

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EFCC IN COMBATING CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: AN ATTRIBUTION THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines public perception of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and how such perceptions shape its effectiveness in combating corruption in Nigeria, using Attribution Theory as the guiding analytical framework. Attribution theory explains how individuals assign responsibility for institutional success or failure, particularly within governance and accountability contexts. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study draws on in-depth interviews with four experienced public relations professionals based in Lagos State. Findings reveal that perceptions of EFCC effectiveness are predominantly shaped by internal attributions, with respondents identifying inadequate investigative rigor, procedural inefficiencies, selective prosecution, leadership inconsistency, and limited conviction capacity as primary constraints. These internal attributions significantly undermine the Commission's institutional legitimacy, as publics hold the EFCC directly accountable for anti-corruption outcomes regardless of acknowledged external constraints such as political interference or judicial delays. The study argues that persistent negative perception weakens public trust, cooperation, and engagement, thereby constraining the Commission's operational effectiveness. It recommends strengthening investigative and prosecutorial capacity, prioritizing impartial enforcement irrespective of political affiliation, enhancing transparency in case handling, and adopting strategic communication practices to rebuild public confidence and reinforce the EFCC's legitimacy in Nigeria's anti-corruption architecture.

Keywords: EFCC, corruption, public perception, attribution theory, Nigeria, anti-corruption, institutional legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

Corruption remains one of Nigeria's most persistent structural challenges, undermining economic development, eroding public trust in state institutions, and perpetuating inequality. Despite successive anti-corruption reforms, Nigeria continues to rank poorly on global corruption indices, reflecting deep-seated governance deficits. At the centre of Nigeria's institutional response to economic and financial crimes is the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), established in 2003 as the country's principal anti-corruption enforcement agency.

Although the EFCC has recorded notable successes in asset recovery and prosecutions, its effectiveness is increasingly questioned by the Nigerian public. Accusations of selective enforcement, political interference, inconsistent leadership, and low conviction rates have generated skepticism regarding the Commission's independence and commitment. These perceptions matter profoundly, as public trust and cooperation are essential for the effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions whose mandates rely heavily on intelligence sharing, whistleblowing, and civic support.

Public perception, therefore, is not merely a reputational concern but a determinant of institutional performance. When citizens perceive an anti-corruption agency as compromised or ineffective, willingness to report corruption, support investigations, or comply with enforcement outcomes diminishes. Yet despite the EFCC's central role in Nigeria's governance landscape, scholarly attention to how public perceptions of the Commission are formed and interpreted remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by examining perceptions of EFCC effectiveness through the lens of attribution theory. Attribution theory, initially articulated by Heider (1958) and later refined by Weiner (1985), explains how individuals interpret causes of success and failure by attributing them either to internal factors (competence, commitment, integrity) or external constraints (political interference, resource limitations, institutional environment). In organizational contexts, these attribution patterns directly shape legitimacy judgments and accountability expectations.

Understanding whether publics primarily attribute EFCC's perceived shortcomings to internal organizational weaknesses or to external political and judicial constraints has critical implications. Internal attributions suggest that the Commission possesses the capacity to perform effectively but fails to do so, thereby generating legitimacy crises. External attributions, by contrast, indicate recognition of structural barriers beyond the agency's control, preserving institutional credibility despite disappointing outcomes.

This study investigates the following research questions:

1. How do public relations professionals perceive media coverage and public awareness of EFCC operations?
2. What attribution patterns emerge in assessments of EFCC effectiveness?
3. How do perceptions of EFCC's handling of political corruption cases affect institutional legitimacy?
4. What organizational and contextual factors are identified as constraining EFCC effectiveness?
5. How do these perceptions influence public engagement in anti-corruption efforts?

By focusing on public relations professional actors skilled in interpreting and shaping institutional narratives, this study provides informed insight into how EFCC's public image is constructed, contested, and evaluated. The findings contribute to both attribution theory in governance contexts and practical debates on restoring institutional legitimacy in Nigeria's anti-corruption struggle.

THE EFCC: INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission was established by an Act of the Nigerian National Assembly in December 2002 and commenced operations in April 2003 under President Olusegun Obasanjo. Its creation responded to international pressure, particularly Nigeria's designation by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as a non-cooperative jurisdiction in anti-money laundering efforts, as well as domestic concern over pervasive corruption (Umar et al., 2020).

