some perceived character flaw. In the 2019 elections in the Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, some advertising messages depicted a lack of initiative and selfishness on the part of the opponents.

(iv) Cinema verite refers to commercials that show the candidate as the man of the people, who have popular acceptance among the ordinary citizens on the streets. Okwechime (2011) notes that the incumbents usually employ this tactic by showing news footage of the candidate's interaction with people during presidential, senatorial, or gubernatorial activities. These commercials portray the candidates in "real life" settings as they are interacting with "the people" in the markets, village square, or during work days in the office. In the 2019 elections in Rivers State, the APC boasted of its 'federal might' and popularity while the PDP flaunted its belief in God with the slogan, "Only God."

(v) Symbolism presents some emotional issues that could arouse fears or anxieties in the minds of the electorate concerning the candidate seeking political office. This kind of advertisement may come as positive advertising promoting the candidate or it could be negative advertising employed to attack the opponent.

(vi) Power signification refers to the strategy of focusing on the experience and credibility of the incumbent candidate or party in power. The advertisements often display the performance of the incumbent showing archive footage of press conferences, foreign trips, meetings with leaders of other countries during international summits, and others. These film clips with appropriate textual descriptions are powerful signifiers of authority against the opponents whose experience in governance may be lacking or limited. In the 2019 election, the APC governorship in Akwa Ibom State was brandished as being generous and patriotic having performed excellently in many public offices before. The PDP candidate on the other hand was presented as godly and trustworthy.

(vii) Testimonials involve the endorsement of a candidate or the political party by respected persons in the society like the clergymen, business gurus, senior academics, traditional rulers, leaders of professional bodies, youth, and women leaders. In this classification of political advertising, the sentiments expressed by non-candidates are used as evidence of voters' support for the candidate and it can also be used as the people's voice rejecting the opponent. This genre was popular during the 2023 elections in the Rivers State of Nigeria as many youth groups, women associations, religious leaders, and ethnic associations endorsed different candidates depending on some sentiments or pecuniary interest.

(viii) The neutral reporter format is the strategy of presenting the audience with series of seemingly factual statements about the candidate or the opponent. The electorate is then left to decipher and make their choice. The advertisements give the impression of neutrality whereas the facts presented are tilted either to enhance the image of the candidate or to smear that of an opponent. In the 2019 general elections in the Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, the two prominent political parties in the election, the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) employed all the above or semblance of the above strategies at one point or the other to woo the electorate during their political campaigns. It was a keen contest between the two political parties and their candidates.

### **Empirical Review**

Tejumaiye, Simon & Obia (2018) examined the influence of political advertising in Nigeria's 2015 presidential elections in Lagos state. Information Processing Theory of William McGuire was adopted as the theoretical framework. Survey research method was applied and questionnaire served as instrument of data collection, multistage sampling method was adopted, and 400 respondents were interviewed. The study found out that half of the respondents (49%) confirmed that political advertising was the significant factor that influenced their voting choice of candidate. For respondents who noted that this was not the case, other factors: ethnic consideration, religious beliefs and other considerations were the influences. Political advertising served as reinforcement stimulus and affirm voters' choice rather than act as voting behavior change (p.122).

Nweke (2023) conducted a study on the Influence of Social Media Political campaign on the choice of candidate among the undergraduate student of the University of Benin in the 2023 General Election. The objectives of the study were to find out the exposure of UNIBEN students to social media political campaign in the 2023 elections, how social media is used during political campaigns and the influence of social media political campaign. The study was anchored on the Media equation theory and the Vale's Persuasion theory, while the survey research method served as the methodology of the study. Nweke study is related to this present study as they both seek to find out the influence of social media during

elections. However, they both differ as this present study focuses finding out how social media political advertising influenced the voting choice of Benin residents. Also, while this present study uses the agenda setting theory, Nweke adopted the equation theory and vale persuasion theory. Findings of the study revealed that majority of UNIBEN students are exposed to social media as a political tool and that it has influenced their choice of candidates. Many of the respondents commend media projections because they perceived it to be an irreplaceable tool in Political activities in Nigeria and the entire work. The study concluded UNIBEN students are satisfied with the usage of social media in electioneering and political campaigns.

### **Research Methods**

The study adopted the descriptive survey design approach. Clearly owing to the nature of this research. It was appropriate to employ the survey method which according to Wimmer & Dominick attempts to describe or document current conditions or attitudes that is, to explain what exists at the moment. Survey method is a method of study of the characteristics of a sample through questionnaire that enables the researcher to make generalization concerning the population of interest (Ohaja, 2003 p.11).

According to the National Population Commission (NPS) census of 2006, the population of Rivers State stood at 5, 198,716. With an annual growth rate of 2.7% and 17 years in between (2006 – 2023) the states' population is projected to be at 7,304,196. Thus, keeping the population of this study at 7,304,196. According to Winner & Dominick, (2011) one goal of scientific research is to describe the nature of a population. Rivers State residents are the target population of this study.

