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A Law and Politics Contextualization of Corporate Activism in Nigeria's 2020 Anti-Police Brutality Campaign – Okanga O. Okanga*

Abstract

Corporate activism – the progressive pursuit of social justice causes by corporations – is a growing global phenomenon. There are increasing expectations and, in many cases, demands that corporations pull off their gloves to actively confront sociopolitical issues bedeviling their communities. Emerging scholarship suggests that corporate activism is influenced by various factors, including the ethical, political, and commercial orientations of corporate minds and the relative political and legal landscape within which corporations operate. Adopting a qualitative research mechanism that reflects on open-source information about relevant actors, collected from blogs, Twitter, and news sites, as complemented by a broad variety of secondary sources, this interdisciplinary research explores the theoretical suppositions of corporate activism in the light of corporate intervention in Nigeria's youth-led nationwide anti-police brutality (#EndSARS) protests of October 2020. The analysis highlights how Nigeria's legal, political, and socioeconomic dynamics factored into the dimensions of corporate activism in that momentous social justice agitation. As a key finding, the paper observes a relatively greater tendency of tech companies to engage in the Nigerian anti-police brutality movement than firms from other sectors, and attributes this relative involvement to the seemingly greater levels of representation of young tech industry employees as victims of police brutality. This tends to ground a crucial supposition in corporate activism theory: that corporations would more likely engage social issues that affect their business.

Keywords: Corporate Activism; Social Justice; Human Rights; Police Brutality; #EndSARS.

1. Background: Police Brutality in Nigeria

2020 will be mostly remembered for a pandemic that claimed the lives of millions (WHO, 2020) and crippled economies globally (World Bank, 2020). It will also be remembered for the wave of social justice agitations that exploded to unprecedented global reckoning (Press & Carothers, 2020). Notable among them was an anti-police brutality campaign that erupted in Nigeria in October of that year (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021). Nigeria's young people mobilized against repressive policing and bad governance in their country through protests that shut down some of the country's major cities and towns for weeks (Olaloku-Teriba, 2020). The protests were a poignant reaction to systemic abuse of power by the Nigerian police (Uwazurike, 2020).

The Nigerian Police Force is constitutionally established and charged with the primary responsibility of protecting life, liberty, and property in Nigeria (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, s. 214, (CFRN)); Nigerian Police Force (Establishment) Act 2020, s.4 (Police Act). To effectively discharge these cardinal functions, various federal statutes confer powers on the police (Police Act, 2015).¹ The police can lawfully arrest (Police Act, s.34), detain (Police Act, s.43), search (Police Act, s.50), prevent offences (Police Act, s.86), investigate offences (Police Act, s.31), grant administrative bail (Police Act, s.64), and prosecute (Police Act, s.68). The rule of law requires these powers to be exercised within stipulated boundaries, including those imposed by the constitution (*Igweokolo v Akpoyibo*, 2017). When police officers exceed their boundaries or infringe on the rights of individuals in a manner not contemplated by law the wrongful use of police powers may be declared unlawful (*Ukata & ors v Akpanowo*, 2016).

The Nigerian police is reputed as a notorious abuser of power and violator of human rights (Emerson 2010; Amnesty International, 2014; Peter Naankiel, 2013; Aborisade & Obileye, 2018). A consequence of this reputation is that citizens resent the police even when they are exercising their legitimate powers in the course of legally permissible law enforcement activities (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000). One particular police unit has attained a level of notoriety that is, perhaps, unprecedented and un contemplated by any standards of policing around the world. That unit – the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) – is at the heart of the massive protests that swept across Nigeria in October 2020 (Dambo et al. 2020).

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¹ The Police Act is the primary policing statute. Other statutes that confer police powers are the various criminal procedure statutes enacted by the National Assembly – the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, 2015 – or by state legislatures.

For many Nigerians, the acronym “SARS” is synonymous with illegal road stops, illegal searches, physical harassment, extortion, torture and extrajudicial killings. Ironically, as the name implies, this police unit was established, in 1992, to combat armed robbery and other violent crimes (Malumfashi, 2020). Yet, SARS has become emblematic of the rot in the Nigerian policing system where the designated protector is renowned as a blatant predator. An Amnesty International report published in mid-2020 captures some of the nefarious activities of SARS (Amnesty International 2020). The report documents 82 cases of extortion, torture and ill treatment by SARS between January 2017 and May 2020. It reveals a pattern of abuse of power by SARS officers and highlights the deficiencies in police accountability that contribute to and exacerbate these violations (Amnesty International 2020). The report finds that detainees in SARS custody have been subjected to a variety of methods of torture, including hanging, mock execution, beating, punching and kicking, burning with cigarettes, waterboarding, near-asphyxiation with plastic bags, forcing detainees to assume stressful bodily positions and sexual violence (Amnesty International 2020). Mostly motivated by financial gain, SARS officers regularly demand bribes, steal and extort money from criminal suspects and their families. SARS officers also act outside of their legal ambit by investigating civil matters and in some cases torturing detainees involved in contractual, business and non-criminal disputes (Amnesty International, 2020).

Young persons between the ages of 17 and 30 are at the most risk of arrest, torture or extortion by SARS. SARS officers often look out for well-dressed young men, especially those in new cars. Often, these young men are accosted at roadblocks or on the streets and accused of being internet fraudsters, known as ‘Yahoo boys’ in local parlance. The young men are taken to the station and threatened with robbery charges, unless they agree to pay large sums of money for bail (Amnesty International, 2020). Queer Nigerians constitute another identifiable demographic that are often targeted by the police for looking too ‘masculine’ as a woman or too ‘feminine’ as a man. They are harassed, extorted and sometimes, arrested (Sule, 2020). As Amnesty International finds, despite the notoriety of SARS abuses and official promises of investigation, few cases are investigated and hardly any officers are brought to justice (Amnesty International, 2020). Nigeria’s federal government has also repeatedly promised to reform SARS without effecting these promises (Amnesty International, 2020; Agbakuru, 2018; Erunke, 2018; Ejike & Nda-Isaiah, 2019).

