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Decolonizing Mediation Legitimacy: Traditional Rulers and the Cultural Nexus Mediation Theory

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Abstract

This article advances the Cultural Nexus Mediation Theory (CNMT) as a postcolonial framework for analysing culturally embedded mediation and the authority of traditional rulers in West Africa. The study combines fourteen months of fieldwork in Nigeria with supplementary qualitative and archival material from Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. The core Nigerian dataset comprises 48 semi-structured interviews, 12 non-participant observations, and a structured survey of 612 respondents across four conflict ecologies. The quantitative analysis is explicitly limited to the Nigerian survey. It shows that respondents reported higher trust in traditional than state mediation and higher reported compliance intention with traditional than state mediation, while individual-level trust was not positively associated with compliance intention. The qualitative evidence instead points to public witnessing, relational accountability, cultural obligation, and the institutional setting as mechanisms through which authority acquires practical force. The article therefore refines CNMT by distinguishing perceived legitimacy, reported compliance, and socially constrained compliance, while treating Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone as comparative qualitative cases rather than additional quantitative samples.

Keywords: Cultural Nexus Mediation Theory (CNMT), Traditional Rulers, Postcolonial Mediation, Insider-Partial Mediators, West Africa, Legitimacy

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Introduction:

The dominant canon of mediation literature, whether articulated within international organizations or embedded in national policy frameworks, has long upheld neutrality as a defining virtue of third-party conflict intervention. Mediators are commonly expected to maintain emotional detachment and impartiality, serving as procedural facilitators committed to fairness rather than relational depth (Bercovitch & Houston, 2000; Moore, 2014). Yet, emerging critiques from postcolonial and critical peacebuilding scholars challenge this orthodoxy, arguing that liberal norms of neutrality can overlook the moral and relational fabrics underpinning community-based conflict dynamics (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). In African societies, the legitimacy of traditional authority is often connected to social embeddedness and locally recognised forms of accountability (Logan, 2013). Across West Africa, traditional authorities—including emirs, obas, chiefs, and other customary leaders—continue to participate in local governance and dispute management. The persistence of these institutions invites a re-examination of the assumptions underpinning procedural models of mediation.

This article advances such re-examination through the lens of the Cultural Nexus Mediation Theory (CNMT). CNMT conceptualises insider-partial mediators as actors embedded within the same moral and cultural universe as disputants. Such proximity may facilitate recognition, information, relational accountability, and culturally intelligible forms of settlement, but it does not by itself establish that trust causes compliance. The theoretical move therefore treats partiality as bounded relational accountability rather than as an automatic source of legitimacy. Methodologically, the study uses a convergent mixed-methods design in which the quantitative component is restricted to 612 Nigerian respondents, while Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone provide supplementary qualitative and archival comparison. The analysis focuses on three mechanisms: cultural embeddedness and audience enforcement; bounded insider-partiality and relational accountability; and moral-spiritual sanction. These mechanisms are interpreted qualitatively and are not treated as independently demonstrated statistical causes of compliance.

The study finds an important distinction between aggregate institutional evaluation and individual-level association. Nigerian respondents rated traditional mediation more highly than state mediation on trust and reported compliance intention, but the survey does not show that respondents who trusted traditional authorities more were correspondingly more likely to report compliance. This distinction limits strong causal or region-wide claims. Instead, the findings support a more conditional version of CNMT in which cultural embeddedness can structure the social environment of mediation while compliance remains shaped by institutional context, relational expectations, and the availability of alternative forums. The comparative material from Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone is used to illuminate this broader regional relevance without being presented as quantitative evidence from the same survey.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review:

The empirical foundation for this article derives from a fourteen-month field investigation conducted between June 2023 and August 2024. The core empirical dataset is Nigerian. Fieldwork covered northern emirate councils (Kano and Katsina), Yoruba obaship domains (Osun and Oyo), peri-urban communities in Jos Plateau, and selected chiefdoms in Bayelsa and Delta States. The Nigerian dataset comprises 48 semi-structured interviews, 12 non-participant observations of palace or community mediation hearings, and a structured survey of 612 respondents. Supplementary qualitative and archival material from Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone is used comparatively to assess whether themes identified in Nigeria resonate with wider West African patterns. These comparative cases are not part of the 612-person quantitative sample.

