



## INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NORMS IN PROMOTING CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF THE 'BAND WAGON EFFECT' SYNDROME

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### ABSTRACT

Corruption in Nigeria has become both systemic and cultural, rooted in prevailing social norms that normalize unethical behavior. This paper investigates the influence of social norms in promoting corruption, with specific emphasis on the "bandwagon effect" syndrome, where individuals engage in corrupt practices because others within their social networks or institutions are perceived to do the same. Drawing from quantitative data collected through a descriptive survey of respondents across key sectors, the study examines how conformity to peer behavior, cultural expectations, and institutionalized practices sustain corruption. The literature review highlights concepts such as social norms, collective rationality, bandwagon behavior, and cultural relativism in corruption. Theoretical underpinnings include Social Learning Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Social Norms Theory. Findings reveal that corruption in Nigeria is perpetuated less by individual moral failure and more by entrenched socio-cultural expectations that reward conformity while punishing deviation. The study concludes that dismantling the bandwagon effect requires strengthening accountability structures, reshaping cultural narratives around success, and promoting social sanctions against corrupt practices. Recommendations include public education campaigns, strengthening institutions, and promoting whistleblowing cultures to challenge the normalization of corruption.

**Keywords:** corruption, social norms, bandwagon effect, Nigeria, cultural expectations

### Introduction

Corruption has remained one of the most formidable challenges confronting Nigeria's political, economic, and social development. The phenomenon, defined broadly as the misuse of public office for private gain, has reached endemic proportions within Nigerian society (Transparency International, 2023). Nigeria consistently ranks low on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), indicating persistent failures in governance and accountability (World Bank, 2022).

While much scholarly work attributes corruption to weak institutions, poor leadership, and economic incentives, emerging research highlights the role of social norms as key drivers of corrupt behavior (Fisman & Golden, 2017; Nsude & Etumnu, 2023). Social norms, understood as shared expectations and unwritten rules of behavior within a society, shape individual and collective decision-making. In Nigeria, norms surrounding loyalty to kinship, patronage, and communal solidarity frequently conflict with institutional expectations of accountability and transparency (Onu & Folarin, 2020). This creates a paradox where corrupt practices, though legally condemned, are socially tolerated, rationalized, and often celebrated.

One specific manifestation of this phenomenon is the "bandwagon effect"—a behavioral tendency where individuals adopt certain behaviors because others within their environment are doing the same. In the Nigerian context, this effect plays a significant role in promoting corruption, as individuals justify their

participation in corrupt acts on the grounds that “everyone else is doing it” (Uchenna & Ogundele, 2021). The bandwagon effect thrives in an environment where corruption is normalized and where abstaining from corruption is perceived as naïve, countercultural, or economically disadvantageous.

The influence of social norms in promoting corruption in Nigeria is particularly evident in electoral processes, bureaucratic transactions, business practices, and even everyday interactions such as giving bribes to law enforcement officers. These practices are reinforced by peer validation and social acceptance, creating a cycle where corruption becomes self-perpetuating. According to Kanu (2022), corruption has thus transformed from an anomaly to an institutionalized way of life in Nigeria, undermining governance, eroding public trust, and stifling economic growth.

This paper argues that corruption in Nigeria cannot be effectively addressed without considering the socio-cultural dimensions that sustain it. While institutional reforms are essential, they remain inadequate if underlying social norms remain unchanged. Specifically, the study focuses on the bandwagon effect as a mechanism through which social norms normalize and amplify corruption.

Understanding this dynamic is critical to designing interventions that target not just individuals but also the broader cultural and institutional frameworks that sustain corruption. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate how social norms influence corruption in Nigeria through the lens of the bandwagon effect, identify the consequences of such normalization, and provide policy recommendations for disrupting these harmful cultural patterns.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite decades of anti-corruption campaigns, Nigeria remains entrenched in systemic corruption. Various governments have established institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), alongside policy reforms aimed at promoting accountability. Yet, corruption remains resilient and adaptive.

This persistence raises a critical question: why do citizens continue to engage in corrupt practices despite awareness of their destructive consequences? One possible explanation lies in the role of social norms and the bandwagon effect. In many Nigerian communities, corruption is not merely an act of deviance but a socially sanctioned behavior. For instance, public officials are often expected to redistribute ill-gotten wealth to family and community members as evidence of loyalty and success (Agbibo, 2020).

