

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING
NATIONAL ECONOMICS UNIVERSITY



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**ANALYZING THE DYNAMICS OF BRIBERY-
PRONE RELATIONSHIP IN VIETNAM: A
PERSPECTIVE OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT
THEORY AND THE NORM OF RECIPROCITY**

PHD DISSERTATION SUMMARY

HANOI - 2025

**THE RESEARCH PROJECT HAS BEEN CONDUCTED
AT THE NATIONAL ECONOMICS UNIVERSITY**

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Reviewers:

1:

2:

3:

**The dissertation defense at the university level
at National Economics University**

On:

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INTRODUCTION

1. Rationale of the research

Across the world, the business environment suffers substantial negative effects due to extensive bribery-based corruption (Khan, 2006; Transparency International, 2023). For businesses facing this challenging environment, it is urgent to understand the mechanisms of bribery. Why bribery-prone relationships occur, how they evolve, and how they become normalized are among important questions for businesses and lawmakers. Answers to these questions will help businesses develop strategies to mitigate bribery's negative effects and improve operational integrity. This understanding is particularly crucial for business entities going through an environment where proper law enforcement fails to secure equitable practices (Gouldner, 1960; Gillespie et al., 2020).

Traditionally, scholars have mostly employed rent-seeking and social norm perspectives to explain the initiation and perpetuation of bribery. According to the rent-seeking perspective (Rose-Ackerman, 1978; Shleifer & Vishny, 1993; Svensson, 2003), parties can actively engage in bribery with an expectation of abnormal rents. Regulation loopholes, monitoring shortages, and government officials' discretions contribute to the rise of bribes (Aidt, 2009; Dreher & Gassebner, 2013; Fisman & Golden, 2017; Khan, 2006; Rose-Ackerman, 1978). However, this approach leaves the interpersonal and social dimensions of bribery largely underexplored. Viewing bribery through such a purely transactional lens underestimates the complex role of cultural norms, social obligations, and emotional processes in sustaining corrupt behaviors (Fisman and Miguel, 2007). In literature, research on "guanxi" or relations in China has touched on the socio-cultural aspect of bribery (Cheung, 2004, (Luo, 2008; Steidlmeier, 1999; Sun and Ai, 2020; Wang, 2016; Wu et al., 2006). However, this body of research only focuses on contexts where cultures and/or institutions are conducive to the use of personal relationships in businesses. This study differs from "guanxi" research as it seeks to unravel the complex nature of bribery exchanges between parties who do not belong to the same close networks.

On the other hand, the social norm perspective suggests that parties commit bribery acts to adhere to the norms of corruption in the environment (Dong, Dulleck, & Torgler, 2012; Uhlenbruck, Rodriguez, Doh, & Eden, 2006; Venard, 2009). In this approach, the role of agents in interpreting and translating external pressures into practices has been well acknowledged (Scott, 2014; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), however, individual psychological processes leading to bribery acts have rarely been examined in the literature (Moore, 2008, Smith-Crowe, 2014).

Consequently, bypassing these individual psychological processes in theorizing corruption leaves important questions unanswered.

Addressing these gaps, this dissertation approaches bribery as a deeply embedded social and psychological phenomenon among partners who may not belong in the same network, focusing specifically on the interplay between norms of reciprocity and the moral disengagement processes. The norm of reciprocity, a foundational concept in social exchange theory, explains how individuals feel obligated to return favors, whether legal or illegal, when they receive an initial gesture of goodwill (Gouldner, 1960); while moral disengagement framework proposes that individuals may utilize cognitive mechanisms to disengage their moral self-sanctions to ease themselves into committing corruption acts. This dynamic creates conditions for what this research defines as obligation based bribery, in which illicit exchanges are not only rooted in instrumental cost benefit calculations but also in social and moral obligations to reciprocate. These obligations, whether pragmatic (aiming to achieve tangible benefits) or moral (aiming to maintain relational harmony or uphold personal loyalty), drive individuals, who may not belong to the same network, to offer or accept bribes, even when such actions conflict with broader ethical or professional standards (Puffer et al., 2010).

Beyond the social exchange mechanisms, the psychological processes employed by individuals in corrupt relationships are also crucial to understand bribery's resilience. The parties, pressured by personal connections or incentives, experience emotional discomfort when engaging in corrupt acts that contradict their role expectations or professional values (Moore, 2008). To manage this discomfort, these actors often rely on rationalization strategies, which allow them to disengage from moral principles while justifying their participation in

bribery.

