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CULTURAL NORMS AND CORRUPTION IN MALAYSIA'S CIVIL SERVICE: A NEW INSTITUTIONAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Thesis submitted in fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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CONFIRMATION BY PANEL OF EXAMINERS

I certify that a Panel of Examiners has met on 6 May 2026 to conduct the final examination of Farhana on her Master of Arts thesis entitled "Cultural Norms and Corruption In Malaysia's Civil Service: A New Institutional Theory Perspective" in accordance with Universiti Teknologi MARA Act 1976 (Akta 173). The Panel of Examiners recommends that the student be awarded the relevant degree. The Panel of Examiners was as follows:

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I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Teknologi MARA. It is original and is the results of my own work, unless otherwise indicated or acknowledged as referenced work. This thesis has not been submitted to any other academic institution or non-academic institution for any degree or qualification.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the existence of extensive anti-corruption frameworks in Malaysia, corruption continues to persist within the civil service, indicating weaknesses not only in regulation but also in policy implementation. Although institutions such as the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission and ministry-level integrity units have been strengthened, corruption-related outcomes remain inconsistent, reflected in fluctuating Corruption Perceptions Index scores and limited disciplinary action against misconduct. Existing reform approaches often emphasise formal rules and institutional mechanisms while overlooking the influence of informal cultural norms on everyday bureaucratic behaviour. This research addresses a critical gap in the literature, which lacks empirical investigation into the mechanisms through which cultural norms influence civil servants' daily interpretations of integrity, corruption, and compliance within bureaucratic settings. This study examines how cultural norms shape civil servants' interpretations of integrity, influence anti-corruption efforts, and affect policy compliance within Malaysia's civil service. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 informants selected through purposive sampling across enforcement, administrative, integrity, and policy-related positions. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by New Institutional Theory. The study focuses on the Malaysian civil service between 2013 and 2025, with emphasis placed on lived experiences and institutional practices. Findings show that while corruption is formally understood as a violation of rules, it may be culturally rationalised in practice. Addressing the question of how norms influence civil servants' perceptions, findings imply that practices such as gift-giving and favouritism are legitimised through narratives of obligation, loyalty, and social harmony. Regarding the question of how they support or undermine anti-corruption initiatives, findings suggest that cultural norms create an ethical landscape in which compliance becomes largely symbolic. In terms of policy compliance, they may substantially influence the patterns of compliance, generating a persistent gap between policy design and bureaucratic practice. This study critiques technocratic, one-size-fits-all reform models and concludes that sustainable integrity cannot be legislated into existence in isolation from cultural realities. Instead, anti-corruption strategies must engage with the informal cultural and institutional dynamics that shape administrative behaviour. This study contributes to the understanding of corruption as a socio-institutional phenomenon and highlights the importance of culturally informed reform approaches in strengthening integrity and compliance within public administration.

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Abbreviations

CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
GTP	Government Transformation Plan
HI	Historical Institutionalism
INTAN	National Institute of Public Administration
JPA	Public Service Department
MACC	Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission
NIP	National Integrity Plan
NIT	New Institutional Theory
RCI	Rational Choice Institutionalism
SI	Sociological Institutionalism
UNCAC	United Nations Convention against Corruption
WPA	Whistleblower Protection Act 2010

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Corruption remains a persistent ethical challenge affecting both developed and developing nations (Rose-Ackerman, 2016). It undermines economic development, erodes public trust, and weakens institutional effectiveness. In many developing countries, corruption has become institutionalised, persisting despite extensive reform efforts. Malaysia exemplifies this paradox. Despite establishing robust anti-corruption institutions like the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), introducing comprehensive legislative frameworks, and implementing successive reform agendas, corruption continues to permeate the civil service (Hairuzzaki et al., 2024; Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Jones, 2022). Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) indicates Malaysia has failed to achieve sustained improvements as scores fluctuate between 47 and 52 (out of 100) over the past decade. This signals a disconnect between formal institutional design and implementation outcomes, suggesting that the presence of rules and enforcement alone does not guarantee compliance.

The prevailing scholarship in Malaysia has largely focused on institutional and legal remedies. Numerous studies documented weaknesses such as political interference, limited prosecutorial independence, fragmented oversight, and inadequate whistleblower protection (Gomez, 2024; Quah, 2022; Sharija, 2020; Khoo, 2005). Consequently, policy responses have prioritised strengthening enforcement agencies, enhancing penalties, and expanding regulatory oversight. While such reforms are necessary, empirical evidence suggests they are insufficient. High-profile prosecutions coexist with routine low-level corruption and strict codes of conduct operate alongside nepotistic practices. This indicates that corruption is not merely a consequence of weak institutions but is also shaped by informal and often unseen socio-cultural dynamics that influence how rules are interpreted and applied in practice.

This paradox has intensified scholarly interest in the interaction between formal institutions and informal norms. New Institutional Theory (NIT) conceptualises institutions as a combination of both formal rules, such as laws, regulations, and procedures and informal constraints, including customs, traditions, and social norms. Scholars argue that institutional change is unlikely to be effective when formal rules are misaligned with deeply embedded norms guiding everyday behaviour. In such a context, compliance may become symbolic, selective, or strategically negotiated rather than substantive. NIT therefore provides a valuable framework for explaining why reforms that appear coherent and robust on paper frequently fail to produce behavioural change within bureaucratic organisations.

The internationalisation of governance norms has further intensified this tension. Global actors promote universal principles of transparency, accountability, and rule of law, yet these principles do not always resonate seamlessly with local socio-cultural realities (Muhammad Safuan, 2023; Jones, 2022). In Southeast Asian contexts, hierarchical authority, kinship obligations, and communal loyalty remain salient forces. When global anti-corruption norms are implemented without adequate consideration of local cultural logics, reforms risk being perceived as externally imposed, procedurally burdensome, or socially insensitive. Reform legitimacy and effectiveness may consequently be undermined.

Cultural norms refer to shared values, expectations, and behavioural patterns that shape perceptions of acceptable conduct. For analytical purposes, this study distinguishes three interrelated norm types drawn from social norm theory (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Descriptive norms refer to patterns of behaviour that are commonplace within a social group. This manifests as what civil servants observe others doing in practice, such as facilitating informal requests from superiors or extending preferential access to co-ethnic peers. Injunctive norms refer to behaviours that members of a group approve of or expect to be approved, capturing the moral dimension of social pressure, for instance, the expectation that loyalty to one's superior or kin group constitutes virtuous conduct even when it conflicts with formal regulations. Institutionalised norms are norms so deeply embedded in organisational routines and administrative culture that they operate largely below conscious awareness, structuring how roles, obligations, and discretion are understood within the civil service. In Malaysia, norms such as respect for hierarchy, reciprocal obligations, group loyalty, and deference to authority manifest across all three registers. Practices such as gift-giving, favouritism, and informal assistance may be simultaneously commonplace (descriptive), socially sanctioned (injunctive) and embedded in administrative habit (institutionalised), even when they contravene formal ethical regulations. Within the civil service, these norm types interact with formal institutional rules in ways that can either reinforce or undermine compliance, depending on how they are interpreted and enacted in specific administrative contexts.

The Malaysian civil service therefore represents a complex institutional environment where formal rules coexist with powerful informal expectations. Civil servants may experience tension between adhering to formal regulations and meeting cultural expectations that govern loyalty and reciprocity, potentially blurring the boundary between ethical support and corrupt favouritism. Deference to authority may discourage whistleblowing while ethnic and familial affiliations may complicate bureaucratic neutrality. Previous studies have shown that patronage networks and political clientelism are often rationalised through cultural narratives of loyalty and obligation rather than overtly criminal intent (Mohd Rusydi & Muhammad Hariz, 2023).

Despite these insights, existing research tends to treat cultural norms as static background variables rather than dynamic forces interacting with institutional structures. Most studies document the presence of cultural practices or evaluate formal anti-corruption mechanisms in isolation, but few examine how civil servants interpret, negotiate and reconcile these competing pressures in their daily work. Moreover, the literature frequently homogenises “Malaysian culture” without sufficiently accounting for variation across organisational levels, professional roles, or institutional contexts within the civil service.

Accordingly, three interrelated research gaps exist. First, there is limited empirical understanding of the mechanisms through which cultural norms influence civil servants’ perceptions and behaviours regarding corruption. Second, insufficient attention has been paid to examine how cultural norms interact with formal institutional rules to enable or constrain reform effectiveness. Third, little is known about how these norms vary across hierarchical and organisational contexts within the Malaysian civil service.

Addressing these gaps is important both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it advances understanding of institutional dynamics in non-Western contexts by examining how culture and institutions co-evolve. Practically, reforms that overlook cultural logic risk addressing symptoms rather than underlying causes, thereby limiting their long-term effectiveness. Understanding how civil servants interpret integrity, obligation, and compliance is therefore essential for designing reforms that are both institutionally robust and socially legitimate.

In response, this study examines how cultural norms within the Malaysian civil service influence perceptions and behaviours related to corruption and anti-corruption reforms. Building on established corruption typologies (Transparency International, 2023; Rose-Ackerman, 2016; Johnston, 2005), this study examines both grand corruption at senior administrative levels and petty corruption in routine bureaucratic interactions. This distinction is critical for understanding how cultural norms operate differently across hierarchical contexts, a gap identified in existing literature that often homogenises “Malaysian culture” without accounting for variation across organisational levels. Through qualitative inquiry grounded in NIT, it explores how informal institutional structures interact with formal institutional structures to shape compliance behaviour. By foregrounding lived experience and meaning-making processes, the study seeks to generate culturally grounded insights capable of informing more effective and sustainable anti-corruption strategies.

1.2 Problem Statement

Effective governance in modern civil services requires institutional frameworks that not only establish formal rules and enforcement mechanisms but also align with practical contexts. International best practices suggest that successful anti-corruption efforts combine robust structures with strategies that address informal norms and values shaping everyday bureaucratic behaviour (Rose-Ackerman, 2016; Lipsky, 2010). Ideally, anti-corruption reforms, including legal frameworks, oversight bodies, and integrity units are expected to reduce unethical behaviour by fostering transparent and accountable systems in which compliance is both mandated and internalised.

However, Malaysia’s civil service continues to exhibit a persistent gap between anti-corruption efforts and their outcomes. Despite the establishment of the MACC, the implementation of multiple institutional reforms such as the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019-2023 and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2024-2028 as well as the creation of integrity units across ministries, corruption remains entrenched. More revealing are recent government figures indicating that integrity units received 5,474 complaints between January and April

2025, yet only 930 cases resulted in disciplinary actions under the Public Officers (Conduct and Discipline) Regulations 1993 (The Star, November 2025). This conversion rate of approximately 17 percent suggests that while formal mechanisms exist, they operate within a context that constrains their effectiveness.

Anti-corruption policies function as formal instruments for managing and preventing corruption. Nevertheless, regulations aimed at curbing unethical behaviours often require broader structural change through reform processes that influence not only rules and procedures but also organisational values and behavioural expectations. Existing research on corruption has largely examined the issue through two dominant perspectives, institutional and cultural. Institutional scholarship focuses on governance mechanisms, legal frameworks, and enforcement capacity; whereas cultural perspectives highlight societal norms, values, and informal networks. Although scholars acknowledge that socio-cultural practices such as *duit kopi* (coffee money), forbearance within social groups, and hierarchical deference may normalise certain corrupt behaviours, relatively few studies have examined how these cultural norms specifically interact with formal anti-corruption frameworks to shape civil servants' daily practices and patterns of policy compliance (Jones, 2022; Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014). The substantial volume of complaints received by integrity units, averaging more than 1,300 cases per month in early 2025, indicates that misconduct and ethical violations remain deeply embedded within civil service operations. This raises the question of whether institutional mechanisms alone are sufficient to address behaviours rooted in cultural norms and informal practices. Consequently, this gap helps explain why reforms that appear sound on paper, such as integrity units with clearly defined mandates and procedures, continue to produce limited enforcement outcomes in practice.

This study therefore investigates the mismatch between Malaysia's institutional anti-corruption efforts and their outcomes by examining how cultural norms shape the effectiveness of these reforms within the civil service. Applying NIT as the analytical framework, this research explores the interaction between institutional and cultural factors in shaping compliance behaviour. As articulated by Syed Hussein Alatas (1968), the application of Western governance standards through international policy transfers may lead the government to prioritise formal institutional adoption at the expense of local social enforcement mechanisms. Similarly, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1985) emphasised that public administration is shaped not only by rational decision-making but also by historical trajectories, political pressures, and socially embedded expectations. When reforms confront deeply rooted cultural norms, resistance and selective enforcement may emerge. NIT therefore provides a suitable framework for examining this interaction, offering deeper insight into why corruption persists despite sustained reform efforts and how future initiatives might better account for socio-cultural realities.

Corruption has wide-ranging social, political, and economic implications for Malaysia. Socially, persistent corruption erodes public confidence and trust in government institutions, potentially leading to reduced civic engagement, weakened accountability demands and broader social disillusionment. Politically, corruption enables wealth and influence to distort decision-making processes, undermining the rule of law through manipulation and weakening democratic institutions. Economically, corruption compromises foreign investment, constrains business growth and undermines public service delivery. When bribery and favouritism influence procurement and contract allocation, the integrity of employment practices and administrative responsibilities may be compromised. This may deteriorate service quality and compromise public safety, as illustrated by unsafe infrastructure projects that require costly reconstruction. The 2025 integrity unit data represent only a partial snapshot of corruption, as many cases may remain unreported due to fear of retaliation or the social acceptance of certain practices. If cultural norms function as barriers to effective reforms, addressing them becomes essential for achieving sustainable governance outcomes. Understanding how cultural dynamics and institutional structures interact to sustain corruption is therefore critical, particularly when evidence suggests that formal reporting and enforcement mechanisms operate within cultural contexts that limit their effectiveness.

1.3 Research Questions

This study examines how cultural norms and institutional pressures interact to shape corruption perceptions, policy compliance, and reform outcomes within Malaysian public administration. Guided by this focus, the study addresses the following research questions:

a) How do cultural norms influence Malaysian civil servants' perceptions of and behaviours towards corruption?
b) In what ways do cultural norms support or undermine the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms in the Malaysian civil service?
c) How does the interaction between cultural norms and formal institutional structures shape patterns of policy compliance among Malaysian civil servants?.

1.4 Research Objectives

In addressing the research questions, this study pursues the following objectives:

a) To examine how cultural norms influence Malaysian civil servants' perceptions of and behaviours towards corruption.
b) To identify the ways in which cultural norms support or undermine the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms in the Malaysian civil service.
c) To analyse how cultural norms interact with formal institutional rules in shaping patterns of policy compliance among Malaysian civil servants.

1.5 Scope of Study

This study investigates why anti-corruption reforms in Malaysia often produce uneven output and outcomes despite sustained policy commitment. Rather than treating culture as a fixed or deterministic variable, the research conceptualises cultural norms as dynamic, evolving shared understandings that guide behaviour within bureaucratic settings. The scope of the study focuses on how these norms shape civil servants' perceptions of corruption and their responses to formal institutional counter-measures within the Malaysian civil service.

The study applies New Institutional Theory (NIT) as its primary analytical framework to examine the interaction between formal institutional structures and informal cultural practice. Specifically, it integrates three complementary strands as analytical lenses: Historical Institutionalism to trace the evolution of norms over time; Sociological Institutionalism to examine how norms are socially constructed and legitimised within organisational contexts; and Rational Choice Institutionalism to analyse how civil servants navigate cultural expectations within strategic contexts and incentive-based environments. The study does not engage deeply with alternative frameworks such as Principal-Agent Theory or Good Governance models, as these fall outside its analytical focus.

Temporally, the study is bound between 2013 and 2025, a period characterised by significant political transitions, governance reforms, and renewed anti-corruption initiatives in Malaysia. This timeframe allows the study to capture changes in institutional arrangements and evolving perceptions of integrity within the civil service. The research does not involve longitudinal tracking of individual participants, nor does it aim to produce predictive forecasts beyond identifying emergent trends and patterns.

Geographically, the research is limited to five urban administrative centres. These sites are selected to provide insight into bureaucratic environments where formal rules, organisational hierarchies and cultural expectations intersect most visibly. The study does not conduct detailed agency-level case studies or cross-national comparisons, as such approaches would exceed the scope and resources of a master’s level investigation.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach, combining semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The primary unit of analysis is civil servants’ perceptions, interpretations, and everyday practices related to cultural norms, corruption, and anti-corruption measures. Primary data are derived from interviews with 20 informants across multiple hierarchical levels, ranging from operational staff to senior management, to capture variation in how cultural norms operate across bureaucratic ranks. This sample size aligns with qualitative research guidelines (Wutich et al., 2024), suggesting that approximately 20 informants are sufficient to achieve thematic saturation and analytical consistency.

Secondary data consists of official government reports, MACC publications, Transparency International assessments and relevant policy documents. These materials provide contextual depth, reveal institutional trends and support data triangulation. A purposive sampling strategy is employed to ensure the selection of information-rich participants and credible documentary sources. The study does not employ large-scale surveys, experimental designs, quantitative statistical modeling, or ethnographic observation, as these methods are less suited for examining the nuanced, context-dependent nature of cultural norms and meaning-making processes within bureaucratic settings.

1.6 Significance of Study

This research addresses the gap between anti-corruption reforms intentions and actual outcomes within Malaysia’s civil service. By examining the misalignment between cultural norms and formal institutional rules, the study offers meaningful contributions at the theoretical, practical, methodological, and societal levels.

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

This study contributes to public administration and anti-corruption scholarships in three key ways.

First, it addresses a gap in existing literature that often treats culture and institutions as analytically separate dimensions. By conceptualising cultural norms as dynamic shared understandings rather than static traits, the study challenges institutional-centric approaches and demonstrates how norms actively shape civil servants’ interpretations of anti-corruption policies. Grounded in NIT, the research demonstrates how cultural norms and formal rules are mutually constitutive, shaping how civil servants interpret and respond to anti-corruption policies in practice.

Second, the study bridges micro-level behavioural analysis with macro-level institutional reform discourse by revealing the meso-level dynamics within bureaucratic organisations. While prior studies tend to focus either on individual misconduct or systemic institutional failures, this research shows how cultural norms operate within organisational contexts to mediate individual behaviour and reform implementation. In doing so, it develops a conceptual framework explaining why identical anti-corruption policies produce divergent outcomes across different institutional and cultural settings.

Third, the study refines understanding of corruption persistence by distinguishing between surface compliance and embedded resistance. Surface compliance refers to formal adherence to rules and procedures, while embedded resistance reflects culturally embedded practices that subtly undermine reform effectiveness. This distinction offers a more precise analytical lens for diagnosing why reforms fail despite apparent compliance with formal anti-corruption measures.

1.6.2 Practical and Policy Significance

The findings offer practical insights for addressing Malaysia's governance challenges within the civil service. For policymakers and enforcement agencies such as the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), National Institute of Public Administration (*Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara*, INTAN) and the Public Service Department (*Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam*, JPA), the study helps explain why anti-corruption policies often fail to translate into behavioural change. By revealing how norms related to loyalty, reciprocity, and hierarchy deference shape perceptions of corruption, the findings support the design of culturally informed training programmes and policy instruments that are better aligned with bureaucratic realities.

For institutional reform initiatives, this research provides a diagnostic perspective that enables public administration leaders to assess the degree of alignment between cultural norms and formal institutions before implementing reforms. Rather than relying on imported best practices that overlook local contexts, agencies can tailor anti-corruption strategies that resonate with civil servants' lived experiences while simultaneously challenging norms that enable corrupt behaviour. Such an approach increases the likelihood of sustainable reform by narrowing the gap between policy intent and policy implementation.

For public accountability mechanisms, the study offers insights for civil society organisations and watchdog groups seeking to strengthen integrity advocacy. By understanding cultural narratives that normalise certain corrupt practices, reform initiatives can be framed using culturally legitimate arguments rather than externally imposed ethical standards. This enhances the credibility and social acceptance of anti-corruption efforts, thereby strengthening public engagement and accountability.

1.6.3 Methodological Significance

Methodologically, the study develops an analytical framework that systematically operationalises the interaction between cultural norms and institutional rules, an interaction frequently acknowledged but rarely examined in corruption research. By explicitly linking cultural interpretations with institutional structures, this framework offers a structured approach for analysing how informal norms shape compliance behaviour within bureaucratic settings. This methodological contribution provides a useful reference for scholars investigating similar cultural-institutional mismatches in other governance domains, including regulatory compliance and public service delivery.

1.6.4 Societal and Economic Impact

At a societal level, this research contributes to Malaysia's development trajectory by addressing corruption's adverse effects on social trust, economic performance, and governance quality. By demonstrating how corruption becomes culturally embedded rather than culturally predetermined, the study reframes anti-corruption reform at both feasible and locally grounded levels. It validates public concerns about corruption's persistence while offering evidence-based pathways toward meaningful and sustainable reform efforts. In doing so, the study underscores the importance of addressing cultural dynamics alongside institutional reforms in promoting long-term social equity and economic resilience.

1.7 Definition of Terms and Terminologies

The following terms and terminologies are central to this study.

1.7.1 Cultural Norms

Cultural norms refer to the shared values, beliefs, and behavioural expectations that guide actions and decision-making within a social or organisational context (Scott, 2014). In this study, cultural norms specifically refer to deeply ingrained habits and routines, such as *budi bahasa* (courtesy), *tolong-menolong* (mutual assistance), and *balas budi* (reciprocity), that may influence the professional conduct of Malaysian civil servants. Cultural norms are examined through civil servants' perceptions of how cultural values may compete with or complement formal institutional requirements in their daily administrative practices.

1.7.2 Corruption

Corruption is defined as the misuse of entrusted public office power for private gain (Transparency International, 2023; Rose-Ackerman, 2016). Within the Malaysian civil service context, corruption encompasses practices such as bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, favouritism, and abuse of authority. This study considers both petty corruption (e.g., *duit kopi* or small facilitation payments) and grand corruption (e.g., contract manipulation, nepotistic appointments) as perceived and experienced by civil servants in their everyday work environments.

1.7.3 Malaysian Civil Service

The Malaysian civil service refers to permanent federal and state-level government employees operating under the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, who are responsible for policy implementation, public service delivery, and administrative functions across ministries, departments and agencies. This study focuses on civil servants involved in administrative or decision-making roles related to public resources, contract awards, licensing, permits, and regulatory enforcement.

1.7.4 New Institutional Theory

In this study, NIT serves as the central conceptual framework for examining how both formal institutions (laws, regulations, procedures, organisational structures) and informal institutions (cultural norms, values, unwritten rules) jointly shape civil servants' perceptions and behaviours regarding corruption. The research employs three complementary strands of NIT: (i) Historical Institutionalism, to analyse how past policy choices and inherited governance structures influence contemporary anti-corruption efforts; (ii) Sociological Institutionalism, to examine how cultural norms legitimate or delegitimate certain behaviours within the civil service; and (iii) Rational Choice Institutionalism, to understand how civil servants calculate costs and benefits when making ethical decisions within institutional constraints. The integration of these strands distinguishes this study from prior research that typically applies them in isolation.

1.7.5 Transparency

Transparency refers to openness and clarity in actions, decisions, and processes, particularly among those exercising public authority (Transparency International, 2018; Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) Act 2009). In governance, transparency involves the provision of accessible and timely information that enables public scrutiny of government operations, decisions and expenditures. From an NIT perspective, transparency represents institutional expectations shaped by normative pressures and socially embedded standards of appropriate conduct (Scott, 2014). Common examples include open tender processes, asset declaration requirements, and public reporting mechanisms.

In this study, transparency is assessed through civil servants' perceptions of disclosure requirements, information accessibility mechanisms, and the actual practice of open governance within their departments.

1.7.6 Accountability

Accountability refers to the obligation of individuals and organisations to explain, justify, and answer for their actions, decisions and use of public resources (Transparency International, 2018). Within the civil service, accountability is operationalised through oversight bodies, reporting systems, and disciplinary mechanisms. From an NIT perspective, accountability illustrates how behaviour is shaped by both formal institutional arrangements such as audits, reporting requirements, and disciplinary procedures as well as informal expectations related to transparency and responsiveness.

In this research, accountability is examined through civil servants' awareness of and compliance with oversight institutions such as the Public Accounts Committee and the Auditor General, as well as their perceptions of disciplinary procedures and consequences for misconduct.

1.7.7 Integrity

Integrity is defined as the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles (Transparency International, 2019). In public administration, integrity is reflected through ethical standards, consistency in decision-making, and compliance with rules even under social, political, or organisational pressure. Previous research identifies integrity as a critical determinant of effective governance, with factors such as leadership, institutional trust, and public engagement contributing to the reduction of corrupt practices (Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et. al., 2019).

For this study, integrity refers to civil servants' adherence to ethical standards and moral consistency in decision-making processes. It is assessed through responses to hypothetical ethical dilemmas and civil servants' perceptions of institutional integrity mechanisms, including codes of ethics, integrity pledges, and MACC-led integrity programmes.

1.8 Organisation of The Thesis

This thesis is structured to ensure clear and logical progression in presenting the research problem, methodology approach, empirical analysis, and findings.

Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on culture, corruption, and institutional theory. It examines cultural elements and institutional mechanisms within Malaysian civil service's anti-corruption settings, identifies research gaps in the literature and establishes the study's theoretical framework.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design, data collection methods, sampling strategies, and analytical approaches employed in this study, providing transparency and justification for the methodological choices adopted.

Chapter 4 presents and analyses the empirical data, focusing on how Malaysian cultural norms shape civil servants' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards corruption and anti-corruption efforts.

Chapter 5 interprets and discusses empirical findings through the lenses of Historical, Sociological, and Rational Choice of NIT. This chapter highlights how interactions between cultural norms and institutional pressures influence corruption perceptions, policy compliance, and the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures.

Chapter 6 summarises the key findings of the study, discusses their implications for policy and practice, offers recommendations for strengthening anti-corruption strategies in Malaysia. It outlines the study's limitations and suggests directions for further research.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Despite extensive legal and institutional reforms, corruption continues to persist within Malaysia's civil service. Existing literature has frequently attributed this persistence to administrative weaknesses, political interference, or inadequate enforcement capacity. However, such explanations do not fully account for why corruption endures within a highly regulated bureaucratic system that is formally equipped with extensive rules, oversight mechanisms, and enforcement bodies (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023). Institutional scholars, particularly within Western literature, therefore, argue that corruption cannot be understood solely through structural or legal deficiencies, but must also be examined within the social and cultural contexts in which administrative decisions are interpreted, justified, and enacted (Rose-Ackerman, 2016; Lipsky, 2010).

Within the Malaysian context, scholars remain divided regarding the primary drivers of corruption. Some emphasise structural and governance related deficits, including weaknesses in institutional design, accountability gaps, and enforcement limitations (Sharija, 2020; Ferry et al., 2018). Others highlight the significance of social interactions, organisational norms, and normative expectations embedded within bureaucratic settings (Hairuzzaki et al., 2024; Lim et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2021; Shakila et al., 2021). Norms such as respect for hierarchy, relational obligations, politeness, and the preservation of harmony are deeply embedded within Malaysia's administrative culture and may exert significant influence on bureaucratic behaviour (Quah, 2022; Ho, 2002; Hofstede, 2001). Within specific institutional contexts, these expectations interact with formal rules in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, at times reinforcing integrity, but at other times reshaping how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and implemented in everyday administrative practice.

Given these dynamics, a conceptual and theoretical exploration is necessary to understand how cultural norms shape corruption-related behaviour within the civil service. This chapter adopts an institutional perspective that conceptualises corruption not merely as individual misconduct, but as a socially mediated practice shaped by the interaction between informal norms and formal institutional structures. Such interactions shapes interpretations of legitimacy, meaning, and patterns of compliance within bureaucratic settings.

2.2 Conceptual Clarification

This section clarifies the key concepts underpinning the study's analytical framework, establishing a shared vocabulary for examining how cultural norms interact with formal institutions to shape bureaucratic behaviour within Malaysia's civil service.

2.2.1 Cultural Norms

Cultural norms refer to shared values, beliefs, and behavioural expectations that regulate conduct through socially constructed understandings rather than formal codification (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Banfield, 1958). Rather than viewing norms as static traditions, institutional scholars conceptualise them as dynamic social constructs. These norms are continuously produced, reproduced, and negotiated through repeated interactions within institutional settings (North, 2005; 1990). When embedded within social relationships and cognitive frameworks such norms may solidify into unwritten rules that guide behaviour alongside, or in some cases in place of, formal institutional structures.

Bicchieri (2006) conceptualised cultural norms as conditional social expectations, whereby individuals comply not merely due to formal sanction but because of anticipated social reactions, peer monitoring, and reputational consequences. Norm violations may therefore incur significant social costs even in the absence of legal punishment. From an institutional perspective, Scott (2014) locates cultural norms primarily within the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars of institutions, shaping perceptions of what is socially appropriate, morally defensible, and legitimate within specific organisational and societal contexts.

These institutionalist accounts stand in productive tension with cultural-dimensionalist approaches such as Hofstede's (2001; 1980) framework, which categorises Malaysia as high in power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance. Whilst Hofstede's dimensions offer comparative utility, critics argue they risk reifying culture as a stable, bounded attribute of national populations rather than as something continuously negotiated and contested (Patterson, 2014; McSweeney, 2002). This study aligns with a constructivist perspective where cultural norms are treated not as immutable Malaysian traits, but as contextually activated institutional scripts whose salience varies across organisational settings and individual ethical orientations.

Within segments of Malaysia's civil service, cultural norms such as *budi-bahasa* (courteous conduct), reciprocity and *orang kita* (relational networks) have been observed to influence administrative behaviour in particular hierarchical and organisational environments rather than uniformly across the civil service (Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Practices perceived as fulfilling social or relational obligations may simultaneously constitute nepotism or favouritism when evaluated against formal ethical and legal standards (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1968). The study therefore examines not only the presence of cultural norms, but also how competing normative frameworks interact and shape ethical judgement and administrative behaviour within bureaucratic settings.

2.2.2 Corruption

Corruption is commonly defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International, 2023)[1], emphasising the violation of public trust and diversion of resources from collective benefit for personal advantage. Similarly, the World Bank (1997) defines corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain, situating the phenomenon squarely within governmental and administrative contexts. Academic scholarship distinguishes between various forms of corruption, including bribery, nepotism, extortion, fraud, and abuse of authority, which may occur at both grand[2] or petty[3] level depending on scale and administrative position (Transparency

[1] In 2019, Transparency International highlighted the impact of corruption on democracy and society's economic and social development. Subsequently, the concept of corruption encompasses illegal acts using unethical methods to gain personal benefits affecting politics, business, and society.

[2] Rose-Ackerman (2016; 1999; 1978) differentiates between grand corruption, involving high-level systemic resource diversion by senior officials, and petty corruption, involving lower-level officials and modest sums. Grand corruption involve political elites distorting public institutions for private enrichment, undermining rule of law, and democratic accountability (Johnston, 2005). High-level officials manipulate policy frameworks and procurement processes through organised networks across political, administrative,

International, 2023; Persson et al., 2013).

Within the Malaysian context, corruption has been widely identified as a persistent governance challenge, linked not only to institutional weaknesses but also to social and cultural practices embedded within bureaucratic routines and everyday administrative interactions (Jones, 2022; Wan Murshida & Mazlena, 2019; Wan Mohammad Taufik et al., 2018). Rather than treating corruption solely as individual moral failure or legal violation[4], this study conceptualises corruption as a socially mediated practice shaped by interactions between formal rules and informal norms. This framing allows corruption to be examined as an outcome of negotiated institutional environments rather than as a purely individual ethical lapse.

2.2.3 Policy Compliance

Classical public administration theories conceptualised policy compliance primarily as a technical process whereby bureaucratic actors implement policy directives once formal rules, authority, and enforcement mechanisms are established (Weber, 1978). From this perspective, compliance is assumed to follow naturally from legal-rational authority and clear administrative procedures. However, institutionalist scholarship challenges this assumption by demonstrating that compliance is deeply shaped by organisational cultures, informal social networks, and shared understandings of appropriateness that influence how rules are interpreted and enacted in practice (North, 1990; March & Olsen, 1989)[5]. Consequently, identical policy

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and economic spheres. This may become a mode of governance that fundamentally damages institutional structures, accountability mechanisms, and social equity.

[3] Petty corruption occur at lower administrative levels through smaller transactional exchanges between citizens and bureaucrats (Olken & Pande, 2012; Tanzi, 1998). While individually minor, petty corruption accumulates to impose significant costs on public service delivery and erodes citizen trust in government institutions.

[4] In alignment with international standards, Malaysia's commitment to combating corruption was enshrined in a dense and extensive body of legislation. The MACC Act 2009 and the Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Terrorism Financing and Proceeds of Unlawful Activities (AMLATFA) Act 2001 formed the cornerstone of this framework. The MACC Act 2009 criminalises several corrupt practices across public and private sectors while the AMLATFA Act 2001 enhances financial surveillance mechanisms for tracking illicit financial flows. Beyond that, a network of subsidiary legislations defined and sanctioned several other corrupt acts as shown in Appendix 1.

[5] Subsequent studies by Scott (2014; 2004) conceptualised policy compliance through three complementary pillars: the regulative pillar comprising of formal laws, the normative pillar comprising of

directives may generate vastly different compliance outcomes across organisational contexts depending on whether they align with or contradict prevailing informal norms.

Policy compliance therefore encompasses both substantive and symbolic dimensions. Substantive compliance reflects genuine behavioural change aligned with policy objectives. In contrast, symbolic compliance involves formal adherence to rules without meaningful alteration of underlying practices (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Enida, 2019). Although symbolic compliance may preserve institutional legitimacy while masking limited behavioural transformation, some scholars argue that it can function as a transitional stage toward substantive change by establishing legitimacy frameworks and signaling institutional alignment (Fernandez, 2024; Jones, 2022).

Compliance dynamics are further complicated in multi-principal accountability settings, where civil servants are simultaneously accountable to multiple authorities. In such contexts, accountability may become diffuse, enabling actors to selectively justify behaviour based on competing expectations (Gomez, 2024; Siddiquee, 2006)[6]. This fragmentation complicates compliance and creates space for rationalisation, selective adherence, and circumvention when formal demands conflict.

Bicchieri's (2006) framework of conditional social expectations further illustrates how informal norms shape compliance behaviour. When rule-bending practices are tolerated or implicitly reinforced within organisations, the perceived social cost of strict formal compliance may exceed the cost of selective non-compliance (Gomez, 2024; Quah, 2022). Over time, such dynamics can produce self-reinforcing patterns in which informal norms gradually displace formal rules as the dominant behavioural guide, undermining the intended effects of policy reforms despite the presence of robust formal frameworks.

2.2.4 Formal Institutions and Informal Institutions

reactive actions, and the cultural-cognitive pillar comprising of tacit cultural and social expectations.

[6] For example, a civil servant who circumvents formal procurement procedures to expedite project implementation for a politically connected superior may justify this action as complying with hierarchical deference norms and responsiveness expectations despite violating formal regulations. In such contexts, apparent non-compliance with one set of rules may be reframed as compliance with alternative, culturally- legitimised expectations.

New Institutional Theory distinguishes between formal and informal institutions as interrelated components that jointly structure social order and behaviour (Hodgson, 2025; Kaufmann et al., 2018; North, 2005; 1990). Formal institutions refer to codified rules, legal frameworks, and official procedures that are enforced through bureaucratic authority and formal sanctions. Informal institutions by contrast, consist of social norms, cultural expectations, and relational obligations that derive legitimacy from collective acceptance rather than legal enforcement.

Within Malaysia's civil service, administrative conduct is governed by extensive formal institutions through laws, codes, and standard operating procedures (Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Nor Raihana & Noorhayati, 2018). However, these operate alongside deeply embedded informal institutions rooted in cultural norms such as reciprocity, deference to authority, and relational loyalty (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Jones, 2022; Kamal Hassan, 2022; Shakila et al., 2021; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Zaleha et al., 2014; Ho, 2002; Syed Hussein Alatas, 1968). These informal norms influence how formal rules are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in everyday administrative practice rather than being applied mechanically.

The relationship between these institutions is therefore neither linear nor uniform. Informal norms may complement formal rules by facilitating cooperation and trust, substitute for them where enforcement capacity is weak, or compete with them by legitimising practices that contradict official standards (North, 2005; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). In the Malaysian context, empirical studies suggest that this interaction often generates ethical grey zones, where the same action may be interpreted as fulfilling social obligations, or as cultural obligations, or alternatively, as constituting corrupt conduct (Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014). This highlights that strengthening formal rules alone is insufficient to ensure ethical governance unless the informal normative environment that shapes interpretation and compliance is also addressed.

