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IMPACT OF TAX PENALTY ON TAXPAYERS' SELF-ASSESSMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Self-assessment, in Nigeria, was introduced to ease compliance, yet many taxpayers still find a way of not fully complying. Therefore, this study attempts to determine the impact of a tax penalty on self-assessment. Anchoring the research design on the cross-sectional survey method, we targeted the RED zone tax offices of the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) in the South-South Region of Nigeria. Applying the subjective sampling method, the study selected 300 respondents from FIRS staff and taxpayers. Descriptive analysis and PPMC were employed in the data analysis. The result showed that tax penalties have a significant and very strong positive impact on taxpayer self-assessment, with a significance value of 0.000 and correlation value of 0.855. The recommendations include ensuring that penalty guidelines are clearly communicated and uniformly enforced to maintain consistency and credibility, regularly reviewing penalty structures to ensure they remain proportionate and effective in deterring non-compliance and also considering a progressive penalty structure where the severity of penalties increases with repeated non-compliance but ensuring that first-time offenders are given opportunities for correction without excessive financial burden. The study concludes that the imposition of tax penalties significantly enhances self-assessment compliance among taxpayers.

Introduction

Tax compliance is a pivotal aspect of a nation's fiscal policy, directly influencing its revenue generation and economic stability (Devos, 2014). In Nigeria, the self-assessment tax system requires taxpayers to accurately report their income and calculate their tax liabilities (Yahaya & Bakare, 2018). To enforce compliance, tax authorities impose penalties on defaulters. Economic Deterrence Theory suggests that higher penalties can

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discourage tax evasion by increasing the perceived cost of non-compliance (Becker, 1968). However, the effectiveness of these penalties depends on enforcement mechanisms and taxpayers' perception of fairness (Oghuma, Izedonmi, & Asein, 2016).

The self-assessment tax system was introduced in Nigeria in 1991 to encourage voluntary compliance and reduce administrative burdens on tax authorities (Yahaya & Bakare, 2018). Under this system, taxpayers are responsible for calculating and remitting their tax liabilities with an expectation of honesty and accuracy. However, challenges such as tax evasion and underreporting persist, hindering optimal revenue collection (Devos, 2014). To address these issues, tax authorities have implemented penalties to deter non-compliance. According to Oghuma et al. (2016), penalties serve as a deterrent by increasing the financial consequences of tax evasion, thus influencing taxpayers' decision-making. The Economic Deterrence Theory suggests that individuals evaluate the costs and benefits of tax evasion before deciding whether to comply (Becker, 1968). Furthermore, the Theory of Planned Behavior argues that taxpayers' willingness to comply depends on their attitudes, perceived control, and social influences (Ajzen, 1991). Understanding the effectiveness of tax penalties is crucial for enhancing the self-assessment system and ensuring sustainable revenue generation.

Tax Penalty

Tax offenses, which are the cause of tax penalties, are a dangerous phenomenon that has constituted itself as a global monster against the developmental efforts of most developing nations of the world, Nigeria inclusive. Tax penalties are essential enforcement tools designed to deter non-compliance and encourage timely and accurate tax reporting. In Nigeria, tax penalties are imposed on taxpayers who fail to comply with tax laws, including late filing of returns, underpayment of taxes, and failure to register for tax purposes. These penalties are designed to encourage timely compliance with tax obligations and discourage deliberate delays or omissions in tax reporting. According to Ogbonna and Appah (2016), tax penalties are punitive measures imposed by tax authorities on taxpayers who fail to comply with tax laws. They describe tax penalty as a financial or legal repercussion faced by taxpayers for non-compliance with tax regulations. According to Bassey and Eze (2019), tax penalties are codified under Nigerian tax laws and vary depending on the specific tax type and duration of non-compliance. For instance, late filing penalties are calculated based on a percentage of the tax owed and accrue daily until the tax return is filed. Penalties serve as a tool employed by governments or tax authorities to deter non-compliance with tax laws (Egwanwor & Edori, 2024). Tax penalties, as defined by various scholars, are punitive measures imposed on taxpayers who fail to comply with tax laws. It encompasses fines, interest on unpaid taxes, and legal sanctions aimed at deterring non-compliance and encouraging timely and accurate tax reporting. They are sanctions imposed on taxpayers who fail to comply with tax laws.

