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WORKPLACE ETHICS, INFORMAL PRACTICES, AND CUSTOMER–ATTENDANT RELATIONS IN CNG FUELLING STATIONS: A SOCIOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF NNPC OUTLETS IN ABUJA

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Abstract

This study examined workplace ethics, informal practices, and customer–attendant relations in Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) fuelling stations operated by the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) in Abuja. Drawing on Weber's theory of rational-legal authority and sociological perspectives on informal economies, the research explores how formal bureaucratic rules coexist with entrenched unethical practices such as favouritism, queue-jumping, and unofficial payments. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Findings reveal that workplace ethics, transparency, accountability, and professionalism are selectively observed and frequently undermined by unprincipled practices normalised as survival strategies. Supervisory complicity further entrenches misconduct, eroding recognised legitimacy and customer trust. Customer–attendant relations are marked by negotiation, reciprocity, and conflict, reflecting broader sociological concerns about corruption, fairness, and the symbolic construction of trust in public institutions. The study contributes to the literature on everyday corruption and informal economies in Nigeria, highlighting CNG fuelling stations as critical sites for examining the interplay between formal regulation, informal negotiation, and established legitimacy. Recommendations emphasise strengthening accountability mechanisms, training attendants and supervisors on workplace ethics, and reducing unofficial practices to improve customer satisfaction and organisational credibility.

Keywords: Workplace ethics; Informal practices; Customer–attendant relations; Institutional legitimacy; Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC)

Introduction

In Nigeria, Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) has become an increasingly important part of the energy landscape, particularly in urban centres such as Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano, etc. As the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) expands its outlets to meet rising demand for alternative fuels due to the subsidy removal, the CNG fuelling stations are not merely sites of energy distribution but also spaces where social relations, workplace ethics, and disreputable practices intersect. These daily interactions between attendants and customers have been shaped by both institutional policies and localised norms, providing fertile ground for sociological inquiry. Examining these forces at work offers insight into how broader socio-economic structures are negotiated at the micro level of routine service delivery in Nigeria.

Workplace ethics at NNPC CNG fuelling stations do not stop at the utilisation of formal codes of conduct; they also encompass the lived realities of attendants who navigate pressures from management, customers, and their own socio-economic circumstances. Issues such as honesty in transactions, adherence to safety protocols, and fairness in service provision are central to maintaining trust and efficiency in their day-to-day activities. Yet these ethical expectations often clash with informal practices, ranging from small favours for regular customers to subtle negotiations over payment methods, reflecting workers' adaptability and resilience in a challenging economic environment. Understanding this tension between formal rules and informal practices is crucial for appreciating how ethics are enacted rather than merely prescribed in codebooks.

Customer–attendant relations at NNPC CNG outlets in Abuja highlight the social dimension of energy distribution. These interactions are not purely transactional; rather, they are embedded in cultural expectations of respect, reciprocity, and negotiation. Customers may perceive attendants as gatekeepers of scarce resources, while attendants view customers as both sources of livelihood and

potential sources of conflict. The quality of these relationships often determines whether service encounters are smooth or fraught with tension. Moreover, the informal bonds that develop, such as familiarity with regular customers, can influence how attendants prioritise service, revealing the subtle ways in which social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) shapes economic exchange.

This case study situates CNG fuelling stations in Abuja within the broader sociological discourse on workplace culture and public service delivery in Nigeria. Focusing on NNPC CNG outlets in Abuja underscores how national institutions interface with local realities, producing a hybrid space where formal organisational structures coexist with informal social practices. The study aims to illuminate how ethics are negotiated, how informal practices sustain or undermine institutional goals, and how customer–attendant relations reflect wider societal values. Ultimately, this research contributes to understanding the daily sociology of energy distribution, offering lessons for policy, organisational management, and the cultivation of ethical workplace cultures in Nigeria's evolving energy sector.

Statement of the Problem

Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) distribution in Nigeria, particularly at CNG fuelling stations operated by the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), is a critical aspect of daily life in Abuja. However, customer experiences at these stations often reveal tensions between formal organisational rules and informal practices. Attendants are expected to uphold workplace ethics by ensuring fairness, transparency, and adherence to established procedures such as organised queues. Yet, reports and observations suggest that attendants frequently engage in sharp practices (Smith, 2007; Osoba, 1996) that undermine these standards, including favouritism, allowing certain customers to bypass queues, and soliciting informal payments.

These behaviours not only disadvantage rule-abiding customers but also erode trust in public institutions and normalise corruption in day-to-day transactions. More troubling is the apparent complicity of supervisors and managers at these stations, who are tasked with enforcing accountability but often turn a blind eye to such practices. Their silence or inaction contributes to the persistence of informal economies within formal organisational settings, raising questions about institutional legitimacy and governance.

