Journal of Ecohumanism
2024
Volume: 3, No: 8, pp. 5681 – 5707
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5172

# A Qualitative Analysis of the Socio-cultural Barriers to Intra-African Trade: Evidence from Nigerian Exporters

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## Abstract

*This study qualitatively analyzed the sociocultural barriers to intra-African trade, focusing on challenges faced by African businesses in cross-border markets, their impacts, and mitigation strategies. An exploratory case study design was adopted, using purposive and snowball sampling to select participants. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 10 members of the Association of Nigerian Exporters (ANE). Reflexivity and participant validation ensured research credibility, while Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework guided data analysis, with thematic maps aiding interpretation. The findings identified five key sociocultural barriers substantially inhibiting intra-African trade: cultural complexity, corruption and bureaucratic obstacles, trust gaps, unhealthy rivalries, and business network challenges. These barriers contribute to miscommunication, failed negotiations, weakened consumer demand, failed partnerships, and increased operational costs for intra-African trade. These findings underscored that sociocultural factors play a pivotal role in shaping the success or failure of intra-African trade, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to address these barriers. In particular, they emphasized that cultural complexity hampers communication and negotiations, while corruption and bureaucratic obstacles erode trust and create inefficiencies. Trust gaps weaken partnerships, unhealthy rivalries hinder collaboration, and business network challenges limit market access and increase operational costs. Tackling these issues is crucial for improving trade efficiency and fostering stronger economic integration across the African continent.*


**Keywords:** *Intra-African Trade, Trade Barriers, Trade Liberalization, Socio-cultural Factors, Non-Tariff Barriers, Exporting.*

## Introduction

The economic, political, social and technological advantages of intra-African trade to the African continent cannot be overemphasized. This is because intra-African trade encompasses the exchange of goods and services between and among African countries, which promotes economic integration and cooperation within the continent (Boungou et al., 2024). It enhances economic growth by fostering a larger, more diverse market for African goods and services, which in turn stimulates industrialization and job creation across the continent (Turkson et al., 2023). This comprehensive integration contributes to a more resilient and self-sufficient continent, mitigating reliance on external markets and enhancing overall prosperity (Tsyokor & Madara, 2022). As a result of this recognition, several national, and regional initiatives have been implemented in an effort to reinforce intra-African trade. Some of these major initiatives include the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) (Mude, 2020). The overarching aim of these regional initiatives is to enhance economic integration by reducing trade barriers, promoting intra-regional investment, and fostering a more competitive and cohesive African market (Oyebamiji, 2024). By doing so, these efforts seek to boost economic growth, create jobs, and increase the overall prosperity of the African continent. However, despite these efforts, the volume of trade between and among African countries has consistently declined

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for decades, compared to trade with other continents like Europe, the Americas and Asia (Garba & Alexander, 2023; Longo & Sekkat, 2001; Onwuka & Udegbunam, 2019).

As of 2024, the largest trading partners for some of the largest African economies, including Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Algeria, Ethiopia, Morocco, Kenya, Angola and Ghana have been China, India, European Union, United Kingdom, United States of America, France, Netherlands, Spain, Turkey, Belgium, Italy, among other non-African countries (Oyebamiji, 2024). To put it in perspective, Nairametrics reports that in 2023, Nigeria's largest trading partner was China with a total trade value of N7.49 trillion (Udi, 2024). In the that same year, the Netherlands emerged as Nigeria's second largest trade partner, with a total trade value of N6.32 trillion of which N4.51 trillion were exported from Nigeria and N1.805 trillion in imported goods. Also, recent statistics released by the South African Revenue Service (SARS) for the first five months of 2024 revealed that the country's largest trade partners are Asia (R381.72 billion) and Europe (R219.25 billion) and the United States (R61.49 billion) (Thorne, 2024). This implies that more and more, African countries are trading less with themselves and more with the West; which holds broader debilitating economic implications for the entire African Continent. The factors behind this economic imbalance have been identified to include political, economic, legal, technological, institutional and socio-cultural barriers (Tsyokor & Madara, 2022; Ogbodo, 2024; Mude, 2020; Pato, 2018). The focus of this study was however on the socio-cultural barriers because this phenomenon has not yet received substantial research coverage, even though it continues to hamper trade between and among African countries. As such, this study sought to explore the major sociocultural challenges encountered by African businesses involved in intra-African trade. This was necessary in order to provide an in-depth exploration of the impacts of these sociocultural factors on intra-African trade with a view to suggesting effective strategies for mitigating them.

*Research Rationale*

The low volume of intra-African trade undermines the economies of African countries by increasing their dependence on external markets, thereby limiting the potential for regional economic integration and growth (Musara & Maredza, 2022). This over-dependence results in a significant outflow of wealth from the continent, as African countries primarily engage in trade with non-African partners like China, the Netherlands, and the United States, as evidenced by Nigeria and South Africa's recent trade patterns. Consequently, the Continent loses opportunities for value addition within its own borders, which could stimulate industrialization, create jobs, and reduce poverty. Moreover, the lack of robust intra-African trade networks hampers the Continent's ability to build resilient economies that can withstand global economic shocks, as African markets remain fragmented and vulnerable to external influences (Emeka, 2020). This scenario also inhibits the development of a unified African market, as envisioned by initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which aims to enhance economic cooperation and reduce reliance on non-African markets. In the long run, the continued marginalization of intra-African trade could exacerbate socio-economic inequalities, stall development, and undermine the Continent's collective bargaining power on the global stage (Kere & Zongo, 2023).

Against this backdrop, several scholarly studies have been conducted to identify and mitigate the major factors impeding the growth of intra-African trade in order to accelerate economic integration for African countries. However, it has been observed that most of these studies (see Table 1) were limited to institutional, political, economic, technological, and legal barriers. Whereas, the nascent yet profoundly potent socio-cultural factors such as lack of trust, xenophobia, intra-African rivalries, post-colonial legacies, and others remain largely unexplored, even though they continue to inhibit intra-African trade. For instance, distrust between Nigeria and South Africa, two of the continent's largest economies, has frequently led to diplomatic spats and economic disruptions, which discourage cross-border trade between them (Mutanda, 2022). Also, in South Africa, periodic outbreaks of xenophobic violence against foreign nationals, particularly those from other African countries, have had a chilling effect on intra-African trade. These attacks not only endanger lives but also disrupt the flow of goods and services, as businesses from affected countries may choose to limit their engagement with South Africa due to safety concerns (Kpoghul et al., 2023). Hence, there is a substantial need for studies aimed at uncovering the full spectrum of socio-cultural factors militating against intra-African trade with a view to mitigating them. This study was therefore carried out to investigate the socio-cultural barriers to intra-African trade from the perspectives of exporters in Nigeria with the following research questions:

What are the major socio-cultural challenges encountered by African businesses involved in intra-African trade?

What are the impacts of socio-cultural challenges on intra-African trade?

## Literature Review

*Intra-African trade: Status Quo Review*

Intra-African trade promotes economic integration but remains dominated by agricultural commodities like maize, cassava, cocoa, and tea (Boungou et al., 2024; Ogbodo, 2024). This reflects Africa's comparative advantage in agriculture and underdeveloped manufacturing sectors (Ouma et al., 2016). Despite the African Continental Free Trade Area's establishment, intra-African trade has decreased, accounting for only 15% of Africa's total trade in 2022, down from 21% in 2015 (UNECA, 2024). Intra-African exports and imports also declined between 2021 and 2022, and the total trade value fell by 5% over five years (UNECA, 2024; Tralac, 2023). These statistics underscore the continued dominance of Africa's trade relationships with external partners such as Europe, Asia, and the Americas, compared to the relatively modest trade volumes between African countries themselves. In particular, China continues to enjoy the largest share of trade with African countries compared to other external partners, especially in the areas of finance, technology, and energy (Obeng-Odoom, 2024). Between 2020 and 2023, China-Africa trade volumes saw substantial growth despite global disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the total trade between China and Africa was valued at approximately $176 billion, but it rebounded and grew to $262 billion by 2023 (Boston University Global Development Policy Center and African Economic Research Consortium, 2024). This growth is driven by China's significant imports of African raw materials, particularly from countries like Angola, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which export commodities such as oil, copper, and iron ore. In return, China exports mainly manufactured goods, including telecommunications equipment and textiles, to African nations (Boston University Global Development Policy Center and African Economic Research Consortium, 2024). In comparison to Western countries, China's trade with Africa has been more dynamic. For example, in 2022, the total trade volume between China and Africa reached $257.67 billion, surpassing that of traditional Western partners such as the United States and the European Union (China Africa Research Initiative, 2024).

