



Article

Revising traditional governance: The role of trust in traditional institutions in building social cohesion

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between trust in traditional institutions and social cohesion, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of perceived fairness within the context of Ilorin Emirate, Nigeria. Drawing on Social Capital Theory and Procedural Justice Theory, the study conceptualized trust in traditional institutions as a key driver of community-level outcomes, operating both directly and indirectly through fairness perceptions. A quantitative research design was adopted using a cross-sectional survey approach. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to residents across Ilorin West, Ilorin East, and Ilorin South Local Government Areas. A total of 328 valid responses were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The findings revealed that trust in traditional institutions has a significant positive effect on social cohesion and perceived fairness, suggesting that trusted institutions are more likely to be viewed as impartial and equitable. Perceived fairness was also found to have a significant positive effect on social cohesion, underscoring its role in fostering social stability and reducing conflict. The study contributes practical insights for enhancing inclusive and legitimate traditional governance systems to strengthen social cohesion in developing contexts.

Keywords: Trust in traditional institutions, perceived fairness, social cohesion, procedural justice, social capital, community governance

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Introduction

Trust in institutions remains a central pillar of governance, particularly in societies where formal state mechanisms coexist with deeply embedded traditional systems. In many developing countries, especially across Africa, traditional institutions comprising customary rulers, community leaders, and religious authorities continue to play a critical role in regulating social order, mediating disputes, and fostering collective identity. Their relevance persists despite the expansion of modern bureaucratic governance structures, reflecting a hybrid institutional environment in which formal and informal systems interact dynamically. In this context, trust in traditional institutions becomes a significant determinant of community-level outcomes, particularly social cohesion, which is essential for stability, cooperation, and sustainable development (Strong & Ansons, 2025).

Social cohesion broadly refers to the extent of connectedness, solidarity, and trust among members of a community. It encompasses shared values, mutual respect, and the willingness of individuals to cooperate for collective goals. In fragile and transitioning societies, social cohesion is often undermined by governance deficits, inequality, and institutional mistrust (Qi et al., 2024). However, traditional institutions, due to their proximity to local communities and embeddedness in cultural norms, are uniquely positioned to reinforce cohesion by promoting shared values and facilitating collective action. Empirical evidence suggests that communities with strong trust in local institutions tend to exhibit higher levels of cooperation, reduced conflict, and enhanced civic engagement (Dzordzormenyoh et al., 2026; Neupert-Wentz & Müller-Crepon, 2024).

Within the Nigerian context, traditional institutions have historically served as intermediaries between the state and citizens, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings (Neupert-Wentz & Müller-Crepon, 2024). Their roles in conflict resolution, community mobilization, and norm enforcement remain critical, especially where formal governance structures are perceived as distant or ineffective (Idrees Gana et al., 2025). As observed in governance studies, institutional arrangements that are perceived as legitimate and accessible tend to foster compliance and cooperation among citizens. This aligns with broader arguments in governance literature that emphasize the importance of trust and legitimacy in enhancing public value and service delivery outcomes (Ehrhardt, 2023; Mukhtar & Jafaru, 2025).

Despite the recognized importance of trust in traditional institutions, the mechanisms through which such trust translates into social cohesion remain underexplored. One critical pathway is perceived fairness, which reflects citizens' evaluation of the impartiality, transparency, and equity of decisions made by traditional authorities (Chlouba, 2024). Fairness perceptions are central to governance outcomes because they shape individuals' willingness to accept authority, comply with rules, and engage in cooperative behaviour. When traditional institutions are perceived as fair, they are more likely to command respect and legitimacy, thereby strengthening social bonds within the community.

Perceived fairness is particularly relevant in contexts where dispute resolution and resource allocation are mediated through informal institutions. As highlighted in governance studies, fairness in administrative processes enhances trust, reduces grievances, and promotes collective stability. Conversely, perceptions of bias, favouritism, or exclusion can erode trust and weaken social cohesion. Thus, fairness operates as a critical psychological and institutional mechanism linking trust in authority to broader societal outcomes.