Despite the significance of these issues, there is limited sociological research examining how workplace ethics, shadow practices, and customer–attendant relations intersect in the context of CNG fuelling stations. Understanding these undercurrents is essential for uncovering how corruption is socially constructed, how power relations are negotiated in business interactions, and how organisational cultures sustain or challenge unethical practices. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the lived experiences of customers, the practices of attendants, and the role of supervisors in shaping workplace ethics and informal economies at NNPC CNG fuelling stations in Abuja.

Research Objectives

In general, the objective of this study is to examine workplace ethics, unofficial practices, and customer–attendant relations in CNG fuelling stations, using NNPC outlets in Abuja as a sociological case study. Therefore, the following are the specific objectives of this study:

1. To investigate customers' experiences and perceptions of attendants' practices at NNPC CNG fuelling stations in Abuja.
2. To analyse how attendants negotiate workplace ethics and illicit practices in their daily interactions with customers at NNPC CNG fuelling stations in Abuja.
3. To explore the role of supervisors and managers in either enforcing or neglecting accountability at the NNPC CNG fuelling stations in Abuja.
4. To assess how informal practices, such as favouritism and queue-jumping, affect customer trust, fairness perceptions, and institutional legitimacy at NNPC CNG fuelling stations in Abuja.
5. To situate attendants' practices within the broader context of informal economies and corruption in Nigerian society.

Significance of the Study

This study advances sociological understandings of corruption and workplace ethics by shifting the focus from moral condemnation to an analysis of structures, interactions, and meanings. By examining routine practices at NNPC CNG fuelling stations, it expands the literature on informal economies and regular corruption in Nigeria, addressing an understudied context where routine transactions intersect with broader governance challenges.

The findings demonstrate how supervisory neglect and complicity enable deviant practices such as favouritism and queue-jumping, thereby undermining organisational credibility and eroding customer trust. These insights are particularly

relevant for NNPC and regulatory bodies, as they highlight the institutional vulnerabilities that compromise accountability and service delivery. The study contributes to public discourse by showing how corruption is normalised in daily life, shaping citizens' perceptions of fairness and legitimacy in public institutions, and ultimately weakening social cohesion.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the research offers practical recommendations. It suggests targeted training for attendants and supervisors on workplace ethics, alongside interventions to reduce favouritism, queue-jumping, and informal enrichment practices. Such measures would not only strengthen accountability mechanisms but also improve customer satisfaction and reinforce established legitimacy. In this way, the study bridges academic inquiry and applied policy, underscoring the sociological significance of unceasing corruption for governance and citizen experience.

Research Questions

1. How do customers at NNPC CNG fuelling stations in Abuja experience and perceive attendants' practices, particularly in relation to favouritism and queue-jumping?
2. In what ways do attendants negotiate workplace ethics and informal practices in their daily interactions with customers at NNPC CNG fuelling stations in Abuja?
3. How do supervisors and managers influence, enforce, or neglect accountability in NNPC CNG fuelling station operations in Abuja?
4. What impact do informal practices have on customer trust, perceptions of fairness, and institutional legitimacy?
5. How are attendants' practices embedded within broader informal economic networks and social norms in Abuja?

Research Propositions

1. **Proposition 1**: Customers who frequently observe attendants favouring individuals who bypass queues are likely to express diminished trust in the operations of NNPC CNG fuelling stations.
2. **Proposition 2**: Attendants with greater social capital, such as connections with supervisors or regular customers, tend to engage more readily in deviant practices and are less likely to face sanctions.
3. **Proposition 3**: Supervisory neglect or complicity contributes significantly to the persistence and normalisation of unofficial practices at NNPC CNG fuelling stations.
4. **Proposition 4**: Informal practices such as favouritism and queue-jumping negatively shape customers' perceptions of fairness and undermine institutional reputation.
5. **Proposition 5**: Attendants' engagement in illicit practices is influenced by broader socio-economic pressures and reflects the normalisation of corruption in everyday life in Abuja.

Literature Review

Informal Practices in Nigerian Public Institutions: Scholarship on corruption in African bureaucracies consistently shows that deviant routines are embedded in social networks and survival strategies (Blundo & De Sardan, 2006; Meagher, 2010). In Nigeria, these practices are not simply deviations from formal rules but are often framed as necessary adaptations to systemic inefficiencies (Aiyede, 2008; OkekeUzodike & Suberu, 2015). This tension between formal regulation and informal negotiation is particularly visible in service delivery sectors, where frontline workers mediate between institutional mandates and customer expectations (Meagher, 2012; Aluko, 2019).

Fuel distribution illustrates how informal economies intersect with workplace ethics. Studies of Nigerian petrol stations reveal that attendants supplement low wages through favours for regular customers or unofficial payments to supervisors (Omotola, 2006; Gould, 2014). Scholars debate whether such practices should be read as corruption or survival strategies, with some emphasising their ethical ambiguity (Osoba, 1996; Bayart, 2009). Comparative work across African cities further suggests that these practices are systemic, embedded in broader strategies of economic precarity (Meagher, 2010; Lindell, 2010; Chalfin, 2010).

