

Legal Culture and Public Awareness: Understanding Compliance Within Modern Societies

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ABSTRACT

Compliance with law is a foundational requirement for the stability and legitimacy of modern legal systems, yet the mechanisms that produce it remain contested. Traditional deterrence models, emphasizing sanctions and incentives, explain only a fraction of observed compliance behaviour, while normative accounts highlight the roles of legitimacy, procedural justice, and personal morality. A significant gap persists in understanding how broad cultural orientations toward law—legal culture—and the specific knowledge and perceptions that constitute public awareness interact to shape compliance across diverse societal contexts. This study addresses that gap by constructing an integrated, multi-level framework that connects macro-level legal culture, meso-level institutional communication, and micro-level individual legal consciousness and awareness. Employing a qualitative socio-legal methodology, the article synthesizes theoretical and empirical scholarship and draws on illustrative examples from jurisdictions with contrasting legal cultures, including Nordic high-trust societies, post-authoritarian states in Central and Eastern Europe, and pluralistic legal orders in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The findings reveal that public awareness functions as a crucial mediator: legal culture shapes the content, sources, and perceived trustworthiness of legal information, which in turn determines whether awareness translates into normative commitment and voluntary compliance or merely into strategic, calculative, or evasive behaviour. The analysis identifies three pathways—normative internalization, institutional trust, and social norm cascades—through which legal culture and awareness jointly produce compliance. The study contributes a dynamic theoretical model that accounts for variation across legal cultures and highlights practical implications for legal communication, civic education, institutional design, and regulatory policy.

Keywords: Compliance; Legal Consciousness; Legal Culture; Legal Socialization; Legitimacy; Procedural Justice; Public Awareness; Rule of Law

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1. INTRODUCTION

Every legal system depends, ultimately, on the willingness of its subjects to obey its commands. No state, however well-resourced its enforcement apparatus, can compel universal compliance through coercion alone; the daily operation of law relies on a reservoir of voluntary cooperation, habitual conformity, and normative commitment that is as cultural as it is institutional (Tyler, 2006; Friedman, 2011). Understanding why people obey the law—and why, under certain conditions, they do not—is therefore a central question for socio-legal scholarship, with profound

implications for the design of effective regulatory policy, the legitimacy of governing institutions, and the very survival of the rule of law.

Decades of empirical research have demonstrated that instrumental deterrence, the dominant paradigm in law-and-economics and much policy thinking, accounts for only a limited portion of compliance behaviour. The certainty and severity of punishment exert some influence, particularly for calculative actors and low-stakes regulatory contexts, but the explanatory power of deterrence models consistently proves modest (Paternoster, 2010; MacCoun, 1993). Normative factors—beliefs about the moral validity of the law, perceptions of procedural fairness, trust in legal authorities—routinely emerge as stronger predictors of compliance in domains ranging from tax payment to environmental regulation to adherence to public health directives during the COVID-19 pandemic (Murphy, 2005; Van Rooij et al., 2021). This finding has led to a rich body of theory centred on legitimacy and procedural justice, which posits that people obey law when they believe that legal authorities are entitled to be obeyed and when they experience legal processes as fair, respectful, and transparent (Tyler, 2006; Jackson et al., 2012a).

Yet, the legitimacy-procedural justice paradigm, for all its explanatory power, leaves important questions unanswered. It tends to assume a relatively stable, information-rich environment in which individuals form coherent judgments about legal institutions based on direct experience or reliable public information. In many societies, however, public awareness of law is fragmentary, distorted, or systematically manipulated. Legal knowledge is rarely the product of dispassionate civic education; it is filtered through social networks, media representations, cultural narratives, and historical experiences that shape not only what people know about law but how they feel about it (Hertogh, 2018; Silbey, 2005). The concept of legal culture—the cluster of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavioural dispositions that a population holds toward law and legal institutions (Nelken, 2012; Cotterrell, 2006)—captures this broader normative environment, yet it is often treated at such a high level of abstraction that its concrete influence on compliance remains underspecified.

