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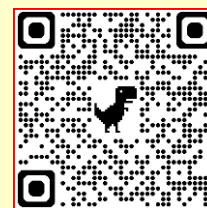
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INSTITUTIONALISING EDUTAINMENT AND ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION: ANALYSIS OF JUDGING MATTERS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Judging Matters as a media-mediated alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism in Nigeria, analysing its operational structure, dispute types, and legal status under the Arbitration and Mediation Act (AMA) 2023. Anchored on Access to Justice and Mediatization theories, the study adopted a qualitative socio-legal design utilising documentary content analysis of 24 Season 1 cases alongside the Lagos State Small Claims Practice Direction 2023 and the AMA 2023. Descriptive statistics reveal that low-value financial disputes, debt recovery (29.2%, n=7) and service contract failures (20.8%, n=5), dominated the docket, constituting 50.0% (n=12) of all cases. Findings show that Judging Matters eliminates financial barriers by offering a zero-cost model that parallels the Small Claims Court's 60-day expedited format. However, statutory matrix analysis indicates that while proceedings fulfill Section 30 fair hearing requirements, key prerequisites: written arbitration agreements (Section 2), signed awards (Section 47), and enforcement records (Section 57), remain unverified. The study concludes that televised adjudication democratises legal access, though its transformative potential requires aligning broadcast formats with strict statutory safeguards. It recommends that producers archive written arbitration agreements, if nothing of such presently exist, Lagos State Judiciary should create frameworks to enforce verified outcomes, and media organizations include on-air disclosures clarifying the legal status of broadcast decisions.

KEY WORDS: Access to Justice, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023, Judging Matters, Mediatization Theory, Small Claims Court, Televised Adjudication.

Introduction

Access to justice is a fundamental condition for the effective functioning of the legal system because the existence of courts does not necessarily mean that citizens can obtain timely, affordable and effective remedies. In Nigeria, access to the formal court system has historically been constrained by financial difficulties, inadequate legal information and other institutional barriers. These difficulties become particularly significant where disputes involve relatively modest claims, because the economic and procedural demands of

litigation may be disproportionate to the value of the matter in dispute. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether a judicial institution exists, but whether ordinary citizens can realistically make use of it when they need redress. Access to justice must consequently be understood in terms of affordability, timeliness, procedural accessibility and the ability of citizens to understand and navigate available mechanisms of dispute resolution.

One response to these limitations has been the development and institutionalisation of alternative dispute resolution (ADR)

mechanisms. Rather than requiring every dispute to proceed through conventional litigation, ADR provides processes through which parties may resolve disagreements through mediation, negotiation, conciliation or arbitration. In Nigeria, the development of court-connected ADR has increasingly been associated with efforts to reduce the burdens of litigation and broaden access to justice. Faturoti (2014) observes that the institutionalisation of ADR within the Nigerian judicial system represents a response to the rigidity and bureaucratic difficulties associated with conventional litigation, particularly through mechanisms such as the multi-door courthouse.

This development is especially significant in Lagos State, where alternative mechanisms have become an established component of the justice architecture. The Citizens' Mediation Bureau of Lagos State Ministry of Justice, for example, provides free mediation for civil, commercial, landlord–tenant, family, inheritance, monetary and related disputes, with the stated objective of providing a less cumbersome means of obtaining justice and discouraging self-help (Lagos State Ministry of Justice, n.d.). ADR therefore represents an important institutional attempt to bring dispute resolution closer to citizens while reducing some of the financial and procedural barriers associated with conventional court proceedings.

It is within this intersection of justice, ADR, public education and mass communication that *Judging Matters* emerged in Nigeria. The programme, launched on Africa Magic Showcase on 27 April 2020, was developed by MultiChoice in partnership with Lagos State Ministry of Justice and was specifically designed to address small claims and minor cases in Lagos. According to its official launch announcement, the programme was intended to provide a forum in which real people could have minor disputes heard and resolved without lawyers' fees, filing costs and prolonged delays, while also serving as a source of education and information about the Lagos State justice system (Africa Magic, 2020).

The distinctive character of *Judging Matters* lies in its combination of judicial-style dispute resolution with the communicative conventions of reality television. The programme features retired Lagos State High Court Judge Justice Olusola Williams, who listens to and determines the cases presented, while lawyer and television host Ebuka Obi-Uchendu serves as counsellor. The cases presented are drawn from everyday disputes, thereby moving legal questions away from the abstract language of statutes and courtrooms and into situations that audiences can readily recognise. The programme consequently performs a dual function: it provides a mediated forum for the resolution of selected minor disputes and simultaneously exposes viewers to practical lessons concerning contracts, agreements, debts, relationships and other areas of everyday legal interaction. Contemporary reporting on the programme similarly emphasised its treatment of real-life disputes and its educational dimension, indicating that its purpose extended beyond entertainment to public engagement with the justice system (Obioha, 2021). This combination makes *Judging Matters* particularly significant within the broader evolution of media-based public legal communication in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The emergence of *Judging Matters*, a television programme established through collaboration between MultiChoice Nigeria and the Lagos State Ministry of Justice, introduces a distinctive alternative by combining dispute resolution with mass-mediated legal education. The programme presents real-life disputes before a retired High Court judge and describes its process as arbitration (Africa Magic, 2020). Despite its public visibility, important

