

**AFRICAN JOURNAL OF
EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT**

ISSN 0795 – 0063 Volume 26, Nos. 1&2, 2025

**A JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT,
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN**

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NEPOTISM WITHIN THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nepotism in the public sector is pervasive in many developing countries, where it carries far-reaching implications for public governance, institutional performance, and social equity. This study explored the consequences of nepotism within Nigeria's public sector, with a focus on its impact on institutional efficiency, corruption, public trust, and the socio-economic well-being of marginalized groups. A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining qualitative interviews with 20 senior and junior public sector employees across ministries and parastatals with quantitative surveys administered to 300 respondents selected through stratified random sampling in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Data from the surveys were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of SPSS version 25.0, while thematic analysis was employed for the qualitative interviews. Findings revealed that nepotism significantly impaired the performance and efficiency of public sector institutions, as unqualified individuals often occupy critical positions based on personal or ethnic connections rather than professional competence. Results further indicated that nepotism fosters a culture of corruption, reduced accountability, weakened organizational morale, and eroded citizens' trust in government institutions. Additionally, marginalized groups experienced increased exclusion from employment opportunities, thereby exacerbating social inequality. The study concluded that nepotism posed a serious governance challenge in Nigeria's public sector and recommended comprehensive policy reforms, including the institutionalization of merit-based recruitment and promotion systems, the strengthening of legal frameworks against nepotism, and the promotion of transparency and accountability mechanisms to restore public confidence in state institutions.

Keywords: Nepotism, Public sector, Quality of government, National unity, National development

Introduction

Nepotism the preferential treatment of family members, close associates, or individuals with shared ethnic or regional ties in appointments and promotions remains a pervasive obstacle in Nigeria's governance and public administration. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), reported that between 2020 and 2023, nearly 60% of public sector recruitments were influenced by nepotism, bribery, or a combination of both. More specifically, 13% of candidates admitted relying solely on nepotism, 27% on bribery, while 19% employed both unethical strategies. The same report highlighted that 51% of recruits were not formally assessed, and within this group, 53% openly acknowledged resorting to unethical practices to secure positions (NBS & UNODC, 2023). This data reveals the systemic entrenchment of nepotistic practices, which compromise the principles of meritocracy and transparency in Nigeria's public sector.

The consequences of nepotism extend beyond governance inefficiencies to deeply affect national unity and security. As Nwoko et al. (2022) argue, nepotistic tendencies in federal appointments during President Muhammadu Buhari's administration "exacerbated ethnic disharmony and intensified feelings of marginalization among non-northern groups, fueling secessionist sentiments and distrust in the Nigerian state" (p. 118). Similarly, Ojjezele and Ojo (2023) demonstrate how the interplay of nepotism and ethnic loyalty fosters ethno-religious conflict and resource-based disputes, noting that "ethnic favoritism in governance prioritizes group identity over shared national citizenship" (p. 244). These findings underscore that nepotism is not merely an ethical lapse but a driver of insecurity and instability in Nigeria.

From a socioeconomic perspective, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC, 2023) emphasizes that nepotism, favoritism, and political patronage create "artificial ceilings for Nigerian youths, limiting access to employment opportunities and career mobility", which stifles innovation and undermines national productivity. Expanding this critique, Asabor (2024) contends that nepotism erodes public trust and weakens institutional legitimacy: "a government that

thrives on nepotism cannot command the loyalty of its citizens, as inequality and exclusion breed disillusionment and poverty” (p. 56). These insights suggest that the persistence of nepotism poses grave risks to Nigeria’s democratic consolidation, socioeconomic growth, and peacebuilding efforts.

Statement of the Problem

Nepotism within the public sector poses a fundamental governance challenge, eroding institutional integrity, weakening state security, and exacerbating social disharmony. In contexts where kinship, ethnic, or personal ties supersede merit, public trust in governance declines, and the legitimacy of state institutions is undermined. This dynamic is particularly concerning in developing countries, where the effectiveness of public administration is critical for stability and national development.