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Analytical leverage is derived from interpreting these materials through CNMT, a framework for examining how culturally embedded institutions structure recognition, accountability, and dispute-resolution practices. Postcolonial political thought emphasises that colonial interventions reordered authority structures across West Africa, privileging legal-bureaucratic modalities while marginalising or subordinating pre-existing normative systems (Mamdani, 2020; Richmond, 2011). Mediation scholarship has also examined the conditions under which third parties intervene in conflicts and the strategic choices that shape mediation behaviour (Bercovitch & Houston, 2000). Such approaches can overlook the relational fabrics through which authority is recognised in communitarian settings. CNMT therefore treats insider-partiality as a form of socially bounded authority: mediators embedded in the same moral universe as disputants may face reputational scrutiny, communal expectations, and culturally specific sanctions. These conditions may shape the social environment in which compliance is negotiated, but they should not be equated automatically with consent or individual trust.

Evidence across Nigeria and the wider West African literature underscores the continuing salience of traditional authority. Recent Nigerian studies document the involvement of traditional rulers in conflict resolution and community peacebuilding, including work on Kwara State (Abdulsalam et al., 2020), Ijebu-Land in Ogun State (Ashiru-Badmus & Oyebode, 2025), Kogi East (Omale et al., 2025), and Gwer-East in Benue State (Utile & Tarnongo, 2024). Comparative scholarship likewise shows that customary authority remains important to local governance and dispute management in Ghana and Sierra Leone (Ubink, 2008; Archibald & Richards, 2002; Shaw, 2005). In Liberia, research on everyday sovereignty and local ownership highlights the importance of locally embedded authority within peacebuilding processes (de Carvalho et al., 2019). Taken together, these sources support the comparative relevance of culturally embedded authority without requiring the stronger claim that identical mediation mechanisms operate across all four countries.

Three interlocking mechanisms appear consistently in both the Nigerian field material and the comparative literature: Cultural Embeddedness and Audience Enforcement: Mediation hearings can occur in open communal spaces where kin, elders, and neighbours are present. Decisions can therefore become reputational currency; failure to comply may invite censure, social stigma, and loss of communal trust. Nigerian interviews frequently referenced the “eyes of the community” (EE-14, Kano, 2023), a dynamic that is consistent with scholarship on customary authority and local accountability in Ghana and Sierra Leone (Logan, 2013; Ubink, 2008; Archibald & Richards, 2002). Audience enforcement embeds compliance in relational accountability rather than reducing it to legal coercion. Bounded Insider-Partiality as Fairness: Contrary to liberal orthodoxy, kinship and community proximity may facilitate fact-finding and accountability, but they can also produce pressure and unequal access. Mediators’ embeddedness in the moral universe of disputants therefore requires continuing scrutiny rather than automatic assumptions of fairness. The Nigerian survey findings are interpreted in this conditional manner.

Hybrid Political Orders and Postcolonial Legitimacy

West African polities exemplify hybrid political orders where statutory and customary institutions coexist (Boege et al., 2008). Such coexistence can produce institutional complementarity, although the precise division of functions varies across contexts. The Nigerian field data indicate substantial preference for traditional mediation, while the comparative material is used only to illuminate the broader institutional setting rather than to claim equivalent prevalence across countries. CNMT situates legitimacy in moral obligation, communal witness, and culturally embedded accountability rather than procedural detachment. Nevertheless, CNMT recognises constraints. Political co-optation, elite capture, and statutory ambiguity can compromise mediator impartiality. Nigerian fieldwork in Bayelsa revealed chiefs accepting inducements from corporate actors (ND-07, Yenagoa, 2024). CNMT’s bounded-partiality framework

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therefore treats legitimacy as contingent on communal oversight, accountability, and the availability of meaningful alternatives. By integrating Nigerian empirical depth with comparative qualitative insights, the study positions CNMT as a framework for analysing how cultural embeddedness and relational accountability shape mediation legitimacy without claiming uniform effects across West Africa.