questions remain concerning its operational relationship with established judicial and ADR mechanisms and, more importantly, the legal status of decisions reached through the programme. The Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023 establishes specific requirements concerning arbitration agreements, arbitral proceedings, awards and their recognition and enforcement (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2023). Yet, there is insufficient empirical and legal scholarship establishing whether and how the procedures and decisions of *Judging Matters* satisfy these statutory requirements. This gap necessitates a systematic examination of the programme as a media-mediated ADR mechanism within Nigeria's contemporary justice system.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine *Judging Matters* as a media-mediated alternative dispute resolution mechanism within the Nigerian justice system, with particular attention to its operational structure, dispute types, adjudicatory practices and legal status under the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023.

The study specifically seeks to:

1. To compare the operational, procedural and financial characteristics of *Judging Matters* with those of conventional civil litigation and the Lagos State Small Claims Court.
2. To identify and classify the major categories of civil disputes presented on *Judging Matters* and examine the legal principles reflected in the determination of those disputes.
3. To assess the extent to which the arbitration procedures and decisions presented on *Judging Matters* conform to the requirements of the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023 concerning arbitration agreements, arbitral proceedings, awards, recognition and enforcement.

Research Questions

1. How do the operational, procedural and financial characteristics of *Judging Matters* compare with those of conventional civil litigation and the Lagos State Small Claims Court?
2. What are the major categories of civil disputes presented on *Judging Matters*, and what legal principles are reflected in their determination?
3. To what extent do the arbitration procedures and decisions presented on *Judging Matters* conform to the requirements of the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023 concerning arbitration agreements, arbitral proceedings, awards, recognition and enforcement?

Literature Review

History, Operational Framework and Legal Context of *Judging Matters*

The development of *Judging Matters* is best understood within Nigeria's broader movement from exclusive reliance on formal litigation towards a plural justice system incorporating alternative dispute resolution (ADR). This transition responds to the cost, delay and procedural complexity associated with conventional litigation. Faturoti (2014) explains that the institutionalisation of ADR in Nigeria represents an attempt to address these weaknesses,

particularly through court-connected mechanisms such as the multi-door courthouse. Ubanyionwu (2023) similarly shows that ADR has evolved from largely informal methods into an established component of contemporary Nigerian justice administration. Lagos State has been prominent in this development through the Lagos Multi-Door Courthouse and the Citizens' Mediation Bureau, which provides free mediation for civil, commercial, landlord–tenant, family, inheritance and monetary disputes (Lagos State Ministry of Justice, n.d.). The Lagos State Small Claims Court represents a further access-to-justice intervention. Its 2023 Small Claims Practice Direction seeks to provide “easy access to an informal, inexpensive, and speedy resolution” of simple debt-recovery claims and permits qualifying liquidated monetary claims up to ₦5 million, excluding interest and costs (Lagos State Judiciary, 2023).

Judging Matters was launched on Africa Magic Showcase on 27 April 2020 through collaboration between MultiChoice Nigeria and the Lagos State Ministry of Justice. Unlike conventional or court-connected ADR, it incorporated dispute resolution into a commercially distributed television programme. Africa Magic presented it as a reality television series dealing with real-life small claims and minor disputes, with retired Lagos State High Court Judge Justice Olusola Williams presiding and Ebuka Obi-Uchendu serving as counsellor. The programme was promoted as providing dispute resolution without lawyers' fees, filing costs and prolonged court adjournments, while educating viewers about the Lagos State justice system (Africa Magic, 2020). Justice Williams had served as a Lagos State High Court judge for 18 years before voluntarily retiring in 2019 (Mirabel Centre, n.d.). The programme therefore combines adjudicatory experience with popular communication, creating a distinctive media-mediated form of dispute resolution.

Its significance lies in this dual function. *Judging Matters* converts everyday disputes involving informal loans, business transactions, Ajo or thrift arrangements, service contracts, verbal agreements and property obligations into publicly accessible narratives about rights and responsibilities. TheNET (2020), for example, reported an Ajo dispute involving ₦120,000 received from a rotational contribution scheme and a footwear transaction involving disputed delivery after payment. Such cases provide an observable setting for examining how agreement, consideration, performance, repayment, negligence and responsibility are communicated and applied to ordinary relationships. This communicative dimension is consistent with Bloch (2013) and Kozinn (2015), who demonstrate that televised adjudication can reproduce legal processes while transforming them through entertainment, personality and public narratives. In Nigeria, Ajayi et al. (2021), studying *Ìgbimo Ìpèrù*, similarly found that television-based ADR involves important communicative and conflict-management practices.