Notwithstanding the growing body of literature on institutional trust and social cohesion, existing studies have largely focused on formal state institutions or generalized measures of trust, with limited attention to traditional governance structures (Bhutto, 2024; Kadioglu Kumtepe, 2025). Moreover, while fairness has been examined in public administration research, its mediating role in the relationship between trust in traditional institutions and social cohesion remains insufficiently theorized and empirically tested. This gap is particularly pronounced in the African context, where hybrid governance systems necessitate a nuanced understanding of how informal institutions shape community dynamics.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine the relationship between trust in traditional institutions and social cohesion, with a specific focus on the mediating role of perceived fairness. The objectives are threefold: (i) to assess the direct effect of trust in traditional institutions on social cohesion; (ii) to examine the influence of trust in traditional institutions on perceived fairness; and (iii) to evaluate the mediating effect of perceived fairness in the trust–cohesion relationship. The study contributes to the literature by integrating governance and social capital perspectives to explain community-level outcomes, while offering practical insights for strengthening inclusive and legitimate local governance systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Conceptual Review

The conceptual foundation of this study is anchored on three core constructs: trust in traditional institutions, perceived fairness, and social cohesion. These constructs are central to understanding governance dynamics in contexts characterized by hybrid institutional arrangements, where formal state structures coexist with informal and culturally embedded systems of authority. A clear conceptualization of these variables is essential for elucidating their interrelationships and empirical relevance.

Trust in traditional institutions refers to the confidence that individuals and communities place in customary authorities such as traditional rulers, community elders, and religious leaders (Bhutto, 2024; Kadioglu Kumtepe, 2025). This form of trust is distinct from trust in formal state institutions, as it is often rooted in historical legitimacy, cultural norms, and sustained interpersonal interactions (Mukhtar & Jafaru, 2025). Traditional institutions derive their authority not from codified legal frameworks but from collective acceptance and long-standing societal values. As such, trust in these institutions is shaped by their perceived integrity, consistency, and responsiveness to community needs.

In many African societies, including Nigeria, traditional institutions play a critical role in governance, particularly at the grassroots level (Adejumo & Sola, 2023). They are involved in dispute resolution, enforcement of social norms, and mobilization of community resources (Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2023). Their proximity to the people enhances their accessibility and relevance, making them key actors in fostering local governance outcomes. Trust in these institutions therefore becomes a crucial determinant of how individuals engage with community structures and participate in collective activities. High levels of trust are associated with increased compliance with community norms, reduced conflict, and enhanced cooperation (Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2023).

Perceived fairness, on the other hand, refers to individuals' subjective evaluation of the equity, impartiality, and transparency of decisions made by authorities (Moliner et al., 2024). It encompasses

both procedural fairness, which relates to the processes through which decisions are made, and distributive fairness, which concerns the outcomes of those decisions. In governance contexts, fairness perceptions are critical because they influence legitimacy, trust, and behavioural responses.

Perceived fairness is particularly salient in traditional governance systems, where decision-making processes are often informal and based on customary practices. The absence of formalized procedures places greater emphasis on the perceived integrity and impartiality of decision-makers (Bhutto, 2024; Kadioglu Kumtepe, 2025). When traditional authorities are seen as fair, their decisions are more likely to be accepted, even in cases where outcomes may not favour all parties. This reduces grievances and enhances social stability (Adejumo & Sola, 2023; Głowczewski & Burdziej, 2023). Conversely, perceptions of bias, favouritism, or exclusion can undermine trust and lead to social fragmentation.

The concept of fairness is closely linked to legitimacy, as fair processes and outcomes reinforce the moral authority of institutions. In this regard, fairness serves as a bridge between trust and broader governance outcomes (Strong & Ansons, 2025). It shapes how individuals interpret institutional actions and determines their willingness to comply with decisions and engage in cooperative behaviour. Thus, perceived fairness is not merely an outcome of trust but also a mechanism through which trust influences social dynamics.

Social cohesion represents the extent to which members of a community are connected, share common values, and are willing to cooperate for mutual benefit (Manca, 2024). It encompasses elements such as interpersonal trust, sense of belonging, social inclusion, and collective efficacy (Orazani et al., 2023). Social cohesion is widely regarded as a critical component of stable and resilient societies, as it facilitates cooperation, reduces conflict, and promotes inclusive development.

