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THE "COLD DRINK" OR "SOMETHING SMALL" ECONOMY: NORMALISED GRATUITY AND EVERYDAY CORRUPTION IN SOUTH AFRICA'S PUBLIC SERVICE

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores the growing normalisation of small-scale bribery in South Africa's public service, commonly referred to as the "cold drink" or "something small" practice. This informal term reflects a subtle yet deeply embedded form of corruption in which citizens are expected to pay for a service that should be free or to avoid punitive administrative action. Although its scale appears minor, normalised gratuity forms part of a broader pattern of systemic corruption that steadily erodes accountability, equality, and citizen trust. The purpose of this paper is to conceptualise the "cold drink" economy, situate it within current research on everyday corruption, and discuss its implications for governance. The paper draws on a narrative review of recent literature published between 2020 and 2025. The findings suggest that normalised gratuity thrives where institutional oversight is weak, frontline discretion is high, and citizens lack confidence in complaint pathways. Further, the practice reinforces power asymmetries between officials and the public, disproportionately affecting low-income individuals. The article concludes that understanding everyday corruption is vital for strengthening reform efforts, as these small exchanges cumulatively undermine state legitimacy. Practical implications include the need for targeted anti-corruption training, clearer performance monitoring for frontline officials, citizen feedback mechanisms, and behaviour-focused interventions. Future research should use case studies

and ethnographic approaches to examine how citizens and officials rationalise these exchanges.

KEYWORDS: Accountability, Corruption, Citizen trust, Everyday bribery, Public service.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Corruption in South Africa is not only a matter of headline-grabbing scandals: deeply rooted, everyday practices continue to erode public trust and undermine service delivery. While media and policy attention often focus on grand corruption at the highest levels, perhaps more dangerous is the creeping normalisation of petty bribery in citizens' daily interactions with state institutions. One of the most insidious expressions of this is the so-called "cold drink" or "something small" phenomenon, a local euphemism for small, informal payments or gifts that are expected by frontline officials to speed up services, excuse violations, or perform routine administrative tasks. This "cold drink" or "something small" practice is neither rare nor isolated. It represents a form of frontline corruption, where public servants who routinely interact with ordinary citizens exploit their discretion to extract small gratuities. According to the National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council, such practices typically involve "informal payments, favours, or coercion … demanded by public officials in exchange for basic services" in places like licensing offices, police stations, or grant-setup points (National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council, 2025). These payments are usually subtle, socially coded, and often rationalised as harmless or traditional behaviour, making them difficult to detect or punish.

In the main, the consequences of these small exchanges are far from trivial. When citizens feel compelled to pay a "cold drink," they may walk away believing that merit and legal processes no longer matter. Over time, this corrodes institutional legitimacy, the idea that public institutions serve all equally, according to rules, rather than favour those who pay extra. The normalization of gratuity chips away at democratic ideals such as accountability, impartiality, and equitable access. This is especially problematic in a country like South Africa, which is founded on a promise of equal citizenship but struggles with persistent inequality and distrust in public institutions. Recent data underscores how widespread and damaging petty corruption has become. A nationally representative survey by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) found that many South Africans report encounters with public officials soliciting bribes, with corruption now a common social norm rather than an exception (HSRC, 2025). In the same vein, a report by Corruption Watch based on

perceptions and experience surveys reveals a significant lack of confidence among citizens in the ability of existing anti-corruption mechanisms. Many respondents believe that these institutions focus more on elite corruption than on the ordinary person's lived realities (Corruption Watch, 2024).

Beyond the personal indignity and financial cost, small-scale bribery reproduces power imbalances. Vulnerable and low-income citizens are especially at risk: those who cannot afford to pay may experience delays or denial of services. Conversely, those who pay may feel trapped, compelled by informal norms to maintain the cycle. This dynamic undermines social equity and deepens socio-economic stratification by turning access to state services into a transactional economy rather than a rights-based system. Moreover, the normalisation of bribery erodes trust in public institutions more broadly. The Afrobarometer's most recent results show that over 80 percent of South Africans believe that corruption has increased, and worryingly, many think ordinary people risk retaliation if they try to report it (Afrobarometer, 2024). This perception aligns with trend data: the public's willingness to report corrupt behaviour has stagnated, even as experiences of bribery remain widespread (HSRC, 2025). When citizens believe that reporting is dangerous or futile, informal systems of compliance gain ground.

Traffic policing, in particular, offers a striking case in point. Investigations show that traffic officers are among the most frequently implicated in bribery requests. According to the Institute for Security Studies, a significant fraction of South Africans have experienced bribe solicitation at traffic stops, an interaction that should be routine and regulated but instead becomes an opportunity for exploitation (ISS, 2025). These repeated interactions normalize the expectation that "just another cold drink" is part of what it costs to get through a traffic checkpoint or avoid a fine. Criminologists and public safety scholars have also pointed out how such corrosion of trust undermines community policing. Where citizens no longer believe in the integrity of law enforcement, cooperation breaks down. Community Policing Forums, meant to bridge citizens and the police, struggle when corruption is embedded in frontline interactions (Maluleke & Rakubu, 2025). The absence of robust accountability mechanisms and the weak enforcement of whistle-blower protections further exacerbate the problem (Maluleke & Rakubu, 2025).

From a governance perspective, the "cold drink" economy is more than just a collection of isolated incidents. It is part of a systemic problem: an informal institutional culture that

tolerates petty corruption as a way of doing business. Despite South Africa's robust anti-corruption legal framework, including laws such as the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act and the Public Finance Management Act, frontline corruption persists in spite of formal controls (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2024). The persistence of such practices signals a governance gap, between rules on paper and behaviour on the ground. Given the threat to institutional legitimacy and the lived harm to citizens, this paper aims to conceptually examine how the "cold drink" practice operates, why it persists, and what its broader implications are for accountability and trust. By synthesising recent empirical research, policy reports, and survey data, this article seeks to highlight how routine bribery is not just a moral problem, but a structural one, embedded in social norms, institutional practices, and daily state-citizen relationships. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions frame the analysis:

1. How does the "cold drink" practice operate as a form of normalised gratuity within the public service?
2. What institutional, social, and cultural conditions enable and sustain this everyday corruption?
3. What are the broader consequences of this practice for public accountability and citizen trust?

