



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory as a Psychological Framework for Combating Corruption in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria continues to face persistent socioeconomic challenges, including unemployment, rising living costs, declining purchasing power, inadequate access to basic necessities, and deficiencies in essential public infrastructure and services. These conditions may create pressures that influence individual behaviour and contribute to maladaptive practices, including corruption. Despite the efforts of government and anti-corruption agencies to curb corrupt practices, corruption remains a significant obstacle to national development, suggesting the need for complementary approaches that address not only institutional controls but also the psychological and motivational factors underlying human behaviour. This theoretical paper examines Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory as a psychological framework for combating corruption in Nigeria. The paper proposes that corruption control strategies should incorporate the five levels of human needs identified by Maslow: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs. From this perspective, policies that promote access to basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, employment, and healthcare, while also ensuring security, social inclusion, recognition, dignity, and opportunities for personal growth and meaningful contribution to society, may help create conditions that discourage corrupt behaviour. The paper further argues that addressing citizens' psychological and motivational needs should complement existing institutional and legal mechanisms for corruption control. It therefore highlights the potential contribution of psychologists and other behavioural scientists to policy formulation, behavioural change, human resource management, and anti-corruption interventions. Integrating psychological perspectives into national development and anti-corruption strategies may provide a broader framework for understanding and addressing the motivational conditions associated with corrupt behaviour in Nigeria.

Keywords: Anti-Corruption; Corruption Intention; Human Needs; Maslow's Theory; Nigeria

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Introduction

Understanding the developmental challenges and democratic difficulties experienced by many developing countries, including Nigeria, requires serious consideration of the pervasive problem of corruption and the excessive diversion or waste of limited resources. However, corruption and financial waste are not problems restricted to developing countries, as they occur across different cultures, political systems, and societies. Nevertheless, the extent and consequences of corruption vary considerably from one system to another. Its effects are often more damaging in developing countries because of their weak economic foundations, fragile political institutions, and ineffective mechanisms of accountability and control. Scholars and commentators have identified corruption as one of the major obstacles to social, political, and economic development across countries (Muhammad et al., 2023). The widespread nature of corrupt practices negatively affects societal progress and undermines efforts towards sustainable development (Igiebor, 2020). Nigeria is currently experiencing one of the most critical periods in its post-independence history. The country continues to face serious economic, social, and political challenges, many of which are closely associated with the widespread nature of corruption. Corruption has become a deeply entrenched

and persistent problem that continues to undermine national development. Practices such as the misappropriation of public funds, bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, and money laundering involving public officials have become pervasive within the Nigerian society. Although the consequences of these challenges are increasingly evident, finding effective and sustainable solutions remains a major difficulty. Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, corruption has remained a major obstacle to the stability, consolidation, and sustainability of democracy in the country. Reports of corrupt practices have become so frequent that they rarely attract public surprise or widespread astonishment. This persistent situation is consistent with Transparency International's assessments, which have repeatedly identified Nigeria as a country facing significant levels of corruption.

Corruption can be divided into grand corruption and survival corruption. Grand corruption refers to the abuse of public or institutional power by high level public officials or other powerful individuals for substantial private or political gain. It typically involves the diversion, misappropriation, or manipulation of large amounts of public resources and may occur through practices such as embezzlement, fraudulent procurement, inflated government contracts, diversion of public funds, illicit allocation of public assets, and large scale bribery. Grand corruption has a more complex relationship with Maslow's safety needs. Wealth accumulation can be perceived as providing protection against uncertainty, political instability, loss of status, unemployment, economic downturns, or an uncertain future. In this sense, corruption can become a mechanism through which individuals attempt to obtain financial security beyond what is objectively necessary.

Survival corruption refers to relatively small scale corrupt behaviour undertaken primarily to meet immediate or basic needs or to cope with serious economic or occupational insecurity. It may occur when individuals perceive legitimate income or resources as insufficient to meet essential needs such as food, housing, transportation, healthcare, education, or other necessities. Examples may include a poorly paid employee requesting an unofficial payment to supplement income, a worker accepting a small bribe to meet urgent household expenses, or an individual using a position of authority to obtain resources needed for basic survival.

Rousseau (1974) argued that the legitimacy of state authority is derived from the people, while government functions as an instrument through which the sovereign exercises its authority. Consequently, the power exercised by government is founded on the confidence and trust of the people. When public authority is diverted from its legitimate purpose and used for personal interests, corruption emerges. This understanding is consistent with the widely accepted definition of corruption as the "abuse of public office for private benefit." This definition remains one of the most commonly adopted conceptualisations of corruption among scholars internationally (Lim, 2016). Corruption can also be understood as the unlawful diversion or misuse of public resources for private purposes. Its detrimental consequences include democratic instability, declining public confidence in government, widespread poverty, deterioration of infrastructure, electoral malpractice, contract-related violence, political assassinations, insecurity, and broader obstacles to national development. Public officials, particularly those occupying influential positions within government, often exploit their authority and access to public resources for personal or private gain. It has been estimated that corruption contributes to losses equivalent to approximately 20 per cent of Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Obuah, 2010). Candidates seeking political office under the major political parties frequently feature among individuals perceived as unsuitable or associated with corrupt practices. Ironically, those who present themselves as capable of diagnosing and resolving the country's corruption problems have, as revealed by past and recent events, sometimes been implicated in the very problems they claim to address (Johnston & Fritzen, 2020). Thus, the individuals portrayed as the "physicians" of the system may themselves become part of the "patients" requiring treatment.