2.2.5 Malaysia's Civil Service

According to Gomez et al. (2018), the Malaysian civil service refers to the permanent administrative machinery responsible for implementing government policies and delivering public services. This includes ministries, departments, and agencies tasked with upholding public interest and advancing national development objectives. Constitutionally, civil service comprises federal and state-level officials appointed and remunerated under public laws. This study examines the civil service not only in structural terms, but also as a behavioural and cultural system, in which institutional arrangements shape governance outcomes and levels of corruption.

Existing research highlights persistent challenges within Malaysia's civil service, particularly related to politicisation, patronage, and accountability (Jones, 2022; Siddiquee & Zafarullah, 2020). These conditions influence how civil servants interpret rules, exercise discretion, and navigate ethical decision-making in everyday practice. Officials involved in procurement, licensing, and financial administration occupy especially critical positions where formal rules intersect most directly with informal expectations, exposing them to competing pressures and heightened ethical risk.

Taken together, these conceptual foundations suggest that understanding corruption and compliance within Malaysia's civil service requires moving beyond legalistic explanations to examine how formal institutions interact with culturally embedded informal norms. The interface between informal norms such as reciprocity, loyalty, face-saving, and formal rules such as anti-corruption statutes, procurement procedures, integrity policies, creates an institutional environment in which corruption cannot be reduced solely to individual moral failure or legal breach. Instead, misconduct is often embedded within grey zones where the same act may be interpreted as gratitude, duty, or corruption depending on context and expectation. Policy compliance likewise cannot be inferred from formal enactments alone as symbolic compliance and multi-principal justifications may obscure substantive non-compliance beneath formal adherence. Accordingly, this study adopts an institutional perspective that treats corruption and compliance as outcomes of negotiated institutional environments rather than purely individual or legal phenomena.

2.3 Administrative and Political Setting in Malaysia

Understanding corruption within Malaysia's civil service requires situating bureaucratic behaviour within its broader administrative and political context. The Malaysian civil service did not emerge in a vacuum but developed through a historical process shaped by colonial governance, post-independence state-building, and enduring socio-cultural norms. These structural and cultural features influence how civil servants interpret authority, exercise discretion, and respond to integrity reform. This section examines four interrelated dimensions; the historical and institutional context of the civil service, the political-administrative interface, administrative culture in Malaysia, and the anti-corruption institutional landscape.

2.3.1 Historical and Institutional Context

Malaysia's civil service evolved through a hybrid institutional trajectory combining pre-colonial governance traditions, British colonial administration, and post-independence state consolidation. Prior to colonial intervention, Malay states operated within feudal governance systems characterised by personalised authority, hierarchical social arrangements, and customary obligations (Wan Kamal & Wan Hamdi, 2016). Authority flowed through rulers and elites, and governance emphasised social harmony, loyalty, and deference rather than impersonal rule enforcement.

British colonial administration introduced a Weberian-style bureaucracy grounded in hierarchy, procedural order, and documentation through the Malayan Administrative Service, a centralised system designed to secure revenue and colonial priorities (Mohd Rizal, 2010; Yeo, 1980; Khoo, 1966). However, colonial governance did not displace indigenous structures. Instead, it incorporated traditional rulers and local elites into the administrative system, producing a colonial-feudal hybrid in which Weberian bureaucratic forms coexisted with relational norms and elite mediation (Masykurotur et al., 2024; Siddiquee, 2010; Khoo, 2005; Ho, 2002; Shamsul, 1997). Hierarchical obedience and reliance on intermediaries became institutionalised features of administrative practice.

Following independence in 1957, Malaysia retained many core features of the colonial administrative system while reorienting the civil service toward nation-building, development planning, and interethnic accommodation (Rais, 2006; Ho, 2002; Common, 2001). The government took on greater roles in planning, regulation, and welfare distribution. The administrative state developed agencies and statutory bodies, embedding a strong executive centre that directed policy and controlled administrative levers (Nor Laili et al., 2022; Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Subsequent administrative reforms, including managerial and performance-based initiatives, were layered onto this hierarchical structure rather than transforming it (Beh, 2011; Siddiquee, 2010; Kalsom, 2010). As a result, modern administrative tools operate within entrenched vertical lines of authority.

These historical legacies produced strong path dependence in bureaucratic behaviour. Hierarchy, deference to authority and reliance on informal practices to manage ambiguity became normalised. While this institutional configuration enabled rapid developmental mobilisation, it also constrained administrative autonomy and fostered environments conducive to selective enforcement and symbolic compliance. Understanding these historical foundations is essential for explaining contemporary patterns of corruption and compliance in Malaysia’s civil service.

2.3.2 Political-Administrative Interface

Malaysia’s public administration operates within a political-administrative interface in which boundaries between political leadership and bureaucratic implementation are closely intertwined (Nashril-Abaidah & Mohammad Agus, 2022; Ahmad Faiz, 2018; Common, 2001). Ministers function simultaneously as both political leaders and heads of ministries, creating a system in which political priorities frequently intersect with administrative decision-making. Although civil servants are formally expected to uphold neutrality and professionalism, political influence often extends beyond policy direction into areas such as appointments, resource allocation, and organisational priorities (The Center to Combat Corruption & Cronyism, 2023; Ahmad Faiz & Zulhilmi, 2021; Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020; Siddiquee & Zafarulah, 2020).

This configuration generates strong upward accountability within the civil service. Officers may prioritise the expectations of superiors, both administrative and political, over strict adherence to procedural rules. At senior levels, appointments may be influenced by political trust rather than exclusively by merit, aligning bureaucratic leadership with prevailing political interests. These dynamics may blur the distinction between administrative responsibility and political loyalty, particularly where hierarchical obedience intersects with political expectations.

Civil servants thus operate within multi-principal accountability environments, answering simultaneously to constitutional mandates, ministerial directives, departmental hierarchies, oversight bodies, and public expectations (Gomez, 2024;

Siddiquee, 2006). When these principals' expectations diverge, accountability becomes diffused. Officers may selectively invoke different sources of authority to justify decisions, complicating enforcement and oversight. This environment weakens consistency and creates space for rationalisation, circumvention, and selective rule application.

Consequently, the political-administrative interface shapes corruption risks by reducing bureaucratic autonomy, constraining internal accountability and incentivising symbolic compliance (Wan Murshida & Mazlena, 2019; Siddiquee, 2010; Common, 2001). Officers may visibly align with integrity initiatives while informally accommodating political or hierarchical pressures, complicating impartial enforcement, and reinforcing practices that prioritise organisational survival and loyalty over procedural compliance.

2.3.3 Administrative Culture in Malaysia

Administrative culture refers to the shared values, norms, symbols, and behavioural expectations that shape rule interpretation and discretionary exercises within bureaucratic settings (Peters, 2021; Lipsky, 2010; Hofstede, 2001; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Often described as the software running on the hardware of bureaucratic structures, administrative culture explains why identical organisational charts function differently across countries, why policy reforms succeed or fail and how the state is experienced by its citizens (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Trondal, 2010). Moving analysis beyond formal-legal descriptions to the lived reality of governance, it reminds us that bureaucracy, at its core, is a human and cultural enterprise that embodies a society's deepest beliefs about authority, fairness and the role of the state (Christensen et al., 2020; Reichborn-Kjennerud et al., 2019; Richards & Smith, 2016; König, 2006; Crozier, 1964; Selznick, 1949; Merton, 1940; Weber, 1978).

In many post-colonial and developing states, administrative cultures exhibit a tension between imported Weberian models and indigenous patrimonial traditions (Quah, 2022; Quah, 2018b; Syed Hussein Alatas, 2015). In Malaysia, administrative culture reflects the layering of Weberian bureaucratic forms onto historically embedded relational and hierarchical expectations. Within segments of Malaysia's civil service, administrative culture is strongly influenced by hierarchical deference, relational obligations, and norms emphasising harmony and loyalty. These layers coexist rather than fully displacing one another, producing a hybrid administrative environment. Cultural values such as *balas budi* (repayment of favours), *jaga hati* (maintaining relationships), *menjaga air muka* (saving face), and *tolong-menolong* (mutual assistance) remain salient in everyday administrative interactions.

Language plays an important role in mediating ethical judgement (Jones, 2022; Quah, 2022; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014). Practices may be framed as “helping” or “facilitating”, thereby obscuring their ethical implications[7]. Such linguistic framing prioritises cohesion and respect for authority, often discouraging confrontation and whistleblowing. Challenging superiors or reporting misconduct may be perceived as disrespectful or disloyal, carrying social and professional costs. As a result, civil servants may avoid actions that disrupt relationships, even when formal rules require impartiality or reporting of wrongdoing.

Administrative culture in Malaysia is not uniform across organisations. Some agencies exhibit stricter procedural cultures that emphasise rule compliance and formal accountability (Sharija, 2020; Nur Shafiqa & Nafisah, 2019), while others tacitly tolerate informal practices to maintain cohesion or expedite processes (Fernandez, 2024; Nurisyal & Norhaninah, 2020). Overall, administrative culture shapes how corruption and compliance are understood in practice by mediating rule interpretation, tolerance thresholds, and reporting behaviour.

2.3.4 Anti-Corruption Institutions and Reform Limitations

Malaysia’s anti-corruption regime comprises a dense array of laws, institutions, and policy initiatives intended to regulate bureaucratic conduct and deter misconduct. Key instruments include the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) Act 2009, the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019-2023, the Whistleblower Protection Act (WPA) 2010, and oversight bodies such as the National Audit

[7] Several conceptual studies discussed that culturally specific vocabularies can create opportunity structures for corruption by reframing unethical acts through alternate moral lenses (Gomez, 2024; Jones, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Ho, 2002). For example, gift-giving as a gesture of gratitude in some instances may be framed as an ethical breach in another. But due to cultural interpretations, gift-giving may escape legal condemnation. Consequently, cultural norms function as competing systems of legitimacy which renders formal prohibitions morally contestable despite strict legal measures (Fernandez, 2024; Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020). As such, problematic behaviours were silently tolerated under the guise of maintaining social harmony.

Department and ministry-level Integrity Units. Collectively, these mechanisms signal a strong formal commitment to integrity and accountability.

Despite these reforms, corruption persists, indicating limitation in implementation rather than absence of formal rules. Coordination among oversight agencies remains fragmented and integrity initiatives are unevenly institutionalised across ministries (Gomez, 2024; Wan Murshida & Mazlena, 2019; Marlina & Jamaliah, 2015; Siddiquee, 2010). Researchers have observed that anti-corruption measures were frequently treated as procedural compliance exercises rather than as mechanisms capable of driving behavioural change. Whistleblower protections are often perceived as insufficient, reducing confidence in reporting mechanisms and discouraging internal accountability.

Scholars have noted that integrity reforms frequently generate symbolic rather than substantive compliance. Civil servants may sign integrity pledges, attend training sessions, or complete reporting requirements without internalising ethical commitments or altering entrenched practices. Enforcement is also reported to be selective in politically sensitive cases, which undermines deterrence and erodes public trust (Gomez, 2024; MACC, 2022). Several scholars suggest that cultural norms further mediate reform outcomes by shaping how rules are interpreted, justified, and applied in daily practice (Fernandez, 2024; Ahmad Faiz & Mohd Zulhilmi, 2021). Practices that conflict with formal standards may be rationalised through appeals to social obligations, loyalty, or organisational necessity. Consequently, while the regulative pillar of anti-corruption has been formally strengthened, the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars continue to constrain consistent behavioural change.

2.4 Cultural Norms in Organisational Behaviour and Perceptions of Corruption

Cultural norms shape organisational behaviour by defining what actors perceive as appropriate, legitimate, and sensible within specific institutional contexts. Within institutional theory, norms operate primarily through the normative pillar and the cultural-cognitive pillar (Scott, 2014). Bicchieri (2006) explains that norms persist through conditional expectations whereby individuals comply because they believe others do so and approve of such behaviour. In bureaucratic settings, this generates strong pressures toward conformity, reciprocity, and social harmony that may override formal mandates[8].

Within Malaysia's civil service, organisational behaviour is influenced by collectivist norms that emphasise respect for authority, relational obligations, and deference to hierarchy. When cultural expectations conflict with procedural requirements, civil servants often prioritise socially appropriate behaviour over formal correctness[9]. These norms should not be understood as fixed tradition but as contested interpretative resources shaping ethical situations (Jones, 2022; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014). Additionally, temporal dynamics, especially during critical junctures such as technological changes, political transitions, administrative reforms, and broader societal shifts further complicate how norms are activated and interpreted in practice (Nidzam, 2018; Zaleha et al., 2014; Shamsul, 1997). This temporal sensitivity reinforced the conceptualisation of cultural norms as dynamic processes rather than static attributes.

Importantly, cultural norms vary across organisations. While national culture provides broad parameters, bureaucratic behaviour is mediated through agency-specific norms shaped by leadership, professional identity, and task environments (Hofstede, 2010). This variation highlights that cultural norms are negotiated rather than uniformly applied (Nurisyal & Norhaninah, 2020; Sharija, 2020; Nur Shafiqa & Nafisah, 2019). Cultural norms also shape perceptions of corruption by providing interpretive frames through which actions are categorised and evaluated. Comparative studies across Asia suggest that practices such as gift-giving may be interpreted as legitimate reciprocity, moral obligation, or illicit exchange depending on the context

[8] Because informal norms are deeply embedded, civil servants may follow them automatically, often without conscious awareness of their impact (Ong et al., 2021; Zaleha et al., 2014). Cultural norms influence corruption-related behaviour through cognitive and relational reasons. Cognitive mechanisms involve cultural beliefs shaping moral reasoning. Officers may justify bending rules because doing so aligns with cultural expectations of kindness or reciprocity. These cognitive frames are shaped through early socialisation and reinforced through organisational culture. Relational mechanisms reflect Malaysia's collectivist culture, which emphasises social harmony and loyalty. Civil servants may avoid confrontation, tolerate misconduct, or comply with informal requests to preserve relationships. This creates ambiguity in ethical judgments and makes anti-corruption reforms more difficult to internalise.

[9] Cultural norms influence not only behaviour but also the interpretation of what constitutes corruption. Certain practices such as gift-giving, preferential assistance, or informal negotiations may not be perceived as problematic within cultural frameworks that value goodwill, relationship maintenance, and social harmony.

(Masykurotur et al., 2024; Kanti, 2020; Quah, 2018a). In hierarchical and collectivist environments, social approval and relational harmony may carry greater weight than formal ethical standards, creating ethical grey zones where rule compliance becomes situational. Norms prioritising harmony and loyalty may discourage whistleblowing, rendering compliance an outcome of negotiation among social expectations, organisational norms, and formal rules.

2.4.1 Corruption in Malaysia's Civil Service: Empirical and Conceptual Insights

Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualises corruption as a socially embedded and institutionally mediated practice rather than merely a legal violation. Scholars emphasise the coexistence of formal legal frameworks with informal normative systems rooted in custom, religion, and social practice (Kamal Hassan, 2022; Abdul Aziz Bari, 2003). These parallel normative orders exert regulatory influence over conduct, complicating legalistic assumptions about compliance and accountability.

Drawing on Syed Hussein Alatas (1995, 1968), corruption is understood not simply as deviant individual behaviour but as patterned practices that may acquire situational legitimacy within specific cultural and organisational contexts. Alatas argued that Western rational-legal models inadequately capture symbolic systems and culturally embedded interpretations of obligation, honour, and authority in societies governed by different normative logics. While legal definitions remain essential for identifying offences, they are insufficient for explaining how certain practices become routinised and normalised within bureaucratic settings. Syed Hussein Alatas (1995)[10] illustrates how practices may be perceived as honourable reciprocities (minimal risk)[11], as necessary workarounds to maintain administrative functioning under institutional constraints (medium-risk)[12], or as predatory collusions that systematically capture

[10] He further developed a three-level typology to illuminate corruption's social dimensions and varying impacts.

[11] Minimal-risk practices involve culturally embedded exchanges that may not be perceived locally as corrupt. Behaviours like gift-giving and favour exchanges are culturally rationalised as extensions of courtesy or relational ethics. In modern Malaysia, research informants have validated these exchanges as expectations to express gratitude or strengthen relational bonds (Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014).

[12] Medium-risk practices are instrumentalised bureaucratic workarounds that preserve functionality while bending rules. Corruption becomes instrumentalised to overcome bureaucratic inefficiencies.

state resources (high-risk)[13]. Practices such as patron-client relationships therefore may embody symbolic honour, loyalty, or social insurance rather than being interpreted as straightforward bribery or corruption (Syed Muhammad Naquib Alatas, 1985; Ungku Aziz in Roving Report, 1961)[14].

Empirical studies in Malaysia consistently identify corruption as a persistent governance challenge shaped by interacting structural, cultural, and operational factors. Hierarchical organisational arrangements that blur political-administrative boundaries and fragmented accountability mechanisms create systemic vulnerabilities (Gomez, 2024; Nor Raihana & Noorhayati, 2018; Transparency International Malaysia, 2018; Siddiquee, 2006). Cultural norms generate ethical ambiguity by blurring distinctions between acceptable social conduct and improper influence (Quah, 2022; Jones, 2022; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014), while discretionary power provides the operational space through which these factors translate into corrupt opportunities (Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Ferry et al., 2018; Marlina & Jamaliah, 2015). Through repetition, socialisation, and selective enforcement, such practices

Individuals offer bribes or invoke informal networks not from malice or greed but as pragmatic strategies to obtain essential services or avoid administrative delays within constrained environments. These practices represent calculated responses (Hairuzzaki et al., 2024; Fernandez, 2024) where rigid procedures, lack of transparency or excessive red tape render formal channels inaccessible or ineffective.

[13] High-risk practices constitute exploitative structural corruption involving collusive networks and institutional capture. Corruption becomes embedded across political, administrative, and economic spheres through organised elite networks and institutional complicity (Transparency International, 2023; Rose-Ackerman, 2016). This includes large-scale embezzlement, abuse of power or governance control by vested interests that entrench social inequality and fundamentally undermine institutional integrity.

[14] Transactional sociology highlights how personalised ties operate as informal insurance where formal systems do not guarantee predictable outcomes (Hodgson, 2025; Kaufmann et al., 2018; Scott, 1972; Blau, 1964). In such contexts, Leff's (1964) "functional corruption" thesis interprets certain networks and favour exchanges as adaptive responses to institutional deficits by ensuring access and opportunities although this contrasts with critics who argue that such functionality often masks cumulative harm and unequal access. Career preservation incentives (avoidance of retaliation, maintenance of networks) further suppress reporting and encourage silent accommodation. Transactional frameworks from political and economic perspectives provided complementary insights into insufficient formal institutional mechanisms. It posited that when formal bureaucratic procedures impose excessive red tape, unpredictable enforcement, or lengthy processing times; rational actors resort to informal mechanisms that offer greater efficiency and certainty (Braun, 2005; Bailey (1970) in Nidzam, 2018). In Malaysia, a survey found a moderate level of adherence to public procurement principles (Sitti Hasinah et al., 2021). This indicated a possibility where individuals may resort to alternative transactional methods to secure bureaucratic efficiency and certainty. However, these frameworks analysed corrupt perspectives as if they were happening only currently without any structural origins.

may become normalised within bureaucratic routines. Methodologically, however, many Malaysian studies tend to treat culture as static traits or descriptive variables, limiting analysis of how norms are mobilised and contested in practice (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Tiyas et al., 2019). This gap underscores the need for an institutional approach that examines meaning-making, justification, and negotiated compliance within bureaucratic environments.

2.5 Cultural Norms and Perceptions of Corruption

Cultural norms shape how corruption is perceived by providing interpretive frames through which actions are classified as legitimate reciprocity, moral obligation, or illicit exchange. The same practice, such as gift-giving, may be understood as an expression of gratitude, social duty, or corrupt inducement depending on contextual framing and social expectation (Quah, 2022; Jones, 2022; Shakila et al., 2021)[15]. Interpretive frames extend beyond gift-giving. Procurement officers who award contracts to known associates may narrate the decision as fulfilling obligations of trust and competence; while personnel managers channelling appointments toward kin or community members may frame the act as responsible stewardship of institutional knowledge. In each case, the same allocation of public resources admits two irreconcilable interpretations: corrupt nepotism or morally grounded guardianship, depending on which normative frame is invoked. This interpretive plurality generates ethical grey zones in which formal rules are open to negotiation and selective compromise, particularly when legal prescriptions collide with culturally embedded expectations. In Malaysia's civil service, cultural vocabularies such as *balas jasa* and *menjaga air muka* enable actors to reframe intent and meaning, granting situational legitimacy to practices that may contravene formal rules[16]. This reframing may allow

[15] Because meanings are situational and relational, actors can stabilise one interpretation to justify behaviour, while critics mobilise another to condemn it.

[16] *Balas jasa* (reciprocation of service or favour) encodes a moral expectation that assistance rendered creates an obligation of return. Within bureaucratic relationships, this norm can transform what integrity frameworks classify as improper influence into a morally intelligible act of honouring a relational debt (Siddiquee, 2006; Khoo, 2005). *Menjaga air muka* (guarding or preserving face) imposes a social duty to protect the dignity and standing of superiors, colleagues, and community members, particularly in hierarchical interactions. Under this norm, refusing a superior's request, reporting a colleague's misconduct, or declining to facilitate an arrangement that benefits one's network risks causing a loss of face that risks social sanction, reputational damage, or exclusion from professional networks.

certain practices to be justified as fulfilling moral, relational, or communal obligation. Such norms operate prospectively by shaping actors' judgements about when formal rules may be selectively compromised, particularly under certain conditions where moral disengagement becomes cognitively defensible.

Norms influence perceptions by guiding judgement under ambiguity, reinforcing loyalty, discouraging reporting, and legitimising selective rule interpretation (Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Quah, 2018b; Hofstede, 2001). Consequently, practices that are formally prohibited may acquire social legitimacy through culturally resonant narratives and moral justifications (Muhammad Safuan et al., 2023; Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Jones, 2022; Lim et al., 2021; Enida, 2019; Quah, 2018b; Siddiquee, 2006; Khoo, 2005)[17]. Critically, this displacement is not uniform. Cultural norms are more likely to displace formal ethical standards when three conditions converge: when the actor is embedded in dense relational networks where reciprocity is continuously monitored; when the formal rule in question conflicts with a deeply internalised moral vocabulary rather than merely an instrumental preference; and when the organisational environment provides no credible protection for those who refuse to comply with informal expectations. These dynamics shift analytical attention from the mere existence of norms to the conditions under which cultural norms override or reinterpret formal ethical standards.

Empirical evidence in Malaysia reflects this complexity. Survey findings show that 51 percent of respondents perceive corruption as culturally embedded, while 57.58 percent associate it with religious elements (Shakila et al., 2021). These findings suggest that corruption is often interpreted through moral and cultural vocabularies rather than solely through legal categories. Moreover, religious and symbolic frameworks introduce additional layers of interpretation[18]. Lord Acton's (1907)

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[17] Across decades, scholars from various countries argued that patronage may be narrated as a moral duty to care for one's people, reframing resource allocation as benevolent guardianship rather than nepotism (Kanti, 2020; Quah, 2018a; Ho, 2002; Syed Hussein Alatas, 2002; Banfield, 1958).

[18] Many studies reviewed cultural symbolism in Malaysia through the lenses of ethinic communitites and historical monarchy. Malay rulers function more than political institutions or ceremonial figureheads. They serve as cultural anchors of Malay identity, embodying ideals of unity, service and guardianship of tradition that extend beyond royal protocol into practice (Rais, 2006; Ungku Aziz in Roving Report, 1961). This symbolism permeated through ruler's portraits displayed in government offices, framing of administrative service as acts of *daulat* (sovereign honour), and integration of royal

observation that law must sometimes yield to culture acquires particular resonance in Malaysia's administrative context, where feudal-derived norms of deference and hierarchical loyalty have persisted within formal bureaucratic structures. These inherited dispositions shape enforcement horizons and selectively reframe compliance as a cultural rather than legal question. As such, normative commitments like *amanah* (trustworthiness) can be selectively invoked to justify certain actions and behaviours (Muhammad Asad, 2024; Kamal Hassan, 2022; Wain, 2021; Megat Ayop & Abd. Halim, 2016). At the same time, religious principles can also function as resources that reinforce integrity and as instruments for rationalisation.

2.6 Interaction Between Cultural Norms and Formal Institutions

Cultural norms do not merely coexist with formal institutions but actively reshape how rules are interpreted and enacted in practice[19]. Civil servants function as institutional interpreters, navigating tensions between formal requirements and informal social expectations (Scott, 2014; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). When social sanctions exceed perceived legal risks, informal norms may become more binding than written rules.

Within Malaysia's civil service, culturally embedded narratives may reframe questionable acts as loyalty, care, or communal responsibility Such reframing allows actors to reconcile rule violations with culturally legitimate narratives, thereby blurring boundaries between compliance and misconduct. These interaction patterns demonstrate that bureaucratic compliance is not automatic or rule-driven but is negotiated through ongoing interaction between institutional constraints and

imagery into national anthems and emblems reinforce hierarchical stratifications that shape deference and enforcement horizons.

[19] Institutional conflicts, when repeatedly navigated, normalise rule-bending. This dynamic involves the purposive actions through which actors create, maintain or disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In Western scholarships, workarounds become routine and taught through tacit socialisation: newcomers observe which rules are rigid, which are flexible and which require reading the room. Over time, exceptional accommodations congeal into unofficial standard operating procedures, sustaining a parallel order of practice (Hodgson, 2025; Scott, 2014; North, 2005). Sometimes, cultural norms were reinforced to resist reforms perceived as culturally tone-deaf; at other times, they adapt rules to accommodate legitimate relational obligations; and in some cases, they invoke formal rules to resist burdensome or politicised cultural demands. Institutional work is thus a site of negotiation where rule-bending a learned response to reconcile competing demands, not mere compliance.

normative expectations (Muhammad Safuan et al., 2023; Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023). Consequently, effective anti-corruption reform requires engagement with the cultural-institutional interface rather than reliance on enforcement alone.

2.7 Research Gaps

Existing studies on corruption in Malaysia's civil service have largely focused on institutional weaknesses, legal frameworks, and enforcement challenges. While more recent scholarship acknowledges the relevance of cultural norms, these norms are often treated as static background variables rather than as dynamic processes shaping everyday bureaucratic behaviour (Fadillah & Nesreen, 2023; Jones, 2022; Quah, 2022). There remains limited examination of how civil servants themselves perceive, negotiate, and justify corrupt practices when confronted with conflicts between formal institutional requirements and informal cultural obligations.

Recent empirical studies raised further questions on how collective pressures influence individual rationalisation and institutionalisation of cultural norms (Nor Farizal et al., 2024; Lim et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2021). Three underexplored issues emerge: (a) how cultural norms operate in practice when invoked or ignored; (b) how individuals benefit from deploying cultural rhetoric; and (c) how actors respond when cultural expectations conflict, such as tensions between hierarchical loyalty and religious prohibition.

Accordingly, three gaps are identified. First, there remains limited empirical examination of how cultural norms are interpreted, mobilised, and negotiated by civil servants in routine administrative practice (Muhammad Safuan et al., 2023; Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Khairul Saidah & Rozaimah, 2021; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Zaleha et al., 2014; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014; Siddiquee, 2010). While norms such as reciprocity or respect for hierarchy are frequently identified, few studies analyse how these norms are strategically invoked to justify or resist behaviour in concrete decision-making situations (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Abdul Faruq et al., 2022; Quah, 2022; Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020; Hofstede, 2001).

Second, much of the literature treats formal institutions and cultural norms as separate analytical domains. The literature offers insufficient insight into how informal cultural expectations interact with formal anti-corruption rules to produce outcomes such as selective compliance or symbolic adherence (Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019). This gap persists despite international evidence demonstrating that such interactions critically shape anti-corruption reform effectiveness (Zimelis, 2020; Enida, 2019; Pillay & Kluvers, 2014; Barr & Serra, 2010). Comparative benchmarks highlight that low-corruption contexts in Scandinavian countries are characterised not merely by strong laws but by a deep-seated alignment between formal institutions and supportive informal norms of high trust, transparency, and egalitarianism (Reichborn-Kjennerud et al., 2019; Hira, 2016). This contrast underscores that the effectiveness of formal rules is contingent on their congruence with the prevailing cultural substrate, a dynamic interaction that remains underexplored in the Malaysian context.

Third, much of the Malaysian literature relies heavily on surveys and perception indices, providing limited insight into how civil servants experience ethical dilemma, reporting risks, and justification strategies in practice. Qualitative and interpretive accounts of lived bureaucratic experience remain underdeveloped (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Tiyas et al., 2019).

Although NIT has been widely applied in international corruption studies, its use in the Malaysian context remains partial and fragmented. Existing studies often focus on isomorphism or regulatory pressures (Jones, 2022; Siddiquee & Zafarullah, 2020; Wan Murshida & Mazlena, 2019; Nor Raihana & Noorhayati, 2018; Marlina & Jamaliah, 2015; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014; Zaleha et al., 2014), treating formal institutions and informal culture as parallel variables rather than interconnected forces that mutually shape governance behaviour (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Quah, 2022; Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020; Nurisyal & Norhaninah, 2020). Few studies integrate NIT together with historical trajectories, normative legitimacy and incentive calculations within a single analytical framework. The study addresses these gaps by examining how cultural norms mediate perceptions of corruption and interact with formal institutional structures to shape compliance behaviour within Malaysia's civil service.

2.8 New Institutional Theory (NIT)

This study adopts NIT as its primary analytical framework to examine corruption in Malaysia's civil service as an outcome of interaction between formal institutions and informal cultural norms[20]. This perspective is particularly suited to the Malaysian administrative context, where formal anti-corruption frameworks coexist with deeply embedded social, cultural, and relational expectations.

NIT is not a unified theory but a family of complementary approaches that explain institutional behaviour through distinct causal logics (Cairney, 2020; Lowndes, 2017; Schmidt, 2006). As a broad framework, it explains how institutions shape behaviour through a combination of formal rules and informal norms. Several main approaches or schools of thought that view institutions and culture from different angles[21]. Across these approaches, institutions are understood to consist not only of formal rules and procedures, but also informal norms, shared values and routine practices that shape how actors interpret and enact rules. Culture, therefore, is not external to institutions; it forms part of the institutional environment that defines what is considered appropriate, legitimate and acceptable, enabling certain practices to persist even when they contradict official rules.

To capture corruption as a socially negotiated and institutionally embedded phenomenon rather than isolated individual misconduct, this study integrates three strands: Historical Institutionalism (HI), Sociological Institutionalism (SI), and Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI).

Historical Institutionalism (HI) emphasises the role of history and time in institutional formation. Culture in HI is understood as the result of prolonged historical processes, where certain practices and norms become entrenched through path dependence and are difficult to change even when policy reforms occur. HI highlights how past administrative arrangements shape present behaviour through path dependence, institutional inertia, and institutional layering (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010;

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[20] It comprises two scopes, formal institutions (structured organisational frameworks of governance) and informal institutions (dynamics of individual interactions), which interact to respond to external environments (Scott, 2014; North 2005).

[21] Several scholars have discussed several perspectives within institutional theory, resulting in distinct analytical strands that offer complementary approaches to understanding institutional phenomena. See Appendix 2.

Thelen, 1999). In Malaysia, colonial administrative legacies[22], post-independence nation-building priorities, and executive-centred governance reforms have produced enduring hierarchical and relational norms that continue to influence compliance and accountability. Anti-corruption reforms are frequently layered onto these structures rather than replacing them. Modern integrity frameworks coexist with traditional expectations such as *patuh* and *jaga air muka* (Masykurotur et al., 2024; Muhammad Safuan et al., 2023), helping to explain why formal change does not always translate into substantive behavioural transformation.

Sociological Institutionalism (SI) places the strongest emphasis on culture. This approach views institutions as systems of meaning, symbols, and norms that form the logic of appropriateness which are understandings of what is considered suitable within an organisation. In SI, culture is central to legitimacy and compliance. Scholars observe that behaviour is guided by the logic of appropriateness, where actors may follow culturally accepted scripts rather than strict legal rules (Scott, 2014; March & Olsen, 2006)[23]. Within Malaysia's civil service, norms such as deference to authority, harmony preservation, and reciprocal obligation are internalised as part of professional identity and moral duty (Jones, 2022; Quah, 2022; Ho, 2002)[24]. This strand explains why certain practices persist despite formal prohibition and why symbolic compliance may satisfy legitimate demands without altering underlying practices.

Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) , on the other hand, views institutions as sets of rules that govern the behaviour of rational actors. Culture in RCI is not the focus, but functions as a backdrop that influences expectations, incentives, and individual strategies in decision-making. This strand complements this integration by examining how actors respond strategically to incentives, risks, and enforcement

[22] Malaysia's hierarchical administrative culture, reinforced by British colonial bureaucracy, creates enduring expectations of obedience towards superiors (Mohd Rizal, 2010).

[23] Institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) explains convergence in organisational forms and practices due to mandate or pressures for success. Decoupling occurs when organisations physically adopt policies to appear formally compliant while maintaining past practices substantively. In Malaysia, ministries may sign integrity charters, run ethics training and issue transparency reports, but everyday routines remain anchored in informal expectations (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Enida, 2019).

[24] Studies document civil servants rationalising gifts as courtesy because rejecting them would damage workplace relationships (Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014).

structures (Peters, 2021; North, 1990). Civil servants weigh potential benefits against perceived risks, including detection probability, sanction severity, and protection offered by social networks (Hairuzzaki et al., 2024; Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019). Fragmented oversight, discretionary authority, and political-administrative overlap may lower perceived risks and enable selective compliance, even in the presence of strong formal penalties.

By integrating these strands, this study conceptualises corruption as an outcome of historical legacies, cultural legitimacy, and rational calculation operating simultaneously. NIT thus provides a coherent framework for analysing how cultural norms mediate the effectiveness of formal anti-corruption institutions in Malaysia's civil service.

2.9 Conceptual Framework

Building on the integrated NIT perspective, this study proposes a conceptual framework that explains how cultural norms and formal institutions interact to shape perceptions of corruption and patterns of compliance among civil servants. The framework is analytically informed by three complementary strands of NIT: Historical Institutionalism (HI), which explains the historical entrenchment of norms; Sociological Institutionalism (SI), which focuses on culture as a system of meaning and legitimacy; and Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI), which examines the strategic calculations of actors within institutional constraints. Together, these strands provide a multi-layered lens to conceptualise corruption as a socially negotiated and institutionally embedded phenomenon.

This framework consists of three interconnected dimensions, each designed to address a specific facet of the research question and aligned with the study's research objectives.

Cultural Foundations

Cultural Foundations captures informal institutions such as balas budi, hierarchical deference, loyalty, face-saving practices and religious or moral vocabularies. These norms are not static traditions, but dynamic interpretive frameworks transmitted through socialisation, forming a substrate that shapes civil servants' initial orientations toward integrity and corruption. HI illuminates how these norms may become resistant to change because of prolonged historical processes. SI further explains how these norms constitute a powerful logic of appropriateness, internalised as part of professional identity and moral duty, guiding what is considered acceptable behaviour within organisational settings. RCI recognises these norms as shaping prevailing incentive structures, social expectations, and implicit costs of deviance that actors must navigate. This dimension corresponds to the study's first research research question and objective (RO1).

Institutional Interfaces

Institutional Interfaces represents the space where these entrenched cultural norms encounter formal institutions such as laws, policies, integrity codes, and enforcement agencies. At this interface, formal rules may be filtered, reinterpreted, or diluted as they move from policy design to implementation. Ambiguity, discretionary authority, and fragmented oversight intensify institutional friction. HI explains why reforms may be layered symbolically rather than embedded substantively. SI explains decoupling where organisations adopt formal policies for legitimacy while daily practices remain anchored in informal expectations. RCI adds a strategic perspective by examining how ambiguity, discretion, and fragmented oversight create calculable risks and opportunities, shaping whether actors comply, circumvent, or rationalise behaviour. This dimension corresponds to the study's second research question and objective (RO2).

Behavioural Negotiations

Behavioural Negotiations focuses on civil servants as active agents who navigate the tensions between cultural expectations and formal requirements. Behavioural outcomes, such as substantive compliance, selective compliance, or ritualistic adherence, can emerge through individual interpretation, justification, and strategic choice. RCI examines how actors strategically weigh the incentives, risks (e.g., probability of detection, severity of sanctions), and protection offered by social networks. SI shows how justifications are framed through culturally accepted scripts (e.g., gift-giving as courtesy or obligation). Over time, outcomes feed back into cultural expectations and institutional routines, reinforcing or gradually reshaping them through a process emphasised within HI and SI. This dimension corresponds to the study's third research question and objective (RO3).