In answering these questions, the article contributes to both academic debates around ordinary or everyday corruption and policy discussions on how to design interventions that can meaningfully address frontline graft. By making the invisible visible, naming the "cold drink" economy for what it is, policymakers, scholars, and civil society can better understand the roots of corruption and take more effective action.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of corruption in South Africa has broadened significantly in recent years, with scholars paying closer attention to the everyday encounters through which citizens experience the state. Although high-profile scandals often dominate public discourse, research increasingly shows that routine forms of bribery and favour-seeking shape perceptions of governance far more frequently and more directly. Auriacombe, Mofokeng and Tshiyoyo (2023) emphasise that corruption should not be understood only as an elite-driven phenomenon, because small-scale bribery affects daily service access and erodes the credibility of the entire political system. Their work demonstrates that petty corruption is

deeply woven into the fabric of public-sector interactions, particularly in settings where citizens rely heavily on frontline officials to access essential state services. A critical insight in the literature is that everyday corruption is not simply a minor or isolated problem, but a persistent feature of how some South Africans navigate public institutions. According to Auriacombe et al. (2023), the routine nature of these interactions means that they gradually become normalised, making them less likely to be challenged. Citizens who encounter such demands for "small payments" often see them as an unavoidable cost of receiving timely assistance, especially when alternative channels are slow or dysfunctional. This normalisation process is central to understanding why the "cold drink" practice has taken root in many administrative and enforcement contexts.

Complementing this perspective, Roberts and Bohler-Muller (2022) show that declining trust in public institutions is strongly linked to these recurrent experiences of bribery in everyday situations. Their study, based on nationally representative survey data, reveals that South Africans increasingly perceive public institutions as incapable of upholding fairness and impartiality. The authors argue that when frontline officials solicit bribes, it reinforces a perception that the state operates according to informal rules rather than its formal constitutional mandates. This finding is particularly salient in sectors such as policing, licensing, and local government services, where citizens interact with the state most frequently and where complaints of bribery are widespread. Further contributing to this body of research, Roberts and Bohler-Muller (2022) note that distrust is not simply an emotional response but a rational judgement shaped by repeated encounters with maladministration. Their work highlights how citizens come to expect bribery even before engaging with certain officials, which suggests that corruption has evolved into a predictable pattern rather than an occasional anomaly. This expectation makes ordinary citizens more vulnerable, especially those who lack the means or knowledge to resist such demands.

Another important dimension of the literature relates to the institutional culture that underpins everyday corruption. Mubangizi (2020) argues that bureaucratic environments characterised by informal practices, weak oversight, and low accountability provide fertile ground for routine bribery. She explains that corruption cannot be separated from the broader organisational norms that guide officials' behaviour. In many public institutions, informal exchanges or favours are seen as ways to "get things done," even when they contravene legal and ethical principles. Mubangizi (2020) suggests that these informal norms become self-

reinforcing, as officials who do not participate in such practices may be ostracised or viewed as naïve by their colleagues. The use of euphemistic language is a further feature that supports this informal culture. Expressions such as "cold drink," "something small," or "a little thank you" function as linguistic tools that obscure the illegality of the exchange. Mubangizi (2020) notes that euphemisms allow both officials and citizens to maintain plausible deniability, reducing the perceived seriousness of bribery. By framing corruption as a harmless social interaction, euphemisms reduce moral resistance and help entrench corrupt practices within organisational routines. This linguistic framing is often culturally coded, meaning that individuals unfamiliar with local terminology may struggle to identify a bribe request when it occurs.

Transparency International (2022) adds quantitative depth to the discussion through its global corruption surveys, which show that bribery is most prevalent in public-sector areas characterised by high levels of bureaucratic discretion and frequent citizen contact. The organisation reports that in South Africa, sectors such as traffic enforcement, local administrative offices, and health facilities are particularly prone to petty corruption. These findings align with domestic research and reinforce the idea that structural vulnerabilities contribute significantly to the persistence of everyday bribery. When officials have substantial discretionary power, opportunities to solicit informal payments increase, especially in contexts where monitoring is limited or ineffective. Recent South African studies also highlight that everyday corruption disproportionately affects individuals from lower-income communities, who have fewer resources to challenge or avoid exploitative behaviour. According to the Ethics Institute (2021), citizens from poorer households are more likely to encounter demands for small bribes because they are more reliant on public services and often lack access to private alternatives. The Institute notes that frontline corruption in areas such as social grant administration, permit processing, and policing places an additional financial burden on households already struggling with basic expenses. This inequality dimension is important for understanding why petty corruption is not merely an administrative issue but a broader social concern that deepens exclusions.

Scholars have also begun to examine the connection between public-sector working conditions and the prevalence of everyday corruption. Sebudubudu and Botlhomilwe (2021) argue that inadequate salaries, poor supervision, and limited career progression contribute to environments where officials rationalise bribery as a means to supplement income or

compensate for low job satisfaction. While not all officials engage in corruption, the pressures created by organisational constraints can weaken ethical standards and make informal exchanges appear normal or justified. This finding is consistent with broader theories of public-sector ethics, which suggest that environments characterised by resource scarcity and limited accountability can foster unethical practices. The literature also discusses the role of weak institutional safeguards in enabling normalised gratuity. Madumo (2022) notes that many municipalities lack effective internal controls, leaving space for frontline officials to operate with minimal oversight. In such environments, citizens may be uncertain about formal procedures, making them more susceptible to manipulation. Madumo (2022) argues that without clear complaints mechanisms and visible consequences for misconduct, even small acts of bribery become entrenched within local governance structures. This lack of enforcement capacity allows corrupt practices to persist largely unchecked.

A further emerging theme is the connection between slow service delivery and the demand for bribes. According to Ngoma and Mayekiso (2023), citizens often pay small bribes to accelerate services in environments where waiting times are lengthy or processes appear inefficient. Their study illustrates how delays function as leverage points through which officials extract informal payments. Citizens who cannot afford to wait or risk losing employment opportunities may feel compelled to comply, even when they recognise the impropriety of the request. This dynamic helps perpetuate the "cold drink" phenomenon, as bribery becomes a rational strategy for navigating slow bureaucratic processes. More recent research highlights how public awareness campaigns and anti-corruption strategies have struggled to address petty corruption effectively. The Public Service Commission (2023) reports that while national policies emphasise ethical conduct, implementation at the departmental level remains inconsistent. The Commission notes that many complaints about bribery are never formally reported, partly because citizens fear retaliation and partly because they believe reporting will not lead to action. This lack of confidence in institutional responses reinforces the normalisation of everyday corruption, as citizens perceive the risks of challenging officials as outweighing the benefits.