2. Legal Safeguards against Police Brutality

Nigeria is, at least on paper, a constitutional democracy.² Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria’s constitution has guaranteed the human rights of all peoples under Nigerian sovereignty. An entire chapter of the constitution is dedicated to the protection of “fundamental human rights” (CFRN 1999, chapter 4). The constitution guarantees, *inter alia*, the right to life (CFRN 1999, s.33), the right to dignity of human person (CFRN 1999, s.34), the right to personal liberty (CFRN 1999, s.35), the right to fair hearing (CFRN 1999, s. 36), the right to privacy (CFRN 1999, s.37), the right to freedom of expression (CFRN 1999, s. 39), the right to freedom of movement (CFRN 1999, s.41) and protection from compulsory acquisition of property (CFRN 1999, s. 44). Although some of these rights are “derogable” under certain circumstances prescribed by law (*Dokubo Asari v FRN*, 2007, 320), there is no *carte blanche* on any authority or person to trample on human rights (CFRN 1999, s.45). Indeed, domestic statutes such as the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA) 2015 and the Anti-Torture Act of 2017 further prohibit human rights abuses. Also, the Fundamental Rights (Enforcement Procedure) Rules 2009 prescribes procedures for any person whose rights are infringed or in danger of infringement to approach the court for reprieve. Nigeria is also a state party to various international instruments that provide human rights safeguards. These include the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR). These instruments impose obligations on Nigeria to protect and defend human rights within its territory (*Fawehinmi v Abacha* 2000, 228).³ It is somewhat paradoxical that despite this assortment of legal safeguards, such rampant abuses are perpetrated unchecked by a state institution, to the extent that the police authorities are unable to produce one instance, over three years, where SARS officers were punished for torture (Amnesty International, 2020).

² For reflections on the concept of constitutional democracy, see (Loughlin, 2019, 438–440).

³ [Supreme Court of Nigeria majority upheld the validity and prevalence of the African Charter on Human and People’s rights (as domesticated) despite the then military regime’s suspension of fundamental rights under domestic law. The court held that the charter was a statute with international flavour. Therefore, if there was a conflict between it and another statute, its provisions would prevail for the reason that it is presumed that the legislature does not intend to breach an international obligation].

3. Judicial Intervention against Police Brutality

Like all authorities in Nigeria, the exercise of police powers is subject to judicial review and the court is empowered to nullify police actions and/or sanction police officers for cause (CFRN 1999, s.6(6)(b)). The courts have variously charged the police to exercise their powers cautiously and lawfully (*Okafor v AIG Police Zone II Onikan*, 2019; *Kure v COP*, 2020; *Luna v COP* 2010).⁴ In *Nzegbuna v Okoye* (2018, 21), the Court of Appeal warned that: "where the use of Police power is improperly deployed, the Court will not hesitate to declare any such wrongful action of the Police null and void..."

The courts check police abuses through the adjudication of criminal cases against police officers and through the enforcement of individual fundamental rights. Accordingly, there are cases where the courts have convicted police officers for criminal violations of human rights (*Agbo v State*, 2004; *Maiyaki v State*, 2008; *Ogboka v State*, 2016)⁵ or entered judgment in favor of victims (*Emonena v IGP*, 2016).⁶ However, it is important to highlight that as a consequence of Nigeria's adversarial justice system, the court does not exercise investigatory or inquisitorial powers; the court can only adjudicate cases brought before it, based on the facts and evidence presented (Oraegbunam, 2019). Because of these limitations, judicial capacity to check abusive policing is significantly limited.⁷ Importantly, if the state does not investigate and or charge police officers for human rights violations, there is little that the court can do to sanction erring police officers. Also, if the court grants relief in fundamental rights cases, such as the award of compensation to victims of abuse, the responsibility to implement the judgment rests with the executive. The summative implication is that there is a chasm between the number of abuse cases and the number of occasions where sanctions and compensation are dispensed. This gap between abuse and justice dispensation sustains an atmosphere that is convenient for continued abuse, as was the case with the events leading up to the 2020 protests.

4. The 2020 #EndSARS Campaign

Following the annual tradition, Nigerians celebrated Independence Day on 1 October 2020. Few days afterwards, allegations swelled the internet detailing more extrajudicial shootings by SARS operatives (Ayandele, 2021; Akinwotu, 2020). Graphic footage of these recent shootings, along with other similar recordings, went viral, sparking a concerted "#EndSARS" outcry on social media (Akinwotu, 2020). The videos appeared alongside increased reports from hundreds of Nigerians in different parts of the country, all confirming a rise in brutality and harassment of citizens by SARS (Desmond, 2020). By 8 October, demonstrations associated with the hashtag had begun to increase in size and number throughout Nigeria, peaking at 26 events by 13 October (Ayandele, 2021). As the demonstrations garnered momentum in Nigeria, they simultaneously spread around the world, with marches through the streets of many cities demanding the Nigerian government scrap the infamous police unit.⁸ Slogans like #EndSARS and "soro soke" soon became global phenomena.⁹

In part response to the protesters' demands, on 11 October, the Nigerian government announced plans to disband the SARS unit and declared that its members would be integrated into other police units (Paquette, 2020). To further this process, the police leadership ordered SARS operatives to report for psychological examination, a prerequisite for their reintegration (Channels Television, 2020). The police also announced the commissioning of a new special unit – the Special Weapons and Tactical Team (SWAT) – to take over the functions of the "defunct" SARS (BBC, 2020). Protesters quickly rejected the reorganization, out of concern that the change was superficial rather than genuine. The

⁴ The first two cases involved police meddling in civil disputes.

⁵ [in all three cases the courts rejected a defence of "accidental discharge" by police officers who were prosecuted/convicted for murder or culpable homicide).

⁶ [unlawful arrest].

⁷ Administratively, section 70 of the new Police Act mandates the Chief Magistrate of a state to visit police stations monthly to inspect arrest records and, where appropriate, grant bail to detainees.

⁸ The "#EndSARS" slogan began trending in 2017 when Nigerian human rights activists launched the campaign to demand action against human rights violations committed by the SARS unit. What followed were repeated false efforts by the Nigerian government to resolve the problem (Chow, 2020). These failed reform efforts eventually led to the uprising of October 2020.

⁹ "Soro soke" is an expression derived from the Yoruba language of South-Western Nigeria which literally means "speak up"! The expression emerged as a battle cry for the protesters to stand up to their oppressors (Alake, 2020).

hashtag #EndSWAT” instantly trended on social media (Salimon, 2020) even as many protesters and activists raised concerns that abusive behavior by former SARS operatives would continue, notwithstanding the name change (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Protesters remained on the streets calling for far-reaching reforms and critical action to address police brutality, especially in the wake of unabated brutality and attacks against protesters, apparently perpetrated by pro-state elements (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Ukpe, 2020; Akinkuotu, 2020; Nwezeh, 2020).

In some respects, the symbolic #EndSARS protests were a culmination of years of frustration of the Nigerian people – especially young people – with the Nigerian state. This would explain why what kicked off as a campaign against police brutality quickly metamorphosed into a demand for broader socio-political change – the reset of a hostile and corrupt system that undermines the ability of Nigeria’s budding youth to maximize their enormous potential (Olaoku-Teriba, 2020).