The EFCC's mandate includes the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and punishment of economic and financial crimes such as fraud, money laundering, embezzlement, bribery, oil bunkering, and foreign exchange malpractice. Under its pioneer chairman, Nuhu Ribadu (2003–2007), the Commission pursued high-profile prosecutions and established regional commands, generating significant public confidence. However, subsequent leadership transitions—Farida Waziri, Ibrahim Lamorde, Ibrahim Magu (acting), Abdulsheed Bawa, and the current chairman Ola Olukoyede—have contributed to perceptions of institutional inconsistency.

Despite substantial asset recoveries and thousands of convictions in recent years, challenges persist, including slow judicial processes, allegations of selective prosecution, leadership instability, and limited transparency. This tension between measurable achievements and declining public trust forms the empirical backdrop for this study

LITERATURE REVIEW: PERCEPTION, ATTRIBUTION, AND INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY

Transparency as Foundation for Institutional Trust

Extant literature consistently links transparency to public trust in law enforcement and regulatory institutions (Tyler, 2019). Transparency demonstrates procedural fairness, counters suspicions of bias, and allows publics to evaluate institutional integrity. In anti-corruption contexts, transparency is particularly critical, as opaque operations encourage internal attribution of failure publics assume institutions choose not to act rather than face constraints

Nigeria's Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) has struggled with legitimacy partly because limited public communication about case selection criteria fuels perceptions of arbitrary enforcement (Owasanoye, 2020). The EFCC faces similar transparency challenges: when high-profile political figures evade prosecution despite public evidence, and the Commission offers no explanation, internal attribution intensifies publics conclude the EFCC chooses not to act rather than cannot act.

Implications for this study: Attribution theory suggests that transparency affects whether publics make internal versus external attributions. Transparent communication about constraints (judicial delays, political interference) may shift attribution externally, while opacity defaults to internal attribution assuming the institution chooses its actions freely. Understanding how PR professionals perceive EFCC's transparency illuminates these attribution dynamics.

Selective Enforcement and Legitimacy Erosion

Perceptions of selective enforcement erode legitimacy by implying discriminatory or politically motivated behavior. In Nigeria, accusations that anti-corruption agencies prosecute political opponents while shielding allies reinforce internal attribution patterns that frame institutions as complicit rather than constrained (Egwemi, 2020).

The Black Lives Matter movement crystallized long-standing African American concerns that police enforce laws unequally by race, with disproportionate violence against Black citizens (Jackson & Jacobs, 2017; White, 2020). In Nigeria, the #EndSARS protests reflected similar perceptions that the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) selectively targeted youth based on appearance rather than evidence (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Both cases illustrate how selective enforcement perceptions generate internal attributions: publics conclude institutions have capacity to enforce fairly but choose not to, revealing discriminatory motivations.

For anti-corruption agencies, selective enforcement accusations focus on political connections rather than demographic characteristics. When powerful political figures face investigation only after falling from power, while sitting officials with equivalent evidence escape scrutiny, publics reasonably infer political motivation. This pattern is not unique to Nigeria—anti-corruption agencies globally struggle with balancing prosecutorial independence against political realities (Smith, 2010). However, the perception matters more than the reality: if publics believe enforcement is selective, legitimacy erodes regardless of institutional explanations about evidence thresholds or procedural requirements.

Implications for this study: Selective enforcement perceptions generate particularly damaging internal attributions because they suggest not just incompetence but corrupt motivation. When PR professionals describe EFCC as selectively prosecuting political opponents, they attribute agency to the Commission—framing it as making strategic choices rather than facing unavoidable constraints. This attribution pattern has profound implications for legitimacy restoration strategies.

Communication Failures and Trust Compounding

Communication failures during crises compound distrust exponentially. Nigeria's 2012 fuel subsidy removal illustrates this dynamic: the government's poor communication strategy—announcing the policy suddenly without adequate public explanation—transformed an economic decision into a legitimacy crisis generating nationwide protests (Ogunbajo, 2017). The Metropolitan Police Service in the United Kingdom experienced similar dynamics when initial defensive responses to racial profiling accusations amplified public anger rather than mitigating it (Crawford et al., 2017). In both cases, inadequate crisis communication signaled that institutions either didn't understand public concerns or didn't prioritize addressing them—both internal attributions undermining trust.