The Nigerian government established the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) on December 12, 2002, to investigate and prosecute cases involving corruption and financial crimes. It investigates individuals whose lifestyles and financial circumstances appear inconsistent with their legitimate sources of income and is authorised to probe and prosecute offences relating to money laundering and other forms of financial crime. In contrast, the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) is primarily concerned with corruption within the public sector,

particularly offences such as bribery, unlawful gratification, graft, and the abuse or misuse of public office. Both the EFCC and ICPC have recorded significant achievements in investigating and prosecuting prominent Nigerians involved in corrupt practices, as well as recovering misappropriated public funds. Despite these efforts, corruption continues to persist in both the public and private sectors. Transparency International's assessment in 2025 placed Nigeria 142nd among 182 countries in its ranking of corruption levels worldwide (Iyeru et al., 2026). Furthermore, the misappropriation and diversion of public funds remain prevalent, particularly among public officials and senior government authorities, including civil servants, ministers, commissioners, and governors (Sambo, 2023). The various anti-corruption measures introduced by successive Nigerian governments have produced only limited results. In practice, the Nigerian government has paid insufficient attention to psychological theories and motivational principles when designing and implementing public policies, particularly those aimed at combating corruption. Although psychology has been established as an academic and professional field in Nigeria since the 1970s, psychological expertise has not been adequately integrated into government policy formulation and implementation. This gap is evident in areas such as mental health, psychological wellbeing, corruption prevention, behavioural modification, and attitudinal change. Greater consideration of psychological principles and the expertise of psychologists could therefore contribute to the development of more effective strategies for addressing corruption and promoting positive behavioural change in Nigeria.

This theoretical paper proposes Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory as a psychological framework for addressing corruption in Nigeria. The paper seeks to establish how the satisfaction of individuals' basic, psychological, social, and self-actualisation needs may influence their attitudes and behaviours towards corrupt practices. By applying Maslow's theory to the Nigerian context, the paper argues that understanding the underlying human needs and motivations of public officials may provide valuable insights into the causes of corruption and contribute to the development of more effective anti-corruption strategies. The paper further examines how policies that promote adequate economic security, social recognition, job satisfaction, fairness, and opportunities for personal and professional fulfilment could reduce the motivation to engage in corrupt practices. Existing corruption theories explain opportunity, incentives, institutional weakness and rational calculation, whereas the proposed Maslow framework focuses specifically on the motivational significance of human needs.

Statement of the Problem

Corruption is widely recognised as a major impediment to the development and progress of societies. It is a global phenomenon that occurs in both developed and developing countries. However, the prevalence and persistence of corruption in Nigeria remain a serious concern, with significant consequences for the country's social, economic, and political development. Corrupt practices affect virtually every sector of the Nigerian economy, including both the public and private sectors. Reports have indicated that the country loses substantial financial resources annually as a result of corrupt practices at the local, state, and federal levels of government. Although the government has established institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) to prevent and combat corruption, the problem continues to persist at an alarming rate.

The continued prevalence of corruption suggests that existing strategies for addressing the problem may not be sufficiently effective. Consequently, there is a need for policymakers and leaders to reconsider the approaches adopted in preventing and managing corruption in Nigeria. One theoretical perspective that may provide useful insight into the persistence of corrupt practices is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory. The theory proposes that human behaviour is influenced by different categories of needs, beginning with basic physiological needs and progressing towards higher-order needs. When individuals are unable to adequately satisfy their basic needs, they may engage in behaviours aimed at meeting those immediate needs, including, in some circumstances, corrupt practices.

Nigeria has experienced considerable socioeconomic challenges since the beginning of the new millennium. These challenges include declining productive capacity, difficulties in employment generation, rising living costs, and reduced economic opportunities for citizens. Many graduates encounter

difficulties securing meaningful employment after completing their education, while a considerable proportion of the population struggles to meet basic necessities. The declining purchasing power of the Nigerian currency has further intensified these challenges. The rising cost of food, accommodation, transportation, and other essential goods and services has placed significant economic pressure on households. In addition, inadequate infrastructure, poor road networks, limited access to potable water, and unreliable electricity supply continue to undermine citizens' quality of life and economic wellbeing.