Media reports indicate that the 2020 protests were largely organized by young people with no clear leaders (Olurounbi, 2020). Yet organizations such as the Feminist Coalition played significant roles in mobilizing donations (at some point as much as N148 million – about \$388,000) and utilizing the funds to cater for important matters like food, water, health kits, ambulances, medical bills, legal fees, and private security (Nwankwor, 2020). The “no leaders” posture, perhaps, made it difficult for the state to compromise the protesters (Ajayi, 2020). Instead, Nigerian youths pressured their leaders and demonstrated a willingness to shut down the country indefinitely in order to elicit more responsive leadership (Omilana, 2020; Adenekan & Falt-Brown, 2020). The government, finding it impossible to breach the wall of distrust and, perhaps, sensing an “Arab Spring” on the horizon, acted swiftly, albeit not to resolve the underlying problems, but to neutralize the protests, by resort to techniques that included restricting bank accounts linked to the protests and clamping down on media coverage(Ani, 2020).¹⁰ The wave of demonstrations was eventually repelled by the Nigerian government on 20 October 2020, in a no charitable way (Spectrum News, 2020). In what is often infamously tagged the “Lekki massacre” (Egbejule, 2021; Bakare, 2021), Nigeria’s armed forces, on that fateful night, reportedly stormed the Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos, and opened fire on a crowd of protesters, leaving many dead or injured (Busari, et al. 2020). After several denials and contradictions, the Nigerian Army admitted issuing live ammunition to the soldiers dispatched to disperse the protesters at Lekki (Elbagi, 2020). Afterwards, the government established state-level panels to probe allegations of police brutality, as well as the 20 October shootings (Mbah, 2020). Among them, the Judicial Panel of Inquiry for Restitution for Victims of SARS Related Abuses and other Matters, chaired by a retired judge of the High Court of Lagos State, subsequently confirmed 48 “casualties” of the shooting. Of this number, 9 persons were deceased, 4 were declared “missing” and “presumed dead”, while many others suffered “gunshot injury” (Ojonugwa, 2021).

What immediately followed the “Lekki massacre” was a sinister breakdown of law and order in many parts of Nigeria, where public and private properties were looted and vandalized (Odutola, 2020; Adediran, 2020). Financial Derivatives Company Limited estimated the economic cost of the protest disruption at N1.5trillion, approximately 1.03% of the GDP and 11.47% of the 2021 federal budget, at a time when the country was battling a recession and the COVID-19 pandemic (Asu, 2020).

Journalist Chiemelie Ezeobi writes that despite how the curtains fell on the nationwide #EndSARS protests, there were so many beautiful stories that emerged from it, as humanity indeed showed up in words and in action (Ezeobi, 2020). The author highlights the uncommon unity, religious tolerance, and empathy, amongst the positives that characterized the movement (Ezeobi, 2020).

5. Corporate Intervention in the 2020 #EndSARS Campaign¹¹

Nigeria’s #EndSARS movement attracted considerable intervention from corporate leaders and enterprises within and outside Nigeria. Among the early supporters of the protests was the financial technology company (Fintech)

¹⁰ On 21 October 2021, the House of Representatives adopted a resolution urging the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) to remove restrictions on all accounts illegally frozen, within seven days, following a motion by a House member who informed that the CBN had frozen more than 5,000 accounts without due process. See (Oluwasegun, 2020).

¹¹ I use the term “corporate” or “corporation” loosely to represent all business- or business-related enterprises known to law, such as companies, partnerships and sole proprietorships. Most corporations named in this paper are identified by their brand name rather than their legal name.

Flutterwave, which kicked off a wave of fundraising by tech companies for the #EndSARS protests. As a show of solidarity, the CEO of Flutterwave, Olugbenga Agboola, announced via his Twitter handle on 9 October that the staff of the firm had raised the sum of N2million internally as support to victims, and had also decided to make the fund open to the public to help raise more for the cause (Emenike, 2020).

Flutterwave's gesture was promptly imitated by a flurry of Fintechs. Among them, PiggyVest announced its support on October 9, with the tweet "Nigerians deserve to live free and not in fear. Our lives matter! Our rights matter!" The tweet was accompanied by a black and red "tri-fist" logo that symbolized the movement for many of those involved. In addition, the COO of PiggyVest, Odunayo Eweniyi – one of a group of dynamic young women whose bravery and organization skills vitalized the movement – lent her support in ways that included providing daily updates on the breakdown of monies received in different currencies and corresponding allocations via the Flutterwave donation fund (Williams, 2020).

Quidax, a leading cryptocurrency exchange in Nigeria, also announced its support via Twitter and instructed other potential donors on how to donate Bitcoin. Quoting the Flutterwave tweet, on 10 October 2020 (Desmond, 2020), Quidax tweeted: "we've joined other tech startups in donating N500,000 to #EndSARS and are calling on other tech startups to do the same. *This problem doesn't only affect us but our customers and employees*".¹²

Bundle Africa, another cryptocurrency platform, set up three cryptocurrency wallets for fundraising aimed at supporting the victims of SARS brutality and the #EndSARS protests (Ozibo, 2020). The company contributed N1million to support the cause. Additionally, Yele Badamosi, CEO of Bundle Africa, *who claims to have been a victim of SARS* (Enengedi, 2020), made a personal contribution of N500,000.¹³ Other Fintechs visibly on the #EndSARS support train include Paystack, Cowrywise, Bamboo, Softcom, BuyCoins, Risevest, Swipe, Busha, and Voyance (Babatunde, 2020; Oluwole, 2020).

Outside the Fintech community, moral and financial support came from diverse organizations, including a prominent transportation company, GIG Mobility¹⁴, a fiscal responsibility firm, BudgIT Nigeria¹⁵, a social entrepreneurial E-learning platform, Scale My Hustle¹⁶, law firms like Aelex, which made lawyers available, *pro bono*, to bail arrested protesters (Adetiloye, 2020) and emPawa Africa, a venture that helps upcoming artists with knowledge and funds to reach their full musical potential.¹⁷ emPawa's intervention, in particular, is another example of an enterprise that primarily interfaces with young people stepping into the #EndSARS arena, likely influenced by the overwhelming impact of police brutality on that demographic.