Ogbonna and Appah (2016) highlight that penalties can take various forms, including fines, interest on unpaid taxes, and legal sanctions, aimed at deterring non-compliance and encouraging timely and accurate tax reporting. Penalties are punishments imposed or suffered for breaking a law or rule, as well as a loss, forfeiture, suffering, or similar event to which one commits by failing to perform some obligation or pay a financial fine. Tax penalties are seen due to failing to comply with tax laws, including late filing of tax returns, underreporting of income, and failure to pay taxes due. Accordingly, a tax penalty is a sanction that the tax law imposes for the commission of an unlawful act or for the failure to carry out a necessary act, such as failing to timely submit a return or fill out incorrect or undervalued forms, etc. (Oladele, Ndalu & Micah, 2021). The tax penalty, as a critical component of tax enforcement strategies, is designed to punish non-compliant behavior and deter future violations. These penalties include fines, interest on unpaid taxes, and other punitive measures. In Nigeria, tax penalties are designed to discourage tax evasion and encourage timely and accurate tax payments (Olowookere & Fasina, 2020). This act serves as punitive measures imposed on taxpayers for non-compliance with tax laws and regulations in Nigeria, and they are intended to deter tax evasion, promote voluntary compliance, and enhance revenue generation for the government. Tax penalties are essential to maintain the integrity of the tax system by discouraging tax evasion and ensuring that all taxpayers fulfill their obligations. The effectiveness of tax penalties depends on their severity, certainty, and timely enforcement by tax authorities. Well-designed penalty systems are crucial for promoting voluntary compliance and reducing the tax gap. Tax penalties as a deterrent mechanism used by tax authorities to enforce compliance with tax laws. They note that the imposition of penalties helps maintain fairness in the tax system by ensuring that non-compliant taxpayers are held accountable for their actions.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that tax penalties play a vital role in enhancing tax compliance. Olowookere and Fasina (2020) found that late filing penalties significantly improve the timeliness of tax return submissions. Yusuf and Sani (2018) demonstrated that late payment penalties effectively ensure prompt tax remittances, thereby supporting government revenues. Bassey and Eze (2019) highlighted that severe penalties for underreporting income deter taxpayers from misrepresenting their earnings, leading to more accurate tax reporting. Musa and Dike (2021) emphasized that penalties for failure to register for tax incentivize early registration, which is crucial for expanding the tax base. The importance of penalties underscores the failure to keep proper records and promote accurate tax assessments. Fagbemi and Uadiale (2017) pointed out that penalties for non-compliance with withholding tax obligations ensure the effectiveness of the withholding tax system.

Taxpayers' Self-Assessment

The Government of Nigeria introduced a system of tax administration called the Self-assessment Regime as a modern practice of paying taxes. It encourages taxpayers to assess themselves and pay their taxes voluntarily. The regime is based on the fact that taxpayers have the best information about their own activities and are therefore in a better position to assess their own tax liabilities.

Self-assessment is a method whereby a taxpayer is required to correctly compute his/her tax liability, properly complete the tax return, pay the self-assessed tax, and submit the tax returns together with the accompanying documents on or before the due date according to the relevant tax law (Federal Inland Revenue Service, 2013). Taxpayer self-assessment is an approach that relies on the integrity and accuracy of taxpayers to determine their tax obligations. In Nigeria, self-assessment is the prevailing method for tax filing, emphasizing the importance of prompt and accurate submission to avoid penalties and facilitate refund claims (Ogaluzor & Edori, 2023). Taxpayer self-assessment is a system in which taxpayers are responsible for calculating and reporting their own tax liabilities. This approach relies on taxpayers' honesty and accuracy, with tax authorities conducting audits and reviews to ensure compliance. Taxpayer self-assessment is a system in which taxpayers are responsible for calculating and reporting their tax liabilities. Under this system, taxpayers assess their income, deductions, and credits and file tax returns without direct intervention from tax authorities. A tax return filed by a taxpayer under the self-assessment regime is considered an assessment in its own right by law and will be accepted subject to verification of completeness.