In the context of this study, social cohesion is viewed as a community-level outcome influenced by institutional and psychological factors. Trust in traditional institutions contributes to cohesion by fostering confidence in leadership and encouraging participation in communal activities. At the same time, perceived fairness enhances cohesion by ensuring that individuals feel respected, valued, and treated equitably within the community (Qi et al., 2024).

The interaction between these constructs reflects a dynamic process in which institutional trust shapes fairness perceptions, which in turn influence social cohesion. Trust provides the initial basis for positive expectations about institutional behaviour, while fairness validates these expectations through observable actions. Together, they create an environment conducive to cooperation and collective action (Qi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the relevance of these constructs is amplified in settings where formal governance structures face challenges such as limited reach, bureaucratic inefficiencies, or perceived corruption. In such contexts, traditional institutions often serve as alternative or complementary governance mechanisms. Their effectiveness, however, depends on their ability to maintain trust and demonstrate fairness in their operations.

Trust in Traditional Institutions and Social Cohesion

Trust in institutions is widely regarded as a foundational element of effective governance and social order. Institutional trust reflects citizens' confidence in the competence, integrity, and reliability of

authorities in performing their roles (Kadioglu Kumtepe, 2025). In the context of traditional institutions, trust is often rooted in historical legitimacy, cultural alignment, and sustained interaction with community members (Van Assche et al., 2023). Unlike formal bureaucratic systems, traditional institutions derive authority from customary norms and collective acceptance, which enhances their credibility and influence within local contexts.

The relationship between institutional trust and social cohesion is well established in the literature. Social cohesion thrives in environments where individuals perceive governing authorities as trustworthy and legitimate (Bhutto, 2024). Trust reduces uncertainty, facilitates cooperation, and encourages compliance with social norms. In communities where traditional institutions are trusted, individuals are more likely to engage in collective activities, resolve conflicts amicably, and uphold shared values. This aligns with social capital theory, which posits that trust serves as a lubricant for social interaction and collective action.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that trust in local institutions enhances community solidarity and reduces social fragmentation (Delhey et al., 2023; Koopman, 2023). In developing contexts, where formal institutions may be perceived as ineffective or corrupt, traditional institutions often fill governance gaps, thereby reinforcing social cohesion. However, the strength of this relationship may depend on the perceived fairness and inclusiveness of these institutions.

H1: Trust in traditional institutions has a positive and significant effect on social cohesion in the community.

Trust in Traditional Institutions and Perceived Fairness

Perceived fairness refers to individuals' assessment of the equity, impartiality, and transparency of decision-making processes. It encompasses both procedural fairness (how decisions are made) and distributive fairness (how outcomes are allocated). In governance contexts, fairness perceptions are critical because they influence legitimacy, trust, and compliance (Bobzien, 2023).

Trust in traditional institutions is expected to enhance perceptions of fairness (Bhutto, 2024). When individuals trust institutional actors, they are more likely to interpret their actions as just and unbiased (Chlouba, 2024). This is particularly relevant in traditional governance systems, where decision-making processes are often embedded in cultural norms and collective values. Trusted institutions are perceived as acting in the best interest of the community, thereby reinforcing fairness perceptions.

Conversely, lack of trust may lead to scepticism and perceptions of bias, even when decisions are objectively fair. Thus, trust serves as a cognitive and emotional lens through which fairness is evaluated. This relationship is consistent with procedural justice theory, which emphasizes that trust in authorities enhances the acceptance of decisions and perceptions of fairness.

H2: Trust in traditional institutions has a positive and significant effect on perceived fairness.

Perceived Fairness and Social Cohesion

Perceived fairness plays a pivotal role in shaping social cohesion. Fair treatment fosters a sense of belonging, reduces grievances, and promotes cooperation among community members. When individuals

perceive decision-making processes as fair, they are more likely to accept outcomes, even when unfavourable, thereby reducing conflict and enhancing stability (Główczewski & Burdziej, 2023).