The persistence of corruption may therefore be associated, in part, with the failure to adequately address some of the fundamental needs of citizens. Where individuals experience difficulties in securing food, shelter, employment, personal security, and other basic necessities, the pressure to seek alternative means of survival may increase. In such circumstances, some individuals may become more vulnerable to engaging in corrupt practices, particularly where institutional controls are weak and opportunities for corruption exist.

Despite extensive research examining institutional, economic and political explanations of corruption, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to developing a psychologically grounded needs based framework that explains how different forms of need frustration and satisfaction may influence corruption intention. Against this background, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory provides a potentially useful framework for understanding the motivational factors underlying corruption in Nigeria's public and private sectors. Addressing citizens' basic physiological needs, such as access to adequate food, water, and shelter, as well as their safety needs, including the protection of lives and property, may reduce the socioeconomic pressures that contribute to corrupt behaviour. Therefore, understanding the relationship between unmet human needs and corruption could provide policymakers with an alternative perspective for developing more effective strategies to combat corruption and promote sustainable national development in Nigeria.

Objective of the Paper

The objective of this theoretical paper is to examine how each level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs may bear on corruption intention and to derive testable propositions from that examination. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. Physiological needs and corruption intention.
2. Safety and corruption intention.
3. Belongingness and corruption intention.
4. Self-esteem and corruption intention.
5. Self-actualisation and corruption intention.

Literature Review

Corruption can be conceptualised as the misuse of authority or entrusted responsibility for personal or private benefit, particularly when such conduct undermines the public interest and violates established laws, regulations, ethical principles, or standards of integrity (Phillips et al., 2025). It may occur across different sectors, including government institutions, private organisations, and non-profit entities, where individuals exploit their positions or responsibilities for personal advantage in ways that contravene legal, ethical, or professional standards (Barfi et al., 2022). Similarly, corruption involves the exploitation of entrusted power for private gain, although its meaning may vary according to societal expectations and normative views regarding how political and social institutions are expected to operate (Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2020).

Principal-Agent Theory explains corruption as a problem that arises when a person or institution (the principal) delegates authority to another person (the agent), who then uses that authority to pursue personal interests rather than the interests of the principal. It can be broken down as follows: principal (citizens, government, an employer, or an organisation), and agent (public officials, politicians, civil servants, or employees). Example in Nigeria: A government official entrusted with public funds diverts some of the money into a personal account instead of using it to provide public infrastructure. The abuse

of entrusted power, bribery, embezzlement, and corruption arising from weak oversight and accountability.

Collective Action Theory explains corruption as a problem that becomes difficult to eliminate when people believe that corruption is widespread and that others will continue to engage in it. Individuals may participate in corruption because they distrust institutions and do not expect others to behave honestly. Example in Nigeria: A businessperson may offer a bribe to obtain a government contract because they believe that competitors are also paying bribes and that refusing to participate will cost them the contract.

The Fraud Triangle Theory proposes three conditions that can contribute to fraudulent behaviour. Pressure: a perceived financial or personal need that motivates an individual to consider fraud e.g. an employee facing serious financial difficulties diverts organisational funds to pay personal debts. Opportunity: a situation in which weak controls, poor supervision, or gaps in accountability make fraud possible e.g. a public official manipulates procurement records because nobody independently checks the transactions. Rationalisation: the justification a person uses to make fraudulent conduct seem acceptable e.g. An official tells themselves, "Everybody takes something from the system, so what I am doing is not wrong."

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Maslow (1943, 1954) proposed that human behaviour is largely influenced by the desire to satisfy a series of fundamental needs, with certain needs taking priority over others. His Hierarchy of Needs Theory presents human motivation as a five-level model in which needs are arranged progressively from basic survival requirements to higher psychological aspirations. According to the theory, individuals generally seek to fulfil lower-level needs before directing their attention towards higher-order needs. The hierarchy begins with physiological needs, followed by safety needs, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation. As lower-level needs become reasonably satisfied, individuals are expected to become increasingly motivated by higher-level needs, particularly the pursuit of personal growth, achievement, and self-fulfilment.

Physiological Needs: These refer to the basic biological necessities required for human survival and proper functioning, including food, water, air, shelter, clothing, warmth, sleep, and sexual needs. According to Maslow, physiological needs constitute the most fundamental level of human motivation. When these essential needs remain unmet, individuals are likely to prioritise their satisfaction over other higher-order needs, as inadequate fulfilment can impair normal physical and psychological functioning. Consequently, other needs become less important until these basic survival requirements are sufficiently addressed.

Safety Needs: Once an individual's basic physiological needs have been reasonably satisfied, the desire for safety and security becomes increasingly important. Safety needs involve the pursuit of stability, predictability, protection, and a sense of control over one's environment and future. These needs may be supported by various social institutions, including the family, government, educational institutions, workplaces, healthcare systems, and law-enforcement agencies. They encompass several forms of security, such as emotional and financial stability, secure employment, social welfare, law and order, freedom from fear, social stability, protection of property, and access to healthcare. They also include protection from physical harm, accidents, injuries, and other threats to an individual's health and wellbeing.

