

Ethical Leadership and Institutional Integrity in Nigeria: Rebuilding Trust Amid Innovation and Uncertainty

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Abstract

In an era defined by rapid technological innovation, social disruption, and institutional uncertainty, ethical leadership has re-emerged as a pivotal force in sustaining organizational integrity and public trust. This study interrogates the dynamics of ethical leadership and institutional integrity in Nigeria, examining how leaders navigate the competing pressures of modernization, digital transformation, and value erosion within public institutions. Drawing on documentary analysis and contemporary governance theories (Transformational Leadership and Institutional Integrity Theories), the paper explores the nexus between ethics, trust, and innovation, emphasizing how leadership behaviours, decision-making processes, and accountability frameworks shape institutional credibility. Findings reveal that the erosion of public trust in Nigeria's governance system is largely driven by weak ethical orientation, policy inconsistency, and the politicization of institutional mandates. However, the study also identifies emerging practices such as transparency-driven reforms, digital accountability systems, and value-based leadership models that demonstrate the potential to restore integrity and rebuild trust. The paper concludes that embedding ethical leadership principles into Nigeria's governance architecture is indispensable for achieving institutional resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of uncertainty. It recommends a paradigm shift from compliance-based ethics to transformative integrity systems that integrate technology, inclusivity, and moral accountability as foundations for sustainable governance.

Keywords: Governance Ethics, Accountability Systems, Transformational Leadership Dynamics, Public Trust Restoration and Digital Integrity Frameworks

Introduction

Leadership ethics and institutional integrity have assumed renewed urgency in the governance discourse of developing nations, particularly Nigeria, where public trust in institutions has been consistently undermined by corruption, maladministration, and value erosion. Over the last two decades, Nigeria's public and private sectors have witnessed recurring crises of confidence manifested in leadership failures, weak accountability systems, and ethical lapses that compromise organizational credibility and developmental progress (Adebayo & Adeyemi, 2021; Ogundiya, 2019). As global governance increasingly evolves within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment driven by technological innovations, digitization, and rapid socio-economic transformation, the demand for ethical leadership as a stabilizing force has never been more pressing (Brown & Treviño, 2020; Northouse, 2022).

Ethical leadership, broadly conceptualized, involves the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and relationships, as well as the promotion of such conduct among followers via communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown & Treviño, 2006). It is anchored on moral integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability: attributes that are essential for institutional trust and legitimacy (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Institutional integrity, on the other hand, embodies the consistency between an organization's espoused values and its actions, ensuring that governance systems remain credible and morally coherent (Huberts, 2018). In Nigeria, however, institutions have been persistently weakened by political patronage, bureaucratic inefficiency, and systemic corruption, resulting in widespread public skepticism about the capacity of leaders to act ethically (Agbibo, 2020; Transparency International, 2023). Recent studies reveal a growing ethical deficit in Nigeria's governance architecture, where innovation and modernization have not necessarily translated into institutional renewal (Okafor & Ekanem, 2022). Instead, the rapid diffusion of digital technologies has introduced new ethical dilemmas ranging from data privacy concerns and cyber corruption to algorithmic bias in public administration; thus complicating the leadership landscape (Olatunji & Akinyemi, 2021). While innovation promises efficiency and transparency, it also exposes leadership systems to fresh vulnerabilities that demand a rethinking of ethical frameworks and value-based leadership models (George et al., 2021). This intersection of ethics, innovation, and uncertainty constitutes the new frontier of leadership studies in Nigeria's governance context.

Extant literature underscores that ethical leadership fosters institutional trust and enhances organizational performance (Mayer et al., 2012; Hassan et al., 2014). However, in Nigeria, much of the scholarship has focused narrowly on corruption and accountability, often neglecting how ethical leadership can function as a transformative tool for rebuilding institutional legitimacy amid rapid socio-technological change (Eneh & Chukwumeka, 2019). This gap reflects a need to interrogate how Nigerian leaders can integrate ethical reasoning and innovative governance to rebuild public confidence in institutions. As innovation disrupts traditional administrative

norms, the challenge of ethical adaptation becomes a defining feature of institutional survival (Denhardt & Catlaw, 2021).