Nevertheless, *Judging Matters* differs fundamentally from conventional litigation and the statutory Small Claims Court. Courts operate under constitutional, statutory and procedural rules, while Small Claims operates within the formal Magistrates' Court system under a specific Practice Direction. *Judging Matters*, by contrast, operates through a consensual televised framework, although Africa Magic describes its process as arbitration and as “fast and effective small-scale conflict resolution” outside conventional court processes (Africa Magic, 2020). This creates a crucial legal question. The Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023 (AMA) establishes requirements concerning arbitration agreements, proceedings, awards, recognition and enforcement (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2023). Agbo (2022) and Ekeke (2024) similarly emphasise that ADR legitimacy depends upon conformity with its governing legal

framework. Thus, if AMA 2023 determines the conditions under which an arbitral decision acquires legal recognition and enforceability, and *Judging Matters* identifies its process as arbitration, its procedures and decisions must be tested against those statutory conditions rather than presumed valid from their televised finality. The legal status of the programme is consequently an empirical and doctrinal question concerning consent, procedural compliance, documentary form, recognition and enforcement.

Empirical Review

Frynas (2001), in the study titled *Problems of Access to Courts in Nigeria: Results of a Survey of Legal Practitioners*, examined the socio-economic and institutional factors that constrain access to conventional courts in Nigeria, particularly in litigation associated with the crude-oil industry. The study was guided by an access-to-justice perspective rather than a formally stated behavioural or communication theory and adopted a mixed empirical design involving a questionnaire survey, analysis of Nigerian court cases and field visits. The population comprised Nigerian legal practitioners with relevant experience, while 240 questionnaire copies were distributed in Lagos and Port Harcourt and 154 were successfully returned, representing a 64.2% response rate; the respondents were therefore selected through a practical field-distribution approach rather than a probability sampling procedure. The study found that financial constraints, inadequate legal education and ignorance of legal rights constituted major barriers to litigation, while delay in case disposal, intimidation and other institutional difficulties also discouraged potential litigants. Specifically, 75.3% of respondents regarded lack of funds as a very important barrier, while substantial proportions identified lack of general education and ignorance of legal rights as major constraints. Frynas concluded that access to Nigerian courts was considerably restricted by socio-economic and institutional factors and recommended improvements in legal-aid provision and institutional accessibility. The study is relevant to the present research because it establishes an empirical basis for examining why a free and simplified television-based mechanism such as *Judging Matters* may attract disputes that might otherwise enter the conventional court system.

Usman, Yaacob and Rahman (2014), in *Towards Improving Consumer Access to Justice in Nigeria: Assessing the Role of Small Claims Court and the Legal Aid Scheme*, investigated mechanisms for improving consumer access to justice by examining the Nigerian small-claims model alongside legal-aid arrangements. The study was framed principally from a human-rights and access-to-justice perspective and employed a doctrinal and comparative research approach rather than a conventional quantitative survey. Its population was therefore not a respondent population; instead, the study examined Nigerian legal and institutional arrangements, international instruments and comparative practices relating to consumer redress, small claims and legal aid. No sampling technique or numerical sample size was reported because the research relied on documentary and comparative materials. The study found that Nigeria's judicial system was congested and delay-prone and that existing mechanisms did not adequately provide functional, accessible and expeditious redress for consumers. It concluded that institutional restructuring was necessary to make justice more accessible and recommended strengthening the Legal Aid Council and developing small-claims or consumer courts capable of providing affordable and speedy redress. The authors' analysis is particularly relevant to the present study because it provides an empirical and institutional foundation for comparing the cost,

accessibility and procedural simplicity of *Judging Matters* with the Lagos State Small Claims Court and conventional litigation.

Ajayi, Ajayi and Fashina (2021), in *Nigeria: Face Acts in Alternative Dispute Resolution Television Program: The Case of Ìgbìmo Ìpètù*, examined the communicative practices through which disputes were presented, challenged and resolved on a Nigerian television-based ADR programme. The study was anchored on Brown and Levinson's Face Theory and adopted a qualitative discourse-analytic design. Its population consisted of recordings of Ìgbìmo Ìpètù, an ADR programme broadcast by Ekiti State Television, from which four recordings were randomly sampled for detailed analysis. The sample size was therefore four programme recordings, while the sampling technique was random selection. The researchers found that the interactions contained bald on-record face-threatening acts, bald off-record face-threatening acts and positive face acts; panel members employed direct and indirect face-threatening strategies when criticising or condemning conduct considered unacceptable, whereas complainants and accused persons sometimes challenged decisions and used positive-face strategies to negotiate interactions and repair damaged relationships. The study concluded that television-based ADR involves not merely legal or dispute-resolution processes but also complex communicative negotiations between adjudicators and disputants. It recommended greater scholarly attention to the linguistic and interactional dimensions of mediated ADR.

Bloch (2013), in *From the People's Court to American Idol: The Relationship between Reality Television and Arbitration, On-Air and Off*, examined the relationship between television reality programming and arbitration, with particular attention to programmes that present adjudication as entertainment. The study was located within socio-legal and media analysis rather than a conventional behavioural theory and adopted a qualitative doctrinal and conceptual approach, drawing on examples of American courtroom television and arbitration practices. Its population was not composed of human respondents; rather, the study's analytical materials consisted of television arbitration programmes, arbitration practices and relevant legal literature, and consequently no probability sampling technique or numerical respondent sample was reported. Bloch's analysis demonstrated that television arbitration programmes occupy a complex position between entertainment, dispute resolution and legal communication, because disputes are simultaneously processed as legal conflicts and transformed into mediated spectacles for public consumption. The study observed that the television format can modify how arbitration is presented, including the personalities of adjudicators, the structure of hearings and the relationship between legal authority and entertainment. It concluded that television arbitration should be examined not simply as entertainment but as a distinctive form of dispute resolution with implications for public understandings of law. The study recommended closer examination of the legal and institutional consequences of televised arbitration. Its relevance to the present study lies in providing a comparative theoretical and empirical foundation for investigating *Judging Matters* as a programme in which actual disputes are processed through an arbitration-oriented format while simultaneously serving entertainment and legal-education functions. This makes it useful for analysing the types of disputes selected for broadcast and the principles through which those disputes are presented and determined.

