

Corporate Social Responsibility and Consumer Rights Awareness: A Research Agenda

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Abstract

Objective: This study incorporates the literature on Corporate Social Responsibility and consumerism, with particular emphasis on the issue of consumer rights awareness, and its potential effect on consumers' reaction towards CSR. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** The paper utilizes a literature review as a basis for the research conclusions, as well as to develop the research framework. **Findings:** The study highlights suggestions from previous researches, which points to the existence of a historical, as well as contemporary link between increased consumer rights awareness, and adoption of CSR by companies. Specifically, the paper buttresses its arguments with some insights from Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the banking and telecommunications sectors, which are have witnessed increased CSR adoption in the country, due to increased agitations from customers, regarding the need for increased ethical behavior and observance of consumer rights by the companies. **Applications/Improvements:** The study develops a research model, along with relevant research propositions that could guide future research endeavors aimed at empirically ascertaining the relationship between consumerism and CSR.

Keywords: Consumer Perceptions, Consumerism/Consumer Rights Awareness, Corporate Social Responsibility, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The notion that businesses exist within a network of relationships, with various stakeholder groups, has been extensively discussed in the literature. Management theorists have long advocated the need for companies to adopt Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which entails that companies broaden their objectives to extend beyond that of satisfying their economic (profit maximization) objective, and to include non-economic objectives that benefits the entire society as well¹⁻³. Among the stakeholder groups to whom companies direct their CSR programmes, researchers have paid particular attention to the efforts and aftermaths of companies' attempts to

manage relationships with the customer groups^{4,5}. The justification is based on the acknowledged importance of consumers as a key stakeholder group of business⁶⁻⁸. Consumers are noted to be the main (external) stakeholder group whose continuous patronage is necessary for the survival of business^{9,10}. The consumers also have significant interactions with companies on a regular basis⁹, and this tends to increase the chances for potential conflicts between the two parties, especially on the issues relating to non-observance of consumers' rights by the companies^{11,12}. Thus, issues relating to CSR and consumerism have remained contemporary topics in the business management and marketing literature.

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CSR generally relates to the efforts of companies to contribute positively towards the general improvement of the environment where they operate. It is a concept, which emphasizes the need and importance for companies to always consider the interests and objectives of the society in the policy formulation, decision making and implementation process¹. Another important concept in the context of firm-customer relationship is consumerism. Consumerism is a marketing concept, which focuses on the actions of consumers, government and business, as well as other organized groups to protect the rights and interests of the consumers¹³.

The two concepts (i.e., CSR and consumerism) are historically linked^{9,11,12}; as they both arose as part of the reactions (from the consumers and other stakeholders) to rescue the consumers from their disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the sellers in the market place⁹. Research efforts at exploring consumer perceptions and reactions to CSR and consumerism have grown over the years. Most of these researches have however examined the consumers' perceptions and responses towards CSR and consumerism as individual concepts/practices, without specific attention towards the empirical verification of the relationship(s) between them. As such, very little is known about the possible relationships between the two concepts, and/or how the consumers' perception of one affects the other.

This paper intends to achieve two major objectives. First, the paper integrates the literature on CSR and consumerism, highlighting the theoretical links between the two concepts, and noting the gaps in the literature. Secondly, the paper also puts forward a research agenda, with propositions and a research model, aimed at exploring the relationships between consumers' perceptions and response to CSR and consumerism. In addition, the paper provides a perspective on the development of CSR and consumerism in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the banking and telecoms sectors, both of which have been at the forefront of CSR practices in the country; but which have, over the years, also been plagued with problems relating to abuse of consumer rights.

This section presents a brief review of literature on the topic. It begins with clarification of the major concepts in the study (i.e., corporate social responsibility and con-

sumer rights awareness). Brief discussions of the major constituents of the two concepts are also discussed, in order to place the discussion in a proper perspective.

2. Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility is one of the contemporary topics that have enjoyed considerable attention from researchers in business management and other areas of specialization¹⁴. The concept however does not lend itself to a single definition, as several conceptualizations have been proposed by different scholars¹⁵, some of which are controversial and even confusing¹⁶. Despite the multiplicity of definitions however, the basic premise of CSR is to encourage businesses to contribute positively towards the general improvement of the environment where they operate^{15,17}.

The CSR concept aligns with the systems and stakeholder theories, since they all emphasize that companies are part of the larger society^{12,18}, where each party affects, and is affected by the activities of the other parties^{11,12,19}. It is thus incumbent upon companies to relate with the society in a manner that maintains harmony between the objective of business (profit maximization) and acceptable standard of business behavior (CSR).