Food supply played a prominent role in sustaining the #EndSARS protests (Adeniji, 2020). The initiative was seemingly launched on 8 October when SME, Iyameto's Kitchen, volunteered to serve free food at a protest site in Lagos (Adeniji, 2020). Various food and drinks businesses soon keyed in to keep the protesters nourished (Agwu, 2020). Among them were the likes of Rite Foods Limited, a sausage and drinks manufacturer, and Chicken Republic, both of which freely shared their brand products to protesters (Okundia, 2020; PM News, 2020). Reports also document how Domino's Pizza and Coldstone Creamery donated free boxes of pizza and cups of ice cream to protesters at multiple locations in Lagos – demonstrating how cross-cutting the effects of police brutality are and why everyone might feel inspired to add their fist to the fight for justice (Okunola, 2020). The "generous" efforts of these enterprises were often appreciated online (Tim, 2020; Foodie in Lagos, 2020).

One of the most inspirational messages of support for the #EndSARS protests came from Spar Nigeria, a mega retail business whose outlet in Lekki, Lagos, was looted by hoodlums taking advantage of the protest (Oluwasango, 2020). Despite suffering this not insignificant mishap, Spar maintained alliance with the protesters. The company tweeted:

¹² <https://twitter.com/QuidaxAfrica/status/1314848367969742848?s=20>.

¹³ <https://twitter.com/BundleAfrica/status/1314974347291959296?s=20>.

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/GIGMobility/status/1315199244001832961?s=20>.

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/BudgITng/status/1314622485384626181?s=20>.

¹⁶ Twitter: <https://twitter.com/scalemyhustle/status/1314888335983247362?s=20>.

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/emPawaAfrica/status/1315018753772576768?s=20>.

“Our Lekki store has been vandalized and looted. But, we acknowledge that this is only a setback compared to the larger issues we are all facing as a nation, and our thoughts and prayers remain with Nigerians everywhere, and for a peaceful resolution to various issues at hand.”¹⁸

With horrifying pictures of the damage done to its store, the company subsequently tweeted, “Rebuilding a supermarket is hard. Rebuilding a nation is even harder. We stand with you Nigeria” “Stay focused. Be the solution”.¹⁹ Many sympathetic Nigerians apologized to the company and vowed to patronize it once order was restored in Lagos (Oluwasango, 2020).

Given their potential for content aggregation, information dissemination, and user mobilization, social media platforms are bound to feature prominently in any popular demonstrations nowadays (Valenzuela, 2013; Brantly, 2019) – and so did they in Nigeria’s #EndSARS movement (Dark, 2020). However, few would have expected one of the world’s prominent social media platforms to directly demonstrate support for the cause. That was the case when Twitter lent early support for the #EndSARS protests, much of which was being coordinated through the platform. Twitter created a special emoji that appeared anytime a person tweeted with the #EndSARS hashtag (Augoye, 2020). The emoji is a tight fist embedded in the national colors of Nigeria (Augoye, 2020). Twitter went further to verify the handles of many leading activists who were championing the #EndSARS cause (Tijani, 2020). This move was made to check the activities of persons using fake social media accounts to impersonate leading #EndSARS activists (Tijani, 2020). Twitter’s CEO, Jack Dorsey, energized the movement by repeatedly tweeting in support, donating money and encouraging others to donate (Akindele, 2020).

Another global tech giant that expressed (lesser) solidarity with the protesters was Google, which through its African account tweeted: “We strongly oppose oppression, brutality & intimidation. We believe a fair and impartial police force is a critical element of a stable society, & that abuse of power infringes on people’s democratic & human rights. We urge a speedy resolution to the current situation.”²⁰

The actions and inactions of enterprises during the October 2020 #EndSARS protests did not go unnoticed by protesters. There were countless tweets in appreciation of supportive brands as well as rebuke for brands that in one way or another derailed the protests. For instance, reacting to Chicken Republic’s supply of meals and drinks to protesters, one social media influencer tweeted: “I understand Chicken Republic shared food to protesters at Lekki tollgate today. Just so we are clear, Chicken Republic is now the best eatery in the whole of Africa...”.²¹ The tweet garnered just under 50,000 combined likes and retweets, perhaps, more than the brand could have hoped to gain from a single paid advertisement.

Some (Alleged) Derailers

Not all businesses mentioned in connection with the #EndSARS movement were mentioned positively. Some businesses became entangled in negative ropes as a consequence of their (perceived) involvement. Some commercial banks drew the ire of protesters after apparently hurrying to restrict the accounts of #EndSARS activists, supposedly on the orders of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). The clash between Access Bank and Gatefield Nigeria Limited illustrates this. The story is that when the protests began, Gatefield Nigeria Limited, a public strategy and communications firm, stepped forward to mobilize financial support for independent journalists and citizens to document the protests, through an initiative called Gatefield Impact (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The Nigerian government responded by directing Access Bank to block the accounts of Gatefield, albeit without a court order – potentially contravening the procedure required by the Banks and Other Financial Institutions Act (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The hashtag “#BoycottAccessBank” quickly garnered momentum on “Nigerian Twitter”, with many users promising an imminent closure of their accounts with Access Bank and urging others to do the same (Ukpong, 2020). In response, Access Bank issued a statement which partly reads: “[i]t is common knowledge that we and the

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/SPARNigeria/status/1318956927628476417?s=20>.

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/SPARNigeria/status/1319262653492101121?s=20>.

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/googleafrica/status/1316676651179278338?s=20>.

²¹ <https://twitter.com/DrOlufunmilayo/status/1315625190504697856?s=20>.

entire banking industry are regulated entities and therefore operate under the authority of our regulators and law enforcement agencies. As such, we are compelled to comply with regulatory directives” (Azeez, 2020).

Only the courts can definitively determine whether Access Bank was obligated to restrict the accounts in the circumstance, but, clearly, Gatefield did not buy that narrative. The company promptly filed a lawsuit against Access Bank, claiming damages equaling \$262,000 for the “unilateral” restriction of its banking access (Oyero, 2020). The fact that the CBN after the fact proceeded to obtain court orders to freeze the accounts suggests that such orders were needed *ab initio*. Fresh orders to lift restrictions on the accounts of #EndSARS protesters were issued by the court in February 2021, months after the protests effectively ended (Princewill, 2020).

Remarkably, one of Nigeria’s leading commercial banks, Stanbic IBTC, reportedly, defied the CBN order to freeze customers’ accounts, labeling it “anti-people” (Sahara reporters). Stanbic’s more empathetic stance attracted much appreciation from protesters vide social media, with many promising to open accounts and encouraging others to dump unsupportive banks and switch to Stanbic (Hettyoblog, 2020).

One company – the Lekki Concession Company (LCC) – occupies a unique chapter of villainy in the minds of many for its alleged complicity in the Lekki killings. LCC is a private company with concession from the Lagos State Government to manage the Lekki Toll Gate – the symbolic central location of the protests (Olisah, 2021). It is claimed that LLC incurred huge financial losses while the toll gate was barricaded and occupied by protesters (Emenike, 2020; Philips, 2020). The “charges” against LCC include removing the security cameras at the toll gate and turning off the power to provide cover of darkness for the military assailants (The Cable, 2020; Sahara Reporters, 2020).²² The complicity of the company may not be formally determined, but the eyes of public opinion did not stare kindly.