Onoja (2025), in *The Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023: Analysis of Its Impact on Arbitration in Nigeria*, examined the statutory reforms introduced by Nigeria's Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023

and their implications for arbitration practice. The study did not employ a behavioural theory but was situated within a legal and institutional framework and adopted a doctrinal research design based on analysis of the Act and relevant arbitration principles. Its population was documentary, consisting of the statutory provisions and related legal materials, and consequently no human population, sampling technique or numerical sample size was reported. The study found that the Act introduced significant reforms, including recognition of electronic communications and oral arbitration agreements, emergency arbitration and statutory provisions relating to mediation, thereby bringing Nigerian arbitration closer to contemporary international standards. It concluded that the Act possesses considerable potential to strengthen Nigeria's arbitration environment but that effective implementation requires greater institutional preparedness. Onoja recommended training and capacity building for arbitration stakeholders and the development of clearer procedures for implementing the Act. The study is directly relevant to the present research because *Judging Matters* explicitly presents its dispute-resolution process as arbitration, making the statutory requirements examined by Onoja essential to assessing the programme's legal status. In particular, the study provides a framework for examining whether the programme's procedures correspond with the contemporary Nigerian legal regime governing arbitration agreements, arbitral proceedings and related procedural safeguards.

Nwakoby, Nwakoby and Nwakoby (2024), in *Impeachment of Arbitral Award: Review of Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023*, examined the nature, finality and enforceability of arbitral awards under the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023, including the circumstances under which an award may be challenged or set aside. The study was grounded in statutory and jurisprudential analysis and adopted a doctrinal legal research design based on primary and secondary sources of Nigerian law. Its population consisted of relevant statutes, judicial authorities and legal literature rather than human respondents; consequently, no respondent sampling technique or numerical sample size was applicable. The study examined the legal character of arbitral awards and the statutory grounds and procedures for challenging awards under the new Act. Its findings emphasised that although arbitral awards possess a strong degree of finality, their legal status does not place them completely beyond judicial scrutiny, since the Act provides recognised grounds and procedures through which an award may be impeached. The authors concluded that the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023 provides a structured framework for determining the finality and challengeability of arbitral awards and recommended careful compliance with statutory requirements in arbitral proceedings. The study is particularly relevant to the present research because it enables the researcher to move beyond the programme's description of *Judging Matters* decisions as "final" and examine the more precise legal questions surrounding the existence of an arbitration agreement, the constitution and conduct of proceedings, the nature of the resulting decision or award, and the possibility of recognition and enforcement under the 2023 Act.

Theoretical Framework

This work was anchored on Access to Justice Theory and mediatization theory. Access to Justice theory was developed principally by Mauro Cappelletti and Bryant Garth in 1978 through their influential work *Access to Justice: The Worldwide Movement to Make Rights Effective*. The theory argues that justice should not merely exist as a formal legal right; individuals must be able to practically access mechanisms for obtaining justice. Its major

propositions include the removal of financial barriers, reduction of procedural complexity and delay, provision of appropriate legal assistance, development of alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms, and reform of legal institutions to make justice more accessible and effective. Cappelletti and Garth particularly identified the need to develop simpler procedures and alternative mechanisms for resolving claims, especially those involving ordinary citizens and small claims.

Mediatization theory is principally associated with Stig Hjarvard, who systematically developed its institutional formulation in 2008 in his work, *The Mediatization of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change*. The theory proposes that media have become an increasingly independent social institution with their own logic, formats, technologies and modes of communication, while other institutions increasingly adapt their activities to these media conditions. Thus, when social institutions enter the media environment, their practices may be reorganised according to media formats, visibility, presentation and communication requirements. The theory is relevant because *Judging Matters* transforms dispute resolution into a televised and publicly mediated process. Arbitration is therefore not simply conducted as a private legal procedure; it is presented through the structures and communicative conventions of television. Mediatization Theory enables the study to examine how arbitration is presented, communicated and performed through television, including the role of questioning, public visibility, presentation of disputes and communication of decisions.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative socio-legal research design using systematic documentary and secondary content analysis. The study examined two interconnected bodies of evidence: first, documentary materials relating to the institutional and procedural characteristics of conventional civil litigation and the Lagos State Small Claims Court; and second, documented cases presented on *Judging Matters* during the study period. The case constituted the principal unit of analysis, while the individual procedural and financial characteristics constituted the variables extracted from each case. A structured coding schedule was used to record the case category, amount claimed where disclosed, nature of the dispute, parties' claims, procedural features, representation, mode of determination, decision reached and legal principle reflected in the determination. For the comparative component, documentary data were extracted from the Lagos State Small Claims Practice Direction 2023 and relevant Lagos State Judiciary materials. The Small Claims framework provides for liquidated monetary claims not exceeding