The present study addresses the research gaps by integrating two complementary qualitative datasets: semi-structured interviews with public officials and in-depth interviews with business people. This study adopts a qualitative methodology to answer its exploratory "how" and "why" research questions. Given the sensitive and culturally complex nature of bribery, this approach is essential for capturing the rich, subjective experiences of those involved.

The implications of this research are particularly significant for business practitioners. By merging theoretical insights from social exchange theory and moral disengagement theory, the study equips businesspeople and leaders with knowledge to better identify and navigate corruption risks. For example, businesses can use the findings to proactively assess and reduce their reliance on transactional favor exchanges that may evolve into long term corrupt relationships. Furthermore, the insights into emotional and rationalization processes can serve as tools to promote ethical behavior within their organizations, by integrating training programs or codes of conduct that emphasize the dangers of moral erosion (McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 1996).

In summary, this dissertation provides an integrated view of how bribery evolves and persists, offering both theoretical contributions and practical solutions. Its focus on Vietnam provides valuable context specific insights into how socio cultural norms influence bribery dynamics. By helping businesses understand and address the root causes of corruption, this study offers a clear roadmap for fostering ethical and transparent relationships in environments prone to bribery. This research is thus a critical contribution to the field of business administration, offering actionable insights to help businesses operate

with integrity in complex, corruption-prone environments.

2. Research objectives and questions

Research objectives

The objectives of the research are threefold:

1. To examine the dynamics of obligation-based reciprocity in bribery exchanges occurring outside of pre-existing, close-knit networks in the Vietnamese context.
2. To investigate the individual-level psychological mechanisms, particularly emotional discomfort and rationalization strategies, and the role of moral disengagement in the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships.
3. To develop an integrated framework that explains the interplay between the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement in shaping the evolution of bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam.

Research questions:

1. How does the norm of reciprocity shape the formation and maintenance of obligations in bribery exchanges beyond pre-existing close-knit networks?
2. How do Vietnamese public officials and businesspeople experience and navigate the ethical and psychological dimensions of developing and sustaining bribery-prone relationships?
3. How do the dynamics of obligation-based reciprocity and the psychological mechanisms identified in this study integrate to explain the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships?

3. Subject and scope of the research

The research focuses on bribery-prone relationships between businesses and government officials in the Vietnamese context, where informal networks and social ties heavily influence social and organizational behavior. More specifically, the study investigates how norms of reciprocity create obligations that facilitate bribery exchanges and how public officials use moral disengagement to rationalize their actions and mitigate the conflict between professional ethics and social obligations.

The scope of research will primarily focus on:

The Vietnamese context: Vietnam as an emerging economy with unique cultural and institutional conditions that make it an ideal case study for understanding bribery through norms of reciprocity and moral disengagement. However, the theoretical frameworks and insights gained from the study have broader applications, particularly for businesses operating in other emerging markets or regions where informal practices dominate formal rules.

Public officials and business people as the primary actors: The study will center on the perspectives and experiences of both parties involved in bribery-prone relationships, exploring their motivations, rationalizations, and the evolution of their obligations.

The initiation and perpetuation phases of bribery-prone relationships: The research will examine the stages of how these relationships begin and how they are sustained over time, paying attention to the shifting dynamics of obligations and the evolving use of moral disengagement mechanisms.

The integration of the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement: The core of the research lies in understanding how these two theoretical constructs intersect and influence each other in the context of bribery. This includes exploring how reciprocal exchanges might lead to the internalization of obligations and how moral disengagement facilitates participation and continuation of bribery.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Key concepts

A bribery-prone relationship can start as a normal, benign, and perfectly legal one between a government official and businesspeople. However, over time, this relationship can be prone to turn into a corrupt one, occurring when businesses provide financial compensation or gifts or favors as a way to influence governmental decisions. In this research, a bribery-prone relationship refers to a relationship between a government official and another party in which bribery acts may emerge and mingle with legal/moral exchanges. A bribery-prone relationship takes place at the very first instance in which one party offers or receives a material favor, be it a gift, payment, or service, with an implicit expectation of future reciprocation.