Viathan Engineering is another company that was forced to address its alleged complicity in the Lekki killings. Being the supplier of power to the Lekki Toll Gate, the company was forced to dispel allegations that it was responsible for switching off the power shortly before the shootings. In a vehement public denial, the company asserted that: “[I]like every off-taker we supply electricity to, the consumer/customer is directly in control of the switch gear – which is used to switch between power sources i.e. PHCN, IPP etc., therefore, the customer can switch power on/off at their will. It is simply NOT possible for us to switch off power for only LCC from our plants (Omonaiye, 2020).”

A rather bizarre case is the one involving the digital ride-hailing service, Bolt. The company was initially hailed for offering reduced fares to riders using the “SoroSoke” mantra to make bookings, but things quickly turned sour after widespread (but unsubstantiated) allegations on social media that Bolt used its 50% “SoroSoke” discount to lure #EndSARS protesters only to deliver them to the police (Babatunde, 2020).

Bolt was forced to debunk these allegations, stating, in part, that its team was “made up of young people and we are doubly aware of the impact of profiling and brutality”, and outlined its commitment to sanction any drivers that were proved to indulge in such shenanigans (Obinna, 2020). However, at least one commentator remained skeptical, asserting that “[m]erely stating that their team is “made up of young people and we are doubly aware of the impact of profiling and brutality” doesn’t exactly quell the possibility of a private company aligning itself with a government agency (Onukwue, 2020). The matter was never fully resolved whether towards “indictment” or “exculpation”.

Facebook is another digital business platform that came to express regrets over its role in the #EndSARS struggle. In contrast with Dorsey and Twitter, Facebook and its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, were only mentioned in connection with the #EndSARS protests when the platforms Facebook and Instagram ‘falsely’ flagged various #EndSARS media as “fake news” (Gilbert, 2020). Although Instagram later apologized for the ‘error’ (Jones, 2020), some commentators observe that these negative tags accentuated the Nigerian government’s own labelling of allegations of improper use of force by its security operatives as ‘fake news’ (Edward-Ekpu, 2020).

²² These allegations were submitted for investigation by an inquisitorial panel established by the Government of Lagos State. To buttress its denial of the charges, LCC submitted a hard drive of the CCTV footage of the night’s events to the “Judicial Panel”, but urged that discretion be exercised in determining when to make the contents public. (Sahara Reporters, 2020).

6. Conceptualizing Corporate Intervention in the 2020 #EndSARS Movement

What made some corporations, and not others, to engage in Nigeria's social activism? There are no mathematically precise answers on the board. After all, "even the devil does not know what the thought of man is" (*Brogden v Metropolitan Railway Company*, 1876-77, p.692). Perhaps, some level of applied theorization can help scholars to proffer plausible explanations of social phenomena or of the motives behind human (or corporate) conduct (Devlin, 1997, p. 22; Stewart et al., 2011).²³ Humanitarianism, branding, and operational necessity are just some of the general theses for why corporations choose to engage in social activism. One may also find reasons – political neutrality and self-interest, for instance – why corporations may choose to abstain from activism or, in some cases, undermine activist movements. Corporations are generally powerful entities (Bakan, 2020). As Bock and Fucillo observed decades ago:

"World affairs can no longer be adequately understood by a study which emphasizes only one set of actors, namely nations... a better understanding of international relations, and indeed of political processes in general, requires that attention be paid to a variety of nonstate actors which have so grown in importance since World War II that their influence is felt everywhere within the international system. Such actors are important in two ways: first, they participate independently in international relations--behaving in many respects as political actors; and second, they exert influence on other actors in the system, especially nation-states. Among such actors the business firm plays the most important role" (Bock & Fucillo, 1975, 51).²⁴

The corporation's legal mandate is to pursue its own best interests and thus to maximize the wealth of its shareholders (Gumpinger, 2011, p.102). However, as entities to whom much "reverence" is accorded, much is also expected of corporations, especially in today's ultra-conscious world. In addition to traditional expectations such as regulatory compliance – sometimes multi-jurisdictionally – innovation, wealth creation and tax contribution, corporations are also expected to support their communities through corporate social responsibility (CSR) and, increasingly, engagement in social justice activism.

Corporate activism (CA) – "a company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment" (Eilert & Cherup, p.461) – seems to be taking a foothold, especially in Western democracies. Corporations are having to take a visible stance on a widening range of sociopolitical issues, including sexual harassment (Costarella, 2017), gender equality (Sustainable Brands, 2019), sexual equality (Shortfall, 2019), racism (Reuters, 2020), voter suppression (Jain, 2021), and even political extremism (Olsen, 2021). Historically, "whether you tag it 'corporate social responsibility,' 'environmental, social governance,' 'corporate impact,' 'shared value' or 'social purpose,' the notion that companies are responsible for more than their bottom line began to take hold in the 1970s" (Meck, 2020). Since then, the expectation that companies engage on social and political issues has steadily gained steam: from the international condemnation of South Africa's apartheid regime to present-day corporate embracement of the #MeToo and #BLM movements (Meck, 2020). The contemporary explosion of CA can be attributed to three factors: the convergence of government and private business responsibilities, the rise of CSR, and the expansion of corporate political rights (Lin, 2018).²⁵ These factors have had the effect of increasing public expectation about what corporations can and should be doing in society (Lin, 2018). The rise in CA is also responsive to a change in values of the young generations employing digital technologies and demanding a different behavior from global firms (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p.354). With so much generational pressure to engage, CA has become a sustainability point for corporations, making it increasingly untenable for them to ignore the sociopolitical issues bedeviling their

²³ A notable limitation of this study is the absence of empirical data on how much the #EndSARS movement may have influenced brand appeal dynamics in Nigeria. This gap represents useful opportunities for further forward-thinking research whether through a strictly marketing or multidisciplinary approach.

²⁴ The authors explain the reason underlying the unique influence of private enterprise: "[w]hile intergovernmental organizations, voluntary associations and social movements have all become more active across national borders in recent years, the business firm is intrinsically better suited to mobilizing resources and making decisions that will have significant impacts on its environment" (Bock & Fucillo, 1975, 51).

²⁵ CA appears to be a quasi-natural progression from CSR, just as CSR evolved from a traditional view that certain activities – for instance, the provision of health, education and infrastructure – were exclusive government activities. (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

communities... (Irrera et al. 2020) even though these issues are seldom related to their bottom lines (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018, p. 78).