The sample size of this study was three hundred and eighty-four (384) based on the population size of 7,304,196 using the Krejcie & Morgan 1970 sample size determination template.

Multistage cluster sampling technique was used, owing to the size of the population in selecting two Local Government Area from each of the three senatorial districts that makes up Rivers State. The two Local Government Areas were selected based on upland and riverine terrain. Rivers-East has eight Local Government Area, two were selected namely: Port Harcourt and Ogu/Bolo.

Rivers-West has eight Local Government Area, two will be selected namely: Ahoada East and Degema, Rivers South-East has seven Local Government Area, two were also selected namely: Eleme and Opobo/Nkoro. Using the cluster sampling technique, the cluster with a larger size has a proportionately more objects in the sample than cluster with smaller size. Therefore, if a sample of 384 respondents were selected from a population of 7,304,196. Owing to the population of the various Local Government Areas, Port Harcourt and Ogu Bolo got 150 copies of the questionnaire, 120 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to respondents in Ahoada East and Degema Local Government Areas while Eleme and Opobo-Nkoro Local Government Areas got 114 copies of the questionnaire.

The instruments for data collection for the study was a well-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to residents of Rivers state. The questionnaire contained only psychographic section with 26 items on a four Likert-type Scale of, Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (SD) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

The data generated through the questionnaire was categorized and represented in frequency tables, which was thereafter analyzed, using weighted mean score. The analysis of data centred on the three research questions for this study.

**Findings/Analysis/Discussions**

**Question 1** What is the perception of Rivers State voters on political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in 2023 election?

**Table 1 Mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) Analysis of perception of Rivers Voters on political advertisement**

S/N	Items	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	Total	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Remark
1	Political advertisement <b>Research</b> of gubernatorial candidates in Rivers State in the 2023 election was insightful.	83 332	122 366	131 262	40 40	376 970	2.57	Agree
2	Political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in Rivers State in the 2023 election was informative.	100 400	104 312	112 224	60 60	376 996	2.64	Agree
3	Political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in Rivers State in the 2023 election was educative.	78 312	80 240	95 190	123 123	376 865	2.30	Disagree
4	Political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in Rivers State in the 2023 election was interesting.	55 220	87 261	100 200	134 134	376 815	2.16	Disagree
5	Political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in Rivers State in the 2023 election was boring	84 348	49 147	136 272	104 104	376 871	2.31	Disagree
<b>Grand mean</b>							<b>2.40</b>	

The above table 1 shows the respondents perception of political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 gubernatorial election varies why some agrees in the insightful and deceptive nature of the advertising other disagree to the fact that political advertising was educative, interesting and boring, with a grand mean of 2.40.

It is obvious that people do not see things from the same perspective more especially when it comes to political advertisement in Rivers State, which entails that their perception was low or negative. This study is in line with the study conducted by Okpala, Onuoha and Leyi (2023), their study focused on audience perceptions of social media's impact on voter turnout in the 2023 presidential elections Awka. The objectives of the study were to determine Nigerian electorate's level of exposure to social media political contents, find out 19 Nigerian electorate's perception of political campaign messages, evaluate Nigerian electorate's perception of the contributions of social media to the processes of 2023 political participation in Awka metropolis. The survey research method was adopted by the researcher and 385 respondents were purposefully chosen from the study population. Findings of the study indicated that most people view social media contributions to 2023 political as political propaganda. The findings also showed that Nigeria election on social media is bedeviled by negativity which causes political apathy. The study concluded that

Nigerian politicians should make every effort to match their words with necessary deeds once in office. It was recommended that Nigerian politicians should vigorously embrace social media in subsequent elections due to its interactive potential.

A study conducted by Oliyide, Adeyemi and Gbadeyan (2011), which is in variance with the finding of the current study, investigated Nigerian electorate perception of political advertising and election campaign. The study adopted quantitative research design using survey with questionnaire as instrument of data collection. The research questions were structured, close ended and two categories of Likert scale, 1 – strongly disagree and 5 – strongly agree were adopted to measure respondents feeling about negative political advertising. The research was conducted a week before the April 25th, 2009 re-run election in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Findings revealed that majority of the respondents“ feels that political advertising is interesting and effective

**Research Question 2: What is the extent to which voters in Rivers State believe in political advertising messages of the gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election?**

**Table 2: Mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) Analysis of the extent to which voter believes in political advertisement.**