Taken together, the framework emphasises interaction rather than linear causation: cultural norms shape how formal rules are interpreted; institutional arrangements condition how norms are activated or restrained; and behavioural responses influence both cultural expectations and institutional practices over time.

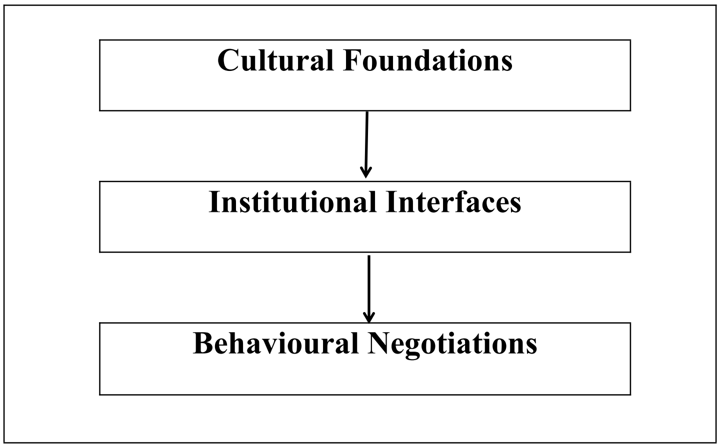

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework of Cultural Norms, Formal Institutions and Compliance in Malaysia's Civil Service

Figure 2.1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study. Cultural Foundations establish what the influential norms are, Institutional Interfaces explain where and how these norms engage with and mediate formal systems, and Behavioural Negotiations reveal the strategic and socially-embedded consequence in terms of actual compliance behaviour. The outcomes from this conceptual framework feed back into cultural norms and institutional practices, reinforcing or gradually reshaping them. Rather than assuming linear causation and fixed behavioural outcomes, this feedback dynamic highlights corruption and compliance as iterative and evolving institutional processeses.

2.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter established the theoretical and conceptual foundations for analysing corruption in Malaysia's civil service through a cultural-institutional lens. It demonstrated that corruption cannot be adequately explained by legal weakness or individual morality alone but must be understood as a negotiated outcome arising from the interaction between formal institutions and informal cultural norms.

The literature review highlighted Malaysia's institutional duality where legal-rational frameworks coexist with relational-moral orders shaped by history, culture, and administrative practice. Cultural norms were shown to function as dynamic interpretive resources that shape perceptions, legitimise behaviour, and influence decisions. The chapter also identified significant gaps in scholarships, particularly the limited attention given to how norms are mobilised in practice and how they mediate reform outcomes.

NIT was introduced as an integrative framework capable of capturing historical persistence, cultural legitimacy and strategic behaviour. The conceptual framework synthesised these insights by mapping how cultural foundations, institutional interfaces, and behavioural negotiations interact to shape compliance behaviour and corruption-related outcomes. The next chapter outlines the research methodology, detailing the qualitative design, data collection strategies, and analytical approach used to empirically examine these cultural-institutional dynamics within Malaysia's civil service.

CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter delineates the philosophical foundations and methodological approach guiding this study's investigation into the mismatch between anti-corruption efforts and outcomes within the Malaysian civil service. It outlines the research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and analytical procedures adopted to examine the interaction between cultural norms and formal institutional rules.

Guided by the research objectives, the study employs a qualitative approach to explore how cultural norms influence civil servants' perceptions and routine practices, how these norms shape the implementation of anti-corruption reforms, and how they interact with institutional rules in shaping policy compliance.

This chapter further details ethical considerations, research limitations, and strategies employed to ensure credibility, dependability, and methodological rigour.

3.2 Research Design

This study investigated how the interaction between cultural norms and formal institutional structures influences the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies within the Malaysian civil service. The research design was informed by three interrelated foundations: philosophical positionings, methodological orientation, and strategic execution.

Philosophically, the study adopted a relativist ontological stance to frame the research inquiry. Based on Mohamad Zulkurnai et al.'s (2014) study, this stance was leveraged in recognition that realities surrounding corruption and administrative practices are socially constructed and may be experienced differently by individuals depending on their institutional positions, situational context, and professional backgrounds. Accordingly, cultural norms are understood as dynamic and context-dependent practices embedded within administrative life. This ontological position allowed the research to remain open to emergent and complex institutional dynamics shaping civil service behaviour.

In terms of epistemology, the study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm. Knowledge was generated through the interpretation of civil servants' perceptions, experiences, and social interactions within their organisational contexts. As noted by Sharifah Liyana et al. (2019), interpretivist approaches are particularly suited to examining subjective meanings within institutional settings. Consistent with this perspective, the study prioritised understanding how actors make sense of rules, norms, and practices related to corruption and integrity.

Building on these philosophical foundations, a qualitative methodological approach was employed. Qualitative inquiry was considered appropriate for this study because it allows close engagement with lived experiences and contextual nuances (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This facilitated in-depth exploration of the interactions between cultural norms and formal institutional arrangements. This facilitated in-depth exploration of meanings, perceptions, and routines within civil service institutional practices.

In terms of strategic execution, the study adopted a single-case study design (Yin, 2018), with the Malaysian civil service serving as the bounded unit of analysis. The civil service was conceptualised as a broad institutional environment comprising multiple agencies operating at federal, state, and local levels. This design was appropriate because it: (i) enabled examination of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts; (ii) facilitated investigation of interactions between formal rules and cultural norms; and (iii) supported triangulation through multiple sources of evidence.

Within this case study design, phenomenological elements were incorporated as an analytical orientation to explore informants lived experiences and meaning-making processes. Rather than constituting a separate research design, phenomenology informed how interview data were interpreted, particularly in understanding how civil servants perceive, experience, and respond to institutional rules and cultural expectations in their daily administrative practices.

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Data Collection Methods

Building on the qualitative approach outlined above, this section details the specific sampling procedures and data collection methods employed. A formal pilot study was not conducted due to access constraints associated with recruiting civil servants, who constitute a sensitive participant group (Cropley, 2022). To ensure clarity and appropriateness, the interview protocols were reviewed by academic supervisors and practitioners prior to data collection.

The study adopted a multi-site research approach, as suggested by Elwood and Martin (2000), to facilitate access to a range of administrative institutions within the Malaysian civil service. Data collection was conducted across selected administrative centres, namely Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Kota Kinabalu, and Seremban. These sites were selected based on their institutional functions within federal and state governance structures, rather than their geographical characteristics. Specifically, the selected sites provided access to different organisational settings involved in policy formulation, administration, enforcement and oversight. This multi-site approach enabled the researcher to engage with civil servants operating within varied institutional roles and hierarchical levels, thereby supporting examination of how cultural norms interact with formal institutional rules across administrative contexts within the civil service.

Data were purposefully drawn from multiple sources including interviews, observational field notes, forums, government documents, and anti-corruption reports to enhance empirical depth and contextual relevance. This multi-source strategy facilitated the examination of both micro-level administrative practices and macro-level institutional policies, thereby strengthening the credibility and contextual validity of the study.

Both primary and secondary data were utilised. For primary data, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture informants' lived experiences and subjective narratives, supplemented by observational field notes recorded during site visits. Secondary data consisted of documents and internet-based materials relevant to civil service institutions, anti-corruption policies and governance reforms, which were used to support data triangulation. Together, these data sources complemented one another and enhanced the robustness of the analytical process.

Primary data collection was conducted over a three-month period, from September to November 2025 to capture contemporary developments in anti-corruption initiatives. In parallel, secondary data spanning the period from 2013 to 2025 were analysed to provide a temporal and historically informed perspective on changes in cultural norms and anti-corruption measures within the Malaysian civil service.

3.3.1 Interviews

Interviews constituted the primary data collection method in this study, enabling the exploration of institutional dynamics through informants' experiences and perspectives. Informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques based on their relevance, expertise and professional involvement in public administration, policy implementation, enforcement, and integrity-related functions.

A total of 20 informants from diverse institutional roles were interviewed. The sampling strategy ensured representation across leadership and operational levels within the Malaysian civil service to capture variation in authority, discretion, and exposure to corruption-related practices. Leadership-level informants were selected to provide insights into policy interpretation, organisational control, and enforcement dynamics, while operational and middle-level officers contributed perspectives on how formal rules and cultural norms are negotiated in everyday administrative practice. Junior officers were included to reflect socialisation processes and frontline administrative experiences. Officers from the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), as policy implementers responsible for translating anti-corruption mandates into practice, offered enforcement-related perspectives. In addition, external informants, including academics, media practitioners, and civil society representatives, were incorporated to provide analytical distance and broader contextual understanding. This composition enabled the examination of how cultural norms and formal rules interact differently across administrative strata. Pseudonyms and role descriptors were assigned to all informants to ensure anonymity, as reflected in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1
Characteristics of Interview Informants

No.	Pseudonym	Position	Years of Service	Participant Category	Brief Notes
1.	I-1	Retired Distinguished Federal Administrator	>30	Former Senior Civil Servant	Worked in 13 agencies and departments across the civil service; awarded Dato' Sri title
2.	I-2	Junior Officer	8	Civil Servant	Federal Administrative Officer involved in projects and tenders
3.	I-3	Lance Corporal	11	Law Enforcement Officer	Worked with two enforcement agencies

4.	I-4	Mid-rank Officer	10	State Civil Servant	Human resource, procurement and finance responsibilities
5.	I-5	Mid-rank Officer	12	State Civil Servant	Worked with two agencies in project tenders and state procurement
6.	I-6	Sergeant	15	Law Enforcement Officer	Human resource administration
7.	I-7	Investigating Officer	10	MACC Officer	Corruption investigation and policy implementation
8.	I-8	Retired Distinguished Municipal Executive	>30	Former Senior Civil Servant	Former city mayor, served across councils, agencies and departments in East and West Malaysia; awarded Tan Sri title
9.	I-9	Investigating Officer	11	MACC Officer	Corruption investigation and policy implementation
10.	I-10	Sergeant	11	Law Enforcement Officer	Crime investigation
11.	I-11	Mid-rank Officer	10	Law Enforcement Officer	Policy implementation and administration
12.	I-12	Senior Investigator	10	Media Practitioner	Investigative journalist specialising in corruption issues
13.	I-13	Former Prime Minister	>40	Former Senior Political Leader	Executive decision-making and policy leadership; awarded Tun title
14.	I-14	Policy Expert	10	Policy Practitioner	Administrative and Diplomatic Officer involved in policy formulation
15.	I-15	Policy Expert	10	Policy Practitioner	Administrative and Diplomatic Officer involved in policy formulation
16.	I-16	Former Chief Commissioner of the MACC	>30	Former Anti-Corruption Executive	Led anti-corruption policy development and implementation; awarded Tan Sri title
17.	I-17	Junior Officer	6	Civil Servant	Procurement and finance administration
18.	I-18	Associate Professor	>20	Academic Expert (Historian)	Historian from Universiti Sains Malaysia
19.	I-19	Head Representative	10	Civil Society Representative	Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism (C4 Center)
20.	I-20	Professor	>30	Academic Expert (Sociologist)	Sociologist from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Examining both leadership and operational levels allows the study to trace how cultural norms and informal expectations circulate vertically within the organisation, from policy interpretation at the top to behavioural enactment at the operational level. This dual-level perspective is essential for understanding corruption not as isolated individual misconduct but as an institutionally embedded phenomenon shaped by interaction across hierarchical boundaries. Corruption and compliance are negotiated differently at leadership and operational levels. Leadership shapes interpretation and enforcement, while operational officers experience cultural pressure in daily practice. Studying only one level would give a partial picture.

All participants received an information sheet and provided written consent prior to participation. Interviews were conducted either in person at approved workplaces or virtually to accommodate confidentiality, availability, and location-specific constraints. Interview durations ranged from 45 to 120 minutes, allowing sufficient depth for probing and elaboration.

Data and thematic saturation was assessed iteratively during data collection and confirmed during preliminary analysis, using criteria adapted from Royse (2008) and Padgett (1998). These criteria included: (i) repetition of information across interviews; (ii) the absence of new insights in subsequent interviews; and (iii) consistency of emerging patterns across participant accounts. Based on these criteria, the final sample size was deemed sufficient for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Three interview approaches were employed as complementary analytical emphases rather than mutually exclusive formats: first, semi-structured interviews were used to explore perceptions and routine administrative practices; second, expert interviews were conducted to obtain insights on institutional arrangements, governance structures, and policy implementation issues; and third, in-depth interviews were utilised to examine more closely the interaction between cultural norms and formal rules, particularly in contexts involving discretion, compliance, and ethical decision-making. The interview instrument is provided in Appendix 3.

Interview data were supplemented by observational field notes recorded during selected site visits, focusing on routine administrative interactions and organisational settings, thereby providing contextual grounding and enhancing the interpretive robustness of the interview narratives. These observational field notes serve a triangulation function that enhance contextual understanding of the institutional culture being discussed.

3.3.2 Document and Internet-based Materials

Document and internet-based materials were utilised as secondary data sources to provide contextual reference and facilitate systematic cross-examination during the analytical process (Cropley, 2022). Relevant elements were identified thematically and aligned with interview data without predetermining analytical outcomes. As such, documents serve a triangulation and corroborative function where themes emerge from interviews and documents are used to verify or contextualise those themes, not to generate new findings independently.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select relevant and credible sources that covered the period from 2013 to 2025. In total, 149 documents and online materials were reviewed based on their relevance to anti-corruption policies, governance, and institutional discourses on integrity within the Malaysian civil service. These materials are included in Appendix 5.

The primary documentary sources comprised official government publications, including national policy documents such as the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019-2023, the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2024-2028, ministerial circulars, codes of ethics, integrity reports, and parliamentary records (Hansard). Legal and regulatory materials, including the MACC Act 2009 and the Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Terrorism Financing and Proceeds of Unlawful Activities Act (AMLATFA) 2001, were also examined to contextualise formal anti-corruption frameworks.

Additional sources included international and comparative materials such as reports and frameworks published by Transparency International, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the World Bank, and other international organisations. These documents were reviewed to situate Malaysian anti-corruption initiatives within broader global governance discourses, without serving as evaluative benchmarks.

Media-based sources, including publicly accessible interviews, documentaries, podcasts, and online discussions related to corruption and governance, were also consulted. As noted by Silverman (2020) and Creswell and Poth (2018), such materials can constitute qualitative data when used systematically. Academic publications, historical records, and archived policy documents were further reviewed to provide background context on institutional reforms and governance practices. These publicly available discussions were not treated as the main primary data of the study. Instead, they were used as supplementary qualitative materials to contextualise and triangulate the findings obtained from the main interview data.

Collectively, these documentary and internet-based sources complemented the interview data by enabling triangulation across formal texts, public records, and supplementary narratives. The use of multiple sources ensured that interpretations were informed by a broad evidentiary base rather than reliance on a single data type.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for analysing qualitative data in this study. This approach enabled systematic organisation and examination of interview transcripts, observational field notes, and documentary materials. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process designed to ensure analytical rigour while maintaining close engagement with the empirical data. The study also adapts core analytical techniques from Grounded Theory, specifically the constant comparison of data across sources and the progression from initial to axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This reflects a theoretically informed eclecticism by combining robust methods from different qualitative traditions to best meet the research objectives.

All qualitative materials were prepared prior to formal analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed into verbatim and anonymised to protect informant confidentiality. In total, interview transcripts (489 pages), observational field notes (81 pages), and 149 documentary and internet-based materials were compiled for analysis. Materials in English and *Bahasa Melayu* were translated by the researcher with contextual annotations added where necessary to preserve meaning. All data were systematically organised and managed using NVivo 14 to ensure transparency, traceability, and consistency throughout the analytical process. Interview transcripts and field notes were imported and open-coded using the software’s node structure. Codes were subsequently organised into parent nodes representing candidate themes, enabling systematic cross-referencing of coded segments across informants and institutional roles. Throughout this process, the researcher exercised continuous interpretive judgement thus, NVivo served as an organisational tool rather than an analytical engine.

Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), adapted to accommodate the multi-source nature of the dataset, which comprised interview transcripts, observational field notes, and documentary materials.

The first phase is familiarisation. Following transcription, all interview recordings were listened to repeatedly alongside their transcripts to ensure accuracy and to begin developing an intuitive familiarity with the data. Transcripts and field notes were read in full on multiple occasions prior to any formal coding, enabling the researcher to note initial impressions, recurring ideas, and points of analytical interest across accounts.

The second phase is initial coding. Open coding was conducted systematically using NVivo. Semantically meaningful units comprising words, phrases, sentences, or passages were identified and assigned descriptive codes that preserved the language and meaning of the informant where possible. Codes were applied inductively, without imposing predetermined categories, to ensure that the analytical framework remained responsive to the data. Both interview transcripts and relevant documentary sources were coded within the same NVivo project to facilitate cross-referencing.

The next phase is theme generation. Initial codes were reviewed and grouped into clusters of related meaning. Codes that shared a common underlying idea or spoke to similar dimensions of the research question were consolidated into candidate themes. This process involved iterative movement between the coded dataset and the emerging thematic structure to assess coherence and internal consistency.

Theme review is the fourth phase. Each candidate theme was reviewed against the full set of coded extracts assigned to it, as well as against the broader dataset, to assess whether it accurately captured a meaningful and distinct pattern. Themes that were too broad, internally inconsistent, or insufficiently supported by the data were refined, merged, or set aside at this stage. This phase ensured that the final thematic structure reflected the data rather than the researcher's a priori expectations.

Phase 5 is theme definition and naming. The boundaries of each confirmed theme were clearly defined, specifying what the theme captured and what fell outside its scope. Each theme was assigned a name that conveyed its analytical substance in relation to the research question. The defining logic of each theme was documented to support reflexive audit and to guide the write-up.

The final phase is writing up. Representative extracts were selected from the coded dataset to illustrate each theme in Chapter 4. Extracts were chosen not solely on the basis of frequency but on their capacity to illuminate the interaction between cultural norms and formal institutional rules as the central analytical concern of this study. Where a theme was elaborated most substantively by a small number of informants, this is noted in the discussion alongside the analytical rationale for its inclusion.

The following paragraphs detail the step-by-step coding procedure, encompassing the deductive and inductive strategies applied, before summarising the three iterative analytical phases in Table 3.2. The researcher engaged in repeated reading of transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials to achieve familiarity with the dataset. Initial coding involved a combination of deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive codes were informed by sensitising concepts drawn from the literature and the study's conceptual framework, serving as preliminary analytical guides that facilitated structured engagement with the data without predetermining analytical outcomes.

These deductive codes were drawn specifically from HI, SI, and RCI of NIT, which formed a provisional coding template applied during the first pass of transcript reading. This allowed the researcher to systematically examine whether and how theoretical constructs appeared in participants' accounts. Subsequently, inductive coding was conducted to allow patterns to emerge directly from interview narratives, observations, and documentary materials. Inductive coding was conducted through open, line-by-line reading of passages that extended beyond the deductive code list. Emergent codes were assigned in vivo labels or descriptive phrases derived directly from informants' language, allowing themes unforeseen by the conceptual framework to surface. These were recorded as new nodes in NVivo 14, maintaining analytical transparency. Throughout these processes, constant comparison was applied across data sources to examine similarities, differences, and recurring patterns. This sequencing was deliberate, deductive coding ensured that analytically significant concepts derived from the literature were systematically applied across all data sources while inductive coding preserved the capacity to identify empirically grounded themes that the existing literature had not anticipated. Together, they produced a coding structure that is both theoretically anchored and empirically responsive.

As summarised in Table 3.2, data analysis proceeded through three iterative phases, the initial coding, the axial coding, and the final coding to distill raw data into thematic patterns addressing the research objectives. Initial coding captured discrete concepts emerging from informants' narratives through line-by-line examination of transcripts. Then, axial coding organised initial codes into intermediate categories by identifying relationships and clustering conceptually related codes. The final coding synthesised axial categories into overarching themes representing the study's analytical findings which ensured systematic progression from descriptive observation to analytical interpretation.

Table 3.2
Coding Process

Dimension	**Initial Coding**	**Axial Coding (Categorisations)**	**Final Coding (Themes)**
Cultural Foundations	Administrative routines, hierarchical arrangements, and inherited work practices	Hierarchical structures, inherited procedures, and long-established systems	The Power of Foundations
	Reciprocity, self-control, capacity for influence, and authority	A. Willpower B. Power Struggles	The Power of Relationships
	Personal judgment, background knowledge, emotional responses, and situational awareness	A. Individual reasoning B. Convenience, Pressure and Decision-Making C. Situational Awareness D. Education E. Lived Experiences	The Power of Mindset
	Grey zone, social bonding, gift- giving, and institutional slogans	A. Competing Narratives B. Cultural Sentiment	The Power of Words
Institutional Interfaces	Economic benefits, materialistic ambitions, temporal change, Covid-19, and social media	1.1: When Traditional Norms Facilitate Reform 1.2: Changes in Workplace Interactions and the Shift Toward Transactional Exchanges	The Transformation of Relational Obligations into Transactional Exchanges
	Inter-agency variation and cultural differences in leadership and work	2.1: The Ritualisation of Reform 2.2: The Hidden Asset - Diversity as Potential Facilitator of Reform	The Performance of Uniformity Masking Diverse Ethical Practices

	Expectations from superiors and colleagues	3.1: The Vertical Pressure 3.2: The Horizontal Pressure 3.3: The Pincer Effect - Convergence of Vertical and Horizontal Pressures	How Hierarchical and Peer Pressures Collude and Creates Negotiable Formal Accountability Mechanisms
Behavioural Negotiations	Changes in work environment, leadership changes, and situational flexibility	1.1: The Arc from Idealism to Accommodation 1.2: Cultural Scripts as Normative Sanctions 1.3: The Re-calibration of Professional Priorities	The Socialisation Lifecycle - The Erosion of the Compliant Self
	Formal expectations intersect with superior Orders, and flexibility of interpreting rules	2.1: A Legacy of Layered Rules 2.2: Fragmented Loyalties 2.3: Strategic Signaling and Social Pressure	The Arena of Negotiation - The Disunion Between Paper and Practice
	Work visibility, departmental risks, leadership, and situational ambiguity	3.1: The Mediating Effect of Visibility and Scrutiny 3.2: The Variable of Leadership 3.3: The Variable of Ambiguity	The Spectrum of Compliance - The Power of Context

As Table 3.2 illustrates, the coding process moved systematically from inductive initial codes through axial categorisation to final thematic synthesis, consistent with both Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Following initial coding, related codes were systematically grouped and refined through iterative comparison across data sources to ensure internal coherence and analytical consistency. Provisional thematic categories were reviewed through repeated movement between coded extracts and the broader dataset. This process focused on organising the data into a coherent analytical structure suitable for subsequent reporting, rather than producing substantive interpretations at this stage. Themes were retained when they captured substantively significant patterns through repeated mention, exceptional depth of elaboration, and capacity to illuminate the interaction between cultural norms and formal institutional rules. This approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidance that thematic salience is a reflexive, researcher-driven judgement. The frequency of mention indicated thematic pervasiveness across the sample while depth of elaboration indicated institutional significance. Themes were confirmed when both patterns converged. A detailed account of thematic emergence across the interview sequence is provided in Appendix 6.

To enhance analytical credibility, triangulation was conducted across interviews, observational field notes and documentary sources. This enabled cross-verification of patterns identified within individual data types. In addition, member checking was undertaken with selected informants to confirm the accuracy of factual representations and contextual descriptions, while peer debriefing sessions with supervisors supported reflexive scrutiny of analytical decisions and minimised potential researcher bias.

In the final stage of analysis, the refined analytical structure was prepared for reporting. Thematic saturation was assessed using established qualitative indicators, including redundancy of information across interviews, the absence of new patterns in later stages of analysis, and consistency across data sources. This ensured that the dataset was sufficiently developed to support the presentation of empirical findings in Chapter 4 and subsequent interpretive discussion in Chapter 5.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Before data collection commenced, ethical clearance was obtained from the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) ethics review committee (Ref. Number: REC/09/2025 (PG/MR/530)) as attached in Appendix 4. The research protocol and data management procedures were developed in accordance with UiTM's ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants and the integrity of the research process. All methodological procedures were documented to maintain procedural transparency and ethical accountability throughout the study.

3.5.1 Interviews

Ethical standards relating to informed consent, confidentiality, data protection, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the interview process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all informants, and relevant gatekeeper approvals were secured where required. Informants were provided with clear explanations of the study's purpose, scope, potential risks, and their rights as participants, including the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. These measures helped mitigate potential power imbalances and ensured participant autonomy.

To protect informant identity, pseudonyms (e.g., I-1, I-2) were assigned, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Interviews were conducted in a manner that prioritised professionalism, respect, and non-judgemental engagement. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any questions, particularly those perceived as sensitive or potentially incriminating. Interview questions were designed to minimise psychological distress and reputational risk, given the sensitivity of corruption-related topics.

For observational activities, the researcher only attended invited civil service talks and activities related to integrity and corruption. The researcher maintained a non-intrusive observer role and ensured that the purpose of observation was made explicit to relevant officers. No covert observation was conducted.

All data were securely stored using encrypted systems. Interview recordings were stored securely following transcription, and access to data was restricted to the researcher. Field notes and documentary materials were similarly protected to ensure confidentiality and data security.

3.5.2 Document and Internet-based Materials

Document and internet-based sources were handled in accordance with recognized ethical standards governing access, use, and interpretation of materials. Publicly accessible materials were utilised, whereas restricted documents were accessed only with formal permission where required. These procedures ensured respect for intellectual property rights and reduced the risk of unauthorised use of sensitive information.

Source selection was conducted transparently, with emphasis placed on the use of credible, verifiable, and contextually relevant materials. Confidentiality considerations were observed to prevent unintended disclosure of sensitive content. Care was taken to avoid misrepresentation, selective citation, or distortion of documentary evidence, particularly when analysing sensitive or contested materials.

All documentary materials were retained and reported in accordance with established data management guidelines to ensure data authenticity, traceability, and ethical accountability throughout the research process.

3.6 Limitations, Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Despite careful research design and implementation, several limitations were acknowledged in this study. These limitations are common in qualitative research, particularly when examining sensitive institutional topics.

One limitation relates to generalisability. As a qualitative study employing purposive sampling, the findings are not statistically generalisable to the entire Malaysian civil service. Although the inclusion of informants from diverse institutional roles, hierarchical levels, and organisational backgrounds enhanced internal diversity, certain administrative levels or geographical areas may remain under-represented. To mitigate this limitation, the study incorporated multiple perspectives, including those from civil servants, enforcement officers, academics, non-governmental organisations, and media practitioners.

Resource constraints also pose challenges. Limited funding and access restricted the scope of primary data collection. To address this, a combination of physical and virtual interviews was employed, and extensive use was made of publicly accessible documents, policy reports, and institutional records to supplement interview data.

Topic sensitivity posed another significant limitation. Given the sensitive nature of corruption-related discussions, some potential informants declined participation, while others exhibited caution during interviews. To mitigate this, ethical safeguards such as anonymisation, secure data storage, and voluntary participation were emphasised. Interview techniques were adapted to include indirect and non-intrusive questioning to minimise discomfort and encourage participation.

Time constraints were also acknowledged. The research was conducted within the timeframe of a master's programme, which limited extended longitudinal engagement. This was partially mitigated through retrospective interviews with retired officials and the use of archival documents to provide temporal context.

A further limitation concerns the reliability of self-reported data. In studies involving sensitive topics such as corruption, informants may engage in social desirability bias where they consciously or unconsciously present responses that align with institutional norms or expected conduct rather than reflecting actual practice. Power asymmetries between informants of differing hierarchical ranks may also have influenced candour. While anonymisation and indirect questioning techniques were employed to reduce this effect, the possibility that responses were shaped by professional self-preservation cannot be entirely discounted.

Finally, the interpretive nature of qualitative research may introduce researcher subjectivity. To minimise potential bias, triangulation was employed across interviews, observations, and documentary sources. Reflexive practices, including reflective journaling and peer debriefing, were also implemented to enhance analytical transparency.

3.7 Research Credibility and Replicability

To ensure trustworthiness, the study addressed credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability through established qualitative research strategies. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation and member checking, ensuring that factual representations and contextual interpretations were accurately reflected. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing sessions were also used to surface researcher assumptions and document interpretive decisions, thereby strengthening analytical transparency. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), these strategies are essential for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Dependability was supported through the maintenance of a clear audit trail documenting key research decisions, including sampling rationales, interview protocols, data management procedures, and analytical memos. These records provided systematic documentation of the research process and supported procedural consistency.

Confirmability was enhanced by distinguishing between controlled and non-controlled elements within the study. Controlled elements included instrument design, sampling criteria, recruitment procedures, data management practices, transcription standards, coding protocols, and data security measures. These procedures were implemented and recorded to minimise researcher bias. Non-controlled elements, such as informants' willingness to disclose information and institutional gatekeeper decisions, were acknowledged and documented as contextual factors influencing data collection.

Transferability was facilitated through detailed documentation of the research context, settings, and informant profiles. These descriptions provide a transparent methodological framework that enables readers and future researchers to assess the applicability of the study’s approach and insights to other institutional or organisational contexts.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the methodological strategy applied to guide the collection and analysis of empirical data for this study. It detailed the research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and analytical procedures employed to examine the interaction between cultural norms and formal institutional rules within the Malaysian civil service.

Through purposive sampling, multi-source data collection and thematic analysis, the chapter established a systematic and transparent methodological foundation for the study. Ethical considerations, research limitations, and mitigation strategies were also addressed to ensure research integrity, credibility, and rigour. Overall, the methodological choices and acknowledged constraints discussed in this chapter provide a framework for the presentation of findings in Chapter 4 and the subsequent analytical discussion in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents empirical findings from interviews with 20 informants across different agencies and job levels, organised into themes developed through thematic analysis. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the patterns, experiences, and perspectives shared by informants. Verbatim excerpts are included to preserve the authenticity of informants' voices and to illustrate how they make sense of their daily practices, organisational expectations, and interactions. Rather than offering full theoretical interpretation, this chapter foregrounds the recurring structures, tensions, and behavioural patterns emerging from the data. Deeper theoretical engagement is developed in Chapter 5.

Themes were developed through thematic analysis following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were generated from interview transcripts through repeated reading and line-by-line annotation. Related codes were grouped into candidate themes, which were subsequently reviewed, refined, and named based on their frequency of recurrence, conceptual salience, and coherence across informants. Thematic saturation was considered throughout this process, with coding concluding when no substantively new patterns emerged.

Supplementary materials including official policy documents, government circulars, selected public statements from speeches, and podcasts were used for contextual triangulation rather than treated as primary empirical data. These materials supported interpretation by situating interview findings within the broader institutional environment. As the data accumulated, similar narratives and behavioural descriptions reappeared across informants at different hierarchical levels, reinforcing the stability of the thematic structure presented in this chapter.

4.2 Background of Informants

Participants in this study represented a range of agencies and job levels with work experience spanning from 6 to more than 30 years. Informants included senior officials involved in policy formulation, mid-level officers responsible for administrative coordination, and frontline implementers engaged in daily operational tasks. This distribution enabled the study to capture perspectives across different layers of institutional authority and responsibility within the civil service.

During interviews, several informants used indirect expressions, vague references, and culturally embedded proverbs when discussing sensitive matters. In some instances, informants paused, avoided certain topics, or chose general descriptions instead of explicit statements. These speech patterns, shifts in tone and non-verbal cues were recorded as part of the empirical material. Such communication styles reflected the sensitivity of corruption-related topics within bureaucratic settings and were treated as meaningful components of the data rather than as limitations.

Informants also differed in how they described their roles. Senior officials (e.g., I- 1, I-8, I-13, I-16) spoke about policy direction, organisational procedures, and overall institutional expectations. Mid-level and frontline officers (e.g., I-5, I-10, I-14) focused more on daily routines, interactions with colleagues, and practical experiences within their departments. This variation in narrative emphasis illustrates how positional authority shapes the framing of integrity, responsibility, and administrative decision-making. Togther, these accounts provide a layered empirical foundation for examining how cultural norms and formal structures are experienced across organisational levels.

4.2.1 Perspectives Across Organisational Levels

Senior officials described their roles in policy formulation, organisational direction, and monitoring of administrative procedures. Their narratives focused on the responsibilities of the civil service, the importance of understanding government policies and the need for effective internal controls:

> I-1: *"Actually, you have to facilitate. You see their procedure is lengthy, difficult. Why? Cut it short. Make it simple… The main role of a public servant, no matter what or where, is to facilitate private enterprise, the private sector, even ordinary citizens. Facilitate them."*

> I-8: *"Whether we are really serious in formulating and enforcing rules so that the opportunities for engaging in corruption are not something tolerated... Many times, by focusing solely on the law, we will often*

> *overlook the fact that there are matters that require attention, especially from the management of these organisations. How they view and design programmes that don't provide opportunities for people who have a tendency to accept bribes, not just internally, but also for external parties..."*

> I-13: *"Sometimes they do not understand what the government policy is… But sometimes they have different views and what they do may not be as expected by the government. So, there must be some communication between the elected government and the civil service. There is some provision for that. And the greater understanding between the legislative and the executive, the better will be the policies of government being implemented…"*

> I-16: *"In terms of compliance and initiative taken, I think we can go back in 1980. And I remember in 1996, the first time the government created a special committee under the cabinet in charge of looking into anti-corruption initiatives... What is most important is we introduce transparency… We actively encourage them to create an environment where every agency has to address their own internal control in fighting corruption."*

Senior officials tended to discuss corruption and compliance from a broader institutional and governance perspective. Their narratives emphasised policy coordination, organisational transparency, and internal control mechanisms rather than individual behaviour alone. This reflects how higher-ranking officers are more directly involved in strategic administration and policy oversight.

In contrast, field-level implementers described corruption-related situations through everyday administrative experiences and interpersonal interactions. Their accounts reflected the practical realities of dealing with the public, workplace relationships, and procedural pressures within daily operations:

> *I-2: "For example, if it happens that the person who wants to handle or obtain the project is an acquaintance of someone in that department or office. Then they invite them to eat and chat. And then accidentally their project gets approved or whatever. Things like that are actually beyond the department's control, if I'm not mistaken. Such things are actually what we or the department try to avoid… But actually, the individual themselves can control it."*

> *I-3: "Changing these norms is quite difficult, quite hard because we are dealing with the public and different people who have their own ways... In comparison, issues of corruption in prison wardens are viewed differently. Prison wardens are more closed off, so there is no interference. As PDRM,*

we interact with the community, so this matter is difficult to manage. This is the challenging part, working with the public."

I-5: "As a civil servant, our duty is to accept government policies and work together with the government to implement them. If there are officers who do not comply, for example there will certainly be investigation..."

I-17: "...those processes are based on KPIs, based on current SOPs, and they help improve efficiency in managing applications. For me, it is necessary... Yet, perhaps there are officers who take advantage of this as an obstacle to speed up the process and as an opportunity to obtain any offers."

Across interviews, some mid-level officers used indirect expressions, general statements or hypothetical examples when referring to sensitive issues. Several informants avoided direct comments about colleagues or senior management. Cultural phrases such as *"itu hal biasa"* were occasionally used to describe certain practices. As one informant noted, I-6: *"There are things we know happen, but we don't discuss openly"*.

These communication patterns were documented as part of the data because they reflected the sensitive nature of corruption-related discussions within bureaucratic settings. The use of indirect expressions, hypothetical examples, and culturally embedded phrases suggested caution in discussing workplace practices openly, particularly when involving colleagues or organisational culture. Taken together, these accounts demonstrate how perceptions of corruption, integrity, and compliance vary across organisational levels while remaining embedded within a shared institutional environment.

4.3 Findings

The findings are organised into three dimensions, each responds to the three research objectives. The first is Cultural Foundations. It addresses RO1, which examines how cultural norms shape civil servants' understanding of workplace behaviour. The next dimension, Institutional Interfaces, addresses RO2, which investigates how cultural norms interact with the implementation of formal anti-corruption reforms. The final dimension, Behavioural Negotiations, addresses RO3, which explores how civil servants navigate tensions between formal rules and informal expectations in daily practice.

4.3.1 Cultural Foundations: How Cultural Norms Influence Civil Servants' Perceptions and Behaviour (RO1)

Cultural Foundations presents the ways in which informants describe cultural expectations, workplace routines and inherited practices that shape their understanding of bureaucratic life. Informants frequently referred to established norms, long-standing administrative habits, and patterns of behaviour that influence how civil servants carry out their duties. Four themes emerged from the data: The Power of Foundations, The Power of Relationships, The Power of Mindsets, and The Power of Words.