Another set of studies examines the digital dimension of corruption. As public services increasingly incorporate digital systems, new forms of petty corruption have emerged. According to Mohlakoana and Dipholo (2023), digital queues or online booking systems have reduced some opportunities for bribery but created others, especially when officials gain

informal control over digital platforms. Their research shows that in several administrative contexts, officials manipulate appointment systems or online approvals to create artificial scarcity, which can then be exploited through informal payments. This demonstrates that technological reforms alone are insufficient unless accompanied by robust oversight and accountability mechanisms. A growing body of literature also highlights the connection between political culture and everyday corruption. Lodge (2021) argues that long-standing political norms, including patronage and clientelism, create an environment where citizens and officials expect reciprocal exchanges. Although these norms originate at higher political levels, they filter down into everyday encounters. Lodge (2021) suggests that the "cold drink" phenomenon can be understood partly through this lens, as it reflects deeper social and political patterns that valorise informal exchanges as a means of navigating the state.

From a governance perspective, research shows that normalised gratuity undermines the constitutional principles of equality and fairness. The Auditor-General South Africa (2022) reports that petty corruption has direct administrative consequences, including irregular service delivery, inconsistent enforcement of regulations, and distortions in resource allocation. These organisational effects reinforce public perceptions that the state is unable to operate equitably. The Auditor-General notes that when officials rely on informal payments, the integrity of public processes is compromised, leading to systematic inefficiencies. International comparative research provides further insights that align with the South African experience. De Maria and Bartolomeo (2021), examining everyday corruption in several African countries, argue that euphemistic practices are common where informal economies intersect with public administration. Their work shows that euphemisms serve not only to disguise wrongdoing but also to create a shared understanding of illicit expectations among citizens and officials. This linguistic framing helps normalise corruption by embedding it within culturally recognised patterns of social interaction.

Other international studies highlight the challenges of enforcement. Persson and Rothstein (2022) argue that anti-corruption efforts often fail because they rely on individual-level behaviour change without addressing the systemic conditions that sustain corruption. Their research suggests that when petty bribery becomes widespread, individuals have little incentive to act differently unless structural reforms alter the broader governance environment. This is consistent with the South African context, where isolated interventions have struggled to reduce everyday corruption in the absence of systemic change. The

literature also explores the psychological dimension of normalised bribery. According to Jamal and Sindane (2024), repeated exposure to everyday corruption leads to moral fatigue, in which citizens become desensitised to unethical behaviour. Their study found that individuals who encounter bribery frequently are more likely to view it as a practical necessity rather than a moral violation. This shift in moral perception is crucial for understanding why bribery persists despite widespread public recognition of its harmful effects. Jamal and Sindane (2024) argue that this form of moral adaptation complicates anti-corruption efforts because it reduces the likelihood that individuals will resist or report corrupt behaviour.

In addition to citizen perspectives, research also considers the motivations of officials who participate in bribery. Chikozho and Masiya (2023) argue that frontline officials often rationalise bribery as compensation for poor working conditions and limited institutional support. Their study highlights that some officials feel under-resourced or overburdened, which contributes to a sense of frustration and disengagement. In this context, bribery becomes normalised as part of a broader coping strategy. While this does not excuse unethical behaviour, it provides an important understanding of how organisational pressures shape individual actions. Finally, the literature identifies significant gaps that the present study aims to address. While numerous scholars have examined corruption broadly, few have explored the linguistic and cultural framing of euphemistic bribery in depth. Even fewer studies have analysed how citizens internalise such practices as normal aspects of everyday governance. This article contributes to the growing field by examining the "cold drink" or "something small" phenomenon as a culturally coded, socially embedded form of corruption that requires targeted scholarly attention.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives that help illuminate why the "cold drink" or "something small" practice has become embedded in routine interactions within South Africa's public service. Routine activity theory and institutional theory provide a useful foundation for examining both the behavioural mechanisms and the organisational environments that allow everyday bribery to flourish. Using these theories together helps explain how small acts of corruption become recurrent, predictable, and socially normalised. Routine activity theory offers a behavioural lens through which the dynamics of everyday corruption can be understood. Originally developed to explain patterns of criminal behaviour,

the theory has more recently been applied to public-sector corruption to show how misconduct emerges when three conditions intersect: a motivated actor, an opportunity, and the absence of effective guardianship. Recent studies show that frontline service environments often meet all three conditions. According to Ferreira and Webb (2021), public officials who hold discretionary authority may be motivated to solicit bribes because such exchanges provide personal financial gain with relatively low risk of detection. Their research demonstrates that officials at licensing offices, traffic enforcement units, and local administrative points often make decisions that directly affect citizens, which creates ample opportunity for exploitation.

A second component of routine activity theory involves the vulnerability of citizens who depend on frontline officials. Nyathi and Masuku (2022) argue that many citizens lack full information about administrative processes or fear delays when navigating bureaucratic systems, making them more susceptible to subtle bribe requests. The authors note that unequal knowledge creates a power imbalance that can be exploited, particularly in settings where services are urgently needed, such as permit applications or law enforcement encounters. These circumstances shape the "opportunity structure" through which bribery becomes feasible and sometimes expected.

The third condition, inadequate guardianship, is reflected in weak supervision and limited monitoring mechanisms. As Enwereji and Kgobe (2023) show, insufficient oversight within public-sector institutions means that many corrupt interactions occur without detection or disciplinary action. Their study reveals that frontline workspaces often operate with limited managerial presence, low technological monitoring, and unclear reporting pathways, all of which reduce institutional capacity to prevent low-level corruption. Routine activity theory therefore explains how behavioural choices are shaped by situational factors that make bribery appear convenient, low-risk, and immediately rewarding for officials.

Institutional theory complements this behavioural analysis by emphasising how social norms, established routines, and organisational histories shape the actions of individuals within institutions. Institutional theory argues that behaviour is not driven solely by personal incentives but by the broader environment of expectations and informal rules that guide daily conduct. Meyer and Hlatshwayo (2021) contend that public servants internalise the norms embedded within their organisational cultures, including practices that may deviate from

official rules. Their work highlights how informal norms can become more powerful than formal policies when they are reinforced through repetition and peer behaviour.

One of the most relevant insights of institutional theory is its ability to explain why euphemistic terms like "cold drink" become normalised within South African public-service culture. Mlambo and Khumalo (2023) find that euphemisms create a shared linguistic code that minimises the moral weight of bribery and frames it as a socially acceptable exchange. According to their analysis, such terminology shields both officials and citizens from acknowledging the illegality of the act, making it easier for the practice to continue without psychological resistance. Institutional theory therefore helps explain how routine corruption becomes embedded in organisational culture through language, shared expectations, and tacit acceptance.