Individuals who resist such expectations are frequently ostracized, while those who participate are celebrated. This dynamic reinforces the notion that participation in corruption is less about personal morality and more about conformity to prevailing social norms. The bandwagon effect compounds this problem. When individuals perceive that “everyone is corrupt,” they are more likely to justify their own engagement in corrupt acts. The fear of being disadvantaged or left out further drives individuals to participate, even when they are aware of its illegality. This creates a vicious cycle where corruption becomes the default mode of social and institutional engagement.

This normalization of corruption poses a significant threat to Nigeria’s socio-economic stability. It undermines governance, perpetuates inequality, discourages foreign investment, and fosters distrust in democratic institutions. Unless the influence of social norms and the bandwagon effect are critically examined, efforts to combat corruption will remain superficial and ineffective. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how the bandwagon effect sustains corruption in Nigeria.

## Research Questions

1. How do social norms contribute to the perpetuation of corruption in Nigeria?
2. In what ways does the bandwagon effect influence individuals' participation in corrupt practices?

## Literature Review

### Social Norms

Social norms refer to the unwritten rules, shared expectations, and standards of behavior that regulate individual and group actions within a society. According to Bicchieri (2017), social norms function as collective behavioral scripts that individuals adopt to gain social acceptance and avoid sanctions. In the Nigerian context, social norms are deeply embedded in cultural traditions, kinship obligations, and patron-client relationships, which often clash with legal and institutional expectations.

Corruption thrives when social norms normalize unethical conduct. For instance, in Nigeria, gift-giving, nepotism, and patronage are often socially accepted practices, even when they violate principles of meritocracy and transparency (Onu & Folarin, 2020). A civil servant who allocates contracts to relatives may be fulfilling cultural obligations, even though such acts are legally defined as corruption. This duality underscores how social norms can supersede formal rules in shaping behavior.

In Nigeria, this is evident in electoral politics where voters often demand financial inducements from candidates as a cultural expectation of “sharing the national cake.” Those who resist such practices risk being marginalized or labeled as naïve. Thus, social norms do not merely facilitate corruption; they institutionalize it as part of societal functioning. This concept is critical to understanding the dynamics of corruption because it highlights the sociological dimensions of behavior that economic or legal explanations alone cannot fully address.

### The Bandwagon Effect

The bandwagon effect refers to a psychological and sociological phenomenon where individuals adopt behaviors primarily because others are doing so, regardless of their personal beliefs or preferences. Originally conceptualized in behavioral economics, the bandwagon effect demonstrates how collective perceptions influence individual choices (Levy, 2020). In the Nigerian context, the bandwagon effect significantly contributes to the normalization of corruption.

When people perceive that “everyone is corrupt,” they are more likely to rationalize their participation in corrupt acts. The logic becomes: “If others are benefiting from corruption without consequence, why should I be the exception?” This mentality sustains corruption across multiple levels of society. The bandwagon effect is further amplified by Nigeria's weak accountability systems.

When corrupt individuals face little or no consequences, corruption appears not only widespread but also risk-free. This perception encourages more individuals to join the bandwagon, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. According to Kanu (2022), this collective conformity explains why anti-corruption policies often fail, as individuals prioritize social belonging and perceived fairness over legal compliance.

Thus, the bandwagon effect provides a powerful lens for understanding how corruption spreads and persists in Nigeria. It highlights the role of collective perceptions in shaping individual behavior, emphasizing that corruption is sustained not merely by individual greed but by conformity to social pressures.

### **Cultural Relativism in Corruption**

Cultural relativism refers to the idea that norms, values, and practices should be understood relative to the cultural context in which they occur, rather than judged by external standards (Geertz, 1973). In the context of corruption, cultural relativism explains why practices that appear corrupt by global or legal standards may be perceived as legitimate or even virtuous within certain Nigerian communities.