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**Fig. 1. Infographic Showing the Growing Dominance of China in African Trade**

Source: Statista (2023)

*Theoretical Framework*

The Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), developed by Arnould and Thompson (2005), underpins this study. CCT explores the socio-cultural and experiential dimensions of consumption, emphasising that consumer behaviour extends beyond individual choices to encompass cultural meanings, social habits, and environmental influences. As a framework, it has demonstrated empirical relevance across diverse studies. Thompson and Üstüner (2015) applied CCT to examine Turkish women's engagement with global beauty standards. Their findings revealed how these women use beauty products and practices to navigate traditional cultural norms and modern consumer culture, supporting CCT's premise of consumption as a tool for identity construction. Similarly, Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) investigated the U.S. local food movement, highlighting how consumers sought not only healthier food but also a cultural resistance against industrial food systems, aligning with CCT's focus on marketplace cultures. Additionally, Askegaard et al. (2010) explored cultural capital in emerging markets, analyzing Kazakhstani consumers' use of luxury goods to negotiate social status within a transforming landscape. These studies demonstrate CCT's applicability in understanding how consumption reflects and shapes personal and societal identities through cultural and social contexts.

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In the context of the present study, CCT provides a detailed framework for understanding the complex interplay between culture, consumption, and societal norms. In the context of analyzing socio-cultural barriers to intra-African trade, CCT is substantially relevant as it allows researchers to delve into the cultural dimensions that influence business practices and consumer behaviours across different African nations. By exploring the major socio-cultural challenges faced by African businesses, such as differing cultural values, consumer preferences, and social norms, CCT helps in identifying how these cultural factors can either facilitate or hinder intra-Africa trade activities. This theoretical lens enables a comprehensive examination of how cultural identities, rituals, and symbolic meanings shape the way businesses operate and interact within diverse African markets, thereby addressing the first and second objectives of the study. Furthermore, CCT offers valuable insights into the strategies that African businesses can adopt to mitigate socio-cultural barriers. By understanding the underlying cultural dynamics, businesses can develop culturally informed strategies that resonate with local markets and bridge cultural gaps between trading partners. For instance, CCT can inform approaches to marketing, negotiation, and relationship-building that are culturally sensitive and adaptive to the specific contexts of different African regions. This theoretical perspective supports the third objective of the study by providing a foundation for developing effective strategies that leverage cultural understanding to enhance intra-African trade. Overall, CCT enriches the research by offering a comprehensive approach to analyzing and addressing the socio-cultural factors that impact intra-African trade, thereby fostering more effective and sustainable business practices across the continent.

*Review of Current Research*

A substantial number of studies have been carried out to identify and explore the barriers to intra-African trade. This unit is dedicated to reviewing such relevant studies to identify the available insights in literature. TABLE 1 summarizes the relevant articles reviewed as well as the gaps identified in them.

**Table 1. Summary of Empirical Studies Reviewed**

| SN | Authors/year | Purpose of paper | Theoretical framework | Methodology | Findings | Research gap |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Oyebamiji (2024) | To investigate the obstacles to intra-African trade, such as colonial-era cash crop legacies, shipping constraints, and transportation challenges, and propose strategies to overcome them | None | Narrative literature review methodology relying on a review of relevant articles | The study found that the numerous trade agreements in Africa have created a complex web of overlapping regulations and trade arrangements, making trade facilitation more challenging and creating uncertainty for businesses operating within the region. | Scope of the study is restricted to institutional factors such as the political legacy of colonialism, shipping constraints, and transportation challenges |
| 2 | Grönbäck (2014) | To identify the factors affecting the flow of intra-African trade | Rational choice intuitionalism and historical institutionalism | A qualitative case study of secondary data on foreign trade in Zambia and Mali | Findings revealed that trade policies, transportation infrastructure, ICT, political instability, and path dependency are the major factors | Scope of the research is limited to institutional, economic, political and technological factors |

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| | | | | | affecting intra-African trade | |
| 3 | Boungou et al. (2024) | The study sought to examine the effect of bribery and corruption on intra-African trade | None | The study obtained secondary data concerning foreign trade among 48 sub-Saharan African countries from 2000 to 2018. The data were analyzed with the aid of gravity model | The study found that corruption has a positive impact on exports and a negative impact on imports of global, primary, and manufactured goods | Scope of the study only addresses a single social factor (bribery) out of the full spectrum of sociocultural barriers confronting intra-Africa trade |
| 4 | Gulseven et al. (2023) | The study examined the relationship between WTO membership and intra-African trade | None | The study relied on panel data on all 54 countries in Africa between 2000 and 2019. The data were analyzed using the gravity model approach | The findings showed that being a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) significantly enhances international trade between African partner countries. | Scope of the study is limited to geopolitical issues such as membership of the WTO and its influence on intra-African trade |
| 5 | Olney (2022) | The study examined the factors impeding the prospects of intra-African trade initiatives | None | The study relied on bilateral trade data among 54 African countries between 1984–2016 obtained from the World Trade Flow (WTF) data set. The data were analyzed using gravity equation model | The findings revealed that weak trade agreements, poor infrastructure, conflict, post-colonial relationships, inconsistent economic policy and high trade costs have significantly impeded trade between and among African countries | The scope of the study is limited to institutional, political, economic and technological barriers; hence the dynamics of sociocultural factors are not accounted for |
| 6 | Turkson et al. (2023) | To examine the effects of sub-regional trade agreements (RTAs) and financial integration on | Gravity model of trade | The study relied on secondary data from the Centre for Prospective | It was found that RTAs, particularly within the Economic Community of West African | Scope of the study is limited to institutional and geographic, political and economic |

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| | | trade flows within Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) | | Studies and International Information data on trade flows among 43 SSA countries between 1960-2015. | States (ECOWAS) and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), have significantly boosted intra-regional trade. Financial integration also positively impacts trade flows, while factors such as distance, land-lockedness, and colonial ties influence trade costs and patterns | barriers to intra-African trade |
| 7 | Amoah (2014) | To explore the challenges and opportunities associated with improving Ghana's trade relations with other African countries. It aimed to identify the specific barriers that hinder intra-African trade and to suggest measures that can be taken to enhance Ghana's trade within the African continent. | None | The study relied on secondary data concerning trade among 49 importing African countries between 2005-2013. The data were analyzed using the gravity model | Findings revealed that the key barriers to trade between Ghana and the rest of Africa include: high trade cost, lack of regional integration, inadequate infrastructure, tariff and non-tariff barriers, lack of access to finance, and limited information on market opportunities. | Scope of the study is limited to institutional, economic, and technological barriers to intra-African trade |
| 8 | Kere and Zongo (2023) | The study sought to unravel the causality between digital technologies and intra-African trade | None | The study collected and analyzed secondary data on foreign trade among 48 Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries between 2000 and 2018 using the gravity model | The study finds that while digitalization, particularly through internet use and mobile payments, positively impacts intra-African exports and trade, its effectiveness is limited for manufactured goods and is enhanced when supported by access to electricity. | Scope of the study is limited to the role of digitization in promoting intra-African trade; sociocultural barriers to the trade are not examined |