In corruption studies, the difference between a “gift” and a “bribe” tends to be dependent on mutual perception by both parties regarding purpose, timing, and anticipated return. To a large extent, a “gift” is something that is bestowed in anticipation of nothing being returned, for example, an expression of gratitude or a sign of social courtesy. In contrast, a “bribe” has an implicit or explicit quid pro quo: the benefit is meant to change the recipient’s official decision or action (Rose-Ackerman, 2008).

1.2 Theoretical framework

This study deliberately adopts a dual-lens theoretical framework, integrating the Norm of Reciprocity from social exchange theory with Bandura’s (1999) theory of Moral Disengagement. This specific

combination is not arbitrary; it is methodologically essential. The Norm of Reciprocity is selected to explain the social mechanism, which is the observable behavioral script of obligation and exchange; while Moral Disengagement Theory is employed to explain the psychological mechanism, which is the internal cognitive script that allows individuals to rationalize their participation. Together, they provide a synergistic framework to deconstruct how these ethically complex relationships are formed, sustained, and justified.

The integration of the Norm of Reciprocity and Moral Disengagement Theory provides a uniquely tailored and powerful framework for this study. It allows for a holistic analysis that honors the complexity of the phenomenon, explaining both the social logic of the exchange and the psychological logic of its justification.

1.3 Moral disengagement theory

Bandura’s more thorough social cognitive theory, which emphasizes how behavioral, environmental, and personal factors interact to form human conduct, serves as the basis for moral disengagement theory. Moral agency is the foundation of this technique because the ability to maintain one’s own ethics dictates how decisions are made. Bandura posits that individuals do not passively absorb environmental influences; rather, they actively govern their conduct through self-reactive processes, such as self-sanctions and moral self-evaluation. High-level moral disengagers deactivate the self-regulatory process through cognitive procedures that control moral behavior.

1.5 Norm of Reciprocity

The underlying idea behind the principle of reciprocity is that people should repay favors with favors of equivalent value. The social norm surpasses strategic consideration by saying that benevolence

should be repaid. Key features of the norm of reciprocity include:

Moral Obligation: This norm is ethical elements because it exerts ethical pressure on people to do their part of the work. Awareness of obligation comes in the guise of obligation and gratitude, which spurs people to meet society standards of justice.

Social Stability and Cohesion: Reciprocity is also important for social stability because it fosters trust, which leads to cooperative networks in society. Reciprocal behavior fosters strong and reliable partnerships while diminishing opportunistic conduct among individuals.

Enforcement through Social Sanctions: Individuals who fail to reciprocate get punished by their social network with emotions of sadness along with isolation and negative impacts on their reputation.

1.6 Research gap

This research seeks to address the following gaps:

1. The limited understanding of obligation-based/reciprocity-driven bribery in relationships outside of pre-existing, close-knit networks, particularly in the moral realm.
2. The insufficient exploration of individual-level psychological mechanisms, including emotional discomfort, rationalization strategies, and the moral disengagement process across different stages of bribery-prone relationships.
3. The absence of an integrated framework combining relational norms (norms of reciprocity) and cognitive psychological processes (moral disengagement theory), which would explain how obligations are created, sustained, and rationalized in perpetuating bribery-prone relationships.

This research bridges these gaps by integrating the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement theories. It proposes an integrated framework that explains how obligation-based bribery starts, evolves, and is sustained over time. Such framework combines relational norms, psychological processes, and socio-cultural specificity to offer a holistic understanding of bribery-prone relationships. By doing so, this research provides actionable insights for business practitioners and policymakers aiming to design anti-corruption interventions that address both systemic and individual-level factors.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research context

The Vietnam story captures a wider story in many emerging market economies characterized by a deeply dynamic economy and weak institutions existing together in an intricate relationship. Vietnam stands out in acquiring the understanding of the role of a well-managed corporation and effective business administration on the economic development and social progress in emerging markets. Thus, studying the relationship of bribery in Vietnam is not only crucial for the development of the country, but extends other countries in the same predicament as Vietnam to learn from these challenges.

2.2 Methodology

Research Method

The research employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing in-depth interviews to gather rich, narrative data from government officials and business representatives in Vietnam. This study employed a rigorous Thematic Analysis approach to interpret the qualitative data collected from interviews. This method was selected as it provides a systematic framework for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning within the data, allowing the core findings to emerge directly from the participants' narratives.