Customer–Attendant Relations in Fuelling Stations: Customer–attendant interactions at fuelling stations function as a microcosm of broader sociological issues. Scholars highlight how rules are negotiated, trust and fairness symbolically constructed, and institutional credibility eroded (Smith, 2007; Olivier de Sardan, 1999). Gestures of respect, reciprocity, and familiarity shape perceptions of fairness and legitimacy (Bayart, 2009; Ekeh, 1975). Yet, as Meagher (2012) and Aluko (2019) note, attendants often balance institutional mandates with customer expectations through informal negotiations, underscoring the fragile boundary between official regulation and everyday practice.

Despite extensive scholarship on corruption and informal economies, CNG fuelling stations remain underexplored. Existing studies focus on markets, transport, and bureaucratic offices, leaving a gap in understanding how informal practices unfold in energy distribution (Meagher, 2010; Osoba, 1996; Chalfin, 2010). This study addresses that gap by situating NNPC CNG outlets in Abuja within debates on workplace ethics, unofficial practices, and customer relations.

Theoretical Framework: Workplace Ethics and Bureaucratic Order

Bureaucratic Order and Informal Practices: Workplace ethics and extra-official practices have long been central to sociological studies of public institutions. Weber (1978) emphasised rational-legal authority, yet African scholarship shows how entrenched corruption undermines bureaucratic ideals (Blundo & De Sardan, 2006; Chabal & Daloz, 1999). Scholars argue that bureaucracies operate within dual systems of formal regulation and informal negotiation, producing hybrid organisational cultures (Bayart, 2009; Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Klitgaard, 1998).

In Nigeria, illicit practices such as favouritism, queue-jumping, and unofficial payments are widespread and normalised, shaping daily interactions between service providers and citizens (Smith, 2007; Osoba, 1996). Supervisory neglect or complicity sustains these dynamics, as managers often ignore misconduct or punish dissent (Agbiboa, 2012; OseiTutu, 2020). These practices raise broader sociological concerns about the erosion of institutional trust and the symbolic construction of fairness (Ekeh, 1975; Lindell, 2010).

Regulatory Frameworks and NNPC Guidelines: NNPC CNG-fuelling station attendants are guided by workplace rules emphasising safety, transparency, regulatory compliance, and customer service ethics (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021; NMDPRA, 2023). Attendants must dispense exact quantities, avoid fraudulent practices, and treat customers respectfully, with service provided on a first-come, first-served basis unless safety dictates otherwise (NNPC Ltd., 2022). Workplace conduct stresses punctuality, accountability, and zero tolerance for bribery (Premium Times Nigeria, 2022). Welfare initiatives, such as health insurance for attendants, reinforce NNPC's commitment to ethical service delivery (NNPC Ltd., 2023).

These measures align with global standards on workplace ethics and safety (International Labour Organization, 2019; Transparency International, 2020). Yet sociological perspectives reveal that unofficial practices continue to shape everyday interactions, making CNG fuelling stations critical sites for examining the interplay between regulation, negotiation, and legitimacy in Nigeria's energy sector.

Debates and Gaps in the Literature: Across this scholarship, a central debate emerges over whether extra-official practices should be understood primarily as corruption or as adaptive survival strategies. While some scholars emphasise their corrosive effects on bureaucratic order and public trust (Osoba, 1996; Smith, 2007), others highlight their embeddedness in social networks and economic precarity (Meagher, 2010; Lindell, 2010). A further tension lies in how legitimacy is conceptualised: whether through formal compliance with rules or through everyday negotiations of fairness and reciprocity (Ekeh, 1975; Bayart, 2009). Despite these rich debates, CNG fuelling stations remain largely absent from the literature, even though they represent critical sites where frontline workers, customers, and supervisors negotiate rules, ethics, and authority in real time. This study intervenes by situating NNPC CNG outlets in Abuja within these broader theoretical conversations, thereby filling a significant empirical and conceptual gap in the sociology of corruption, workplace ethics, and service delivery in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, which is particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena in their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach allows for the capture of nuanced experiences, perceptions, and unapproved practices that cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measures. The case study design provides depth and contextual richness, enabling the researcher to examine workplace ethics, illicit practices, and customer–attendant relations within NNPC CNG fuelling stations in Abuja. A total of forty (40) customers were interviewed during the fieldwork conducted between December 2025 and March 2026. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, guided by multiple criteria, including frequency of patronage, willingness to share experiences openly, demographic diversity, and a range of experiences with attendants and waiting times. This approach ensured that the sample captured both frequent and occasional customers, as well as those with differing levels of satisfaction and frustration. In addition to interviews, ten (10) structured observation sessions were conducted at each of the three selected NNPC CNG stations, resulting in a total of thirty (30) sessions. Each session lasted approximately one hour and was scheduled across both peak and off-

peak periods to capture variations in customer–attendant interactions and unapproved practices.