Theme 1: The Power of Foundations

Informants described enduring routines and administrative traditions that influence their work processes. They referred to hierarchical structures, inherited procedures, and long-established systems that guide behaviour within the civil service. Several informants spoke about established modes of operation, deference to superiors, and efforts to improve procedures within their agencies.

Senior officers explained how certain practices have been carried over across different administrative periods and continue to shape decision-making. I-1 recounted:

> I-1: *"There are gatekeepers of power… You know where is the power? JPA (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam), Treasury, second to that at that time ICU, Implementation Coordination Unit… The Treasury and ICU are under the Prime Minister…"*

Other senior officials described initiatives they had introduced while in office, and the extent to which such efforts continued after their tenure.

> I-8: *"During my time as Dato Bandar (City Mayor), we used computerised automations and emails so no need to make people wait long… every Friday I always hold talks and urged my subordinates to simplify the work… but after I retire and visit the place, they go back to previous style of work… new Dato Bandar, new style…"*

These accounts suggest that organisational practices are often shaped by institutional legacies that extend beyond individual office holders. Informants frequently described workplace routines as being transmitted across administrative generations, creating continuity in organisational behaviour despite changes in leadership and administrative priorities.

Several informants highlighted expectations around obedience and the role of superiors in guiding decision-making.

> I-3: *"In the service, we are taught that following the superior's instruction is part of our amanah (trust). Even if you feel something is not right, you must respect the chain of command… for my experience, I have not encountered any yet."*

> I-17: *"There are bosses that become enablers of corruption, some may openly ask for gifts.. some may not do it but they allow their subordinates to, these kind of bosses are what some officers like and support but when they encounter a boss that is rigid and strict, these officers do not like the boss and may not cooperate…"*

Some informants described situations in which subordinates rely on their leaders' judgement when executing instructions.

> I-9: *"They normally think - 'If the boss says it is okay, then it is fine. Maybe he knows the policy better. We just follow.'"*

Taken together, these narratives indicate that hierarchy functions as more than a formal administrative arrangement. Obedience to authority was frequently portrayed as a normal and expected feature of bureaucratic life, influencing how officers interpret responsibility, accountability, and discretion when carrying out their duties.

In several interviews, informants shifted to general statements or hypothetical examples when asked about sensitive issues involving superiors. Others avoided explicit descriptions or referred to practices indirectly. As I-6 mentioned:

> I-6: *"We all understand the duties and accept them well; if we do not like the duty, we will work hard and apply for promotion or transfer… it's simple."*

Informants also shared experiences in which hierarchical relationships provided support or protection within their work environments.

> I-2: *"We refer to our seniors as Abang and Kakak. They instilled positive environment... when dealing with contractors and private companies, there is always a risk... With Abang and Kakak, there is a sense of group protection that deflects these fears."*

The findings further suggest that hierarchy is not always perceived negatively. While hierarchical arrangements may reinforce compliance and deference, they may also provide guidance, mentorship, and a sense of collective protection, particularly for officers operating in uncertain or high-risk environments.

Other informants noted changes in work culture where collaborative approaches are practiced in some agencies.

> I-10: *"Hierarchy is significant… it helps to define job scopes and roles so there is no overlap..."*

> I-14: *"Before this, yes, there is a seniority-based obedience, but now in the Ministry, we have group-style work, each officer is considered a collaborator… all officers contribute their ideas..."*

> I-3: *"In the police, the one good thing is we work in teams… we often rotate duties. This is a good thing to avoid certain individuals from being targeted..."*

Although hierarchical norms remain influential, several informants described emerging workplace practices that emphasise teamwork and collaboration. These accounts suggest that traditional structures increasingly coexist with more participatory forms of interaction, reflecting gradual shifts in organisational culture across some public sector agencies.

Informants also referred to historical developments in administrative structures and how they shaped current practices. Some pointed to older bureaucratic arrangements, colonial influences, and inherited procedures.

> I-13: *"we did not have a civil service as such during the time of the Malay absolute monarchy. The British introduced a system of government in which there is a civil service that serves the government and is responsible for carrying out government policies towards the people… the British*

system, in terms of its arrangement, is very good. There is nothing that we are unhappy about. But sometimes, of course, the people in the civil service are not holding to the principles of administration..."

I-18: *"Who created the perception that society is fundamentally divided by race?… Historically, politicians negotiated, now they don't... Even small things can build perceptions in society, for example, issues of racism... These leave perceptions as elements that separate them."*

These reflections indicate that cultural foundations are not limited to contemporary workplace experiences. Informants frequently linked present-day administrative behaviour to broader historical developments, suggesting that workplace norms are embedded within longer institutional and societal trajectories.

Several informants linked current practices to long-standing administrative habits shaped over time. Some officers noted that certain departments operate in silos or follow inherited work styles.

I-1: *"The policy didn't get through, and then people blame this and that… it doesn't follow the policy. So some of the officers, because they are afraid, just follow the minister's orders. You can't say, 'Oh, this is not so good'… it's a Yes Sir culture."*

I-2: *"if the senior officer makes a decision hastily without thinking it through, this can lead to negative comments or adverse consequences for him. However, if a subordinate simply follows orders from their superior without thinking carefully, I feel that would also become a problem and a mistake for them, because when a department is involved in a case or issue, it's not necessarily the individual alone who will be questioned or prosecuted. Sometimes, this can result in the organisation itself being charged…"*

I-3: *"If they didn't ask us to take action, we wouldn't take action, just like that."*

I-8: *"We try to follow formats to implement policies, and then we also need to see if it is related to how we instill values in government staff so that it becomes more transparent and ready to provide this development that needs to be carried out..."*

I-14: *"So sometimes when you do a certain type of work, they say, 'Oh we do it this way, the process flow is A, B, C.' So that's because of their norms. But if we look at the circular, it will be A, C, D… Cultural norms within the organisation itself, especially in close-service departments, they will follow* *the norms on how the process works. But they don't cross-check it with the actual process flow… if you go by the process flow, that's not really the way the work is done."*

I-15: *"How can you tell if there is corruption? It's hard to know whether this information is real or fake. Usually, the person who leaks the secret is someone from his surroundings, or a team member… Projects are normally done by a small team and other people may not know what the group does or what happened unless someone from the team said it."*

Collectively, these accounts reveal the persistence of deeply embedded administrative habits that continue to shape everyday organisational behaviour. Informants described situations where inherited routines, informal expectations, and established ways of working frequently operate alongside formal procedures. Rather than simply following official rules, officers often rely on culturally embedded understandings of how work is normally conducted within their organisations.

Overall, the findings indicate that cultural foundations are embedded within administrative routines, hierarchical arrangements and inherited organisational practices. These foundations shape how civil servants understand authority, interpret their responsibilities, and navigate everyday bureaucratic life, often influencing behaviour in ways that extend beyond formal rules and procedures.

Theme 2: The Power of Relationships

This theme captures how informants described the internal and external conflicts when making decisions. Informants explained that interpersonal relationships and social bonds through a person's self-regulation and social network positioning can influence how formal rules are implemented. The data show recurring references to elements such as reciprocity, self-control, capacity for influence, and authority.

A. Willpower

Informants described willpower as the mental and moral strength to resist external pressures and internal temptations.

I-2: *"In my opinion, an individual who is willing to set aside integrity by engaging in corruption does so because they want to keep up with the times.*

We are currently living in a world filled with technology, everyday, we use Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and so on. Sometimes, individuals will observe others' lifestyles there. Today they go eat at a fancy restaurant, the next month they have a new car, go on vacation and so on… this indirectly forms a sense of envy and dissatisfaction for what others have which indirectly leads the individual to take the easy path that involves sacrificing their integrity by engaging in corruption. As we all know, taking bribes is easy. Leak project information and so on, it's easy money for someone to make."

I-9: *"They do this on the basis of efficiency, trying to fulfil certain criterias, tasks…"*

I-18: *"It happens in society, not a matter related to the government or the people, but related to humans themselves, their attitude. If their attitude is wrong, indeed they will practice it. If their religion is strong, they will avoid it. There are many elements. I think our culture of corruption is not as focused compared to other places, but it still exists."*

I-11: *"It goes back to the person, whether they are strong to face adversity and pressure…"*

I-1: *"...to work in the government, to be a civil servant you have to know how to face the pressure, know how to manage bosses, people, you must be strong."*

These accounts suggest that integrity was frequently understood as a personal capacity rather than solely an organisational requirement. Informants consistently emphasised the importance of self-discipline, resilience, and moral conviction in resisting pressures that may encourage unethical conduct.

External sources echoed the idea that integrity is a fundamental everyday choice. Tun Mahathir Mohamed implied leadership values as willpower of an individual to do the right thing, as in a Launching Ceremony of the 10th USLS 2019 keynote speech: *"A leader must have integrity and honesty as without them, the leader will be corrupt and untrustworthy… To me, leadership is not rocket science. It is about everyday values."* (Prime Minister's Office Archives, 2019).

Dato' Seri Ayob Khan also stated: *"Not only those with top positions, individuals at the bottom also should uphold leadership values, show examples that uphold integrity and honesty…"* (Youtube MalaysiaKini, 2023).

Other informants reported that upholding integrity could lead to social or professional isolation within their departments. In later discussions, they described that willpower was the strength needed to withstand adversity and pressure within the workplace itself.

Taken together, the findings indicate that willpower was not viewed as a static personal trait but as an ongoing process of self-regulation. Informants frequently associated ethical behaviour with the ability to withstand both organisational pressures and personal temptations that emerge in everyday work settings.

B. Power Struggles

Informants described that peer pressure and the threat of isolation are primary external forces which individuals strategise for professional survival.

> I-8: *"In this system, we survive through connections. If you always follow the rules strictly, sometimes you become isolated. People will say you are not cooperative."*

> I-1: *"If your entire peer in that department is on the take, if you do not take, you might be in trouble... you might be eventually forced to also take."*

> I-12: *"Everyone has to be careful of the trap of corruption, this means that people use kindness and other gestures that appear to be goodwill but actually are motivated by something else. They manipulate balas budi (reciprocity) to get whatever they want, money, control, anything…"*

These accounts suggest that workplace relationships may create competing expectations for civil servants. While formal rules emphasise impartiality and compliance, informal networks often generate pressures to demonstrate loyalty, reciprocity, and group solidarity.

Cultural norms can be leveraged as ethical traps. I-1 recalled some individuals advised that rejection could *"discourage the person from acting out their kind gestures"*. Similar accounts reported that cultural norms can be weaponised to pressure an individual into violating a formal rule to uphold certain obligations. The individual may be wedged between the struggle of power. Additionally, informants noted that ambiguity and poor management conditions can create opportunities and rationalisations for cutting corners.

Several informants described situations where acts of kindness, generosity, or social obligation were not always interpreted as neutral gestures. Instead, these actions could create implicit expectations that complicated an officer's ability to maintain professional distance and compliance with formal procedures.

> I-5: *"We have job rotation, but sometimes we are short-staffed, so one staff member sometimes takes on two or three portfolios. When a new management comes in, our communication isn't clear, and this can become an opportunity for some civil servants to choose the more convenient option for work; usually, that's how it is."*

These narratives indicate that ethical challenges do not always emerge from deliberate misconduct. Informants frequently pointed to organisational conditions such as unclear communication, staffing shortages, and administrative ambiguity as circumstances that may encourage procedural shortcuts or rationalisations.

Many informants expressed that civil servants often face the risk of struggling with confrontation, especially those in whose tasks face public scrutiny. As such, it is possible that civil servants may feign loyalty and conformity to hierarchy, while personally struggling with ethical conduct and integrity.

A recurring pattern across interviews was the perception that ethical conduct may carry professional consequences. Informants described situations where strict adherence to rules could result in social isolation, strained workplace relationships, or perceptions of being uncooperative.

Several informants further described how anti-corruption efforts may become entangled with broader organisational and political pressures. These pressures were frequently portrayed as influencing both the implementation of integrity initiatives and the willingness of individuals to challenge unethical practices.

> I-16: *"During our research, many heads of anti-corruption has sacrificed themselves or been victimised… when they perform their job effectively at the end of the day, they will be terminated or stopped or if they are very lucky, they've been promoted to a higher role but less powerful... There are same cases wherever anti-corruption process being terminated or victimised, in Nigeria, Sri Lanka or even in Hong Kong … CPIB Singapore and all that, even KPK anti-corruption in Indonesia at one time, more than 50 officers who are independent in fighting corruption. They are professionals, they are lawyers, they are accountants... And this is a strategy... They move everybody, including the commissioner… they are making the anti-corruption less effective or more comply with what the government want… So for 40 years, I saw in Malaysia, there is attempt and*

> *this is not abnormal. Of course, if you investigate politician, the ruling politician, for example, they will ask you. But it depends on the chief commissioner. There is a limit for you to allow things to happen, but you cannot cross the line where it will cause public confidence decaying or lost."*

External sources reported incidents showcasing MACC leadership navigating intense pressure by strategically framing their tenures around principle rather than concessions. For example, the eventual retirement of Tan Sri Abu Kassim and Dato' Seri Mohd Shukri Abdull were presented not as a surrender to pressure, but as the fulfillment of a deliberate and principled mandate. Similarly, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim consistently positioned to fight against corruption as a central pillar of his administration since his rise as Prime Minister. To dilute the perception of power struggles and pressures over the anti-corruption leadership, he publicly urges the citizenry and political figures to allow these agencies to operate without interference. In his words: *"The MACC must always carry out its duties and responsibilities independently and impartially, including in investigations involving political figures and former national leaders … If it is clear from the investigation that there is a high-profile case which has strong grounds for prosecution, then it is the responsibility of the MACC and the Attorney General's Chambers to do so."* (MalayMail, Bernama, 2023).

In some cases, opportunities are leveraged as a tool to achieve desired benefits:

> I-15: *"They leverage their work efficiency as an excuse to leave early, take things from office to their home, or use the office like their living area or do anything they want, the bosses closed one eye and also leveraged this as an unspoken incentive, at the same time, those who don't perform will be asked 'Why are you not like your colleague?'"*

> I-11: *"There are bosses who encourage unethical behaviours, but I have not experienced that…"*

> I-2: *"One of my previous boss reported a company for attempted corruption during a tender application but he became the one who was detained. The company managed to put the blame on him and he was punished… sometime later, the higher ups declare my boss was proven innocent, but they don't detain the culprit, plus, they didn't remove his name from the blacklist… People don't really talk about this, I cannot deny that there are people, seniors, like that, but my experiences are all positive ones…"*

Collectively, these accounts illustrate how relationships may function as both sources of support and sources of pressure. Informants described a workplace environment in which personal obligations, informal expectations, and organisational hierarchies frequently intersect with formal rules, creating situations that require continuous negotiation between professional responsibilities and social realities.

Overall, the theme demonstrates that relationships play a significant role in shaping workplace behaviour. Informants consistently described how personal networks, reciprocity, peer expectations, and organisational power structures influence decision-making, often creating tensions between formal integrity requirements and informal social obligations.

Theme 3: The Power of Mindset

This theme presents how informants described the personal viewpoints, thought processes and perspectives that shape their understanding of workplace behaviour and decision-making. The data show recurring references to elements such as personal judgment, background knowledge, emotional responses, and situational awareness. These reflections were shared in general terms, with informants using broad descriptions rather than explicit personal accounts.

Collectively, these accounts suggest that workplace behaviour is not shaped solely by formal regulations or organisational expectations. Informants frequently described how individual reasoning, personal experiences, educational background, and situational interpretations influence the way officers understand and respond to ethical challenges in their daily work.

A. Individual Reasoning

Informants explained that individuals rely on their own judgment when making decisions, especially in situations involving pressure or competing expectations.

> I-4: *"In procurement, we often face pressure... Mostly, what I have seen is that wrongdoings lie in the abuse of power, but all this happens because people want convenience when carrying out their duties, as our processes are sometimes rigid and confusing."*

> I-3: *"It's difficult, we have to be able to manage them, we have to work together with people so that we are able to carry out our duties, the work of police is closely tied with peoples' lives, habits and concerns…"*

These narratives indicate that decision-making is often shaped by individual interpretations of workplace realities. Informants described situations where officers relied on personal judgement to navigate competing demands, organisational pressures and practical constraints.

Several informants referred to emotions and personal coping approaches when describing their experiences. Some mentioned that individuals act based on their own comfort levels or emotional capacity.

Government circulars also outline the importance of emotional and personal competence. For example, a 2005 circular notes the need for officers to manage thoughts, emotions, and attitudes when delivering public service.

Observational data collected during interviews showed varied emotional expressions among officers during discussions, including cautiousness, neutrality, and assertiveness. These were documented as part of the informants' communication styles.

B. Convenience, Pressure and Decision-Making

Some informants described workplace decisions as influenced by practical needs, convenience or external pressures.

> I-9: *"One reason is to make work convenient, and another is because they want to cover the cost of living… Some agencies clearly have a hierarchy, which is actually important for them to carry out their responsibilities. However, this can become a problem when mixed with the tendency to seize power..."*

> I-1: *"There are two aspects. Pressure. If you don't follow, you won't get promoted, or you'll be transferred... The other one is that you have to take the power so that you feel comfortable and it's easy to get favours..."*

Taken together, these accounts suggest that convenience and pressure frequently interact in shaping workplace decisions. Informants described circumstances where individuals may prioritise efficiency, career considerations, or personal comfort when responding to organisational demands.

C. Situational Awareness

Informants shared that behaviour at work can change based on context, audience, and environment. They explained that officers often adjust their communication or level of openness depending on who is present. Several informants described how individuals may adapt their behaviour.

> I-5: *"People are not afraid of corruption; they are afraid of being caught and losing face. The shame is heavier than the punishment"*

> I-3: *"… it was embarrassing to be the only one being punished... That kind of experience becomes something that discourages one from repeating the mistake, even if it was a minor offence…"*

> I-11: *"There is space and opportunity… I've heard, sometimes our officers aren't even embarrassed. They talk about what they do…"*

The findings suggest that officers often adjust their behaviour according to context, audience, and perceived risk. Informants described how communication styles, openness, and willingness to discuss sensitive matters may vary depending on the surrounding environment and social circumstances.

D. Education

Informants also highlighted the influence of formal and informal education on how individuals view their duties and understand ethical boundaries. Those with legal backgrounds tended to emphasise procedural clarity and compliance.

> I-6: *"Any kind of gifts and favours may be considered corruption, because there is always a risk... It is a protection of the state."*

> I-3: *"The police are strict, even gifting a pen is considered corruption…"*

> I-19: *"When you talk about corruption, you have to know which one you are talking about… kickbacks, bribery and all these are petty corruption, there is another form of corruption which is the grand corruption…"*

> I-15: *"This is not in your line, you can ask anyone in the law about it…"*

Other informants referred to social or relational considerations when reflecting on ethical issues.

> I-17: *"My perspective is this, if you meet someone on the basis of work and they ask you out for meals it can be considered a risk for corruption. Because from what I know, most corruption happens outside of work hours…"*

> I-1: *"I asked the mufti… I asked if an officer doesn't ask for money but people are thankful and give the officer money, is it haram (forbidden) if you accept it? He said, project is done. It is their way of being thankful, if you don't take it, they feel hurt…"*

Informants frequently linked ethical understanding to educational exposure, professional training, and specialised knowledge. These accounts suggest that different educational and professional backgrounds may influence how officers interpret ethical boundaries, organisational rules, and corruption-related risks.

E. Lived Experiences

Informants described how their upbringing, environment, and social networks shaped their understanding of workplace behaviour.

> I-16: *"This may start from the family level, that at home, they must be given more freedom to express their opinion… but in certain areas, the culture of respecting older generation is so very strong..."*

Some public commentaries by former ministers also referred to the influence of early experiences. A 2025 podcast highlighted examples in schools where practices involving gifting might indirectly shape expectations.

Other informants explained how social surroundings may influence behaviour.

I-2: *"I think the people who you are surrounded by has an impact on how you behave…"*

I-17*: "If a few people in the department agree to one thing, mostly the rest will follow or just keep quiet and let them be…"*

I-12*: "Sometimes, superiors and friends can also pressure you to do something, the basis is you are not in the workplace…"*

I-1: *"Friends, I tell you, they can affect you, you know.."*

I-10: *"People can hide and show different behaviours. In certain situations, they may appear compliant but have ulterior motives…"*

Collectively, these accounts indicate that ethical perspectives are shaped through accumulated life experiences and social interactions. Informants frequently described family upbringing, workplace relationships, and social environments as important influences on how individuals understand acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Theme 4: The Power of Words

Informants' body language and use of narratives captured how mindsets form initial ethical boundaries and influence behaviour. Recurring keywords from the data include: grey zone, social bonding, gift-giving, and institutional slogans.

The findings suggest that language plays an important role in shaping how workplace behaviour is understood and justified. Informants frequently relied on particular narratives, concepts, and expressions when explaining ethical dilemmas, social obligations, and organisational expectations.

A. Competing Narratives

Across interviews, informants described how ideologies influenced justification, obscuration, or redefinition of behaviours.

> I-2: *"There are some people who are used to thinking that this is just helping a friend, or others think from the perspective of Islam that corruption is haram, but sometimes they think it's part of helping people, not taking bribes".*

> I-11: *"There are people who use morals and religion as a tool to justify their behaviours as socially legitimate, as a matter of fact from a logical point of view it is only beneficial to certain people, not to the public… But because there are people who understand it in a certain way, then these things become difficult to differentiate… Malaysia is not like Singapore, where the law is strictly what it is. In Malaysia, we are considerate of different views and ideologies."*

> I-17: *"For example, currently this tagline 'I, who fulfil trust' (Saya Menjalankan Amanah) I feel that word is very close to our hearts because we carry out each responsibility. That responsibility is not a responsibility from the boss but is actually a responsibility to the people. However, if the officer does not observe those verses, it is merely decoration or superficial, and so on. But perhaps, it does not have any impact."*

> I-1: *"I asked the mufti… if an officer doesn't ask for money but people are thankful and give the officer money, is it haram if you accept it? He said, it is their way of being thankful, if you don't take it, they feel hurt… But if your are conscious of your role, you don't take it."*

> I-2: *"It doesn't matter what religion, corruption is a bad thing... But I think, if they are used to doing it, they will justify to continue to do it."*

Public statements, such as those by Dato Seri Ayob Khan (8 August 2024), also addressed confusion about what constitutes a permissible or impermissible act:

> *"There are also certain parties trying to link this (corruption) with racial issues... If we are Muslims, if our faith is truly strong, we would not take bribes. There is no need for us to blame others." (as cited in MalaysiaKini).*

Cultural practices such as festival gift-giving were also mentioned:

> I-3: *"Usually, in the places I serve, the district I am assigned to, if there is a celebration, we will be invited. In such an event or ceremony, it is customary for there to be, you know, a gift presentation by the host. The gifts are given as a token of appreciation… I don't think it's really corrupt since in general, it's done openly, not secretly..."*

> I-14: *"If an officer received chocolates, these are considered gifts. These gifts can be accepted. But the amount and context matters, if it is more than a certain amount, just fill in a form and declare it."*

Informants also described workplace interactions:

> I-3: *"Some people from our branch are indeed allowed to go to certain places as part of their assignments. As there is permission, it becomes like a norm in the life of some officers. For example, going to that place, of course, we have to drink. Getting drunk and all. This has become practice. Because of that assignment. But we are Muslims."*

> I-6: *"The officer taking bribes may justifies it with the cost of living, or he is easily swayed by the desire for comfort and luxury in this world. As Muslims, we should not overly desire luxury, right? But there are also people like that; that value is not deeply ingrained."*

Other informants referred to gift-giving as normal cultural practice:

> I-19: *"I think there is a culture of giving gifts and all that in Malaysia. Hampers gifted during Chinese New Year, for Hari Raya is something that is culturally acceptable, but some frameworks require declaration if it's more than a certain value."*

> I-17: *"Although there are CCTVs that show what interactions happen between civil servants and the clients, sometimes there are some things given discreetly. For instance, hampers look ordinary but inside the hamper there is gold hidden, just to say thanks to the civil servant."*

Informants also explained that different departments apply gift regulations based on risk levels:

> I-3: *"In the police even a single pen gifted is considered corruption, the police are very strict."*

> I-4: *"In administrative sectors, only certain gift requirements have to be declared because these departments are considered low risk for corruption, people don't normally corrupt such officers. But in the high risk departments like finance, procurement and project tenders, all gifts received are to either be declared verbally or through a formal letter depending on the value of the gift, who gave it and how it is received."*

> I-8: *"In beginning, it was declared that if students want to enter the government, they have to vote or go for the student council. They give vouchers, gifts and hampers to get these votes and gain support. It becomes something expected."*

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate how similar behaviours may be interpreted differently depending on the narratives used to explain them. Informants described situations where concepts such as helping others, gratitude, religious obligation, or social harmony were used to frame actions that may otherwise raise ethical concerns.

B. Cultural Sentiment

Informants described the influence of social expectations, friendliness, and community relationships on daily work interactions. They referred to cultural values such as maintaining harmony, respecting others, participating in social events, and building rapport.

> I-1: *"… being friendly is not an issue, drink coffee, eat together, its good socialisation"*

> I-15: *"… there are always celebrations, social activities like family day, competitions, it's part of our culture"*

> I-17: *"I think activities are important for rapport building and strengthening social ties, it's normal and also needed"*

Other accounts described how these practices can create expectations:

> I-3: *"… a restaurant owner said he often deliver food to officers. He complained that he was being charitable to us always helping by providing food, it turns out he was expecting something in return. That's where the community abuses it, thinking that assistance, help and gifts can be used as a reason and as an opportunity to bribe police officers. Also, one of the reasons why corruption is hard to manage is because we don't want to be considered rude or unfriendly to the community. If we are rude, accusations might arise, such as claims that the officers are unfriendly or not community-oriented. These are among the factors perhaps, police and community are inseparable."*

Some informants shared concerns that cultural expectations may affect workplace situations:

> I-5: *"Sometimes some people are not aware that what they are doing is corruption, because we want to be friendly to the public."*

> I-10: *"Some locals are too trusting or easily sympathetic towards others..."*

> I-15: *"... some officers ask companies to sponsor gifts for activities… some take hampers meant for citizens..."*

> I-17*: "The risk of these social activities are where some officers ask for companies to sponsor things and gifts, sometimes building special rapport and social ties with selected companies... Some ask, some look for it, some agree with it and some just follow. It becomes an advantage for selected parties."*

> I-19: *"Culturally, petty corruption is often rationalised as helping our people, tokens of appreciation, or expediting services..."*

These reflections suggest that cultural expectations surrounding friendliness, reciprocity, and community engagement remain influential within everyday workplace interactions. Informants frequently described situations where maintaining social relationships and organisational harmony became intertwined with ethical decision-making.

4.3.2 Institutional Interfaces: How Cultural Norms Shape the Effectiveness of Anti-Corruption Reforms (RO2)

This section presents informants' descriptions of how cultural norms interact with the implementation of Malaysia's formal anti-corruption reforms. Informants referred to integrity pledges, codes of conduct, gift declaration rules, whistleblower mechanisms, and enforcement procedures in describing their workplace experiences. Across interviews, they described how workplace culture, social expectations, and relational obligations shaped the level of openness, participation, and interpretation of these reforms.

Informants also demonstrated different levels of candour depending on institutional position. Senior officials (I-13, I-16) spoke more directly about institutional challenges. Mid-level officers (I-5, I-10) often added disclaimers like *"this is just my personal observation"*. When asked whether reforms changed daily behaviour, several informants described participation levels rather than outcomes. For example, when asked about Integrity Week, I-14 stated: *"The activities were well-attended and officers participated actively"*.

Informants described anti-corruption reforms not only as formal institutional mechanisms, but also as practices interpreted through existing workplace culture and social expectations. Their accounts suggested that officers often understood and responded to reforms through relational norms, organisational experiences, and everyday administrative interactions. These communication patterns reflected how organisational hierarchy, institutional loyalty, and workplace sensitivity influenced the way informants discussed reform effectiveness. Several officers appeared more cautious when evaluating institutional outcomes directly, particularly when discussing sensitive organisational issues.

Informants described anti-corruption reforms as operating within existing organisational cultures rather than independently of them. Their accounts suggest that the implementation and interpretation of reforms are often shaped by workplace norms, social expectations, and institutional experiences. Findings within this dimension are presented through two themes and related sub-themes.

Theme 1: The Transformation of Relational Obligations into Transactional Exchanges

This theme captured the apparent shift from traditional cultural norms of social relations into a modern materialistic economy of benefit transaction that alters the logic of corruption and influences reforms.

Informants frequently described tensions between traditional relational values and increasingly transactional workplace expectations. Their accounts suggested that cultural obligations, social reciprocity, and material considerations often intersect in shaping workplace behaviour and responses to reform initiatives.

Sub-theme 1.1: When Traditional Norms Facilitate Reform

Informants referred to concepts such as *balas budi* (reciprocation), gratitude, collective responsibility, and *amanah* (trust) when describing how officers respond to integrity initiatives. These concepts also appear in formal documents such as the Public Officers (Conduct and Discipline) Regulations, 4(2)(b), P.U. (A) 395/1993, the NACP 2019-2023 and the *Pengurusan Integriti dan Tatakelakuan Penjawat Awam* March 2019, JPA.

Several informants described situations where cultural norms supported reform efforts:

> I-2: *"It doesn't matter what religion it is, all prohibit its followers from committing evil or doing bad things… no religion would ever instruct its followers to do bad things…"*

> I-12: *"The measures that the government introduced, like the integrity policy, some other policy… the government did implement them through the concept of cultural norms in Malaysia… many officers carried them out, and also complied…"*

> I-14: *"Before we implement any policy, especially those from international benchmarks, like Transparency International's CPI, we cross check whether the elements match with our local values where we can adapt and integrate…"*

> I-4: *"helping colleagues is a sign of gratitude… of course we want to continue doing good to others…"*

> I-3: *"following orders is a responsibility (amanah)… we also trust superiors with the responsibility to carry out orders…"*

> I-5: *"the work is based on faith, this (police logo) is our responsibility, not just a logo… the word integrity written in it reflects our behaviour and our duty to the country…"*

These accounts suggested that culturally familiar values such as trust, gratitude, collective responsibility, and moral obligation may strengthen acceptance of integrity-related reforms when reform messages are framed in ways that resonate with existing social norms and organisational culture.

Informants also stated that integrity messages framed using familiar moral terms gained stronger acceptance. Some informants noted that officers responded positively when leaders emphasised ideas of protecting team reputation, carrying responsibility, or honouring entrusted duties.

References to official documents such as the National Integrity Plan (2004) and the Government Transformation Programme (2010) show that some reforms intentionally employ culturally familiar values such as trust, collective dignity, and responsibility. Informants who had attended such programmes reported that these messages resonated with officers because they were framed in familiar moral language.

These reflections indicated that anti-corruption initiatives may gain greater legitimacy when institutional reforms are communicated through values already embedded within local cultural and organisational contexts.

Collectively, these findings suggest that cultural norms do not always undermine reform efforts. Under certain circumstances, values such as *amanah*, gratitude, and collective responsibility may reinforce integrity initiatives by providing culturally familiar reference points for ethical conduct.

Sub-theme 1.2: Changes in Workplace Interactions and the Shift Toward Transactional Exchanges

Some informants described a shift from traditional relational practices towards a more material-based interactions in daily work. These descriptions referred to situations where workplace exchanges became increasingly associated with personal benefit, career advancement, or efficiency.

> I-10: *"...people use corrupt methods to manipulate others, it normally occurs in ordinary settings, not only in professional settings…"*

> I-1: *"gatekeepers in powerful agencies demand to be paid. Otherwise, they will not approve the project…"*

Other informants explained that rising living costs and social expectations contributed to increased emphasis on material benefits:

> I-2: *"... financial incentives can make a civil servant strive to perform well because of the benefits gained. So in this sense, acting corruptly appears to do more damage than providing benefits…"*

Some referenced the government's introduction of performance-linked assessments and monetary incentives (see *Pekeliling Perkhidmatan Sumber Manusia*, 1 January 2025), describing how such systems shaped officers' motivations and work practices.

A few informants (I-18, I-20) also mentioned how exposure to technology and global trends since the 1990s influenced workplace expectations and created generational differences in attitudes. These informants described shifts in thinking influenced by media consumption, lifestyle comparisons, and broader societal trends.

The accounts in this sub-theme describe how relational norms coexist with more transactional expectations in daily work interactions. These narratives reflected how workplace relationships and administrative interactions may increasingly be shaped by material expectations, career incentives, and broader socioeconomic pressures. Informants described situations where officers navigated between traditional relational obligations and more transactional forms of workplace behaviour.

At the same time, informants described increasing exposure to material incentives and performance-oriented expectations. These accounts suggest that traditional relational norms increasingly coexist with transactional considerations, creating new tensions in how officers understand responsibility, reward, and ethical conduct.

Theme 2: The Performance of Uniformity Masking Diverse Ethical Practices

Malaysia's anti-corruption reforms include Integrity Week campaigns, integrity mandatory training, codes of conduct, gift declaration requirements, and whistleblower protection mechanisms. Informants generally described these initiatives as widely implemented across ministries and departments. However, their accounts show that although reforms appear uniform on paper, the ways officers respond to and practise these initiatives vary considerably across workplaces.

Sub-theme 2.1: The Ritualisation of Reform

A number of informants described reform activities as routine administrative requirements rather than initiatives that directly shape behaviour.

> I-14: *"Initiatives like Integrity Week, mass pledges and training sessions are designed by each Integrity Unit, these initiatives served as part of work requirements, fulfil training hours and work modules so, officers treat it as such…"*

Informants described reform activities as procedural routines embedded within administrative requirements rather than deeply internalised ethical practices. Participation was often associated with fulfilling institutional expectations, attendance obligations, and reporting requirements. Several informants stated that participation is usually high but noted that it is difficult to assess whether these programmes influence daily conduct.

> I-17: *"In reality, reforms and anti-corruption initiatives are mere paper requirements, just so that officers can carry on with other jobs. The efficiency and effectiveness is only known to the Integrity Unit officers… it is only one way communication and it does not instill any fear or continuous integrity values…"*

Informants also put a strong emphasis on visible participation. Posters, banners, and campaign materials were said to be prominently displayed, and attendance at talks and pledge ceremonies was generally expected.

> I-10: *"We have seen many anti-corruption campaigns. The slogans are there, the posters are everywhere... But in the office, it is not easy to tell if behaviour remains the same or if it has changed."*

Research observations during an Integrity Talk reflected similar patterns. The session was conducted formally, attendance was full and officers followed the expected protocol. However, most participants appeared passive and engagement was minimal. These observations suggested that anti-corruption initiatives were often performed through visible organisational compliance, such as attending programmes, displaying campaign materials, and following formal procedures, while the extent of behavioural internalisation remained uncertain.

Gift declaration procedures were also described as inconsistently practised. Some informants highlighted uncertainty about what constitutes a gift and when declarations are required.

> I-17: *"...not all gifts are declared as they should be. Sometimes gifts received beyond work hours can be potentially corrupt. I believe interactions beyond office hours can be weaponised as corrupt intent because no one is watching."*

Several informants referred to cultural expectations such as balas budi and maintaining harmonious relations, stating that these practices influence whether officers report or declare certain exchanges.

Overall, informants' accounts indicate that while anti-corruption initiatives are implemented widely and consistently, officers may experience and approach them as procedural obligations, with varying degrees of internalisation across different departments.

Sub-theme 2.2: The Hidden Asset - Diversity as Potential Facilitator of Reform

Informants described that the civil service is not uniform in its ethical practices. Their accounts point to noticeable variation in how officers interpret and apply reform measures. Some departments or units were said to uphold stricter standards, while others displayed greater tolerance towards informal practices.

> I-17*: "There are bosses who enable this kind of behaviour and there are bosses who prohibit these behaviours…"*

This variation suggests the presence of officers and leaders who actively discourage inappropriate practices despite operating in the same organisational and cultural environments. Their approach reflects alternative interpretations of responsibility and workplace expectations.

Several informants also explained that policy guidelines are applied flexibly across agencies due to differing work contexts and organisational cultures.

> I-14*: "The policy plans created are merely general guides... we already know the diversity of ethnic and religious and cultural customs. So we are selective to apply the requirements according to what is needed…"*

Government documents such as NACP 2019-2023 and NACS 2024-2028 similarly present broad outcome statements, which informants noted allow departments to adapt implementation according to their operating environment.