The theory also provides insight into how historical patterns of governance influence contemporary behaviour. Govender (2022) notes that long-standing institutional weaknesses, such as fragmented accountability systems and uneven enforcement, have produced environments where informal practices flourish. These historical conditions contribute to an unofficial institutional culture where corrupt acts are rationalised as practical necessities rather than ethical violations. In such contexts, the "cold drink" practice becomes part of a stable but detrimental system of informal rules that can persist even when formal anti-corruption reforms are introduced.

When used together, routine activity theory and institutional theory provide a holistic explanation for normalised gratuity. Routine activity theory accounts for the micro-level conditions that enable bribery in everyday encounters, while institutional theory explains the macro-level cultural and organisational structures that support its endurance. The combination of these perspectives shows that bribery is not simply a result of individual misconduct but a product of broader institutional environments that fail to discourage or disrupt corrupt routines. Understanding these intersecting dimensions is essential for designing anti-corruption interventions that address not only individual behaviour but also the institutional cultures that sustain informal and unethical practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a narrative literature review design in order to explore how the "cold drink" or "something small" practice functions as a form of everyday corruption within South

Africa's public service. A narrative review is appropriate when the objective is to integrate diverse bodies of knowledge, interpret emerging patterns, and develop conceptual insights rather than measure variables or test hypotheses. Recent methodological literature confirms that narrative reviews are useful in studies focused on public administration, governance cultures, and corruption dynamics because they allow the researcher to synthesise qualitative, conceptual, and empirical findings across multiple sources (Snyder, 2019; though older, still widely cited; more recent supportive perspectives below). Contemporary authors continue to emphasise the value of narrative synthesis for studies seeking to understand socially embedded behaviours and institutional processes that do not lend themselves easily to direct measurement. For example, Ncube and Dube (2022) explain that narrative reviews are particularly useful when analysing corruption patterns because they allow the researcher to account for contextual and cultural dimensions that quantitative designs may overlook.

This study relies exclusively on secondary data published between 2020 and 2025. All sources were drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals, policy reports, national surveys, and governance datasets that address corruption, public service behaviour, institutional accountability, and citizen trust in South Africa. The decision to limit the review to the most recent five years aligns with growing scholarly recognition that corruption patterns and public perceptions shift rapidly and therefore require up-to-date analysis (Roberts & Bohler-Muller, 2022). The exclusive use of secondary literature means that no primary data were collected from human participants, and for this reason ethical clearance was not required, consistent with guidelines outlined by Mabele and Malefane (2021) for documentary and desk-based research in the social sciences.

Source selection followed a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is appropriate in narrative reviews because it allows the researcher to identify material that directly addresses the conceptual focus of the study while excluding irrelevant or peripheral literature. As stated by Mohajan (2022), purposive sampling helps ensure that the final dataset reflects depth, relevance, and conceptual alignment rather than breadth alone. In this study, sources were selected if they met three core criteria: first, they had to focus on corruption, public sector practices, governance culture, or citizen trust; second, they needed to provide empirical or conceptual insights relevant to the South African context; and third, they had to offer recent findings that reflect ongoing governance challenges. This process resulted in a final

dataset that includes studies on petty bribery, institutional behaviour, accountability failures, enforcement gaps, and public trust in state structures.

The analytical process unfolded in several stages. The first stage involved a thorough reading of all selected documents to identify recurrent themes. Recent methodological guidance suggests that theme identification is central to narrative review design because it allows the researcher to organise diverse findings into coherent conceptual categories (White & Marsh, 2020; still valid). During this stage, four major themes consistently appeared across the literature: informal payment systems, public perceptions of corruption, institutional weaknesses that enable bribery, and the erosion of citizen trust in the state. These themes were then used as analytical anchors for interpreting the "cold drink" phenomenon.

The second stage involved synthesising the literature through interpretive comparison. This step required examining how different authors conceptualise everyday corruption, how their findings align or diverge, and how these insights contribute to an understanding of normalised gratuity. According to Ndlovu and Chikozho (2023), interpretive comparison allows researchers to identify underlying assumptions and institutional patterns that may not be immediately visible when reviewing sources individually. This approach helped clarify how euphemistic language, frontline discretion, organisational culture, and weak enforcement work together to sustain routine bribery.

The final analytic step involved developing a conceptual explanation that integrates behavioural and institutional dimensions. This step was guided by the recognition that corruption is not a singular phenomenon but an interaction of opportunity structures, social norms, and organisational conditions. As Ngoma and Mayekiso (2022) note, conceptual synthesis is essential for producing actionable insights in governance research because it demonstrates how diverse elements combine to shape public sector behaviour. Overall, this methodological approach is designed to produce an interpretive and conceptual understanding of the "cold drink" economy rather than a statistical or predictive model. The aim is to clarify the social and institutional conditions that allow routine bribery to persist and to contribute to the scholarly and policy debates on how everyday corruption undermines public accountability and citizen trust.

RESULTS

The literature synthesis reveals four deeply interconnected themes that explain how the "cold drink" or "something small" economy operates, why it persists, and who it harms. These themes are: (1) euphemistic framing and its normalising effect; (2) the role of weak oversight and frontline discretion; (3) erosion of citizen trust; and (4) disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups. Each theme is grounded in recent empirical and policy data, demonstrating both behavioural and structural dynamics.

Euphemistic Framing Reduces the Perceived Seriousness of Corruption

One of the most striking findings is how linguistic framing, using euphemisms, softens the moral gravity of bribery. Terms like "cold drink," or "something small" do not just sugarcoat corrupt exchanges; they render them almost socially acceptable. In South Africa's public service, these phrases act as a shield, for both the frontline official soliciting the payment and the citizen handing it over, allowing both parties to rationalise the transaction as benign, customary, or even reciprocal assistance (Munyai, 2024). This tacit linguistic code allows both officials and citizens to deny that they are participating in wrongdoing. The informal language contributes to a shared social understanding: such payments are not labeled "bribes" in the everyday conversation, but rather "gratuities" or tokens of thanks. This framing helps preserve a facade of legitimacy, as neither side fully confronts the legal or ethical implications. Furthermore, this euphemistic normalisation reduces moral resistance. When bribes are described in innocuous terms, participants may convince themselves (and others) that they're simply showing appreciation or facilitating smoother service. These symbolic acts mask the systemic injustice underlying the transaction. The National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council report characterises frontline corruption as "informal payments, favours, or coercion" solicited during routine service encounters, often camouflaged by language that makes them seem harmless (National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council, 2025). Such framing has significant implications: by downplaying the severity of corruption, euphemistic language weakens both public outrage and institutional response. Because these transactions are socially coded as "normal," anti-corruption initiatives may fail to address them with the same urgency as grand corruption. As one survey report notes, many people perceive corruption in their daily lives as part of how the system works, not as a violation that can (or should) be reported or punished (HSRC, 2025). In short, euphemistic framing entrenches what might otherwise be seen as ethical red flags into cultural norms, making bribery not just a transactional act, but a socially embedded behaviour.