The role of tax authorities is to verify the accuracy of self-reported information through audits and other enforcement mechanisms. The self-assessment regime helps taxpayers manage their tax affairs and be fully accountable without being forced to do so. The self-assessment regime empowers taxpayers, promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility toward tax obligations. It also facilitates quicker tax collection and reduces tax authorities' workload, allowing them to focus on enforcement and compliance verification. Without adequate enforcement, taxpayers may underreport their liabilities, leading to revenue losses (Musa & Dike, 2021).

The main objectives of the Self-Assessment Regime are: to make payment of tax easy by enabling taxpayers to assess themselves and pay a fair tax according to their business activities, to test the honesty and integrity of the taxpayer, to build trust in the taxpayer to make the tax administration system friendly and more efficient through: easing the process of paying tax; reducing the pressure on taxpayers by tax authorities; minimizing tax disputes between taxpayers and tax authorities; focusing more on supporting taxpayers to comply voluntarily, ensuring steady inflow of revenue to the government without waiting until revenue authorities reach every taxpayer.

Theoretical Framework

Economic Deterrence Theory

Established by Gary S. Becker (1968) posited that individuals make rational decisions by weighing the costs and benefits of their actions. In the context of taxation, this theory suggests that taxpayers are more likely to comply when the perceived cost of non-compliance (i.e., penalties and the likelihood of detection) outweighs the benefits of evasion. Therefore, stringent penalties and effective enforcement mechanisms are expected to deter tax evasion and promote compliance (Becker, 1968). It has to do with tax authorities using force and penalties to coerce taxpayers to comply with tax laws (Des-Wosu, Edori & Chuku, 2022). Oghuma et al. (2016) supported this argument, stating that increased penalties enhance compliance levels by discouraging tax evasion.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Proposed by Icek Ajzen in 1991, the Theory of Planned Behavior asserts that an individual's behavior is influenced by their intentions, which are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Classified a psychological theory that relates beliefs, behaviors, and attempts to explain human behavior (Ogaluzor & Edori, 2023). Applied to tax compliance, this theory implies that taxpayers' intentions to comply are affected by their attitudes toward taxes, societal norms regarding tax payment, and confidence in their ability to comply (Ajzen, 1991). Yahaya and Bakare (2018) argued that penalties can influence these factors by altering attitudes and perceived control, thereby affecting compliance behavior.

Empirical Review

Ndlovu and Schutte (2022) conducted a study on small business owners to determine how penalties influence the tax compliance behavior of small business owners. The investigation relied on qualitative research and collected data through semi-structured interviews with small business owners in Gauteng, South Africa, who had requisite experience. The investigation found that, to an extent, penalties encourage timely payment of taxes by small business owners; however, charging large penalties can discourage registering for taxes.

Idris (2022) empirically examined the influence of taxpayer awareness and tax penalties on tax administration. The study used survey design (cross-sectional) with a population comprising all registered corporate taxpayers covering the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. One hundred and fifty tax files of corporate taxpayers domiciled in FIRS (North-Central and South-West) zonal offices made up the sample. The sample size was selected by stratified random sampling. A partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis showed a positive influence of taxpayer awareness and tax penalties on tax administration in Nigeria. This means that taxpayer awareness and penalties are excellent predictors of tax administration.

Olowookere and Fasina (2020). Evaluated the Impact of Tax Penalties on Compliance Behavior in Nigeria using as a study population small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Oyo State. The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys of 300 SME owners and in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed using statistical and thematic analyses. The study found that tax penalties significantly deter non-compliance among SMEs. However, the effectiveness of penalties was moderated by the perceived fairness and consistency of the penalties' application.