The rationale for this study is therefore twofold. First, it seeks to deepen the understanding of ethical leadership as a dynamic force for institutional renewal in contexts of uncertainty and technological transformation. Second, it aims to explore practical frameworks for embedding integrity systems that promote trust-building, accountability, and inclusivity in Nigerian institutions. The issues canvassed in this study revolve around how ethical leadership can be mainstreamed into innovation-driven governance models to counterbalance moral decline and restore public trust. In sum, this study positions ethical leadership not merely as a moral imperative but as a strategic governance tool essential for sustaining institutional integrity in Nigeria's rapidly evolving socio-political and technological landscape. It argues that rebuilding trust amid innovation and uncertainty demands leaders who combine moral competence with adaptive intelligence, capable of navigating complexity without compromising integrity.

Objective of the Study

To examine how ethical leadership can serve as a strategic mechanism for strengthening institutional integrity and rebuilding public trust in Nigeria amid the challenges and opportunities of innovation and uncertainty. The study seeks to:

1. Examine how ethical leadership influences institutional integrity and trust-building within Nigeria's governance framework.
2. Analyze the impact of innovation and technological transformation on ethical leadership practices and institutional accountability.
3. Propose strategic approaches for strengthening ethical leadership and embedding integrity-driven reforms to rebuild public trust in Nigeria's institutions.

Review of Related Literature

Conceptual Clarifications

Ethical Leadership: Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making, and the promotion of such conduct among followers (Brown & Treviño, 2006). It embodies values such as integrity, fairness, trustworthiness, transparency, and empathy (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Ethical leaders influence not only the moral climate of organizations but also foster trust and commitment among subordinates through role modeling and accountability (Mayer et al., 2012). In governance contexts, ethical leadership acts as a counterforce to corruption and arbitrariness by aligning power with moral responsibility (Denhardt & Catlaw, 2021).

Institutional Integrity: denotes the consistency between an institution's declared values, standards, and its actual practices (Huberts, 2018). It reflects the moral coherence and accountability mechanisms that preserve organizational legitimacy and credibility. An institution with integrity ensures that its governance systems are value-driven, transparent, and resistant to corruption or external influence (Huberts & Lasthuizen, 2014). Integrity thus

operates as both a moral compass and a functional control mechanism that ensures alignment between intentions and actions in governance.

Trust Rebuilding: refers to the deliberate process of restoring citizens' confidence in institutions that have suffered ethical or operational decline (Dirks et al., 2009). Institutional trust is central to good governance, as it enhances compliance, social cohesion, and legitimacy. Once broken, trust can only be restored through visible ethical reforms, transparent accountability systems, and consistent moral conduct by leadership (Mishra & Mishra, 2013).

Innovation and Uncertainty: Innovation represents the introduction of new ideas, technologies, and administrative processes aimed at improving efficiency and service delivery (George et al., 2021). However, innovation often brings uncertainty—manifested in ethical dilemmas, technological disruptions, and institutional adaptation challenges (Bessant & Tidd, 2015). For Nigeria, the digital transformation of governance presents both opportunities for transparency and risks of cyber corruption, manipulation, and data misuse (Olatunji & Akinyemi, 2021).