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| 9 | Tsyokor and Madara (2022) | To examine the non-tariff barriers inhibiting indigenous African SMEs' intra-African trade and internationalization within Sub-Saharan Africa with a focus on Ghana's indigenous SMEs exporting to Nigeria | Institutional theory | Qualitative data from nine (9) owners of indigenous Ghanaian SMEs were collected using interview guide and analyzed thematically. | The findings revealed that the non-tariff barriers to intra-African trade and internationalization for Ghanaian SMEs include: Lack of interest in African-origin products; lengthy administrative customs procedures and extensive documentation; port congestion due to inefficient bureaucracy, causing delays; extortion, corruption, and sexual harassment by customs officials; numerous roadblocks (border checkpoints); regional differences in cross-border trade policies; lack of harmony in regulations on rules of origin; stringent local content requirements and technological challenges | Scope of the study is limited to institutional challenges to infra-African trade for Ghanaian SMEs |
| 10 | Ogbodo (2024) | The study aimed to assess the effectiveness of the African Union's efforts in improving intra-African trade through the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) between 2018 and 2023. It specifically | Neo-functionalism theory | The study relied on secondary data from institutional reports on trade between and among African countries. The data obtained were analyzed using content analysis method | The findings revealed that the implementation of the AfCFTA has not significantly improved the intra-African trade profile, even as the AU struggles to deepen market integration through AfCFTA mechanisms. Nevertheless, structural | Scope of the study is limited to institutional and geopolitical barriers to intra-African trade with no reference to the sociocultural dimensions of the barriers |

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| | | examined the impact of the AfCFTA on the intra-African trade profile and the African Union's success in deepening market integration within Africa. | | | challenges to regional integration persist, and the AfCFTA may not fully address these issues or reposition African economies as intended. | |
| 11 | Mude (2020) | This study examined whether the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), established in 2019, represents a genuine transformative integration for Africa or if it continues the neo-liberal organized hypocrisy that has historically hindered intra-African trade. It aims to assess whether the AfCFTA can overcome existing structural economic and political barriers to achieve meaningful free trade on the continent. | Neo-liberalism theory | The study obtained and analyzed secondary data relevant to intra-African trade from books, journal articles, newspaper articles, policy papers, and organizational reports. The data were analyzed with the aid of content analysis method | The findings revealed that AfCFTA has established a solid foundation for transforming intra-African trade by enhancing trade opportunities across the continent. However, the paper argues that neo-liberal economic and political structures that have historically impeded free trade in Africa remain largely unchanged. | Scope of the study is limited to institutional and geopolitical barriers to intra-African trade with no reference to the sociocultural dimensions of the barriers |
| 12 | Pato (2018) | The study investigated the reasons behind the persistently low levels of intra-African trade despite various regional integration efforts. It aimed to identify the key challenges hindering trade within Africa and propose potential solutions to boost economic | None | The study solely used a qualitative approach. It analyzed secondary data, reports, and case studies on intra-African trade and regional integration efforts obtained from international | The study found that intra-African trade remains subdued due to several factors, including poor infrastructure, complex and inconsistent regulatory frameworks, and pervasive non-tariff barriers. It was also revealed that border inefficiencies, | Scope of the study is limited to institutional, economic, political, technological and legal. The only social issue addressed is corruption, while the full spectrum of other socio-cultural factors remains unexplored |

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| | | collaboration on the continent | | organizations like the African Development Bank, World Bank, and United Nations, as well as relevant research papers | corruption, and bureaucratic red tape significantly increase the cost and time of trading within Africa | |
| 13 | Garba and Alexander (2023) | The primary purpose of the paper was to investigate the challenges of regional integration in Africa and their effects on the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) policy. | Neo-liberalism theory | The study relied on secondary sources of data collection such as relevant published literature, reports, and other published materials related to intra-African trade from the Institute for Economics and Peace, International Monetary Fund, African Development Bank, and other relevant organizations | The study identified the following as challenges hindering the effective execution of the AfCFTA policy: Language barriers; multiple currencies; porosity of borders; foreign interference; political instability and insecurity; poor human development; overlapping membership of sub-regional organizations; poor state of infrastructure; state-centric nature of integration initiatives | Scope of the study is limited to institutional, economic, political, technological and legal. |
| 14 | Longo and Sekkat (2001) | The study aimed to identify and rank the obstacles hindering intra-African trade to understand why trade linkages within the continent are weak and what factors contribute to this | None | The study relied on a panel dataset on bilateral trade flows among 41 African countries between 1980 to 1997. The data were analyzed using the gravity equation integrated in | The study found that the critical factors hindering intra-African trade include: Inadequate infrastructure; poor telecommunication networks and weak transport systems. These infrastructural deficiencies are more impactful in hindering trade | Scope of the study is limited to economic, technological, political and institutional factors |

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| | | | | the gravity model | than other factors like economic policy conduct and political tensions. | |
| 15 | Onwuka and Udegbunam (2019) | The study aimed to examine the potential benefits and challenges associated with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), highlighting the economic prospects it offers and the obstacles that may hinder its successful implementation. | Regional economic integration theory | The study employed a qualitative approach. This involved the collection and analysis of secondary data from relevant literature, trade agreements, and economic data related to the AfCFTA from the African Union (AU), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA); among others | The findings revealed that while AfCFTA holds significant promise for enhancing intra-African trade and economic integration, several challenges could impede its success. These include infrastructure deficits, overlapping regional economic communities, political instability, and a lack of harmonization in trade policies. | Scope of the study is limited to institutional, technological, economic, political and legal barriers, while socio-cultural factors are not addressed |

## Materials and Methods

This study adopted an exploratory case study research design to investigate the socio-cultural barriers to intra-African trade, focusing on Nigerian exporters as a single case. This design was deemed appropriate for exploring complex and under-researched phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2012). Exploratory case studies provide a flexible framework for generating new insights and understanding where existing knowledge is sparse (Baskarada, 2014). The study targeted members of the Association of Nigerian Exporters due to their expertise and experience in intra-African trade, offering a focused and context-rich examination of the socio-cultural barriers and mitigation strategies they encounter. A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify 10 participants with relevant expertise, complemented by snowball sampling to access additional respondents within the network (Parker et al., 2019). This combination ensured the inclusion of participants with deep insights while maintaining the study's focus on the specific research questions.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to share detailed personal experiences and perspectives on socio-cultural barriers to trade. This method allowed flexibility for probing deeper into responses and exploring emerging themes, ensuring rich qualitative data (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews were administered via telephone to accommodate participants' geographical locations, recorded with their consent, and transcribed using TurboScribe for accuracy. Reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the data, emphasizing the researcher's active role in interpreting themes. To enhance credibility, reflexivity and member checking were employed. Reflexivity involved critical self-reflection on potential biases during theme construction, while member checking ensured that preliminary findings were validated by participants, enhancing the trustworthiness of the results (Birt et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2020).

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## Analysis and Discussion

Between August 29th and September 10th 2024, the researcher conducted interview sessions with 10 members of the Association of Nigerian Exporters over the telephone. This was actualized by obtaining official authorization from the Association's President, who referred the researcher to relevant members to participate in the interview sessions. After the conduct of the interview, the audio recordings from all 10 participants were transcribed into text using TurboScribe. The generated transcripts were manually reviewed and cross-checked against the audio recordings to ensure that what was said was actually transcribed in a legible and accurate manner. The emerging data are presented and analyzed subsequently.

**Table 2. Participants' Demographic Characteristics**

| **Gender** | **Frequency** |
|---|---|
| Male | 8 |
| Female | 2 |
| Total | **10** |
| | |
| **Commodity exported** | |
| Textiles and garments | 1 |
| Cocoa and its components | 2 |
| Yams | 1 |
| Cashew nuts | 1 |
| Palm oil | 2 |
| Sesame seeds | 1 |
| Cassava | 1 |
| Groundnut | 1 |
| Total | **10** |
| | |
| **Length of exportation experience** | |
| 1-5 years | 2 |
| 6-10 years | 5 |
| 11 years and above | 3 |
| Total | **10** |
| | |
| **Export experience in African countries** | |
| Yes | 10 |
| No | -- |
| Total | **10** |
| | |
| **Favourite export destination** | |
| Africa | -- |
| Asia | 2 |
| Europe | 6 |
| The Americas | 2 |
| Total | **10** |

Source: Interview survey (2024)

TABLE 2 summarizes participants' demographics, including gender, commodities exported, export experience, and preferred destinations. Of the 10 participants interviewed, 8 were male and 2 were female. Exported commodities included textiles, cocoa, yam, cashew nuts, palm oil, sesame seeds, cassava, and groundnut. Five participants had 6–10 years of export experience, 3 had over 11 years, and 2 had 1–5 years. All participants had intra-African trading experience, though 6 preferred Europe as their export destination,

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2 chose Asia, and 2 the Americas, with none favouring Africa. These predominantly male exporters show moderate to extensive experience, with a preference for non-African markets.