Despite the stated diversity, informants also indicated that standardised reform mechanisms may not always accommodate these differing workplace realities. Ethical officers operate under the same peer dynamics and hierarchical expectations as others, and informants did not describe systematic support structures that distinguish or reinforce these positive practices.

The data shows that while formal reforms promote uniformity, actual practices vary across units and leaders. This diversity includes officers who emphasise principled conduct and stricter adherence to rules, representing a potential resource for reform, even though their influence depends on workplace conditions and organisational support.

Collectively, these findings suggested that diversity within organisational practices may function both as a challenge and as a potential resource for reform implementation. While institutional reforms promote standardisation, informants described how differing leadership styles, workplace cultures, and ethical orientations continue to shape how reforms are understood and practised across the civil service.

Theme 3: How Hierarchical and Peer Pressures Collude and Creates Negotiable Formal Accountability Mechanisms

The data shows that civil servants often navigate competing pressures that shape how formal rules are applied in practice. Informants described workplace accountability as shaped not only by formal procedures, but also by hierarchical expectations, peer dynamics, and organisational relationships. Their accounts suggested that administrative decisions are often negotiated within broader social and institutional pressures rather than determined solely by written regulations.

Sub-theme 3.1: The Vertical Pressure

Several informants referred to hierarchical norms as a significant factor shaping workplace behaviour. They described a long-standing culture of deference towards authority, where directives from higher-ranking officers carry substantial weight.

> I-18: *"...Malaysia's concept of feudalism was instilled by the British. Prior to that, people obey the Institution, there is a check and balance between kings and people… people still rely on authorities and the power of the courts… they remain loyal to the government, the Institution, the king, and leaders…"*

> I-16: *"We started our origin in the area where one time we are very strong feudalism… even way back in 1970s… a formal letter ended with 'Saya menurut perintah' indirectly condition how you should behave when you perform your responsibility… There are occasions where many public officers believe that it cannot be approved but when Wahyu (a direction from above) came down saying to allow or to give an exception, the tendency to follow the directive is higher…"*

Informants consistently described instances where decisions were deferred upward. Some viewed this as necessary for consistency, while others suggested it reduced individual decision-making.

> I-10: *"Hierarchy is necessary to ensure responsibility and accountability…"*

> I-16*: "... if you go to hospital in the government there is a section for VIP… people accept that when they receive a verbal supporting letter from higher ranking officers or influential people, the tendency to entertain it is higher due to respect for hierarchy."*

In some interviews, informants mentioned circumstances where investigations or enforcement work became sensitive when involving higher-level individuals.

> I-16: *"Of course, if you investigate a politician, the politician will ask you… There is a limit for you to allow things to happen."*

Several informants also referred to how directives from senior officers or political leaders could influence the pace or direction of administrative work.

> I-13: *"…one body is dependent on people supporting them, they are elected. The other, the executive, are not elected. So, their attitude towards work differs. The legislators are always one thing concerned about whether their decisions are acceptable to the people… And sometimes this cultural*

> *difference may result in a lack of understanding between the two bodies… The current government is very much a government of the legislative. Because the legislative seems to have gained power over the executive. So much so that it is the legislators quite often interferes with the application or implementation to be done by the executive.”*

Some informants contrasted Malaysia’s hierarchical culture with other countries.

> I-16: *“…Malaysia’s Power Distance Index is high… In some countries, the process is more merit-based, but here a directive from above can override the usual procedure.”*

> I-10: *“comparing Malaysia with United Kingdom, the UK has grown very much on meritocracy and securing basic necessities for citizens like cheaper foods and lower cost of living, so their rate of corruption is lower…”*

Official statements highlight parallel efforts to reinforce independence in enforcement agencies. Informants referenced these public commitments when discussing institutional expectations:

Statement by the Prime Minister, 2025: *“The government does not interfere in enforcement agencies’ actions… The police are free to do their work, LHDN to collect taxes and MACC to conduct raids...”*

Taken together, informants described a working environment where hierarchical expectations structure many day-to-day practices. Decisions may be shaped not only by written rules but also by signals and requests from higher authority. These accounts indicate that hierarchical influence remains a significant feature of administrative life. Informants frequently described authority structures as shaping how rules are interpreted, how decisions are made, and how accountability mechanisms operate in practice.

Sub-theme 3.2: The Horizontal Pressure

Informants described that workplace behaviour is also shaped by peer expectations and social obligations. Several interviews showed that horizontal pressure operates alongside hierarchical influence, creating a strong expectation for conformity within the group. I-16 illustrated this clearly through a policing example: *"...in the whole police station the whole group wanted to take and I ask one of the two cadets who just joined the law enforcement why he got involved, he said 'If I don't get involved and be part of the member I'll be like an albino'"*.

Informants reported that maintaining harmony (*jaga hati*) and preserving reputation (*jaga nama*) were important considerations in daily interactions. These norms sometimes discouraged open disagreement. I-2 referred to this pattern as *"knowing but not speaking"*, describing situations where individuals were aware of wrongdoing but refrained from commenting. I-9 added organisational culture can become deeply embedded: *"when you go into it, you absorb it, become part of your behaviour... like natural"*.

Informants noted that preserving smooth relationships was often prioritised. Avoiding confrontation was seen as a way to maintain respect among colleagues, especially in environments where teamwork and familiarity are valued. Several interviews indicated that this environment may reduce the likelihood of officers raising concerns or reporting irregular behaviour.

Across accounts, newcomers were described as learning workplace expectations from peers. Informants consistently portrayed peer relationships as an important source of behavioural influence. Expectations of conformity, group belonging, and social harmony were frequently described as shaping responses to ethical dilemmas and organisational challenges.

Sub-theme 3.3: The Pincer Effect - Convergence of Vertical and Horizontal Pressures

Informants described situations where hierarchical expectations and peer-level pressures operated simultaneously. This combination shaped how rules were interpreted and how officers navigated daily responsibilities.

> I-18: *"...There is no single loyalty, for example, in the context of the Rukun Negara for this society or ethnic group… elements of loyalty exist, but the elements of ethnicity also exist, influencing our attitudes in all aspects... There is no single element that represents our highest and true appreciation on the value of independence…"*

Some informants noted that responses to rules or scandals may differ across regions or groups. These variations were described as part of the wider social environment in which civil servants operate.

Public commentary referenced by informants also pointed to concerns regarding workplace expectations. For example political commentator, Hanipah Maidin, remarked that civil servants should focus on serving the current government, and that certain behavioural expectations in administrative culture may affect professionalism (Malaysia Focus, 2025).

Informants described that officers may face expectations from both superiors and colleagues. Not complying with expectations from above may bring formal consequences, while resisting peer expectations may lead to social isolation in the workplace.

Several interviews also pointed to the influence of educational and early organisational experiences.

I-16 shared an example regarding classroom interaction and caution in expressing disagreement: *"In Malaysia, if you try to argue with your lecturers purely for the sake of argument, the reaction will be different… there is an environment that you must be very, very cautious. When you wanted to reply, you wanted to ask, you wanted to debate, you wanted to challenge the ideas..."*

He later added that shaping attitudes requires early exposure to ethical reasoning: *"If you wanted to change the thinking, reaction… you must train the education system, the training system must break the mindset... They must understand the issue of fairness and also the principle of state to serve the people…"*

I-8 also emphasised early exposure: *"Integrity needs to be instilled early on… Student council elections already show that anything related to power must have an affiliation with those who have power, and at the same time there are incentives and assistance. This means they are taught that way... We have to teach them fair competition, and transparent rules…"*

Informants described how expectations from both vertical and horizontal directions shape everyday practices. Officers may adjust their decisions to balance directives from above with the need to maintain good relations with colleagues. Collectively, these accounts suggest that officers often navigate simultaneous pressures from both hierarchical authority and peer expectations. Informants described this convergence as creating a complex decision-making environment in which formal compliance, workplace relationships, and personal judgement must be continuously balanced.

4.3.3 Behavioural Negotiations: How Civil Servants Negotiate Between Formal Rules and Informal Expectations (RO3)

This section presents findings on the daily behavioural negotiations that shape how civil servants navigate formal rules and informal cultural expectations. The data suggests that compliance is not a fixed or binary condition, but a contingent outcome shaped by situational pressures. The research process itself mirrored this tension; several officers denied participation upon learning the study concerned corruption, likely due to concerns that involvement might be interpreted by colleagues or superiors as criticism of the institution. As a result, participating informants often shared information within self-imposed boundaries, attempting to meet formal interview protocols while simultaneously protecting institutional reputation. Their silences, vague phrasing, and evasions reflect the same formal-informal collision they described within their organisations.

Informants described compliance as something negotiated within everyday workplace realities rather than simply determined by formal rules alone. Their accounts suggested that officers continuously balance institutional expectations, organisational survival, peer relationships, and personal judgment when navigating ethical situations.

Theme 1: The Socialisation Lifecycle - The Erosion of the Compliant Self

The finding suggests that compliance changes over time. New civil servants often enter with strong idealism shaped by induction training but gradually adjust to the system's informal realities. This shift is driven by both vertical and horizontal pressures.

Sub-theme 1.1: The Arc from Idealism to Accommodation

A prominent pattern is the contrast between formal training and workplace reality. Integrity is emphasised during induction, but new officers soon learn that questioning seniors can be risky. As I-2 explained: "*During the induction they taught us integrity. But in the real office, it can be different... I have heard that some officers may face challenges if you question seniors... we just keep silent"*.

This transition from principle to idealism to pragmatism is gradual. Vertical pressures discourage challenging authority, while horizontal pressures promote conformity. Together, these reinforce the idea that social assimilation is more important than ethical consistency. Officers learn acceptable language to describe discrepancies without explicitly labelling them as corruption.

I-1 semilarly emphasised the power of hierarchy: *"If you don't comply, they will make things difficult for you… These people, Ketua Setiausaha Negara, Ketua Pengarah JPA, Ketua Setiausaha Perbandaran decided promotions, demotions and postings… If they want to make your life difficult, then you are unlucky…"*

Taken together, these accounts suggest that organisational adaptation involves learning not only formal responsibilities but also informal expectations that shape workplace behaviour.

Sub-theme 1.2: Cultural Scripts as Normative Sanctions

Cultural proverbs such as *"jangan jaga tepi kain orang"* (don't be a busybody/don't watch others' affairs) and *"jangan taruh pasir dalam periuk nasi orang lain"* (don't put sand in others' rice pot/don't spoil others' livelihoods) operate as moral injunctions discouraging oversight and whistleblowing.

> I-16: *"…these proverbs indicate our culture of discouraging whistleblowers..."*

Several informants referred to commonly used cultural expressions when discussing reactions towards reporting misconduct. These expressions were frequently described as encouraging restraint and discouraging direct intervention in the affairs of others. Informants suggested that such expressions may influence how individuals perceive reporting behaviour, particularly when concerns about social relationships and workplace harmony are involved.

Sub-theme 1.3: The Re-calibration of Professional Priorities

I-1: *"People think working as Dato' Bandar is a gold mine…"*

Over time, survival and convenience begin to overshadow the original ethos of public service. As I-2 noted: *"People aim to work in government to secure their financial needs… Some say it's easy money... working for the benefit of the people is rare"*.

Several informants described changing priorities across different stages of a civil servant's career. Their accounts frequently referred to practical considerations such as financial security, career progression, and workplace survival. These accounts suggest that professional priorities may evolve over time as officers respond to changing organisational and personal circumstances.

I-16 analysis provides a psychological lens: *"…individuals may become centred on family, money or self rather than principles. The cumulative effect is an identity shift where ethical boundaries weaken in favour of practical career considerations."*

Collectively, these findings suggested that behavioural negotiation within the civil service is shaped through ongoing interaction between institutional structures, workplace culture, and individual adaptation. Informants frequently described ethical behaviour as something continuously adjusted in response to organisational realities, social pressures, and personal survival strategies.

Theme 2: The Arena of Negotiation - The Disunion Between Paper and Practice

The data reveals the existence of two parallel systems: formal rules and informal norms. Compliance is negotiated between these systems, creating grey zones where the spirit of rules is compromised even while procedures are formally followed.

Informants described a persistent gap between formal institutional procedures and the informal practices embedded within daily administrative life. Their accounts suggested that officers frequently navigate between written regulations and workplace norms when carrying out their responsibilities.

Sub-theme 2.1: A Legacy of Layered Rules

Official circulars outline clear processes, yet these are often subject to senior approval or reinterpretation, creating ambiguity between policy and practice.

> I-14: *"Normally we have a meeting to identify the high-risk departments and areas. The heads of these departments will give a report to declare whether the subordinates of their department are bound by a certain risk. For those that do, the Integrity Unit will monitor and perform the necessary duties to ensure these departments have a mitigation risk analysis..."*

However, several informants noted limited transparency:

> I-17: *"…the result of data collection and suggestions were not disclosed. Officers do not have full information to understand whether the department has been effective or not in the anti-corruption compliance. All the reports were solely the duty of the Integrity Unit, one thing I wished could be improved is that these reports should be shared with department officers so that we know what to look out for and what can be improved."*

> I-5: *"We have programmes, posters, awareness, even officer engagement, but we don't have the detail on how effective these efforts are…"*

I-7 added the constraint of limited manpower:

> I-7: *"…our MACC officers are also posted to Integrity Units, most of the time, only to high-risk departments. One department normally receives only one of our officers to facilitate integrity programmes… there is too much work."*

These testimonies suggest that new formal rules are layered onto existing practices rather than replacing them, thereby allowing informal norms, such as gift-giving or pre-selection of vendors, to persist under the façade of procedural compliance.

Sub-theme 2.2: Fragmented Loyalties

Informants noted the coexistence of formal hierarchy with ethnic, regional, and relational loyalties. This produces multiple competing loyalties that dilute the authority of formal rules.

> I-18: *"There isn't a single Malaysian culture that is universally evident… perhaps one perception is a lighter aspect for some people and more significant for others… There are many divisions as the idea of 'Malaysia' is still artificial…"*

The interview also reflected caution when discussing sensitive societal issues. Informants frequently qualified or moderated their comments when discussing topics related to identity, culture, and institutional practices.

Sub-theme 2.3: Strategic Signaling and Social Pressure

Officers manage appearances to meet both formal expectations from superiors and informal expectations from peers. Examples include:

> I-6: *"They are trying to find convenience to achieve several objectives, it may be work KPI or anything else…"*

> I-7: *"They wanted to ease and facilitate their duties…"*

> I-2: *"They are motivated by their social group…"*

A particularly revealing account from I-11 illustrates ambiguous coercion:

> I-11: *"Sometimes bosses ask us for gifts and snacks… They ask 'if you go back to your hometown, bring something, don't come back empty handed… People say its just sweet-talk or it is only a conversation starter, but there is some element or initiative for corruption… you know, favour for favour… the feeling of being asked like that is uncomfortable…"*

Informants described situations where requests or expectations were communicated indirectly, making it difficult to distinguish between casual social interactions and perceived obligations.

Theme 3: The Spectrum of Compliance - The Power of Context

Informants described compliance as highly dependent on organisational context, visibility, and leadership dynamics. Their accounts suggested that ethical behaviour and rule enforcement may differ considerably across departments and institutional environments.

Sub-theme 3.1: The Mediating Effect of Visibility and Scrutiny

I-3 compared the police force and prisons:

> I-3: *"In the police, even a gift such as a pen is considered corruption… In prisons, issues were resolved internally, nobody else knows what happened…"*

Higher visibility enforces stricter compliance; low visibility allows informal norms to thrive. This shapes corruption risk profiles differently across departments and suggests that the opaquest environments may be the most vulnerable.

Informants frequently associated highly visible work environments with stricter monitoring and greater scrutiny. In contrast, less visible settings were described as providing fewer opportunities for external observation.

Sub-theme 3.2: The Variable of Leadership

Leadership emerged as a perceived determinant of departmental ethics, though difficult to observe directly. Through interviews, informants explained that formal and informal institutions are actively managed and mediated at every level, be it individual or hierarchical leadership. Informants described both enabling and protective leadership, but cultural norms made it difficult to provide concrete examples.

> I-6: *"Social circle and environment affect a person…"*

Although informants frequently referred to leadership influence, direct observations regarding leadership styles were limited, as many participants discussed these issues cautiously and in general terms.

I-14's ministry presented a counter-example: *"There is very little observation of hierarchy in the ministry… Complaints must go through the system..."*

These accounts suggest that perceptions of leadership effectiveness may vary across organisational settings and workplace cultures.

Sub-theme 3.3: The Variable of Ambiguity

Informants frequently described ambiguity as a factor that complicates the interpretation of ethical behaviour and corruption-related practices. Their accounts suggested that uncertainty regarding intent, context, and acceptable conduct may influence how rules are understood and applied in practice.

> I-7: *"Regarding the laws we follow here in Malaysia, I think it's quite clear in terms of offences... But giving money can be labeled as a loan, then is it a crime?"*

I-16 and I-11 compared Malaysia's cultural boundaries with those of other countries, highlighting how cultural understandings shape corruption perceptions:

> I-16: *"countries like Sweden, Switzerland, Norway and so on, they do not have a specific anti-corruption agency, but they have agency in fighting corruption comparing to Malaysia, where culture has played a very important role... In the Middle East, abuse of power, especially when the leaders give project to the brothers and sisters, those are related to them, it's not a serious offence. Unlike in Malaysia, it is a serious offence. So in this situation, you have to really reform the thinking and the understanding of the society on the meaning of corruption".*

> I-11: *"Singapore's preventive laws, procedures and measures exceed expectations… They provide clear recognition and understanding of boundaries…"*

Taken together, these accounts suggest that understandings of corruption and acceptable conduct may vary according to organisational, cultural, and societal contexts. Informants frequently referred to differences in interpretation when discussing ethical boundaries and enforcement practices.

The findings indicate that compliance within the civil service is continuously negotiated through organisational culture, social pressures, and contextual circumstances. Informants described ethical behaviour as shaped by overlapping influences from institutional expectations, interpersonal relationships, and situational realities that may either reinforce or weaken formal accountability mechanisms.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented findings on how civil servants described the relationship between cultural norms, workplace practices, and anti-corruption efforts within the Malaysian civil service. Informants frequently referred to the influence of hierarchy, peer relationships, organisational culture, and informal expectations when discussing ethical behaviour and decision-making.

The findings showed that workplace behaviour is influenced by both formal institutional requirements and informal social expectations. Informants described situations in which officers navigated organisational rules alongside pressures arising from hierarchy, peer relationships, workplace culture, and everyday administrative realities.

The findings also revealed that organisational behaviour within the civil service is shaped through ongoing interaction between institutional structures, social relationships, and culturally embedded expectations. Informants consistently described how workplace decisions and ethical responses were influenced by hierarchy, peer conformity, ambiguity, and practical survival strategies within everyday administrative environments. Informants also highlighted the continued influence of long-standing organisational practices and established ways of working. Their accounts suggested that workplace norms and inherited administrative routines remain relevant in shaping how integrity, accountability, and responsibility are understood in everyday practice.

Overall, the chapter suggests that formal anti-corruption reforms alone may be insufficient without deeper engagement with the cultural and institutional conditions that shape behavioural negotiation within the civil service. The findings point towards the importance of understanding how informal norms, organisational expectations, and institutional pressures interact in influencing compliance practices in Malaysia's administrative context. The implications of these findings and their relationship to Historical Institutionalism, Sociological Institutionalism and Rational Choice Institutionalism are examined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This thesis investigates why corruption continues in Malaysia's civil service despite extensive efforts undertaken by the government. The central problem is the persistent gap between formal anti-corruption initiatives and their uneven effectiveness within a cultural environment that remains ambiguous and deeply embedded in everyday administrative life. While Malaysia has developed a comprehensive legal and institutional framework to combat corruption, these reforms do not consistently translate into uniform compliance in practice. Within this context, cultural norms emerge as a critical explanatory variable shaping how reforms are interpreted, enacted, resisted, or selectively adapted by civil servants.

This study pursues three objectives: (a) examining how cultural norms influence civil servants' perceptions and shape their routine behaviour; (b) exploring how these norms support, reinterpret, or undermine the intended effects of formal anti-corruption reforms; and (c) analysing how cultural norms interact with institutional rules to produce context-dependent patterns of compliance. Drawing on qualitative case study design, this study is based on empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 informants across various agencies and administrative levels.

This chapter interprets and analyses the findings presented in Chapter 4 through the lens of New Institutional Theory (NIT). Specifically, it integrates insights from Historical Institutionalism (HI), Sociological Institutionalism (SI), and Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) to explain not only how corruption-related practices persist, but why they may appear rational, legitimate, or unavoidable within particular institutional and cultural settings. The combined use of these perspectives enables a more comprehensive understanding of corruption as a negotiated institutional outcome shaped by historical legacies, normative expectations, and strategic calculation.

To ensure alignment with the research objectives, the discussion is organised into three analytical dimensions. The first dimension addresses how cultural norms influence civil servants' perceptions and behaviour (RO1). The second dimension examines how cultural norms shape the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms (RO2). The third dimension analyses how cultural norms interact with formal institutional rules to produce context-dependent patterns of compliance (RO3). Together, these dimensions provide an integrated explanation of how cultural norms and formal institutions interact to shape corruption-related outcomes within Malaysia's civil service.

5.2 Overview of Key Findings

This study examined how cultural norms influence perceptions of corruption, anti-corruption reforms, and policy compliance within Malaysia's civil service. Drawing on perspectives from informants across different agencies and administrative levels, the findings reveal that civil servants operate within a bureaucratic environment where formal institutional expectations coexist with cultural norms and social obligations. Consistent with past research (Shakila et al., 2021; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Mohamad Zulkarnai et al., 2014), the findings illustrate a series of unspoken rules governing real bureaucratic conduct.

Several recurring patterns emerged from the data. First, cultural norms shape how civil servants understand integrity, authority, reciprocity, and appropriate behaviour in everyday administrative settings. These norms influence perceptions of corruption and contribute to the formation of behavioural expectations within organisations. The findings suggest competing institutional realities, from Scott's (1969) "culture of compliance" where bureaucratic hurdles facilitate corruption, to descriptions of Meyer and Rowan's (1977) "culture of circumvention" where impractical rules are bypassed through learned habits. Aligning with past studies (Wang, 1997; Syed Hussein Alatas, 1968), the findings suggest culture does not operate as a fixed set of values but as a dynamic battleground in which prescribed norms (rules) clash with practical behaviour (reality). Corruption thus emerges as an outcome of repeated interactions within this formal-informal tension.

Second, anti-corruption reforms do not operate independently from their surrounding social environment. Informal expectations, relational obligations, and established organisational routines influence how reforms are interpreted, implemented, and experienced in practice. Consequently, the effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives varies across institutional contexts and administrative settings.

This aligns with SI's (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) decoupling process as anti-corruption initiatives may be complicated by institutional habits and cultural interpretations that reproduce the status quo. This dynamic reflects HI's concept of path dependency (Mahoney, 2000; Thelen, 1999) where institutions layer strategies by adding new rules atop old norms rather than through displacement.

Third, compliance was found to be neither uniform nor automatic. Informants described situations in which formal rules, professional responsibilities, and cultural expectations interacted in complex ways, producing different forms of compliance, adaptation, and negotiation. Behaviour was frequently shaped by the need to balance procedural requirements with social relationships, organisational expectations, and contextual considerations. This aligns with SI's proposition (Hofstede, 2010) that institutional behaviour is reproduced through routine interactions rather than uniformly imposed structures.

Taken together, the findings suggest that corruption cannot be understood solely as a consequence of individual misconduct or institutional weakness. Rather, it emerges from the ongoing interaction between formal institutional arrangements and informal cultural norms. The following sections discuss these findings in relation to the study's three research objectives through the analytical lens of NIT.

5.3 Discussion of Research Objective (1): How Cultural Norms Influence Civil Servants' Perceptions and Behaviour (RO1)

This section addresses the first research objective (RO1), which examines how cultural norms influence civil servants' perceptions of corruption and shape routine administrative behaviour. Drawing on HI, SI, and RCI, the discussion explores how historically embedded norms, relational expectations, cognitive assumptions, and linguistic constructions influence the way civil servants understand integrity, authority, and appropriate conduct within bureaucratic settings.

The findings suggest that perceptions of corruption are not formed solely through formal laws or organisational rules. Instead, they are shaped through a combination of historical experiences, social relationships, individual interpretations, and culturally embedded vocabularies that influence how actions are understood and justified in everyday administrative practice.

5.3.1 The Power of Foundations: The Historical Architecture of Contemporary Ethics

As part of RO1, this section examines how historically embedded cultural norms influence civil servants' perceptions of authority, integrity, and appropriate administrative behaviour. The analysis indicates that Malaysia's civil service is shaped by inherited bureaucratic traditions, what this study terms The Power of Foundations. This pattern aligns with HI's argument that institutions evolve through path-dependent trajectories (Cairney, 2020; Thelen, 1999), where contemporary arrangements reflect historical decisions that have become self-reinforcing. Administrative structures that emphasise hierarchical obedience remain visible in institutional phrases and official sign-offs in past circulars such as *'Saya Yang Menurut Perintah'* (I, who obey). Even the later rebranding to *'Saya Yang Menjalankan Amanah'* (I, who fulfil trust) and then to *'Berkhidmat Untuk Negara'* (Serving for the Country) signals continuity rather than substantive transformation, illustrating Thelen's (1999) concept of institutional inertia where historically embedded routines become self-reinforcing and resistant to change. From SI's perspective, such norms function as cognitive defaults. Practice is followed not necessarily because they are efficient, but because they feel appropriate, familiar, and legitimate. I-13's view that the British system remains sound *"in terms of its arrangement"* but *"people in the civil service are not holding to the principles"* show that the core challenge lies not in structural design, but in evolving cultural constraints through cultural contexts.

I-18's testimony strengthens this interpretation by suggesting that colonial administrators deliberately fused cultural symbolism with bureaucratic authority to secure legitimacy. This produced a governance culture where power is associated with moral guardianship and questioning authority is framed as destabilising rather than civic duty. Contradicting Siddiquee (2006) and Common (2001), Malaysia's dual-order governance appears less accidental, suggesting an inherited institutional hybridity that continued after independence. SI explains this hybridity through ambiguity-driven reliance on directives. As I-9 expressed: *"If the boss says it is okay, then it is not corruption… We just follow"*. This reflects March and Olsen's (1989) logic of appropriateness where compliance derives from conforming to perceived institutional expectations rather than evaluating ethical implications.

Although this historical design provides predictable procedures and continuity, it may blur the moral boundaries by conflating obedience with integrity. From a HI viewpoint, colonial-era bureaucratic discipline shaped a moral hierarchy where loyalty to rank is equated with virtue. Corruption is therefore judged not purely based on the act but based on the legitimacy of the actor. If a directive comes from a superior, it may not be perceived as morally questionable. This suggests that corruption may at times be interpreted as an outcome of collective compliance rather than individual deviance. Genuine transformation therefore requires institutional redesign that simultaneously re-configures incentive structures, enforcement mechanisms, and cultural scripts across multiple levels of the bureaucracy. The findings indicate that institutional obedience function not merely as administrative discipline, but as a culturally reinforced behavioural expectation reproduced through historical continuity and organisational socialisation.

The account from I-8 regarding reforms disappearing after a reformist leader retires highlights path dependency's re-assertive force. Despite reforms such as digitisation, streamlined procedures, and improved service ethos, practices reverted to earlier routines once the reform champion departed. This indicates symbolic compliance where formal rules are adopted ceremonially but operational behaviour remains governed by informal norms. Such dissonance underscores the struggle of anti-corruption efforts as reforms target formal structures while behaviour is shaped by embedded cultural expectations.

Furthermore, contemporary bureaucracy remains influenced by patronage and political interference. I-18's reflection that the British dismantled traditional checks and balances to consolidate administrative control shows how feudal legacies were repurposed into hierarchical administrative norms. From an RCI's lens, these norms constitute a durable incentive structure that rewards stability, administrative continuity, and collective conformity. Combined with HI's concepts of path dependency and institutional inertia, successive administrative decisions became institutionalised over time, producing a layered and complex governance environment. From SI's perspectives, they create cognitive pluralism where multiple logics coexist and allow actors to select whichever the rationale; cultural, relational, or procedural that best justifies their decisions. This institutional environment may complicate the implementation of anti-corruption reforms by creating multiple and sometimes competing standards of appropriateness.

Malaysia's historical formation, rooted in feudal kingdoms, colonial rule, ethnic political settlements, and rapid modernisation, has produced institutional configurations with strong cultural overlaps. Sensitivity surrounding 3Rs, formalised through social taboos and legal restrictions, illustrates how culture constrains discourse through both normative and coercive means. Wang's (1997) argument that weak cultural adaptability reduces state capacity resonates strongly here. Cultural norms such as hierarchy, reciprocity, and ethnic loyalty provided stability during earlier developmental phases but increasingly struggle to support modern expectations of transparency, accountability, and rule-based governance.

These norms continue to be reproduced through family socialisation (I-16), education (I-8, I-16), and workplace rituals (I-15, I-17). As such, transformation requires more than procedural reform; it requires the renegotiation and reinterpretation of cultural expectations that shape administrative behaviour. The persistent tension between formal anti-corruption institutions and informal cultural norms contributes to the uneven effectiveness of reform initiatives. Collectively, these findings suggest that corruption within Malaysia's civil service cannot be understood solely as a consequence of weak enforcement or individual moral failure. Instead, it reflects historically embedded institutional arrangements in which cultural norms, organisational hierarchy, and administrative routines continue to shape how integrity, obedience, and accountability are interpreted and practised within everyday bureaucratic life.

5.3.2 The Power of Relationships: Relational Dynamics and Ethical Judgement

As part of RO1, this section examines how relational expectations influence civil servants' perceptions of corruption and shape everyday administrative behaviour. The finding that civil servants experience tension between formal duties and informal social obligations (The Power of Relationships) reinforces SI's proposition (March & Olsen, 1989; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) that behaviour is guided by socially constructed notions of appropriateness. The data reveal two competing forces shaping compliance: an individual's internal ethical capacity (willpower) and external coercive pressures embedded in relational expectations. This extends earlier work (Quah, 2022; Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020) by showing that cultural expectations may overwhelm individual agency and cause anti-corruption measures to falter if they clash with unwritten rules.

I-1's observation *"if your entire peer in that department is on the take, if you do not take, you might be in trouble"* illustrates SI's mimetic pressures where individuals conform because deviation invites social sanctions. Yet,the findings show that civil servants do not passively submit, and they often recognise ethical tension. I-11's discomfort when superiors solicited gifts demonstrate an awareness of transgression, complicating the assumption that socialisation fully internalises corrupt norms. This supports a combined SI-RCI analysis where civil servants act intentionally, but within constraints shaped by ambiguous cultural expectations.

A key dimension of relational dynamics lies in informants' strategic silence and coded communication. Through interviews, informants spoke cautiously, using euphemistic terms to avoid explicitly naming wrongdoing. Phrases like *"beyond departmental control"* (I-2) subtly normalise relational obligations (*hutang budi*) while signalling that certain actions fall outside formal regulatory reach. Cultural proverbs like *"don't be a busybody"*, *"don't spoil others' livelihoods"* (I-16) may further reinforce silence by framing whistleblowing as a breach of social etiquette rather than an ethical act. I-2's admission that officers *"just keep silent"*, and I-9 notes that reporting wrongdoing *"brings shame to the department"*, illustrates how linguistic framing protects informal norms and offers plausible deniability. Requests for anonymity and hesitation across interviews reveal the cognitive and emotional labour required to navigate these competing demands. This dynamic challenges RCI's assumption (Hairuzzaki et al., 2024; Sharija, 2020) of stable preference structures. Extending Nurfarizan and Intan (2023), the data suggest civil servants operate with fragmented ethical consciousness where they recognise formal prohibitions, experience moral discomfort, then rationalise actions to reconcile competing expectations.

At the socio-cultural level, practices such as festive gift-giving illustrate how culturally legitimate behaviour can undermine formal rules. As I-3 explained: *"It's done openly so everyone can see the giving of the gift... I don't think it's really corrupt... it's more about us accepting it as a gift for our success, for the help we've given"*. The same logic may also facilitate rule-bending when relational obligations are perceived as morally legitimate and socially expected. Hierarchical and peer pressures converge to create what multiple informants described as *"traps"* (I-9, I-10, I-11, I-6, I-12) where gestures of goodwill mask transactional intent. I-12 noted that seemingly kind acts may be motivated by ulterior purposes. This strategic manipulation illustrates past studies' (Jones, 2022; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014) observation on how cultural values, particularly *balas budi*, turn reciprocal bonds into coercive obligations. Refusing such gestures risks being labeled rude or ungrateful, producing normative entrapment where cultural vocabularies reinterpret ethical refusal as a social offence.

Operational fragmentation within the bureaucracy further illustrates RCI's opportunity structures. When *"one staff member sometimes takes on two or three portfolios"* and *"communication isn't clear"* (I-5) discretionary spaces emerge where rules can be selectively applied. This mirrors Scott's (1995) notion of institutional bricolage, where actors draw on multiple, even contradictory, moral logics to justify decisions. For instance, police departments impose strict prohibitions *"even a pen is considered corruption"* (I-3), while administrative sectors treat gifts as *"low risk"* (I-4). This variation demonstrates both risk calculation (RCI) and interpretive inconsistency (SI). The same act, the giving or receiving of gifts, can carry entirely different moral meanings across organisational contexts.

This fragmentation may be further complicated if added with other institutional logics, like religion and race. Dato' Seri Ayob Khan's reminder that corrupt acts contradict Islamic teachings attempts to foreground religious moral logic. Yet, the need for such reminders shows that multiple frameworks, such as religious, ethnic, and relational logics, compete to define ethical boundaries. Each provides alternative justifications for behaviour, reflecting a broader ethical pluralism within the civil service. This systemic inconsistency may reinforce the ambiguous cultural context that continues to hinder anti-corruption reforms. The coexistence of religious, ethnic, relational, and organisational logics creates multiple and sometimes competing standards through which ethical behaviour is evaluated. Rather than producing a single shared understanding of integrity, these overlapping frameworks contribute to diverse interpretations of what constitutes appropriate conduct within bureaucratic settings. The findings therefore suggest that civil servants' perceptions of corruption are shaped not only by formal rules but also by the relational environments within which ethical decisions are made.

5.3.3 The Power of Mindset: Cognitive Frameworks and Interpretive Flexibility

As part of RO1, this section examines how individual reasoning, lived experiences, and cognitive interpretations shape civil servants' perceptions of corruption and influence administrative behaviour. The finding that individual reasoning, education and lived experiences may create diverse ethical lenses (The Power of Mindset) extends SI's (Scott, 2014) emphasis on competing cognitive scripts and assumptions. The data show variation: civil servants with legal training consistently adopt universalistic frameworks (*"any kind of gifts may be considered corruption, because there is always a risk"* (I-6)), while those without such exposure apply particularistic interpretations dependent on relationships and context. This supports Hofstede's (2010) distinction between national and organisational culture but reveals far greater intra-organisational heterogeneity than studies (Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Zaleha et al., 2014) previously acknowledged. Although diversity may enrich organisational problem-solving, it fragments ethical authority such that no dominant interpretive logic governs conduct. I-11's comment *"Malaysia is not like Singapore, where the law is strictly what it is… we are considerate of different views and ideologies"* captures institutional ambiguity and frames legal flexibility as cultural virtue.

The data also indicate that reasoning is not purely cognitive but shaped by affective and situational processes. Informants described emotional burdens, stress, pressure, and procedural confusion which create cognitive shortcuts that may prioritise psychological comfort over ethical scrutiny. When overwhelmed, officers may treat ethics not as a principle to uphold but a burden to minimise. This suggests an institutional culture lacking clear and consistent ethical mandates. From SI's logic of appropriateness, perceived appropriateness depends not on abstract rules but on situational cues and social expectations. Informants' use of adjusted personas, vague language, and strategic politeness demonstrates sophisticated situational awareness. While this flexibility may reflect social intelligence, it also opens up space for ethical relativism. Emotional and situational intelligence may be used to navigate situations more skillfully by reading social cues to know when rules can be bent, managing superiors' emotions to avoid scrutiny or performing integrity while engaging in hidden misconduct. The distinction between the wrongness of an act and the shame of being caught indicates performative ethics, where integrity is maintained only as long as respectability is preserved.