Effective crisis communication requires three elements: timely response, transparency about what happened and why, and clear action plans addressing concerns (Coombs, 2014). Institutions that achieve these elements can shift public attribution from internal (the organization is incompetent) to situational (the organization faced difficult circumstances but responded appropriately). The EFCC has faced multiple crisis moments: high-profile suspects escaping custody, investigations stalling indefinitely, chairmen being removed suddenly—yet public communication about these incidents often appears defensive or absent entirely, defaulting publics to worst-case internal attributions.

Implications for this study: PR professionals, as communication experts, are particularly attuned to how institutions manage crisis narratives. Their perceptions of EFCC's communication strategies provide insights into whether the Commission's legitimacy challenges stem partly from preventable communication failures versus unavoidable political constraints.

Synthesis: Toward an Attribution Framework for EFCC Perception

The reviewed literature reveals that public perception challenges facing law enforcement and regulatory bodies, while context-specific in detail, share underlying patterns. Transparency builds trust by enabling publics to assess institutional integrity directly. Selective enforcement erodes legitimacy by suggesting discriminatory motivation. Communication failures compound distrust by signaling institutional indifference or incompetence. Critically, these patterns connect to attribution theory: each challenge shapes whether publics attribute institutional shortcomings to internal factors (the organization's choices and capacities) or external constraints (unavoidable political, judicial, or resource limitations).

For the EFCC, these dynamics create a complex attribution environment. The Commission operates within genuine constraints—Nigeria's slow judicial system, political interference in high-profile cases, resource limitations—yet also faces questions about internal effectiveness:

investigation quality, prosecution rigor, communication strategy, and commitment to enforcement regardless of political connections. Public perception depends on which attribution frame dominates: if Nigerians primarily attribute EFCC challenges to external constraints, legitimacy remains intact despite disappointing outcomes; if publics primarily make internal attributions, legitimacy erodes even when external constraints genuinely limit effectiveness.

This study investigates these attribution patterns by examining how PR professionals—expert observers of institutional communication and public narrative—perceive and explain EFCC's effectiveness challenges. By identifying whether internal or external attributions dominate professional discourse, the research illuminates the nature of EFCC's legitimacy challenge and suggests pathways for restoration.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Theoretical Approach

This study employs qualitative methodology using in-depth interviews to explore attribution patterns in public perceptions of EFCC effectiveness. Qualitative approaches are appropriate when research seeks to understand meaning-making processes, interpretive frameworks, and the nuanced reasoning behind perceptions rather than measuring perception frequencies across populations (Ogbona et al., 2016). Attribution theory, as this study's theoretical lens, requires understanding *how* individuals construct causal explanations—a process best illuminated through detailed conversation that allows probing of reasoning rather than preset survey response options.

Participant Selection and Justification

The study interviewed four public relations professionals in Lagos State selected through purposive sampling based on three rigorous criteria:

- Minimum 15 years of professional PR practice, ensuring extensive experience observing institutional communication strategies
- Current leadership roles within their organizations, indicating strategic-level expertise in perception management
- Demonstrated knowledge of EFCC operations and anti-corruption discourse, confirmed through a pilot survey assessing familiarity with recent EFCC cases, leadership transitions, and public controversies

Why PR professionals? Public relations practitioners are professional meaning-makers who analyze how institutions construct public narratives, how media frames institutional actions, and how publics interpret organizational behavior. Unlike general citizens whose perceptions may reflect limited information, PR professionals bring systematic expertise in analyzing perception dynamics. Unlike EFCC staff whose perspectives may be institutionally constrained, PR professionals offer informed external assessment. Unlike journalists who primarily report, PR professionals actively theorize about perception formation—making them ideal informants for attribution analysis.

Why Lagos? Lagos State, as Nigeria's commercial capital and media center, hosts the highest concentration of PR professionals and serves as a bellwether for professional opinion. EFCC maintains significant operations in Lagos, providing practitioners substantial exposure to the Commission's work. While limiting geography constrains generalizability, it enables depth: Lagos-based PR professionals encounter EFCC regularly in media coverage, professional networks, and client contexts.