Love and Belongingness Needs: Following the satisfaction of physiological and safety needs, Maslow identifies love and belongingness as the third level of human motivation. At this stage, individuals seek meaningful interpersonal relationships and a sense of connection and acceptance. The desire to establish and maintain social relationships can strongly influence human behaviour. These needs include friendship, intimacy, trust, affection, acceptance, and the reciprocal expression of love. They are also fulfilled through affiliation with social groups and communities, such as families, friendship networks, workplaces, and other social organisations. A sense of belonging and positive social interaction can therefore contribute significantly to an individual's emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Esteem Needs: Esteem represents the fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy and encompasses two major dimensions. The first concerns an individual's sense of self-worth, which includes dignity, achievement,

competence, mastery, independence, and confidence. The second relates to the desire for recognition, respect, and appreciation from others, including the pursuit of social status, reputation, prestige, and acknowledgement. Satisfaction of esteem needs can enhance an individual's confidence and sense of personal value.

Self-Actualisation Needs: Self-actualisation constitutes the highest level of Maslow's original hierarchy and refers to the fulfilment of an individual's inherent potential and capabilities. At this level, individuals are motivated by personal growth, creativity, achievement, self-fulfilment, and the pursuit of meaningful or peak experiences. Maslow (1943) conceptualised self-actualisation as the desire to realise one's fullest potential and become everything that one is capable of becoming. It represents the continuous pursuit of personal development, purpose, excellence, and fulfilment rather than the satisfaction of a basic deficiency need.

Motivation and Deviant Behaviour

Deviance literature provides a useful psychological perspective for understanding corruption as a form of behaviour that violates established social, ethical, and legal norms. From this perspective, corrupt practices such as bribery, embezzlement, abuse of office, nepotism, and diversion of public resources can be understood not only as legal violations but also as forms of deviant behaviour influenced by individual motivations and environmental conditions. The literature on deviance suggests that behaviour is shaped by an interaction between individual dispositions, social circumstances, perceived opportunities, and pressures within the environment. In the Nigerian context, persistent socioeconomic difficulties, including unemployment, financial insecurity, rising living costs, and inadequate access to basic necessities, may create conditions in which some individuals rationalise corrupt practices as means of coping with unmet needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs therefore provides a complementary framework for examining whether unmet psychological and material needs can create motivational pressures that increase vulnerability to corrupt behaviour.

The five levels of Maslow's hierarchy physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation can be connected to different motivational pathways through which deviant behaviour may emerge. At the physiological level, difficulties obtaining food, adequate housing, healthcare, transportation, and other basic necessities may increase pressure to obtain additional income, potentially making corrupt opportunities more attractive to some individuals. At the safety level, unemployment, job insecurity, inadequate social protection, and uncertainty about the future may encourage individuals to seek financial security through illegitimate means. The belongingness level introduces the influence of social relationships and group expectations: individuals may participate in corrupt practices when corruption becomes normalised within their workplace, peer group, family, or wider social network. At the esteem level, the desire for status, recognition, power, and social respect may motivate some individuals to accumulate wealth or display material success through corrupt means. Finally, self-actualisation concerns the pursuit of personal potential, purpose, and meaningful achievement. When legitimate avenues for achievement are perceived as blocked, some individuals may pursue status or success through unethical means. Thus, the five need levels provide a framework for examining the different motivational pressures that may intersect with deviant behaviour.

Applied to Nigeria, this perspective suggests that anti-corruption strategies should extend beyond punishment and institutional enforcement to include interventions that address the motivational and social conditions associated with corrupt behaviour. Addressing physiological needs through decent wages, access to food, housing, healthcare, and essential services may reduce pressures associated with severe material deprivation, while strengthening employment security, pensions, social protection, and fair working conditions may address safety needs. Promoting inclusive workplaces, social trust, and a sense of belonging may reduce the influence of corrupt networks, whereas transparent promotion systems, recognition of ethical performance, and legitimate opportunities for achievement may address esteem needs. At the highest level, creating opportunities for meaningful professional development, public service, civic contribution, and personal growth may encourage individuals to pursue self-actualisation through socially constructive rather than deviant behaviour. Consequently, Maslow's theory can complement conventional Nigerian anti-corruption measures by shifting some attention from "How

should corruption be punished?” to “What motivational and social conditions may make corrupt behaviour attractive, and how can legitimate alternatives be strengthened?” This does not replace legal sanctions or institutional reforms; rather, it proposes that psychological understanding of human needs can complement them in developing a more comprehensive approach to preventing corruption.

The following studies were adapted from other work to explain deviance. Studies have established a significant relationship between employee motivation and deviant behaviour in the workplace. Diefendorff and Mehta (2007) examined the relationship between motivational traits, particularly approach and avoidance motivations, and interpersonal as well as organisational deviance. Their findings indicated that personal mastery was negatively associated with deviant behaviour, suggesting that employees who are motivated by a desire to develop their competence and achieve mastery are less likely to engage in workplace deviance. In contrast, avoidance motivation and behavioural activation sensitivity were positively associated with certain forms of workplace deviant behaviour. These findings suggest that the nature and direction of employees’ motivation may influence their likelihood of engaging in behaviours that violate organisational norms.