Fairness also strengthens social norms and collective identity. In communities where fairness is upheld, individuals are more likely to trust one another and engage in prosocial behaviour (Adejumo & Sola, 2023). This creates a virtuous cycle in which fairness reinforces trust, and trust enhances cohesion. In contrast, perceptions of unfairness can lead to distrust, resentment, and social fragmentation.

The importance of fairness in governance contexts has been widely documented. Studies in public administration highlight that fairness in service delivery and decision-making enhances citizen satisfaction and trust, which in turn strengthens social cohesion. In traditional settings, where institutions play a central role in dispute resolution and resource allocation, fairness becomes even more critical.

H3: Perceived fairness has a positive and significant effect on social cohesion in the community.

The Mediating Role of Perceived Fairness

While trust in traditional institutions is expected to directly influence social cohesion, this relationship is likely to be mediated by perceived fairness. Trust alone may not be sufficient to generate cohesion unless it translates into fair and just outcomes. Perceived fairness serves as a key mechanism through which trust is operationalized into social outcomes (Bobzien, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, fairness enhances the legitimacy of institutions, which in turn strengthens social cohesion. Trust in traditional institutions fosters positive expectations, which shape perceptions of fairness. These perceptions then influence individuals' willingness to cooperate, comply with norms, and engage in collective activities (Idrees Gana et al., 2025; Kadioglu Kumtepe, 2025).

Empirical evidence suggests that fairness mediates the relationship between trust and various governance outcomes, including compliance, satisfaction, and social stability (Idrees Gana et al., 2025). In the context of traditional institutions, fairness is particularly important because it determines the extent to which institutional authority is accepted and respected by community members.

H4: Perceived fairness mediates the relationship between trust in traditional institutions and social cohesion in the community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Social Capital Theory and Procedural Justice Theory to explain the relationship between trust in traditional institutions, perceived fairness, and social cohesion.

Social Capital Theory, as advanced by Putnam (1993), emphasizes the role of trust, norms, and networks in facilitating collective action. Social capital is conceptualized as a resource embedded in social relationships that enhances cooperation and coordination. Trust in institutions, particularly at the community level, is a critical component of social capital (Di Napoli et al., 2019). In societies where traditional institutions are trusted, social networks are strengthened, and individuals are more likely to engage in cooperative behaviour (Nikolakis & Nelson, 2019).

In the context of this study, trust in traditional institutions represents a form of institutional social capital that fosters social cohesion. Traditional institutions act as nodes of social interaction, providing platforms for community engagement and conflict resolution (Adejumo & Sola, 2023). Their legitimacy and acceptance enhance the density of social networks, thereby strengthening cohesion (Di Napoli et al., 2019). However, the effectiveness of these institutions in generating social capital depends on their perceived fairness and inclusiveness.

Procedural Justice Theory complements this perspective by focusing on the importance of fairness in decision-making processes. According to this theory, individuals are more likely to accept and comply with decisions when they perceive the process as fair, regardless of the outcome (Tyler, 2016). Fairness enhances the legitimacy of authorities, which in turn fosters trust and cooperation.

In traditional governance systems, procedural fairness is reflected in the transparency, consistency, and impartiality of decisions made by community leaders (Moliner et al., 2024). When individuals perceive these processes as fair, they are more likely to trust the institution and engage in cooperative behaviour. This reinforces social cohesion by reducing conflict and promoting collective identity.

The integration of Social Capital Theory and Procedural Justice Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of trust, fairness, and cohesion. While Social Capital Theory explains the role of trust and networks in fostering cohesion, Procedural Justice Theory highlights the mechanisms through which fairness shapes these relationships. Together, they offer a robust theoretical foundation for examining the mediating role of perceived fairness in the relationship between trust in traditional institutions and social cohesion.

Consequently, this study is grounded in the integration of Social Capital Theory and Procedural Justice Theory, which collectively explain how trust in traditional institutions translates into social cohesion through perceived fairness.

The model posits that trust in traditional institutions serves as the primary independent variable influencing both perceived fairness and social cohesion. Trust reflects citizens' confidence in the integrity and reliability of traditional authorities, which shapes their expectations and evaluations of institutional performance. In line with Social Capital Theory, trust enhances social interaction and cooperation, thereby directly contributing to social cohesion.