Generally, there is a wide range of discussions on what constitutes a company's social responsibility²⁰⁻²². A review of extant literature reveals that the most popular components of CSR are those four dimensions codified by¹. Carroll's four-part dimensions of CSR are regarded as most popular and comprehensive, as they effectively capture the responsibilities that companies owe the society CSR²³⁻²⁶. Going by ^{1,27} definition of CSR, the responsibilities of a company entails the following:

- 1). **Economic Responsibility:** the company's responsibility to make decisions that will increase the shareholders' wealth and create jobs with decent wages, while at the same time, producing quality goods and services that are needed and desired by customers and also sell those goods and services at a reasonable price.
- 2). **Legal Responsibility:** the responsibility of the company to operate within the laws, rules and

regulations set down by recognized institutions in the society.

- 3). **Ethical Responsibility:** the company's responsibility to demonstrate strong commitment to established code of ethics by refraining from all activities that are considered as immoral or unethical in the society.
- 4). **Philanthropic Responsibility:** the expectations that the company will voluntarily demonstrate good citizenship behavior by committing some part of its earnings towards improving the overall welfare and betterment of the society.

2.1 Consumerism and Consumer Rights Awareness

Issues relating to consumer rights awareness and protection are usually discussed under the general concept of consumerism. In¹³ define consumerism as "an organized movement of citizens and government agencies to improve the rights and power of buyers in relation to sellers". Consumerism thus refers to all efforts, made at different levels, and by different groups, to protect and possibly increase the rights and powers of consumers in relation to sellers^{28,29}. Organized social movements leading to consumerism started in the United States of America, from where it later spread to other parts of the world^{10,30,31}.

The consumer movement is today acknowledged as a major political force around the world^{10,29,31}. The movement has continued to grow, with several bodies and organizations at national and international levels committed to the protection and enforcement of consumers' rights.

The formation of consumer movements, and their ability to effectively protect consumer rights will obviously depend on the knowledge and awareness of what constitutes consumer rights, by the concerned parties, especially the consumers, who are at the centre of the entire discourse³²⁻³⁶. As such, consumer rights awareness is inevitably, the most salient issue in the consumerism discourse. As a distinct construct within the umbrella concept of consumerism, consumer rights awareness refers to the individual consumer's knowledge and under-

standing of his/her rights in relation to companies and their offerings, as well as knowledge of relevant consumer protection agencies^{36,37}. The consumers' awareness of their rights is considered an important ingredient in the relationships with companies in the market-place^{32,33,35}. This is because the adequate awareness of consumer rights places the consumers in a better position to make informed purchase decisions³⁸, and also empowers them to be able to put pressure on corporations to produce quality goods and services³⁹.

Historically, the codification of consumer rights is credited to President John F. Kennedy of the USA, in 1962. President Kennedy identified four basic rights, which he noted were necessary to protect all consumers in market relations with the sellers^{9,10,40}. These rights are: the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose and the right to be heard. These four basic rights were later extended to eight, with the addition of four new rights namely, the right to satisfaction of basic needs (the right to basic needs), the right to redress, the right to consumer education and the right to a healthy environment^{34,41}. The eight rights were adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1985^{34,40}, leading to their domestication by various countries and economic zones in the world²⁰. Brief explanations of these rights are presented.

- i. **Right to Basic Needs:** The right to basic goods and services that are considered as necessities of life, such as adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, education and sanitation.
- ii. **Right to Safety:** The right to be protected against the marketing of goods and services, and production processes that are hazardous to health and life.
- iii. **Right to Information:** The right to be given adequate information needed to make informed choices. It also includes the right to be protected against dishonest or misleading advertising or labeling.
- iv. **Right to Choice:** The right to choose products and services at that are of satisfactory quality and competitively priced. This right entails the prevention of consumers from exposure to

- unfair and exploitative business practices, such as monopolies, artificial scarcity, profiteering etc.
- v. **Right to Representation:** This refers to the consumers' right to be heard. The right to express consumer interests in the making and execution of government policy.
 - vi. **Right to Redress:** The right to be compensated for misrepresentation, shoddy goods or unsatisfactory services.
 - vii. **Right to Consumer Education:** The right to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to be an informed consumer.
 - viii. **Right to Healthy Environment:** The right to live and work in an environment which is neither threatening nor dangerous and which permits a life of dignity and wellbeing.