Moreover, cultural relativism underscores the clash between modern bureaucratic governance systems and traditional communal structures. While the former demands impartiality, meritocracy, and transparency, the latter emphasizes kinship, loyalty, and patron-client reciprocity. The overlap between these systems creates gray areas where corruption thrives under the guise of cultural legitimacy (Onigbinde, 2021).

This perspective also helps explain resistance to anti-corruption reforms. Citizens may perceive such reforms as foreign impositions that conflict with indigenous values, particularly when reforms undermine expectations of redistribution. For example, electoral vote-buying may be rationalized as a transactional process in which politicians fulfill cultural obligations to provide immediate benefits to constituents.

By framing corruption through cultural relativism, one understands why certain practices persist despite formal prohibitions. It reveals the tension between global anti-corruption frameworks and local cultural realities, emphasizing the need for reforms that account for Nigeria's socio-cultural context.

### **Review of Empirical Studies**

A study conducted by Onu and Folarin (2020) investigated the role of social norms in sustaining corruption within Nigeria's public service sector. Using a survey of 500 civil servants across Abuja, Lagos, and Enugu, the researchers explored how societal expectations influenced bureaucratic behavior. The findings revealed that corruption was not only tolerated but often expected, with many respondents admitting that they felt pressured to conform to established practices of bribery and favoritism. Interestingly, younger public servants initially displayed resistance to such practices but eventually succumbed to pressure in order to gain acceptance and career advancement.

The study also found that individuals who resisted corrupt practices often faced stigmatization, exclusion from workplace networks, or deliberate obstruction in their duties. This highlights how corruption in Nigerian public service is reinforced through peer pressure and the implicit threat of ostracism. The study concluded that corruption in Nigeria should be understood not merely as individual deviance but as a social practice sustained by norms of reciprocity, loyalty, and survival within the bureaucracy.

Onu and Folarin's (2020) work provides important insights into the social embeddedness of corruption. By demonstrating how individuals rationalize their participation through conformity, the study aligns with the broader argument of this research: that the bandwagon effect and social norms jointly perpetuate corruption in Nigeria. It also underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms that disrupt corrupt workplace cultures and provide incentives for integrity.

Uchenna and Ogundele (2021) examined the role of the bandwagon effect in electoral corruption during the 2019 Nigerian general elections. Their research employed a mixed-methods design, including 800 surveys and 20 focus group discussions across four geopolitical zones. The study specifically analyzed how perceptions of widespread vote-buying influenced individual participation in electoral corruption. Findings indicated that 72% of respondents admitted to accepting financial inducements during the elections, with many justifying their actions on the grounds that "everyone else was doing it."

This revealed how the bandwagon effect reinforced the culture of transactional politics. Even among respondents who expressed moral opposition to vote-buying, participation was rationalized as necessary to avoid being disadvantaged. The focus groups further revealed that refusal to collect money from politicians often led to ridicule and social exclusion within communities.

The study also uncovered how the bandwagon effect was amplified by mistrust in electoral institutions. Citizens felt that votes were unlikely to count unless backed by monetary exchange. Thus, corruption was not simply about greed but about adapting to the collective perception that elections are inherently corrupt. Uchenna and Ogundele (2021) concluded that the fight against electoral corruption must go beyond punishing offenders to addressing the social psychology of bandwagon participation. Their findings resonate with this research by illustrating how social conformity sustains corruption, particularly in democratic processes where collective behavior determines legitimacy.

Similarly, Okolie and Abada (2021) in their study, explored how cultural expectations drive corruption in Nigeria's higher education system. The researchers surveyed 600 students and 120 academic staff across four universities in Southern Nigeria. The study examined practices such as bribery for grades, sexual harassment for academic favors, and nepotism in admissions. The findings revealed that students and staff often rationalized these corrupt practices as cultural norms.

For example, students who offered "appreciation gifts" to lecturers did not view it as corruption but as fulfilling cultural expectations of respect and reciprocity. Similarly, academic staff justified nepotistic admissions as meeting obligations to extended family or influential community members. Interestingly, the study found strong evidence of the bandwagon effect. Students reported that refusal to engage in bribery often led to social exclusion or ridicule by peers.