These findings challenge the deterministic readings of Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions framework. I-16 asserted that civil servants can be *"trained to understand that a blind follower is wrong"* suggests that cultural dispositions are malleable. This aligns with Patterson's (2014) view of culture as a dynamic and negotiated process. The data highlight several mechanisms through which mindsets evolve. Emotional awareness influences risk calculation, situational awareness enables strategic adaptation, and educational background provides alternative interpretive frameworks through which ethical dilemmas are understood. These findings suggest that ethical judgement is not fixed but develops through ongoing interaction between personal experiences, organisational environments, and broader cultural expectations. Anti-corruption training must therefore engage with these cognitive processes if it is to effectively counteract ambiguous norms and competing ethical interpretation.

Institutional attempts to recalibrate cognitive frames, such as from *'Saya Yang Menurut Perintah'* to *'Berkhidmat Untuk Negara'*, reflect symbolic efforts to reshape mindset. However, I-17's scepticism that these slogans remain *"merely decoration"* if not practiced indicates the limits of symbolic reform. This resonates with Enida's (2019) and Ostrom's (2007) observations on decoupling, showing that Malaysian civil servants are fully aware of the gap between symbolic adoption and substantive implementation.

At the individual level, civil servants behave as rational actors navigating a complex mix of incentives and sanctions. This theme highlights ethical conduct as a finite resource eroded by external pressures. I-2's remark that corruption arises from *"keeping up with the times"* and social media-driven envy highlights a pragmatic calculus: pursuing *"easy money"* and lifestyle improvements while perceiving detection risks as low. I-9's echoes this when noting officers engage in corruption *"to make work convenient"* and *"cover the cost of living"*, framing corruption as problem-solving rather than moral failure. The phrase (I-5) *"people are not afraid of corruption, they are afraid of being caught and losing face"* reveals that shame (*malu*) operates as a cultural deterrent stronger than legal punishment. The same mechanism may also silence whistleblowing and reinforce compliance with informal norms. I-8's observation that strict rule-followers become isolated *"people will say you are not cooperative"* shows how cultural sanctions can punish integrity. When some officers *"aren't even embarrassed"* (I-11), this indicates the erosion of social sanctions and normalisation of deviance.

The data further suggest that willpower may erode through processes of ethical habituation. As I-2 described that repeated exposure to corruption leads individuals to justify actions *"no matter what religion says"*. SI predicts that repeated rationalisations normalise previously unacceptable behaviour. This corroborates Lim et al. (2022), who trace the shift from idealism to accommodation through cognitive dissonance and justification. Informants described constructing justifications: *"this is just helping a friend"* (I-9) to maintain a positive moral self-image. Thus, interpretive diversity becomes a mechanism of strategic moral flexibility, where cultural ambiguity enables ethical reinterpretation. In such contexts, interpretive tools meant to clarify right and wrong may instead become resources to obscure ethical boundaries. Collectively, these findings suggest that perceptions of corruption are shaped not only by formal rules and institutional controls, but also by the cognitive frameworks through which civil servants interpret, justify, and evaluate their everyday actions. The Power of Mindset therefore highlights how individual reasoning, emotional responses, and situational judgements interact with broader cultural expectations to influence ethical behaviour within the civil service.

5.3.4 The Power of Words: Cultural Vocabularies as Ethical Terminologies

As part of RO1, this section examines how cultural vocabularies shape civil servants' perceptions of corruption and influence ethical judgement within bureaucratic settings. The analysis indicates that shared ideologies, competing narratives, and cultural sentiments function as interpretive resources, supporting SI's proposition (Scott, 2014) that institutions are sustained through shared meanings. Concepts like *balas budi*, *menjaga air muka*, and *jaga hati* do not operate as fixed moral codes rather, they serve as flexible vocabularies strategically deployed to navigate ethical ambiguity. This extends prior research (Jones, 2022; Mohamad Zulkurnai et al., 2014) by showing how these cultural terms are invoked to reframe potentially corrupt acts as socially appropriate behaviour, illustrating the symbolic power of cultural frameworks.

The data presents cultural sentiment as a double-edged sword. It can be a source of social cohesion or a mechanism for coercive pressure. It serves as a social glue that integrates civil service with society through cultural values. The reluctance to be seen as rude or unfriendly is a recognition that authority is ultimately granted by the community. This desire to maintain a positive public image ensures that the civil service remains accessible and responsive. It acts as a crucial counterbalance to the potential for authoritarian detachment as it grounds state power in a relationship of mutual respect and familiarity where building trust is required for effective governance.

However, interview data reveal a sophisticated SI process of moral reframing. For example, I-2 noted: *"some people think from the perspective of Islam that corruption is haram, but sometimes they think it's part of helping people"*. This suggests that individuals do not necessarily reject religious prohibitions. Instead, they may reinterpret the nature of the act so that the prohibition appears irrelevant or inapplicable. The findings therefore challenge assumptions found in some interpretations of Kamal Hassan (2022) that cultural or religious values automatically restrain corruption. Instead, the same normative framework (e.g., Islamic ethics) may be read through competing lenses (divine prohibition versus social duty), creating ambiguity that can be strategically exploited.

The data illustrate three distinct mechanisms through which cultural vocabularies operate. First, categorical ambiguity. Terms like gift and bribe lack clear boundaries, producing grey zones where actors exercise discretion. As I-19 observed, *"petty corruption is often rationalised as helping our people, tokens of appreciation or expediting services"*, demonstrating how linguistic framing transforms the moral meaning of actions. Second, selective appropriation. Individuals may draw upon whichever ethical framework best validates their actions. For instance, seeking religious justification for questionable payments demonstrates how religious authority can be selectively mobilised to legitimise ambiguous conduct. Third, institutional slogans as legitimation devices. Phrases like *"police and community are inseparable"* (*polis dan masyarakat berpisah tiada*) (I-3) may be used rhetorically to justify practices that formal rules explicitly prohibit, reframing them as part of community bonding or mutual goodwill.

These findings show that cultural vocabularies originally intended to uphold traditional values can become mechanisms enabling ethical violations. This aligns with SI's account of symbolic power (Hodgson, 2025; Scott, 2014) demonstrating that culture acts as an interpretive resource that helps actors navigate between formal rules and informal expectations. Malaysia's civil service operates within multiple overlapping normative orders as theorised by Syed Hussein Alatas (1968), but this study adds empirical depth by illustrating how individuals may actively manipulate, rather than passively absorb, these cultural frames. For instance, I-19's comment that gifts may be culturally acceptable in ordinary settings but problematic in procurement highlights the need for clearer ethical boundaries. I-17's revelation that a hamper may conceal gold *"just to say thanks"* illustrates how cultural camouflage can be used to convert public authority into a commodity for private negotiation. However, the findings also challenge overly structural or deterministic interpretations. I-3's testimony regarding police strictness (*"even gifting a pen is considered corruption"*) demonstrates that cultural norms may not universally facilitate corruption. Instead, their impact is contingent on organisational context. In settings with strict enforcement and high visibility, cultural vocabularies may be constrained by institutional discipline.

Overall, the analysis suggests that cultural ambiguity does not automatically produce corruption. Rather, it creates a space for ethical negotiation in which outcomes depend upon organisational context, leadership, enforcement, and social expectations. The Power of Words therefore highlights how language, narratives, and cultural vocabularies shape the way civil servants interpret, justify, and evaluate ethical conduct within everyday bureaucratic life.

5.3.5 Summary of Research Objective (1)

This section addressed RO1 by examining how cultural norms influence civil servants' perceptions of corruption and shape routine administrative behaviour. The findings demonstrate that these perceptions are not determined solely by formal rules, legal frameworks, or individual moral judgement. Instead, they are constructed through the interaction of historical experiences, social relationships, cognitive interpretations, and culturally embedded vocabularies that shape how integrity, authority, and accountability are understood in everyday bureaucratic settings.

The analysis identified four interrelated dimensions that influence these perceptions and behaviours. First, The Power of Foundations highlighted how historically embedded administrative traditions continue to shape understandings of authority, obedience, and legitimacy. Second, The Power of Relationships demonstrated how relational obligations, social expectations, and peer pressures influence ethical judgement and behavioural choices. Third, The Power of Mindset revealed that civil servants interpret ethical dilemmas through diverse cognitive frameworks shaped by education, experience, and situational considerations. Finally, The Power of Words illustrated how cultural vocabularies, and symbolic narratives provide interpretive resources that can justify, challenge, or redefine the meaning of particular actions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that corruption-related behaviour within Malaysia's civil service cannot be understood solely as a consequence of weak enforcement or individual moral failure. Rather, it reflects a complex cultural-institutional environment in which civil servants continuously interpret, negotiate, and reconcile competing expectations arising from formal institutions and informal social norms. From the perspective of NIT, these findings support the view that behaviour is shaped not only by formal structures but also by historically embedded norms, shared meanings and strategic interpretations.

Consequently, RO1 demonstrates that cultural norms operate as powerful institutional forces that influence how corruption is perceived, how ethical boundaries are defined and how administrative behaviour is enacted in practice. These findings provide the foundation for the next section, which examines how cultural norms shape the implementation and effectiveness of formal anti-corruption reforms within Malaysia's civil service.

5.4 Discussion of Research Objective (2): How Cultural Norms Shape the Effectiveness of Anti-Corruption Reforms (RO2)

This section addresses RO2 by examining how cultural norms interact with formal anti-corruption reforms within Malaysia's civil service. While anti-corruption initiatives are designed to strengthen accountability, transparency, and ethical conduct, the findings suggest that their effectiveness is often mediated by informal institutional forces operating alongside formal rules. Drawing on HI, SI, and RCI, this section explores how cultural norms influence the implementation, interpretation, and practical outcomes of anti-corruption reforms.

The findings indicate that anti-corruption reforms do not operate within a culturally neutral environment. Instead, reforms are introduced into institutional settings characterised by established social relationships, historical administrative traditions, and competing normative expectations. As a result, formal reforms may be accepted symbolically while being interpreted, adapted, or selectively implemented through existing cultural frameworks. This creates variation between the intended objectives of reform and the realities of administrative practice.

Three interrelated themes emerged from the analysis. First, relational obligations may gradually be transformed into transactional exchanges that weaken the intended effects of anti-corruption mechanisms. Second, formal conformity to integrity initiatives may conceal substantial differences in ethical practice across agencies and organisational contexts. Third, civil servants often experience simultaneous pressures from superiors and peers, creating institutional environments in which formal accountability requirements compete with informal expectations of loyalty, reciprocity, and group solidarity.

Together, these findings suggest that the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms depends not only on the quality of formal institutional design but also on how reforms interact with existing cultural norms and organisational practices. The following sections discuss these dynamics through three dimensions: the transformation of relational obligations into transactional exchanges, the performance of uniformity masking diverse ethical practices, and the convergence of vertical and horizontal pressures within bureaucratic settings.

5.4.1 The Transformation of Relational Obligations into Transactional Exchanges

As part of RO2, this section examines how cultural norms influence the implementation and effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms. The findings suggest that formal reforms may unintentionally alter the form of corrupt practices without necessarily eliminating the underlying cultural and relational dynamics that sustain them. The findings reveals a paradoxical pattern: anti-corruption reforms may inadvertently shift corruption from relational exchanges rooted in social obligation to more explicit transactional dealings. While RCI posits that stricter rules should deter corruption by increasing the costs of misconduct (Beckert, 2010), the data indicates a more adaptive behavioural response. I-1's testimony that gatekeepers now *"demand to be paid. Otherwise, they will not approve the project"* illustrates this evolution: what was once embedded in reciprocity and relational obligation has become a direct monetary transaction. Rather than eliminating corrupt behaviour, reforms may contribute to changes in the way such behaviour is organised and justified.

The findings suggest that when formal rules are misaligned with prevailing informal norms, they do not suppress corrupt practices but instead recalibrate them. This aligns with North's (2005) concept of institutional friction, where new formal rules encounter resistance from entrenched informal norms. Informants described how actors adjusted their strategies as procurement regulations tightened, engaging in what I-10 termed *"manipulation in ordinary settings"*. This demonstrates an adaptive corruption ecology where actors modify their tactics in response to regulatory constraints, resulting in normative recalibration rather than behavioural transformation.

From an NIT perspective, this suggests that reforms focused primarily on procedural tightening may unintentionally encourage the adaptation and concealment of corruption rather than its elimination, especially when informal cultural expectations remain institutionally embedded.

Malaysia's experience is not isolated within the regional context. Comparable patterns of formal-informal institutional tension have been documented across Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, Agus (2011) observed that bureaucratic reciprocity networks operate parallel to formal accountability structures, producing outcomes structurally similar to Malaysia's dual-order governance. Hutchcroft's (1998) analysis of the Philippines demonstrates how patrimonial relational obligations become institutionalised within bureaucratic hierarchies, mirroring this study's findings on balas budi and hierarchical deference. Quah (2011) further note that postcolonial Asian states share a common inheritance of layered institutional logics, where colonial administrative frameworks were grafted onto pre-existing relational governance traditions. This comparative evidence suggests that Malaysia's experience forms part of a broader regional pattern and provides additional support for the revised conceptual framework proposed in this study.

These findings challenge assumptions of conventional procedural anti-corruption approaches, such as those emphasised in Transparency International (2023) and UNCAC frameworks, which conceptualised corruption primarily as an enforcement deficit rectified through technical solutions (e.g., more monitoring, stricter penalties, enhanced transparency). The Malaysian context suggests that such interventions can become counterproductive when they fail to address the cultural logics that structure everyday bureaucratic behaviour. Increasing the risks and sanctions without addressing underpinning motivations may simply professionalise corrupt networks. Actors may become more sophisticated at navigating oversight, employing cultural vocabularies, and procedural knowledge to obscure misconduct and minimise detection. In this sense, reforms may alter the techniques through which corruption is practised without fundamentally changing the incentives and social expectations that sustain it.

Historical trajectories are also essential to understanding this transformation. As I-18 and I-20 highlighted, the technological and economic shifts of the 1990s cultivated a more materialistic orientation among segments of bureaucracy. Rapid development produced aspirational consumption pressures, visible in I-2 reflection *"observe others' lifestyles...fancy restaurant, new car, vacation"*. Given the gap between such aspirations and civil service salaries, informal practices may become rationalised as necessary means of achieving socially normative lifestyle. Thus, corruption evolves not only in response to reform but also in relation to broader socio-economic transitions.

However, findings do not suggest cultural norms are inherently corrosive. Instead, they reveal dual potentialities. When properly engaged, traditional norms can reinforce integrity rather than undermine it. I-4's testimony that helping colleagues may be framed as gratitude and collective responsibility demonstrates that relational ethics can support compliance when interpreted through principles such as *amanah* (sacred trust) and communal honour. This mirrors Quah's (2017, 2011) analysis of Singapore, showing that effective anti-corruption strategies do not abandon cultural norms but strategically reinterpret them to complement formal codes. Malaysia's National Integrity Plan (2004), which sought to embed *amanah* into ethical governance, reflects this recognition, though empirical evidence suggests its implementation was uneven and often symbolic. The findings therefore suggest that anti-corruption reforms require cultural alignment in addition to procedural strengthening. Formal rules alone may be insufficient if they operate in ways that contradict or ignore deeply embedded social expectations and relational obligations.

Collectively, these findings indicate that corruption within Malaysia's civil service adapts alongside institutional reform rather than disappearing in response to it. Consequently, the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms depends not only on enforcement capacity but also on the extent to which reforms engage with the cultural, relational and socioeconomic conditions that shape everyday administrative behaviour.

5.4.2 The Performance of Uniformity Masking Diverse Ethical Practices

As part of RO2, this section examines how cultural norms shape the implementation and effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms by influencing how reform initiatives are interpreted, enacted, and experienced across different organisational settings. The finding that anti-corruption initiatives undergo ritualisation (Sub-theme 2.1) reinforces Meyer and Rowan's (1977) notion of ceremonial conformity where organisations adopt formal structures to project legitimacy while decoupling these structures from everyday practice. Testimonies from I-14, I-15 and I-17 that reforms are *"mere paper requirements, just so that officers can carry on with other jobs"* illustrate this decoupling and emphasise how reform instruments become symbolic rather than substantive.

The findings suggests several mechanisms through which this ritualisation emerge. First, compliance as performance. Integrity pledges, ethics training, and poster campaigns may be treated as administrative tasks to be completed rather than ethical commitments to be internalised. The researcher's observation of a rigid atmosphere during Integrity Talks echoes Sharifah Liyana et al.'s (2019) and Quah's (2018b) analysis on how procedural compliance is celebrated as sufficient regardless of behavioural outcomes. In this sense, reform instruments risk becoming box-ticking exercises devoid of transformative potential.

Second, low cost, high visibility signaling. Attending integrity events and signing pledges require minimal effort yet produce visible evidence of participation. Such activities create favourable audit trails and satisfy external reporting requirements. This generates perverse incentives whereby the appearance of reform may be rewarded more than behavioural change. As I-10 remark *"slogans are there, posters are everywhere...but in the office, it is not easy to tell if behaviour remains the same"*.

Third, cultural norms as enablers of decoupling. Collectivist injunctions such as *'jaga hati'* and *'elak memalukan orang'* may dissuade civil servants from questioning whether symbolic compliance reflects genuine commitment. This supports SI's argument (Scott, 2014) that cultural assumptions operate as stabilising forces that protect ceremonial practices from scrutiny. Anti-corruption initiatives thus risk prioritising visibility and participation over behavioural substances.

From an NIT perspective, these findings suggest that anti-corruption reforms may become institutionally successful in symbolic terms while remaining behaviourally weak in practice, particularly when organisational legitimacy is measured through procedural visibility rather than ethical transformation.

While reform processes emphasise uniformity, the findings (Sub-theme 2.2) reveal considerable internal diversity within Malaysia's civil service. This challenges monolithic portrayals in existing scholarship (Norziaton & Zatun, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Nur Shafiqa & Nafsiah, 2019). I-17's remark that *"there are bosses who enable this kind of behaviour and there are bosses who prohibit these behaviours"* demonstrates the existence of distinct ethical climates across units and agencies. Within this diversity lies untapped facilitative potential. Ethical leaders reinterpret cultural norms in ways that reinforce rather than undermine integrity. For instance, *amanah* may be framed as accountability to citizens rather than loyalty to superiors, and *jaga nama* may be redefined as protecting institutional reputation through ethical conduct rather than concealing wrongdoing. This extends Quah's (2022) and Ho's (2002) discussion by demonstrating that even within theoretically uniform systems, micro-level leadership may create differences in ethical climate.

Despite this potential, current reform strategies may fail to recognise or leverage such diversity. I-14's observation that policy plans serve merely as *"general guides"* and must be selectively applied underscores the need for contextual adaptation. Yet, Malaysia's reforms frequently presume uniform transformation and favour standardised solutions. This approach may inadvertently suppress existing ethical enclaves and overlook opportunities to empower principled actors who could function as internal change agents.

The findings therefore suggest that diversity within organisational culture should not necessarily be viewed solely as a governance weakness. Under supportive leadership and institutional conditions, variation in ethical interpretation may also provide spaces for positive institutional adaptation, and reform-oriented behaviour. Consequently, the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms depends not only on the existence of formal policies but also on the extent to which reforms recognise, engage, and harness the diverse organisational cultures that exist within the civil service.

5.4.3 The Pincer Effect: Convergence of Vertical and Horizontal Pressures

As part of RO2, this section examines how cultural norms shape the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms through the interaction of hierarchical authority and peer conformity within bureaucratic settings. The findings indicate that that vertical and horizontal pressures may converge to render formal accountability negotiable particularly when mediated by Malaysia's culturally ambiguous governance environment. The data illustrates three interconnected dynamics that shape reform outcomes.

First, vertical pressure through hierarchical authority. I-16's testimony regarding investigation *"ceilings"* on politicians and I-1's description of the *"three wise men"* who control promotions illustrate how hierarchical power may create accountability gap. Verbal supporting letters from influential figures may override formal procedures, while informal directives from the highest ranks often carry unquestionable authority. These findings reinforce Gomez's (2024) and Fernandez's (2024) analyses of elite impunity and suggest that Malaysia's anti-corruption infrastructure, especially MACC, may lack genuine operational independence despite formal legal autonomy (Gomez, 2024; Wan Murshida & Mazlena, 2019). I-16's comparative data showing Malaysia's Power Distance Index (PDI) score of 100 versus Austria (11) and the UK (35), provide quantitative grounding for these qualitative observations. However, the findings extend Hofstede (2001) by suggesting that high PDI does not merely generate deference but may actively construct corruption pathways, where authority can be framed as absolute and organisational hierarchy transforms from a neutral feature into a structural vulnerability.

Second, horizontal pressure through peer conformity. I-16's description of cadets joining corrupt practices to avoid becoming *"an albino"*, a metaphor for social exclusion, illustrates the strength of peer-based enforcement mechanisms. This supports SI's argument that conformity is not just general pressure but a relational dynamic of inclusion and exclusion where non-participation invites professional isolation and reputational risk. I-2's phrase *"knowing but not speaking"* encapsulates a shared code of silence that discourages reporting. This aligns with studies (Jones, 2022; Quah, 2022; Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020; Ho, 2002) highlighting Malaysia's culture of non-confrontation. Informants consistently described proverbs such as *'jangan jaga tepi kain orang'* and *'jangan taruh pasir dalam periuk nasi orang'* as cultural injunctions that may discourage whistleblowing. These norms help explain why Malaysia's anti-corruption mechanisms, despite legal protections, struggle when confronting horizontal social sabotage (Mohd Rusyidi & Muhammad Hariz, 2023; Shakila et al., 2021).

Third, the convergence effect. The data show that vertical and horizontal pressures often reinforce one another. Hierarchical demands for loyalty are enforced not only through positional authority but also through peer pressure. At the same time, peer conformity may be legitimised by deference to rank. Civil servants thus face simultaneous pressure from both superiors and colleagues, making ethical resistance socially and professionally untenable. This pincer movement may produce a dual-layered enforcement mechanism that makes compliance with integrity norms extremely difficult.

From an NIT perspective, hierarchical authority within the civil service may therefore operate as a mechanism of coordination and an institutional condition shaping how accountability is selectively interpreted, enforced, and negotiated in practice. These findings suggest that peer conformity may function as an informal enforcement mechanism capable of reinforcing organisational silence and weakening formal accountability structures through social sanction rather than legal coercion.

The findings further suggest that these pressures may be intensified by broader social and communal loyalties. I-18 reflections on fragmented national identity, where *"loyalty to ethnic group"* supersedes *"loyalty to country"* indicate that institutional expectations sometimes coexist alongside alternative sources of identification and obligation. Consistent with Ho (2002) and Shamsul (1997), these overlapping loyalties may create multiple normative reference points through which ethical issues are interpreted. Consequently, reform initiatives based on uniform assumptions regarding values and behaviour may encounter difficulties when implemented across diverse organisational and social contexts.

Despite these challenges, the data also reveal opportunities for reform. Informants pointed to growing public expectations for institutional independence, accountability, and transparency. Such developments suggest that both political leadership and civil society can contribute to reducing pressures that discourage ethical behaviour. However, the findings indicate that technical policy solutions alone are unlikely to achieve sustained change unless they explicitly address the cultural dynamics that shape compliance and accountability within everyday administrative practice.The findings therefore suggest that anti-corruption reforms are most vulnerable when formal accountability mechanisms operate within environments characterised by strong hierarchical dependence and peer-based conformity. In such contexts, cultural norms may unintentionally undermine reform objectives by prioritising loyalty, cohesion, and deference over ethical scrutiny and institutional accountability.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that institutional interfaces within Malaysia's civil service transform cultural norms into strategic resources that both enable and constrain behaviour. Rather than eliminating corruption, formal reforms may recalibrate relational practices into increasingly transactional and concealed forms, particularly when symbolic compliance substitutes for substantive transformation. From an NIT perspective, RO2 highlights how misalignment between formal rules and informal norms generates adaptive responses that weaken reform effectiveness and sustain existing patterns of behaviour.

5.4.4 Summary of Research Objective (2)

This section addressed RO2 by examining how cultural norms shape the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms within Malaysia's civil service. The findings demonstrate that reform effectiveness is not determined solely by the formal design or rigour of anti-corruption mechanisms. It can be mediated by how reforms interact with, accommodate, or are resisted by embedded cultural and relational norms.

The discussion identified three interrelated dynamics shaping these reform outcomes. First, the transformation of relational obligations into transactional exchanges revealed that tightening formal rules does not necessarily eliminate corrupt practices but instead recalibrates them, shifting corruption from reciprocity-based relational exchanges towards more explicit monetary transactions. This adaptive response suggests that procedural reforms, when misaligned with prevailing cultural expectations, may inadvertently professionalise and conceal corrupt behaviour rather than eradicate it.

Second, the performance of uniformity masking diverse ethical practices showed how anti-corruption initiatives may become ritualised, with compliance reduced to symbolic, low-cost displays that satisfy audit and reporting requirements without producing genuine behavioural change. At the same time, considerable diversity exists beneath this surface uniformity, as ethical climates vary across units depending on leadership, suggesting untapped potential for context-sensitive reform that current standardised approaches fail to harness.

Third, the convergence of vertical and horizontal pressures demonstrated how hierarchical deference and peer conformity reinforce one another to create a "pincer effect" that renders formal accountability negotiable. Civil servants facing simultaneous pressure from superiors and colleagues find ethical resistance socially and professionally costly, while overlapping loyalties to ethnic, communal, or organisational groups further complicate uniform reform implementation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that anti-corruption reforms function less as neutral technical interventions and more as institutional events that are filtered, reinterpreted, and sometimes neutralised through existing cultural logics. From the perspective of NIT, reform effectiveness emerges through the interaction of historical institutional legacies, relational obligations, organisational visibility, and socioeconomic pressures. Cultural norms therefore operate with dual potentiality: they can entrench and conceal corrupt practices, but when strategically engaged by ethical leadership, they may also be reinterpreted to reinforce integrity and accountability.

Overall, RO2 demonstrates that strengthening formal rules and enforcement capacity alone is insufficient to guarantee reform success. Sustainable anti-corruption outcomes require deliberate engagement with the cultural and relational dynamics that shape how reforms are interpreted and enacted in practice. The findings suggest that an ongoing, dynamic tension between formal rules and the informal cultural norms continue to structure everyday administrative behaviour

5.5 Discussion of Research Objective (3): How Civil Servants Negotiate Between Formal Rules and Informal Expectations (RO3)

This section addresses RO3 by examining how cultural norms interact with formal institutional rules to shape patterns of compliance within Malaysia's civil service. While formal institutions prescribe standards of conduct through laws, regulations, and anti-corruption mechanisms, the findings indicate that compliance is rarely a simple matter of rule adherence. Instead, civil servants continuously navigate tensions between official expectations and informal cultural obligations embedded within everyday organisational life.

Drawing upon HI, SI, and RCI, this section explores how compliance emerges through ongoing behavioural negotiations rather than through automatic obedience to formal rules. The findings suggest that civil servants operate within environments characterised by competing institutional logics, where professional obligations, social relationships, organisational expectations, and personal values frequently intersect. Consequently, compliance is often shaped by interpretation, adaptation, and negotiation rather than by strict procedural adherence.

The analysis reveals three interrelated dimensions of behavioural negotiation. First, organisational socialisation gradually shapes how civil servants understand and respond to ethical expectations, producing shifts from initial idealism towards accommodation and adaptation. Second, civil servants frequently operate within parallel institutional orders where formal rules coexist alongside informal cultural norms, creating competing sources of guidance and legitimacy. Third, compliance emerges as a situational and context-dependent process influenced by organisational environments, leadership practices, and perceived consequences of action or inaction.

Together, these findings suggest that corruption and compliance should not be understood as binary outcomes but as products of continuous interaction between formal institutions and informal cultural expectations. The following sections examine these dynamics through the themes of the Socialisation Lifecycle, Parallel Institutional Orders, and Situational Compliance.

5.5.1 The Socialisation Lifecycle: Engineering Ethical Erosion

As part of RO3, this section examines how organisational socialisation shapes civil servants' understanding and response to ethical expectations. The finding suggests civil servants undergo a gradual shift from initial idealism to subsequent accommodation indicates SI's (March & Olsen, 1984; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) systematic socialisation process. I-2's testimony about the contrast between induction training emphasising integrity and the realities of office practice demonstrates Hodgson's (2025) institutional switching mechanism. In this context, concepts of social appropriateness to align with expectations (SI), incentive for formal obedience (RCI), and historically inherited routines (HI) are mobilised interchangeably in daily bureaucratic routines. As such, the data suggests these principles may be strategically invoked to maximise situational advantage when cultural justifications are available. Thus, while formal onboarding communicates official values, informal socialisation may ultimately shape operational norms.

This finding suggests a two-stage socialisation process. In the first stage, exposure to formal rules provides awareness of procedural expectations. In the second stage, daily workplace experience may teach civil servants that rules are negotiable, contingent, and context-dependent. This challenges the conventional assumption (Afzal et al., 2022; Sharija et al., 2020; Ferry et al., 2018; Marlina & Jamaliah, 2015) that organisational socialisation uniformly embeds official values. Instead, Malaysian civil servants appear to develop a form of dual ethical consciousness, enabling them to circumvent formal rules without perceiving themselves as unethical. I-2's phrase *"we just keep silent"* when observing senior officer transgressions captures this learned strategic acquiescence. From an NIT perspective, this suggests that organisational socialisation within the civil service may simultaneously institutionalise awareness of formal integrity norms while normalising adaptive behaviour that accommodates informal workplace expectations.

The data reveal specific socialisation mechanisms: (i) hierarchical warnings, *"if you don't comply, they will make things difficult for you"* (I-1); (ii) horizontal pressure through peer modeling where individuals may imitate misconduct if they observed that colleagues' misconduct goes unpunished; and (iii) cultural scripts where proverbs such as *"don't be a busybody"* or *"don't spoil other livelihood"* (I-16) may legitimise silence and discourage accountability. These intersecting mechanisms may create a comprehensive socialisation architecture that gradually erodes initial ethical commitments. I-1's experience, initial resistance, cognitive dissonance, and eventual accommodation to authority, illustrates this trajectory from idealism to strategic conformity.

The process also demonstrates that socialisation may operate through passive exposure and active coercion. The threat of career stagnation, social exclusion, and hierarchical retaliation produces an environment where ethical resistance may become materially and emotionally costly. This reflects RCI's emphasis on incentive structures (North, 1990), SI's logic of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 1989) and HI's institutional inertia (Thelen, 1999). In this setting, corruption provides social belonging, smoother workflow and career security, while integrity carries risks, uncertainty and lack of organisational protection.

I-16's testimony on cultural proverbs functioning as normative sanctions reveals the cultural layer of socialisation. Phrases like *"don't spoil others' livelihoods"* may recast oversight as moral violation and whistleblowing as betrayal.

Plus, I-8's observation that students are already socialised into believing that *"gifting is a must"* to gain social advantage shows how unethical practices are reproduced long before individuals enter the civil service. Thus, formal anti-corruption training may have limited impact when operating against cultural socialisation that begins in families and educational institutions, where harmony and relational obligations are privileged over principled confrontation. These findings suggest that behavioural negotiation within the civil service is not produced solely within organisational settings, but is reinforced through wider cultural and social institutions that shape attitudes towards authority, reciprocity, and accountability long before formal employment begins

However, the data also indicates that some individuals do resist socialisation pressures. Informants described officers who maintained integrity despite a coercive environment, suggesting that individual agency remains relevant. This supports I-16's distinction between money-centred, family-centred, and principle-centred orientations, where the latter group is more likely to resist corruption. This challenges RCI's structural determinism (Hairuzzaki et al., 2024; Muhammad Nurul et al., 2020) and suggests that the outcome of socialisation depends partly on pre-existing ethical foundations and personal commitments individuals bring into public service.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that behavioural negotiations within Malaysia's civil service emerge through long-term socialisation processes where formal institutional expectations, cultural norms, and organisational pressures interact continuously. From an NIT perspective, corruption-related behaviour may therefore be understood less as isolated misconduct and more as the cumulative outcome of institutional environments that gradually normalise strategic accommodation, silence, and adaptive conformity within everyday bureaucratic life.

5.5.2 Parallel Institutional Orders: The Arena of Daily Negotiation

As part of RO3, this section examines how civil servants negotiate competing expectations arising from formal institutional rules and informal cultural norms. The findings suggest that behavioural outcomes are frequently shaped by the coexistence of parallel institutional orders operating simultaneously within everyday administrative practice. The finding that formal rules and informal practices operate as parallel systems creating daily negotiation arenas illustrates a form of institutional duality within Malaysia's civil service. Rather than functioning as mutually exclusive systems, formal regulations and informal cultural expectations coexist simultaneously, requiring civil servants to navigate between them in everyday administrative life. The findings suggest three major dynamics through which this duality manifests.

First, layered rules without displacement. I-17's testimony that *"corruption becomes a practicality"* despite formal prohibitions indicates that new anti-corruption policies are absorbed without displacing existing informal norms. This reflects HI's concept of institutional layering (Mahoney, 2000; Thelen, 1999), where rules accumulated rather than replace one another. Consequently, civil servants navigate both formal requirements and informal expectations, with the latter exerting greater influence over practical outcomes.

The manipulation of open tender process as described consistently by I-1, I-8 and I-17, demonstrates how formal procedures may become performance rituals, echoing Scott's (1969) argument on institutional performance where organisational compliance becomes symbolic enactment rather than substantive change. Officers may be aware of this duality; they may not mistake procedural performance for genuine reform but may consciously participate in both simultaneously. This extends scholarship on symbolic compliance (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Enida, 2019) by showing how Malaysian civil servants engage in intentional dual navigation, rather than passive conformity. From an NIT perspective, these findings suggest that anti-corruption reforms may coexist with older informal institutional arrangements without fundamentally transforming the behavioural logics governing everyday administrative practice.

Second, knowledge fragmentation. I-17's frustration and I-5's observation that Integrity Unit findings are seldom shared with departments suggest institutional asymmetry of information. Anti-corruption work may be an opaque specialist domain, suggesting limited organisational ownership or shared responsibility. Consequently, reform initiatives appear distant, technocratic, and disconnected from everyday operational realities. However, I-7 and I-9 noted that such opacity arises partly from manpower shortages within MACC and Integrity Units rather than intentional secrecy. This suggests that some reform barriers arise from structural constraints rather than intentional resistance. The findings therefore indicate that institutional duality may be reinforced by resource limitations that restrict communication, knowledge-sharing, and organisational learning. Expanding Integrity Unit capacity and creating more systematic knowledge-sharing platforms may therefore provide opportunities to reduce the distance between integrity initiatives and everyday administrative practice.

Third, fragmented loyalties. I-18's observation that ethnic, regional, and communal affiliations sometimes remain influential alongside national and organisational identities suggests that formal civil service structures may operate alongside alternative networks of loyalty and obligation. Reactions to corruption scandals may depend heavily on communal affiliation rather than factual evidence. This extends work on selective accountability (Jones, 2022; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Ho, 2002) by suggesting that enforcement outcomes may sometimes be interpreted through social and cultural lenses rather than exclusively through formal institutional criteria. The findings also reveal a spatial dimension to behavioural negotiation. I-12's observation that people behave differently outside office hours and corruption may occur *"beyond the space of office"* illustrates how ethical expectations may vary across institutional settings. Formal organisational environments often impose stronger behavioural controls, whereas informal social spaces may permit greater flexibility in ethical interpretation. The same individual may therefore operate under multiple normative frameworks depending on organisational visibility, social relationships, and situational context. These findings suggest that behavioural negotiation within the civil service is highly contextual, with ethical standards frequently shaped by organisational settings, relational networks, and perceived levels of scrutiny.

The coexistence of parallel institutional orders also helps explain why anti-corruption reforms frequently generate inconsistent outcomes despite extensive formal regulation. Formal institutional mechanisms may establish procedural expectations, yet informal systems continue shaping how those rules are interpreted, prioritised, and selectively applied in practice. Civil servants consequently become active negotiators between competing institutional demands rather than passive recipients of formal rules alone.

This dual-order environment further complicates accountability because responsibility itself becomes diffused across overlapping systems of loyalty, hierarchy, and social obligation. Officers may formally comply with procedures while informally accommodating relational expectations, thereby preserving both organisational legitimacy and social belonging simultaneously. Such dynamics reinforce SI's proposition that institutions are sustained not merely through coercive enforcement, but through socially embedded patterns of meaning and appropriateness.

At the same time, the findings indicate that institutional duality does not always produce uniform corruption outcomes. Certain departments characterised by stronger leadership, clearer ethical boundaries, or higher visibility appeared more capable of constraining informal adaptation. This suggests that organisational context mediates the extent to which parallel institutional orders undermine or reinforce integrity practices.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that behavioural negotiation within Malaysia's civil service occurs within overlapping formal and informal institutional orders that coexist simultaneously rather than sequentially. Civil servants therefore do not simply follow or reject formal rules; they continuously negotiate between competing expectations arising from regulations, organisational norms, social relationships, and cultural obligations. From an NIT perspective, compliance and corruption emerge from this ongoing negotiation between parallel institutional logics that shape how rules, relationships, and accountability are interpreted in everyday bureaucratic practice.