The central puzzle animating this article is the connection between legal culture, public awareness of law, and compliance. Under what conditions do legal-cultural frameworks promote accurate and normatively committed legal awareness, and when do they foster ignorance, cynicism, or strategic evasion? How does public awareness mediate between the broad cultural dispositions of a society and the specific compliance decisions of individuals and communities? Existing scholarship has addressed these questions in fragments. The legal culture literature maps national and regional differences in attitudes toward law but rarely traces the micro-level mechanisms connecting these attitudes to behaviour (Blankenburg & Bruinsma, 1994; Gibson & Caldeira, 1996). The legal consciousness tradition explores how ordinary people understand and interact with law but has been criticized for its predominantly U.S.-centric focus and insufficient attention to cross-cultural variation (Hertogh, 2018; Chua & Engel, 2019). The procedural justice literature has generated impressive empirical findings but has been applied unevenly outside Western democracies, raising questions

about its cultural universality (Bradford et al., 2014; Tankebe, 2013). A systematic integration that explains how legal culture and public awareness jointly produce compliance across different societal contexts remains absent.

This article addresses that gap. Its primary objective is to develop an integrated, multi-level theoretical framework that traces the pathways from macro-level legal culture through meso-level institutional communication and micro-level public awareness to individual and collective compliance behaviour. Three subsidiary objectives structure the analysis: to critically synthesize the disparate literatures on legal culture, public awareness, and compliance; to identify the mechanisms that mediate and moderate the relationship between legal culture and compliance; and to illustrate the framework's utility through comparative discussion of distinctive legal-cultural contexts. The study contributes to socio-legal theory by moving beyond the deterrence-versus-legitimacy debate and offering a culturally sensitive, mechanism-based account of how law achieves—or fails to achieve—compliance. Its practical significance lies in providing guidance for policymakers, legal educators, and institutional designers seeking to foster compliance in societies characterized by high legal-cultural heterogeneity and low institutional trust.

The article proceeds by reviewing the foundational and contemporary literature, outlining the qualitative socio-legal methodology, presenting and discussing the integrated framework through an examination of illustrative legal-cultural contexts, and concluding with theoretical and practical implications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept of Legal Culture

The term “legal culture” was popularized by Lawrence Friedman (1975, 2011) to denote the ideas, attitudes, values, and expectations that a society holds toward law and legal institutions. Friedman distinguished between internal legal culture—the norms and orientations of legal professionals—and external legal culture, the beliefs and attitudes of the general population. This distinction highlights a crucial dynamic: the transmission of legal norms from the professional sphere to the public sphere is never direct or complete, but is mediated by a range of social, political, and communicative processes (Nelken, 2012). Subsequent scholarship has refined the concept along several dimensions. David Nelken (2012) has emphasized the comparative utility of legal culture, using it to explain persistent differences in litigation rates, regulatory styles, and compliance patterns across jurisdictions. Roger Cotterrell (2006) has situated legal culture within a broader sociology of law, arguing that it serves as the interpretive framework through which legal norms acquire social meaning and motivational force. James Gibson and Gregory Caldeira (1996) operationalized legal culture as a set of measurable attitudes toward the rule of law, judicial legitimacy, and legal compliance, demonstrating cross-national variation through survey research in Europe and the United States.

Critical voices have cautioned against the reification of legal culture into a homogeneous, static entity. Anthropologists and socio-legal scholars have shown that within any society, multiple legal cultures coexist—professional cultures, subaltern cultures, and hybrid cultures that emerge at the intersection of state law and customary or religious normativity (Merry, 1988; Chua, 2015). In postcolonial and pluralistic legal orders, the state’s legal culture often competes with, rather than dominates, the normative frameworks of indigenous, religious, or community-based legal systems (Sieder, 2017). Legal culture, on this reading, is not a uniform national attribute but a field of contestation and negotiation. Nevertheless, even critics acknowledge that broad, shared orientations toward law exist and exert demonstrable influence on institutional behaviour and public attitudes (Hertogh, 2018).