Research Design and Methodology

This research adopted a convergent mixed-methods design. Fieldwork was conducted over fourteen months, from June 2023 to August 2024, with the principal empirical site in Nigeria and supplementary comparative work in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Nigeria was selected as the primary case because it contains multiple forms of traditional authority operating alongside statutory institutions, allowing comparison across distinct conflict-governance ecologies. The Nigerian sites comprised Kano and Katsina emirate councils, Osun and Oyo obaship domains, Jos Plateau peri-urban forums, and chiefdoms in Bayelsa and Delta States. The comparative countries were used for contextual and qualitative comparison rather than as additional survey populations.

Qualitative Strand

The Nigerian qualitative component comprised 48 semi-structured interviews and 12 non-participant observations of mediation processes. Participants included traditional rulers, council members, recent disputants, women and youth representatives, and local government officials. Sampling was purposive and, where necessary, snowball-based. Interviews examined legitimacy, fairness, trust, moral sanction, social visibility, access to alternative forums, and experiences of compliance or disagreement. Supplementary qualitative and archival material from Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone was used to identify points of regional convergence and divergence. The qualitative material is used to interpret mechanisms and institutional processes; it is not used to establish population-level prevalence.

Quantitative Strand

The quantitative component consists of a structured survey of 612 Nigerian respondents distributed across the four field ecologies: Kano and Katsina (n=158), Osun and Oyo (n=142), Jos Plateau (n=156), and Bayelsa and Delta (n=156). The achieved sample included 311 women and 301 men and was stratified to capture variation in age, gender, and socioeconomic background. The survey measured trust in traditional and state mediation, reported compliance intention with traditional and state mediation, cultural congruence, and community presence using five-point scales. Because the four field ecologies were purposively selected and access was partly gatekeeper-mediated, the survey is treated as an achieved sample rather than a probability sample of Nigerian residents. The analysis therefore makes no claim of national representativeness.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed thematically. Quantitative analysis proceeded in four stages. First, descriptive statistics compared trust and reported compliance intention across traditional and state institutions. Second, paired-sample t-tests assessed within-respondent differences between traditional and state evaluations. Third, Pearson and Spearman correlations assessed the bivariate relationship between trust in traditional authority and reported traditional compliance intention. Fourth, an OLS model estimated the adjusted association between traditional compliance intention and trust in traditional authority while controlling for cultural congruence, community presence, gender, age group, education, and field ecology. Heteroskedasticity-consistent HC3 standard errors were used for principal inference. The regression is associational and is not interpreted causally. A one-way ANOVA was additionally used to assess whether the traditional-minus-state compliance gap varied across the four field ecologies.

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Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity:

Ethical approval and site permissions were obtained in accordance with the requirements governing the fieldwork. Participants provided informed consent, and identifiable information was removed during transcription. The researcher's positionality and cultural familiarity were addressed through reflexive journaling and deliberate inclusion of dissenting accounts, including participants dissatisfied with traditional rulings. Particular attention was paid to the possibility that reported compliance may reflect not only perceived legitimacy but also social pressure, reputational costs, or constrained access to alternative forums.

Discussion and Implications:

The findings refine rather than simply confirm CNMT. The Nigerian survey establishes an asymmetry in institutional evaluations: respondents rated traditional mediation more highly than state mediation on trust and reported compliance intention. However, the individual-level evidence does not support the inference that higher trust produces higher compliance. The Pearson correlation between traditional trust and reported traditional compliance intention is r=-.033 (p=.418), and the adjusted OLS estimate for trust is B=-.049 (p=.238) under HC3 robust inference. The central theoretical implication is therefore that aggregate institutional evaluations cannot substitute for individual-level analysis. CNMT is strongest when formulated as an account of the institutional and relational conditions within which authority becomes meaningful, rather than as a simple trust-to-compliance mechanism.