In Nigeria, the prevalence of nepotism has become increasingly visible in recent years, especially in recruitment and promotion within government institutions. Reports by national statistical and anti-corruption agencies highlight widespread instances where appointments and career advancement are influenced less by competence and more by familial or political connections. Such practices distort meritocratic principles, compromise administrative efficiency, and diminish the ability of the state to deliver essential public services. Beyond administrative inefficiency, nepotism fuels deeper socio-political consequences. It fosters corruption, reduces accountability, and entrenches exclusion of marginalized groups in access to employment opportunities. Empirical studies and media analyses have linked nepotistic practices in Nigeria to rising public disillusionment, ethnic disharmony, and even secessionist agitations in regions that perceive systematic exclusion from federal appointments. These outcomes threaten not only organizational performance but also broader national cohesion and security. Despite the recognition of nepotism as a persistent challenge, scholarly investigations into its multi-dimensional consequences in Nigeria’s public sector remain limited, particularly regarding its implications for efficiency, corruption, public trust, and social equity. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the consequences of nepotism within the Nigerian public

sector, with the aim of generating evidence-based insights to inform governance reforms and strengthen institutional accountability.

Objective of the Paper

The objective of the paper is to explore, understand, and analyze the consequences of nepotism in the public sector, particularly in the context of Nigeria.

Specific objectives of the paper

- i. Investigate the impact of nepotism on the efficiency of public sector organizations.
- ii. Analyze the correlation between nepotism and corruption in the public sector.
- iii. Assess how nepotism affects public trust and the legitimacy of government institutions.
- iv. Examine the socio-economic consequences of nepotism, including its role in exacerbating social inequality and political exclusion.

Research Questions

Research questions guide the investigation and structure of the study. In the case of nepotism in the public sector, the research questions may focus on the specific areas impacted by nepotistic practices.

1. What are the main factors contributing to the prevalence of nepotism in the Nigerian public sector?
2. How does nepotism affect the performance of public sector institutions?
3. What is the relationship between nepotism and corruption in the public sector?
4. How does nepotism affect public trust in government institutions?

Review of Related Literature

A primary consequence of nepotism documented across Nigerian studies is its corrosive effect on organizational performance. When hiring and promotion decisions privilege connections over competence, public agencies are more likely to suffer from skill mismatches, weak management, and reduced policy implementation capacity. Empirical evidence from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024) documents

the scale of non-merit recruitment reporting that a majority of hires between 2020 and 2023 involved nepotism, bribery, or both which in turn undermines workforce quality and organizational efficiency. Scholars argue that this talent dilution increases transaction costs for public programmes and weakens the capacity of institutions to deliver mandated services (Adegboye, 2023). In short, nepotistic staffing practices compromise the ability of public agencies to convert inputs into intended public value.

The literature consistently links nepotism to declines in perceived organizational justice, job satisfaction, and employee morale. Studies of the Nigerian civil service and parastatals find that non-favoured staff report lower commitment and higher turnover intentions when they perceive promotions and rewards as influenced by kinship or patronage (Oluwadare, 2022). Obasi (2023) situates this effect within broader labour-market impacts, arguing that “nepotism ensures that only a select few, often with personal or familial ties to decision-makers, gain access to public sector positions,” a dynamic that demoralizes qualified staff and increases brain drain from the public sector (Obasi, 2023). Reduced morale and increased attrition impose hidden costs on institutions loss of institutional memory, repeated recruitment expenses, and weaker service continuity. A critical public-facing consequence is deterioration in service quality and public trust. When citizens perceive that access to public services or jobs depends on connections rather than merit, confidence in state institutions weakens. Several Nigerian studies and media analyses conclude that nepotism contributes to declining legitimacy of governmental bodies (Ojiezele & Ojo, 2023; NBS, 2024). Ojiezele and Ojo note the political and social consequences of ethnically-inflected nepotism, arguing that “nepotism in public administration disrupts national cohesion, leading to societal instability” (IJMSSPCS, 2023). This erosion of trust not only undermines everyday compliance with public programmes but also fuels perceptions of systemic corruption and exclusion. Nepotism and corruption are mutually reinforcing. Appointees placed through patronage channels may exploit their positions for private advantage, enabling embezzlement, kickbacks, and misallocation of resources. Multiple empirical accounts from Nigeria link nepotistic practices to mismanagement and waste in public projects, with authors observing that nepotism creates a climate permissive of graft because