2.2 Public Awareness of Law: Knowledge, Perceptions, and Ignorance

Public awareness of law encompasses both the cognitive dimension—what people know about specific legal rules—and the evaluative dimension—how they perceive, interpret, and judge those rules. Empirical studies consistently reveal that public legal knowledge is fragmentary and often inaccurate. Classic surveys in the United States and the United Kingdom found that large proportions of the population are ignorant of basic legal rights and procedures, relying on media representations and popular narratives rather than direct engagement with legal texts (Genn, 1999; Pleasence et al., 2013). Yet, ignorance is not random; it is patterned by social position, cultural proximity to legal institutions, and the salience of particular laws to everyday life. Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey’s (1998) influential study of legal consciousness in the United States demonstrated that ordinary people construct narratives of law—“before the law,” “with the law,” and “against the law”—that shape their disposition toward compliance, resistance, and evasion. These narratives are not merely individual cognitive frames but collective cultural products, transmitted through communities and shaped by historical experience.

Subsequent research has extended the legal consciousness framework into comparative contexts, revealing significant variation in how publics understand and orient themselves toward law. Marc Hertogh (2018) introduced the concept of “legal alienation,” describing a condition in the Netherlands—and, by extension, other societies—where citizens perceive law as distant, opaque, and disconnected from their lived normative worlds, a perception that breeds indifference and strategic non-compliance rather than normative commitment. Lynette Chua and David Engel (2019) have explored legal consciousness in Southeast Asia, showing how the interaction between state law, customary practice, and religious norms produces hybrid forms of awareness that do not map neatly onto Western models. In post-authoritarian and post-conflict societies, public awareness of law is deeply inflected by historical legacies of instrumentalized law and politicized justice; citizens may know the law but view it as a tool of power rather than a framework for justice, a disposition that severely attenuates its normative force (Kurkchian, 2011).

2.3 Compliance Theories: Deterrence, Legitimacy, and Morality

The literature on compliance has been dominated by two competing paradigms. The deterrence paradigm, rooted in rational choice theory and behavioural economics, posits that individuals comply with law when the expected costs of violation outweigh the expected benefits (Becker, 1968). This model generated extensive empirical research on the effects of sanction certainty and severity, yielding mixed results. While some studies find deterrent effects for particular categories of behaviour—such as tax evasion and traffic violations—the overall explanatory power of deterrence variables is limited, and the model struggles to account for widespread compliance in the absence of credible enforcement (MacCoun, 1993; Paternoster, 2010).

The legitimacy paradigm, associated primarily with Tom Tyler and his collaborators, argues that people comply with law primarily because they believe legal authorities are legitimate and entitled to be obeyed, a belief that is strongly influenced by perceptions of procedural justice—the fairness, transparency, and respectfulness of legal processes (Tyler, 2006; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). This paradigm has received robust empirical support across multiple domains, including policing, taxation, and regulatory compliance (Murphy, 2005; Jackson et al., 2012b). Importantly, legitimacy has been shown to predict compliance independently of deterrence judgments, and in many contexts, its effects are stronger.

A third strand highlights personal morality—individuals' independent normative judgments about the rightness or wrongness of specific conduct—as a driver of compliance, sometimes distinct from both deterrence and institutional legitimacy (Robinson & Darley, 1995; Darley, 2009). When law aligns with personal moral beliefs, compliance is spontaneous and habitual; when law conflicts with morality, compliance becomes contingent on enforcement or countervailing normative commitments. This insight underscores the importance of legal culture, as it is within cultural frameworks that moral norms are formed, communicated, and collectively enforced.