Thematic Review

- a) **Ethical Leadership and Institutional Integrity:** Ethical leadership is foundational to institutional integrity because leaders define the moral tone of their organizations. According to Brown and Treviño (2020), ethical leaders serve as moral exemplars whose behavior sets standards that influence institutional ethics. In Nigeria, however, the absence of moral leadership has fostered a culture of impunity where administrative rules are often subordinated to personal and political interests (Adebayo & Adeyemi, 2021). The moral dissonance between institutional ideals and leadership behavior has weakened integrity systems, resulting in declining public confidence (Agbibo, 2020). Studies such as Hassan, Wright, and Yukl (2014) demonstrate that ethical leadership improves organizational commitment, performance, and trust. Similarly, Mayer et al. (2012) found a trickle-down effect of ethical leadership, where moral behavior at the top influences ethical conduct across all levels. For Nigeria's institutions to regain integrity, leadership ethics must transition from rhetorical posturing to value-driven governance practices that are measurable and enforceable.
- b) **Innovation, Technological Change, and Ethical Decision-Making:** Innovation introduces complexity into ethical governance. The advent of digital technologies has revolutionized service delivery but has also amplified vulnerabilities such as cybercrime, misuse of data, and digital manipulation (George et al., 2021). Olatunji and Akinyemi (2021) argue that Nigeria's digital transformation efforts lack robust ethical oversight, creating new spaces for corruption within e-governance systems. Ethical leadership must therefore extend beyond moral persuasion to include digital ethics—addressing issues of transparency, algorithmic bias, and technology-induced inequity. Research by Denhardt and Catlaw (2021) highlights that leadership effectiveness in the digital era depends on balancing innovation with accountability. Leaders must possess adaptive intelligence—the ability to anticipate ethical

implications of new technologies and implement preventive safeguards. In Nigeria, where public sector innovation is often donor-driven and inadequately regulated, ethical foresight becomes critical for sustaining institutional trust.

- c) ***Rebuilding Trust through Integrity-Driven Reforms***: Trust in institutions is the cornerstone of legitimacy. Mishra and Mishra (2013) posit that rebuilding trust requires consistency between moral intent and observable behavior. In the Nigerian context, citizens' mistrust of institutions arises from historical patterns of corruption, leadership failure, and unfulfilled policy promises (Ogundiya, 2019). Transparency International (2023) continues to rank Nigeria among nations with pervasive corruption, despite multiple anti-corruption agencies. Emerging evidence suggests that trust can be restored when institutions institutionalize ethical practices through integrity systems – such as whistleblower protection, transparent procurement processes, and digital accountability mechanisms (Okafor & Ekanem, 2022). Ethical leadership, by embodying fairness and openness, plays a catalytic role in this restoration process.

Despite decades of institutional reforms and anti-corruption campaigns, Nigeria's governance structure remains trapped in a moral paradox where innovation appears to be rising, but trust is declining. Technological advancements have enhanced access to information and administrative efficiency, yet ethical governance remains elusive (Eneh & Chukwuemeka, 2019). The persistence of leadership failures, nepotism, and weak enforcement of ethical codes suggest a disconnect between modernization and moral transformation. The central problem is that Nigeria's leadership modernization has not been matched with ethical evolution. Innovation has been pursued as a technical solution rather than as an ethical reform agenda. Thus, while government institutions embrace digital tools, their ethical frameworks remain outdated, producing a form of "digital corruption" that erodes rather than rebuilds public trust.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies underscore the importance of ethical leadership in governance and institutional performance. Brown and Treviño (2020) found that ethical leadership enhances employee engagement, transparency, and trust in both public and private organizations. Hassan et al. (2014) demonstrated that ethical leadership reduces absenteeism and improves organizational commitment in government agencies. Similarly, Mayer et al. (2012) confirmed the cascading effect of ethical behavior from leaders to subordinates.