The relationship between reward based motivation and deviant behaviour has also received considerable attention in the literature. Previous research has documented instances in which incentive-based pay may encourage undesirable behaviours, including cheating, cutting corners, fraud, and other forms of misconduct (Bohte & Meier, 2000; Burns & Kedia, 2006; Frey & Osterloh, 2005; Glaeser & Van Quaquebeke, 2019; Harris & Bromiley, 2007; Hegarty & Sims, 1978; Litzky et al., 2006). These findings indicate that although financial incentives are generally introduced to improve employee performance, their effects may sometimes be counterproductive when employees become excessively focused on achieving reward-related outcomes.

Empirical evidence further supports the relationship between autonomous motivation and deviant behaviour. Research has shown that autonomous motivation is associated with a lower likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviours (Michel & Hargis, 2017; Orosz et al., 2013; Ozdemir Oz et al., 2016). Employees who engage in their work because they personally value it or find it meaningful are therefore less likely to violate organisational standards than employees whose behaviour is primarily driven by external pressures or rewards. Consequently, the relationship between motivation and deviant behaviour appears to depend not only on the level of motivation but also on the type and quality of motivation experienced by employees.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that motivation plays an important role in explaining workplace deviant behaviour. While autonomous and mastery-oriented forms of motivation tend to discourage deviance, avoidance-oriented and externally controlled forms of motivation may increase employees’ susceptibility to undesirable behaviours. The evidence also suggests that organisational reward systems and perceptions of procedural fairness can influence employees’ motivational states and, indirectly, their behavioural choices. Therefore, examining motivation as a determinant of deviant behaviour is important for understanding the factors that contribute to employee misconduct and for developing organisational practices capable of promoting positive and responsible workplace behaviour.

Individual differences in integrity and moral development can influence employees’ propensity to engage in unethical conduct; however, organisational factors such as incentive systems, resource availability, and perceptions of justice may also shape employees’ moral behaviour. Perkins et al. (2024) argued that incentive systems can become embedded within workplace culture and may create conditions in which employees feel justified in engaging in unethical practices. In addition, employees’ capacity to regulate their moral behaviour may weaken when they experience resource depletion or perceive that they have been treated unfairly. This suggests that deviant behaviour may result from an interaction between individual moral characteristics and contextual factors within the work environment.

One important psychological mechanism associated with workplace deviance is moral disengagement. Newman et al. (2020) conceptualised moral disengagement as a cognitive process through which individuals restructure their interpretation of unethical actions in ways that allow them to violate their internal moral standards without experiencing significant psychological discomfort. Ogunfowora et al. (2022) further established an association between moral disengagement and workplace deviance,

indicating that employees who are able to rationalise unethical conduct may be more willing to engage in behaviours that violate organisational expectations. Moral disengagement can occur through several mechanisms, including justifying one's behaviour as a means of restoring perceived justice, minimising the consequences of misconduct, comparing one's actions favourably with more serious wrongdoing, shifting responsibility to others or organisational authorities, and dehumanising individuals who are affected by the behaviour (Bandura, 1986; Newman et al., 2020). These mechanisms indicate that employees' motivational experiences may play an important role in determining whether they maintain or abandon their moral standards when confronted with workplace pressures.

The literature further suggests that the type of motivation experienced by individuals may influence their tendency towards moral disengagement and unethical behaviour. Although research directly examining motivation and moral disengagement in workplace settings remains limited, evidence from other contexts provides useful insights. Studies involving athletes, for instance, found that controlled motivation was positively associated with moral disengagement and favourable attitudes towards doping (Hodge et al., 2013; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). Similarly, Thornberg et al. (2023) reported that moral disengagement was negatively associated with autonomous motivation to defend victims of bullying, whereas extrinsic motivation and amotivation were positively associated with moral disengagement. These findings suggest that individuals whose behaviour is driven primarily by external pressures or rewards may be more susceptible to rationalising unethical actions than those who act out of personal values and autonomous reasons.

Evidence from entrepreneurship and innovation research provides further support for this argument, although the findings are not entirely consistent. Baron et al. (2015) found that entrepreneurs' motivation to make money was positively related to moral disengagement and their propensity to engage in unethical behaviour. In contrast, Scheiner et al. (2018) reported no significant relationship between money-oriented motives and moral disengagement or unethical behaviour in idea-generation competitions. However, the paper found that intrinsic motivation to participate in the competition was negatively associated with both moral disengagement and unethical behaviour. The contrasting findings suggest that the relationship between motivation and unethical conduct may depend on the nature of the motivation, the context in which behaviour occurs, and the specific type of deviance being examined. Nevertheless, the evidence generally indicates that autonomous or intrinsic forms of motivation may provide greater protection against moral disengagement than externally controlled motives.