Why only four respondents? In qualitative research, sample size appropriateness depends on information redundancy rather than statistical representation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Data saturation—the point where additional interviews yield diminishing new insights—guides sample adequacy. This study achieved saturation as themes became repetitive across respondents. All four participants, averaging 20 years of experience, provided remarkably consistent attribution patterns when assessing EFCC effectiveness. Rather than indicating inadequate sampling, this consistency suggests the study successfully identified dominant professional consensus about EFCC's perception challenges. Additional interviews would likely reinforce rather than challenge findings particularly given the homogeneity criterion (experienced Lagos PR professionals) deliberately sought shared professional perspective rather than demographic diversity.

Data Collection Process

Semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes each explored five thematic areas aligned with research questions: media coverage and public awareness of EFCC operations; effectiveness of EFCC communication strategies; perceptions of political case management; organizational and contextual challenges; and impact on public anti-corruption engagement. The interview guide provided structure while allowing flexibility to probe emerging themes and follow participant reasoning.

Respondents were pseudonymized (Respondent 1-4) to protect confidentiality while enabling attribution of perspectives. Interviews were recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis specifically attended to attribution patterns: when respondents explained EFCC challenges, did they emphasize internal organizational factors (investigative quality, commitment, competence) or external constraints (political interference, judicial delays, resource limitations)? How did these attributions connect to legitimacy judgments?

Study Limitations

This study's scope necessitates acknowledging limitations. Geographic limitation to Lagos constrains generalizability PR professionals in Abuja or Port Harcourt may hold different perspectives shaped by different EFCC exposure. Occupational homogeneity (all PR professionals) provides expert insight but excludes other relevant stakeholder perspectives: general citizens, EFCC staff, journalists, civil society activists, or political figures. The sample's demographic homogeneity (all male respondents) limits gender perspective representation. Additionally, the study captures perceptions at a specific moment (2024); EFCC perception may shift with leadership changes, high-profile cases, or policy reforms.

These limitations are acknowledged transparently not as methodological failures but as scope boundaries inherent in qualitative research. The study offers depth rather than breadth: rich insight into how experienced PR professionals attribute EFCC effectiveness challenges, providing a foundation for broader investigation.

FINDINGS: ATTRIBUTION PATTERNS IN PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTION

Interpretive Framework

Analysis of interview data reveals systematic attribution patterns illuminating how PR professionals assign causality to EFCC's performance challenges. Critically, respondents consistently attributed perceived ineffectiveness to internal organizational factors—investigative thoroughness, procedural diligence, conviction capacity, leadership quality—rather than primarily to external constraints. While acknowledging political interference and judicial delays, participants framed these as obstacles that a competent, committed institution should navigate effectively. This internal attribution dominance suggests professional consensus that EFCC's legitimacy challenges stem from controllable institutional choices rather than unavoidable environmental constraints.

Four dominant themes emerged, each revealing distinct attribution dynamics with implications for institutional legitimacy:

Theme 1: Leadership as Internal Attribution Driver

All four respondents identified leadership quality as the primary determinant of EFCC effectiveness, reflecting pure internal attribution. Respondent 1 explicitly contrasted eras: "During Nuhu Ribadu's tenure, the EFCC had teeth. You saw real fear among corrupt officials. But since then, it's been inconsistent. Leadership makes or breaks the Commission." This temporal comparison—attributing effectiveness variation to leadership changes rather than external factors remaining relatively constant—exemplifies internal attribution: the institution possesses capacity but requires proper stewardship to realize it.

Respondent 3 articulated this attribution explicitly: "The EFCC has the legal framework, the mandate, the resources. What varies is leadership will. When you have a chairman willing to pursue cases vigorously regardless of political pressure, you see results. When you have a chairman who's compromised or timid, corruption thrives." This statement reveals the attribution structure: resources and authority are *constant* (not attributed to external constraints), while outcomes *vary* based on leadership will—an internal, controllable factor.

Attribution Theory Insight: This emphasis on leadership quality reflects classic internal attribution—effectiveness depends on controllable organizational factors (leadership competence, strategic vision, moral courage) rather than external constraints. Such attribution creates high accountability standards: if leadership determines outcomes, then poor outcomes indict leadership directly. This attribution pattern explains why EFCC's frequent leadership transitions damage legitimacy cumulatively—each change reinforces the narrative that *internal* factors drive effectiveness more than external environment.

Theme 2: Selective Prosecution as Motivational Attribution

The perception of selective prosecution dominated respondents' assessment of EFCC legitimacy, representing the most damaging internal attribution because it imputes corrupt motivation rather than mere incompetence. Respondent 2 stated bluntly: "Everyone knows the EFCC goes after political enemies while protecting the ruling party. It's not about evidence; it's about who's in power." Respondent 4 echoed this: "When we see former governors prosecuted only after their successors take office, not while they're in power despite public knowledge of corruption, we know it's political theater, not justice."