In Nigeria, Adebayo and Adeyemi (2021) reported that ethical leadership correlates positively with accountability and public sector efficiency. However, Agbibo (2020) noted that despite reforms, Nigeria's ethical leadership deficit persists due to political interference and institutional capture. Okafor and Ekanem (2022) examined ethical leadership within the innovation context and observed that Nigerian institutions often adopt technology without developing corresponding integrity systems, thereby creating new avenues for misconduct. Eneh and Chukwuemeka (2019) emphasized that leadership integrity is not only a moral issue but also an

administrative necessity for national development. Olatunji and Akinyemi (2021) found that while digital governance initiatives have improved access to services, the lack of ethical standards in data handling undermines citizens' trust in such systems. Comparative studies from other African contexts, such as Kenya and Ghana, similarly affirm that ethical leadership is a critical predictor of institutional performance and legitimacy (Mutua, 2020; Asiedu & Mensah, 2021).

The reviewed literature collectively affirms that ethical leadership and institutional integrity are essential for sustaining public trust and governance legitimacy. It also establishes that innovation and digital transformation, while offering opportunities for transparency, simultaneously introduce new ethical vulnerabilities that require adaptive and integrity-based leadership. However, three latent gaps emerge:

1. **Contextual Gap:** Most studies on ethical leadership in Nigeria focus on corruption control and administrative ethics but rarely interrogate how ethical leadership operates within innovation and uncertainty frameworks, especially in the digital age.
2. **Conceptual Gap:** There is insufficient theorization of the nexus between ethical leadership, institutional integrity, and trust-building in the context of socio-technological disruption.
3. **Empirical Gap:** Limited empirical evidence exists on how ethical leadership can be institutionalized through digital ethics, transparency culture, and accountability systems to rebuild trust in Nigerian governance.

This study is therefore positioned to fill these gaps by examining how ethical leadership can be leveraged as a strategic mechanism for institutional integrity and trust restoration in Nigeria's innovation-driven yet ethically fragile governance environment.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory and Institutional Integrity Theory. Both frameworks provide complementary lenses for understanding how ethical leadership can influence trust, accountability, and institutional resilience in Nigeria's evolving governance environment.

- a) **Transformational Leadership Theory:** first developed by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass (1985), posits that effective leaders transcend transactional exchanges to inspire and morally elevate followers toward collective goals. Transformational leaders influence change through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). They are characterized by moral conviction, authenticity, and the capacity to integrate ethics into strategic decision-making. In the context of governance, transformational leadership transcends bureaucratic control by cultivating value-based behavior that prioritizes the public good (Denhardt & Catlaw, 2021). Ethical leadership shares deep resonance with transformational leadership, as both rest on moral foundations and emphasize the development of trust between leaders and followers (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Transformational leaders act as moral exemplars, using integrity

as a vehicle for institutional transformation (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Applied to the Nigerian context, the theory underscores the necessity of leadership that is not merely regulatory or reactive but morally transformative—able to navigate ethical dilemmas and technological disruptions with principled judgment. The erosion of trust in Nigerian institutions—often linked to corruption, weak accountability, and moral deficit—reflects a failure of transformational and ethical leadership (Ogundiya, 2019; Agbiboa, 2020). Thus, the theory supports the study's argument that sustainable institutional trust can only emerge when leaders demonstrate moral courage, transparency, and adaptive vision amid uncertainty and innovation.

- b) ***Institutional Integrity Theory***: developed within the field of public ethics and organizational behavior, explains how institutions maintain legitimacy through coherence between their stated values and actual practices (Huberts, 2018; Paine, 1994). It holds that institutions are not merely structures but moral entities whose integrity depends on the alignment between principles, actions, and outcomes. Institutional integrity goes beyond compliance with rules—it reflects a deeper commitment to ethical consistency and moral accountability (Huberts & Six, 2012). According to this theory, when the ethical infrastructure of an institution is weakened—through corruption, politicization, or moral compromise—trust deteriorates, and the institution loses its legitimacy (Kaptein, 2019). Conversely, institutions that embody integrity foster transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness, thereby strengthening citizens' confidence in governance. In Nigeria, where public institutions are often perceived as opaque and self-serving, Institutional Integrity Theory provides a critical framework for understanding how ethical leadership can restore public confidence. It emphasizes that ethical leaders act as guardians of institutional values, ensuring that innovation, reform, and policy implementation are grounded in moral purpose and not merely in efficiency or expediency (Huberts, 2018). By embedding integrity into governance processes, ethical leadership transforms institutions into trustworthy agents of societal change.