Theoretically, the extensiveness of CA rests on an interplay between both external and internal factors. Internal factors embody the mindset and motivations of the corporation, while external factors constitute the environment in which the corporation operates. For instance, the sociopolitical terrain in which a corporation finds itself and the level of shielding from state backlash that the legal system guarantees might be crucial external considerations. This may explain the relative prevalence of CA in Western democracies. As such, it is important to understand why corporations indulge in CA as much as why they may not.

While there may be various motivations driving CA, much of the literature associates CA with branding or marketing as an underlying motivation (Drumwright, 1996; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Gray, 2019; Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Eilert & Cherup, 2020).²⁶ This species of literature highlight how social justice causes provide a platform – or imperative – for corporations to positively inscribe themselves in the minds of important stakeholders like customers and employees (Glover et al. 2020).²⁷ As one writer observes: “crisis though is unusual, unexpected and often a difficult situation, but brands that think of the consumers during such difficulty will be remembered after the crisis. Brands that are able to take advantage of the crisis, be concerned about the consumers’ feeling and how they can get along and ahead of the crisis, are brands that will be remembered after the pandemic” (Ajayi, 2020).

Eilert & Cherup take a lead role in theorizing CA in the modern era (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p. 461). An important contribution of their piece lies in its attempt to distinguish CA from the more conversant corporate social responsibility (CSR). The authors assert that while companies generally have greater discretion to conform to ethical norms instituted by the environment, whether and how they respond depends on how salient the issue is to management and how they perceive the costs and benefits of a response to this issue (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p. 463).²⁸ The support of a social, political, economic, or environmental issue as part of CSR is motivated by isomorphic influences stemming from the company’s various stakeholder groups and is normally perceived as positive (or at least not negative) behavior, unless the company is hypocritical and insincere in its support (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p. 463).

The response to CA can vary: CA reflects a strong, public stance on an issue that the company defends even in the wake of criticism. As a result of taking a stand on often controversial issues—and in contrast to CSR—CA can be risky (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, 463).²⁹ Generally, the more strongly CA deviates from values in the institutional environment, the more likely it will be perceived as risky and, thus, penalized even by the firm’s investors (Bhagwat, et al. 2020). This risk—and the reason why CA is needed—is a consequence of the type of the issue that the company supports. CA focuses on issues that face barriers in their progress toward a solution, and this behavior is therefore more goal-oriented toward solving specific social problems or transforming the social order and status quo (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, 463; Bhagwat, et al. 2020; Buechler, 2000; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; King & Pearce, 2010). Because the attitudes and behaviors of institutional actors present barriers in this pursuit, CA requires promoting social change through “placing pressures on institutions” (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.463; Hond & Baker, 2007; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The existence of barriers to real societal change is the reason that engaging in CSR is not enough to make meaningful progress to solve the issue. Therefore, a stronger stand is needed to overcome these often deeply rooted barriers (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.463-464).

When it comes to resolving an endemic problem such as police brutality in a fragile democracy like Nigeria, the obvious institutional barrier is the state which enjoys command and control over all police officers. It would take genuine commitment from state actors to eradicate this problem. Regrettably, that commitment has barely expressed

²⁶ Maks-Solomon asserts that corporate activism is often swayed by businesses’ genuine determination to sway policy outcomes rather than the desire to “appeal to liberal customers and future employees”. (Maks-Solomon, 2020).

²⁷ This explains the assertion that “[b]rand activism is the process of brands using public relations strategies, corporate social responsibility and marketing techniques to take a public stand on socio and political issues” – (Glover et al. 2020)

²⁸ This explains why CEOs play such an important role in charting their firm’s CA objectives.

²⁹ In the U.S. recently, the Republican Party government of Texas threatened tax hikes and boycotts to punish companies that criticize restrictive voting laws that are alleged to target disenfranchising minorities (Porter, 2021).

itself. The Nigerian government cannot claim ignorance over the well documented activities of SARS. Indeed, the various vain “attempts” by the federal government to reform the notorious police unit leave no doubt that the state is well apprised of the problem. The barrier, therefore, seems to be attitudinal – a case of state priorities. This could be reflective of a broader attitude to governance that rides on non-accountability. It is these barriers that CA targets through support of the #EndSARS movement.

Influence Strategies

Briscoe and Gupta (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016) classify activist influence tactics into either persuasive tactics, or disruptive tactics. Persuasive tactics are intended to convince targets of CA about the merits of the claims made by the agent. These tactics include recommendations and information exchange (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.465). Companies may provide persuasive data or information about a cause to sway attitudes in favor of the issue (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p. 465). Disruptive tactics, on the other hand, are geared toward creating material or reputational damage and include threats (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.465; Payan & McFaland, 2005). Such tactics aim to make a statement through actions such as protests or boycotts (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

CA, in the context of police brutality in Nigeria, has taken both persuasive and disruptive dimensions. An example of the former is Sterling Bank Plc’s vocal anti-police brutality initiative which included public engagements between human rights advocates and police representatives (Adepetun, 2020; The Sun, 2020). The lack of widescale success of such attempts induced the resort to disruptive strategies embraced by other corporations.

The Role of Company Identity Orientation

Corporations are legal fictions. As such, they have no mind of their own. They act through officers and agents, who formulate and implement policies in their name (Iwai, 1999; Watson, 2019; *NBCI v Integrated Gas Nig. Ltd*, 1999), 119. Accordingly, corporate policies – including the choice to embrace CA – may reflect the corporation’s values and ideals, or better said, the values, ideals and experiences of its decisionmakers/stakeholders. Some companies may, therefore, be prone to activism due to the value system they are built on (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.467; Bundt et al. 2013).

Research suggests that organizational identity orientation should have a strong influence on whether and how companies engage in CA (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.467; Bundt et al. 2013). Brickson differentiates between three types of identity orientations. Companies with an individualistic orientation conceive of themselves as distinct from others and are generally motivated by self-interest. Given that CA is a risky activity, one would not expect a company with this orientation to take a stand unless the benefits of engaging in CA far outweigh the risks (Brickson, 2005; Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.467). Companies with a relational orientation perceive themselves as relationship partners and are motivated to engage in activities that provide a benefit to others. Finally, companies with a collectivistic orientation see themselves as members of larger groups or communities and are thus likely to participate in activities focusing on greater collective welfare (Brickson, 2005). Eilert & Cherup posit that companies with either a relational or collectivistic orientation are motivated and able to engage in successful activism and create change, albeit in different ways and for different reasons (Brickson, 2005, p.467-468).