₦5 million, counterclaims up to ₦10 million, self-representation, settlement facilitation and defined procedural timelines, including a maximum 60-day period for disposal. These documentary provisions were compared with the operational characteristics documented for *Judging Matters*. Descriptive statistics, principally frequencies, percentages, minimum and maximum values, mean and median claim amounts where sufficient monetary observations were available were used to summarise the coded cases. Because the present study analyses a documentary corpus rather than a probability sample of Nigerian litigants, the statistics are descriptive and are used to establish the distribution and characteristics of the cases rather than to make population-level statistical generalisations.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. First, *Judging Matters* cases were coded into substantive dispute categories and their financial and procedural characteristics were summarised using frequency and percentage distributions. Second, the identified categories and decisions were subjected to thematic and legal content analysis to establish the contractual, tortious, restitutionary and other legal principles reflected in the cases. Van Leeuwen's (2008) representation of social practices was employed to examine how disputants, claims, legal authority and adjudicatory actions were represented within the televised setting. Third, the documented procedures and decisions were subjected to a statutory compliance matrix based on the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023. Particular attention was given to the existence and form of an arbitration agreement, the constitution and conduct of proceedings, the nature and form of awards, and the statutory requirements for recognition and enforcement. Under the Act, an arbitration agreement must be in writing in the statutory sense, while section 57 provides for recognition and enforcement of an arbitral award and requires the party seeking enforcement to supply the original or certified award and the original or certified arbitration agreement. Validity was strengthened through triangulation of programme records, independently published descriptions of cases, official Lagos State Judiciary documents and the text of the AMA 2023. Content validity was additionally established through expert review of the coding instrument by specialists in law/ADR and communication/media studies. Reliability was demonstrated by having a defined proportion of the cases independently coded by a second coder and reporting the resulting inter-coder agreement coefficient. This distinction is particularly important because the programme's description of its process as arbitration cannot, by itself, establish compliance with every statutory requirement of the AMA 2023.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Comparative Operational, Procedural and Financial Characteristics of Civil Justice Pathways in Lagos State

Comparative dimension	Conventional civil litigation	Lagos State Small Claims Court	<i>Judging Matters</i>
Institutional character	Formal judicial process before Magistrate/High Court	Specialised division of the Magistrates' Court for small claims	Television-based dispute-resolution programme presented as arbitration
Financial jurisdiction	Determined by the jurisdiction of the particular court and applicable law	Liquidated monetary claims up to ₦5,000,000	No statutory monetary ceiling established from the programme materials examined; cases are generally small-scale disputes
Counterclaims	Governed by applicable procedural rules	Counterclaims up to ₦10,000,000	Dependent on the particular dispute presented

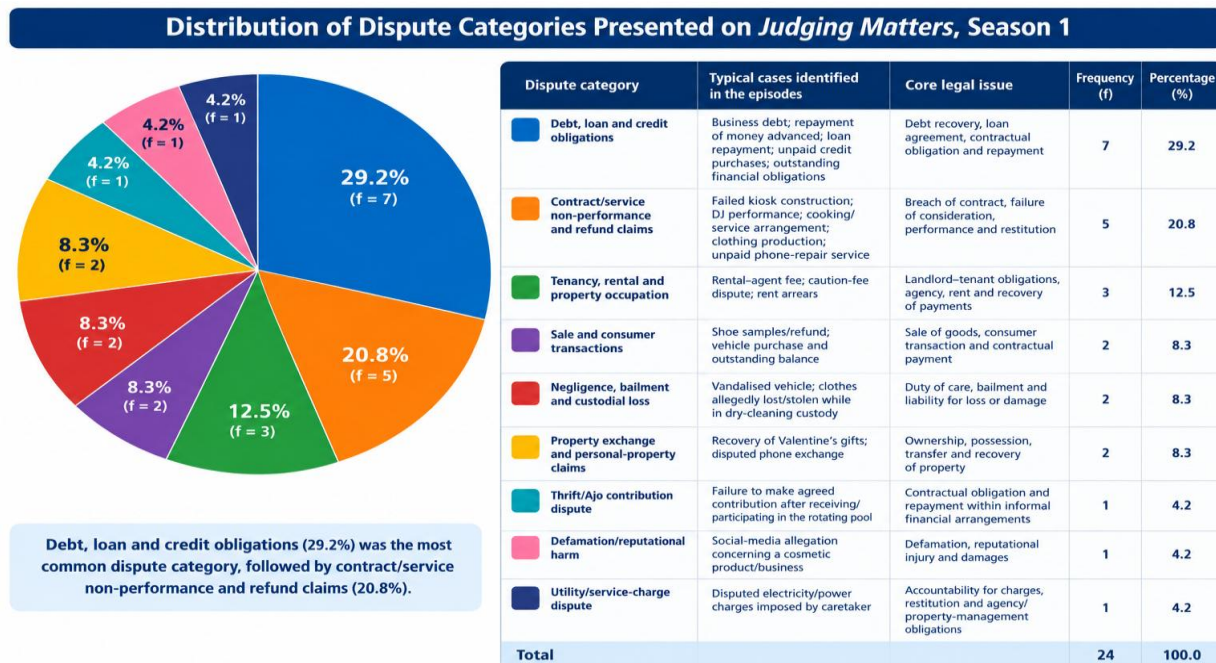
Commencement	Formal court processes and filing requirements	Prescribed Small Claims forms, letter of demand and summons	Programme referral/selection and appearance before the adjudicator
Legal representation	Parties may be represented by legal practitioners subject to applicable court rules	Self-representation is encouraged	Parties present their disputes directly; programme materials identify a counsellor who assists in the proceedings
Settlement	May occur within formal proceedings	Magistrate is required to encourage settlement	Dispute resolution occurs within a mediated/televised adjudicatory setting
Procedural timetable	Governed by applicable court rules; may involve multiple appearances	Structured timelines; judgment expected within 60 days of filing	Programme materials present the process as a rapid/single-session resolution format
Cost to parties	Filing and associated litigation costs apply	Prescribed filing fees apply	Programme launch materials state that litigants incur no filing or legal fees
Enforcement	Through recognised judicial execution procedures	Judgment enforceable in the manner of a Magistrates' Court monetary order	Legal enforceability under the AMA 2023 requires separate examination of the arbitration agreement and award
Public communication	Primarily formal judicial process	Public judicial process with limited mass-media reach	Mass-mediated through television and streaming platforms
Primary purpose	Adjudication of civil disputes according to law	Accessible, inexpensive and speedy resolution of qualifying claims	Dispute resolution combined with public legal education and entertainment