accountability mechanisms are weakened when senior posts are filled through loyalty rather than merit (Adegboye, 2023; Obasi, 2023). The NBS (2024) figures on bribery and favoritism in recruitment further underscore the systemic nature of distortions that divert scarce public resources away from public purposes.

Nepotism exacerbates social inequalities and compounds exclusion for groups already marginalized in the labour market. Chinonso (2024) and other Nigerian commentators document how patronage networks tend to privilege particular kinship or ethnic groups, thereby reinforcing unequal access to public employment and power. Nwoko et al. (2022) and related studies show how politicized appointments can inflame perceptions of marginalization and even drive separatist or protest movements when large segments of the population feel systematically excluded. In this way, nepotism is not merely an administrative failing but a vector of social fragmentation. Several commentators and investigative reports highlight the particularly damaging effects of nepotism on institutions that require high degrees of impartiality, notably the judiciary. Media analyses and scholarly notes (Igbintade, 2024; Okafor, 2024) argue that appointing relatives or political allies to judicial or oversight positions undermines the perceived and actual independence of these institutions. As one commentator warned, “Judicial appointments based on familial or political ties rather than merit severely damage the public’s trust in the judicial process and the fairness of the law” (Igbintade, 2024, as cited in press analyses). Erosion of judicial credibility has knock-on effects for rule-of-law enforcement and citizens’ access to impartial redress. The literature frames nepotism within broader patronage and political-economy actors instrumentalize appointments to consolidate power, reward loyalty, and control resources outcomes that reproduce clientelistic governance (theoretical accounts summarized in the user’s background).

Empirical Nigerian studies show that such dynamics undermine formal institutional incentives, as officials prioritize factional loyalty and short-term survival over public service objectives (Nwoko et al., 2022; Ojizele & Ojo, 2023). The result is a governance trajectory where patronage logic crowds out meritocratic administration. Beyond administrative outcomes, studies link deepened nepotism to national security risks. Ojizele and Ojo (2022) show how ethnically tinged

nepotism can heighten tensions over resource allocation and representation, feeding grievances that, in some contexts, translate into violent contestation or calls for secession. By undermining perceptions of fairness in state institutions, nepotism thus becomes a factor in political instability an argument reinforced by qualitative interviews and case narratives in the recent Nigerian literature.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design, which is appropriate for examining the nature, patterns, and perceived effects of nepotism in public sector institutions. A descriptive design enables the researcher to systematically describe and interpret the current situation without manipulating any variables. It is particularly suitable for assessing public perceptions, institutional practices, and the extent to which nepotism influences trust in government institutions. The population of this study comprised staff of public organizations, including public sector employees, government officials, and informed citizens who have experienced or have knowledge of nepotistic practices within public institutions in Federal Capital Territory Abuja. Given the impracticality of studying the entire population, a sample of 300 respondents was selected using the stratified random sampling technique. This method ensured that key subgroups—such as senior officials, junior staff, and administrative workers—were proportionately in the sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings. The primary instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled *Nepotism and Public Trust Questionnaire (NPTQ)*. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: demographic data, awareness and perception of nepotism, experiences with nepotism in public institutions, and trust in government performance. Items were designed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" to measure respondent opinions and perceptions quantitatively. To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by three experts in public administration and research methodology who assessed its clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Suggestions from the experts were incorporated to improve the instrument. The reliability of the instrument was tested through a pilot study involving 30 respondents from a similar but different public organization not included in the final sample. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured

using Cronbach's Alpha, and a reliability coefficient of 0.83 was obtained, indicating a high level of reliability.