S/N	Items	VLE 4	LE 3	LE 2	VLE 1	Total	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Remark
1	I did not believe in the political advertisement messages of gubernatorial candidates in Rivers State because I saw it as one of those things that must be done when contesting election.	132 528	131 393	53 106	60 60	376 1120	2.97	Agree
2	I believed the political advertising message of the candidate I voted because he has been tested and trusted.	122 488	115 345	79 158	60 60	376 1051	2.79	Agree
3	I did not believe in the political messages of any of the gubernatorial candidate in Rivers state because they do not have the people at heart.	100 400	54 162	107 214	115 115	376 891	2.36	Disagree
4	The political advertisement of the gubernatorial candidate I voted for was inspiring and real.	140 560	100 300	83 166	53 53	376 1079	2.94	Agree
5	The political advertising of the gubernatorial candidate I voted in the 2023 election was educative.	127 508	116 348	78 156	55 55	376 1067	2.83	Agree
<b>Grand mean</b>							<b>2.77</b>	

The table above 2 which represents the extent voters believe in political advertisement. the aggregation of voters’ response demonstrates that voters’ believability of political advertisement is high with a grand mean of 2.77.

In a study by Ijeh, N. P (2011), titled “ Voters’ Perception of Cultural Elements in Political Advertising for the April 2011 General Elections in Nigeria”, the paper observes that some political advertisers for the April 2011 general elections in Nigeria incorporated cultural elements such as native languages; cultural dressing; emphasis on candidates’ cultural affinities by birth, history, marriage and chieftaincy titles; cultural music and dances; cultural norms, values and ideologies; as well as visits to and endorsements of candidates by traditional rulers. Voters perceived this in good light and majority indicated that they were attracted by these cultural elements to the political advertisements and learnt about the candidates from them. However, a minority of them indicated that these incorporated cultural elements actually influenced their voting decisions. This is to say that the incorporation of cultural elements in political advertisement in the above study made respondent believe in the candidate and extended their votes.

**Research Question 3:** What is the level of importance voters attached to political advertisement of the gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election?

**Table 3: Mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) Analysis of level of importance voters attach to political advertisement.**

S/N	Items	VLE 4	LE 3	LE 2	VLE 1	Total	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Remark
1	The level of importance I attached to political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election is very high.	134 536	157 471	24 48	61 61	376 1118	2.97	Agree
2	The level of importance I attached to political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election is high.	127 508	78 234	116 232	55 55	376 1030	2.73	Agree
3	The level of importance I attached to political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election is low.	56 224	109 327	109 218	101 101	376 870	2.31	Disagree
4	The level of importance I attached to political advertisement of gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 election is very low.	29 116	40 120	154 304	153 153	376 693	1.84	Disagree
<b>Grand mean</b>							<b>2.46</b>	

This table 3 demonstrate the fact that the level of importance attached to political advertisement about gubernatorial candidates in Rivers State is on the average, which is to say that political advertisement value is on the decline with a grand mean of 2.46. Importance attached to anything demonstrates the value placed on that thing. Value also determines the level of exposure. Isah (2023) examined exposure to political advertising messages and voter's choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Edo State. the objectives of the study were to find out the extent at which Edo electorate are exposed to political advertising messages, find out channels through which Edo electorate were exposed to political advertising messages and the influence of political advertising messages on the voting behaviour of Edo electorate during the election. The study was anchored on the social judgement theory, while the survey research method was adopted for the study. Also, the multi stage sampling technique was adopted as the technique to

draw samples for the study. The study concluded that voting patterns and voter behaviour were affected by the political advertising and campaign rhetoric that voters were exposed to in the months leading up to the presidential election. It was recommended that voters should always assess the content of advertising messages and compare the results with the observable characteristics of the candidates.

### **CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study investigated political advertisement and voter preference in the 2023 gubernatorial election in Rivers State. Key concepts were reviewed two theories were used, relevant studies were reviewed, the study adopted the survey research design with a projected population of 7,304,196 were used and a sample size of 384.

From the foregoing the study concludes that political advertisement its very important in electioneering, because it plays important role in determining voter preference in an election, however, it cannot be the only determinant in making voting decision of voters. Political candidates should endeavor to match their campaign promises with action because, if that is done, it is a big factor in voting for a political candidate without much advertisement because, the candidate's performance speaks volume for him/her.

Furthermore, the use of attack political advertisement has become the order of the day in Nigerian political landscape, candidates no longer focus on issues rather, adopt attack approach to make opponents look bad in the eyes of the voters. This type of political advertising should be discouraged, and appropriate sanction should be meted on offenders, which will serve as a deterrent to politicians.

This study has established without equivocation the fact that political advertisement has influence on voter preference in the 2023 gubernatorial election in Rivers State. Against this backdrop therefore, the following recommendation were made;

1. Voters in Rivers States are entitled to their perception on political advertisement
2. Voters should always look at the antecedents of any political candidate before believing in whatever they have to say on their political advertisement,
3. Voters should attach less importance to political advertisement and focus on the integrity of the candidate.

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