Source: Researcher's compilation from Lagos State Small Claims Practice Direction 2023, Lagos State Judiciary materials, Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023, and documented *Judging Matters* programme materials.

Table 1 shows that while conventional litigation, the Small Claims Court, and *Judging Matters* all resolve civil disputes, they diverge in structure, cost, speed, and enforcement. The Small Claims Court

simplifies judicial litigation within a 60-day statutory timeline. Conversely, *Judging Matters* eliminates filing fees and legal costs using a televised format. The core distinction is institutional: the Small Claims Court holds express statutory authority, whereas *Judging Matters* relies on establishing whether its arbitral arrangements satisfy the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023.

Figure 1: Distribution of Dispute Categories Presented on *Judging Matters*, Season 1



Source: Researcher's classification and calculation from the 24 individually identifiable cases described for *Judging Matters*, Season 1. Episode-level case descriptions were cross-checked against the programme catalogue and published episode records.

The distribution reveals that *Judging Matters* predominantly handled low-value financial and contractual disputes from everyday transactions. Debt/loan obligations (29.2%, n=7) and contract non-performance (20.8%, n=5) comprised 50.0% (n=12) of Season 1 cases, making monetary obligations central to the docket. Tenancy

disputes accounted for 12.5%, while consumer sales, negligence, and property claims represented 8.3% each. Thrift, defamation, and utility disputes each constituted 4.2%. These findings confirm the

show resolves everyday micro-claims rather than complex commercial litigation, aligning with its design for small claims.

Figure 2: Statutory Assessment of *Judging Matters* Arbitration Procedures under the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023