While the original study had its own objectives, a subsequent review of the anonymized interview transcripts for this dissertation revealed emergent themes of profound relevance to the current research questions. Specifically, the dataset contained rich, detailed narratives about favor exchange, the norm of reciprocity, and the psychological

justifications used by officials, making it an exceptionally well-suited source of data for this thesis. The use of this fully anonymized, pre-existing dataset was deemed methodologically appropriate and ethically sound, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of themes that were present but not the central focus of the initial inquiry.

Sampling

The sample consisted of 23 government officials and 20 business people. The government officials were from various sectors, including Natural Resources, Finance, Trading, Construction, Transportation, and Inspection, and were located in districts such as Can Tho, Da Nang, Dong Thap, Ha Noi, HCMC, Hue, Nghe An, Son La, and Thai Binh.

The business people represented a range of industries and company sizes, from micro-enterprises in retail and civil contracting to large firms in agricultural produce. They were located in provinces including Can Tho, Da Nang, Ha Noi, HCMC, Nghe An, Son La, and Thai Binh.

The sample size for this cohort was not predetermined but was instead guided by the principle of thematic saturation. Saturation is the point at which collecting additional data yields diminishing returns, and no substantively new themes related to the research questions are emerging from the interviews.

Data Analysis

The analytical process began with data preparation and familiarization. Data transcribed from audio recordings were analyzed soon after collection, ensuring the coder retained as much detail as possible about the interview context. Audio files from in-depth interviews were manually transcribed within 24 hours of collection. This concurrent approach to data collection and analysis enhanced the reliability and validity of the qualitative research. Transcription was

done without technological assistance. This thorough process included noting pauses, filler words (e.g., "ah," "uh"), tone changes, and other nuances to ensure no data was overlooked.

Using NVivo software, the author applied open, axial, and selective coding to identify preliminary themes and categories. To verify that our analytical interpretations aligned with participants' intentions, member-checking was conducted after the initial coding phase. Concise summaries of emerging constructs were shared with a purposive subset of informants (eight public officials and four business representatives) who provided feedback in follow-up meetings.

To achieve transferability, the author provided rich, detailed accounts of participants' narratives, settings, and interactions. The author included extensive verbatim quotations by preserving pauses, hesitations, and tonal inflections to convey the emotional texture of participants' reflections.

To avoid individual bias and enhance dependability, two external qualitative scholars independently coded a randomly selected 20 percent of the transcripts. Through critical dialogue, we resolved discrepancies in code application and refined our coding definitions accordingly. An additional expert in organizational ethics reviewed our preliminary process model. These layers of independent scrutiny and discussion not only strengthened our analytical rigor but also ensured that our findings reflect a multiplicity of scholarly perspectives.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1 Two forms of bribery: Transaction vs. Obligation

The research identifies two distinct types of bribery. Transaction-based bribes are straightforward, one-time exchanges for an immediate result, such as paying to avoid a traffic ticket or speed up paperwork. The relationship does not persist beyond the transaction.

In contrast, obligation-based bribes, which the study found to be the overwhelming majority, are not about immediate gains. They are long-term investments where a briber provides favors to cultivate a relationship and create a sense of obligation in a public official, expecting illegal favors in return at a later date.

3.2. Pragmatic and moral obligations in bribery

In the exploration of the dynamics of bribery, two distinct types of obligation that govern reciprocal bribery relationships were discovered: pragmatic obligations and moral obligations. Both of these types of obligation are essential for understanding the mechanisms at play in how such corrupt practices operate.

From the perspective of a public official, pragmatic obligation refers to the urge to return favors to a partner, primarily driven by the benefits such reciprocations can give to the official. From the businesspeople's view, practical obligation is not just something they feel; it is something they create and use on purpose.

While practical obligation is based on defined advantages and disadvantages, another type that impacts bribery is moral obligation. For the public official, this is the obligation that comes with the feeling of owing a favor and the expectation of return that is deemed socially right and appropriate. On the other hand, businesspeople carefully create situations that build strong moral obligation in officials because they know it helps ensure long-term support.

3.3. Psychological Processes and Rationalization

Both parties experience significant internal conflict and use rationalization strategies to cope with their unethical behavior.