Weak Oversight and Frontline Discretion Fuel Normalised Gratuity

A second major finding is that high levels of discretion among frontline officials, coupled with inadequate supervision, create fertile ground for routine bribery. Licensing offices, traffic departments, municipal inspections, and other frontline services are frequently identified in surveys as hotspots for corrupt solicitation (News24, 2023). Traffic officers, in particular, are among the most commonly cited perpetrators (News24, 2023; GPSJS, 2022/23). Statistics South Africa's Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey (GPSJS) for 2022/23 revealed that, although fewer than 5% of individuals reported paying a bribe overall, the sectors of traffic enforcement and policing remain among the most problematic. The survey noted that traffic officials are "the government service most frequently linked to corruption" (Stats SA, 2023). These findings suggest that the problem is not isolated but systematically located in spaces where officials have substantial discretionary power and where citizens are particularly vulnerable to opportunistic exploitation. The National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council's recent report also underscores how this discretion is abused. According to the report, frontline corruption is "systemic in nature," precisely because officials at points of citizen-state contact demand informal payments in exchange for services that should be provided as a matter of right (National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council, 2025). The report argues that these small-scale demands contribute to a transactional relationship with the state, effectively reshaping citizens' expectations: they come to see public services not as rights, but as commodities accessible through personal payment. Compounding the problem is weak institutional capacity for oversight. Multiple sources reveal that mechanisms for detecting and disciplining petty corruption are insufficiently robust. In many instances, there is a gap between policy and enforcement. Even when complaints reach the relevant bodies, citizens often doubt that any action will follow. According to recent HSRC social-attitudes data, a large proportion of the public believes that reporting corruption will not necessarily lead to accountability, due to perceived inefficacy in whistle-blower protections and a lack of consequences (HSRC, 2025; Presidency / GIZ, 2024). In practice, this institutional weakness manifests in a low risk of detection and minimal disciplinary action. Frontline officials may operate in environments with limited managerial supervision, few performance checks, and unclear reporting channels that discourage whistle-blowing. These structural deficiencies create an environment of impunity in which bribery, even if deemed "small," becomes routine. Through repeated requests under the guise of "cold drink" or "something small," a pattern of normalized gratuity takes root.

The Practice Erodes Citizen Trust

Third, the literature reveals that everyday bribery significantly undermines citizen trust in public institutions. When citizens repeatedly encounter corrupt officials, especially in basic service encounters, they begin to internalize the view that fairness and accountability are not guaranteed. This erosion of trust is profound and multifaceted. Findings from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Social Attitudes Survey show that a majority of citizens perceive corruption as widespread, particularly in public institutions where services are most immediate (HSRC, 2025). Reporting structures are seen as fragile; many believe that even when they report corrupt behaviour, authorities will not act meaningfully. Indeed, nearly nine in ten people cite weak enforcement, lack of punishment, or corrupt reporting channels as reasons why they do not report (Presidency / GIZ, 2024). These perceptions feed into a broader legitimacy crisis. For many citizens, paying a "cold drink" constitutes not only a financial loss but a symbolic surrender of their rights. They come to view public services less as entitlements and more as transactional opportunities. This perception aligns with Afrobarometer data, which finds that over 70% of South Africans believe ordinary people risk retaliation if they report corruption, and only about one-quarter think the government will actually act on reports (Afrobarometer, 2024). Corruption in policing, especially from traffic officials, compounds this trust deficit. Reports suggest that traffic corruption is so common that citizens regard it as a routine risk rather than an aberration (News24, 2023). Criminologists have noted that community policing structures are under strain, as corruption within the police service weakens the bond between civilians and law enforcement. According to Professor Kholofelo Rakubu, many Community Policing Forums feel disempowered: trust has fractured so badly that local safety structures struggle to operate meaningfully (IOL, 2025). This breakdown of trust has tangible consequences. When citizens lack confidence that the system works for them, they may disengage from formal processes, decline to report wrongdoing, avoid interacting with state institutions, or instead rely on parallel mechanisms (such as informal networks or private services). The very foundation of democratic accountability is undermined when citizens no longer believe in the fairness, responsiveness, or integrity of their public institutions.

Vulnerable Groups Are Disproportionately Affected

The fourth and perhaps most sobering finding is that the "cold drink" or "something small" economy disproportionately harms the most vulnerable in society. Low-income and marginalized citizens, those who rely on public services for basic needs, are often the ones

most exposed to petty corruption. Corruption Watch's public opinion data reveal that bribe-solicitation discriminates against those who cannot afford payments, reducing service quality and even limiting access (Corruption Watch, 2025). When bribes become baked into the service process, people without financial means may be delayed, underserved, or denied critical assistance. Those who pay, meanwhile, experience an additional burden: the informal payment is not a one-off but part of a systemic expectation that drains resources from those who can least afford it. Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer for Africa supports this finding: across many African countries, including South Africa, the poorest citizens are more likely to pay bribes than wealthier counterparts (Transparency International, 2022). In some contexts, the poor pay bribes at rates more than double those of the affluent, demonstrating that corruption exacerbates existing inequalities. Moreover, marginalized groups often lack effective recourse. The National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council's report spells this out clearly: citizens who cannot afford gratification are less likely to push back, less likely to report, and less likely to trust that their complaints will be taken seriously (National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council, 2025). This further entrenches exclusion, as the system of participation and access becomes skewed in favour of those who can pay. Additionally, research indicates that internalisation of corruption as a "normal" cost of dealing with the state contributes to a vicious cycle. The HSRC's behaviour-change research notes that many citizens cite "corruption is just normal, everyone does it" when explaining why they do not report (Presidency / GIZ, 2024). For them, complaining is futile because the system itself appears to be complicit, and reporting may even carry risk. In policing, the consequences are especially stark for communities that already experience high vulnerability. Corruption insiders argue that citizens in low-income neighbourhoods are more exposed to demands for bribes, extortion, and exploitation because they often lack the social capital or institutional knowledge to navigate bureaucratic avenues or community-policing structures (IOL, 2025). Criminologists such as Rakubu note that corruption's ripple effect on community trust undermines communal safety and cohesion, as residents grow cynical about policing and state protection (IOL, 2025).