The two theories are mutually reinforcing. Transformational leadership theory explains the individual-level moral and visionary behaviour of leaders necessary to inspire ethical transformation, while institutional integrity theory explains the system-level ethical alignment that ensures institutional practices reflect these values. Together, they provide a holistic framework for understanding how ethical leadership can rebuild institutional trust amid innovation and uncertainty. This integrative approach positions ethical leadership not merely as a personality trait but as a transformative process that aligns moral values with institutional structures and technological adaptation. It also suggests that restoring trust in Nigerian institutions requires leaders who not only act ethically but also institutionalize ethics through systems that sustain transparency, accountability, and innovation. Within this dual-theoretical framework, the study is guided by the following assumptions:

1. Transformational leaders promote institutional integrity by embedding ethical principles into the culture and operations of governance systems.
2. Ethical leadership provides the moral energy required to sustain institutional trust in times of uncertainty.
3. Institutions that align ethical values with innovative governance practices are more likely to command public trust and legitimacy.

This theoretical blend thus underpins the study's central argument that ethical leadership, operationalized through transformational behaviors and integrity-based systems, is indispensable for rebuilding trust in Nigeria's governance institutions amid rapid innovation and evolving uncertainty.

Methodology

This study adopted a documentary research design, which is particularly suited for conceptual and empirical investigations relying on secondary data to interpret and analyze social phenomena (Mogalakwe, 2006). A documentary research design enables a systematic exploration of existing documents, reports, academic literature, and policy instruments to derive insights into patterns of ethical leadership, institutional integrity, and trust-building in governance. It is justified on the grounds that the topic under study as rooted in leadership ethics, institutional dynamics, and governance reform; requires an interpretive and evidence-based synthesis of existing materials rather than the collection of primary data (Ahmed, 2020). This design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to trace how ethical leadership and institutional integrity have evolved over time in Nigeria, to evaluate the impact of innovation and uncertainty on governance practices, and to extract lessons from documented experiences across national and international contexts. By integrating theory, policy, and practice, the study bridges the gap between normative ethical frameworks and real-world institutional behavior, thereby offering a holistic understanding of the issues under review.

The study relied exclusively on secondary data derived from multiple credible documentary sources. These include:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, theses, and conference papers related to ethical leadership, institutional integrity, and governance reforms in Nigeria and comparable developing democracies.
2. Publications and reports from Nigerian public institutions such as the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), and the Office of the Auditor General of the Federation.
3. Relevant sections of Nigeria's Public Service Rules, Fiscal Responsibility Act, Freedom of Information Act, and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2017–2021).

4. Reports from international organizations such as Transparency International, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank on governance, ethics, and institutional reform.
5. Reputable newspaper editorials, digital archives, and institutional press releases that document trends in leadership behavior, accountability, and innovation-related challenges in Nigeria's governance landscape.

The inclusion of diverse data sources enhances the credibility, depth, and triangulation of the study, allowing for an integrative analysis of ethical leadership and institutional integrity within dynamic socio-political contexts. Data collection involved a systematic review and content analysis of the identified documents. Following Krippendorff's (2018) framework, materials were purposively selected based on relevance, credibility, and currency, particularly focusing on publications and policy materials between 2010 and 2025; a period marked by Nigeria's intensified anti-corruption reforms and digital transformation initiatives.

The analysis followed three major steps:

1. **Thematic Coding:** Key concepts such as ethical leadership, institutional integrity, trust, innovation, *and* uncertainty were extracted and coded to identify recurring patterns and contradictions.
2. **Contextual Interpretation:** The study interpreted these patterns within Nigeria's governance context, considering socio-political and technological developments that shape ethical behavior and institutional performance.
3. **Analytical Synthesis:** Emerging themes were critically synthesized to establish causal and conceptual linkages between leadership ethics, institutional trust, and the pressures of innovation and uncertainty.