It may be difficult to ascertain precisely which orientational category underlies a corporation’s activism. For instance, a corporation like Twitter which, together with its CEO, Jack Dorsey, took specific measures to aid the #EndSARS protests may be wholly driven by its value system as a platform that facilitates the interrogation of social justice discourse. On the other hand, Twitter and Dorsey may also have been (partly) motivated by a feeling of comradeship.

As highlighted above, young Nigerian techies are often the victims of SARS abuse. There are copious allegations that SARS operatives use the pretext of detecting internet fraud to regularly accost, harass and extort property, including smartphones and laptops, from these techies (Shapshak, 2019). With computer literacy sky-high among Nigerian youths, there are many who work within and outside the tech space. But according to many “unlearned individuals” in this police unit, owning a laptop is synonymous with being a cyber-criminal (Adeoye, 2019). These constant travails partly explain the unmatched commitment of Nigerian Fintechs to the #EndSARS campaign. Indeed, as recently as 2019, the tech community had rallied around a campaign tagged #StopRobbingUs (Onukwue, 2020). That campaign was ignited by the alleged harassment and robbery of a software developer in Nigeria in September 2019 by SARS officers (Adeoye, 2019). Incredibly, one of Nigeria’s newest crop of Fintech startups, the digital bank Kuda,

developed an unusual feature on its app ominously named “Panic Balance.” Through this feature, users can set a fake balance of N5,000 (\$11.00) or less, and when in trouble, they can display the fake balance by shaking their device. That way, they can mislead anyone threatening them to the point of raiding their bank balance. Bizarrely, this dummy feature was not set-up to mislead ordinary robbers, but officers of Nigeria’s SARS unit (Henry, 2020). The continued dereliction of the government to eradicate these abuses meant drove the tech community to rally together to demand change when the opportunity resurfaced a year later.

It is instructive that Dorsey visited Nigeria in November 2019 – barely two months after the #StopRobbingUs campaign was launched and less than a year before the mega #EndSARS protests.³⁰ During that visit, he held several meetings with tech innovators and stakeholders in Nigeria and announced major expansions of the Twitter’s workforce in Africa, as well as plans to revisit Nigeria in 2020 (Iyanda, 2019). These engagements may have allowed Dorsey to form strong alliances with the country, especially its young techies, who, to reiterate, are so often the victims of SARS (Orijinmo, 2020). If Dorsey discussed these policing abuses with Nigerian techies during or after his visit, it may help explain his empathetic approach towards the #EndSARS movement.

If relational identity orientation does explain the actions of Jack Dorsey and Twitter, then it would also explain the predominant engagement of tech companies in the #EndSARS struggle since companies with a relational identity orientation should also be motivated to engage in CA if it benefits their relationship with core stakeholders such as consumers, employees, or the community, especially as these companies demonstrate genuine concern for their stakeholders (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.468). It is, perhaps, worth restating that the CEO of one of Nigeria’s Fintechs – Bundle Africa – was, reportedly, a direct victim of SARS (Enengedi,2020).

The foregoing implies that much of CA can be driven by survival instinct, and such instinct can unify competing corporations to face a common “demon”. The influence of multiple companies coming together to engage in a common social justice cause is highlighted by Eilert & Cherup. They assert that the “logic of numbers” can help increase the visibility of the issue, signal its importance to others, and set expectations. These expectations create normative and mimetic influences, and other companies may then follow with their support (Eilert & Cherup, 2020, p.465-466). This cohesive element helped to build momentum in the #EndSARS protests. In particular, Flutterwave’s announcement of moral and financial support on 9 October prompted many Fintechs to follow suit. Their cooperative indulgence is, perhaps, best explained by the common object – to eradicate police brutality – concretized a year earlier through the #StopRobbingUs campaign.

A recent study by the US-based Global Strategy Group on CA stresses that “there is reward for companies that take action on political and social issues, and a penalty for inaction” and that “in today’s highly-engaged and highly-partisan world, companies also need to understand their consumers’ politics and ideology” (Global Strategy Group, 2019). Accordingly, “companies that took a position are regarded as trustworthy, mission-driven, responsible, reliable, bold and progressive, while those that never took a position are viewed as out-of-touch, irresponsible, untrustworthy, selfish, unpatriotic and short-sighted” (Global Strategy Group, 2019). Another study, the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, finds that 64% of *international consumers* choose to buy from, avoid or boycott a brand based on the brand’s stance on societal issues (Edelman, 2019). A 2020 version of the same study, conducted in the wake of the George Floyd killing, finds that an average of just over 50% of responders – from six countries – opine that brands owe it to their employees to speak out against systemic racism and racial justice (Edelman, 2020). Meanwhile, certain U.S. polls revealed that as much as 68% of consumers expect brands to be clear about their values in terms of where they stand on racial justice issues (Christie, 2020). Glover, Ruby & Brag (2020) observe that: “[c]onsumers want to buy from brands that have shared core values and brand alignment. Whether it is supporting a social cause, standing behind a social movement, consumers choose brands that have the same values.’... If you don’t participate in social activism brand marketing, you run the risk of facing public backlash.”

These conclusions suggest that the mere concern that staying on the sidelines might reflect a lack of empathy can itself drive corporations to indulge in CA (Haas & Garratt, 2018). However, the extent to which this supposition correctly

³⁰ The timing of that visit may be instructive considering that Facebook’s CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, also made a widely publicized visit to Nigeria (including its Lagos tech district), albeit in 2016 – prior to the launch of the #EndSARS and #StopKillingUs campaigns.

applies to a country like Nigeria is presently unascertainable because there are no equivalent reliable data demonstrating what Nigerians want brands to do about police brutality.³¹ Such uncertainty makes it difficult for the “strategic brand”, especially, to gauge the potential repercussions – in terms of patronage – that may result from (not) taking a stance on the #EndSARS cause. My anecdotal view is that a brand that desired to support the movement – like many did – had to take a blind dive, perhaps, purely on its values, and, perhaps with the assurance that a state backlash would not outweigh the potential customer relationship. Recognizing the apparent dilemma of some Nigerian corporations, Gbenga & Ojewunmi aptly observe that:

“[w]e expected brands such as the historically youth-focused GTBank or Airtel, or Glo to play bigger roles. But they’ve been quiet. And that’s understandable. *Nigeria is a peculiar context*. Unlike North America or Europe where it’s easy to have activist brands such as Nike, Smirnoff, Airbnb or Dove, the backlash for brands taking a stand in Nigeria won’t only come from an aggrieved pro-SARS section of the populace, but the government will also step in to chastise your business. We are seeing instances of these already even as the government frustrates the funding efforts of the protesters by blocking accounts and deactivating funding links. A lot of the brands who have been quiet are more comfortable alienating the EndSARS protesters, rather than compromise their standing with the Nigerian government. But the protesters are watching too. As the protests shuffle along; they are committing everyday to only patronize brands that stand with them” (Gbenga & Ojewunmi, 2020).