Data saturation was assessed iteratively during fieldwork, and after approximately thirty-five interviews, recurring themes such as artificial delays, informal payment practices, and customer frustration began to dominate responses. The final five interviews confirmed these patterns without introducing new themes, indicating that saturation had been reached. Similarly, observation notes from the last five sessions largely reinforced earlier findings, further validating saturation. Customers were generally willing to offer their opinions freely, a willingness that can be attributed to the extended waiting times they experienced in line due to artificial delays imposed by attendants. These prolonged interactions created opportunities for customers to reflect on and articulate their experiences in detail, thereby enriching the data collected.

To enhance methodological transparency and address key concerns regarding credibility and transferability, supplementary materials are provided in two tables as participant characteristics and observation log summary. The participant table outlines demographic diversity, frequency of patronage, and occupational backgrounds, thereby clarifying the purposive sampling strategy and ensuring readers can assess the breadth of perspectives represented. The observation log table details the number, duration, and coverage of sessions across the three selected stations, demonstrating systematic engagement with the field setting. Together, these additions, alongside the statement on data saturation, provide a transparent account of the study's methodological rigor and strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	**Details**
Total participants	40 customers
Gender distribution	40 male, 0 female
Age range	21–55 years
Occupations	Civil Servants (10), Commercial Drivers (20), Private Sector Employees (10)
Frequency of patronage	Frequent users (≥3 times per week): 22; Occasional users (≤2 times per week): 18
Selection criteria	Frequency of patronage, willingness to share experiences, demographic diversity, range of experiences with attendants and waiting times

Table 2
Observation Log Summary

Station	**Number of sessions**	**Duration per session**	**Total hours observed**	**Coverage**
Station A (National Hospital)	10	1 hour each	10 hours	Peak and off-peak periods
Station B (Wuse Zone 1)	10	1 hour each	10 hours	Peak and off-peak periods
Station C (Ushafa-Bwari)	10	1 hour each	10 hours	Peak and off-peak periods
Total	30	1 hour each	30 hours	Comprehensive coverage across three stations

Study Area and Case Selection

The research is situated in Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory, where NNPC operates some CNG fuelling outlets. Abuja was chosen because of its socio-political significance and its role as a hub of both bureaucratic regulation and informal economic activity (Agbiboa, 2012; Meagher, 2010). The selection of NNPC outlets reflects their centrality in Nigeria's energy transition and their relevance as ever-present sites where workplace ethics and unofficial practices are enacted.

Data Collection Methods

Two primary qualitative methods were employed:

i. **Semi-Structured Interviews with Customers:** Semi-structured interviews were

conducted with customers who regularly patronise NNPC CNG fuelling stations. This method allows flexibility while ensuring coverage of key themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interview questions explored customers' perceptions of attendants' practices, experiences of fairness or favouritism, and trust in recognised legitimacy. Interviews are particularly effective in capturing subjective meanings and lived experiences (Seidman, 2019).

ii. **Participant Observation at CNG Stations:** The researcher engaged in direct, first-hand observation at selected NNPC outlets. Participant observation is a cornerstone of ethnographic and sociological research, enabling the researcher to capture continuous practices and interactions in situ (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Spradley, 1980). Observations focused on attendants' routines, customer interactions, and supervisory oversight. Field notes documented both verbal and non-verbal dynamics, including gestures of respect, reciprocity, and subtle negotiations. This method provides insights into corrupt practices that may not be explicitly articulated in interviews (Olivier de Sardan, 1999).

Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive sampling, selecting participants who could provide rich insights into the research objectives (Patton, 2015). Customers were chosen based on their frequency of patronage and willingness to share experiences. Observations were conducted across multiple stations to ensure diversity in practices and interactions. Supervisors and attendants were included indirectly through observation, though the primary focus remained on customer perspectives. This strategy is in line with the fact that purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to ensure depth and relevance rather than statistical representativeness (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Data Analysis

Data from interviews and observations were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were developed inductively, reflecting recurring themes such as transparency, favouritism, accountability, and trust. These codes were grouped into broader categories aligned with the study's objectives: workplace ethics, informal practices, supervisory roles, and customer–attendant relations. The analysis was guided by sociological theories of bureaucracy, informal economies, and institutional legitimacy (Weber, 1978; Smith, 2007; Blundo & de Sardan, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly suited for qualitative data because it allows for systematic identification and interpretation of patterns across narratives (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, and anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms and excluding identifying details (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Observations were conducted with sensitivity to the public nature of CNG fuelling stations and respect for attendants' and customers' privacy. Ethical approval was guided by established sociological research standards (American Sociological Association, 2018).

Reflexivity and Positionality

Given the reliance on participant observation, reflexivity was central to the research process. The researcher critically considered how their presence at fuelling stations might shape attendant and customer behaviour. Attendants were aware of being observed, and steps were taken to minimise the observer effect, including maintaining a discreet presence, limiting direct engagement during observation, and triangulating observational insights with interview data. The researcher reflected on how their positionality, shaped by social identity, role as an outsider, and perceived authority, could influence access, interpretation, and meaning-making. This reflexive stance ensured that findings were not presented as neutral but as situated knowledge, acknowledging the interplay between researcher and field (England, 1994).