2.4 The Gap: Toward an Integrated Cultural-Compliance Framework

Despite the richness of these separate literatures, an integrated account of how legal culture and public awareness jointly produce compliance remains elusive. The legal culture literature operates at a macro-sociological level and rarely specifies the micro-mechanisms linking cultural orientations to individual behaviour. The public awareness and legal consciousness traditions provide rich micro-level data but have been criticized for insufficient engagement with the structural and institutional factors that shape what publics come to know and believe about law. Compliance studies, particularly in the procedural justice tradition, have largely been conducted in Western, high-trust legal cultures, raising questions about generalizability. Studies in non-Western and post-authoritarian contexts have produced inconsistent findings: some replicate the procedural justice effect, while others find that instrumental or identity-based factors are more influential (Tankebe, 2013; Bradford et al., 2014; Reisig & Lloyd, 2009).

The gap, in essence, is a missing middle: the mechanisms through which broad cultural orientations toward law translate into the specific awareness, attitudes, and motivations that govern compliance behaviour. This article fills that gap by constructing

a multi-level model that specifies these mediating pathways, drawing on comparative illustrations from distinctive legal-cultural contexts.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-building socio-legal methodology, combining critical theoretical synthesis with comparative case illustration. The approach is interpretive and integrative rather than hypothesis-testing, appropriate to the objective of constructing a conceptual framework that bridges disparate literatures and explains cross-cultural variation in compliance (Banakar & Travers, 2005).

The research design comprises two phases. The first phase involves a systematic synthesis of the theoretical and empirical literature across the fields of legal culture studies, legal consciousness and public awareness research, and compliance studies (including deterrence, procedural justice, legitimacy, and personal morality traditions). This synthesis is analytical rather than merely descriptive: it identifies key concepts, mechanisms, points of agreement and divergence, and unresolved theoretical tensions, using these to construct an integrated model. The model operates at three levels: the macro-level of legal culture (shared orientations toward law, institutional trust, historical legacies), the meso-level of institutional and communicative processes (legal education, media representation, procedural experiences), and the micro-level of individual awareness, attitudes, and compliance behaviour.

The second phase applies this model through a comparative discussion of illustrative legal-cultural contexts. Three context clusters were selected to represent maximal variation on dimensions relevant to the framework: the Nordic high-trust legal cultures (Denmark, Norway, Sweden), post-authoritarian legal cultures in Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Romania), and legally pluralistic societies (India, South Africa, Kenya). These are not treated as formal case studies with controlled comparison but as empirical reference points that illuminate the operation of the model's mechanisms in context. Data for this phase are drawn from secondary sources: published socio-legal scholarship, comparative survey data (including the European Social Survey, World Values Survey, and Afrobarometer), institutional reports, and illustrative judicial and policy developments. The analysis does not rely on primary empirical data collection.

The validity of the synthetic framework is assessed through its internal coherence, its capacity to integrate previously disconnected findings, and its ability to generate plausible explanations for observed cross-cultural variation in compliance patterns. As with all theory-building qualitative research, the framework is offered as a provisional explanatory account to be refined through future empirical testing. No human participants were involved, and standard academic integrity norms apply.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the integrated framework and discusses its application. The discussion is structured around three major findings: (4.1) legal culture as the architect of public legal awareness; (4.2) three mediating pathways linking awareness to

compliance; and (4.3) the moderating role of historical legacies and institutional communication.

4.1 Legal Culture as the Architect of Public Legal Awareness

The first finding emerging from the theoretical synthesis is that legal culture does not simply colour an otherwise objective public understanding of law; it fundamentally shapes the content, sources, and perceived trustworthiness of legal information, thereby constructing the cognitive and evaluative landscape in which public awareness is formed. This influence operates through three mechanisms: normative framing, institutional trust calibration, and narrative production.