The approach was interpretivist, prioritizing meaning and context over quantification. The findings were therefore analyzed through thematic interpretation, aligning with the study's theoretical frameworks: transformational leadership theory and institutional integrity theory; to explain how ethical leadership can be institutionalized to rebuild public trust.

To enhance validity, only peer-reviewed, official, and verifiable documents were included in the data set. Triangulation across academic, institutional, and international sources ensured that conclusions were not drawn from a single perspective. Reliability was achieved by maintaining a consistent set of inclusion criteria and analytical categories throughout the study process.

Although the study relies on secondary data, ethical considerations were observed by properly acknowledging all sources, avoiding misrepresentation, and maintaining intellectual honesty. The analysis remained objective, with interpretations grounded in evidence rather than normative bias or political predisposition. The study is delimited to Nigeria's governance and institutional landscape, with references to comparative contexts only where relevant. While documentary analysis provides depth and historical continuity, it does not capture lived experiences or primary perceptions of leaders and citizens. However, this limitation is mitigated

by the extensive use of official records and empirical literature, which offer rich contextual and policy insights into the ethical dimensions of leadership and institutional trust.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that the crisis of ethical leadership and institutional integrity in Nigeria is deeply embedded in the structural, cultural, and moral fabric of governance. The analysis indicates a persistent deficit of moral accountability, weak ethical infrastructure, and a disconnect between policy pronouncements and institutional behavior. These findings align with the assumptions of transformational leadership theory and institutional integrity theory, which jointly explain how leadership values and institutional systems interact to shape public trust and moral legitimacy amid innovation and uncertainty.

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- 1) ***Ethical Leadership Deficit and the Erosion of Public Trust***: The first major finding underscores a significant deficit in ethical leadership, particularly among public office holders whose decisions are often guided by political loyalty and personal gain rather than the moral imperatives of public service (Ogundiya, 2019; Adebayo & Adeyemi, 2021). The review of ICPC and EFCC annual reports (2018–2023) revealed recurrent cases of procurement fraud, abuse of office, and policy inconsistency within federal and state institutions. This ethical decline has eroded citizens' trust, leading to widespread skepticism toward governance institutions (Transparency International, 2024). The findings align with transformational leadership theory, which posits that moral authority and idealized influence are central to leader-follower trust (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In Nigeria's context, the absence of such leadership behaviors – rooted in empathy, vision, and moral integrity – has created a legitimacy vacuum. Moreover, the institutional integrity theory perspective suggests that this erosion of trust stems from a misalignment between institutional values and actual practices (Huberts, 2018). For example, while the Public Service Rules emphasize accountability and transparency, many public agencies exhibit ethical incoherence, where anti-corruption policies coexist with entrenched patronage systems (Kaptein, 2019). Thus, the findings illustrate a dual-level ethical failure: moral inconsistency among leaders and structural weakness within institutions.
- 2) ***Innovation, Digitalization, and Emerging Ethical Dilemmas***: A second major finding highlights the complex ethical challenges emerging from digital innovation and technological transformation in Nigeria's governance systems. The introduction of e-governance platforms, online procurement portals, and biometric verification systems has improved administrative transparency in theory (Olatunji & Akinyemi, 2021). However, evidence from policy evaluations and media audits indicates that these innovations often coexist with digital forms of corruption, including cyber-fraud, data manipulation, and contract inflation through online platforms (George et al., 2021). This paradox reveals a critical tension between technological efficiency and ethical governance. While innovation enhances procedural accountability, it does not automatically instill moral responsibility



among leaders or staff. As posited by transformational leadership theory, innovation requires leaders who can model ethical behavior, articulate a clear moral vision, and integrate values into technological processes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The absence of such leadership allows innovation to evolve without an ethical compass, reinforcing systemic distrust. From the institutional integrity theory standpoint, technological reforms in Nigeria often lack the ethical infrastructure to ensure value congruence. Digital innovation, when divorced from moral principles, becomes an administrative tool rather than a transformative force. The findings therefore affirm that innovation without integrity results in “ethical vacuums” – situations where new technologies expose, rather than correct, institutional moral weaknesses.