Findings

The study revealed that workplace ethics among CNG attendants are selectively observed, particularly in the domains of transparency, accountability, and professionalism. These principles, which are supposed to underpin service delivery in public institutions, were inconsistently applied and often undermined by corrupt practices that have become normalised in daily transactions.

Transparency: Transparency was compromised by the existence of a dual system of service delivery. It was observed that customers who were unwilling to provide unofficial payments were required to queue in an orderly manner and were served with a single pump, while those who offered tips ranging from ₦1,000 to ₦1,500 were ushered in quickly and served with two pumps. This practice

created a visible divide between "favoured" and "ordinary" customers, producing resentment among those who resisted bribery. Some of the customers explained: *"Because they chose to be good Nigerians by not offering bribes, they are made to suffer by being deliberately delayed."* Such deliberate delays were not incidental but manufactured by attendants to coerce customers into paying bribes. This erosion of fairness demonstrates how transparency was systematically undermined, producing frustration and hostility among those who resisted informal payments. The normalisation of this practice reflects a broader sociological reality in Nigeria, where corruption is not only tolerated but often rationalised as a survival strategy.

Accountability: Accountability was weakened by supervisory complicity. It was observed that the attendants were carrying out their activities openly under the supervision of managers, yet misconduct was ignored. Customers reported that supervisors colluded with attendants to share proceeds from unofficial payments. For instance, when one customer protested about being delayed, *"the supervisor instructed the attendants not to sell CNG to him."* Also, some customers averred that "*it is difficult to separate between supervisors and the attendants, save for when they need to intimidate those that resist their injustices.*" These two scenarios showed that supervisors not only tolerated misconduct but also actively participated in punishing dissent. The absence of corrective measures illustrates how accountability mechanisms were hollow, reinforcing informal norms over formal rules. This dynamic resonates with broader sociological debates about institutional decay, where oversight structures exist in theory but fail in practice, thereby eroding legitimacy and reinforcing informal economies.

Professionalism: The professionalism was undermined by the preferential treatment dished out by the attendants. Attendants were observed deliberately frustrating customers to push them toward bribery, while those who complied were treated with courtesy. Customers described this practice as "normal," rationalising it as necessary for survival. Two cab drivers who enjoy complying with the attendants' informal ways of buying CNG explained: *"We have to do what they want so that we can get the gas and provide our cab services. We have to deliver our mandate to the owners of the cars we are driving, and also, we have to provide for our families. That is why this has become normal to us."* This normalisation of corruption reflects how professionalism was commodified, with ethical standards contingent on informal exchanges rather than universal principles. In sociological terms, this demonstrates how economic pressures and institutional weakness combine to produce a moral economy where corruption is embedded in people's lives.

Other unofficial practices: Queue-jumping was observed, particularly for uniformed men, who were allowed to bypass waiting customers. This reinforced social hierarchies and inequality, privileging certain groups while disadvantaging others. Customers expressed resignation, stating: *"What can we do other than be patient and allow them to do what they like."* Such practices illustrate how informal rules intersect with social status, privileging certain groups while disadvantaging others. This phenomenon reflects Ekeh's (1975) "two publics" thesis, where loyalty to informal networks supersedes obligations to the civic public, thereby undermining established legitimacy.

Customer–attendant relations: The relationships between customers and attendants were strained by overbilling, delays, and perceived exploitation. It was observed how customers in the queue were harassed by the attendants, sometimes threatening to remove them from the line. One customer protested: *"How can you waste my time and still remove the tip from my account. This is wickedness and unacceptable."* These conflicts often escalated quickly, as customers who felt exploited refused negotiation. The breakdown of trust transformed routine service encounters into contested interactions, destabilising daily relations. This dynamic illustrates Gould's (2014) argument that corruption erodes reciprocity and undermines the social fabric of institutions, producing hostility rather than cooperation.

Institutional dynamics: A dual enforcement of rules was observed. It was observed that safety regulations were strictly applied, particularly for customers in the queue, while ethical rules were ignored. Also, it was observed that customers who insisted on fairness were labelled "rebellious" and subjected to verbal abuse. This duality illustrates how formal and informal rules coexist, with attendants prioritising compliance in areas visible to regulators while bending ethical norms in regular transactions. This type of selective enforcement reflects Chabal and Daloz's (1999) notion of "instrumental disorder," where institutions function through negotiated informality rather than strict adherence to formal rules.