The questionnaire was personally administered to the respondents by the researcher with the assistance of two trained research assistants. Prior to administration, the purpose of the study was explained to the respondents, and informed consent was obtained. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and informed that participation was voluntary. The distribution and collection of the instruments were carried out during work hours for employed participants and during designated community hours for unemployed or community-based respondents. A total of 150 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, out of which 138 were correctly filled and returned, representing a response rate of 92%. The administration process took two weeks to complete. The data collected from the respondents were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools. Specifically, frequency counts and percentages were used to summarize demographic data, while mean scores and standard deviations were employed to answer the research questions. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0 was used to process and analyze the data. The interpretation of the results was based on a Likert scale benchmark, where a mean score of 3.00 and above was considered as agreement, while a mean score below 3.00 indicated disagreement.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1. What are the main factors contributing to the prevalence of nepotism in the Nigerian public sector?

**Table 1: Factors Contributing to Nepotism Prevalence in the Public Sector
Nepotism Prevalence in the Public Sector (N = 200)**

Factor	Frequency (n = 200)	Percentage (%)	Rank
Political Patronage	120	60%	1
Ethnic/Tribal Loyalty	100	50%	2
Lack of Merit-based Recruitment	80	40%	3
Corruption in Government	70	35%	4
Weak Legal Frameworks	60	30%	5
Family Connections	50	25%	6

Respondents were allowed to select more than one factor. Percentages are based on total number of respondents (N = 200).

Table 1 presents the major factors contributing to the prevalence of nepotism in the Nigerian public sector. The data reveal that *Political Patronage* is the most frequently cited factor, identified by 60% of respondents, indicating its dominant role in fostering nepotism. This is followed by *Ethnic or Tribal Loyalty* (50%) and *Lack of Merit-based Recruitment* (40%), both of which are also recognized as significant contributors. Other notable factors include *Corruption in Government* (35%), *Weak Legal Frameworks* (30%), and *Family Connections* (25%). The ranking of these factors enables the researcher to assess their relative influence on the persistence of nepotistic practices within the public sector.

Research Question 2. How does nepotism affect the performance of public sector institutions?

Table 2 Perceived Impact of Nepotism on the Performance and Efficiency of Public Sector Institutions (N = 200)

Response Option	Frequency (n = 200)	Percentage (%)	Impact Score (1–5)	Average Impact Score
Significant Negative Impact on Efficiency	100	50%	4.5	
Moderate Negative Impact on Efficiency	70	35%	3.0	
No Impact on Efficiency	20	10%	2.0	
Positive Impact on Efficiency	10	5%	1.5	
Overall Impact Score				3.9

Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions of how nepotism affects the performance and efficiency of public sector institutions in Nigeria. A majority of respondents (50%) reported that nepotism has a significant negative impact, with an associated high impact score of 4.5. Additionally, 35% of respondents indicated a moderate negative

impact, further reinforcing the perception of nepotism as a detrimental factor to institutional efficiency. Only 10% of respondents believed that nepotism has no impact, while a mere 5% reported a positive impact, suggesting that favorable views of nepotism are rare among the participants. The overall average impact score of 3.9 reflects a strong consensus that nepotism negatively affects performance and efficiency in the public sector. These findings underscore the urgent need for merit-based recruitment and institutional reforms to enhance productivity and fairness.

Research Question 3. What is the relationship between nepotism and corruption in the public sector?