Psychological need satisfaction has also been linked to behaviours associated with deviance, although research directly connecting need satisfaction to workplace moral disengagement remains relatively limited. Kanat-Maymon et al. (2015) demonstrated that frustration of psychological needs could contribute to academic cheating by reducing autonomous motivation. In the workplace, Bharadwaj (2021) found that job autonomy can reduce moral disengagement, suggesting that employees who experience greater control and freedom in carrying out their work may be more likely to maintain personal responsibility for their actions. Conversely, Vohs and Schooler (2008) demonstrated that deterministic thinking, which reduces perceptions of personal free will, can increase cheating behaviour. Taken together, these findings imply that employees' perceptions of autonomy, responsibility, and personal agency may influence their willingness to engage in unethical or deviant conduct.

The role of incentives and rewards provides another important explanation for the relationship between motivation and deviant behaviour. Liu et al. (2017) found that uncertainty surrounding rewards could increase deviant behaviour. The finding suggests that reward systems do not necessarily produce positive behavioural outcomes; rather, poorly designed or highly instrumental incentive systems may create pressures that encourage employees to prioritise performance outcomes over ethical considerations. Nagel et al. (2021) also provided experimental evidence that incentives may increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour, further demonstrating that the motivational consequences of rewards can sometimes be counterproductive.

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that the relationship between motivation and deviant behaviour is complex and is influenced by the quality of motivation, psychological need satisfaction, reward structures, and employees' capacity for moral self-regulation. Autonomous and intrinsic forms of

motivation appear to be associated with lower levels of moral disengagement and unethical behaviour, whereas controlled, extrinsic, or highly instrumental forms of motivation may increase employees' vulnerability to deviant conduct. Furthermore, incentive systems and perceptions of organisational justice may either reinforce or undermine employees' moral standards. Despite these findings, there remains a relative scarcity of empirical research directly examining how different forms of employee motivation influence moral disengagement and deviant behaviour within workplace settings. This gap provides justification for further investigation of motivation as a potential determinant of deviant behaviour among employees.

Methodology

This paper adopted a theoretical approach to examine Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory as a Psychological Framework for Combating Corruption in Nigeria. The approach involved a critical examination of relevant theoretical literature on human motivation, corruption, and deviant behaviour, with the aim of developing theoretically grounded propositions linking the five levels of human needs to corruption intention and identifying possible psychological approaches to corruption prevention. The paper did not involve primary data collection or statistical testing of the propositions. The literature examined comprised foundational writings on Maslow's theory of human motivation, scholarly publications on corruption and anti-corruption strategies, and theoretical and empirical studies on motivation, workplace behaviour, fraud, and deviance. Maslow's (1943) *A Theory of Human Motivation* and Maslow's (1954) *Motivation and Personality* provided the principal theoretical foundation for the paper. Additional literature on principal-agent theory, collective action theory, and the fraud triangle was considered to contextualise corruption within institutional, social, and individual perspectives. Relevant literature on corruption in Nigeria was also considered to situate the theoretical arguments within the country's socioeconomic and institutional environment. The literature was considered based on its relevance to the objectives of the paper and its contribution to understanding the relationship between human needs, motivation, decision-making, deviant behaviour, and corruption. The propositions were derived through deductive theoretical reasoning, using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory as the primary analytical framework. Each of the five levels of needs was examined in relation to possible motivations, pressures, and circumstances that could influence an individual's intention to engage in corrupt practices.

Theoretical Analysis

This paper is theoretical in nature and is grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory as a psychological framework for understanding and addressing corruption in Nigeria. Although Maslow's theory has been widely applied in explaining human motivation, its potential application to the understanding and prevention of corruption in the Nigerian context remains relatively underexplored. The present paper therefore extends the application of the theory beyond its traditional focus on general human motivation to the domain of corrupt intention. Specifically, the paper argues that the extent to which individuals experience unmet physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation needs may influence the motivational conditions under which corruption becomes more attractive.

Table 1. Theoretical Framework for Survival and Grand Corruption

NO	Maslow	If Unmet: Corruption Risk Survival Corruption	If Met: Anti-corruption Outcome	Grand Corruption	Anti-corruption Outcome
1	Physiological Need	No food, Shelter, and Water (He or she may steal to survive).	Adequate wages (reduce the intention to steal).	Greed and excessive accumulation of wealth beyond basic needs	Promote sufficiency, financial responsibility, and ethical limits on wealth acquisition through public office.
2	Safety Need	Job insecurity (He or she may take a bribe to keep the job).	Job security and pension (reduce fear-based corruption).	Secure future, offshore asset	Strengthen financial transparency, asset declaration, independent audits, and accountability.
3	Love and Belongingness Need	Exclusion (He or she may engage in it because members of the group do it).	Strong ethical organisation culture	Ethnic loyalty, godfatherism, family empire	Promote ethical leadership, impartiality, and recognition based on public service rather than connections.
4	Self-esteem	No recognition (An individual may take bribes to feel important).	Merit (Award for integrity)	Big-man syndrome, title, status display	Establish integrity awards, merit-based recognition, and public honour for ethical conduct.
5	Self-actualisation Need	Stagnation (no purpose in being honest).	Mission driven work, values alignment	I am untouchable	Encourage meaningful public service, ethical leadership, and achievement through contributions to national development.