Government Officials: They often feel guilt, shame, and a fear of being trapped. To manage this, they rationalize their actions by focusing on helping specific people rather than the abstract harm to society ("beneficiary specificity") or by deliberately blurring the connection between the favor they received and the illegal favor they return ("evaluation subjectivity").

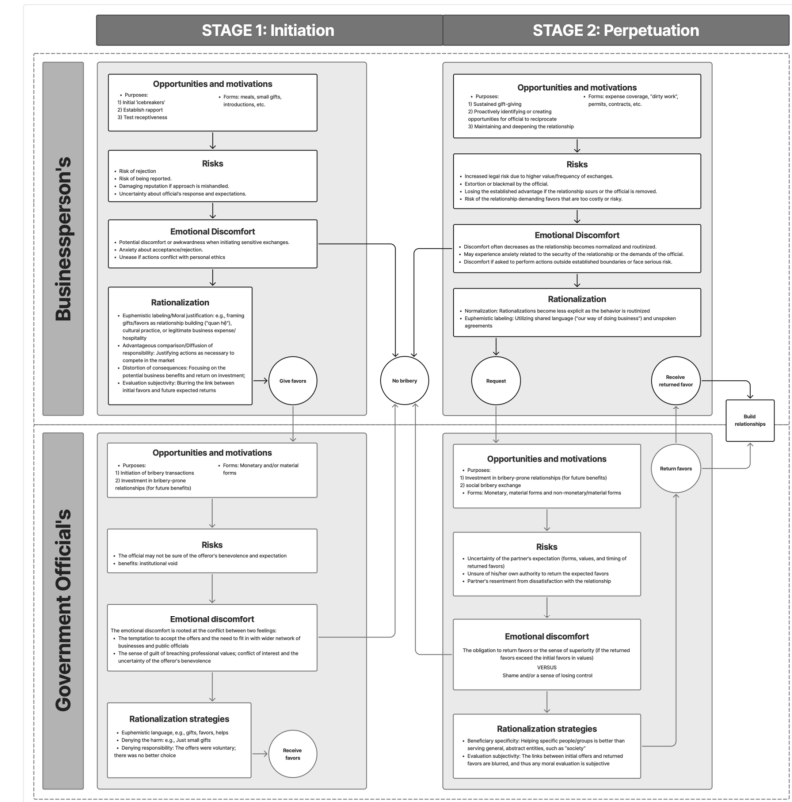
Businesspeople: They also experience initial anxiety and guilt. They employ several moral disengagement tactics, such as calling bribes "facilitation fees" (Euphemistic Labeling), blaming the "broken system" for forcing their hand (Displacement of Responsibility), or arguing their actions help create jobs and are for the "greater good" (Moral Justification). Over time, this behavior becomes normalized and feels like a standard part of doing business.

3.4. A Divergent Perspective

The study's key finding, confirmed by interviewing both groups, is the critical divergence in perspective. Businesspeople are the proactive architects of this system. They strategically and patiently cultivate obligations. Officials, on the other hand, often perceive themselves as passive participants who become trapped by these accumulating social debts. This reveals an unbalanced dynamic of entrapment, rationalization, and mutual dependence.

3.5. A process model of bribery-prone relationship evolvment

To further understand the bribery-prone relationship in depth, the author developed a model that explains the psychological processes involved in both the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships. The model integrates insights drawn from both government officials' and businesspeople's experiences, demonstrating how affective experiences, cognitive processing, the norm of reciprocity, and moral disengagement mechanisms interact across different stages of the relationship's lifecycle.



Process model of the initiation and perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships

Source: Developed by the author

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATION

4.1 Discussion of results

This research sought to analyze the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of bribery-prone relationships in Vietnam. Particularly, it focuses on their evolution into bribery-prone relationships. With the syntheses of theoretical constructs of social exchange theory, namely the norm of reciprocity, and moral disengagement theory, this study presents a novel explanation for how bribery is initiated, sustained, and normalized. The core of this explanation is the discovery of a deliberate process where an initial, transactional 'pragmatic obligation' is strategically converted into a durable, personal 'moral obligation'. The findings provide important insights into how these constructs interact to underlie corrupt behavior that exists in spite of regulatory as well as ethical constraints. This section integrates the overall findings of the study and illustrates how the findings satisfy its objectives. It also critically examines how the findings elucidate the broader issue of corruption in Vietnam.