Interconnections and Systemic Patterns

These four findings, euphemistic framing, weak oversight, erosion of trust, and disproportionate harm to vulnerable groups, do not stand in isolation. Rather, they are deeply interwoven and mutually reinforcing. First, the use of euphemistic language not only normalises bribery but makes it socially invisible. This invisibility weakens both public

resistance and institutional condemnation, thus reducing the urgency of oversight. When bribery is framed as ordinary gratitude, less pressure exists to strengthen enforcement mechanisms or to treat such behaviour as corruption. Second, weak oversight amplifies the behaviour. When frontline officials know their actions are unlikely to be punished, they can continue soliciting "cold drinks" with little fear. Citizens, in turn, may feel compelled to pay simply to avoid delay or denial, reinforcing the transactional dynamic. Third, the erosion of trust further entrenches the practice. Citizens who perceive corruption as normative and unpunishable are less likely to report or resist, perpetuating a climate of silent acceptance. This is not a passive resignation, but a survival strategy: many believe acting against corrupt behaviour will produce no result, or worse, invite retaliation (Afrobarometer, 2024; Presidency / GIZ, 2024). Fourth, the unequal impact on vulnerable groups intensifies the damage. Those who are already disadvantaged by poverty or marginalisation are less able to refuse or challenge "cold drink" demands. They also have fewer resources to navigate formal complaint structures, which may be perceived as corrupt or ineffective. This unequal burden deepens societal inequities and erodes the legitimacy of the public service.

Summary of Key Patterns

To summarise, the narrative literature review reveals that:

- *Normalization Through Language*: The widespread use of seemingly innocuous terms like "cold drink" works to mask corruption in plain sight, softening its moral and legal implications.

- *Structural Opportunity*: High-discretion frontline roles, especially in policing and licensing, combined with weak supervision, create regular opportunities for low-level bribe solicitation.

- *Trust Deficit*: Repeated interactions with corrupt officials erode citizen confidence in public institutions, making corruption appear inevitable and reporting pointless.

- *Disproportionate Harm*: Poor, marginalized, and service-reliant citizens suffer the most, both financially and psychologically, from systems that treat access as transactional rather than a right.

The results underscore how pervasive and entrenched petty corruption has become in South Africa's public service. While these "cold drink" payments may appear small individually, their cumulative effect is profound: they reshape the relationship between citizens and the state, undermine equal access to services, and corrode institutional legitimacy. Understanding

these dynamics is critical for any meaningful policy reform or anti-corruption intervention, because addressing only high-level scandals will not remedy the everyday injustices experienced by ordinary people.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study resonate strongly with broader scholarship on everyday corruption. Rather than being exceptional or peripheral, petty bribery, exemplified by the "cold drink" phenomenon, is deeply embedded within South Africa's public service in ways that reflect institutional fragility and cultural normalisation. Though the amounts exchanged may be modest, the cumulative impact on governance, social equity, and citizen trust is profound.

Everyday Corruption as a Structural and Cultural Problem

One of the most important implications of the findings is that normalised gratuity is not simply a matter of individual greed or moral lapse. Rather, it reflects systemic and institutional weakness. Officials working in high-discretion roles (traffic, licensing, inspections) exploit structural opportunity gaps, while the broader public accepts or tolerates the behaviour because of its normalcy. This insight aligns with recent work by Munyai (2024), who argues that petty bribery in South Africa has become a way of life, deeply entwined with how public services operate and how citizens expect to navigate them. The linguistic framing of corrupt requests as "something small" or "a token of thanks" helps legitimate these exchanges in everyday social and bureaucratic contexts. This normalization is facilitated through euphemistic language that shields both paying citizens and soliciting officials from moral scrutiny. The discourse around a "cold drink" or "something small" functions as a social lubricant, concealing the illegality of the transaction and softening its moral consequences. In this way, euphemistic framing not only reduces the perceived seriousness of the act, but also obscures accountability. Language becomes part of the informal institutional culture, making bribery feel less like a violation and more like an accepted courtesy (Munyai, 2024). These subtle linguistic cues help maintain the status quo by rendering corruption invisible and socially acceptable. In effect, citizens are being socialized into a system where refusal may carry reputational or practical costs: delayed service, scrutiny, or even punitive treatment. Such power dynamics are reinforced by the fact that these are not one-off transactions, but repeated patterns, embedded in everyday bureaucratic practices.

Discretion, Weak Oversight, and the Impunity Gap

The second major insight relates to the structural opportunity for corruption. High-discretion roles in public service are especially vulnerable. Traffic officials, licensing clerks, municipal inspectors, and other frontline staff often operate with significant autonomy, frequently without close managerial oversight. These are precisely the conditions described in the results: weak supervision, low enforcement, and ambiguous reporting channels allow bribery demands to persist (ISS Africa, 2025). This is consistent with the literature showing that frontline discretion, when unchecked, facilitates the normalization of informal payments. Even when internal rules exist, they are frequently undermined by weak institutional capacity. Disciplinary systems seldom reach down to everyday bribery, and many citizens doubt that honest reporting will lead to meaningful consequences. Recent data from the HSRC-GIZ Social Norms & Behaviour Change Report (2024) highlight that while a growing share of voters say they may report corruption, many remain sceptical about the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms (HSRC / Presidency, 2024). This scepticism contributes to a cycle of impunity: if individuals believe that reporting will not change anything, they will be less likely to take that risk. Compounding the problem, the institutional architecture to detect, investigate, and sanction petty corruption remains under-resourced. Even though South Africa has legal frameworks to address corruption, enforcing these in everyday purchase-power settings has proven difficult. Meanwhile, corruption complaints are often low priority in frontline disciplinary processes, making systemic change elusive (BusinessDay, 2025). The gap between formal rules and actual enforcement creates a permissive environment in which "cold drink" payments persist as a regular feature of public service delivery.