The qualitative evidence helps explain why high aggregate evaluations can coexist with a weak individual-level trust–compliance association. Public witnessing can make settlements socially visible; relational proximity can expose mediators to reputational scrutiny; culturally meaningful practices can increase the social weight of agreements; and the availability or absence of alternative forums can alter the practical costs of rejecting an outcome. These mechanisms are treated as qualitative explanations rather than as statistically demonstrated causes because they were not all directly operationalised in the survey. Comparative material from Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone supports the plausibility of regional parallels but is not used to generalise the Nigerian survey results to those countries.

A second implication concerns insider-partiality. Shared social and cultural relationships may facilitate information, recognition, and accountability, but they can also produce unequal access and pressure to conform. The concept should therefore be distinguished from impartiality without being romanticised. The relevant question is not whether a mediator is formally neutral, but how proximity structures accountability, whose interests are protected, and whether disputants retain meaningful opportunities to contest or seek an alternative forum. This formulation allows CNMT to recognise both the legitimacy-producing and constraining dimensions of embedded authority.

A third implication concerns moral-spiritual sanction. Qur'anic oaths, lineage-based practices, libation, ancestral invocation, and other ritual forms can give settlements moral significance beyond formal procedure. Yet the presence of such practices does not establish voluntary consent. Compliance may be consistent with recognition, but it may also reflect reputational pressure, social discipline, or constrained choice. CNMT therefore treats moral-spiritual sanction as part of an institutional ecology in which legitimacy and coercion can coexist, rather than as evidence that compliance is necessarily voluntary or that traditional mediation is inherently more legitimate.

The policy implication is not that states or donors should simply privilege traditional institutions over statutory mechanisms. Instead, hybrid arrangements should be designed around accountability, access, and safeguards against exclusion. Support for traditional mediation should include transparent record-keeping,

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avenues for appeal or referral, gender- and youth-sensitive participation, and safeguards against political capture. Formal recognition should not erase the social practices that make customary forums meaningful, but neither should cultural authenticity be used to shield arbitrary or coercive authority. The evidence supports institutional complementarity under conditions of meaningful contestability rather than a binary choice between traditional and state mediation.

Policy Implications and Scholarly Contributions

Recognising the salience of traditional mediation across West Africa calls for a calibrated approach to institutional pluralism. The Nigerian evidence suggests that traditional forums can command substantial public recognition, but it does not establish universal legitimacy or superior effectiveness. Policy should therefore focus on the conditions under which customary and statutory institutions can interact while preserving access, accountability, and protection against abuse. In particular, collaboration should be accompanied by transparent referral arrangements, documentation of settlements, and safeguards for participants who are socially marginal or lack strong ties to the customary community.

For policymakers, the most defensible lesson is not to formalise every customary practice but to strengthen the accountability environment around plural institutions. Traditional forums can retain culturally meaningful procedures while developing mechanisms for record-keeping, review, referral, and protection of vulnerable participants. Such measures can help preserve relational legitimacy without assuming that social pressure is equivalent to consent. International and domestic peacebuilding programmes should similarly treat cultural embeddedness as a contextual resource to be assessed rather than as a universal prescription.

From a broader peacebuilding perspective, the integration of traditional authority within national and regional conflict management frameworks could **localise peace architectures** in ways that enhance state legitimacy. Across ECOWAS member states, incorporating traditional mediators into preventive diplomacy and post-conflict reintegration programs could bridge the persistent gap between formal peace agreements and local acceptance. This aligns with the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063 call for "African solutions to African problems," situating CNMT within continental aspirations for culturally grounded governance.

The study makes three scholarly contributions. First, it refines CNMT by separating aggregate institutional evaluation from individual-level behavioural association: high trust and high reported compliance intention can coexist without a positive individual-level trust–compliance relationship. Second, it contributes to postcolonial mediation scholarship by showing that insider-partiality is analytically productive only when examined together with accountability, social discipline, unequal access, and the possibility of coercion. Third, it demonstrates the value of a mixed-methods strategy in which Nigerian quantitative evidence is used to test individual-level associations while comparative West African qualitative material is used to assess the broader cultural and institutional relevance of the theoretical claims. This avoids treating neighbouring countries as if they were part of the Nigerian survey.