*Major Socio-cultural Challenges to Intra-African Trade*

Participants identified a range of socio-cultural factors militating against the flow of intra-African trade. These were consolidated into themes and discussed systematically along with supporting quotes from the interview transcripts.

*Theme 1: Cultural complexity*

The theme 'cultural complexity' comprises three sub-themes, namely: language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and religious differences. Participants maintained that cultural complexity stands as a major factor impeding the flow of intra-African trade. In particular, they indicated that language and religious differences can significantly instigate cultural misunderstandings that undermine the prospects of trade cooperations between and among African businesses. This is because they create communication gaps and mistrust, hindering effective collaboration and negotiation between African businesses. In the exact words of Participant 8:

"Language barriers are a significant issue. Even though we may be exporting to nearby African countries, each country has its own local language. I've had difficulties communicating in French-speaking regions, which has affected negotiations and dealing with logistics (P8 Ln 12)".

This viewpoint is also echoed by Participant 1, who mentioned that:

"Language barriers are one of the main issues. In as much as many African countries use English or French, accents, dialects, and local terms often create confusion and misunderstandings. This makes it difficult for non-natives to do business there. We do not understand the language, we cannot enter into contracts or have crucial business agreements because you have to know what you are signing off on (P1 Ln 12)"

Participant 3 expressed similar viewpoints by explaining that:

"Religious differences can also strain trade relationships, especially in regions like North Africa with strong religious beliefs. In some cases, practices common in my area may not be well received elsewhere. My partners in more conservative regions sometimes hesitated to engage due to religious differences (P3 Ln 17).

Emphasizing the degree to which cultural misunderstandings like this could stifle trade relations, Participant 2 indicated that:

"Cultural misunderstandings create additional problems, especially when businesses don't research local customs well. I've had clients offended because my greeting style wasn't what they were used to, which impacted negotiations. Small gestures can make a huge difference in building good rapport (P3 Ln 14)".

These participants' viewpoints indicate that cultural complexity is a significant barrier to intra-African trade, with language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and religious differences being key obstacles. Participant 8 highlighted that language barriers, such as difficulties communicating in French-speaking regions, impede negotiations and logistics (P8 Ln 12). Similarly, Participant 1 emphasized that even though many African countries use English or French, local dialects, accents, and terms often cause confusion, making business transactions challenging (P1 Ln 12). Participant 3 added that religious differences, especially in regions with strong religious beliefs like North Africa, can strain trade relationships, as conservative regions may be hesitant to engage due to differing religious practices (P3 Ln 17). Participant 2 further illustrated how cultural misunderstandings, including failure to understand local customs and greetings, can negatively affect negotiations, demonstrating how seemingly small cultural differences can significantly hinder business dealings (P2 Ln 14).

Journal of Ecohumanism
2024
Volume: 3, No: 8, pp. 5681 – 5707
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5172

*Theme 2: Corruption and Bureaucratic Obstacles*

The theme 'corruption and bureaucratic obstacles' comprising two sub-themes, namely: official corruption, and corruption in trade practices. Participants decried that the perceived high-level of corruption prevalent in African societies is a major factor undermining trade transactions by businesses on the continent. This sort of corruption includes institutional corruption by government officials and agencies seeking bribes and extorting African businesses before they are allowed to operate. It also includes corrupt trade practices by individual African businesses who use sharp gimmicks and scams to defraud fellow African businesses. Participant 9 underscored the severity of these corrupt practices by explaining that:

"Corruption is also a big issue. In some countries, bribing customs officials is practically required if you want your shipment to clear on time. This not only adds to the cost but also makes it hard to plan for timely deliveries, especially for perishable goods like cocoa fruits (P9 Ln 13)".

Participant 3 also echoed similar sentiments by explaining that:

"Corruption in trade practices is also a major hurdle. Customs officials or port authorities sometimes expect "extra payments" to facilitate processing, which makes exporting costly and unpredictable. Once, I had to delay a shipment because the customs team asked for an unauthorized fee (P3 Ln 13)".

Participant 2 elaborates further on the ramifications of individual corruption and fraud by maintaining that:

"Corruption in trade practices is also widespread among African businesses. Apart from dealing with institutional bribery and bureaucracy, we often face the challenge of dealing with fraudulent businesses masquerading as legitimate ones trying to scam us. These fraudulent enterprises often collude with government officials to obtain licenses, permits and documentations that make them appear legitimate and many of my colleagues have fallen prey to such corrupt manipulations. I always verify with my network of partners before I proceed with any new business offer (P2 Ln 14)".

From these participants' viewpoints, it is evident that corruption and bureaucratic obstacles significantly hinder trade transactions within African societies. Participant 9 highlighted the pervasive nature of corruption, noting that businesses often face bribes from customs officials, particularly when dealing with time-sensitive shipments, which drives up costs and disrupts logistics. Similarly, Participant 3 pointed to the unpredictable nature of such practices, describing how customs and port authorities sometimes demand "extra payments" to facilitate trade, thereby complicating the export process. Moreover, Participant 2 expanded on the issue by addressing the rise of fraudulent businesses that exploit government systems to appear legitimate, defrauding genuine enterprises and causing substantial financial losses. The need for constant vigilance and verification among business networks, as emphasized by Participant 2, underscores the depth of corruption in trade practices across the continent.

*Theme 3: Trust Gap*

Trust gap emerged as a deep-rooted issue impeding the cooperation and relationships necessary to actualize trade between and among African businesses. This theme comprises three sub-themes, namely: perception of poor-quality African goods; poor quality African technology, and preference for non-African products. The participants interviewed revealed that there is a deep-seated mistrust among African businesses that goods coming from Africa are of inferior quality due to the perceived inferior quality of African technologies. This perception arose from historical underinvestment in industrialization and technological innovation across many African countries, leading to a reliance on raw material exports rather than manufacturing value-added goods. As such, many African consumers would prefer to purchase non-African goods, which are believed to be superior in quality. These dynamics undermine the prospects of intra-African trade by discouraging local consumption, which ultimately reduces overall demand. As Participant 1 observed:

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5172

"There's also a lack of trust among African business partners. Many traders don't have a long history of partnerships across borders, so skepticism about each other's honesty can lead to tense negotiations. Another issue is the perception of poor-quality goods. African products are sometimes viewed as subpar, even when the quality is high. This makes it difficult to convince buyers that our cashews meet international standards (P1 Ln 13-14)".

Participant 4 also added that:

"Many also perceive African technology as inferior, assuming products from Europe or Asia are better-made, which harms trust in African exports (P4 Ln 14)".

Commenting on the adverse effects of the situation, Participant 7 noted that:

"Preference for non-African products also limits demand—some consumers believe foreign items are of better quality. This is tied to stereotypes about specific African nationalities too; stereotypes can create biases where certain African traders are simply not trusted. For instance, I had a South African buyer hesitate to do business with me because of preconceived notions about Nigerians in the textile trade (P7 Ln 12-13)".

These viewpoints shed light on the deep-rooted trust gap that hinders the growth of intra-African trade, with participants highlighting several key factors contributing to the issue. Participant 1 emphasized that a lack of trust among African business partners, often stemming from limited cross-border partnerships and skepticism about each other's honesty, makes it difficult to establish fruitful business relationships. Additionally, perceptions of poor-quality African goods, as noted by Participant 1, persist despite the presence of high-quality products, further complicating efforts to convince consumers of their value. Participant 4 added that African technology is often perceived as inferior, with non-African products from regions such as Europe or Asia viewed as superior, further eroding trust in African exports. Furthermore, Participant 7 pointed out that the preference for non-African products limits demand and is also influenced by stereotypes about certain African nationalities, creating biases that can deter business dealings across borders. These insights collectively demonstrate how mistrust, negative perceptions, and preferences for foreign goods are undermining the potential for successful trade within Africa.