The study conducted in Nigeria by Oghuma (2018) attempted to unveil the influence of tax audits and penalties on the tax compliance model of companies' income taxpayers. Using cross-sectional survey design on the population (all registered corporate taxpayers in Nigeria), selected one hundred and fifty (150) corporate taxpayers. Sample was made based on tax files from Edo State, and the sample size was selected based on stratified random sampling. The study adopted Palil's (2010) questions to gather data for the study. The result based on the ordinary least square (OLS) regression analysis shows that tax audit and tax penalty influence on tax compliance is significant.

The principal aim of Terrefe (2016) study was to explore the implementation of the self-assessment tax system and its impact on the level of tax compliance of taxpayers in Wolaita zone. The study was based on empirical studies by other scholars. The study concluded that self-assessment systems are generally considered to be an effective means of promoting taxpayers' tax compliance voluntarily under certain conditions, such as taxpayers' tax knowledge, tax system simplicity, effective tax laws enforcement and penalties, rendering good service to taxpayers, filing procedure that is simple and tax audits that are risk-based. Two hundred close-ended questionnaires were also administered to respondents that were purposively selected, and an unstructured interview was conducted in addition. Data that was gathered were systematically tabulated, and percentages, mean, and weighted mean were used in analyzing them while data gathered from the interview were incorporated directly in the study literature. The survey results indicated that although zone made an effort in implementing the self-assessment tax system, the results showed that the practice was not good.

Oladipupo and Obazee (2016) explored how taxpayer knowledge and penalties affect tax compliance. This study only considered SMEs in Nigeria. The study used the research design known as the survey, chose the questionnaire for data gathering, and analyzed the data using the ordinary least square regression method. The results showed that tax knowledge had a significant positive impact on tax compliance, whereas tax penalties had an insignificant positive impact on tax compliance.

James and Alley (2004) concentrated on small and medium enterprises in Nigeria and empirically investigated tax payers' knowledge and penalties' impact on tax compliance using a survey research design. The ordinary least squares regression was adopted to analyze the data gathered via the questionnaire. Findings showed positive significant relationship with tax knowledge and tax compliance while the result on tax positive impact on tax compliance.

Methodology

The study employed the cross-sessional survey method and used the structured questionnaire to obtain primary data from the RED zone tax offices of Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) in South-South Region of Nigeria via tax taxpayers and staff. Applying the subjective sampling method, 300 respondents were selected out of which 90 were staff of the FIRS, while 210 respondents were taxpayers in the RED zone of tax offices of the FIRS. Descriptive analysis and PPMC were employed in the analysis of the collated data from the closed-ended questionnaire administered.

Data Presentation

Table 1

S/N	STATEMENT	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
	Tax Penalty						
1	Penalties serve as punitive and deterrence measures against non-compliance with tax laws and regulations.	72	109	33	28	25	267
2	Combining tax penalties and other enforcement mechanisms effectively improves the tax compliance rate	34	87	56	49	41	267
3	The threat of penalties significantly reduces the incidence of tax evasion and avoidance.	21	70	11	97	68	267
	Taxpayer Self-Assessment						
4	Taxpayer Self-Assessment enhances tax compliance by promoting a sense of responsibility among taxpayers	118	149	0	0	0	267
5	The introduction of self-assessment ensures that more taxpayers will calculate their tax liabilities and file returns promptly.	77	163	20	7	0	267
6	Taxpayer self-assessment demystifies tax processes and reduces administrative burden on tax authorities	83	151	17	13	3	267

Table 2: Tax Penalty Responses

QN	Likert-scale value	No. of Responses	Value for Analysis
4	5	72	360
	4	109	436
	3	33	99
	2	28	56
	1	25	25
5	5	34	170
	4	87	348
	3	56	168
	2	49	98
	1	41	41
6	5	21	105
	4	70	280
	3	11	33
	2	97	194
	1	68	68