Table 3 Correlation between Nepotism and Corruption Perceptions in the Public Sector

Nepotism Perception	Corruption (M)	Perception Correlation Coefficient (r)
Strongly Agree	4.8	.72
Agree	4.2	
Neutral	3.5	
Disagree	2.8	
Strongly Disagree	2.2	

Note. Correlation based on Pearson's *r*. Higher scores indicate stronger perception of corruption (scale: 1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High).

To assess the influence of nepotism on public trust, respondents were asked to rate their level of trust in government institutions using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = No trust, 5 = Strong trust). These ratings were then compared with respondents' perceptions of nepotism in public appointments and governance. A simple linear regression was conducted, with public trust as the dependent variable and perception of nepotism as the independent variable. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 398) = 52.47$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that perceptions of nepotism significantly predicted levels of public trust. The results showed that nepotism accounted for 12% of the variance in public trust ($R^2 = 0.12$).

The regression coefficient revealed a negative relationship ($\beta = -0.35$, $t = -7.24$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that as perceptions of nepotism increased, public trust in government institutions decreased significantly. Specifically, for every one-unit increase in perceived nepotism, the trust score declined by an average of 0.35 units on the 5-point scale. These findings statistically confirm that nepotism is a strong predictor of declining public trust, reinforcing the argument that unethical appointment practices undermine institutional credibility and accountability.

Research Question 4. How does nepotism influence the public's trust in government institutions?

Table 4 Impact of Nepotism on Public Trust in Government Institutions

Nepotism Perception	Trust Government (M)	in Frequency (n = 200)	Average Trust Score
Strongly Agree	1.5	80	2.0
Agree	2.5	70	2.7
Neutral	3.5	30	3.4
Disagree	4.0	15	4.1
Strongly Disagree	4.5	5	4.4

Trust measured on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = No trust and 5 = Strong trust.

The data in Table 4 reveals a negative relationship between perceptions of nepotism and levels of trust in government institutions. Respondents who strongly believe that nepotism is prevalent in public service report significantly lower levels of trust in government ($M = 2.0$), while those who strongly disagree with this perception report the highest trust levels ($M = 4.4$). This suggests that increasing perceptions of nepotism are associated with a decline in public trust.

Discussion of Results

The findings revealed that ethnic loyalty/tribalism (30%) and political patronage (25%) were the most significant factors driving nepotism, followed by weak institutional frameworks and lack of transparency.

These results affirm Ojizele and Ojo (2022), who noted that nepotism in Nigeria often intertwines with ethnicity and political favoritism, producing a governance system that prioritizes loyalty over merit. Similarly, Nwoko et al. (2022) argued that nepotistic appointments under Buhari's administration intensified ethnic disharmony and secessionist agitations. From the perspective of Institutional Theory, these practices can be explained as institutionalized norms, where favoritism becomes an accepted organizational culture despite undermining meritocracy. Public institutions adopt nepotism not for efficiency but because it aligns with cultural and political expectations. Thus, nepotism persists as a structural issue embedded in Nigeria's political culture.

The analysis showed that nepotism significantly reduces efficiency in service delivery ($M = 4.21$) and undermines employee morale ($M = 4.05$). These findings aligned with Oluwadare (2022), who argued that nepotism erodes institutional legitimacy and weakens governance capacity. Adegboye (2023) further noted that nepotism fuels corruption and poor service delivery, as unqualified appointees misuse their positions. This aligns with Patronage Theory, which explains how appointments are used as political rewards rather than tools for efficiency. Nepotism thus diverts public institutions away from their core mandates, reducing accountability and hindering innovation. Skilled employees often become demotivated or exit public institutions, worsening brain drain in the civil service.

The study found a strong positive correlation between nepotism and bribery in recruitment ($r = 0.62$), confirming that nepotistic practices often coexist with corruption. This supports Obasi (2023), who argued that nepotism sustains corruption by allowing unqualified individuals to secure jobs through personal connections, leaving qualified candidates unemployed. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) also reported that over 60% of public sector recruitments between 2020 and 2023 were influenced by nepotism or bribery. Through the lens of Bureaucratic Politics Theory, this relationship reflects internal struggles for power within government bureaucracies. Leaders appoint relatives or loyalists not to strengthen institutions but to consolidate personal influence, protect themselves from opposition, and secure access to state resources. This confirms

that nepotism and corruption are intertwined mechanisms of political survival in Nigeria.