Nigeria provides the principal empirical case, while Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone offer comparative qualitative insight. The findings should therefore be generalised analytically rather than statistically. The transferable proposition is that mediation legitimacy and compliance are likely to depend partly on the cultural and institutional environment in which authority is exercised. Whether the same mechanisms operate with similar force elsewhere requires additional country-specific data. CNMT is consequently best understood as a framework for generating and testing comparative propositions, not as a claim that one model of traditional mediation is uniformly effective across West Africa.

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Future Research Directions

Future research should advance this inquiry along three interrelated trajectories. First, longitudinal studies tracing conflict outcomes over several years are essential to evaluate the durability of settlements mediated under the Cultural Nexus Mediation Theory (CNMT) framework. While this study offers compelling evidence of short-term compliance rooted in spiritual oaths and communal sanction, sustained monitoring could determine whether such mechanisms yield more stable peace than state court decrees or NGO-facilitated mediations. Second, intersectional approaches deserve greater attention. Gender and youth dynamics, particularly the pre-mediation caucuses among Yoruba women or the advisory roles of female elders in northern Ghana, suggest that palace mediation is neither monolithic nor uniformly inclusive. Future studies should interrogate how authority, age, and gender hierarchies shape participation and legitimacy within the insider-partial model. Third, comparative experiments incorporating measured procedural innovations such as digital record-keeping, structured dialogue techniques, or hybrid forums involving local chiefs and statutory officers could assess whether incremental modernisation enhances transparency without eroding the trust-based informality central to traditional systems. Expanding CNMT testing across other West African societies, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Niger, would further illuminate its regional adaptability, revealing the extent to which moral authority and communal embeddedness can coexist with contemporary governance reforms.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that culturally embedded authority remains an important component of conflict governance in Nigeria and provides useful comparative insight into wider West African mediation practices. Its central finding is more qualified than the original formulation: traditional mediation received higher aggregate evaluations of trust and reported compliance intention than state mediation, but individual-level trust did not positively predict reported compliance intention in the 612-person Nigerian survey. This result cautions against inferring behavioural mechanisms from group means. It also suggests that CNMT should focus on the institutional ecology within which authority operates—public visibility, relational accountability, cultural obligation, social discipline, and access to alternative forums—rather than assuming that trust alone produces compliance.

The study also shows why legitimacy, compliance, and coercion must remain analytically distinct. Traditional authority may be experienced as culturally meaningful and accountable while simultaneously imposing social costs on dissent. Moral-spiritual practices can strengthen the significance of settlements without demonstrating voluntary consent. The appropriate contribution of CNMT is therefore not to replace one universal model with another, but to provide a culturally grounded framework for analysing how authority, recognition, accountability, and constraint interact in plural mediation systems. The Nigerian evidence provides the primary empirical basis for these claims, while the comparative material from Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone indicates avenues for further testing rather than grounds for statistical generalisation.

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Table 1

Paired institutional evaluations in the Nigerian survey (N = 612)

Measure	Traditional M (SD)	State M (SD)	t (df)	P
Trust in mediator fairness	4.19 (0.67)	3.49 (0.87)	15.38 (611)	<.001
Reported compliance intention	4.15 (0.69)	3.73 (0.85)	9.55 (611)	<.001
Cultural congruence	4.35 (0.54)	—	—	—
Community presence	4.27 (0.67)	—	—	—
Note	Means are respondent-level five-point ratings; the first two comparisons are paired-sample tests.	—	—	—

Note: Values are means (M) with standard deviation (SD) in parentheses. Paired-sample t-tests compare traditional and state evaluations within respondents. The survey measured reported compliance intention, not observed behavioural compliance.

The Nigerian survey shows a clear aggregate asymmetry in institutional evaluations. Trust in traditional mediation was higher than trust in state mediation, with a within-respondent difference of 0.69 scale points, $t(611)=15.38$, $p<.001$. Reported compliance intention was also higher for traditional mediation, with a difference of 0.42 scale points, $t(611)=9.55$, $p<.001$. These results establish differences in reported evaluations; they do not establish that trust causes compliance or that traditional mediation is universally more legitimate or effective.