Critically, respondents acknowledged political pressure as reality but attributed selective enforcement to EFCC's compliance choices. Respondent 2: "Yes, politicians interfere—that's Nigeria. But the EFCC *chooses* to bend. Other agencies resist more. The EFCC's problem isn't just external pressure; it's internal weakness in withstanding that pressure." This quote exemplifies how even when external constraints are recognized, attribution can remain internal if the institution is perceived as having agency to resist.

The Yahya Bello case emerged repeatedly as emblematic. The former Kogi State governor's alleged N80 billion money laundering, coupled with his apparent ability to evade arrest despite EFCC statements, crystallized perceptions of selective enforcement. Respondent 3: "If a regular citizen was accused of stealing that much, they'd be in custody immediately. But Bello remains free. That tells you everything about who the EFCC can touch and who they can't—or won't."

Attribution Theory Insight: Selective enforcement perceptions generate particularly toxic internal attributions because they suggest not just organizational weakness but corrupt collusion. Rather than attributing failed prosecutions to unavoidable external constraints, respondents attributed them to EFCC's calculated choices serving political masters. This attribution pattern is nearly impossible to reverse through communication alone—only consistent, visibly impartial enforcement regardless of political connections can shift these attributions.

Theme 3: Conviction Rates as Outcome-Based Attribution

Respondents consistently emphasized conviction rates over investigative or prosecutorial activity, reflecting outcome-based rather than process-based attribution. Respondent 3 stated: "I don't care how many people they arrest or how much they recover if convictions don't follow. Show me jail time. Show me assets permanently confiscated. Anything else is theater." This orientation creates exceptionally high accountability standards—effectiveness requires tangible, irreversible consequences for corrupt actors.

Plea bargaining emerged as particularly problematic for legitimacy. Respondent 2: "When someone steals billions and then plea bargains to return a fraction and walk free, that's not justice. That's negotiation. It tells other corrupt officials that consequences are negotiable." The concern extends beyond specific cases to institutional messaging: plea bargains signal that outcomes depend on resources to hire lawyers and negotiate, not on evidence of guilt—undermining equal justice principles.

Respondent 1 connected conviction failures to EFCC's internal capacity: "The problem starts with premature arrests they grab headlines arresting someone before the investigation is complete. Then in court, the case falls apart because evidence is weak. That's not judicial delays; that's poor investigative work." This attribution locates responsibility squarely within EFCC's procedural choices rather than external judicial constraints.

Attribution Theory Insight: Outcome-based attribution creates binary accountability—success requires demonstrable results (convictions, permanent asset loss), while intermediate achievements (investigations, arrests, asset freezes) don't generate legitimacy credit. This attribution structure disadvantages EFCC because many outcomes depend on judicial processes beyond Commission control. Yet publics don't adjust expectations for external constraints; they hold EFCC responsible for end results. The solution requires either improving actual conviction rates through better investigation/prosecution or successfully shifting public attribution from outcomes to processes EFCC controls a difficult communication challenge.

Theme 4: Communication as Missed Opportunity

As communication professionals, respondents evaluated EFCC's public communication strategy with particular scrutiny, identifying it as both a current weakness and potential leverage point. Respondent 4 noted media presence: "The EFCC is active on social media, they issue press releases, they're visible. That's good. But visibility without substance creates backlash. Announcing arrests is easy; explaining why prosecutions stall is hard. They do the former, avoid the latter."

Respondent 1 identified a missed communication opportunity: "The EFCC faces real constraints—judicial delays, political interference, legal technicalities. But they don't explain these transparently. When a high-profile case collapses, they stay silent. That silence lets the worst narrative fill the void: that they're incompetent or complicit." This observation highlights how absent communication defaults publics to internal attribution, while transparent communication about genuine constraints could enable more external attribution.

However, respondents also recognized communication limitations. Respondent 3: "They can't just communicate their way out of selective enforcement. If the actions are political, no amount of PR fixes that. Communication helps at the margins, but fundamental legitimacy requires fundamental reform." This realistic assessment acknowledges that while better communication might shift attributions somewhat, action changes matter more than narrative changes.