*Theme 4: Unhealthy Rivalries*

Unhealthy rivalries between and among African countries are substantially undermining the prospects of intra-African trade. This theme comprises four sub-themes, namely: tribal or ethnic biases; Xenophobia; stereotyping, and competition between regional economic blocs. Participants maintained that the rise of Xenophobia in countries like South Africa is fueling resentment among locals toward other African nationals, thereby instigating hate, suspicion and lack of cooperation that derail foreign trade. The negative stereotypes accompanying these tides portray some African nationals as untrustworthy, economically predatory, or even as threats to local prosperity, reinforcing fear and distrust that hinder cooperative trade relationships across the continent. These unhealthy rivalries have also managed to creep into regional economic blocs like ECOWAS, SADC (Southern African Development Community) and EAC (East African Community), fueling inter-bloc tussles and undermining cohesive trade policies, which altogether truncate the prospects of intra-African trade. Participant 10 elaborately describes the situation by stating that:

"Tribal and ethnic biases also impact trade relationships. In some cases, if a trader is from a different ethnic group or country, they may not receive fair treatment, regardless of the product quality. For example, a buyer from South Africa was initially hesitant to work with me because of their perception of certain ethnic groups' business practices. Such stereotypes create unnecessary trade barriers and make it harder to build trust and partnerships across borders. Historical tensions between African countries add to this, especially where past conflicts influence trade decisions today. There are lingering mistrusts in countries with historical land or resource disputes, such as conflicts over fishing rights or agricultural land. A South African buyer once told me that he preferred not to source goods from a neighbouring country due to a long-standing

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5172

territorial dispute, even though they had better products. These lingering tensions affect trade prospects considerably. Stereotypes about African nationalities are also common. African traders are sometimes seen as more likely to deliver low-quality goods, which can be discouraging for genuine exporters. I've noticed clients from certain regions hesitating to trade if they hear a seller is from a specific African country (P10 Ln 13-15)".

Participant 9 added that:

"Xenophobia also plays a role, and it's an uncomfortable one. Some locals view foreigners with suspicion, which can impact trade relationships. I've faced situations where local businesses preferred not to work with me simply because I'm from a different country within Africa (P9 Ln 14)".

Acknowledging the ugly roles of tribal or ethnic biases in worsening trade relations, Participant 2 maintained that:

"Tribal and ethnic biases sometimes influence business dealings, especially in countries with deep-rooted tribal structures. Certain ethnic groups prefer to trade only with members of their own tribe, making it hard for outsiders to establish a foothold. Once, a deal I had in an East African country fell through because a competitor from the preferred local ethnic group offered a similar product. Stereotypes about specific African nationalities are also a problem. For example, some Nigerians are seen as aggressive in negotiations, which can lead to mistrust before any discussions even begin. As a Nigerian exporter, I've had to go the extra mile to assure clients that my operations are aboveboard (P2 Ln 16-17)".

Furthermore, Participant 3 describes how competition among regional economic blocs can also eclipse the prospects of intra-African trade over the long haul. In their own words:

"Competition between regional economic blocs, like ECOWAS and SADC, can also be an obstacle. Policies can differ so much that trade becomes difficult. Each bloc has its standards, which can sometimes complicate things for exporters trying to enter new markets across these regions. For example, there are tariffs imposed by SADC that don't apply in ECOWAS, affecting pricing and market access (P3 Ln 19)."

These participants' viewpoints underscore the detrimental effects of unhealthy rivalries on intra-African trade. Participant 10 highlights how tribal and ethnic biases create barriers, as traders from certain ethnic groups or nationalities are sometimes distrusted based on stereotypes rather than product quality. Participant 9 emphasizes the role of xenophobia, explaining how locals' suspicion of foreigners disrupts trade, as businesses may refuse partnerships based solely on nationality. Participant 2 acknowledges similar challenges, particularly in deeply tribal societies, where business opportunities are reserved for those within the preferred group, making it difficult for outsiders to compete. They describe how Nigerian traders, often perceived as aggressive, face prejudgments that demand extra assurances of integrity. Moreover, Participant 3 addresses the inter-bloc competition between regional entities like ECOWAS and SADC, explaining that incompatible policies and tariffs complicate cross-regional trade, thus weakening the continent's unified market potential. Together, these perspectives reveal how inter-African trade is strained by distrust, biases, and conflicting economic policies, all of which inhibit the continent's economic integration and growth.

*Theme 5: Business Network Complexity*

The theme 'business network complexity' describes the difficulties that African businesses encounter in building and sustaining valuable business relationships in African countries. This theme comprises four sub-themes, namely: network building difficulty, logistical constraints, regional favoritism and local market preferences. The interview data reveals that African businesses are having a hard time building and maintaining critical relationships with partners in other African countries to facilitate their trade activities. This difficulty is fueled by language and cultural differences, logistical challenges due to distance, regional favoritism and local market preferences. As such, the inability to harness local business partners in African countries constitutes a major barrier to the growth of intra-African trade. According to Participant 3:

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"It's tough to form pan-African business networks due to logistical challenges, limited market information, and competition between countries. As an exporter, finding reliable partners across Africa is harder than in Europe, where systems are more unified (P3 Ln 20)".

Participant 4 echoed similar sentiments by maintaining that:

"Building pan-African business networks is difficult too; the language and cultural differences make forming reliable networks across borders a complex process (P4 Ln 14)".

Participant 9 highlighted the role of regional favoritism in complicating intra-African trade by indicating that:

"Regional favoritism is common. I've noticed that some businesses in one region prefer to work with others from their region, which sometimes excludes me even if my products are competitive. These biases can create unnecessary divisions and make trade more challenging (P9 Ln 18)".

These participants' viewpoints underscore the complex nature of establishing pan-African business networks, as they face multifaceted challenges in expanding trade relationships across the continent. According to Participant 3, logistical constraints and the limited availability of market information make it considerably harder to find trustworthy partners in Africa compared to Europe, where unified systems streamline cross-border trade (P3 Ln 20). Participant 4 further elaborates on these difficulties, citing language and cultural differences as significant obstacles that complicate the process of creating dependable networks across African borders (P4 Ln 14). In addition, Participant 9's experience highlights regional favoritism, where businesses within the same region often prioritize working together, sometimes excluding others regardless of product quality, which, as noted, fosters unnecessary divisions and further hinders the potential for intra-African trade (P9 Ln 18). Together, these insights emphasize the interplay of logistical, cultural, and regional barriers that African businesses must navigate, posing substantial limitations on network building and trade development across the continent.

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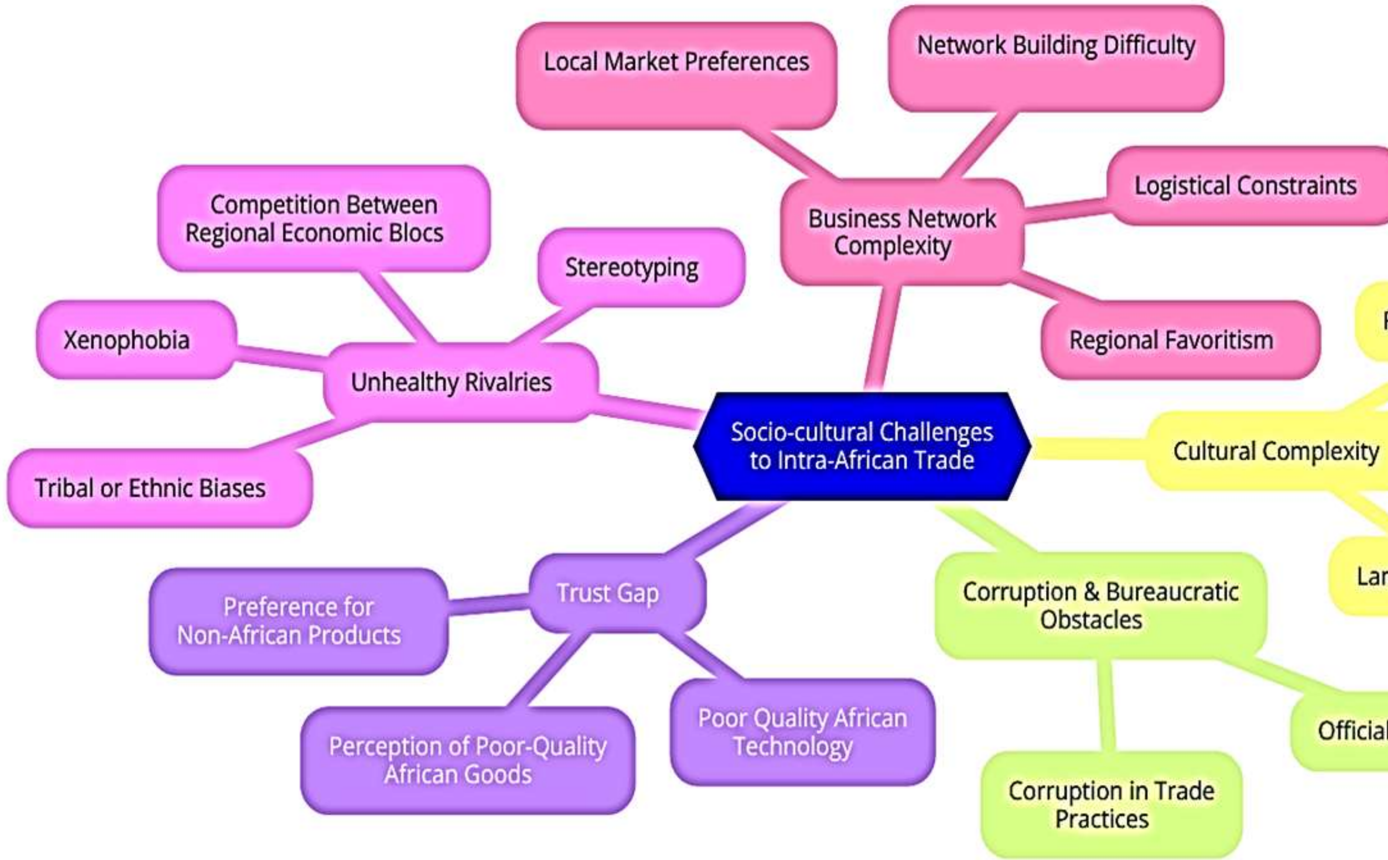