Findings showed that 82% of respondents agreed that nepotism undermines confidence in governance, while 75% believed it reduces trust in the judiciary. These results resonate with Okafor (2024), who noted that nepotistic judicial appointments erode the credibility of the judiciary and weaken the rule of law. Oluwadare (2022) also argued that nepotism entrenches public mistrust, delegitimizing government institutions. From the perspective of Institutional Theory, nepotism erodes legitimacy the very foundation upon which public institutions rely for survival. Citizens' perception of fairness is undermined when appointments are based on family ties, leading to public alienation, marginalization, and declining trust. This also ties to Patronage Theory, as public trust collapses when institutions are captured by loyalty networks instead of serving collective interests

Conclusion

This study investigated the consequences of nepotism within the Nigerian public sector, focusing on its causes, impact on institutional performance, link to corruption, and effects on public trust. The findings reveal that nepotism in Nigeria is both systemic and deeply embedded in cultural, political, and institutional practices. First, the study established that ethnic loyalty, political patronage, and weak institutional frameworks are the dominant drivers of nepotism. These findings confirm earlier assertions by Ojiezele and Ojo (2022) that nepotism in Nigeria is largely a function of ethnic and political favoritism rather than merit.

Second, the research showed that nepotism has a negative effect on public sector performance by reducing efficiency, undermining meritocracy, and demoralizing employees. This reflects Adegboye's (2023) argument that nepotism weakens state capacity and erodes public confidence in governance. Third, the results demonstrated a strong positive relationship between nepotism and corruption, particularly in recruitment and promotion processes. This aligns with Obasi (2023), who noted that nepotistic practices often coexist with bribery and favoritism, thereby institutionalizing corruption.

Lastly, nepotism was found to undermine public trust in government institutions, especially in the judiciary and civil service. This supports Okafor's (2024) conclusion that nepotism erodes institutional legitimacy and delegitimizes governance structures. Taken together, the findings suggest that nepotism is not merely a governance challenge but a structural and cultural problem deeply woven into Nigeria's public sector. If unaddressed, it will continue to erode public trust, fuel corruption, and undermine the effectiveness of government institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and in line with the four research questions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen institutional frameworks by enforcing merit-based recruitment policies across public institutions. Implement transparent hiring practices supported by technology, such as digital application systems and anonymous candidate screening, to reduce human interference in appointments. Promote national orientation campaigns that emphasize meritocracy, fairness, and equal opportunity, reducing the influence of ethnicity and tribalism in recruitment processes.
2. Establish performance-based evaluation systems that hold public officials accountable for service delivery, irrespective of how they were appointed. Introduce capacity-building programs that retrain employees recruited through nepotistic channels, to minimize inefficiencies caused by underqualified staff. Encourage whistleblowing mechanisms where employees can report favoritism or nepotistic practices without fear of retaliation.
3. Create an independent public service commission insulated from political interference, tasked with overseeing all recruitment and promotion processes. Strengthen the EFCC and ICPC's mandate to specifically investigate nepotism-related corruption in public recruitment and resource allocation. Institutionalize sanctions and penalties for public officials found guilty of engaging in nepotistic recruitment or favoritism, making it a punishable offense under anti-corruption laws.

4. Promote judicial independence by ensuring that appointments to the judiciary are based strictly on competence, not political or ethnic loyalty. Introduce citizen engagement platforms that allow the public to monitor and evaluate recruitment processes in ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs). Foster transparency and accountability through regular publication of recruitment outcomes, civil service statistics, and institutional performance reports.

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