Research Propositions Evaluation

The research propositions were consistently supported through thematic analysis of direct observations and customer testimonies.

i. Proposition 1: Customers who frequently observed attendants favouring individuals who bypassed queues expressed diminished trust in the operations of NNPC CNG fuelling stations. Evidence included repeated accounts of customers feeling disadvantaged and punished for adhering to rules.
ii. Proposition 2: Attendants with greater social capital, such as ties to supervisors or regular customers, engaged more readily in unofficial practices and were shielded from sanctions. Observations revealed that these attendants often operated with impunity.
iii. Proposition 3: Supervisory neglect or complicity contributed significantly to the persistence and normalisation of corrupt practices. Supervisors were observed ignoring misconduct and, in some cases, punishing attendants who resisted such practices.
iv. Proposition 4: Corrupt practices such as favouritism and queue-jumping negatively shaped customers' perceptions of fairness and undermined institutional legitimacy. Testimonies highlighted widespread frustration and erosion of confidence in the station's integrity.
v. Proposition 5: Attendants' engagement in unethical practices was influenced by broader socio-economic pressures, reflecting the normalisation of corruption in everyday life in Abuja. Accounts of bribery framed it as a survival strategy rather than an exceptional act.

Table 3
Proposition Summary

Proposition	Result	Evidence
Proposition 1	Supported	Queue favouritism eroded trust; customers felt punished for honesty
Proposition 2	Supported	Attendants were protected by ties to supervisors/regulars
Proposition 3	Strongly supported	Supervisors were complicit, ignored misconduct, and punished dissent
Proposition 4	Supported	Customers perceived unfairness, and legitimacy was undermined
Proposition 5	Supported	Bribery normalised as a survival strategy

Together, these findings demonstrate that informal practices are not isolated incidents but systemic features of day-to-day service delivery at NNPC CNG stations.

Discussion of Findings

The findings revealed that workplace ethics at NNPC CNG fuelling stations are selectively observed, with transparency, accountability, and professionalism inconsistently applied. Rather than functioning as universal principles, these values were negotiated through informal and often unethical practices. Customers unwilling to pay unofficial tips were forced to queue and endure delays, while those who offered payments were fast-tracked. This dual system illustrates Weber's (1978) tension between rational-legal authority and the persistence of patrimonial practices in African bureaucracies. The coexistence of formal rules and informal exchanges undermines fairness, showing how bureaucratic institutions in Nigeria operate less as neutral service providers and more as arenas of negotiation where access is commodified. This dynamic highlights the fragility of rule-based governance when informal norms dominate, raising questions about the sustainability of reforms aimed at institutional integrity (Smith, 2007; Blundo & de Sardan, 2006).

Transparency at the NNPC CNG stations was compromised by the normalization of unofficial payments. Attendants deliberately delayed service to coerce tips, creating a two-tier system of access. Customers rationalized these payments as "normal," reflecting Olivier de Sardan's (1999) concept of the moral economy of corruption, where informal practices are socially tolerated as survival strategies. This normalization is significant because it demonstrates how corruption is not merely imposed from above but co-produced by both service providers and users. The moral economy framework suggests that corruption persists not only because of weak enforcement but because it is embedded in everyday expectations of reciprocity and survival. Thus, transparency is not simply absent, rather, it is actively redefined through informal exchanges that blur the line between coercion and consent (Osoba, 1996; Omotola, 2006).

Accountability at the NNPC CNG stations was weakened by supervisory complicity. Supervisors ignored attendants' misconduct and, according to customers, shared in the proceeds of induced services. This resonates with OseiTutu's (2020) findings on supervisory neglect in African bureaucracies, where managers collude with frontline workers. The absence of corrective measures demonstrates institutional tolerance for

corruption, eroding legitimacy and reinforcing informal norms over formal rules. Importantly, this complicity reveals how accountability mechanisms are hollowed out from within: rather than being neutral enforcers, supervisors become active participants in informal economies. This undermines the very foundation of bureaucratic authority, as institutions lose credibility when those tasked with oversight are implicated in misconduct (Agbiboa, 2012).

Professionalism at the NNPC CNG stations was undermined by preferential treatment. Attendants frustrated customers to push them toward bribery, while those who complied were treated with courtesy. This selective professionalism reflects Bayart's (2009) "politics of the belly," where public service is commodified, and ethics are contingent on informal exchanges. The erosion of professionalism is not merely a matter of poor service delivery; it transforms service encounters into sites of conflict rather than cooperation. Customers' frustration and hostility highlight how compromised professionalism destabilizes trust, turning routine transactions into adversarial negotiations. This dynamic illustrates how corruption corrodes not only institutional legitimacy but also the interpersonal fabric of service relations, producing antagonism where cooperation should prevail.

Queue jumping by uniformed men illustrates how social hierarchies intersect with informal practices. Attendants privileged certain groups, reinforcing inequality and undermining trust. This echoes Ekeh's (1975) "two publics" thesis, where loyalty to informal networks supersedes obligations to the civic public. The privileging of uniformed men demonstrates how corruption is not only economic but also social, reproducing hierarchies of power and status. Customers' resignation to "what can we do other than be patient" shows how unethical practices become normalised, producing a culture of compliance rather than resistance. This normalisation is crucial because it reveals how corruption is sustained not only by coercion but also by resignation, as citizens adapt to exploitative systems rather than challenge them (Meagher, 2010).