**Fig. 2. Thematic Map Showing Key Themes and Sub-Themes for Sociocultural Challenges to Intra-African Trade**

Source: Authors' qualitative analysis (2024)

*Impacts of Socio-cultural Challenges on Intra-African Trade*

The impacts of socio-cultural challenges on intra-African trade are multi-faceted, ranging from slow negotiations and lack of cooperation to diminished consumer demand. These impacts were consolidated into themes and discussed systematically along with supporting quotes from the interview transcripts.

*Theme 1: Miscommunication and Failed Negotiations*

One of the most obvious impacts of socio-cultural challenges on intra-African trade is the escalation of miscommunication which results in lengthy and ultimately failed negotiations. Participants indicated that due to differences in language spoken in other African countries, they are unable to relate, communicate and enter business agreements with counterparts on the continent. This is critical because business communications, and negotiations ought to be clear enough for parties to enter agreements based on full disclosure and clarity to avoid future conflict. However, given that some African countries do not have English as their lingua franca, but French and other local dialects, it becomes difficult for businesses to gain market access without local support (which an add to cost). There is also the issue of different business etiquettes, which manifests in cultural differences in the approach of doing business, thereby leading to conflict between and among partners. As Participant 2 describes:

"Cultural misunderstandings harm negotiations, too. When basic customs aren't respected, it creates tension, and deals might not go through. For instance, once a client felt disrespected simply because I used

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5172

a greeting style unfamiliar to them. Minor issues like these, over time, add up and make African business environments harder to navigate (P2 Ln 22)".

Participant 4 also expressed similar sentiments by maintaining that:

"Diverse business etiquettes often lead to misinterpretations, which harm relationships and can lead to distrust or misunderstanding during negotiations. Nigerian businessmen are usually direct and outspoken and, in some regions, being very direct might seem rude, while others expect it. Misunderstandings like these can prevent deals from being finalized and negotiations to fall apart (P4 Ln 16)".

Language differences can also contribute to failed business communications and negotiations. In the words of Participant 5:

"Language barriers often lead to misunderstandings, which can result in wrong shipments, lost business opportunities, and frustration for both parties. I once lost a deal with a buyer in Senegal because of poor translation, which led to a delayed shipment and lost business opportunity (P5 Ln 14)".

Participant 6 also describes how cultural and business etiquette differences can impact intra-African trade. In their view:

"Cultural misunderstandings can also result in missed opportunities. I've seen clients in other African countries misunderstanding a business proposal simply because it was delivered in an unfamiliar manner. Differences in business etiquettes, such as improper negotiations, can make partners feel disrespected, which in turn affects the long-term relationship (P6 Ln 14)".

These participants' viewpoints suggest that socio-cultural challenges are a significant barrier to successful intra-African trade. For instance, Participant 2 emphasizes that cultural misunderstandings, such as unfamiliar greeting styles, create tension and impact business deals negatively. This viewpoint is echoed by Participant 4, who elaborates on the harm diverse business etiquettes can bring to trade relationships, with misinterpretations leading to distrust and missed deals—especially when direct communication styles clash across regions. Participant 5 further highlights the impact of language barriers, recounting a personal experience where a translation error with a Senegalese buyer led to delayed shipments and lost opportunities, underscoring the critical need for clear, culturally aware communication. Similarly, Participant 6 discusses how differing business etiquettes can lead to misunderstandings, even to the point of potential deals being jeopardized, illustrating how respect for local customs is essential for long-term partnerships. Together, these perspectives illustrate the complex role of socio-cultural dynamics in African business, where language, etiquette, and communication style significantly affect trade outcomes.

Theme 2: Failed partnerships and alliances

The prevalence of socio-cultural challenges on the African continent often results in failed partnerships and business alliances, which undermine intra-African trade. This is because it is difficult for African businesses to establish relationships with other African businesses and strategic partners that would enable them gain market entry and acceptance. One of the major socio-cultural challenges perpetuating this issue is the trust gap that exist among African businesses. Another is cultural and racial biases, where some African businesses are reluctant to trade with African businesses from certain nationalities based on negative stereotyping and Xenophobic fears. In addition, unhealthy rivalries among regional economic blocs like ECOWAS, SADC and others create competitive tensions that hinder effective collaboration, reduce trust, and lead to fragmented and incompatible policies, which collectively strain the partnerships and alliances necessary for fostering seamless intra-African trade. According to Participant 1:

"Lack of trust between partners prevents alliances. In fact, most African businesses hesitate to cooperate with fellow Africans from different countries or regions due to fears of being exploited. This inability of African businesses to establish credible alliances in other markets blocks regional growth as a whole. Rivalries and superiority contests hinder cross-border cooperation. Businesses may avoid imports from

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5172

certain countries due to pride or politics, blocking potential supply chain efficiencies. Xenophobia prevents people from considering business deals. When there's an ingrained fear or bias against outsiders, it's challenging to gain trust or establish a market presence (P1 Ln 20, 23-24)".

Participant 2 also added that:

"These socio-cultural issues severely undermine intra-African trade. Lack of trust, for instance, discourages partnerships and joint ventures that could make African businesses more competitive globally. Without trust, businesses often spend extra on legal and verification costs or avoid certain markets altogether. I've seen colleagues turn down offers to collaborate with certain African partners because of a few bad experiences. Ethnic and tribal biases create an uneven playing field in African markets. Local businesses sometimes prioritize vendors from preferred tribes, leaving outsiders at a disadvantage. I've encountered this personally when trying to enter certain East African markets, only to find my product overlooked in favour of a local competitor (P2 Ln 20, 24)".

Similarly, Participant 5 stressed that:

"Rivalries between countries make collaboration hard, especially if one country feels another is taking business away from it. Xenophobia limits opportunities in some countries, where African goods are unfairly rejected simply due to the country of origin. Additionally, tribal and ethnic biases mean that some businesses are favored over others, which leads to uneven trade relations within regions. Lastly, the lack of coherence between economic blocs like ECOWAS and SADC leads to inconsistent trade regulations and tariffs, making it difficult to establish a smooth trading flow (P5 Ln. 14)".