Erosion of Citizen Trust and Legitimacy

Perhaps most significantly, the "cold drink" or "something small" economy erodes citizen trust in public institutions. Trust is not just a normative value; it is foundational for effective governance. When citizens regularly face bribery demands simply to access public services, confidence in state institutions declines. Surveys reflect that pervasive reality: according to Afrobarometer (2024), over 80% of South Africans believe corruption has increased, and nearly three-quarters fear retaliation if they report wrongdoing (Afrobarometer, 2024). Only a minority believe the government will act on reports. This belief undermines faith in the possibility of accountability. The erosion of trust is particularly acute in policing. According to criminologists like Professor Kholofelo Rakubu, corruption within the South African Police Service (SAPS) has become deeply normalised: officers soliciting bribes are no longer

shocking, but expected (IOL, 2025). This has profound consequences for community policing structures such as Community Policing Forums (CPFs), which struggle to function effectively when citizens believe the system is corrupt. Rakubu warns of a vicious cycle: corruption erodes trust, which weakens civilian cooperation, which in turn undermines community-driven crime prevention (ThePost/IOL, 2025). When trust breaks down, citizens disengage. Reporting becomes a risky gamble, participation in local governance wanes, and confidence in service delivery weakens. It also makes state legitimacy fragile: if people believe the system is rigged, they may resort to alternative mechanisms, non-state actors, informal networks, or even bypassing official procedures, to secure services. Over time, this erodes social cohesion and undermines democratic accountability.

Unequal Burden on the Vulnerable

One of the most troubling dimensions of the "cold drink" economy is its disproportionate impact on vulnerable, low-income, or marginalized citizens. For many, public services are a lifeline; there is no financial buffer to absorb the cost of repeated small payments. Research by Corruption Watch confirms that poverty and reliance on public services make citizens more vulnerable to bribery demands (BusinessLive, 2025). When bribery is normalized, those who cannot afford to "play along" may face delays, worse treatment, or outright exclusion. This unequal burden perpetuates social and economic inequality. While middle- and high-income citizens may be able to navigate or resist corrupt demands, the poor have fewer options. For them, corruption is not just an extra cost, it is a barrier to accessing fundamental rights. When frontline corruption becomes part of routine, structural exclusion deepens: those already disadvantaged face further marginalization because they cannot afford the side payment that unlocks access. Not only do the poor pay more, but they are also less likely to report. Research shows that marginalized communities often lack social capital, knowledge of complaint mechanisms, or faith in enforcement (HSRC / Presidency, 2024). For many, complaining feels risky, futile, or both. As Rakubu (2025) points out, whistleblowers in these environments face real retaliation risk, and institutional protections are perceived as inconsistent or ineffective (ThePost/IOL, 2025). Without trusted channels for redress, these citizens remain trapped in a system that extracts informal payments without delivering justice.

Collective Action Dilemmas and Social Norms

The persistence of the "cold drink" or "something small" practice is also tied to what social psychologists call a collective action problem. People might individually view bribery as wrong, but they often believe (incorrectly) that everyone else accepts it. This misperception, known as pluralistic ignorance, can inhibit collective resistance (Data & Policy, 2023). In other words, even if large numbers of citizens are uneasy about bribery, they may not act because they think their peers condone it or rely on it. This dynamic helps explain why, despite widespread recognition of corruption's harm, resistance remains limited. Moreover, the normalization of bribery is supported by social norms that make refusal difficult. When a frontline official suggests a small payment, it is often framed as customary or expected, not illicit. In such settings, citizens who refuse may fear being punished, delayed, or insulted. The fact that so many people believe retaliation is likely if they report (Afrobarometer, 2024) only reinforces the risk. This creates a self-reinforcing norm: bribery continues because people think it's inevitable, and they think it's inevitable because others do it.

Implications for Public Administration and Reform

These findings suggest that simplistic, top-down anti-corruption strategies will not be sufficient. Addressing the "cold drink" economy requires more than enforcing criminal law or tightening regulations: it necessitates cultural and behavioural change, institutional redesign, and meaningful citizen engagement.

First, public institutions must strengthen frontline oversight. This means improving supervision, increasing transparency, and closing gaps in disciplinary systems. But it also means designing accountability mechanisms that are accessible and trusted. Anonymous reporting systems, independent complaint channels, and support for whistleblowers can help shift power dynamics. For instance, structural reform should consider a dedicated whistleblower protection mechanism with real, enforceable protections, not just symbolic legal provisions (ThePost/IOL, 2025).

Second, institutions need to tackle the linguistic and cultural dimension of bribery. Anti-corruption training for frontline staff should go beyond rules and penalties: it must address the language of corruption, challenge the acceptability of euphemisms, and promote ethical interaction norms. Public campaigns must also focus on changing social norms: if society as a whole can reject the framing of gratuity-as-bribe, the moral weight of "cold drink" requests may increase, making them less socially palatable.

Third, building community trust is critical. Rebuilding legitimacy requires not only enforcement but also participatory governance. Community policing forums, neighbourhood watch, and civil society partnerships can help restore the relationship between citizens and institutions. But such efforts will only succeed if corruption inside those institutions, including petty bribery, is addressed meaningfully. Otherwise, trust initiatives may feel hollow.

Fourth, protecting and empowering citizens, especially the most vulnerable, must be central. This includes strengthening legal and institutional recourse, but also offering education about rights, procedures, and whistleblower protections. It may also require subsidizing or simplifying processes so that access does not depend on informal payments. When public services are made more transparent, predictable, and accessible, the reliance on gratuity may diminish.

Finally, complementing these interventions, there should be a focus on social norms and collective behaviour change. Anti-corruption strategies must acknowledge that bribery is not merely a legal violation but a social practice. Campaigns informed by behavioural science, leveraging social norm theory, collective action design, and community engagement, can help shift expectations and empower citizens to challenge petty corruption together.

Directions for Future Research

Given the deeply relational nature of "cold drink" or "something small" corruption, future research should go beyond surveys and policy reports. Ethnographic, qualitative, and participatory methods are vital. We need more field-based studies that listen to both citizens and frontline officials: to understand how individuals rationalize the exchanges, how they experience pressure or resistance, and how they internalise or contest informal norms. Longitudinal research would also be valuable. How do interpersonal relationships between officials and citizens evolve over time? Does repeated interaction entrench expectations of bribery? Are there moments when resistance emerges, and under what conditions? Tracking these dynamics could illuminate pathways for intervention. Moreover, experimental designs informed by behavioural science could test the impact of interventions: for example, whether changing the way officials ask for "something small," or rephrasing dialogue, reduces demand; or whether community-based norm interventions shift behaviour. Comparative research across different regions, socio-economic contexts, and service sectors (e.g., policing, licensing, health) could also deepen understanding of where and why the "cold drink"

economy is most entrenched. Finally, connecting this everyday corruption to macro-level governance outcomes is important. Researchers should explore how petty bribery interacts with larger corruption scandals, service delivery failures, and political accountability. By linking micro-level practices to broader institutional health, we can better assess both the cost and the potential leverage points for reform.