Statutory Assessment of <i>Judging Matters</i> Arbitration Procedures under the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023					
S/N	AMA 2023 Requirement	Relevant Statutory Requirement	Evidence Sought in <i>Judging Matters</i> Records	Evidence Established from Programme Records	Assessment
1	Existence of arbitration agreement	An arbitration agreement may be a clause in a contract or a separate agreement and must be in writing; the Act recognises recorded communications and certain exchanges of claims and defences as satisfying the writing requirement (s. 2).	Signed agreement, written submission to arbitration, electronic record, contractual arbitration clause, or other record satisfying s. 2.	Programme records identify the process as arbitration and show parties voluntarily appearing before the adjudicator, but the publicly available case descriptions do not reproduce the parties' arbitration agreements or establish their statutory form.	Not ascertainable from available records
2	Consent/ submission to arbitration	The parties must have an agreement submitting the relevant dispute to arbitration; an arbitration agreement is binding and generally excludes another dispute-resolution method unless otherwise provided (s. 1–2).	Evidence that both parties agreed to submit the particular dispute to the arbitral process.	Participation of both disputants in the televised proceedings is observable; however, participation alone does not establish the content or legal form of an arbitration agreement.	Partially evidenced; statutory sufficiency not ascertainable
3	Appointment/authority of arbitrator	The arbitral tribunal must possess authority derived from the arbitration agreement and applicable appointment procedure.	Evidence concerning appointment, acceptance or authority of the arbitrator/tribunal.	Justice Olusola Williams is publicly identified as the presiding judge/adjudicator of the programme; however, the available records do not establish the contractual/statutory appointment mechanism for each dispute.	Appointment observable; statutory constitution not ascertainable
4	Equality and opportunity to present the case	Each party must be treated equally and given a reasonable opportunity to present its case (s. 30).	Evidence that claimant and respondent were both heard, allowed to explain their positions and respond to the opposing case.	Episode records demonstrate direct questioning of disputants and presentation of competing accounts before the adjudicator.	Substantively evidenced from programme records
5	Determination of procedural rules	Parties may agree the procedure; where they do not, the applicable Arbitration Rules under the Act govern the proceedings, subject to the statutory requirements (s. 31).	Published procedural rules, agreed procedure, notices, pleadings or other evidence showing the procedural framework applied.	The programme has an identifiable recurring hearing format, but the available records do not establish that the parties agreed to the statutory rules or another procedure satisfying s. 31.	Not ascertainable
6	Opportunity to challenge jurisdiction	The arbitral tribunal has jurisdiction to rule on its own jurisdiction, including objections concerning the existence or validity of the arbitration agreement (s. 14).	Evidence of jurisdictional determination or opportunity to challenge jurisdiction.	No publicly available record examined establishes a jurisdictional objection or a formal determination concerning the existence or validity of an arbitration agreement.	Not ascertainable
7	Form of arbitral award	An arbitral award must be in writing and signed by the arbitrator(s) (s. 47).	Written award, signed award, date and other statutory elements.	Programme episodes provide televised decisions/rulings, but the publicly accessible records do not provide certified or signed arbitral awards.	Not ascertainable
8	Reasons and terms of determination	The Act specifies requirements concerning the contents of an award, including the determination made by the tribunal (s. 47).	Written award setting out the determination, relief and other required particulars.	The broadcasts communicate the adjudicator's conclusions and remedies to the parties; however, the underlying formal award documents are not publicly available.	Decision communicated; statutory award requirements not ascertainable
9	Binding character of award	An arbitral award is recognised as binding subject to the Act and may be enforced by the Court (s. 57).	Evidence that the decision constitutes an arbitral award within the meaning of the Act.	The programme presents its decisions as final, but the available records do not establish that each decision satisfies the statutory definition and formal requirements of an arbitral award.	Not legally established from programme records alone
10	Recognition and enforcement	A party seeking enforcement must apply to the Court and supply the original/certified award and original/certified arbitration agreement; enforcement may be granted in the same manner as a judgment or order (s. 57).	Evidence of an arbitration agreement, formal award and application for judicial enforcement.	No evidence has been established from the programme records of post-programme applications for judicial recognition or enforcement of the televised decisions.	Not ascertainable / no enforcement evidence identified
11	Grounds for refusal/set-aside	The Act provides grounds on which an award may be set aside or recognition/enforcement refused, including invalid arbitration agreement, inability to present a case, procedural irregularity and matters outside the submission (ss. 55 and 58).	Evidence that parties were informed of or had access to statutory challenge mechanisms, or evidence of subsequent challenge proceedings.	No publicly available programme record examined documents an application to set aside, refuse recognition or otherwise challenge a <i>Judging Matters</i> decision under the Act.	Not ascertainable

Source: Researcher's statutory content analysis of documented *Judging Matters* cases and the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023. Statutory requirements are derived from sections 1, 2, 14, 30, 31, 47, 55, 57 and 58 of the Act.

Figure 2 highlights a distinction between *Judging Matters'* observable operation and its statutory arbitral status under the AMA 2023. While party participation and fair hearing are evident, written arbitration agreements, tribunal appointment, procedural rules, and signed awards remain unverified. Lacking statutory enforcement proof under Section 57, the findings confirm functional arbitration characteristics but insufficient documentary evidence of full AMA compliance.

Discussion of findings

Against with Frynas (2001) and Usman et al. (2014), who identified high filing fees, extreme procedural delays, and legal illiteracy as major deterrents to formal litigation, *Judging Matters* offers a zero-cost, rapid-resolution platform for low-value civil claims. Data from Season 1 indicates that 50% of featured disputes centered on debt recovery and contract non-performance, the precise category of everyday, low-value disputes that Cappelletti and Garth (1978) argue are routinely priced out of conventional courts. Furthermore, the format mirrors the procedural efficiency of the Lagos State Small Claims Court by dispensing with technical legal filings and lengthy adjournments. However, a significant divergence exists regarding the institutional and legal validity of the platform: while Usman et al. (2014) emphasized formal legal-aid and judicial restructuring, *Judging Matters* operates as a televised arbitration hybrid. A statutory analysis under the Arbitration and Mediation Act (AMA) 2023 show that while the televised proceedings

substantively satisfy the statutory requirement of equal opportunity to be heard (Section 30), critical formal requirements, such as the existence of a written arbitration agreement (Section 2) and signed, written awards (Section 47), remain unverified in public records, rendering its decisions legally uninspected compared to formal judicial or small claims judgments. The analysis x-rays a strong operational alignment between *Judging Matters* and the access-to-justice framework, as the show successfully eliminates the primary socio-economic barriers to legal redress identified in empirical literature.