These participants' viewpoints entail that the socio-cultural barriers in Africa, such as distrust, racial and ethnic biases, and regional rivalries, severely impact intra-African trade. Participant 1 highlights the detrimental effect of trust gaps, where African businesses are wary of cooperation with counterparts from other countries due to fears of exploitation, which stifles potential for cross-border growth and creates a reluctance to import from specific countries based on pride or political biases (P1 Ln 20, 23-24). Participant 2 echoes this, adding that the lack of trust not only raises costs due to legal verifications but also leads businesses to avoid certain markets. This participant also points to ethnic and tribal biases that favour local businesses, creating an uneven playing field, which he personally encountered when his product was overlooked in favour of a local competitor in East Africa (P2 Ln 20, 24). Participant 5 reinforces these observations, noting how rivalries and xenophobia can lead to African products being unjustly rejected, while tribal preferences result in unfair trade advantages within regions. Furthermore, he notes that inconsistent regulations across economic blocs like ECOWAS and SADC prevent streamlined trade, compounding the fragmentation that obstructs intra-African business alliances (P5 Ln. 14).

Theme 3: Weakening consumer demand and sales

In addition to undermining business alliances across the African continent, sociocultural challenges also substantially weaken consumer demand, and sales of African products, which explains why intra-African trade volumes are lower than other regions like Asia, Europe or the Americas. This trend is often fueled by the negative perceptions of African technologies and products as being of inferior quality, which increases the preference for African goods. Meanwhile, the appetite for non-African goods soars, especially those coming from Asia, Europe or the Americas. The misperception and mischaracterization of African goods as inferior undermines intra-African trade and the collective growth of the African economy because it discourages local consumers from supporting regional products, stifles the development of homegrown industries, and perpetuates a dependency on imports from Asia, Europe, and the Americas, thereby weakening the continent's economic resilience and self-sufficiency. According to Participant 7:

"Preference for non-African products weakens demand for local items, even when they're competitive in quality and price, as customers are sometimes quick to choose Asian, European or American brands over African-made products (P7 Ln. 15)".

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Participant 8 also added that:

“The perception of African goods as poor in quality harms their competitiveness in African markets. Many buyers overlook goods produced within the continent, preferring imports from the white people, which hinders local industries from growing and competing. For instance, even though African groundnuts are high quality, buyers sometimes import from Thailand or China because of biases (P8 Ln. 23)”.

Participant 9 explains further that:

“When African consumers favor non-African products, we struggle to compete locally. It affects demand significantly because people feel that foreign products are better. This mentality also influences wholesalers and retailers, who may choose foreign over local products, reducing our market reach within the continent (P9 Ln. 23)”.

Participant 10 also confirms that:

“The preference for non-African products means that African businesses face lower demand for their goods within the continent, even when they meet quality standards. This affects our ability to scale businesses and limits the growth of regional industries. For example, a Ghanaian client who had preferred European suppliers even admitted that he felt pressured by his customers to offer "foreign products." This restricts local brands from gaining prominence in their markets. (P10 Ln. 18)”.

Altogether, these participants’ viewpoints underscore the pervasive impact of negative perceptions toward African goods on intra-African trade and the growth of the continent's economy. Participant 7 highlights how consumers’ preference for non-African brands, even when local products match or exceed in quality and price, leads them to choose imports from Asia, Europe, or the Americas, limiting demand for African-made items. Participant 8 elaborates that the perception of African goods as inferior not only harms their competitiveness but also hinders local industries, as buyers often choose imports over high-quality African products, due to ingrained biases. Participant 9 emphasizes how the preference for foreign products impacts the competitiveness of African businesses within local markets, influencing wholesalers and retailers to favour imported goods, which reduces market access for African products. Moreover, Participant 10 confirms that the demand for non-African products makes it challenging for African businesses to scale, as even those that meet quality standards face limited growth due to consumer and supplier bias toward foreign brands.

Theme 4: Increased operational cost

Surprisingly, it is costly for African businesses to do business in African countries than it is for them to trade in Europe, America or Asia. According to a 2024 report by CNBC Africa, African businesses continue to face high costs for intra-African cross-border transactions, making it more expensive for them to trade within the continent (Rossiello, 2024). As the participants acknowledged, these costs are increasingly exacerbated by institutional corruption in African countries where government officials and agencies exploit African businesses for bribes using coercion or manipulation. This can also be done through the unjust imposition of multiple levies and duty charges on goods coming from African countries, which ultimately add to cost. Through fraudulent schemes and shady business arrangements, individual African businesses or groups are robbing other African businesses of business capital, which amounts to substantial losses. These events constitute a repellent for African businesses intending to invest in other African markets. As Participant 9 explains:

“Corruption increases the cost of doing business because African exporters need to factor in bribes or unexpected fees to get shipments across borders. This makes goods more expensive, which reduces competitiveness and discourages some businesses from even trying to export within Africa (P9 Ln. 21)”.

Also, Participant 8 added that:

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"Corruption and the expectation of bribes not only increase costs but also discourage businesses from expanding to certain markets. It's hard to sustain profitability when informal payments and delays are frequent (P8 Ln. 24)".

Moreover, a similar viewpoint is echoed by Participant 3, who mentions that:

"Corruption impacts the flow of goods significantly. Every time we encounter corrupt practices at ports, it adds extra costs to our business and creates delays. This unpredictability makes African trade less attractive, and ultimately, we pass on these costs to consumers, making African products less competitive (P3 Ln. 23)".

Furthermore, Participant 2 emphasize that:

"Corruption not only increases operational costs but also contributes to inefficiencies. African businesses can't afford to waste money on unofficial fees, yet these bribes are sometimes required just to get goods moving. This deters smaller exporters who might not have the budget to cover such hidden costs, limiting market access for newer players (P2 Ln. 21)".

These participants' viewpoints suggest that corruption and unofficial fees significantly drive up the cost of intra-African trade, posing a barrier to market expansion within the continent. Participant 9 emphasized how the necessity of factoring in bribes for smooth cross-border transactions not only raises prices but also diminishes competitiveness, deterring some exporters from pursuing African markets (P9 Ln. 21). Participant 8 noted that corruption discourages businesses from venturing into certain markets due to the financial strain of informal payments, impacting their profitability and expansion efforts (P8 Ln. 24). Participant 3 highlighted that corruption creates delays and adds unpredictability to the trade process, ultimately passing increased costs onto consumers and reducing the competitiveness of African products (P3 Ln. 23). Moreover, Participant 2 expressed that hidden costs from corruption contribute to inefficiencies and limit access for smaller exporters who lack the resources to cover these unofficial expenses, ultimately stifling the growth of newer market players (P2 Ln. 21).

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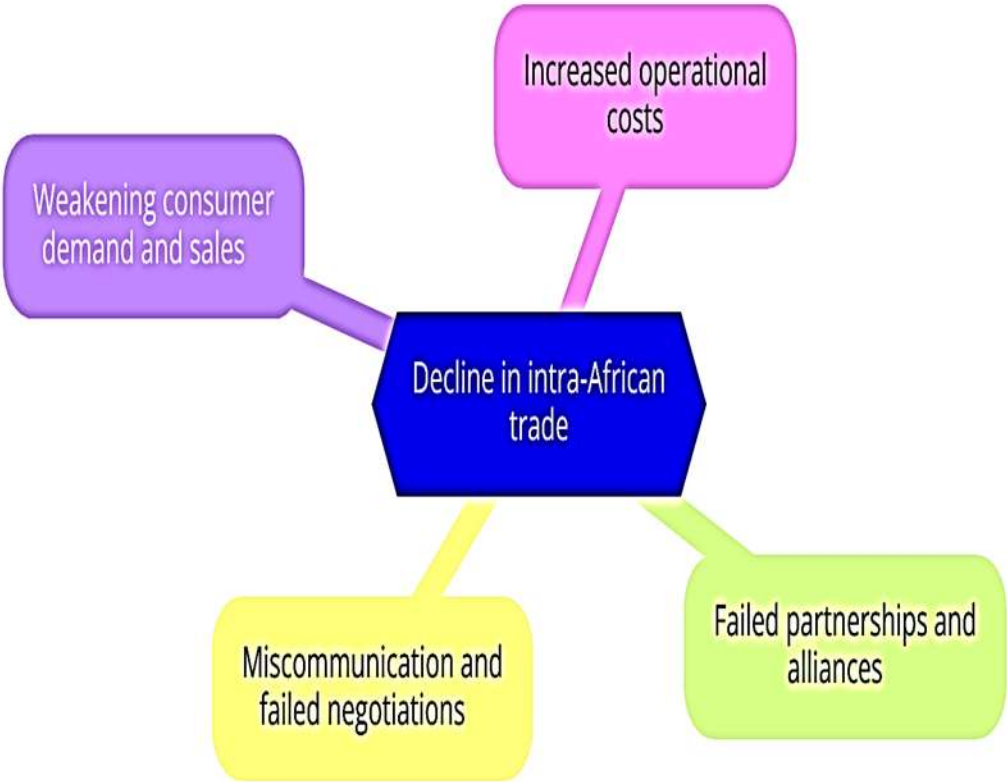