- 3) *Institutional Weakness, Compliance-Based Ethics, and Reform Challenges*: The third finding reveals that most Nigerian institutions maintain a compliance-based ethics framework, focused on punitive control rather than value-driven transformation. Policy analysis of Nigeria’s National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2017–2021) and subsequent progress reports shows an overreliance on enforcement mechanisms – such as audits, sanctions, and disciplinary codes – without adequate emphasis on leadership development or ethical culture building (ICPC, 2022). This finding reinforces institutional integrity theory, which argues that integrity thrives when institutions internalize moral values as part of their operational DNA (Paine, 1994; Huberts & Six, 2012). Compliance-based systems may curb misconduct temporarily, but they rarely cultivate the internalized moral commitment necessary for sustained integrity. Transformational leadership theory further elucidates this problem by suggesting that ethical transformation requires inspirational leadership capable of shifting organizational culture from rule-following to value-living (Bass, 1985). The evidence from Nigeria’s public institutions demonstrates that without such moral leadership, ethics remain procedural and fragile – dependent on external enforcement rather than internal conviction. Thus, institutional integrity in Nigeria remains vulnerable because reforms often target surface-level symptoms (corruption and inefficiency) rather than the deeper moral and cultural foundations of governance. The analysis reveals an urgent need to shift from compliance ethics to transformative ethics, grounded in value internalization, innovation ethics, and moral leadership.

Synthesizing these findings, the study identifies several emerging pathways for restoring institutional trust. Evidence from select Nigerian agencies (e.g., the Central Bank, Bureau of Public Procurement, and the Nigerian Communications Commission) suggests that organizations adopting ethical leadership training, digital accountability frameworks, and open data systems show measurable improvements in public confidence (World Bank, 2023). Such institutions exhibit the hallmarks of transformational and integrity-based leadership: leaders who model ethical behavior, ensure policy coherence, and embed transparency into innovation systems. This finding validates the integrative value of both theories: transformational

leadership provides the moral impetus, while institutional integrity ensures the systemic coherence necessary for sustainable trust. The data also indicate that trust-building in Nigeria’s governance requires not only ethical leaders but also ethical institutions capable of surviving leadership transitions. Hence, rebuilding trust amid uncertainty must be both leader-centered and system-oriented, combining visionary leadership with institutionalized integrity frameworks.

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to the Study Objectives

Objective	Key Findings	Theoretical Interpretation
To examine how ethical leadership influences institutional integrity and trust-building within Nigeria’s governance framework	Ethical leadership deficit contributes directly to moral incoherence and declining institutional trust.	Transformational Leadership Theory explains how the absence of moral exemplarity undermines institutional legitimacy.
To analyze the impact of innovation and technological transformation on ethical leadership practices and institutional accountability	Innovation has produced both transparency opportunities and ethical vacuums.	Both theories highlight that innovation without ethical leadership leads to systemic fragility.
To propose strategic approaches for strengthening ethical leadership and embedding integrity-driven reforms to rebuild public trust	Trust can be rebuilt through transformational leadership, value-based reforms, and integrity-centered systems.	Institutional Integrity Theory provides a model for embedding moral coherence within governance institutions.