4.2 Theoretical contributions of the research

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to understanding bribery. It does so by integrating theories of “social exchange theory” and “moral disengagement theory.” The study delves into the dynamics of bribery-prone relationships and broadens paradigms in multiple aspects. Specifically, it reveals how socio-cultural norms and psychological processes work together to form and maintain corrupt transactions. These contributions have implications not only for understanding corruption in Vietnam but also in broader contexts.

4.3 Practical implications

This study offers important practical insights for businesses, managers, policymakers, and anti-corruption agencies looking to understand bribery-prone relationships. Crucially, the research shows bribery isn't just a single transaction; it evolves within relationships. Therefore, strategies to reduce bribery must consider the interplay of cultural norms, personal ethical disengagement, and weaknesses in systems. These insights can help improve business practices, company policies, government actions, and anti-corruption programs in Vietnam and similar cultural contexts.

Bribery-prone relationships create significant risks for businesses, such as harming their reputation, leading to legal trouble, and inefficient use of resources. However, managers should realize that stopping bribery involves more than just enforcing compliance rules. By emphasizing the socio-cultural dimensions of reciprocity and moral disengagement, these findings help businesses grasp how bribery starts. More importantly, they show how it can be anticipated, reduced, and ultimately transformed into ethical interactions. Unlike traditional methods that rely heavily on top-down rules, this study emphasizes the importance of internal company practices, leadership actions, and actively engaging with stakeholders. These business-oriented implications provide practical guidance to establish competitive advantage without compromising integrity. The findings of this study offer several strategies for managers to implement.

4.4 Limitations and future research agenda

This study provides significant insights into bribery-prone relationships and its implications for enterprises; however, it possesses certain limitations.

One of the important limitations of this study is that it is limited to Vietnam. Vietnam is a proper case to study since it is a collectivist culture with high citizen corruption throughout its history. As a result of this focus, however, the results might not be the same in cultures or nations with other forms of government.

From a methodological standpoint, employing qualitative interviews and case studies limits the study's reach because of the naturally reduced sample sizes linked to these approaches. Qualitative methods are superb for comprehensive examination of complex relational difficulties, such as bribery. Nevertheless, further research could improve this by utilizing quantitative approaches.

4.5. Conclusion

This dissertation has carefully examined the relational dynamics of bribery-prone behaviors. In culturally complex environments like Vietnam, reciprocity and relational loyalty strongly influence business practices. By integrating theories of social exchange and moral disengagement, this study has offered a better understanding of how bribery emerges. Here, bribery is not merely a transactional act but is part of an evolving network of relationships shaped by cultural and institutional factors. This research elaborates on the interplay between socio-cultural norms and an individual's psychological process to highlight the complexity of bribery-prone relationships.

From a practical standpoint, the research findings help emphasize the importance of implementing ethically and culturally sensitive strategies in organizations operating in a bribery-prone environment. This dissertation has raised a framework where business managers can balance between competitiveness and ethics in relationships with government officials. This actionable framework includes emphasizing

ethical leadership, fostering transparency, and designing operational processes that mitigate corruption risks. The research also emphasizes the important role of government and policymakers in tackling structural drivers of bribery. By effectively utilizing the findings of this research, businesses as well as institutions can create an environment where ethical reciprocity is prioritized and sustainability is fostered.

In conclusion, this research makes a critical contribution to the field of business administration by merging ethical, cultural, and managerial perspectives to address one of the most enduring challenges in global business environments: bribery. By providing scholarly insights with actionable recommendations, this dissertation equips both academics and practitioners with more effective strategies for anti-corruption reform. Ultimately, this work lays the foundation for a future where businesses succeed not through shortcuts but by cultivating trust, transparency, and lasting value in their relationships.

**LIST OF WORKS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION
THAT THE PHD CANDIDATE HAS PUBLISHED**

1. Nguyen, T. V., Doan, M. H., & Tran, N. H. (2021), 'The perpetuation of bribery-prone relationships: A study from Vietnamese public officials', *Public Administration and Development*, 41(5), 244–256.
2. Tran, N. H. (2025), 'From obligation to corruption: The integration of the norm of reciprocity and moral disengagement in bribery-prone relationships', *International conference of soci-economic and environmental issues in development*, Hanoi, 11 June. Hanoi: Finance publishing house, pp 3819-3826.