The second finding, concerning the categories of disputes presented on *Judging Matters* and the legal principles reflected in their determination, reveals a clear concentration on ordinary, low-value disputes arising from everyday economic and social transactions. Of the 24 identifiable cases in Season 1, debt, loan and credit obligations constituted the largest category, with 7 cases (29.2%), followed by contract, service non-performance and refund claims with 5 cases (20.8%); together, these accounted for 12 cases (50.0%) of the entire corpus. Tenancy, rental and property-occupation disputes accounted for 3 cases (12.5%), while sale and consumer transactions, negligence/bailment and custodial-loss claims, and property-exchange/personal-property disputes each accounted for 2 cases (8.3%). Ajo/thrift, defamation and utility/service-charge disputes each occurred once (4.2%). The pattern is important because it shows that the programme was not dealing randomly with disputes but was substantially oriented towards monetary

obligations, informal contracts, failed services, property transactions and other everyday civil grievances that are ordinarily capable of resolution without complex judicial proceedings. In this respect, the finding supports Frynas (2001), who identified financial constraints and other institutional difficulties as important barriers to access to Nigerian courts, and Usman, Yaacob and Rahman (2014), who argued for accessible and expeditious mechanisms for small-value consumer and civil claims. It also agrees with Bloch (2013) that television arbitration tends to bring ordinary disputes into a publicly mediated legal environment. However, the present study goes beyond these earlier works by providing a quantified classification of the disputes actually presented on a Nigerian television arbitration programme and by identifying the legal issues embedded in them, including debt recovery, contractual performance, restitution, tenancy obligations, sale transactions, bailment, property rights and defamation. This empirical pattern provides strong support for Access to Justice Theory, since the nature of the cases suggests that the programme serves disputes for which ordinary citizens may seek a simpler and less burdensome avenue of redress; it equally supports Mediatist Theory, because those disputes are not merely resolved but converted into publicly presented legal narratives. The theory nevertheless does not explain the substantive legal correctness of each determination, making statutory and doctrinal legal analysis necessary to establish whether the principles applied in individual cases correspond with Nigerian law. The interactional and communicative dynamics of *Judging Matters* demonstrate both the utility and limits of Mediatist Theory and discourse-analytic frameworks in explaining mediated dispute resolution.

The third finding, concerning the conformity of *Judging Matters* with the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023, presents the most significant legal qualification arising from the study. The programme satisfies some of the functional characteristics of arbitration: disputants voluntarily appear before an identified adjudicator, both sides are heard and questioned, their competing claims are considered, and a determination is communicated at the end of the proceeding. However, the statutory assessment shows that these observable features do not, by themselves, establish compliance with the Act. Section 2 requires an arbitration agreement in writing or in a recognised recorded form, yet the publicly available programme records examined do not disclose the agreements on which the individual proceedings were based. Similarly, although section 30 requires equal treatment and a reasonable opportunity for parties to present their cases, which is substantially observable in the broadcasts, compliance with section 31 concerning the agreed or applicable arbitral procedure could not be established. More importantly, section 47 requires an arbitral award to be in writing and signed, while the study found only televised decisions and no publicly available signed awards corresponding to the cases; section 57 further requires an original or certified award and the original or certified arbitration agreement for judicial recognition and enforcement, yet no evidence of subsequent court enforcement was identified. These findings partly support Onoja (2025), whose doctrinal analysis demonstrates that the AMA 2023 establishes a more comprehensive and modern framework for arbitration, but they also extend his work by testing those statutory requirements against an actual televised arbitration practice rather than examining the Act in the abstract. They similarly reinforce Nwakoby, Nwakoby and Nwakoby (2024), who emphasised that the finality of an arbitral award remains subject to statutory safeguards and judicial scrutiny. The divergence is that the present study does not conclude that *Judging Matters* is non-compliant; rather, it establishes that several critical elements are not ascertainable from

the available documentary evidence, thereby exposing a gap between the programme's public representation of its decisions as "final" and the documentary requirements necessary to establish them as enforceable arbitral awards under Nigerian law. Access to Justice Theory supports the programme's apparent removal of cost and procedural barriers, but offers no basis for determining statutory validity, while Mediatist Theory explains why arbitration is reformatted into a visible television event but similarly cannot confer legal authority on the resulting decisions. The finding therefore demonstrates that accessibility and media visibility may strengthen the practical appeal of *Judging Matters*, but neither can substitute for the formal legal requirements governing arbitration under the AMA 2023. Yet, non-availability does not automatically translate for non-existent.

Recommendations

1. The producers of *Judging Matters* should execute and publicly archive standard, statutory-compliant written arbitration agreements prior to filming to ensure full legal alignment with Section 2 of the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023.
2. The Lagos State Judiciary should formalise an institutional framework to integrate verified television-based dispute outcomes into the Small Claims enforcement structure, thereby ensuring that participants receive binding, judicially enforceable judgments.
3. Media organizations producing legal ADR programs should incorporate clear on-air legal disclosures explicitly clarifying the legal status, enforceability, and statutory nature of the arbitral decisions reached during the broadcast.

Conclusion

As alternative dispute resolution continues to evolve beyond formal courtrooms, televised adjudication occupies a vital, transformative space in the modern legal landscape, redefining how ordinary citizens encounter and understand the law. While the tensions between media logic and strict statutory compliance remain evident, the enduring value of these platforms lies in their ability to strip legal processes of daunting formality and prohibitive expense. The future of access to justice increasingly depends on the deliberate integration of formal legal safeguards within highly accessible, popular media formats. By bridging the gap between statutory rigour and public accessibility, mediated dispute mechanisms hold the potential to redefine civil justice as a truly participatory, transparent, and democratic public institution.

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