The findings collectively reveal that ethical leadership is both the moral catalyst and structural enabler of institutional trust. In Nigeria’s innovation-driven governance context, ethical renewal demands transformational leadership capable of inspiring moral behavior and institutionalizing integrity. While innovation offers a pathway for efficiency, it can also magnify ethical failures when decoupled from value-based governance. By synthesizing the insights from both transformational leadership theory and institutional integrity theory, this study concludes that ethical leadership must evolve from mere compliance to transformational integrity—a governance model that unites moral vision, technological innovation, and institutional coherence as the foundation for rebuilding trust amid uncertainty.

Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore that rebuilding public trust and institutional integrity in Nigeria requires not only ethical leadership commitment but also the structural embedding of integrity systems that transcend individual morality. Guided by the insights from the applied theories, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. ***Institutionalization of Ethical Leadership Training and Development:*** The Federal Government, through agencies such as the Public Service Institute of Nigeria (PSIN) and the Office of the Head of the Civil Service, should design structured ethics-based leadership



programmes aimed at developing value-driven leaders capable of demonstrating integrity, accountability, and visionary transformation. Such capacity-building initiatives should emphasize the four pillars of transformational leadership through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006) as critical ingredients for institutional renewal.

2. ***Embedding Integrity Systems within Organizational Frameworks:*** Consistent with institutional integrity theory, ethical behavior must be systemically integrated into the formal and informal norms of public institutions. Government bodies should adopt integrity management systems that combine ethical codes, transparent procedures, whistleblower protection mechanisms, and digital compliance tools to monitor conduct and enhance institutional credibility. This will shift ethical governance from a reactive, punitive model to a proactive, preventive culture (Huberts, 2018).
3. ***Leveraging Innovation for Transparency and Accountability:*** Innovation and digital transformation should be harnessed to strengthen, not erode, public trust. The adoption of e-governance, open data portals, and blockchain-based accountability systems can minimize human discretion and corruption risks in administrative processes. By aligning technological advancement with ethical oversight, Nigeria can ensure that innovation contributes to inclusive governance and trust restoration.
4. ***Enhancing Citizen Engagement and Co-creation of Integrity Values:*** Building trust in governance requires public participation in ethical reform. Civil society organizations, media, and educational institutions should collaborate with government bodies to co-create national ethical charters and promote civic education that reinforces the principles of integrity, fairness, and transparency. This participatory approach aligns with the transformational leadership emphasis on shared vision and collective moral purpose (Northouse, 2021).
5. ***Institutional Reforms to Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms:*** Anti-corruption institutions such as the EFCC, ICPC, and CCB should undergo structural and operational reforms to enhance inter-agency coordination, autonomy, and digital efficiency. Ethical oversight bodies must be insulated from political interference to maintain the trustworthiness and credibility of integrity systems. The legislative framework should be updated to reflect modern realities of governance under technological uncertainty.

Conclusion

This study which situated its analysis within the dual lenses of transformational leadership theory and institutional integrity theory revealed that ethical leadership serves as a moral compass in times of uncertainty, inspiring behavioral transformation and institutional trust through value-based decision-making. However, the persistence of corruption, weak accountability structures, and inconsistent enforcement of integrity frameworks continue to undermine institutional credibility and citizen confidence in governance. Whereas,

transformational leadership theory provided a lens to understand how value-oriented leaders can inspire ethical renewal and innovation-driven trust; institutional integrity theory clarified the systemic nature of ethics underscoring that institutions, not individuals alone, must embody moral principles to remain resilient in uncertain environments. Together, these theories emphasize that rebuilding public trust requires an alignment between ethical leadership behavior and institutional systems of integrity.

The study concludes that ethical leadership, when effectively institutionalized, can transform Nigeria's governance architecture into one that is transparent, responsive, and citizen-centered. As innovation continues to reshape the governance system, ethical and integrity-driven frameworks must guide its adoption to ensure that technological progress serves the broader public interest. In sum, Nigeria's path toward institutional renewal lies not only in policy reform but also in cultivating a culture of ethical consciousness and institutional accountability capable of sustaining trust in an age of innovation and uncertainty.

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