Normative framing refers to the tendency of legal culture to establish the baseline expectations against which specific laws are evaluated. In societies with a legal culture characterized by high levels of generalized trust in state institutions—the Nordic countries being the archetypal examples—citizens tend to approach law with a presumption of legitimacy and benevolence. Compliance is framed as a civic duty rather than a strategic calculation, and awareness of specific legal requirements is integrated into a broader normative identity of law-abidingness (Jackson et al., 2012a; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). Survey data from the European Social Survey consistently show that Nordic populations report not only high trust in police and courts but also high levels of subjective compliance across regulatory domains, a pattern that holds even when the deterrence environment is relatively mild (Hough, 2013). This suggests a legal-cultural environment in which public awareness is a resource for conformity rather than a tool for evasion.

Conversely, in post-authoritarian legal cultures, the legacy of instrumentalized law—where law was experienced as a tool of state repression rather than a framework for justice—generates a durable normative frame of scepticism and distance. Research on legal consciousness in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe reveals that citizens often possess substantial formal knowledge of legal rules but view them as instruments of elite power, to be negotiated, circumvented, or strategically invoked rather than internalized as normative commitments (Kurkchiyan, 2011; Grodeland, 2010). Public awareness in this context is characterized by what Hertogh (2018) terms “cynical knowingness”: citizens know the law but regard compliance as contingent on enforcement and personal advantage. Quantitative studies confirm that in Poland and Hungary, procedural fairness exerts a weaker effect on compliance than in Western Europe, and instrumental calculations and personal morality play proportionally larger roles (Grzymała-Busse, 2019; Boda & Medve-Bálint, 2017).

Institutional trust calibration refers to the process through which legal culture determines the level of trust citizens place in the institutions that produce and communicate legal information. Where trust is high, institutional communications—statutory publications, judicial decisions, regulatory guidance—are received as credible and authoritative, facilitating accurate public awareness. Where trust is low, citizens turn to alternative information sources—social networks, community leaders, informal intermediaries—whose representations of law may be incomplete, distorted, or

strategically deployed. In legally pluralistic contexts, this dynamic is particularly pronounced. In many sub-Saharan African societies, customary and religious authorities command greater trust than state legal institutions, and public awareness of state law is often mediated through these trusted intermediaries (Ubink, 2018; Cheeseman, 2018). The resulting awareness is hybrid: citizens may possess knowledge of both state law and customary norms, but the normative force of each depends on the perceived legitimacy of its source. Compliance with state law in such environments often requires alignment between state and customary normative frameworks; where they conflict, state law is frequently evaded or subordinated.

Narrative production refers to the way legal culture generates and sustains collective stories about law—stories of justice or injustice, efficacy or failure, protection or oppression—that profoundly shape public awareness at an affective and identity-based level. Ewick and Silbey's (1998) three legal consciousness narratives—before the law, with the law, against the law—are products of a specific American legal culture with its distinctive history of rights mobilization and racialized legal experience. In other cultural settings, different narratives predominate. Postcolonial legal cultures in South Asia often generate narratives of law as simultaneously aspirational and alien, a colonial inheritance that promises equality but delivers hierarchy, producing an ambivalent awareness characterized by strategic invocation and profound distrust (Chua & Engel, 2019; Baxi, 2006). The South African constitutional narrative of transformative constitutionalism, deliberately cultivated by the post-apartheid Constitutional Court and civil society, represents a conscious effort to reshape legal culture through the production of new narratives that link law to liberation and dignity (Klug, 2010). The Court's socioeconomic rights jurisprudence, even when not fully enforced, generates narratives that sustain a public awareness of law as a site of moral possibility, contributing to compliance in domains such as housing and healthcare through the legitimating force of aspirational norms (Liebenberg, 2010).

The crucial theoretical insight is that public awareness of law is not an exogenous variable that can be manipulated through information campaigns alone; it is an endogenous product of legal culture. Efforts to improve public legal awareness must therefore engage with the cultural frameworks that determine how legal information is received, interpreted, and acted upon. Practical interventions—public legal education, legal empowerment, community-based paralegal programmes—succeed to the extent that they work with, rather than against, the grain of legal-cultural norms, leveraging trusted intermediaries and culturally resonant narratives.