Perceived fairness is conceptualized as a mediating variable that captures individuals' assessment of the impartiality and equity of institutional decisions. Drawing from Procedural Justice Theory, fairness is expected to play a critical role in legitimizing institutional authority and fostering acceptance of decisions. Trust in traditional institutions is hypothesized to enhance fairness perceptions, which in turn strengthen social cohesion by promoting cooperation and reducing conflict.

Social cohesion, the dependent variable, represents the level of connectedness, trust, and solidarity within the community. It is influenced both directly by trust in traditional institutions and indirectly through perceived fairness. The dual pathways reflect the possibility that trust can foster cohesion independently, while also operating through fairness perceptions to enhance collective outcomes.

The framework thus specifies both direct and indirect effects, allowing for the examination of mediation. The inclusion of perceived fairness as a mediator provides a more nuanced understanding of the trust–

cohesion relationship, highlighting the importance of governance quality and legitimacy in shaping community dynamics.

This integrative model is particularly relevant in contexts characterized by hybrid governance systems, where traditional institutions play a significant role alongside formal state structures. It offers a theoretically grounded and empirically testable framework for understanding how institutional trust can be translated into tangible social outcomes through fairness mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between trust in traditional institutions, perceived fairness, and social cohesion among residents of Ilorin Emirate, Kwara State, Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey approach was employed, which is consistent with prior studies in governance and public administration that seek to capture perceptions and attitudes at a specific point in time. The use of a structured questionnaire enabled the collection of standardized data suitable for multivariate analysis, particularly Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

Data for the study were collected using a paper-based questionnaire. This approach was considered appropriate given the contextual realities of the study area, where varying levels of digital access and literacy may limit the effectiveness of online surveys. The questionnaire was designed in a clear and concise manner to facilitate comprehension among respondents and to minimize response bias.

The study population comprised residents of the Ilorin West, Ilorin East, and Ilorin South Local Government Areas. Given the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame and the large size of the population, it was treated as infinite. To determine an adequate sample size, G*Power software was employed, which is widely used in social science research for statistical power analysis (Ramayah et al., 2018). The software ensured that the minimum sample size required to detect significant effects at an acceptable level of statistical power was achieved. Using a Confidence Level of 95%, a 0.05 margin of error, and 25% Effect Size, a sample size of 325 respondents was generated.

A snowball sampling technique was utilized to recruit respondents. This non-probability sampling method was particularly suitable for accessing a diverse range of community members across the three local government areas. Initial respondents were identified and subsequently referred other participants within their networks, thereby facilitating wider coverage and participation.

To ensure the validity of the instrument, both face validity and content validity were established. Face validity was assessed by subjecting the questionnaire to expert review to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items. Content validity was ensured by aligning the measurement items with established constructs in the literature, thereby confirming that the instrument adequately captured the dimensions of the variables under investigation.

Reliability of the instrument was assessed through a pilot test conducted among 10 residents outside the study area. The pilot study enabled the refinement of the questionnaire by identifying ambiguous items and ensuring internal consistency. Following the pilot phase, the final questionnaire was administered to the target population.

A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed across the three local government areas. Out of these, 375 responses were received, representing a satisfactory response rate. After data screening and cleaning, 328 responses were deemed usable for analysis. The screening process involved checking for incomplete responses, inconsistencies, and outliers to ensure data quality.

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 software. This technique was chosen due to its suitability for exploratory and predictive research, as well as its robustness in handling complex models and non-normal data distributions. The analysis involved the assessment of both the measurement model (reliability and validity) and the structural model (hypothesis testing).

To address the issue of common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was employed. The test assessed whether a single factor accounted for the majority of the variance in the data. The results indicated that common method bias was not a significant concern, as no single factor dominated the variance.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study. The questionnaire did not include any sensitive or intrusive questions, thereby ensuring the comfort and confidentiality of respondents. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. These measures ensured compliance with ethical standards in social science research.