Customer–attendant relations at the NNPC CNG stations were strained by deliberate overbilling, delays, and perceived exploitation. Customers often responded with hostility, refusing negotiation when they felt exploited. This breakdown of trust reflects Gould's (2014) argument that corruption erodes social reciprocity and institutional legitimacy. The escalation of conflicts demonstrates how informal practices destabilize everyday collaborations, transforming routine service delivery into contested encounters. Importantly, this hostility signals that corruption does not always produce compliance; it can also generate resistance and conflict. Such strained relations reveal the paradox of corruption: while it is normalized as survival, it simultaneously undermines the cooperative bonds necessary for institutions to function effectively.

The findings highlight the dual enforcement of rules: safety regulations were strictly applied, while ethical rules were ignored. This selective enforcement illustrates how formal and informal rules coexist, with attendants prioritizing compliance in areas visible to regulators while bending ethical norms in dealings with customers. Such duality is consistent with Chabal and Daloz's (1999) notion of "instrumental disorder," where institutions function through negotiated informality rather than strict adherence to formal rules. This selective enforcement is significant because it shows how institutions strategically perform compliance to external oversight while internally sustaining informal economies. It underscores the performative nature of bureaucratic order in African contexts, where rules are applied instrumentally rather than universally.

Perhaps most striking is the normalisation of bribery and preferential treatment. Customers who paid tips described the practice as "normal," rationalising it as necessary for survival. This reflects Olivier de Sardan's (1999) concept of the moral economy of corruption, where informal practices are embedded in social life and justified by economic necessity. The normalisation of corruption at CNG fuelling stations mirrors broader Nigerian society, where informal economies sustain livelihoods but undermine institutional legitimacy (Meagher, 2012; Aiyede, 2008). This finding is critical because it demonstrates how corruption is not an aberration but a systemic feature of governance, woven into the fabric of everyday life. The persistence of such practices suggests that reform efforts must grapple not only with enforcement but with the social acceptance of corruption as a survival mechanism.

Implications and Recommendations

Policy implications: Unethical and unofficial practices undermine workplace ethics and institutional legitimacy at NNPC CNG fuelling stations. Oversight structures are weak and require independent auditing. Anti-corruption policies should be extended to person-to-person service delivery points, not just high-level petroleum contracts (Transparency International, 2020).

Transparent billing systems and grievance redress mechanisms are essential to protect customers.

Managerial Implications: At the organisational level, NNPC must confront the entrenched culture of tolerance for informal practices that has taken root within its fuelling stations. The findings demonstrate that attendants and supervisors alike have internalised corruption as part of their work routines, creating a permissive environment where misconduct is not only tolerated but actively reinforced. To address this, managers must institute regular training programs focused on workplace ethics, customer service, and accountability. Research has shown that ethics training can reduce tolerance for corruption in frontline service delivery by reshaping attitudes and reinforcing institutional values (Klitgaard, 1998).

Supervisors, in particular, must be held accountable for the actions of attendants under their watch. The absence of corrective measures observed in this study indicates that supervisory roles are currently symbolic rather than functional. Performance evaluations should therefore be tied directly to ethical compliance, ensuring that supervisors who fail to enforce standards face sanctions. Establishing confidential reporting channels for both customers and attendants could also help expose misconduct without fear of retaliation. Such mechanisms would empower whistle-blowers and create a culture of accountability, thereby weakening the informal networks that currently sustain corruption.

Furthermore, managerial reforms must go beyond punitive measures to include positive reinforcement. Attendants who demonstrate ethical conduct and professionalism should be rewarded through recognition programs, promotions, or financial incentives. This dual approach, sanctioning misconduct while rewarding integrity, would help shift workplace norms toward ethical compliance. Without such reforms, the persistence of corrupt practices will continue to erode established legality and customer trust.

Sociological Implications: From a sociological perspective, the findings demonstrate how informal economies intersect with formal institutions in ways that destabilise social reciprocity and undermine legitimacy. Customers' acceptance of bribery as "normal" reflects Olivier de Sardan's (1999) concept of the moral economy of corruption, where unethical practices are embedded in social life and justified by economic necessity. This normalisation perpetuates corrupt practices and erodes institutional authority, creating a vicious cycle in which corruption is both a cause and consequence of systemic weakness.

The selective enforcement of safety regulations versus ethical rules demonstrates how formal and informal systems coexist within Nigerian bureaucracies. This duality echoes Chabal and Daloz's (1999) notion of "instrumental disorder," where institutions function through negotiated informality rather than strict adherence to formal rules. In this context, attendants prioritise compliance in areas visible to regulators, such as safety, while bending ethical norms in carrying out their assigned duties when dealing with customers. This selective enforcement reveals the pragmatic logic of survival within weak institutions, where rules are applied strategically rather than universally.

The breakdown of trust between customers and attendants underscores Gould's (2014) argument that corruption destabilises social reciprocity. Customers who felt exploited refused negotiation, transforming routine service encounters into contested interactions. This hostility reflects broader societal tensions, where corruption erodes the bonds of trust necessary for cooperative social life. In this sense, CNG fuelling stations serve as microcosms of Nigerian society, illustrating how corruption shapes regular business interactions, normalises inequality, and challenges the credibility of public institutions.