4.2 Three Pathways from Awareness to Compliance

The second major finding concerns the mechanisms through which public awareness translates into compliance. The integrated model identifies three distinct but interacting pathways: normative internalization, institutional trust, and social norm cascades.

Normative internalization occurs when legal awareness leads individuals to incorporate legal norms into their personal moral framework, such that compliance

becomes voluntary and self-reinforcing. This pathway is most effective when laws align with pre-existing cultural values and when individuals perceive the law as morally justified. Research on tax compliance across Nordic and some Western European countries demonstrates high levels of voluntary compliance driven by internalized norms of civic duty, even in the absence of high audit probabilities (Alm & Torgler, 2011). In these contexts, public awareness campaigns that emphasize shared social responsibility and the public goods funded by taxation reinforce internalization, whereas campaigns focused on deterrence can paradoxically crowd out intrinsic motivation. However, the internalization pathway is vulnerable to cultural disruption. When legal norms change faster than cultural attitudes—as with progressive gender equality legislation in patriarchal societies, or environmental regulation in economies dependent on extractive industries—internalization fails, and compliance becomes dependent on external enforcement or social pressure, creating fragile and contested compliance regimes.

Institutional trust constitutes a second pathway, closely aligned with the procedural justice paradigm. Even when individuals do not personally internalize a legal norm, they may comply because they trust the institutions that make and enforce the law and believe those institutions are procedurally fair. This pathway is particularly important for regulatory domains where public awareness is low and personal moral intuitions are weak—complex financial regulation, technical environmental standards, pharmaceutical safety rules. Trust-based compliance operates through the delegation of normative judgment: citizens trust that the regulatory process has produced rules that are reasonable and justified, even if they do not fully understand them. Empirical research confirms that trust in regulatory institutions mediates the relationship between awareness and compliance in domains such as food safety, vaccine regulation, and financial reporting (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Van Rooij & Fine, 2021). However, this pathway is acutely vulnerable to scandals, regulatory failures, and political attacks on institutional credibility. The 2008 financial crisis, the Volkswagen emissions scandal, and public controversies over vaccine approvals during the COVID-19 pandemic all eroded institutional trust and, with it, trust-based compliance, generating significant public non-compliance even where legal awareness was technically high.

Social norm cascades represent the third pathway. Individuals often comply with law not because of personal moral conviction or institutional trust but because they perceive that others in their social environment comply and that non-compliance would invite social disapproval. Legal awareness contributes to this pathway when it includes knowledge of the law's social legitimacy—the perception that the law is widely accepted and followed within one's community. Sunstein's (1996) work on expressive law and the norm cascade model of Cass Sunstein and others explains how legal enactments can shift perceived social norms, generating compliance through social conformity rather than internalization or institutional trust. Empirical studies of anti-smoking legislation, seatbelt laws, and recycling mandates provide evidence for this mechanism: initial compliance is driven by law's signaling effect, which communicates that a behaviour is now socially unacceptable, and over time, this social disapproval is internalized as a personal norm (McAdams, 2015; Tankard & Paluck, 2017). The normative internalization

that results from a successful norm cascade illustrates the dynamic interaction of the three pathways: social conformity can bootstrap the internalization process, creating a self-sustaining compliance culture.

In different legal-cultural settings, one pathway may dominate, but the most robust compliance regimes are those in which all three pathways reinforce one another. Nordic legal cultures exemplify this synergy: internalized civic norms, high institutional trust, and dense social norm networks combine to produce exceptionally high compliance across regulatory domains (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). In post-authoritarian contexts, by contrast, low institutional trust undermines the trust pathway, while collective memories of state instrumentalization of law weaken the internalization pathway; compliance is sustained, where it exists, primarily through social norms and the continued presence of enforcement, yielding a more fragile equilibrium (Boda & Medve-Bálint, 2017). In legally pluralistic contexts, social norms may operate in tension with state law: community norms may actively discourage compliance with state law that is perceived as illegitimate, and institutional trust in customary authorities may eclipse trust in formal legal institutions, creating a compliance environment where the state's legal culture is only one among multiple competing normative systems (Ubink, 2018).