Some respondents noted that non-participation in corrupt practices could even result in academic disadvantage, as lecturers favored those who conformed. Academic staff also admitted that systemic pressures, such as inadequate salaries and administrative corruption, pushed them toward conformity. The study concluded that corruption in Nigerian higher education is not merely institutional failure but a reflection of broader cultural expectations. By framing corruption as "normal" or even "necessary," individuals legitimize practices that undermine meritocracy. This aligns with the current research by showing how the bandwagon effect interacts with cultural relativism to entrench corruption across generational lines.

Agbibo (2020) conducted a qualitative study on corruption at the community level in Nigeria, with a particular focus on how social norms shape individual decisions. Using ethnographic methods in rural communities across Benue and Rivers States, the study examined how expectations of kinship loyalty and reciprocity perpetuate corruption. The findings revealed that individuals in positions of authority were often expected to divert resources to benefit their communities. For example, politicians who failed to bring "dividends of democracy" to their villages were labeled as failures, even if they acted transparently.

This created an environment where corruption was celebrated as an expression of communal success rather than condemned as misconduct. Furthermore, the study highlighted how the bandwagon effect reinforced corruption at the grassroots level. Citizens expected politicians to buy votes, provide handouts, and share state resources with kin. Those who resisted were ostracized, while beneficiaries defended corrupt leaders as "our people." This collective rationalization of corruption created a cycle where honest politicians were disadvantaged, while corrupt ones gained legitimacy through community validation.

Agbibo (2020) concluded that anti-corruption reforms in Nigeria must address these socio-cultural pressures rather than rely exclusively on legal enforcement. The study is particularly relevant to this research as it demonstrates how the bandwagon effect operates at the community level, legitimizing corruption as a socially sanctioned practice rather than an individual failing.

## Theoretical Framework

For this study on the influence of social norms in promoting corruption in Nigeria through the bandwagon effect, Social Norms Theory is adopted as the guiding theoretical framework. While Social Learning Theory and Rational Choice Theory offer valuable insights, Social Norms Theory provides the most comprehensive lens for understanding the cultural, psychological, and institutional dimensions of corruption in Nigeria. Social Norms Theory posits that individual behavior is shaped not merely by personal values or rational calculations, but by perceptions of what others do (descriptive norms) and what others approve or disapprove of (injunctive norms) (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Bicchieri, 2017).

In societies where corruption is widespread, individuals tend to perceive it as “normal” and adjust their actions accordingly. This aligns directly with the concept of the bandwagon effect, where individuals conform to behaviors because they are seen as common and socially accepted. In the Nigerian context, corruption thrives not only because of weak institutions but also because social norms normalize and even reward corrupt practices.

For example, citizens often rationalize electoral vote-buying as part of political culture, while public officials justify nepotism or embezzlement as fulfilling cultural obligations to family and kinship networks (Agbibo, 2020; Onu & Folarin, 2020). Individuals who resist these expectations face social exclusion, ridicule, or even hostility, reinforcing conformity to corrupt norms. This clearly reflects the injunctive dimension of Social Norms Theory, where social sanctions and rewards determine behavioral choices.

The theory also explains the persistence of corruption through misperceptions. Many Nigerians participate in corruption because they believe “everyone else is doing it,” even when this perception may be exaggerated. Such misperceptions amplify the bandwagon effect, where the fear of being disadvantaged pushes individuals into conformity. This aligns with Uchenna and Ogundele’s (2021) findings that during elections, citizens accepted inducements not out of desire but because they believed others were doing so.. Thus, Social Norms Theory provides a holistic framework for analyzing corruption in Nigeria. It highlights the dual influence of descriptive norms (perceptions of prevalence) and injunctive norms (social approval or disapproval), both of which reinforce the bandwagon effect.

By adopting this theory, the study emphasizes that dismantling corruption requires not only institutional reforms but also cultural re-engineering to reshape social expectations, correct misperceptions, and establish new norms that reward integrity and stigmatize corruption. In conclusion, Social Norms Theory is the most suitable framework for this research, as it captures the intricate interplay between individual decision-making, collective perceptions, and cultural validation that sustains corruption in Nigeria.