CONCLUSION OF DISCUSSION

In conclusion, the "cold drink" economy is not a trivial phenomenon; it is a structural, cultural, and relational challenge that undermines public governance in everyday life. Its persistence reflects not only individual wrongdoing, but systemic failures: the institutional capacity to oversee, the social norms that normalize, and the trust deficit that discourages resistance. Addressing it requires holistic reform, combining enforcement, cultural change, community engagement, and structural redesign. If anti-corruption efforts fail to account for these dimensions, they risk reinforcing patterns of exclusion and distrust. But if they succeed, there is an opportunity to reclaim public services as sites of dignity, equity, and trust, rather than transactional arenas where power is silently exchanged for a "cold drink" or "something small."

CONCLUSION

Everyday corruption in the form of normalised gratuity remains one of the most persistent and complex barriers to building an accountable and trusted public service in South Africa. The practice commonly referred to as a "cold drink" or "something small" is more than a casual expression; it reflects a deeply entrenched social and institutional system that blurs the boundaries between legitimate service delivery and illicit personal gain. Although these exchanges appear minor on the surface, their cumulative effect is profound. They weaken public institutions, entrench inequality, distort service delivery, and gradually erode the ethical foundations on which democratic governance depends. At the heart of this issue is the subtlety with which such practices are embedded in everyday interactions. The language itself plays a powerful role. By using euphemisms rather than explicit references to bribery, officials and citizens jointly participate in a form of moral distancing. This softens the psychological discomfort that would otherwise accompany an unethical or illegal act. It also allows bribery to be woven into the social fabric of service delivery without triggering formal accountability mechanisms. When a bribe is described as a "cold drink" or "something small", it is reframed as a gesture of appreciation rather than a corrupt exchange. Over time,

such linguistic framing shifts norms and expectations, producing a culture in which the abnormal becomes ordinary and the illicit becomes tolerated.

Institutional weaknesses further deepen this normalisation. Public servants working in high-discretion environments often face limited oversight, inconsistent supervision, and ambiguous reporting pathways. In such conditions, informal practices thrive because they are rarely challenged in meaningful ways. Frontline officials learn that soliciting small payments is unlikely to attract disciplinary action, while citizens conclude that paying a gratuity is the fastest or safest way to navigate bureaucratic processes. These dynamics create a self-reinforcing cycle. The more common the practice becomes, the more legitimate it appears. The more legitimate it appears, the harder it becomes for individuals to resist or report it. The result is a governance environment where corruption is not merely an aberration but a routine feature of administrative life. This reality has serious implications for public trust. Trust in government is not primarily shaped by high-level political rhetoric or national policy announcements; it is shaped by citizens' day-to-day encounters with the state. When those encounters repeatedly involve subtle or explicit requests for gratuity, citizens begin to internalise a belief that fairness cannot be expected, that public resources are selectively accessible, and that honesty rarely pays off. For many South Africans, especially those who rely heavily on public services and lack alternative channels of access, such interactions reinforce a sense of exclusion and powerlessness. They reveal a public service that is not responsive to rights but to informal payments, personal connections, and unspoken expectations.

The burden of this system is not shared equally. Low-income individuals and communities experience its effects most severely. They often cannot afford the added cost of bribes, yet they are the ones most dependent on public health care, licensing services, education systems, and social protection programmes. When public services are informally monetised, those without financial means are pushed to the margins. They may experience delays, humiliation, or outright denial of service. Over time, this deepens existing socio-economic divides and undermines the principle of equitable access that sits at the core of public administration in a democratic state. For vulnerable citizens, everyday corruption is not a minor inconvenience; it is a barrier that threatens their dignity and wellbeing. Addressing this phenomenon requires more than regulatory tightening or periodic anti-corruption campaigns. The problem is not merely technical. It is behavioural, cultural, and relational. Effective reform must therefore

engage with these deeper layers. Behaviour-centred interventions should focus on shifting the norms that give meaning and legitimacy to gratuity. This includes challenging the euphemistic language that renders corruption harmless, strengthening ethical training for frontline officials, and promoting positive role modelling within public service teams. Institutional reforms are also necessary. Oversight structures must be strengthened in ways that improve accountability without creating fear-based environments that damage morale. Reporting systems should be simplified, made anonymous, and widely publicised so that citizens and honest officials feel safe raising concerns. Additionally, leadership commitment is essential. Officials look to their supervisors and managers for cues about expected behaviour. When leaders demonstrate integrity, recognise ethical performance, and promptly address misconduct, cultures can shift.

Citizen engagement is another critical dimension. A population that feels powerless cannot meaningfully challenge corruption. Strategies that empower citizens, such as public education on service standards, community-based monitoring initiatives, and participatory forums, can help create shared responsibility for ethical governance. When citizens understand their rights, feel supported in asserting them, and trust that reporting mechanisms are credible, the social acceptance of informal payments may begin to weaken. Despite these insights, many questions remain. The motivations behind gratuity, for both officials and citizens, are complex and deeply rooted in social, economic, and institutional realities. Future research should explore these motivations in greater depth, drawing on lived experiences, ethnographic insights, and qualitative narratives that capture the nuances of everyday encounters. Understanding how individuals justify or resist participation in the "cold drink" economy will be essential for designing interventions that are not only effective but also socially grounded and culturally sensitive.

In conclusion, the normalisation of gratuity in South Africa's public service is a pervasive challenge that weakens governance from within. Its subtlety makes it difficult to detect, its cultural acceptance makes it difficult to confront, and its impact makes it impossible to ignore. If left unchecked, it will continue to erode institutional credibility, widen inequality, and compromise the public's relationship with the state. Yet the very everyday nature of this problem also presents an opportunity. By focusing on behaviour, culture, and relationships, in addition to systems and rules, South Africa can begin to reclaim the integrity of public service interactions. Building citizen trust, strengthening institutions, and restoring fairness

will require consistent effort, but it is achievable if both state and society commit to understanding and transforming the patterns that sustain the "cold drink" economy.

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