4.3 Historical Legacies and Institutional Communication as Moderators

The third major finding is that the strength and configuration of the three pathways are moderated by two critical factors: historical legacies and the quality of institutional communication.

Historical legacies shape legal culture in durable ways that outlast regime changes. The experience of living under a legal system that served repressive or extractive ends produces collective memories and transmitted attitudes that persist across generations. Post-authoritarian societies in Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and parts of Africa and Asia exhibit legal cultures characterized by low institutional trust, high perceptions of corruption, and a prevalence of instrumental orientations toward law—patterns that direct empirical research links to historical experiences of legalized repression (Grzymała-Busse, 2019; Mishler & Rose, 2001). These legacies moderate compliance by attenuating the institutional trust pathway and weakening the capacity of law to signal legitimate social norms. In such contexts, legal reforms alone cannot rapidly rebuild trust; cultural change requires sustained institutional performance that demonstrates procedural fairness, independence, and effectiveness over time, coupled with deliberate communicative strategies that acknowledge historical wrongs and construct new institutional narratives.

Postcolonial legal legacies add a further dimension. In societies where state law was imposed through colonial domination and remains culturally associated with foreign power, legal awareness is often mediated through a framework of postcolonial critique that delegitimizes law's normative claims. Research from India, Kenya, and South Africa documents how the colonial origins of legal institutions and doctrines continue to shape public perceptions, generating an awareness that is simultaneously

dependent on law for rights mobilization and deeply mistrustful of law as an instrument of elite domination (Baxi, 2006; Mutua, 2016; Chanock, 2001). Compliance in these contexts often takes the form of strategic legal mobilization—using law as a resource in political and social struggles—rather than habitual voluntary conformity, a pattern that reflects the ambivalent legal consciousness produced by colonial legal culture.

Institutional communication—the manner, content, and channels through which legal institutions communicate with the public—moderates the translation of awareness into compliance. Transparent, accessible, and culturally sensitive communication can foster trust and accurate awareness; opaque, legalistic, or culturally dismissive communication can do the opposite. Studies of tax compliance demonstrate that providing taxpayers with clear, non-threatening information about how taxes are used, framed in terms of shared public benefits rather than legal obligation, significantly increases voluntary compliance (Alm & Torgler, 2011). Research on health law compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic found that public trust in government communication was a stronger predictor of adherence to lockdowns and vaccination than knowledge of the specific regulations (Van Rooij et al., 2021; Devine et al., 2021). Conversely, in Poland and Hungary, government communication strategies that openly disparage legal institutions and frame judicial independence as an obstacle to popular sovereignty have actively eroded institutional trust and weakened compliance with judicial decisions, illustrating how political communication can weaponize cultural narratives to disable law’s normative force (Sadurski, 2019).

The practical implication is that institutional designers and policymakers cannot treat public legal awareness as a technocratic variable to be optimized through better information dissemination. Awareness is embedded in cultural meaning systems and historical experiences. Strategies that build compliance must simultaneously address the legal-cultural environment, the institutional communication climate, and the specific content of public legal knowledge. Civic education, legal empowerment programmes, and community-based justice initiatives represent promising interventions, but their effectiveness depends on their sensitivity to local legal culture and their ability to work through trusted intermediaries rather than centralized state channels (Maru & Gauri, 2018; Golub, 2003).