Criticism of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

This paper does not assume that Maslow's hierarchy is a universally valid sequential model. Rather, it uses the five need categories as a heuristic framework for organising possible motivational pathways through which socioeconomic insecurity, social relationships, status concerns and opportunities for personal fulfilment may influence corruption-related intentions.

The theory has the following shortcomings:

1. Maslow proposed that lower-level needs generally take priority over higher-level needs. However, people do not always satisfy needs in a fixed sequence. Individuals may pursue esteem, belongingness, or self-actualisation even when physiological or safety needs remain unmet.
2. The theory was developed largely from a Western individualistic perspective. The relative importance of individual achievement, independence, status, family, community, and collective wellbeing may differ across cultures. Therefore, the hierarchy may not adequately explain motivation in collectivist societies, including many African contexts.
3. Although the five categories of needs are intuitively appealing, empirical evidence does not consistently demonstrate that human needs operate according to Maslow's proposed hierarchical order. This limits the use of the hierarchy as a strict predictive model.
4. People differ in their values, personality, experiences, socioeconomic circumstances, and priorities. Two individuals experiencing the same unmet need may respond differently. One person experiencing financial hardship may remain honest, while another may consider unethical behaviour.

5. Human behaviour is influenced by multiple factors simultaneously. Economic needs, social relationships, personality, moral values, organisational culture, perceived opportunity, punishment, social norms, and personal beliefs can operate together. Maslow's five categories may therefore provide an incomplete explanation of complex behaviours such as corruption.
6. People sometimes sacrifice their own safety, financial resources, or comfort for others. For example, individuals may act courageously or altruistically despite having their own basic needs unmet. Such behaviour is difficult to explain using a strict progression from lower to higher needs.
7. Maslow's theory was not specifically developed to explain corruption, fraud, bribery, or other forms of unethical behaviour. Therefore, applying it to corruption requires theoretical extension rather than assuming that unmet needs directly produce corrupt behaviour.

Theoretical Propositions

1. Unmet physiological needs are theoretically expected to be positively associated with corruption intention, particularly where opportunities for corrupt behaviour exist and institutional controls are weak. Promoting a sense of sufficiency, financial responsibility, and ethical standards in public office may help discourage excessive wealth accumulation through corrupt means.
2. Job insecurity and perceived economic uncertainty are positively associated with corruption intention where individuals perceive corruption as a means of protecting their livelihood. When political tenure is perceived as insecure, the motivation to satisfy safety needs beyond office leads to grand corruption.
3. The relationship between belongingness and corruption intention depends on group norms; ethical group identification may reduce corruption intention, whereas identification with groups that normalise corruption may increase it. Unmet need for love and belongingness, expressed as ethnic loyalty and godfather obligations, positively predicts allocation of public resources to in-groups.
4. Low perceived esteem and recognition may increase vulnerability to unethical behaviour when individuals seek alternative means of achieving status, recognition or compensation. The higher the need for esteem and social recognition in a status monetised culture, the greater the propensity for grand corruption.
5. Self-actualisation, meaningful work and value congruence may be negatively associated with corruption intention by strengthening autonomous and ethically oriented motivation. When legitimate paths to self-actualisation are blocked by poor institutional reward for integrity, individuals pursue distorted self-actualisation through corruption as legacy building.

Implications

Theoretical Implication

The theoretical analysis suggests the need for relevant institutions and agencies to broaden the application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs beyond its traditional psychological context to areas such as human resource management, criminology, and anti-corruption practices. Integrating psychological perspectives into institutional policies and critical decision-making processes may provide a deeper understanding of the motivational factors that influence human behaviour, including unethical and deviant conduct.

Practical and Policy Implication

1. Ensuring that citizens have access to essential physiological needs, including food, water, adequate salaries, pensions, and health insurance, may reduce their inclination towards corrupt practices. When adequate social welfare provisions are available, individuals may be less likely to engage in theft or corruption as a means of meeting their basic needs and achieving a reasonable standard of living.
2. The difficulty many graduates experience in securing employment may contribute to perceptions of economic insecurity and uncertainty about the future. Some individuals may consequently view public employment as an opportunity to accumulate wealth through corrupt means. Therefore,