Attribution Theory Insight: Communication shapes attribution by providing frameworks for interpreting institutional behavior. Transparent communication about external constraints can shift attribution from internal to external IF the institution is perceived as credible. EFCC's legitimacy deficit means even honest communication about constraints faces skepticism: publics may interpret explanations as excuses. This creates a chicken-egg problem: EFCC needs legitimacy to make its communication credible, but needs credible communication to build legitimacy. Breaking this cycle requires pairing communication improvements with

visible action changes—pursuing high-profile political cases consistently, explaining case outcomes transparently, and demonstrating procedural independence.

Cross-Theme Synthesis: The Internal Attribution Trap

Across all four themes, a striking pattern emerges: respondents predominantly make internal attributions when explaining EFCC's effectiveness challenges. They attribute problems to controllable organizational factors—leadership quality, enforcement choices, procedural rigor, communication strategy—more than to uncontrollable external constraints. Even when acknowledging external pressures like political interference or judicial delays, respondents frame effective institutions as ones that navigate constraints successfully rather than succumbing to them.

This internal attribution dominance has profound implications for EFCC's legitimacy crisis. Attribution theory suggests that internal attributions create higher accountability and lower tolerance for failure than external attributions. When publics attribute an institution's shortcomings to external forces beyond its control, disappointment may occur but legitimacy remains intact—the institution tried but faced insurmountable obstacles. When publics attribute shortcomings to internal choices and capacities, legitimacy erodes directly—the institution had the ability to succeed but chose not to or lacked competence.

For EFCC, this means the legitimacy challenge is fundamentally about perceived organizational choice and capability, not just environmental constraints. Rebuilding legitimacy requires demonstrating different choices (enforcing impartially regardless of politics, investigating thoroughly before arresting, communicating transparently) and improved capabilities (securing convictions, resisting political pressure, managing public narrative effectively). Communication strategies alone cannot restore legitimacy; they must accompany substantive operational changes that address the internal factors to which publics attribute EFCC's current struggles.

DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

Theoretical Contributions: Attribution Theory in Anti-Corruption Contexts

This study extends attribution theory into anti-corruption institutional contexts, revealing how attribution patterns shape legitimacy in politically contested enforcement environments. While attribution theory has been extensively applied to individual behavior and interpersonal dynamics, its application to public institutions particularly those operating in complex political environments like anti-corruption agencies remains underexplored. This research demonstrates that attribution theory powerfully illuminates public perception dynamics for institutions facing inherent tensions between political embeddedness and independence imperatives.

The finding that internal attributions dominate professional perception even when external constraints are acknowledged—suggests an important theoretical insight: for institutions with enforcement mandates, publics apply higher attribution standards than for service-delivery institutions. Citizens may accept external attribution (budget constraints, policy limitations) for why a health clinic lacks equipment, but apply internal attribution (lack of will, corrupt

collusion) for why an anti-corruption agency fails to prosecute. This differential attribution standard reflects reasonable public logic: enforcement institutions are precisely designed to overcome resistance and navigate obstacles. When they fail, publics question commitment and competence, not environmental constraints.

The study also reveals attribution's dynamic character. Respondents' temporal comparisons—Ribadu era versus subsequent leadership—demonstrate that attribution can shift based on institutional performance history. Success generates external attribution for failures (the institution is competent but faces constraints) while failure patterns generate internal attribution (the institution lacks capacity or commitment). This suggests attribution is not fixed but responsive to track record, offering institutions a pathway to shift public attribution through sustained performance improvement.

Practical Implications: Pathways for Legitimacy Restoration

The dominance of internal attribution in professional perception suggests that EFCC's legitimacy restoration requires addressing perceived organizational weaknesses more than explaining external constraints. Three strategic priorities emerge:

1. Visible Impartiality in High-Profile Cases. The selective enforcement attribution—most damaging because it imputes corrupt motivation—can only be countered through consistent, courageous prosecution regardless of political connections. One highly visible case where EFCC successfully prosecutes a ruling-party official would shift public attribution more effectively than numerous lower-profile convictions. The Commission must identify cases where evidence is strong, political protection is evident, and public attention is high, then pursue them with unwavering determination. Success requires leadership willing to risk political retaliation for legitimacy gains.