4.4 Synthesis: The Dynamic Legal Culture–Awareness–Compliance Model

The integrated model that emerges from this analysis can be summarized as follows. Legal culture, at the macro level, establishes the normative, institutional, and narrative frameworks within which public awareness of law is formed. Public awareness, at the micro level, encompasses cognitive knowledge of specific laws and evaluative orientations toward those laws—perceptions of legitimacy, moral congruence, and social acceptability. The relationship between awareness and compliance is mediated by three pathways—normative internalization, institutional trust, and social norm cascades—whose relative strength is moderated by historical legacies and the quality of institutional communication. Compliance, in turn, feeds back into legal culture: sustained compliance experiences can gradually shift cultural orientations, while

patterns of widespread non-compliance can entrench cultures of legal alienation and cynicism.

This model has several theoretical virtues. It integrates previously disconnected literatures. It specifies mechanisms and moderators rather than offering generic correlations. It accommodates cross-cultural variation without abandoning the ambition of a general explanatory framework. It avoids both the reductionism of pure deterrence models and the cultural determinism of some legal culture scholarship by recognizing that culture is both a constraint on and a product of law's operation. The model is offered not as a final word but as a coherent framework for organizing existing knowledge and guiding future empirical research.

5. CONCLUSION

This article set out to explain how legal culture and public awareness interact to produce compliance in modern societies. The principal findings are threefold. First, legal culture acts as the architect of public legal awareness, shaping through normative framing, institutional trust calibration, and narrative production what citizens know about law and how they evaluate it. Awareness is not a neutral cognitive resource; it is culturally constituted, historically inflected, and institutionally mediated. Second, public awareness translates into compliance through three pathways—normative internalization, institutional trust, and social norm cascades—whose configuration varies systematically across legal-cultural contexts. Third, historical legacies of authoritarianism, colonialism, and institutional failure, together with the quality of institutional communication, moderate the strength of these pathways, accounting for much of the observed cross-national variation in compliance regimes.

The theoretical contribution of the study is the articulation of an integrated, multi-level model of legal culture, awareness, and compliance that moves beyond the deterrence-versus-legitimacy stalemate and the fragmentation of existing scholarship. By specifying the mechanisms that connect macro-cultural orientations to micro-level behaviour, the model provides a framework for explaining when and why law achieves durable voluntary compliance, and when compliance remains shallow, strategic, or absent. The concept of legal culture is operationalized not as a vague background condition but as a set of identifiable mechanisms with testable implications.

The practical implications are significant. For legal policymakers, the findings underscore the futility of attempting to engineer compliance through sanction enhancements alone, or through public information campaigns that ignore the cultural frameworks in which legal information is received. Compliance-building requires investment in procedural fairness, institutional transparency, and culturally sensitive communication; it requires engaging with the historical narratives that shape public trust; and it requires recognizing that in legally pluralistic societies, state law must negotiate its authority with other normative orders rather than assert a monopoly of legitimacy. For legal educators and civil society organizations, the model highlights the importance of legal empowerment strategies that build awareness through trusted community intermediaries, linking legal knowledge to culturally resonant values and

collective action. For international rule-of-law actors, the findings caution against the transplantation of institutional templates without attention to the legal-cultural ecologies that determine their reception and effectiveness.

The study has limitations that invite further research. The illustrative comparative discussion, while valuable for theory-building, does not constitute a rigorous empirical test of the model's causal claims. Future research should develop quantifiable indicators of the model's constructs—public legal awareness profiles, pathway configurations, cultural orientation scales—and test the model through cross-national survey designs, longitudinal studies that track cultural and compliance shifts over time, and experimental methods that isolate specific mechanisms. The applicability of the model to non-state normative systems, such as corporate compliance cultures, international legal regimes, and digital platform governance, warrants dedicated investigation. The role of new information technologies—social media, algorithmic curation, artificial intelligence—in reshaping public legal awareness and the pathways to compliance represents an urgent frontier that the present framework can help to structure but does not fully address.

In an era of democratic fragility, proliferating disinformation, and declining trust in institutions across many societies, understanding the cultural conditions of law's effectiveness has never been more important. The analysis presented here offers a framework for that understanding—not as a panacea, but as a more realistic and nuanced basis for strengthening the rule of law in diverse and challenging contexts.

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