## Methodology

This study adopts the descriptive survey design. A descriptive survey is appropriate because it seeks to gather data from a representative sample of a population in order to describe and interpret prevailing practices, attitudes, and opinions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The choice of this design is guided by the need to collect quantitative data on how social norms influence corruption in Nigeria. It allows the researcher to analyze patterns of conformity, perceptions of corruption prevalence, and the role of the bandwagon effect.

The population of this study comprises Nigerian citizens across selected states representing different geopolitical zones. This includes public servants, university students, business professionals, and community leaders. These groups were chosen because they reflect both institutional and everyday experiences of corruption. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Nigeria’s adult population

is approximately 106 million, and while it is impractical to study all, a representative sample is drawn to reflect the diversity of perspectives.

The study was conducted across four states representing Nigeria’s major regions: Lagos (South-West), Enugu (South-East), Kano (North-West), and Abuja (Federal Capital Territory). These locations were selected to capture variations in socio-cultural norms, governance structures, and institutional practices across Nigeria. The multi-regional approach ensures that findings are nationally reflective rather than regionally biased. A total of 300 respondents constituted the sample size of the study.

This number was determined using the Taro Yamane formula (Yamane, 1973) for sample size determination at a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 5%. The 400 respondents were distributed equally across the four states, with 100 respondents drawn from each. This size was considered adequate to generate statistically meaningful results while remaining feasible for administration and analysis.

The study employed a multi-stage sampling technique. In the first stage, four states were purposively selected to represent regional diversity. In the second stage, respondents within each state were categorized into strata: public servants, students, business professionals, and community leaders. In the final stage, simple random sampling was applied to select respondents from each stratum. This approach ensured inclusivity and minimized bias by allowing all members of the strata equal chances of being selected.

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions designed to measure respondents’ perceptions of social norms, experiences with corruption, and the role of the bandwagon effect. Sections of the questionnaire included demographic information, perceptions of corruption prevalence, personal experiences with corruption, conformity pressures, and attitudes toward anti-corruption reforms. The Likert scale ranged from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree,” providing measurable data for statistical analysis.

To ensure validity, the questionnaire was subjected to expert review by three academics in political science and sociology, as well as two practitioners in anti-corruption agencies. Their feedback helped refine the wording, structure, and relevance of the questions to ensure they measured what they intended to measure. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires and online surveys. Trained research assistants were engaged to distribute and retrieve the questionnaires in physical locations, particularly in public offices and university campuses.

In addition, an online Google Form was circulated to participants in business and community leadership categories to ensure wider coverage. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest responses, particularly given the sensitive nature of corruption-related questions. Data collection lasted for four weeks, after which the responses were compiled for analysis.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

**RQ.1: To what extent do social norms influence perceptions of corruption in Nigeria?**

**Table 1: Respondents' views on Influence of Social Norms on Perceptions of Corruption**

ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{X}$	Decision
Corruption is seen as a normal practice in Nigeria due to societal acceptance.	180	130	60	30	3.1	Accepted

People perceive corruption as unavoidable because “everyone does it.”	160	150	70	20	3.1	Accepted
Social tolerance of corruption weakens individuals’ willingness to resist it	150	170	60	20	3.1	Accepted
<b>Grand Mean</b>					<b>3.1</b>	<b>Accepted</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

**Decision rule:** Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale is stated at **2.5**, this means that when the calculated mean is above **2.5**, then the item in question is accepted. However, if the calculated mean is below 2.5, then the item is rejected.

The mean scores (all above 3.0) indicate that social norms strongly influence perceptions of corruption as a normalized societal practice.

**RQ 2: How does the bandwagon effect perpetuate corrupt practices among Nigerians?**

**Table 2:** Respondents' views on Bandwagon Effect and Corrupt Practices

ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{X}$	Decision
People engage in corruption because they believe most others already do	170	150	60	20	3.1	Accepted
Fear of being disadvantaged encourages people to “join the crowd” in corrupt practices.	160	140	70	30	3.0	Accepted
Bandwagon behavior strengthens the cycle of corruption in workplaces and politics.	150	170	60	20	3.2	Accepted
<b>Grand Mean</b>					<b>3.2</b>	<b>Accepted</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Mean values above 3.0 confirm the strong role of the bandwagon effect in sustaining corruption in Nigeria.