5.5.3 Situational Compliance: The Power of Context

As part of RO3, this section examines how compliance emerges through context-dependent negotiations between formal institutional expectations and informal cultural norms. The findings suggest that compliance is not a fixed condition but varies according to organisational environments, leadership practices, visibility, incentives, and cultural interpretations. The finding that compliance varies across contexts underscores three contingencies shaping whether institutional collusion results in corruption or integrity.

First, visibility and scrutiny as determinants of compliance. I-3's comparison between police where *"even a gift such as a pen is considered corruption"* and prisons, where *"nobody else knows what happened"* as matters are resolved internally, demonstrates how visibility influences behavioural outcomes. This supports RCI's proposition that detection probability shapes decision-making (Beckert, 2010). High-visibility agencies adopt stricter ethical interpretations because reputational risks and public oversight demand conservative behaviour. At the same time, these findings expose the limitations of enforcement-centric reforms. Enhanced monitoring may induce compliance in visible sectors but may fail to address cultural ambiguity that legitimises corruption in low-visibility environments. Sustainable reform requires the internalisation of integrity norms within everyday administrative culture, not merely the threat of detection. From an NIT perspective, this suggests that compliance is not solely shaped by formal enforcement capacity, but also by how organisational visibility interacts with cultural expectations and institutional incentives.

Second, leadership as ethical gatekeeper. The data indicate that leadership quality is a crucial determinant of departmental integrity. The informal norms and ethical tone set by supervisor and colleagues may become guides for behaviour. I-17's contrast between leaders who prohibit unethical practices and those who enable them demonstrates considerable ethical heterogeneity across agencies and departments. Such variation contributes to a more fragmented and uneven bureaucratic environment.

This reinforces earlier scholarship (Quah, 2022; Jones, 2022) noting leadership's influence through behaviour modelling, protection, discipline, and interpretive authority. However, ethical leadership appears structurally fragile. I-8's observation that departments *"go back to previous style of work"* once a reform-oriented leader departs shows the temporary nature of leadership-driven change. This exemplifies HI's institutional stickiness (Mahoney, 2000), where underlying routines reassert themselves once external pressures weaken. Consequently, reform strategies that rely excessively on charismatic or principled leaders without broader structural reinforcement risk producing only temporary enclaves of integrity rather than enduring institutional transformation.

Third, ambiguity as an ethical escape hatch. I-7's account of investigations complicated by alternative rationalisations illustrates how definitional ambiguity enables reinterpretation. Unlike theft or fraud, corruption involves relational exchanges where intent is not always visible. Payments framed as *"loans"*, gifts justified as politeness or hospitality masked as goodwill blur the legal boundaries. This supports arguments advanced by Muhammad Saufan et al. (2023), Jones (2022) and Muhammad Nurul et al. (2020) that culturally sanctioned behaviours create alternative explanatory pathways, making formal classification difficult. Investigators may struggle not due to incompetence but because cultural norms grant plausible, socially acceptable reinterpretations that obscure intent. This dual framing, politeness versus corruption, may fundamentally challenge enforcement frameworks grounded in legal clarity against relational exchanges. These findings suggest that ambiguity functions as an institutional resource enabling actors to strategically navigate between formal legal definitions and culturally acceptable explanations.

I-16's comparison with Sweden, Switzerland and Norway, which maintain low corruption without dedicated anti-corruption agencies, together with the Middle Eastern tolerance for nepotism, highlights the pivotal role of cultural meaning-making, not just institutional structures. However, I-11's reflection that Singapore's preventive laws and procedures *"exceed expectations"* simultaneously demonstrates how deliberate institutional design, clear ethical boundaries, and consistent enforcement may constrain cultural ambiguity more effectively. Ultimately, the Malaysian case demonstrates that corruption continues not because culture inherently permits it, but because ambiguous cultural scripts interact with institutional signals, producing a wide interpretive space that allows competing meanings to flourish. Anti-corruption reforms that do not explicitly engage these cultural dynamics risk being ritualised, selectively applied, or substantively neutralised.

Collectively, this dimension demonstrates that corruption and compliance in Malaysia's civil service are continuously negotiated through behavioural socialisation, parallel institutional orders, and contextual contingencies. Rather than being the outcome of isolated choices, ethical erosion emerges from repeated interactions within environments where ambiguity, incentives, and cultural meanings intersect. From an NIT perspective, this behavioural negotiation represents the final translation of historical foundations and relational interfaces into everyday practice. Without disrupting these negotiated spaces, formal anti-corruption reforms are likely to remain symbolically robust but operationally fragile.

The findings further suggest that cultural norms within Malaysia's civil service function primarily as mediating rather than directly enabling corruption. Cultural vocabularies and frameworks such as *balas budi*, hierarchical deference and *malu* do not independently produce corruption. Instead, they interact with institutional conditions to determine whether cultural scripts are activated in integrity-reinforcing or corruption-permissive directions. This is evidenced by the finding that identical cultural norms such as reciprocity and gift-giving, produce different outcomes across organisational contexts: strict prohibition in high-visibility agencies yet normalised exchange in low-visibility environments. Accordingly, this study positions culture not as the singular root cause of corruption, but as a conditional amplifier interacting with institutional structures, organisational environments, and behavioural incentives to shape how integrity and corruption are negotiated within Malaysia's civil service.

5.5.4 Summary of Research Objective (3)

This section addressed RO3 by examining how cultural norms interact with formal institutional rules to shape compliance behaviour within Malaysia's civil service. The findings demonstrate that compliance is not a fixed outcome determined solely by formal regulations. Rather, it emerges through continuous negotiation between competing institutional expectations, organisational realities, and cultural obligations.

The discussion identified three interrelated mechanisms shaping these behavioural negotiations. First, the socialisation lifecycle revealed how civil servants gradually learn to navigate the gap between formal integrity expectations and informal workplace realities. While official training programmes promote ethical conduct, organisational experiences often expose officers to alternative norms that encourage accommodation, silence, and adaptive conformity. Consequently, compliance becomes shaped not only by formal rules but also by socialisation processes operating within organisational and broader societal environments.

Second, the existence of parallel institutional orders highlighted how civil servants simultaneously operate within formal bureaucratic systems and informal cultural networks. Formal procedures, regulations, and accountability mechanisms coexist alongside relational obligations, social expectations, and cultural loyalties. Rather than replacing one another, these institutional orders function concurrently, requiring civil servants to continuously negotiate between competing sources of legitimacy and guidance.

Third, the findings demonstrate that compliance is highly contextual and contingent. Organisational visibility, leadership quality, enforcement consistency, and cultural ambiguity all influence how rules are interpreted and applied. The same cultural norm may reinforce integrity in one setting while facilitating accommodation or corruption in another. This suggests that behavioural outcomes depend less on the existence of particular cultural values and more on the institutional conditions within which those values are activated and interpreted.

Taken together, these findings suggest that corruption and compliance within Malaysia's civil service are best understood as negotiated institutional outcomes rather than purely individual choices or simple violations of formal rules. From the perspective of NIT, behavioural outcomes emerge through the interaction of historical legacies, social expectations, organisational pressures, and strategic calculations. Cultural norms therefore function primarily as mediating mechanisms that shape how institutional rules are interpreted, enacted and negotiated in practice.

Overall, RO3 demonstrates that anti-corruption reforms cannot rely solely on strengthening formal rules and enforcement mechanisms. Sustainable improvements in integrity require attention to the behavioural environments through which civil servants interpret, negotiate and ultimately respond to competing institutional demands. The findings therefore reinforce the central argument of this thesis that corruption persists not because formal institutions are absent, but because formal rules continue to interact with deeply embedded cultural and organisational dynamics that shape everyday bureaucratic behaviour.

5.6 Synthesis of Institutional and Cultural Dynamics

Cultural norms influence civil servants' operational worldview and responses in complex ways. For example, cultural norms can create an administrative environment that promotes structural stability and manages risk. On the other hand, they may conceal an ecosystem where certain routines and behaviours erode accountability by reframing unethical conduct either as loyalty or practical survival. This dynamic may create ambiguous ethical spaces where corruption becomes culturally defensible.

The findings suggest that corruption within Malaysia's civil service cannot be adequately understood through legal or procedural explanations alone, but must instead be interpreted through the interaction between institutional structures, cultural expectations, and behavioural adaptation. This study indicates that compliance in the Malaysian civil service operates through a three-stage behavioural mechanism. First, socialisation processes lay the foundation for ethical orientations and teach civil servants how to navigate the system, both formally and informally. Second, in everyday bureaucratic life, officers encounter decision points where they must negotiate between formal rules and informal expectations. Third, situational variables, including leadership quality, visibility of oversight, and the degree of institutional ambiguity, may shape whether individuals choose compliance or circumvention.

This behavioural sequence demonstrates that compliance is not static, but continuously shaped by interaction between organisational context, social pressures, and institutional interpretation. As such, a civil servant's behaviour may vary across contexts. An individual may refuse bribes in a high-visibility posting yet accept them in a low-visibility environment, not due to a change in personal character but because the situational equilibrium has shifted. Similarly, ethical conduct practised under principled leadership may collapse once a corrupt successor assumes office. This is not evidence of socialisation failure but an indication that leadership redefines what is rational and appropriate within a given context.

The data implies that most civil servants act strategically, rather than uniformly compliant or consistently corrupt individuals. They navigate competing demands through situational calculation, institutional cues, and cultural interpretation. The phrase *"knowing but not speaking"* (I-2) captures this condition: officers recognise wrongdoing but may remain silent based on their calculation of the risks and costs associated with intervening. This challenges reform efforts (Sharija et al., 2020; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019; Ferry et al., 2018) that focus narrowly on ethical training. These behavioural negotiations appear shaped by institutional environments where silence, accommodation, and selective conformity may offer greater organisational safety than principled resistance.

The evidence suggests that corruption continues because civil servants operate in environments where ethical behaviour is structurally disadvantaged, especially within an ambiguous cultural context that rewards silence, harmony, and conformity. From HI's perspective, Malaysia's institutional design reflects path-dependent legacies. I-17's remark, *"They treat officers and ministers differently, if ministers ask to do something, they will definitely do it immediately"*, illustrates how political authority may routinely supersede administrative protocol. YB Rafizi's acknowledgment further affirms this pattern: officers have long been conditioned to *"wait for the minister"* before acting.

These findings suggest that hierarchical obedience and political deference may become institutionalised behavioural expectations within the civil service, reinforcing the negotiation of accountability through authority structures rather than procedural neutrality. This may implicate the civil service through hierarchical compliance, where political interests can override institutional integrity. Moreover, the systematic marginalisation of anti-corruption leaders, through termination, transfer, or stalled promotions, demonstrates how institutional design may enable political capture of accountability mechanisms. Aligning RCI with SI perspectives, civil servants may rationally avoid enforcement because the career costs outweigh the potential benefits. If political elites control appointments, budgets, and mandates of enforcement bodies, accountability institutions may remain structurally vulnerable to the very actors they are intended to regulate.

Systemically, the convergence of individual incentives (RCI), organisational routines (HI), and cultural scripts (SI) produce corruption as an institutional outcome. These three perspectives are not competing explanations but complementary dimensions of a single governance reality. The political-administrative interface amplifies these dynamics. When ministers prioritise speed over procedure (I-17; Gomez, 2024; Fernandez, 2024), when political loyalty influences ethnic-based appointments (I-18; Ho, 2002), and when enforcers face retaliation (I-16; Wan Murshida & Mazlena, 2019), the institutional ecosystem signals that corruption may be tolerated or even expected. Through shared legitimacy (March & Olsen, 1989), the fear of *malu* (shame) may operate as an informal enforcement mechanism. Yet, this same cultural logic may also perpetuate silence, protect departmental image, and suppress reporting. Informants' accounts reveal that corruption is often not exposed to avoid bringing shame to the organisation, demonstrating how cultural norms can subvert formal accountability while maintaining symbolic legitimacy. This reflects a central paradox identified throughout the study: cultural norms that sustain organisational cohesion and social harmony may simultaneously weaken transparency, confrontation and institutional accountability.

The monarchy's role epitomises this cultural-institutional ambiguity. One interpretation views it as part of a distributed system of sovereignty facilitating checks and balances through mutual adjustment. From this perspective, the system enhances resilience and prevents excessive concentration of power within any single entity. Another interpretation views it as a feudal legacy reinforcing hierarchical deference and constrains democratic accountability. In this latter reading, bureaucratic deference may become a rational career strategy rather than genuine respect. This may create conditions where proximity to traditional power, rather than merit alone, influences advancement opportunities. Over time, such feedback loops may reinforce cultural norms that protect institutional arrangements resistant to reform and weaken anti-corruption initiatives.

Collectively, the synthesis demonstrates that corruption within Malaysia's civil service emerges from the interaction between historical legacies, institutional incentives, cultural expectations, and behavioural adaptation. From an NIT perspective, corruption persists as informal institutional logics continuously mediate, reinterpret, and negotiate how those rules are understood and practised within everyday administrative life.

5.7 Chapter Summary

The theoretical implication of this study is that corruption within Malaysia's civil service cannot be explained solely through individual moral failure or structural deficiencies. Instead, it arises from a complex interplay between socialisation, institutional demands, and situational contingencies embedded within an ambiguous cultural environment. Cultural ambiguity creates shifting zones of negotiation where compliance is not fixed but context-dependent. The findings further suggest that corruption should be understood as an institutionally negotiated outcome shaped through the interaction between historical legacies, cultural expectations, and organisational pressures operating within everyday bureaucratic practice.

The practical implication is that corruption continues because reform initiatives often target formal structures while leaving the deeper cultural and institutional logics intact. The result may be performative integrity and ceremonial adoption of reforms, while day-to-day practice is governed by informal norms. Merely introducing new laws or procedures atop unreformed incentive structures, hierarchical traditions, and cultural vocabularies risks creating further decoupling rather than genuine change. This indicates that anti-corruption reforms may remain symbolically strong yet operationally fragile when institutional behaviour continues to be mediated by informal expectations, relational obligations and organisational accommodation.

Effective intervention therefore requires transforming the institutional ecology and cultural conditions that may make ethical behaviour costly and corruption advantageous. Integrity must become the strategically rational, socially legitimate, and institutionally supported choice for civil servants, not merely the formally prescribed one.

Overall, the study demonstrates that sustainable anti-corruption reform in Malaysia requires not only procedural and legal adjustments, but also broader institutional and cultural transformation capable of reshaping how accountability, integrity, and compliance are interpreted and practised within the civil service.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Overview

This chapter synthesises the study's findings on how cultural norms interact with formal institutions in Malaysia's civil service. It acknowledges the study's limitations, outlines recommendations for future research and highlights both theoretical contributions to New Institutional Theory (NIT) and practical implications for policymakers. The chapter also reflects on methodological challenges encountered during the research before concluding with an integrated discussion of the study's significance. The chapter further consolidates the study's central argument that corruption within Malaysia's civil service emerges through the continuous interaction between formal institutional structures and informal cultural expectations shaping everyday administrative behaviour.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

6.2.1 Research Objective (1): How Cultural Norms Influence Civil Servants' Perceptions and Behaviour

This study examined how cultural norms, functioning as informal institutions, interact with formal rules in Malaysia's civil service. Using qualitative research methods, the study explored how these interactions shape corrupt practices and influence reform effectiveness. It examined how cultural expectations, historical legacies, and social obligations collectively influence civil servants' behaviour in ways that complicate integrity efforts. The findings indicate that corruption persists in Malaysia's civil service not because laws are inadequate or civil servants lack ethical awareness, but cultural norms may actively mediate how formal institutions function in ways that existing reforms fail to fully address.

Cultural norms operate as flexible tools rather than fixed traditions. Values such as deference to authority and reciprocity continue to shape corruption perceptions. In doing so, they create grey areas where questionable practices may become culturally defensible. For example, small gifts or favours may be framed as *budi* (kindness) or *tanda penghargaan* (tokens of respect) rather than bribes. Civil servants may strategically invoke notions of reciprocity and loyalty to justify practices that formally contravene established rules. While such norms are not inherently corrupt, they may blur the boundary between social courtesy and corruption, thereby undermining integrity frameworks. Although these norms do not inherently produce corruption, they may blur distinctions between social courtesy and misconduct, thereby influencing how formal rules are understood, negotiated, and selectively applied. Corruption therefore emerges not solely from individual opportunism but from broader cultural and institutional processes that shape everyday administrative behaviour.

6.2.2 Research Objective (2): How Cultural Norms Shape the Effectiveness of Anti-Corruption Reforms

The study found that anti-corruption reforms frequently encounter resistance and reinterpretation as they interact with existing cultural and institutional arrangements. Three interrelated mechanisms were identified. First, normative recalibration describes how informal practices adapt to formal rule changes while preserving underlying behaviours. Second, ritualistic decoupling refers to organisations displaying formal compliance externally while maintaining informal practices internally. Third, convergent pressures emerge where hierarchical and peer influence render formal accountability negotiable. Together, these mechanisms help explain why extensive anti-corruption initiatives, including legal reforms, integrity programmes, and enforcement institutions, may produce limited behavioural change.

The findings suggest that reform outcomes are mediated by cultural norms that influence how policies are interpreted and implemented. Consequently, formal reforms may be symbolically adopted without substantially altering the informal institutional logics that continue to govern everyday organisational behaviour.

6.2.3 Research Objective (3): How Civil Servants Negotiate Between Formal Rules and Informal Expectations

The findings demonstrate that compliance within Malaysia's civil service is highly contextual rather than purely rule-bound. Compliance outcomes are influenced by organisational socialisation processes, parallel institutional orders, and situational contingencies. Civil servants continuously negotiate between formal institutional expectations and informal cultural obligations, resulting in behavioural outcomes that vary according to organisational settings, leadership quality, visibility of oversight, and levels of ambiguity. Several mechanisms explain these behavioural negotiations. Selective appropriation enables actors to invoke particular norms depending on situational demands, while cultural camouflage allows legitimate cultural practices to obscure corrupt intent. As a result, compliance and corruption are not fixed categories but negotiated outcomes shaped by the interaction between formal rules, organisational incentives, and cultural meanings. These findings highlight that corruption may persist not because formal institutions are absent, but because civil servants operate within environments where multiple institutional logics coexist and compete for legitimacy.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that corruption within Malaysia's civil service is sustained through the continuous negotiation between formal institutional expectations and informal cultural realities. From an NIT perspective, this highlights the importance of understanding corruption not solely as a legal or procedural issue, but as a broader institutional and cultural phenomenon embedded within everyday administrative practice.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations bear on the interpretation of these findings. First, sample limitations arise from the qualitative design, which prioritised depth over breadth. The study drew on the perspectives of 20 informants rather than a representative sample of Malaysia's approximately 1.4 million civil servants. Although theoretical saturation was achieved for the key themes identified, alternative perspectives may exist among civil servants who were not interviewed. In addition, the predominance of federal-level informants means state and local administrative dynamics may be underrepresented. While purposive sampling was appropriate for exploring the interaction between cultural norms and corruption, the findings cannot be statistically generalised to the entire Malaysian civil service. These limitations reflect the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry, where the objective is analytical depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical representativeness. The purpose of the study was therefore not statistical generalisation but analytical generalisation to institutional processes, meanings, and mechanisms operating within the civil service.

Second, limitations associated with self-reported data must be considered. The study relied primarily on interview data and relevant policy documents, without incorporating large-scale experimental or quantitative data. Interview data relies on participants' self-reported perceptions, experiences, and interpretations. These may be affected by social desirability bias, retrospective recall limitations, or reluctance to disclose information related to corruption. Despite efforts to build rapport and ensure confidentiality, some informants may have understated the extent of corruption to avoid association with misconduct. Variations in interview candour across different settings, such as shared spaces versus private spaces, further reinforce this concern. While such constraints are common in corruption research, they nonetheless limit confidence in claims regarding the prevalence of specific behaviours. At the same time, the cautious language, hesitation and indirect expressions observed during interviews also formed part of the empirical findings, reflecting the broader culture of sensitivity and negotiated silence surrounding corruption-related discussions within the civil service.

Third, scope-related limitations stem from the study's analytical focus on corruption within the civil service. This research largely excluded political corruption involving elected officials except where it directly influenced civil servants' behaviour, as well as forms of business-government corruption beyond procurement contexts and judicial corruption. These boundaries were necessary for analytical clarity, but they result in a partial view of Malaysia's broader corruption ecology.

Fourth, temporal limitations should be acknowledged. Data collection was conducted within a specific timeframe and therefore may not capture subsequent developments in cultural norms, governance practices, or anti-corruption initiatives. The findings reflect norms and practices as described by informants during the study's period. Given Malaysia's evolving political and social landscape, including generational change and technological advancement, the dynamics examined in this study may shift over time. As such, the findings may insufficiently reflect future institutional developments. This suggests that institutional behaviour and corruption-related norms should be understood as dynamic phenomena, evolving alongside broader political, technological, and societal transformations.

Fifth, limitations related to document availability affect the secondary data analysis. The study relied on publicly accessible documents, while internal agency records, confidential reports, and classified integrity assessments may contain additional insights that were not available. Although document selection followed a systematic approach, it remained purposive rather than exhaustive. Consequently, the documentary evidence should be interpreted as providing contextual support rather than a comprehensive representation of all institutional records relevant to corruption and integrity.

Sixth, theoretical limitations should be noted. The pluralistic application of NIT enabled a comprehensive analysis but also introduced analytical complexity. Integrating Historical, Sociological, and Rational Choice Institutionalism risks theoretical eclecticism rather than a fully unified framework. Moreover, the emphasis on cultural norms as mediating mechanisms may understate the role of structural and material factors such as remuneration levels, political instability, and economic inequality in shaping corruption incentives. While the study deliberately foregrounded the often underexplored role of culture, this focus may inadvertently downplay these structural dimensions. Nevertheless, the integration of multiple institutional perspectives enabled the study to capture the multidimensional nature of corruption more comprehensively than a single-theory approach would likely permit.

Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful contributions to understanding how formal and informal institutions interact in shaping bureaucratic behaviour. Sustained engagement with informants provides rich insights that are difficult to capture through purely quantitative approaches. Although the qualitative case study design presents challenges in terms of generalisability and subjectivity, it is particularly well-suited to revealing the complex and dynamic interaction between institutional structures, cultural norms, and everyday administrative practices.

Overall, these limitations do not invalidate the findings, but instead, define the boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted. They highlight the complexity of studying corruption within culturally sensitive and institutionally layered administrative environments such as Malaysia’s civil service.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations build directly on the limitations identified in this study and outline possible directions for extending and deepening future research. Several of the directions outlined below carry dual significance: they are researchable questions and, simultaneously, implementable actions that policymakers and agencies can initiate without waiting for further academic study.

First, comparative research across different states within Malaysia would illuminate contextual variation in how formal rules interact with cultural norms. Regional differences in ethnic composition, political dynamics, and local leadership styles may shape distinct patterns of patronage, gift-giving, and informal practices. Such research could assess whether the mechanisms identified in this study operate uniformly across different states or manifest differently depending on local administrative and socio-cultural contexts.

Second, large-scale studies would enhance the generalisability of findings. Future research could adopt stratified sampling across hierarchical levels and departments, and risk profiles, including comparisons between high-risk and low-risk administrative contexts. A larger and more representative sample would allow for statistical testing of relationships between cultural pressures and specific compliance outcomes. Future studies could also collaborate with agencies such as the Public Service Department and the MACC to develop periodic integrity perception surveys. Such initiatives would generate more generalisable evidence on the prevalence of cultural pressures, enable longitudinal tracking of reform outcomes and assist researchers in identifying institutional hotspots or pockets of integrity requiring further investigation. These approaches would help bridge the gap between interpretive qualitative insights and broader population-level patterns within the civil service.

Third, examining the interaction between anti-corruption interventions and cultural contexts remains necessary. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs could test whether reforms that explicitly engage with cultural norms prove more effective than purely procedural approaches. For instance, future studies might compare integrity training that frames ethical conduct through culturally resonant values such as amanah with training that emphasises legal compliance. The use of vignette-based methods could additionally create safe spaces for civil servants to discuss ethical dilemmas, reduce social desirability bias, and clarify ambiguous boundaries between acceptable cultural practices and corruption.

Fourth, ethnographic and in-depth case study approaches could provide deeper insights into tacit routines and informal practices that are difficult to capture through interviews alone. Prolonged engagement with a single department may uncover unspoken norms shaping everyday behaviour. Studying departments or units identified as ethical enclaves could help explain how certain leadership styles, organisational arrangements, or sub-cultures enable resistance to corrupt pressures. Focusing on civil servants who actively resist corruption would also shift analysis from a deficit-oriented perspective to an asset-based approach, highlighting resilience strategies and forms of moral courage. Longitudinal case studies tracking similar departments over five to ten years could further illuminate how political change, digitalisation, or sustained reform efforts reshape institutional norms over time. Such approaches would allow future researchers to move beyond perceptions and explore how corruption-related norms are reproduced, negotiated, and resisted through everyday organisational interaction.

Fifth, mixed-methods research designs could help overcome the methodological constraints of this study by combining qualitative depth with quantitative breadth. Large-scale surveys could test whether patterns identified through interviews are reflected across the broader civil service population. Quantitative modelling could also examine the relative influence of cultural pressures compared to factors such as remuneration, workload, and perceived cost-of-living pressures, thereby clarifying whether culture primarily enables corruption by rendering structurally induced practices morally acceptable.

Sixth, research extending beyond the civil service would contribute a more comprehensive understanding of Malaysia's corruption ecology. Examining political corruption, business-government relations, and judicial corruption could reveal whether the institutional mechanisms identified in this study operate similarly across different governance domains or are context-specific.

Seventh, cross-national comparative research within Southeast Asia would test the broader applicability of the study's findings. Comparing Malaysia with countries such as Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia could reveal how differences in colonial legacies, ethnic composition, and political systems shape corruption dynamics. Such comparisons would help distinguish mechanisms that are uniquely Malaysian from those reflecting wider regional patterns.

Finally, action research involving collaboration with reform-minded civil servants could generate practice-oriented knowledge. By designing and implementing culturally engaged interventions within real bureaucratic settings, action research would move beyond diagnosing problems to testing solutions. This approach generate practical and theoretically informed insights into how culturally sensitive interventions are implemented, adapted, and sustained within real bureaucratic settings, while simultaneously revealing unanticipated barriers to reform implementation.

Taken together, these recommendations reflect the need for future research to move beyond descriptive accounts of corruption and towards deeper examination of the institutional, cultural, and behavioural mechanisms through which corruption is reproduced, negotiated, and resisted. Overall, future research should continue exploring corruption beyond merely a legal or administrative issue, but as a multidimensional institutional phenomenon shaped by the interaction between culture, organisational structure, political context, and behavioural negotiation.

6.5 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study makes meaningful theoretical and practical contributions to New Institutional Theory (NIT), corruption studies and public administration in non-Western contexts.

6.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to NIT by identifying four institutional transformation mechanisms: normative recalibration, selective appropriation, cultural camouflage, and ritualistic decoupling. Through these mechanisms, formal anti-corruption rules are reinterpreted and neutralised in everyday administrative practice. While prior NIT scholarship recognises the interaction between formal and informal institutions, this study specifies how such interaction operates within governance contexts characterised by legal pluralism, strong informal norms, and high power distance. The findings therefore extend NIT beyond broad institutional interaction by demonstrating the specific micro-level processes through which cultural norms mediate, reinterpret, and weaken formal anti-corruption mechanisms in everyday bureaucratic settings.

The findings extend concepts such as institutional layering and decoupling by demonstrating their concrete manifestation in non-Western bureaucracy. Corruption is shown not to result primarily from weak enforcement, but from the co-evolution of cultural norms and institutional structures that normalise prohibited practices. Culture functions as an interpretive mechanism, shaping how actors understand rules and justify behaviour, rather than as an independent causal factor. This shifts institutional analysis from static structures to dynamic processes of institutional negotiation.

The study also introduces the idea of hybridity by design, demonstrating that dual institutional arrangements were deliberately constructed during formative historical periods to secure legitimacy across diverse social groups. This challenges assumptions that contemporary governance problems are merely transitional and suggests that reform strategies must confront intentionally embedded institutional complexity rather than assume linear modernisation.

Beyond NIT, this study demonstrates that corruption may be socially embedded rather than rationally calculated. Civil servants were found to employ moral rationalisation, including cultural duty redefinition and selective invocation of religious norms, to justify participation in questionable practices. The findings also indicate that corruption may coexist with relatively strong bureaucratic capacity. This challenges the common assumption that corruption always reflects state weakness and suggests a more nuanced understanding of how corruption operates in functioning administrative systems.

Collectively, these theoretical contributions reposition corruption as an institutionally negotiated and culturally mediated phenomenon rather than solely a problem of weak enforcement or individual deviance. They extend NIT by demonstrating how corruption may emerge through continuous negotiation between formal institutions and informal cultural norms within non-Western bureaucratic settings.

6.5.2 Practical Contributions

The study offers practical insights for policymakers and reform practitioners. The findings suggest that effective anti-corruption reform requires engagement with cultural and institutional realities rather than procedural expansion alone. Integrity initiatives are more likely to succeed when formal rules are reinforced through culturally resonant values such as *amanah* (trustworthiness), *maruah* (dignity), professional responsibility, and public service ethics, and when ethical leadership is visibly modelled by senior officials.

The study highlights the importance of integrating cultural considerations into the design and implementation of anti-corruption initiatives. Rather than relying exclusively on legal enforcement and procedural controls, reform strategies should engage with the cultural meanings, relational expectations, and organisational environments that influence everyday behaviour. The findings suggest that integrity programmes are more likely to succeed when ethical expectations are embedded within routine organisational practices and reinforced through leadership behaviour, peer norms, and institutional incentives.

The study further demonstrates that departments exhibiting strong integrity cultures can serve as valuable organisational learning sites. Understanding the institutional conditions that sustain such environments may assist policymakers in developing more context-sensitive approaches to reform implementation. This shifts anti-corruption efforts away from uniform compliance models towards strategies that recognise variation across organisational settings and cultural environments.

The study also highlights the importance of integrating integrity into everyday bureaucratic practices. This may include case-based ethics training, whistleblower protection, and the incorporation of ethical conduct into performance evaluations and promotion systems. The findings additionally support the use of organisational culture assessments as complementary tools for identifying informal norms, behavioural expectations, and integrity risks that may not be visible through conventional compliance monitoring systems. Such approaches may assist policymakers in identifying areas where formal reforms are not fully aligned with organisational culture and everyday administrative practice.

These recommendations collectively shift anti-corruption reform away from narrow procedural compliance towards a broader institutional and cultural engagement strategy grounded in the realities of Malaysian administrative practice. Without addressing the cultural and institutional logics that shape behaviour, anti-corruption reforms risk producing symbolic compliance rather than meaningful change. Overall, the study contributes practical direction for policymakers by demonstrating that sustainable anti-corruption reform requires simultaneous attention to formal institutions, organisational environments, and cultural norms. Reform efforts that engage all three dimensions are more likely to produce meaningful and enduring improvements in integrity governance within Malaysia's civil service.

6.6 Reflections on the Research Journey

Conducting this study highlighted both substantive and methodological challenges in researching a sensitive and normatively charged topic. Gaining access to informants and building trust required question framing and sustained ethical sensitivity to encourage open discussion.

Being a Malaysian researcher studying Malaysian institutions, the researcher benefited from cultural familiarity in interpreting practices related to *bud*i, *tanda penghargaan*, and *balas jasa*. This insider position was balanced through peer debriefing and reflective journaling to minimise the risk of cultural overfamiliarity and interpretive bias. This reflexive positioning enabled deeper contextual interpretation through continuous and repetitive critical analysis.

The research also revealed the human dimensions of corruption. Many informants were navigating competing institutional and social pressures rather than acting purely out of self-interest. This underscores the importance of understanding structural and cultural influences on behaviour.

Methodologically, the study reaffirmed the value of triangulation through interviews, document analysis, and observations in developing a balanced understanding of institutional practices. These experiences contributed to the researcher's development in studying complex governance phenomena.

The research journey ultimately reinforced the importance of approaching corruption as a socially embedded and institutionally negotiated phenomenon shaped by historical experience, organisational context and cultural meaning.

6.7 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that anti-corruption reform in Malaysia cannot succeed through procedural expansion and enforcement alone. Corruption persists because institutional change unfolds within cultural and historical contexts that shape how rules are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted. Without engaging these underlying logics, reforms risk becoming performative adherence that preserve external legitimacy while leaving everyday practices unchanged.

The findings consistently indicate that corruption within Malaysia's civil service is sustained through the interaction between formal institutional structures and informal cultural expectations operating within everyday administrative environments. At the same time, the findings offer genuine grounds for optimism. Values such as *amanah* and collective responsibility, when strategically reinterpreted and modelled by institutional leaders, can reinforce integrity rather than undermine it. The existence of ethical enclaves demonstrate that principled conduct is possible even under constraining conditions and these conditions themselves can be cultivated.

Theoretically, this study extends NIT by identifying four micro-level transformation mechanisms: normative recalibration, selective appropriation, cultural camouflage, and ritualistic decoupling through which cultural norms may systematically mediate formal anti-corruption rules in non-Western bureaucratic settings. In doing so, the study advances understanding of corruption as an institutionally negotiated outcome shaped by the continuous interaction between historical legacies, cultural expectations and organisational realities.

More broadly, the study challenges explanations that locate corruption solely in weak enforcement, inadequate regulations or individual moral failure. Instead, it demonstrates that corruption may persist even within relatively capable bureaucratic systems when informal norms and formal institutions become mutually reinforcing. This highlights the importance of examining corruption as a multidimensional institutional phenomenon rather than merely a legal or administrative problem.

Ultimately, the challenge is not whether culture matters, but whether reformers are willing to engage with it seriously. This study has shown that corruption in Malaysia's civil service is sustained through the co-evolution of formal rules and informal norms across historical and organisational contexts. Recognising this reality represents an essential starting point for developing reforms that are not only procedurally robust, but also institutionally embedded, culturally coherent and capable of generating sustainable behavioural change.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Legislative Cluster	Key Exemplary Statutes	Primary Anti-Corruption Focus
Core Anti-Corruption & Enforcement	• MACC Act 2009 • AMLATFA Act 2001 • Penal Code	Criminalises bribery, kickbacks, cartel, collusion, nepotism, extortion, graft, embezzlement and abuse of power in public and private sectors; establishes enforcement agencies and provides for asset forfeiture and financial surveillance.
Financial Sector & Market Regulation	• Financial Services Act 2013 • Capital Markets and Services Act 2007 • Development Financial Institutions Act 2002 • Banking and Financial Institutions Act 1989 • Labuan Financial Services and Securities Act 2010 (Labuan Offshore Securities Industry Act 1998) • Labuan Islamic Financial Services and Securities Act 2010 (Labuan Trust Companies Act 1990) • Copyright Act 1987 • Financial Services Act 2013 • Development Financial Institutions Act 2002 • Goods and Services Tax (Repeal) Act 2018 • Islamic Banking Act 1983 (Islamic Financial Services Act 2013) • Offshore Banking Act 1990 • Offshore Insurance Act 1990	Prohibits market manipulation and criminalises fraudulent accounting, illicit financial flows and embezzlement within regulated financial institutions.

National Governance, Public Administration & National Security	• Customs Act 1967 • Immigration Act 1959/63 • Government Procurement Procedures • Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 • Child Act 2001 • Corrosive and Explosive Substances and Offensive Weapons Act 1958 • Customs Act 1967 • Excise Act 1976 • Exchange Control Act 1953 • Explosives Act 1957 • Firearms (Increased Penalties) Act 1971 • Dangerous Drugs (Forfeiture of Property) Act 1988 • Immigration Act 1959/63 • Income Tax Act 1967 • Interest Scheme Act 2016 • International Trade in Endangered Species Act 2008 • Insurance Act 1996 • Internal Security Act 1960 • Kidnapping Act 1961 • Kootu Funds (Prohibition) Act 1971 • Passports Act 1966	Targets illicit activities within the area of public spending and governance, including falsifying documents, smuggling, bribery for permits and circumventing tender processes.
Sector-Specific & General Legislation	•Companies Act 2016 •Computer Crimes Act 1997 •Capital Markets and Services Act 2007 (Futures Industry Act 1993) •Direct Sales and Anti-Pyramid Scheme Act 1993 •Various regulations (e.g., Control of Supplies, Consumer Protection, Betting, Common Gaming Houses, Fisheries, Palm Oil, Timber, Merchant Shipping, Money Services Business, Moneylenders, Optical Discs, Pawnbrokers, Payment Systems, Sales Tax, Service Tax, Strategic Trade, Securities Commission, Securities Industry, Takaful, Trade Descriptions, Trademarks, Wildlife Conservation)	Addresses fraud, breach of trust, illicit enrichment and cronyism in business and specific economic sectors.