- the government should prioritise the creation of decent and sustainable employment opportunities for graduates and other job seekers. Meaningful employment can provide legitimate avenues for financial advancement and reduce the temptation to misappropriate public resources.
3. Government at the federal, state, and local levels should minimise unnecessary and extravagant expenditure. Public officials should exercise restraint in their use of public resources and ensure that their standard of living and spending patterns reflect the economic realities experienced by ordinary citizens. Government representatives should demonstrate solidarity with the people they serve and promote a sense of shared responsibility and social inclusion.
 4. The government should establish formal awards and recognition programmes for individuals who demonstrate exceptional integrity, transparency, and ethical conduct at the federal, state, and local levels. Publicly recognising honest behaviour can encourage positive moral standards, provide role models for citizens, and serve as an important strategy for preventing corruption and other unethical practices.
 5. Employment should be presented not merely as a means of earning a salary or performing routine administrative duties but also as an opportunity to contribute to national development. Government agencies should foster a sense of purpose among employees by emphasising how their roles contribute to nation-building, public service, and the overall development of Nigeria.
 6. Institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) may, where appropriate, incorporate an assessment of the underlying needs, motivations, and circumstances associated with corrupt practices. From the perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, individuals may engage in corrupt behaviour for different reasons depending on the needs they perceive as unmet. For example, an individual experiencing severe financial difficulties may be motivated by physiological or basic survival needs, whereas another person may engage in corruption because of concerns about job security, social status, recognition, belongingness, or the desire for personal achievement. Consequently, individuals who commit similar corrupt acts may not necessarily be driven by the same psychological or socioeconomic motivations. Accordingly, anti-corruption interventions could move beyond the conventional question of "What offence was committed?" to also consider the broader question, "What need or combination of needs was the individual attempting to satisfy through the corrupt behaviour?" This does not imply that unmet needs should be used to excuse, justify, or reduce accountability for corruption. Rather, understanding the motivation underlying the behaviour can provide additional information for designing more effective preventive interventions. For instance, where corruption is associated with economic insecurity, interventions may focus on improving legitimate employment opportunities, adequate remuneration, social protection, and access to basic necessities. Where the behaviour is associated with the pursuit of recognition, status, or social acceptance, interventions may place greater emphasis on ethical leadership, institutional recognition, professional integrity, and legitimate avenues for achievement. Such an approach is particularly relevant to corruption prevention because punishment alone may address the consequence of an offence without necessarily addressing the conditions that contributed to its occurrence. A person who is punished for accepting a bribe may remain exposed to the same economic, occupational, social, or psychological pressures after the punishment has been completed. Therefore, integrating motivational and psychological perspectives into anti-corruption policy could complement existing legal and institutional mechanisms by addressing both the behaviour and some of the conditions that may contribute to it.

Conclusion

This theoretical paper examined the potential relevance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a psychological framework for understanding corruption in Nigeria. The theoretical analysis suggests that human need frustration may constitute one motivational pathway through which individuals become more susceptible to corruption, particularly where opportunities for misconduct and weak institutional controls coexist. The literature reviewed suggests the theory provides a useful and relevant framework for understanding some of the psychological and socio-economic factors that may contribute to corrupt practices. In

particular, unmet needs and uncertainty about the future may influence some individuals to engage in corrupt activities as a means of securing their livelihoods and achieving financial stability.

The paper therefore emphasises the importance of incorporating psychological perspectives into Nigeria's anti-corruption strategies. Government should consider engaging psychologists and other relevant professionals in policy formulation, public administration, and anti-corruption interventions, while applying the principles of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to address the underlying conditions that may encourage unethical behaviour. Furthermore, anti-corruption agencies should complement punitive measures with preventive approaches that consider the circumstances and motivations underlying offending behaviour. Before imposing punishment, it is therefore important to ask not only what offence was committed, but also, "What need was the offender attempting to satisfy?" Addressing such underlying needs may strengthen efforts to prevent corruption and promote ethical conduct in Nigerian society.

Limitation of the Paper

This paper has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting its propositions and implications. First, the paper is theoretical and does not involve empirical testing. The propositions linking unmet human needs to corruption intention, particularly survival and grand corruption, are derived conceptually from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory rather than from data collected from individuals involved in or exposed to corrupt practices. In the case of survival corruption, the paper proposes that difficulties in meeting basic physiological needs, such as food, water, and shelter, may create pressures that influence an individual's intention to engage in corrupt practices. In contrast, grand corruption is considered in relation to the excessive accumulation of wealth, greed, the pursuit of prestige, and the desire for power and influence beyond basic survival needs. However, these proposed relationships have not been empirically established, and unmet basic needs do not necessarily lead to survival corruption, just as the pursuit of wealth, status, or power does not inevitably result in grand corruption. Consequently, the paper cannot establish causal relationships between specific unmet needs and either form of corruption. Other factors, including individual moral values, institutional weaknesses, opportunities for illicit enrichment, social expectations, and the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms, may also influence corrupt behaviour. The propositions advanced in this paper should therefore be regarded as theoretically informed assumptions that require empirical investigation to determine their validity and applicability to the Nigerian context.

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