Results and Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	178	54.3
	Female	150	45.7
Age Group	18–25 years	72	22.0
	26–35 years	104	31.7
	36–45 years	78	23.8
	46–55 years	46	14.0
	56 years and above	28	8.5
Marital Status	Single	121	36.9
	Married	176	53.7
	Divorced/Separated	18	5.5
	Widowed	13	4.0
Education Level	No formal education	22	6.7

	Primary education	48	14.6
	Secondary education	112	34.1
	Tertiary education	146	44.5
Local Government Area	Ilorin West	132	40.2
	Ilorin East	96	29.3
	Ilorin South	100	30.5
Employment Status	Unemployed	64	19.5
	Self-employed	118	36.0
	Public sector employee	72	22.0
	Private sector employee	58	17.7
	Student	16	4.9
Income Level (Monthly)	Below ₦50,000	86	26.2
	₦50,000 – ₦100,000	104	31.7
	₦100,001 – ₦200,000	82	25.0
	Above ₦200,000	56	17.1
Political Awareness	Low	74	22.6
	Moderate	156	47.6
	High	98	29.9

The demographic profile of the respondents indicates a fairly balanced gender distribution, with males constituting 54.3% and females 45.7%. The majority of respondents were within the economically active age groups, particularly between 26–35 years (31.7%). Most participants were married (53.7%), reflecting the socio-cultural context of the study area.

In terms of educational attainment, a significant proportion (44.5%) had tertiary education, suggesting a relatively informed sample capable of responding to governance-related questions. Respondents were fairly distributed across the three local government areas within Ilorin Emirate.

Regarding economic characteristics, a large segment of respondents were self-employed (36.0%), followed by public sector employees (22.0%), indicating the prominence of informal and semi-formal economic activities in the area. Income distribution shows that the majority earn below ₦100,000 monthly, reflecting prevailing income realities.

Finally, political awareness levels were predominantly moderate (47.6%), with a considerable proportion exhibiting high awareness (29.9%), suggesting that most respondents possess sufficient knowledge of governance processes to provide meaningful responses relevant to the study variables.

Table 2: Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	Item	Loading	CA	CR	AVE
Trust in Traditional Institutions (TTI)	TTI1	0.742	0.821	0.872	0.577
	TTI2	0.768			
	TTI3	0.735			
	TTI4	0.781			
	TTI5	0.754			
Social Cohesion (SC)	SC1	0.721	0.865	0.894	0.546
	SC2	0.748			
	SC3	0.772			
	SC4	0.739			
	SC5	0.758			
	SC6	0.731			
	SC7	0.765			
Perceived Fairness (PF)	PF1	0.753	0.806	0.866	0.564
	PF2	0.779			
	PF3	0.741			
	PF4	0.762			
	PF5	0.728			

The measurement model demonstrates satisfactory reliability and convergent validity. All indicator loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong item reliability. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values for all constructs fall within the acceptable range of 0.70 to 0.90, confirming internal consistency reliability. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are above 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity, as each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (HTMT Criterion)

Constructs	TTI	SC	PF
TTI	0.227		
SC	0.219	0.387	
PF	0.336	0.470	0.116

The HTMT values for all construct pairs are below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating that discriminant validity is established. This suggests that each construct is empirically distinct from the others and captures a unique aspect of the model.

Table 4: Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	Std. Dev.	T-value	P-value	f ²	Decision
H1	TTI \rightarrow SC	0.342	0.061	5.607	0.000	0.168	Supported
H2	TTI \rightarrow PF	0.417	0.058	7.190	0.000	0.214	Supported
H3	PF \rightarrow SC	0.389	0.064	6.078	0.000	0.182	Supported
H4	TTI \rightarrow PF \rightarrow SC	0.162	0.041	3.951	0.000	0.096	Supported