The high ratings for cultural congruence and community presence are substantively important but should be interpreted descriptively. They indicate that respondents regarded cultural fit and public visibility as salient features of traditional mediation. The subsequent individual-level analysis tests whether these evaluations translate into a positive trust–compliance association after adjustment for other characteristics.

Table 2

Traditional-minus-state reported compliance intention gap by field ecology

Field ecology	N	Mean gap	SD
Bayelsa & Delta chiefdoms	156	0.21	1.18
Jos Plateau peri-urban forums	156	0.18	1.16
Kano & Katsina emirate councils	158	0.64	0.99
Osun & Oyo obaship domains	142	0.68	0.95

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The traditional-minus-state compliance gap varied across the four Nigerian ecologies: 0.21 in Bayelsa and Delta, 0.18 in Jos Plateau, 0.64 in Kano and Katsina, and 0.68 in Osun and Oyo. A one-way ANOVA indicates statistically significant variation across the settings, $F(3,608)=9.36$, $p<.001$. This is a contextual pattern within the achieved sample, not evidence that field ecology itself causes compliance.

The ecological variation is consistent with the proposition that compliance is embedded in different institutional environments. However, the survey does not directly measure every historical, political-economic, or social mechanism that distinguishes the four settings. The results should therefore be interpreted as evidence of patterned contextual variation rather than as a causal ranking of traditional institutions.

Predictor	B	HC3 SE	t	p; 95% CI
Constant	4.340	0.334	12.99	<.001; [3.686,4.995]
Male (vs female)	-0.042	0.055	-0.76	.446; [-0.150, 0.066]
30–39 (vs 18–29)	-0.128	0.077	-1.65	.098; [-0.279, 0.024]
40–49 (vs 18–29)	-0.062	0.078	-0.80	.425; [-0.216, 0.091]
50+ (vs 18–29)	-0.112	0.076	-1.47	.142; [-0.261, 0.038]
Diploma (vs Bachelor)	-0.042	0.084	-0.50	.618; [-0.205, 0.122]
Postgraduate (vs Bachelor)	-0.112	0.082	-1.37	.172; [-0.273, 0.049]
Primary (vs Bachelor)	-0.196	0.091	-2.16	.031; [-0.374,-0.018]
Secondary (vs Bachelor)	-0.061	0.082	-0.74	.457; [-0.221, 0.099]
Jos Plateau (vs Bayelsa & Delta)	0.167	0.088	1.90	.057; [-0.005, 0.339]
Kano/Katsina (vs Bayelsa & Delta)	0.425	0.077	5.55	<.001; [0.275,0.575]
Osun/Oyo (vs Bayelsa & Delta)	0.392	0.078	5.00	<.001; [0.238,0.546]
Traditional trust	-0.049	0.041	-1.18	.238; [-0.130, 0.032]
Cultural congruence	0.001	0.053	0.02	.981; [-0.102, 0.105]
Community presence	-0.013	0.043	-0.31	.754; [-0.098, 0.071]

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Table 3. Adjusted OLS model of reported traditional compliance intention (N = 612). HC3 robust standard errors. Reference categories: female; age 18–29; Bachelor; Bayelsa & Delta chiefdoms. R^2=.082; adjusted R^2=.060; F(14,597)=3.794, p<.001.

Adjusted analysis shows no statistically significant positive individual-level association between traditional trust and reported traditional compliance intention (B=-.049, p=.238). Cultural congruence (B=.001, p=.981) and community presence (B=-.013, p=.754) are likewise not independently associated with the outcome. The clearest adjusted differences are associated with field ecology: Kano/Katsina and Osun/Oyo have higher reported compliance intention than Bayelsa/Delta, while the Jos coefficient is positive but not conventionally significant (p=.057). The model explains approximately 8.2% of the variance. These are adjusted associations within the achieved sample, not causal effects.

Robustness check: Pearson r=-.033 (p=.418); Spearman rho=-.026 (p=.519); OLS + HC3 B=-.049, SE=.041, p=.238. These sensitivity results converge on the absence of a detectable positive individual-level trust–compliance association.

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