Recommendations

Based on these implications, the study recommends a multi-layered approach to reform:

1. **Regulatory enforcement:** The Nigerian Midstream and Downstream Petroleum Regulatory Authority (NMDPRA) should strengthen oversight by deploying independent monitors at CNG fuelling stations. These monitors must operate on rotational schedules to prevent collusion and should submit real-time compliance reports through digital dashboards accessible to headquarters. Enforcement should also include surprise audits, undercover inspections, and a whistle-blower protection framework to encourage reporting of misconduct. By institutionalizing independent monitoring, ethical standards can be enforced consistently rather than left to discretionary practices.
2. **Technological interventions:** The NNPC/NMDPRA should implement transparent digital mechanisms to reduce

opportunities for bribery and overbilling. Queue management systems can assign digital tokens to customers, ensuring service order is automated and tamper-proof. Automated billing platforms linked directly to customer mobile apps or smart cards would eliminate manual price manipulation. Additionally, integrating CCTV surveillance with AI-based anomaly detection can flag irregular service patterns, such as repeated queue jumping or unexplained billing discrepancies. These interventions not only reduce corruption but also build customer trust in the fairness of service delivery.

3. **Supervisor accountability:** Oversight departments must hold supervisors directly responsible for attendants' misconduct. This requires a dual mechanism: sanctions for complicity and incentives for ethical compliance. Supervisors should undergo mandatory ethics training and sign accountability contracts that tie their performance evaluations to compliance outcomes. A transparent disciplinary framework should be established, where documented cases of misconduct trigger investigations and penalties. Conversely, supervisors who demonstrate consistent ethical enforcement should be rewarded with recognition, promotions, or financial bonuses. This dual approach balances deterrence with motivation, ensuring accountability is not merely punitive but also constructive.
4. **Customer empowerment:** Customer empowerment is critical to breaking the cycle of normalization. Establishing customer feedback platforms, such as toll-free hotlines, mobile apps, and on-site kiosks, would provide channels for grievances to be recorded and addressed. A grievance redress mechanism should guarantee timely responses, with clear escalation procedures if complaints are ignored. Publishing monthly reports on customer feedback and corrective actions taken would enhance transparency and reassure customers that their voices matter. Empowered customers become active stakeholders in enforcing ethical standards, reducing the culture of resignation and compliance.
5. **Public campaigns:** Civic education initiatives should challenge the normalization of bribery by reframing fairness and accountability as shared social values. Campaigns can leverage radio, television, and social media to disseminate messages that highlight the costs of corruption to society. Collaborations with civil society organizations, religious institutions, and community leaders can amplify these messages, embedding them in everyday discourse. Interactive campaigns, such as community dialogues and school-based ethics programs, would ensure that anti-bribery values are not abstract but grounded in lived experiences. Over time, such campaigns can shift public attitudes from resignation to resistance.
6. **Further research:** Researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to examine how reforms affect customer–attendant relations over time. This would reveal whether interventions produce sustained changes or temporary compliance. Comparative studies across Nigerian cities should also be prioritized to uncover regional variations in unethical practices, providing insights into localized drivers of corruption. Such research would inform context-specific reforms, ensuring that interventions are not one-size-fits-all but tailored to diverse socio-economic and cultural realities. By grounding reforms in evidence, policymakers can design strategies that are adaptive and resilient.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to NNPC CNG filling stations in Abuja, with data collected exclusively from customers and through the researcher's direct observation. As such, the findings may not be generalisable to other regions, fuel types, or broader institutional contexts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study consistently validate all five propositions, demonstrating that unethical practices at NNPC CNG stations are deeply embedded in socio-economic realities, reinforced by supervisory complicity, and corrosive to customer trust and institutional reputation. These practices, ranging from bribery, systemic coercion, and queue-jumping to overbilling and preferential treatment, illustrate how workplace ethics are systematically undermined by informal economies in NNPC CNG stations.

From a sociological standpoint, the coexistence of formal safety rules with informal ethical practices reflects the duality of Nigerian bureaucracies, where rational-legal authority is constantly negotiated through informal exchanges. This duality not only undermines fairness but also normalises inequality, producing a culture of compliance rather than resistance. Ultimately,

NNPC CNG fuelling stations serve as microcosms of Nigerian society, reflecting how corruption and unprincipled practices shape fixed interactions, destabilise social reciprocity, and challenge the credibility of public institutions.

The study underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms that address both structural weaknesses and cultural norms. By strengthening accountability mechanisms, investing in ethical training, and challenging the normalisation of bribery, Nigeria's energy sector can begin to restore fairness, transparency, and legitimacy. Such reforms are not merely technical but sociological, requiring a transformation of continuous practices and values. Only through such comprehensive efforts can institutions rebuild trust and fulfil their mandate of serving the public equitably.

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