The structural model results indicate that trust in traditional institutions has a significant positive effect on social cohesion ($\beta = 0.342, p < 0.001$) and perceived fairness ($\beta = 0.417, p < 0.001$). Perceived fairness also significantly influences social cohesion ($\beta = 0.389, p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the mediation analysis reveals that perceived fairness significantly mediates the relationship between trust in traditional institutions and social cohesion ($\beta = 0.162, p < 0.001$). The effect sizes (f²) range from small to moderate, indicating meaningful contributions of the exogenous constructs to the model.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the proposed relationships between trust in traditional institutions (TTI), perceived fairness (PF), and social cohesion (SC). The results demonstrate that trust in traditional institutions has a positive and significant effect on social cohesion, indicating that communities where traditional authorities are trusted tend to exhibit higher levels of unity, cooperation, and collective identity. A combination of these leads to the formation of societal cohesion necessary for peaceful co-existence. This finding advances the postulations of the social capital theory that institutional trust fosters social networks and cooperative behaviour (Putnam, 1993). It also corroborates prior studies that emphasize the role of local and informal institutions in strengthening community bonds, particularly in contexts where formal governance structures may be perceived as distant or ineffective (Bhutto, 2024; Manca, 2024; Van Assche et al., 2023). In relation to the study area, cooperative behaviour has culminated in the gradual integration of Durban, an annual cultural festival, an indication of entrenched social cohesion in the Ilorin Emirate.

Furthermore, the significant relationship between trust in traditional institutions and perceived fairness suggests that trust enhances citizens’ evaluations of the impartiality and equity of traditional authorities.

This finding is consistent with procedural justice literature (Tyler, 2016), which argues that trust in authority shapes fairness perceptions. In the context of Ilorin Emirate, where traditional institutions play a central role in dispute resolution and community governance, trust appears to function as a cognitive lens through which institutional actions are interpreted as fair and legitimate. Consequently, this perception of trust enhances societal coordination, culminating into the emergence of social cohesion. This finding underscores the relevance of institutional trust, particularly in traditional authorities to progressive governance.

The results also reveal that perceived fairness has a significant positive effect on social cohesion. This implies that fairness in decision-making processes and outcomes is critical for fostering a sense of belonging, reducing grievances, and promoting harmonious relationships within the community. This finding is in line with previous research in governance and public administration, which highlights fairness as a key driver of legitimacy, compliance, and social stability (Moliner et al., 2024; Orazani et al., 2023; Tyler, 2016). Particularly, diverse societies, such as the Ilorin Emirate, combining low- and high-income earners, elite and uneducated, urban and rural settlers, etc., there are natural room for suspicion in the exercise of traditional authorities, but with fairness established either through conflict resolution or public good distribution, social cohesion is established, complimented with the wide spread practice of Islam in the Emirate.

Importantly, the mediation analysis confirms that perceived fairness significantly mediates the relationship between trust in traditional institutions and social cohesion. This indicates that while trust directly enhances social cohesion, a substantial portion of its effect operates through fairness perceptions. The presence of partial mediation suggests that fairness serves as an essential mechanism through which institutional trust is translated into tangible social outcomes. This finding extends existing literature by demonstrating that trust alone is insufficient unless it is reinforced by fair and inclusive institutional practices.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that trust in traditional institutions plays a pivotal role in enhancing social cohesion within communities, particularly when such trust is reinforced by perceptions of fairness. The findings demonstrate that both direct and indirect pathways are significant, with perceived fairness serving as a critical mediating mechanism. This underscores the importance of not only building trust in traditional authorities but also ensuring that their actions are perceived as fair, transparent, and inclusive. In contexts characterized by hybrid governance systems, traditional institutions remain vital actors in fostering social stability and collective identity.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the integration of social capital and procedural justice frameworks by demonstrating how trust and fairness jointly influence community outcomes. It provides empirical evidence that fairness is a key explanatory mechanism in the trust–cohesion relationship, thereby enriching the discourse on governance and social cohesion in developing contexts.

Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers and community leaders should prioritize strategies that enhance both trust and fairness in traditional governance systems. Traditional authorities should be encouraged to adopt transparent and inclusive decision-making processes, particularly in areas such as conflict resolution and resource allocation. Capacity-building initiatives, including training on ethical

leadership and participatory governance, can further strengthen fairness perceptions among community members.

Additionally, there is a need to foster stronger collaboration between formal government institutions and traditional authorities to ensure consistency in governance practices. Such integration can enhance legitimacy and promote a unified approach to community development. Public awareness campaigns that highlight the roles and responsibilities of traditional institutions may also help to reinforce trust and engagement among citizens.

Finally, future research should explore additional mediating and moderating variables, such as cultural norms and institutional accountability, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics influencing social cohesion.

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