Source: Author's analysis based on AMLATFA Act 2001 and MACC Act 2009.

APPENDIX 2

Category	Approach	Core Focus	Causal Factors Commonly Used in Studies	Critical Values / Limitations
Core Branches	Historical Institutionalism (HI)	Institutions are viewed as enduring rules shaped by history.	Path dependence and critical junctures confine bureaucratic trajectories.	Strong on continuity, weak on explaining agency and reform.
	Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI)	Institutions as incentive structures.	Rules provide payoffs, sanctions and enforcement.	Illuminates incentives, but assumes rationality; overlooks legitimacy and norms.
	Sociological (Normative) Institutionalism (SI)	Institutions as norms, culture and legitimacy.	Behaviour guided by rules of appropriateness and socialisation.	Captures cultural depth, but weak on power asymmetries and strategic incentives.
Comparative / Structural Branches (pertaining to policy studies)	Empirical Institutionalism (EI)	Formal structures explain policy differences.	Variations in constitutions, legislatures, federal/unitary systems shape outcomes.	Focuses on formalism, neglects informal norms and practices.
	Network Institutionalism (NI)	Informal networks and policy styles.	Rules-of-the-game (Game Theory) within policy communities guide decisions.	Strong on informal rules, but may underplay structural/legal frameworks.
Ideational / Critical Branches (pertaining to understanding social realities)	Constructivist / Discursive Institutionalism (CI/DI)	Institutions as ideas and discourse.	Stability arises from dominant ideas; change through contestation.	Strong on meaning, but risks neglecting enforcement and material constraints.

	Feminist Institutionalism (FI)	Gendered dynamics of institutions.	Institutions reproduce gendered power hierarchies.	Reviews the idea of social balance; adds emphasis on neglected dimensions on social interactions but it is an underdeveloped study.
Global / Economic Branches (pertaining to contemporary issues)	International Institutionalism (II)	Transnational rules shaping domestic practice.	International regimes constrain and guide domestic institutions.	Explains external pressures, less on internal adaptation.
	Political Economy / Economic Institutionalism (PEI)	Institutional foundations of capitalism and markets.	State-market rules shape incentives and behaviour.	Useful for procurement corruption, but overly structuralist.

Source: Author’s synthesis of NIT Branches.

APPENDIX 3

Interview Protocol

Title: Cultural Norms and Corruption in Malaysia's Civil Service: A New Institutional Theory Perspective

Researcher: Farhana

Institution: Universiti Teknologi MARA

Contact: 2024611458@student.uitm.edu.my

Study Information

Background: Cultural norms refer to the shared, often tacit expectations, values and behavioural codes that guide social interaction within a given society (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). In the context of public administration, these norms function as informal institutions that influence perceptions of appropriateness and legitimacy, often operating independently or in tension with formal rules and procedures (Scott, 2008). Norms are not merely social customs; they constitute cognitive frames that shape behaviour, enabling or constraining actions through internalised expectations. This framing is particularly relevant in bureaucratic settings, where compliance, discretion and performance are mediated not only by formal policies but also by culturally embedded assumptions about authority, reciprocity and social obligation.

The theoretical grounding for cultural norms draws on seminal scholars such as Hofstede (2001) and Cialdini & Trost (1998). These sources frame cultural norms not as ethnically deterministic, but as shared systems of values, expectations and behavioural codes that are shaped by both societal traditions and institutional practices. Within Malaysia's civil service, studies by Jones (2022), Gomez and Jomo (1999) and Syed Hussein Alatas (1968) demonstrate how norms, like deference to hierarchy, obligations to social networks and prioritisation of group harmony have been historically embedded within administrative routines. These studies exemplified that cultural norms may exert a significant influence on decision-making and professional conduct. These norms do not operate in isolation, but often intersect with formal institutional frameworks, at times reinforcing regulatory intent, and at other times subtly subverting it. For example, culturally sanctioned practices such as reciprocal gift-giving, expressions of loyalty based on social connection and prioritising group cohesion may be socially perceived as common, even when they contradict formal codes of ethics or anti-corruption protocols.

This study adopts an institutionalist perspective that distinguishes between formal structures (such as laws, policies and procedures) and informal institutions (such as norms, values and social behaviours) (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Cultural norms are thus understood as dynamic, historically contingent andsocially constructed mechanisms that are internalised through bureaucratic socialisation and everyday administrative practice. They are not treated as static residues of ethnic culture but as living expressions of socially constructed expectations embedded within the organisational field of the civil service. This approach avoids cultural determinism and instead emphasises how formal institutional structures (laws, bureaucratic frameworks, anti-corruption protocols, etc.) interact with culturally shaped informal expectations (like deference to authority, patronage, loyalty, etc.). By viewing cultural norms as informal institutions, this study advances understanding of how legitimacy, discretion and compliance are negotiated within Malaysia's governance landscape.

Problem Statement: Corruption still poses risks within Malaysia's civil service despite numerous formal anti-corruption frameworks, institutional reforms and regulatory oversight mechanisms (Transparency International, 2023). Legal codes, agency mandates and compliance protocols have made notable advances, yet systemic corrupt practices continue to undermine public trust, policy implementation and administrative efficiency (Fernandez, 2024; Siddiquee & Zafarullah, 2020). These formal interventions alone have proven insufficient to address entrenched behavioural patterns and social dynamics that impede codified anti-corruption efforts. Consequently, there is a need to interrogate deeper factors beyond the reach of legislation that may sustain corrupt practices.

This study posits that cultural norms are understudied factors of corruption. Cultural norms are defined as shared expectations, values and tacit behavioural codes within a society (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini & Trost, 1998) that exert influence over what is perceived as legitimate or acceptable behaviour. In the Malaysian civil service, norms such as deference to hierarchy and the prioritisation of social harmony may subtly clash with formal anti-corruption rules, thereby weakening integrity initiatives (Norziaton & Zatun Najmiah, 2022; Quah, 2022). Cultural practices including gift-giving, reciprocal obligations and group-based patronage may become internalised through bureaucratic socialisation, resulting in their reproduction within institutional structures. Yet these cultural practices are seldom empirically investigated.

The interplay between cultural norms and formal governance frameworks represents a blind spot in current research and policy. Existing research tends to treat institutional structures and cultural norms in isolation, rather than exploring their complex intersection (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019). This neglects the ways in which cultural norms may adapt to, resist or reshape formal bureaucratic reforms, this may sustain the conditions in which corruption thrives. Accordingly, this study addresses a knowledge gap by qualitatively examining how cultural norms within Malaysia's civil service interact with institutional mechanisms that may either reinforce or undermine anti-corruption initiatives. By applying New Institutional Theory, this research aims to provide a more integrated and culturally attuned explanation for corruption in the context of public administration.

Purpose: This study aims to explore how deeply rooted cultural norms and formal institutional structures influence the perceptions and behaviours of civil servants toward corruption in Malaysia.

Research Questions:

1. How do cultural norms in the Malaysian civil service shape perspectives and behaviours of civil servants towards corruption?

2. In what ways do informal cultural norms (like deference to authority and prioritising group cohesion) influence the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies and reforms in the civil service?

3. How does the interaction between cultural norms and institutional structures affect

compliance with integrity policies in the civil service?

Type of Study: Qualitative research using semi-structured interview methods.

Section 1 - Purpose of Interview

This interview is part of a qualitative research study exploring how cultural norms, such as shared beliefs, traditions, values, and obligations, interact with institutional structures (e.g., laws, policies) to either sustain or disrupt corruption in Malaysia's civil service. Using the lens of New Institutional Theory, the research aims to understand how these cultural and institutional factors shape the perceptions and behaviours of civil servants toward anti-corruption efforts.

The insights gathered from informants will contribute to more culturally grounded anti-corruption strategies and help inform policy reforms that are both socially accepted and contextually effective.

Section 2 - Interview Protocol

Part A(1): Informant Profile

A1. Name (optional/anonymous):

A2. Position & Rank:

A3. Length of Service:

A4. Ministry/Agency:

A5. Date of Interview:

A6. Location/Platform: [Physical location or online platforms]

Part A(2): Introduction & Consent Script

Good [morning/afternoon], and thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. My name is Farhana, and I'm a postgraduate student at Universiti Teknologi MARA. This interview is part of a study exploring how cultural norms (such as shared beliefs, values and obligations) interact with institutional pressures, such as laws and formal regulations to sustain or disrupt corruption through influencing perceptions and behaviours for anti-corruption efforts and governance among Malaysian civil servants.

This conversation is confidential and voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. With your permission, I'd like to audio-record the session so I can accurately capture your responses.

Your identity will be anonymised in any publications or reports.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

And may I have your consent to proceed this interview?

Part B: Perception on Cultural Norms

B1. In your experience, how is 'integrity' interpreted within your organisational culture?

- Probe: How does this differ from official or legal definitions of integrity?

B2. Could you describe your experience dealing with practices of 'duit kopi' (bribes),

gifts or 'mutual assistance' in official dealings?

B3. Is there any social or cultural pressure to bypass procedures to help colleagues or

peers?

B4. In your context, who influences the perception of acceptable or corrupt behaviour? (e.g., senior officials, cultural leaders, religious figures)

Part C: Influence of Informal Culture on Corruption

C1. What are the main challenges in implementing anti-corruption policies/initiatives (e.g., NACS, MACC act 2009) in your department?

C2. How do colleagues react to integrity training/procedures?

- Probe: Are they seen as relevant or 'just a formality'?

C3. Have you ever faced a dilemma between following rules or adhering to the 'departmental culture'?

C4. From your perspective, how do local cultural norms (like saving face, respect for seniority) affect the implementation of anti-corruption policies?

Part D: Interaction with Institutional Structures

D1. In your experience, are corrupt practices (e.g. bribery, nepotism) in Malaysia viewed as socially acceptable, taboo or something in between?

- Probe: Why?

D2. How do current systems (e.g., performance appraisals, disciplinary processes) encourage or discourage integrity practices?

D3. If an officer reports corruption, what risks or reactions might they face?

Part E: Suggestions for Change

E1. What are your suggestions for making anti-corruption reforms more effective in Malaysia's cultural context?

Part F: Suggestions and Conclusion

F1. What improvements do you recommend to reduce culturally-driven corruption?

F2. Is the institutional reform planned in RMK13 could better align with cultural values?

F3. Any final thoughts or concerns you would like to share?

Part G: Appreciation

Thank you for your valuable insights and contributions. All information will be analysed confidentially and used solely for research purposes. Should you wish to receive a summary of the findings or the final research report, we would be pleased to share it with you upon the completion of the study.

Section 3 - End of Interview Protocol

Protokol Temu Bual

Tajuk (Bahasa Inggeris): Cultural Norms and Corruption in Malaysia's Civil Service: A New Institutional Theory Perspective

Tajuk (Bahasa Melayu): Norma Budaya dan Rasuah dalam Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia: Perspektif Teori Institusi Baharu

Penyelidik: Farhana

Institusi: Universiti Teknologi MARA

Hubungi: 2024611458@student.uitm.edu.my

Maklumat Kajian

Latar Belakang: Norma budaya merujuk kepada jangkaan, nilai dan kod tingkah laku dikongsi sesama masyarakat yang sering bersifat tersirat dan menjadi panduan dalam interaksi sosial sesebuah masyarakat (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Dalam konteks pentadbiran awam, norma-norma ini berfungsi sebagai institusi tidak formal yang mempengaruhi persepsi terhadap kesesuaian dan keabsahan tindakan, yang seringkali beroperasi secara bebas atau bertentangan dengan peraturan dan prosedur rasmi (Scott, 2008). Norma bukan sekadar adat sosial; ia membentuk kerangka kognitif yang membentuk tingkah laku, sama ada mempermudah atau mengehadkan tindakan undang-undang melalui jangkaan yang telah diinternalisasi.

Kerangka ini relevan dalam persekitaran birokrasi, di mana pematuhan, budi bicara dan prestasi tidak hanya ditentukan oleh dasar rasmi, tetapi juga oleh andaian budaya mengenai autoriti, timbal balik dan tanggungjawab sosial. Asas teori mengenai norma budaya diambil daripada tokoh seperti Hofstede (2001) serta Cialdini & Trost (1998), yang menekankan bahawa norma budaya bukanlah ditentukan oleh etnik, sebaliknya merupakan sistem nilai, jangkaan dan kod tingkah laku yang dikongsi serta dibentuk oleh tradisi sosial dan amalan institusi.

Dalam perkhidmatan awam Malaysia, kajian oleh Jones (2022), Gomez & Jomo (1999) serta Syed Hussein Alatas (1968) menunjukkan bagaimana norma seperti kepatuhan terhadap hierarki, tanggungjawab kepada rangkaian sosial dan keutamaan terhadap keharmonian kumpulan telah terbenam secara sejarah dalam rutin pentadbiran. Kajian-kajian ini membuktikan bahawa norma budaya boleh memberi pengaruh besar terhadap proses membuat keputusan dan etika profesional. Namun, norma-norma ini tidak beroperasi secara berasingan. Ia sering berinteraksi dengan kerangka institusi rasmi, ada kalanya mengukuhkan niat peraturan, tetapi ada juga melemahkannya secarahalus. Contohnya, amalan seperti pemberian hadiah timbal balik, ungkapan kesetiaan berdasarkan hubungan sosial dan keutamaan terhadap keharmonian kumpulan sering dianggap lumrah, meskipun ia bercanggah dengan etika atau protokol antirasuah rasmi.

Kajian ini menggunakan perspektif institusionalis yang membezakan antara struktur rasmi (seperti undang-undang, dasar dan prosedur) dan institusi tidak formal (seperti norma, nilai dan tingkah laku sosial) (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Norma budaya difahami sebagai mekanisme sosial yang dinamik, bergantung kepada sejarah dan dibentuk oleh masyarakat, yang telah diinternalisasi melalui sosialisasi birokratik dan amalan pentadbiran harian. Norma ini tidak dilihat sebagai sisa budaya etnik yang statik, sebaliknya sebagai ekspresi yang dinamik terhadap jangkaan sosial yang terbina dalam medan organisasi perkhidmatan awam.

Pendekatan ini menolak persepsi bahawa budaya adalah disebabkan latar belakang ethnik individu, sebaliknya menekankan bagaimana struktur institusi rasmi (undang-undang, kerangka birokratik, protokol antirasuah dan lain-lain) berinteraksi dengan jangkaan tidak formal yang dibentuk oleh budaya (seperti penghormatan kepada autoriti, naungan, kesetiaan dan lain-lain). Dengan melihat norma budaya sebagai institusi tidak formal, kajian ini memajukan pemahaman tentang bagaimana keabsahan, budi bicara dan pematuhan dirunding dalam landskap tadbir urus Malaysia.

Pernyataan Masalah: Rasuah masih menjadi ancaman dalam perkhidmatan awam Malaysia meskipun terdapat pelbagai kerangka antirasuah rasmi, reformasi institusi dan mekanisme pengawasan (Transparency International, 2023). Kod undang-undang, mandat agensi dan protokol pematuhan telah menunjukkan kemajuan ketara, namun amalan rasuah sistemik terus menjejaskan kepercayaan awam, pelaksanaan dasar dan keberkesanan pentadbiran (Fernandez, 2024; Siddiquee & Zafarullah, 2020). Campur tangan rasmi sahaja terbukti tidak mencukupi untuk menangani pola tingkah laku dan dinamika sosial yang telah berakar umbi dan seringkali melawan usaha antirasuah yang telah dikodifikasikan. Justeru, terdapat keperluan untuk menyelidik faktor-faktor mendalam yang melangkaui capaian perundangan yang mungkin menyumbang kepada kelangsungan amalan rasuah.

Kajian ini berpendapat bahawa norma budaya merupakan faktor yang kurang diberi perhatian dalam kajian rasuah. Norma budaya ditakrifkan sebagai jangkaan, nilai dan kod tingkah laku tersirat yang dikongsi dalam sesebuah masyarakat (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini & Trost, 1998) dan mempunyai pengaruh ke atas apa yang dianggap sah atau boleh diterima. Dalam perkhidmatan awam Malaysia, norma seperti kepatuhan terhadap hierarki dan keutamaan terhadap keharmonian sosial mungkin bercanggah secara halus dengan peraturan rasmi antirasuah, sekali gus melemahkan inisiatif integriti (Norziaton & Zatun Najmiah, 2022; Quah, 2022). Amalan budaya seperti pemberian hadiah, tanggungjawab timbal balik dan naungan berasaskan kumpulan boleh diinternalisasimelalui sosialisasi birokrasi dan seterusnya dihasilkan semula dalam struktur institusi. Namun, amalan ini jarang dikaji secara empirikal.

Interaksi antara norma budaya dan kerangka tadbir urus rasmi mewakili jurang dalam penyelidikan dan dasar semasa. Penyelidikan sedia ada cenderung memisahkan struktur institusi dan norma budaya, tanpa meneroka kerumitan interseksinya (Nurfarizan & Intan, 2023; Sharifah Liyana et al., 2019). Pendekatan ini mengabaikan cara norma budaya menyesuaikan diri, menolak atau membentuk semula reformasi birokratik rasmi yang memungkinkan persekitaran yang membenarkan rasuah terus berlaku. Oleh itu, kajian ini menangani jurang pengetahuan dengan meneliti secara kualitatif bagaimana norma budaya dalam perkhidmatan awam Malaysia berinteraksi dengan mekanisme institusi yang mengukuhkan atau melemahkan inisiatif antirasuah. Dengan menerapkan Teori Institusi Baharu (New Institutional Theory), kajian ini bertujuan menyediakan penjelasan yang lebih bersepadu dan selaras dengan budaya tentang rasuah dalam konteks pentadbiran awam.

Tujuan Kajian: Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka bagaimana norma budaya yang berakar umbi dan struktur institusi rasmi mempengaruhi persepsi dan tingkah laku penjawat awam terhadap rasuah di Malaysia.

Soalan Kajian:

1. Bagaimanakah norma budaya dalam perkhidmatan awam Malaysia membentuk perspektif dan tingkah laku penjawat awam terhadap rasuah?

2. Dalam apakah cara norma budaya tidak formal (seperti kepatuhan kepada autoriti dan keutamaan terhadap keharmonian kumpulan) mempengaruhi keberkesanan dasar dan reformasi antirasuah dalam perkhidmatan awam?

3. Bagaimanakah interaksi antara norma budaya dan struktur institusi memberi kesan kepada pematuhan terhadap dasar integriti dalam perkhidmatan awam?

Jenis Kajian: Penyelidikan kualitatif menggunakan kaedah temu bual separa berstruktur.

Bahagian 1 - Tujuan Temu Bual

Temu bual ini merupakan sebahagian daripada kajian penyelidikan kualitatif yang meneroka bagaimana norma budaya, seperti kepercayaan bersama, tradisi, nilai, dan tanggungjawab sosial, berinteraksi dengan struktur institusi (contohnya, undang-undang dan dasar) dalam menyokong atau mengganggu amalan rasuah dalam perkhidmatan awam di Malaysia. Melalui kerangka Teori Institusi Baharu (New

Institutional Theory), kajian ini bertujuan memahami bagaimana faktor budaya dan institusi ini membentuk persepsi dan tingkah laku penjawat awam terhadap usaha pembanterasan rasuah.

Penemuan yang diperoleh daripada para informan akan menyumbang kepada perumusan strategi antirasuah yang lebih berteraskan budaya serta membantu merangka pembaharuan dasar yang lebih diterima oleh masyarakat dan berkesan mengikut konteks tempatan.

Bahagian 2 - Protokol Temu Bual

Part A(1): Profil Informan

A1. Nama (pilihan/anonim):

A2. Jawatan & Pangkat:

A3. Tempoh Perkhidmatan:

A4. Kementerian/Agensi:

A5. Tarikh Temu Bual:

A6. Tempat/Platform: [Lokasi fizikal atau platform dalam talian]

Part A(2): Skrip Pengenalan & Persetujuan

(Selamat [pagi/petang]. Terima kasih kerana sudi meluangkan masa untuk mengambil bahagian dalam temu bual ini. Saya Farhana, seorang pelajar pascasiswazah di Universiti Teknologi MARA. Temu bual ini adalah sebahagian daripada kajian yang meneroka bagaimana norma budaya (seperti kepercayaan, nilai dan tanggungjawab bersama) berinteraksi dengan tekanan institusi seperti undang-undang dan peraturan rasmi dalam menyokong atau menghalang rasuah, serta bagaimana norma budaya membentuk persepsi dan tingkah laku penjawat awam terhadap usaha anti-rasuah dan tadbir urus.

Perbualan ini adalah sulit dan secara sukarela. Anda boleh memilih untuk tidak menjawab sebarang soalan atau menamatkan temu bual pada bila-bila masa. Dengan keizinan anda, saya ingin merakam sesi supaya saya boleh menangkap respons anda dengan tepat.

Identiti anda akan dirahsiakan dalam sebarang penerbitan atau laporan.

Adakah anda mempunyai sebarang soalan sebelum kita mulakan?

Dan bolehkah saya mendapatkan keizinan anda untuk meneruskan sesi ini?)

Part B: Persepsi tentang Norma Budaya

B1. Berdasarkan pengalaman anda, bagaimana ‘integriti’ difahami dalam budaya organisasi anda?

- Soalan Siasatan: Bagaimana ia berbeza dengan definisi rasmi atau perundangan tentang integriti?

B2. Bolehkah anda kongsikan pengalaman anda berurusan dengan amalan seperti ‘duit kopi’ (sogokan), pemberian hadiah, atau ‘tolong-menolong’ dalam urusan rasmi?

B3. Adakah wujud sebarang tekanan sosial atau budaya untuk melangkaui prosedur demi membantu rakan sekerja atau kenalan?

B4. Dalam konteks anda, siapakah yang mempengaruhi persepsi terhadap apa yang dianggap munasabah atau rasuah? (cth: pegawai kanan, pemimpin budaya, tokoh agama)

Part C: Pengaruh Norma Tidak Formal terhadap Rasuah

C1. Apakah cabaran utama dalam melaksanakan dasar/inisiatif anti-rasuah (cth: Strategi Pembanterasan Rasuah Nasional Malaysia, Akta SPRM 2009) di jabatan anda?

C2. Bagaimanakah reaksi rakan sekerja terhadap latihan atau prosedur integriti?

- Soalan Siasatan: Adakah ia dilihat sebagai sesuatu yang relevan atau sekadar formaliti?

C3. Pernahkah anda berhadapan dengan dilema antara mematuhi peraturan atau mengikut ‘budaya jabatan’?

C4. Pada pandangan anda, bagaimana norma budaya tempatan (seperti menjaga air muka, menghormati senior) mempengaruhi pelaksanaan dasar anti-rasuah?

Part D: Interaksi dengan Struktur Institusi

D1. Berdasarkan pengalaman anda, adakah amalan rasuah (cth: sogokan, nepotisme) di Malaysia dianggap sebagai sesuatu yang diterima masyarakat, tabu atau di antara kedua-duanya?

- Soalan Siasatan: Mengapa?

D2. Bagaimanakah sistem sedia ada (cth: penilaian prestasi, proses tatatertib) menggalakkan atau menghalang amalan integriti?

D3. Jika seorang pegawai melaporkan kes rasuah, apakah risiko atau reaksi yang mungkin mereka hadapi?

Part E: Cadangan Perubahan

E1. Apa cadangan anda untuk menjadikan reformasi anti-rasuah lebih berkesan dalam konteks budaya Malaysia?

Part F: Cadangan dan Penutup

F1. Apakah penambahbaikan yang anda cadangkan untuk mengurangkan rasuah yang didorong oleh budaya?

F2. Adakah reformasi institusi yang dirangka dalam RMK13 lebih selaras dengan nilai-nilai budaya?

F3. Adakah sebarang pandangan atau kebimbangan akhir yang ingin anda kongsikan?

Part G: Penghargaan

Terima kasih atas perkongsian yang sangat bernilai. Semua maklumat akan dianalisis secara rahsia dan digunakan untuk tujuan penyelidikan sahaja. Sekiranya Tuan/Puan ingin mendapatkan ringkasan dapatan atau laporan akhir kajian, kami sedia berkongsi setelah kajian selesai.

Bahagian 3 - Tamat Protokol Temu Bual

APPENDIX 4

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UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA | Pejabat Timbalan Naib Canselor (Penyelidikan dan Inovasi)

Reference : UiTM.800 - 1/1/9
Our reference : REC/09/2025 (PG/MR/530)
Date : 1 ربيع الأخير 1447H
23 September 2025

Ms Farhana – 2024611458
(Supervisor: Dr. Ahmad Faiz Yaakob)
Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies
UiTM Negeri Sembilan
Seremban 3 Campus
70300, Seremban
NEGERI SEMBILAN

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته and Greetings

Ms

APPROVAL LETTER - UiTM RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Research Ethics Committee (REC). After considering your application, the Committee approved your proposal titled "English: Cultural Norms and Corruption in Malaysia's Civil Service: A New Institutional Theory Perspective Bahasa Melayu: Norma Budaya dan Rasuah dalam Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia: Perspektif Teori Institusi Baharu". Details of the approval are as follows:

Ref. number:	REC/09/2025 (PG/MR/530)
Approval Period:	23 September 2025 until 01 August 2026
Authorised personnel:	1. Farhana 2. Dr. Ahmad Faiz Yaakob
Location	Putrajaya (Kuala Lumpur), Johor Bahru (Johor), George Town (Penang), Kuching (Sarawak), and Seremban (Negeri Sembilan).

The UiTM Research Ethics Committee operates in accordance with ICH Good Clinical Practice Guidelines, Malaysian Good Clinical Practice Guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki. The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with these guidelines and declaration.

We draw to your attention the requirement that a report on this research, must be submitted every 12 months from the date of the approval or on the completion of the project, whichever occurs first. Failure to submit reports will result in withdrawal of consent for the project to proceed. Amendments, if any, to the study documents are to be submitted to the REC for approval.

If you require further information, please contact the REC Secretariat at 03-55442846/03-55442737 or email at recsecretariat@uitm.edu.my.

اوسها، تقوى، موليا
"MALAYSIA MADANI"
"BERKHIDMAT UNTUK NEGARA"

Yours sincerely,

(EMERITUS PROFESSOR DATO' DR RAYMOND AZMAN ALI)
Chairman
UiTM Research Ethics Committee

c.c.: Deputy Rector (RI), UiTM Negeri Sembilan

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Research Ethics Approval Letter.

APPENDIX 5

Document Type	Source category	N	Period covered	Access status	Representative examples	Analytical purpose
Official Government	National policy documents	4	2004-2028	Official use	National Integrity Plan 2004 NACP 2019-2023; NACS 2024-2028	Formal anti-corruption policy framework and stated institutional objectives
	Ministerial circulars and administrative directives	12	2008-2025	Mixed	Circulars relating to procurement, integrity and conduct (titles withheld)	Formal rule structures governing civil service conduct and administrative practice
	Codes of ethics and integrity frameworks	6	2012-2023	Public	Civil Service Code of Conduct; MACC integrity guidelines	Normative standards against which informal practices were examined
	Parliamentary records (Hansard)	11	2004-2025	Public	Parliamentary debates on anti-corruption legislation and accountability measures (specific dates withheld)	Legislative discourse and political framing of anti-corruption reform
	Institutional integrity and audit reports	9	2012-2024	Mixed	Agency-level integrity reports and audit findings (titles withheld)	Institutional self-assessment of compliance and governance performance
Legal And Regulatory Materials	Legislation and statutory instruments	8	2001-2024	Public	MACC Act 2009; AMLATFA 2001 and subsequent amendments	Formal legal framework contextualising institutional enforcement authority
International And Comparative Materials	International organisation reports and	18	2013-2025	Mixed	Transparency International CPI reports; UNCAC review documents;	Situating Malaysian anti-corruption initiatives

Document Type	Source category	N	Period covered	Access status	Representative examples	Analytical purpose
	frameworks				World Bank governance indicators	within global governance discourse
Media And Internet-Based Sources	Publicly accessible media and online materials	47	2013-2025	Public	Interviews, documentaries, podcasts and online discussions on corruption and governance	Public discourse and contextual narratives on institutional behaviour
Academic And Archival Sources	Academic publications	26	1991-2025	Public	Peer-reviewed journal articles and books on institutional theory, corruption and Malaysian governance	Theoretical grounding and contextualisation of findings within existing scholarship
	Historical and archival records	8	Pre-2013	Mixed	Archived policy documents and historical administrative records	Longitudinal perspective on institutional reform and governance evolution
	Total	149			Sources selected purposively for relevance to anti-corruption policy, governance arrangements and institutional discourses within the Malaysian civil service	

Access status:

Official use: Documents and sources made officially available
Public: Documents and sources that can be easily searched, retrieved and shared online
Mixed: Documents and sources that may be sensitive and require permission to obtain

Source: Author's analysis of documents and internet sources materials

APPENDIX 6

Phase	Interview	Emergence status	Analytical note
Active Theme Emergence	I-1	New theme	Multiple new themes identified for analysis.
	I-2	New theme	New themes emerged relating to operational-level experience; extended I-1 patterns.
	I-3	New theme	Enforcement context introduced distinct thematic dimensions not present in prior interviews.
	I-4	New theme	Procurement context yielded a new theme; existing themes further elaborated.
	I-5	Minor extension	No new themes; elaborated procurement-related patterns identified in I-4.
	I-6	Minor extension	Extended enforcement themes; added nuance to hierarchical dynamics.
	I-7	New theme	MACC institutional perspective introduced a new theme on enforcement mandate tensions.
Thematic Consolidation	I-8	Minor extension	Senior perspective deepened existing themes.
	I-9	No new themes	Data consistent with established thematic structure; confirmed patterns from I-7.
	I-10	No new themes	Confirmed existing enforcement-related themes.
	I-11	Minor extension	Elaborated policy implementation theme; added contextual depth.
	I-12	New theme	External observer perspective introduced new themes on public accountability narratives.
	I-13	Minor extension	Substantively deepened themes on executive discretion; analytical weight high despite no new theme.
	I-14	No new themes	Policy-making context confirmed existing themes; patterns consistent.
	I-15	No new themes	Consistent with I-14; confirmed saturation of policy-related themes.
	I-16	Minor extension	Elite-level account deepened enforcement and institutional themes.
Saturation	I-17	No new themes	No new themes or extensions; provisional saturation confirmed from this point.
	I-18	No new	Historical framing confirmed and contextualised existing themes; no new dimensions.

Phase	Interview	Emergence status	Analytical note
		themes	
	I-19	No new themes	Civil society perspective corroborated existing themes; thematic consistency maintained.
	I-20	No new themes	Final interview confirmed saturation; no new thematic material identified.

Emergence status:

New theme: Substantively new pattern identified
Minor extension: Existing themes elaborated
No new themes

Source: Author's NVivo analysis based on empirical data saturation

APPENDIX 7

Additional Reading:

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Farhana is a researcher and scholar in politics, governance, and social science, specialising in public administration and policy studies. Her academic record is one of consistent distinction. She completed her Foundation in Law at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in 2021 as a Top 10% Scorer, achieving a CGPA of 3.91. She then graduated with a Bachelor of Administrative Sciences (BAS) from UiTM's Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Policy Studies in 2024, with a CGPA of 3.79 and secured a place on the Dean's List every semester of her undergraduate degree (2021-2024). Her undergraduate excellence was recognised with the Vice Chancellor's Award in 2024. She is a recipient of UiTM Endowment Scholarship (2024-2026) for a Master of Administrative Sciences degree, with plans to pursue further postgraduate studies.

Her research centres on how institutions, administrative systems, and governance cultures shape policy outcomes, organisational performance, and civil servant welfare. Trained in qualitative and conceptual methodologies, her work focuses on policy studies, institutional behaviour, and national development. Her academic foundation equips her to analyse public sector challenges, structural constraints, and development priorities with analytical rigour.

Professionally, her experience blends rigorous research analysis with applied project management. She served as a Business Development Researcher at OSA Technology Sdn Bhd (2022-2024), analysing investment ventures. Her role as a Data Analyst & Career Trainee under the Khazanah Youth Development programme with Excelerate Asia and Pilihan Wibawa Sdn Bhd (2024) involved job market analysis for the Research & Development sector. She has also held a Research Assistant Apprenticeship (2022-2024), contributing to grant acquisition (MyStarfish Foundation

Projects for Happiness (2023)) data optimisations, and education module developments. This applied focus is further demonstrated in her leadership of the GESA team, where she developed the “Empowering Teenagers to Say No!” pilot project to improve youth access to services. Complementary internships at UiTM’s Faculty of Administrative Sciences (2023) and the Industry Community Alumni Entrepreneur Network (ICAEN) (2024) honed her skills in event management, publication, and administration.

Beyond core research roles, she has cultivated substantial project coordination and entrepreneurial competencies. She served as Programme Director for the UiTM CSR project ‘Ramah Mesra bersama Anak-anak Yatim NS Kausar’ (2023) and Co-Project Manager for a ‘Baby Hatch Talk’ Facebook Live event (2021). She also acted as secretary for a digital business venture under the MASMED Young Entrepreneur (MyENT) programme, managing reports for a successful campaign. Her additional qualifications include an LCCI certification, a Distinction in GCSE O-Level English, and completion of a General Assembly Data Analysis bootcamp.

Complementing her academic research, she has a background in professional and analytical writing. Building on an early foundation in poetry and literary work, she now develops research-driven essays, analytical pieces, and curated manuscripts across politics, governance, social policy, and public administration. This practice has refined her editorial judgement, and ability to translate complex institutional concepts into accessible narratives; skills that integrate research, strategy, and communication for practical, scalable impact.

Her mission is to strengthen ethical governance, uplift civil servant welfare, and support national development through research-driven, people-centred reforms. Her vision is to contribute to a stronger Malaysian public sector by bridging academic research, policy analysis, and community-based innovation for sustainable, long-term impact.

LIST OF CONFERENCES AND PRESENTATIONS

Presenter, *The Invisible Institution: How Cultural Norms Perpetuate Corruption in Malaysia’s Civil Service*. International Conference of Law, Accounting & Finance

(ICLAF 2025), Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Negeri Sembilan, 1-2 September 2025.

Presenter, *Corruption in Between: The Complexity of Formal Institutions and Informal Cultural Norms*. International Conference on Public Policy and Social Sciences (ICoPS 2025), Bangkok, Thailand (Hybrid), 4-5 October 2025.

Presenter, *Introducing New Institutional Theory to Assess Corruption in Malaysia's Civil Service*. International Conference on Humanities in Asia Pacific (ICHAP 2025), Universiti Sains Malaysia, 16-17 October 2025.

LIST OF COMPETITIONS AND AWARDS

Gold Award, IMANINOVASI 2025, for *Preliminary Exploration of Integrating Adab+ into Lecture-Based Teaching to Reintroduce Malay Worldview in HRM Curriculum*. Institut Pemikiran dan Kepimpinan Melayu (IMPAK) UiTM Shah Alam.

Gold Award, i-SPIKE 2025 Innovation Competition, for *Culture-Lens Education Kit*. Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Policy Studies, UiTM Kedah.

Silver Award, 2nd SGD Innovation Competition, for *Integrity Atlas 1.0*. Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development (IBSD), UiTM Shah Alam.

Bronze Award, IIDEX 2025 Innovation Competition, for *Cultural-Lens Kit: A Module for Culturally Responsive Anti-Corruption Education 2.0*. Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam.

Intellectual Property: Registered creator for *Cultural-Lens Kit* (IP/CR/08541), *Integrity Atlas 1.0* (IP/CR/08674), and *Cultural-Lens Kit 2.0* (IP/CR/08914).

Best Presenter, *The Invisible Institution: How Cultural Norms Perpetuate Corruption in Malaysia's Civil Service*. International Conference of Law, Accounting & Finance (ICLAF 2025), Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Negeri Sembilan, 1-2 September 2025.

Best Paper, *The Invisible Institution: How Cultural Norms Perpetuate Corruption in Malaysia's Civil Service*. International Conference of Law, Accounting & Finance (ICLAF 2025), Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Negeri Sembilan, 1-2 September 2025.

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