**Fig. 3: Thematic Map of Impact of Sociocultural Challenges on Intra-African Trade**

Source: Authors' qualitative analysis (2024)

## Discussion

The analysis of interview data identified five major sociocultural challenges hindering intra-African trade: cultural complexity, corruption and bureaucratic obstacles, trust deficits, unhealthy rivalries, and business network fragmentation. These findings align with existing literature. Beecroft et al. (2020) highlighted how excessive customs processes and corruption in the ECOWAS region inflate transaction costs, deterring cross-border trade. Chauvet and Collier (2004) noted that variations in institutional effectiveness and cultural diversity erode trust in regional trade agreements, amplifying risks and discouraging partnerships. Similarly, Bah et al. (2021) emphasized how regulatory inefficiencies and corruption inflate costs, reducing the competitiveness of intra-African trade.

Additionally, Yushi and Borojo (2019) underscored how fragmented trade networks create logistical and regulatory hurdles, hindering the scalability of intra-African business operations. These factors collectively impair initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which aim to enhance regional trade integration. The impacts of these challenges on intra-African trade are profound, manifesting in miscommunication, failed negotiations, weakened consumer demand, and higher operational costs. Darley and Blankson (2008) revealed that cultural diversity causes misunderstandings and inconsistent interpretations of business practices, disrupting partnerships and reducing trust. Aziz et al. (2018) found that weak institutional structures lead to poor perceptions of African products, reducing consumer demand due to concerns over quality. Beecroft et al. (2020) further illustrated how bureaucratic delays inflate transaction costs, weakening trade relations and discouraging strategic partnerships.

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ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5172

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study undertook a qualitative analysis of the sociocultural barriers to intra-African trade. As African countries have been observed to do less business with each other and more business with the West, it was necessary to explore the potential sociocultural factors responsible for such trends. In-depth key participant interviews were conducted with Nigerian exporters to obtain relevant primary data. The data were analyzed and interpreted using reflexive thematic method. The findings revealed that at least 5 major sociocultural factors are responsible for barricading the flow of intra-African trade. These factors include: cultural complexity, corruption and bureaucratic obstacles, trust gap, unhealthy rivalries, and business network complexity. It was also revealed that these sociocultural factors undermine intra-African trade by perpetuating the following negative outcomes: miscommunication and failed negotiations, weakening consumer demand and sales, failed partnerships and alliances and increased operational costs. In light of these findings, this study concludes that the prospects of intra-African trade will remain shackled and continue to undermine the economic stability of Africa if substantial individual and institutional actions are not taken to close the trust gap, improve confidence in African products and forge long-term alliances necessary for sustained market entry.

To address the socio-cultural challenges impeding intra-African trade, the following recommendations are suggested:

- To eliminate the trust gap undermining intra-African trade, African governments and regional economic organizations like ECOWAS and others should prioritize the establishment of standardized quality assurance frameworks across member states. This could include harmonizing product certification, inspection procedures, and implementing regional regulatory bodies to ensure that African goods meet agreed-upon standards. Regular audits and transparent quality control systems would help build market confidence and encourage inter-country trade by ensuring consistency in product quality.

- African governments, alongside regional economic blocs, should invest in targeted capacity-building initiatives aimed at improving the production capabilities of local industries. This could include funding training programmes, technical support, and facilitating access to advanced technologies for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to improve the quality of African products and exports. These efforts would enhance local production standards and reduce dependency on foreign imports, boosting demand for locally produced goods.

- The scourge of corruption and bureaucratic obstacles should be eliminated by implementing a comprehensive digitalization of trade processes and government services. This would involve the establishment of a centralized digital platform for trade documentation, customs clearance, and regulatory approvals, ensuring transparency, reducing human intervention, and accelerating the flow of goods across borders. Additionally, African governments and regional economic blocs should strengthen anti-corruption measures by adopting strict monitoring, enforcing accountability, and encouraging citizen participation in oversight to create a more efficient, transparent, and business-friendly environment.

- On the individual front, African businesses must conduct operations in other African countries with absolute reverence for the cultural norms, traditions and standards of acceptable practices. This can be facilitated by cultural training, hiring local interpreters and agents to get acquainted with local cultural nuances in order to promote market acceptance.

- It is also critical for African businesses to form long-term strategic relationships with local partners in targeted African countries in order to facilitate smoother market entry and forge mutual cooperation necessary for reciprocal trade. This will enhance intra-African trade as those partners will inter-trade with each other, thereby boosting economic exchanges within Africa.

- African businesses can also harness the enormous potential of digital marketing technologies and platforms to boost intra-African trade by investing in e-commerce platforms that connect producers directly with consumers across the continent. This includes creating region-specific online marketplaces, leveraging social media for targeted marketing campaigns, and utilizing data analytics to understand consumer preferences and optimize product offerings. Additionally, businesses should explore partnerships with financial technology (FinTech) companies to provide seamless payment solutions and improve logistics networks, ensuring that African products are easily accessible and competitively marketed within the regional market.

5.1. Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge by providing in-depth insights into the dynamics of sociocultural barriers and how they impact intra-African trade as well as effective coping strategies adopted by African businesses. In particular, the study confirms how sociocultural challenges such as corruption and bureaucratic obstacles, cultural complexity, trust gap, business network complexity and unhealthy rivalries are undermining intra-Africa trade by instigating miscommunication and failed negotiations, weakening consumer demand and sales, disrupting partnerships and hiking operational costs. This study also makes a theoretical contribution to knowledge by confirming the relevance of the consumer culture theory (CCT) in explaining the dynamics of intra-African trade. The findings of the study align with the basic assumption of CCT, which posits that consumer decisions are not solely driven by economic factors but are deeply intertwined with cultural meanings, social relationships, and identity. In this case, the cultural complexity and trust gaps between African nations reflect how cultural values, norms, and social networks influence business practices, creating barriers to trade. Additionally, the issues of corruption, bureaucratic obstacles, and business network complexity emphasize the role of power structures and social hierarchies in shaping trade interactions. These findings confirm CCT's relevance by demonstrating that intra-African trade is not only a matter of economic transactions but is also deeply affected by cultural and social dynamics, which can either facilitate or hinder cross-border trade.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies**

The data presented and analyzed in this study were obtained from Nigerian exporters with substantial experience in intra-African trade. It may not reflect the unique experiences of business organizations in other African countries; which may experience sociocultural barriers in a different dimension. There is therefore need for similar studies from the perspectives of other African business organizations or trade association to generate diverse insights into the dynamics of the sociocultural barriers impeding the flow of intra-African trade. This is critical because understanding the diverse sociocultural barriers experienced by different African countries in intra-African trade can provide a more comprehensive perspective on the challenges hindering economic integration within the continent. By examining these barriers from the standpoint of other African business organizations or trade associations, future studies can reveal variations in cultural norms, language, trust issues, and regulatory practices that may impact cross-border trade differently across regions. Such insights could inform policy-makers and trade facilitators in designing tailored strategies that address country-specific barriers while fostering unity, ultimately strengthening the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and promoting sustainable economic growth across the continent.

**Funding:** This research benefitted from no external funding.

**Conflict of Interest:** All authors are in full agreement and hereby declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

Volume: 3, No: 8, pp. 5681 – 5707
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5172

**Data Availability**: The qualitative data used in this study are accurate and can be provided upon request through the corresponding author

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Journal of Ecohumanism
2024
Volume: 3, No: 8, pp. 5681 – 5707
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