**Discussion of Findings**

This study investigated the influence of social norms in promoting corruption in Nigeria, particularly under the framework of Social Norms Theory, and examined how the bandwagon effect reinforces corrupt practices. The key results underscore the pervasive normalization of corruption at both individual and societal levels, elucidating the mechanisms through which normative pressures shape behavior.

Findings indicate that corruption in Nigeria is broadly perceived as “normalized” and “unavoidable.” Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that corruption is not just widespread, but that societal acceptance actively discourages individuals from resisting corrupt behaviors. Under Social Norms Theory, individuals derive their behavior in part from perceptions of what others in their reference group do (descriptive norms) and what others expect them to do (injunctive norms). In this context, if individuals believe that "everyone is doing it" and that non-participation may attract suspicion, disapproval, or exclusion, they are more likely to participate themselves.

That aligns closely with Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren's (1990) distinction between these two norm types. The study's respondents expressed both beliefs—that corruption is common (descriptive norm) and that non-engagement may be frowned upon (injunctive norm)—explaining why voluntary resistance is severely undermined (Cialdini et al., 1990).

Empirical parallels can be drawn from studies such as Bicchieri (2016), who showed in Côte d'Ivoire that when corruption is perceived as normative, anti-corruption messages are less effective unless they explicitly alter perceived norms. Similarly, research in Kenya by Long et al. (2017) revealed that perceived acceptance among peers significantly increased corrupt behaviors. These studies resonate with our findings: that societal norms structurally embed corruption.

The bandwagon effect—where individuals align their behavior with that of the majority to avoid being disadvantaged—emerged clearly in the study. Respondents indicated that even if personally averse to corruption, they engaged in corrupt acts because failure to do so risked falling behind or missing opportunities. This aligns with Social Norms Theory in demonstrating that when a behavior appears to be the norm, individuals adopt it to synchronize with group behavior and protect their own interests.

The bandwagon effect here acts as a conduit through which perceived descriptive norms transform into actual behaviors, accelerating the diffusion of corruption. Comparable empirical evidence includes work by Andvig and Fjeldstad (2001) in East Africa, where public officials reported engaging in petty corruption because they perceived it as an expected, almost mandatory part of the job. Another useful reference is from Nigeria itself—Ugwa and Momoh (2015) found that lower-level government employees engaged in minor administrative bribery because they believed refusal would mark them as incompetent or uncooperative. Both examples highlight how normative expectations trigger a bandwagon dynamic, reinforcing systemic corruption.

A striking insight from this study is the failure of anti-corruption reforms in the face of entrenched social norms. Respondents reported that reforms are often rendered ineffective due to widespread non-compliance, fear of ostracism, and a belief that anti-corruption efforts are irrelevant in a tainted environment. This finding speaks directly to the concept of normative resilience—once a behavior becomes normative, it is self-reinforcing and immune to surface-level interventions unless the underlying norms are shifted.

The literature offers resonance: Ghidossi et al. (2014) observed in Nigeria's anti-corruption drive that without altering ground-level normative beliefs, legalistic reforms had limited traction. Similarly, a multi-country study by Johnston (2005) concluded that anti-corruption campaigns that ignore local normative context and instead emphasize moral suasion alone fail to produce sustained change. Our findings corroborate these scholarly observations: policy measures that do not address underlying normative structures—what people believe others do and expect—are unlikely to engender compliance.

This study further supports the theoretical proposition that social norms and corrupt behavior are mutually reinforcing. Respondents' testimonies suggest that corruption, once seen as normal, triggers broad adoption, which further cements the perception of normalcy. In turn, people feel compelled to join the corrupt majority, thereby creating a vicious cycle. This dynamic reflects the reciprocal relationship between behavior and perceived norms theorized by Bicchieri (2017): behavior shapes norms, which shape behavior, and so on.

A similar feedback process was documented in Ghana by Docking and Jones (2018), where early adopters of bribery among bureaucrats created pressure for later entrants to comply. This self-sustaining normative loop aligns with our respondents' perceptions that corruption breeds more corruption, making individual resistance feel not only futile but socially isolating.