Table 3: Self-assessment Responses

QN	Likert-scale value	No. of Responses	Value for Analysis
10	5	118	590
	4	149	596
	3	0	0
	2	0	0
	1	0	0
11	5	77	385
	4	163	652
	3	20	60
	2	7	14
	1	0	0
12	5	83	415
	4	151	604
	3	17	51
	2	13	26
	1	3	3

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of all Variables

	N	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic
TAXPEN	15	165.4000	34.16958	132.33820	17513.400
SELFASS	15	226.4000	70.77508	274.11072	75136.686
Valid N (listwise)	15				

Based on the descriptive statistics shown above, tax penalty is 165.4000, 132.33820 and 17513.400 for the mean, standard deviation and variance, respectively; and for taxpayer self-assessment it is 226.4000, 274.11072, and 75136.686 for the mean, standard deviation and variance, respectively.

Ho: There is no significant relationship between tax penalties and self-assessment.

Table 5: Relationship between Tax Penalties and self-assessment

Correlations

		TAXPEN	SELFASS
TAXPEN	Pearson Correlation	1	.855**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	15	15
SELFASS	Pearson Correlation	.855**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	15	15

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 presents the relationship between tax penalties and tax registration. The table shows a correlation coefficient of r = 0.855** with a corresponding significant/probability value of 0.000. The correlation coefficient is also positive, indicating that an increase in self-assessment is associated with an increase in tax penalties. Thus, the analysis from table 5 shows that there is a significant relationship between tax penalties and self-assessment. Table 5 shows that the probability/significant value is 0.000, < 0.05 level of significance, hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and restates that a significant relationship exists between tax penalties and self-assessment.

Discussion of Results

The test of the hypotheses found a positive and very strong relationship between tax penalties and self-assessment, as shown in table 5 with the correlation coefficient value of r = 0.955** significant at pv = 0.000< 0.05. The 0.955 r value indicates that the variables are positively related and move in the same direction. This coefficient indicates a strong positive correlation between variables. A value of .855 suggests that as the tax penalty (TAXPEN) increases, self-assessment (SELFASS) also tends to increase. This indicates a strong association between higher tax penalties and higher self-assessment. In other words, an increase in tax penalties will also increase self-assessment. Again, the r value indicates that 0.955 or 95.50% variation in self-assessment is captured and explained by tax penalties, while the remaining 0045 or 4.5% are accounted for by the error term, that is, factors outside tax penalties. The 0.000 significant or probability value, which is less than the benchmark of 0.05, indicates a significant relationship between tax penalties and tax registration.

The strong correlation suggests that higher tax penalties are associated with higher self-assessment. This could imply that individuals or entities with higher penalties may also report higher self-assessed values, possibly as a reaction to penalties or due to more accurate assessments resulting from penalty-related adjustments. Understanding this relationship can help assess how changes in tax penalty structures influence self-assessment practices. For tax authorities, this correlation may offer insights into the effectiveness of penalties as a deterrent or incentive for accurate self-reporting.

Therefore, this study rejected the null hypothesis of no significant relationship between tax penalties and self-assessment and stated that there is a significant relationship between tax penalties and self-assessment.

In summary, the correlation analysis shows a strong and significant positive relationship between tax penalties and self-assessment, indicating that higher tax penalties are associated with higher self-assessment values.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals that the imposition of tax penalties significantly enhances self-assessment compliance among taxpayers. In particular, stronger penalty measures are associated with a marked increase in taxpayers' proactive efforts to correctly assess and report their tax liabilities. This indicates that taxpayers who perceive the consequences of non-compliance as both severe and credible are more inclined to engage actively in self-assessment practices. Overall, the findings support the view that well-designed penalty regimes can serve as an effective behavioral incentive, promoting compliance and accuracy in tax reporting.

The following recommendations were made by the study:

Ensure that penalty guidelines are clearly communicated and uniformly enforced to maintain consistency and credibility.

Regular review of penalty structures to ensure they remain proportionate and effective in deterring non-compliance.

Consider a progressive penalty structure where the severity of penalties increases with repeated non-compliance, while also ensuring that first-time offenders are given opportunities for correction without excessive financial burden.

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