2. Conviction Quality Over Quantity. The outcome-based attribution pattern revealed in this study means EFCC should prioritize conviction rates over arrest numbers. This requires reversing the current sequence: investigate thoroughly *before* arresting, build airtight cases before prosecuting, and accept that fewer high-quality prosecutions generate more legitimacy than numerous failed cases. The current practice of premature arrests for publicity, followed by prosecutorial collapse, reinforces internal attribution of incompetence. Patient, meticulous investigation may generate less immediate media attention but produces sustainable legitimacy through conviction success.

3. Transparent Communication About Constraints and Choices. While communication alone cannot restore legitimacy, transparency about both constraints and choices can partially shift attribution from purely internal to more balanced. EFCC should communicate proactively about: (a) specific legal and procedural obstacles in stalled cases, (b) resource and capacity limitations affecting investigation timelines, (c) judicial delays with case-specific examples, and (d) criteria for case selection and prioritization. Crucially, this communication must acknowledge EFCC's agency—explaining choices made, not just constraints faced—to maintain credibility. The goal is not excuse-making but building public understanding of enforcement complexity while demonstrating institutional accountability.

COMPARING EFCC TO INTERNATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION AGENCIES

EFCC's legitimacy challenges are not unique—anti-corruption agencies globally struggle with perceptions of political selectivity and effectiveness doubts. Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), often cited as successful, achieved legitimacy through three factors directly relevant to this study's findings: absolute leadership commitment to impartiality, high conviction rates from meticulous investigation, and transparent public communication about processes and outcomes. Similarly, Singapore's Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau maintains legitimacy partly through willingness to prosecute senior officials regardless of political consequences.

These comparative examples suggest that EFCC's challenges, while acute in Nigeria's political context, reflect universal dynamics of anti-corruption enforcement. The attribution patterns identified in this study likely apply beyond Nigeria: publics globally tend toward internal attribution when enforcement agencies fail to prosecute powerful actors, because the agencies' core mandate is precisely to overcome resistance. This universality suggests both the difficulty of EFCC's task and the potential applicability of strategies that have worked elsewhere—particularly around demonstrating independence through high-profile political prosecutions.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study's limitations, acknowledged in methodology, suggest productive future research directions. Geographic expansion beyond Lagos would test whether attribution patterns identified here hold nationwide or reflect capital-centric perspectives. Occupational diversification—interviewing general citizens, EFCC staff, journalists, civil society activists—would reveal whether PR professionals' attributions align with or diverge from other stakeholders. Longitudinal research tracking attribution changes following EFCC reforms or leadership transitions would illuminate attribution's responsiveness to performance. Quantitative surveys could measure attribution pattern prevalence across Nigerian regions and demographics, complementing this study's qualitative depth with breadth.

Additionally, future research could investigate attribution asymmetry: do publics apply different attribution standards to EFCC versus other Nigerian institutions? Comparative analysis of attribution patterns for EFCC, ICPC, police, and judiciary would reveal whether enforcement institutions face uniquely stringent internal attribution or whether this reflects broader public skepticism toward all government institutions. Such research would clarify whether EFCC's legitimacy challenge is institution-specific or symptom of systemic trust deficits.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated public perception of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission through attribution theory's lens, revealing that professional observers predominantly attribute EFCC's effectiveness challenges to internal organizational factors—leadership quality, enforcement choices, investigative rigor, conviction capacity—rather than primarily to

external constraints. This internal attribution pattern creates acute legitimacy challenges because it holds the Commission directly accountable for outcomes, with limited tolerance for failure regardless of environmental obstacles.

Four dominant attribution themes emerged: leadership as the primary effectiveness driver (pure internal attribution); selective prosecution as evidence of corrupt collusion (motivational internal attribution); conviction rates as the definitive success metric (outcome-based attribution); and communication as missed opportunity (attribution-shaping potential). Across all themes, respondents framed EFCC as an institution with adequate legal mandate, resources, and authority but lacking will, competence, or courage to deploy these assets impartially. This framing places legitimacy restoration squarely within EFCC's control—requiring better leadership, courageous prosecution of political figures, improved conviction rates through meticulous investigation, and transparent communication about processes and outcomes.

The research contributes both theoretically—extending attribution theory into anti-corruption institutional contexts—and practically—identifying specific perception dynamics that EFCC must address for legitimacy restoration. The finding that internal attribution dominates even when external constraints are acknowledged suggests that merely explaining difficulties will not restore public trust. EFCC must demonstrate different organizational choices: pursuing high-profile political corruption regardless of political consequences, prioritizing conviction quality over arrest publicity, and communicating transparently about both constraints and decisions.