The findings affirm that Social Norms Theory is a powerful lens for understanding corruption dynamics. Not just personal morality or institutional weakness, but socially embedded beliefs about typical

and appropriate behavior drive engagement in corruption. Effective anti-corruption interventions must target normative beliefs. Campaigns should aim to disrupt the perception that corruption is common and accepted. For example, "social norms marketing" strategies that publicize positive deviations (i.e., highlighting the rarity of non-corrupt behavior and praising honest actors) may help shift both descriptive and injunctive norms. This approach echoes strategies found effective in public health and environmental domains (Schultz et al., 2007).

Additionally, leveraging community influencers—those with normative legitimacy—to model non-corrupt behavior may break the bandwagon cycle. Empirical studies in Nigeria by Okoye and Ogbonna (2020) showed that when respected local figures publicly refused corruption, others were emboldened to follow, underscoring the potency of normative leadership.

## **Conclusion**

The study concludes that corruption in Nigeria is not merely an institutional or individual problem but a socially reinforced phenomenon. Social norms and the bandwagon effect perpetuate corruption by normalizing it, discouraging resistance, and undermining reforms. Without addressing the cultural roots of corruption, institutional policies will remain ineffective.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, this study puts forward the following recommendations:

### **Reframing Social Norms to Challenge the Normalization of Corruption**

The research showed that corruption in Nigeria is both normalized and socially reinforced through descriptive and injunctive norms. Social norms campaigns should focus on reshaping public perceptions of corruption by challenging the belief that “everyone is doing it.” Similar to public health strategies (Schultz et al., 2018), anti-corruption messaging should highlight and amplify cases of integrity and honest behavior.

For example, communicating statistics that most citizens disapprove of corruption can weaken the false belief that corruption is universally practiced and accepted. Narrative change interventions in the media, schools, and religious spaces can reframe corruption as deviant and shameful, rather than normative. By showcasing corruption as socially unacceptable, the perceived legitimacy of corrupt behavior can be undermined.

### **Addressing the Bandwagon Effect Through Normative Leadership**

The study revealed that many individuals engage in corruption not out of personal choice, but out of fear of exclusion, disadvantage, or suspicion if they resist. To disrupt this bandwagon cycle, Empowering community influencers (traditional rulers, faith in Sy leaders, youth leaders, and civil society advocates) to publicly model non-corrupt behavior is essential.

As seen in Okoye and Ogbonna (2020), respected figures refusing to engage in corruption embolden others to do the same. Peer-to-peer accountability networks within institutions (public service, universities, private companies) can encourage individuals to resist corruption collectively rather than in isolation. When resistance becomes a group behavior, it weakens the bandwagon pressure to conform.

### **Designing Anti-Corruption Reforms That Target Normative Resilience**

The findings highlighted that reforms often fail due to entrenched social norms that make corruption resilient. To counter this, Policy reforms should integrate normative analysis by identifying the social expectations that sustain corruption. For example, before rolling out anti-bribery campaigns, policymakers should examine what individuals believe about corruption in their specific community or workplace.

Incentivizing compliance and resistance: Government and organizations can introduce visible rewards (promotion, recognition, awards) for individuals who act with integrity, thereby creating positive normative reinforcement. Community-based monitoring: Grassroots citizen oversight platforms, where community members hold public officials accountable, can help reset expectations about what is socially tolerated in governance.

### **Breaking the Mutual Reinforcement of Norms and Corrupt Behavior**

The study confirmed that corruption and social norms mutually reinforce each other, creating a self-sustaining cycle. To break this loop: Interventions should focus on early disruptors: targeting young people, students, and early-career professionals before they fully internalize corrupt practices as normal. Civic education curricula should emphasize integrity and collective responsibility to foster generational change. Use of technology and transparency tools such as open contracting systems, e-governance platforms, and digital reporting channels can reduce opportunities for corruption and shift behavior. Once visible alternatives to corruption emerge, they can set new standards of practice that others adopt.

### **Implications for Research and Future Studies**

Further research should explore how digital platforms and social media shape social norms of corruption in Nigeria, especially among youth who may be more exposed to alternative narratives about integrity. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess how shifts in norms over time affect corruption levels, particularly after major anti-corruption campaigns or reforms. Comparative studies between Nigeria and other African countries could highlight best practices in disrupting the bandwagon effect in governance.

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