If skipping a popular social justice agitation like the #EndSARS movement can cost a corporation some patronage, then one would be entitled to presume that negative intervention would prove even costlier. Yet, there is no evidence currently to suggest, for instance, that banks – Access Bank – that promptly restricted customers’ accounts, at the behest of the state, suffered serious losses of patronage compared to those – like Stanbic IBTC Bank – that resisted the move.³² There is no data to demonstrate how this “willing participation” may have affected the compliant banks’ relationships with their customers; although it would appear that these banks considered it wiser to align with the state even at the risk of partly upsetting their customer base.

Among those standing by during the #EndSARS protests were Nigeria’s all-important oil corporations. If oil behemoths like Shell, Chevron, Total and Mobil, whose operations are so vital to the economic survival of the Nigerian state, intervened in support of the protesters, one wonders what a difference that could have made in neutralizing government barriers. However, although these corporations tend to engage in CSR in their host communities, none displayed any visible interest in CA throughout the crisis. A possible explanation for this apparent disinterestedness, especially for upstream operators, is that these corporations lack a communal connection with ordinary Nigerians and therefore feel distant from the sociopolitical issues that confront them. From a branding perspective, upstream oil corporations have little or no business-to-customer interface with ordinary Nigerians. They do not sell products directly to the public – so, do not require public patronage. At the same time, their Nigerian interactions are mostly with the government, mainly through the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) and the state-owned oil company, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). This factor does not, however, explain the similar silence of downstream sector companies who regularly interact with the public through retail marketing and sale of petroleum products.

This ushers in another plausible explanation: that these corporations were simply avoiding confrontation with the Nigerian government. While CA has the potential to deepen the social impact of traditional activism and to enhance

³¹ Previous studies rank factors such as price, quality of product or service, asset security, accessibility, brand image, and value-added services as leading determinants of customer patronage in Nigeria. The results vary “sectorally”. See, for instance, (Maiyaki, 2011); (Aregbeyen, 2011); (Nkamnebe *et al.*, 2014); (Sani, 2017); (Odia & Adegkunle, 2020). Although these studies do not specifically identify CA as a factor, one cannot infer that CA is or remains immaterial to branding in Nigeria, given the emergent reality of increased sensitivity around issues like police brutality and its brand-related portrayal on social media. There is room to consider whether the new wave of social justice “wokeness” heralds a shift, of any level, in consumer preferences and priorities. Also, considering that “brand image” is deemed an important factor, one cannot rule out CA becoming organically or spontaneously embedded in “brand image”.

³² The absence of publicly available evidence should not, however, warrant any conclusions that there were no consequences, either way. The observation is only premised on currently available facts.

the value of corporations, it does also have the potential to deepen politicization of the marketplace and to attract politically motivated backlash (Lin, 2018). Even in advanced democracies, there is concern that as businesses become more prominent in social activism, they could also become more prominent targets for regulation, investigation, and counter-activism (Lin, 2018, p.15382). In that sense, any show of support for “anti-government” protests might be interpreted by state actors as an affront, worthy of consequences. Lessons can be drawn from Angola, where British Petroleum (BP), after pressure from NGOs, decided to voluntarily publish what it paid the Angolan government, in 2001, as part of its efforts to foster transparency as a basis for addressing the resource curse in the country. The Angolan government responded with a threat to terminate BP’s oil licenses if such payment details were made public again (Idemudia, 2017, p.42). The Nigerian government’s media clampdown, restriction of activists’ bank accounts and eventual protest crushing tactics constitute enough warning about its potential response to big corporations that throw their weight behind sociopolitical activism. If the government were to sanction a corporation for activism, however unjust that sanction might seem, the path to rectification could be long, arduous, and unproductive, especially in a system of justice where adjudication remains inefficient, and where the executive has an unchecked penchant for disobeying court orders (Okakwu, 2017; Sahara Reporters, 2019). Perhaps, here lies some subtle territorial difference between CA in established democracies and fragile democracies (Gbenga & Ojewunmi, 2020). Given such a picture, it seems that the safer policy for any corporation is to avoid getting in the crosshairs of the state, regardless of its humanitarian identity orientation. It is, therefore, no surprise that the only visible message of solidarity from Nigeria’s entire oil sector was a carefully crafted reaction from Oando Plc,³³ whereas, Forte Oil, one of the biggest petroleum businesses in Nigeria, fell on the receiving end of modern cancel culture after its retail outlet in the capital, Abuja, was accused of refusing to dispense fuel products to protesters (Divinewill, 2020).

7. Conclusion

This piece draws on existing theorization/conceptualization of CA to muster an explanation of corporate intervention – or lack of – in one of the momentous social justice movements of modern history. Nigeria’s 2020 #EndSARS protests were known for their spontaneity, intensity, ubiquity, and organic coordination. Yet, while young people on and off the streets led the agitation, it is also evident that corporate indulgence provided useful fodder. Various businesses played their part in igniting and sustaining the protests, by providing useful supplies to keep protesters on the streets. However, the data suggests that a large quantum of the engaged corporations were from the tech sector – a sector whose young participants (employees) have been identified by reports – e.g., Amnesty International – as regular victims of police brutality. Similar levels of enthusiasm are not shown by corporations from other sectors of the economy, even as some corporations are alleged to have undermined the movement. The tech sector factor in Nigeria’s experience significantly advances the inference that corporate activism is much influenced by affinity to ‘victims’.

The importance of this study is underscored by the fact that CA – and research of CA – is not yet as grounded in Nigeria as it is in some liberal democracies. The paper brings that dimension of study into the Nigerian orbit with hopes for greater exploration of the subject. There is certainly scope for empirical research in the field. However, how such a trend of academic exploration evolves would depend on whether corporations continue to embrace the phenomenon of activism. Corporations are survivalists by nature; therefore, the plausibility of such a path would largely significantly depend on the brand building opportunities and the socio-political dynamics that subsist around them. Corporations will certainly feel better assured to indulge in activism if their core “customers” demand it and if they (corporations) do not have to look over their shoulders for the flight of economic bullets.

³³ On 13 October 2020, during the protests, Oando Plc tweeted: “we can achieve so much more when we work together as one nation, bound in unity. As a people, we must embrace dialogue and collaborative solutions to push for progress by way of #institutionalreform across all sectors in a bid to create the Nigeria we seek. #EndPoliceBrutality”. It was a rare message of solidarity from Nigeria’s oil sector. See https://twitter.com/Oando_PLC/status/1316148284243804164?s=20.

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