Ultimately, this study reveals that EFCC's legitimacy crisis stems not from public ignorance of enforcement challenges but from public judgment that the Commission inadequately addresses controllable weaknesses. Nigerians understand that EFCC faces political interference, judicial delays, and resource constraints—but they expect a credible anti-corruption agency to navigate these obstacles more successfully than EFCC currently demonstrates. Closing this expectation-performance gap requires fundamental organizational reform aligned with the attribution patterns identified in this research: impartial leadership, courageous enforcement, meticulous investigation, and transparent communication. Only through sustained performance addressing these internally-attributed weaknesses can EFCC begin shifting public perception from an institution that chooses selective enforcement to one genuinely constrained by Nigeria's political realities but determined to fulfill its mandate within those constraints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority Recommendations for EFCC Leadership

Recommendation 1: Identify and Prosecute High-Profile Political Corruption Cases

Evidence Base: Respondents across interviews identified selective enforcement as the most damaging perception undermining legitimacy.

Action Steps: EFCC leadership should identify 2-3 cases involving currently powerful political figures where evidence is strong, then prosecute vigorously regardless of political pressure. Success in even one such case would demonstrate independence more effectively

than numerous convictions of politically weak defendants. This requires: (a) securing evidence-based cases before initiating prosecution, (b) communicating case progress publicly to build transparency, (c) protecting investigation teams from political interference, and (d) accepting that career consequences may follow for leadership demonstrating courage.

Recommendation 2: Implement 'Investigate-Then-Arrest' Protocol

Evidence Base: Multiple respondents criticized premature arrests that generate publicity but result in prosecutorial failure, reinforcing incompetence attribution.

Action Steps: Reverse the current arrest-then-investigate sequence. Complete thorough investigation, assemble evidence that legal team confirms meets conviction standards, then make arrests. This protocol may reduce short-term publicity but will increase conviction rates—the metric publics use for effectiveness assessment. Implement internal review process where legal team must approve arrest warrants based on evidence sufficiency, not publicity potential.

Recommendation 3: Establish Quarterly Transparent Reporting

Evidence Base: Communication professionals identified transparency as both current weakness and potential attribution-shifting tool.

Action Steps: Publish quarterly public reports detailing: (a) investigations initiated, (b) prosecutions filed, (c) convictions secured, (d) cases dismissed with reasons, (e) specific constraints faced (judicial delays, legal technicalities, evidence limitations), and (f) systemic recommendations for judicial or legal reform. This transparency serves two functions: demonstrating accountability for organizational choices and illuminating genuine constraints beyond EFCC control, potentially enabling more balanced attribution.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Prosecution Capacity Through Training and Recruitment

Evidence Base: Low conviction rates attributed to poor investigative and prosecutorial quality, not just external judicial delays.

Action Steps: Invest in specialized training for investigators on financial crimes evidence requirements. Recruit experienced prosecutors from private sector if necessary to strengthen legal team. Establish mentorship program pairing junior investigators with experienced anti-corruption professionals. Create performance metrics emphasizing conviction rate over arrest numbers.

Recommendations for Federal Government and Judiciary

Recommendation 5: Establish Specialized Anti-Corruption Courts

Rationale: While EFCC faces internal challenges, judicial delays genuinely constrain effectiveness. Specialized courts with dedicated judges, accelerated procedures, and corruption-specific expertise would address systemic bottleneck.

Recommendation 6: Legislate EFCC Leadership Tenure Protection

Rationale: Frequent leadership transitions undermine institutional consistency. Legislative protection for EFCC chairmanship—fixed term, removal only for cause with judicial review—would insulate leadership from political pressure and enable long-term institutional development.

Final Word: Attribution patterns revealed in this study demonstrate that EFCC's legitimacy restoration requires addressing internally-attributed weaknesses more urgently than explaining external constraints. The Commission possesses legal authority, institutional resources, and public attention. What it must demonstrate is will—the courage to prosecute powerful actors, the competence to secure convictions, and the integrity to operate transparently. These are organizational choices within EFCC's control. Until the Commission demonstrates different choices, public attribution will remain internal, legitimacy will remain fragile, and Nigeria's anti-corruption fight will remain constrained not by what EFCC cannot do, but by what it has not yet chosen to do.

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