3. The CSR - consumerism Link

The concepts of CSR and consumerism are historically linked, as they both arose as part of the reactions to the incessant complaints of unfair treatment of consumers by the sellers in the market place⁹. In⁹ specifically highlighted CSR and consumerism as part of the four major kinds of reactions that arose as a means of rescuing the consumers from their disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the sellers in the market place. The other two major reactions, being the evolution of consumer legislations from the government, aimed at protecting the consumers; and the emergence of the marketing concept, which emphasizes customer satisfaction as the central focus of all marketing activities⁹. Several researchers have also pointed to the fact that, one of the major reasons for the adoption of CSR, especially by companies in the advanced economies, is the increased customer awareness and interest in the social behavior of companies⁴²⁻⁴⁵. Thus indicating that, consumerism, arising from increased consumer awareness and advocacy, is an important driver of CSR adoption by companies^{33,35,38,45}.

Further evidences of the link between CSR and consumerism can be adduced from reported findings, which revealed situations where consumer actions, such as boycotts, was used to 'force' companies to adopt corporate

responsible behaviors^{46,47}. Consumer boycott refers to the consumers' decision not to buy a particular product (or from a particular company).

It is a form of "*negativeethical consumerism*"⁴⁸, that consumers have used to penalize companies that are perceived as socially irresponsible^{48,49,50}. Conversely, the literature also reports several research findings that suggest that consumers have favorable attitude and purchase intention towards companies that are perceived as socially responsible^{47,49,51-53}.

The foregoing discussions indicate that there exists a link between CSR and consumerism. Previous researchers have noted that adequate awareness on the part of consumers lead to consumerism and consumer advocacy, which in-turn empowers the consumers to be able to put pressure on corporations to produce quality goods and services and also act responsibly^{38,39}. Incidentally however, this link has received very little attention, especially in terms of empirical studies, thus presenting research avenues for prospective researchers.

3.1 CSR and Consumerism: The Nigerian Perspective

The development of modern forms of CSR practices in Nigeria is closely linked to the reforms that took place in the banking and telecoms sectors in the country, in the early part of the current millennium^{53,54,55}. Prior to that period, CSR practices in the country were almost restricted to the oil companies, whose CSR initiatives were mostly in the form of community development efforts aimed at placating aggrieved communities in the oil-rich region of the Niger-Delta^{56,57}. The CSR activities of the banking and telecoms sectors were brought to the fore in the early part of the 2000s, due to the growing importance, and contributions of the sectors to the Nigerian economy^{54,55}. The banks and telecoms service providers both have large customer/subscriber base, with whom they engage in frequent transactions. Thus, with the attendant heavy publicity that is often associated with CSR activities in Nigeria, it took just a very short time-span for the CSR activities of the companies to become well known to the vast majority of Nigerians.

It is noteworthy to mention the fact that the avowed commitment of the banks and telecoms companies did not come on a platter of gold. The companies were more-or-less 'forced' to adopt CSR through the combined efforts and struggles of consumers, civil society organizations, and the government^{46,58}. The consumers have been particularly persistent in voicing their complaints against the unethical and socially irresponsible practices of these companies. Backed by several consumer advocacy groups, customers have on several occasions, taken practical steps towards emancipating themselves from abusive tendencies of the banks and telecoms companies.

The most prominent evidences of these steps are the consumer boycott actions that took place in 2003 and 2016 in the telecoms and banking sectors respectively. The 2003 telecoms consumer boycott is particularly considered as a landmark event in the history of company – customers' relationship in Nigeria⁴⁶. Based on the directives of some consumer advocacy groups, mobile telecoms subscribers in the country switched off their phones on the 19th of September, 2003^{46,59}, thus refusing to make or receive calls for the whole of the day. The boycott action resulted in serious revenue losses to the mobile telecoms companies, who were reported to have lost up to N1 billion^{46,59}.

The success of the consumer boycott action produced the desired effects, as the telecoms companies began to take steps aimed at addressing the grievances that led to the boycott action. The companies immediately began to promote social initiatives aimed at portraying them as socially responsible corporations^{46,59}. In addition to addressing the issues related to cost and quality of services, various CSR programmes, associated to different facets of the social and economic lives of the people, were initiated, promoted and funded by the companies. Examples of such programmes include the sponsorship of social, cultural and educational programmes on TV; economic empowerment schemes for young school leavers; scholarship schemes for indigent and exceptional students in tertiary institutions; provision of free medical services for children, pregnant women and the aged in the society; to mention just a few.

While we may not ascribe the same level of success

to the recently observed boycott of banking services in 2016, the success of the 2003 consumer boycott action in Nigeria provides evidence of an existing link between consumerism and CSR, and further suggests that companies' adoption of CSR can be a direct response to consumerism/consumer activism. Empirical support for such these suggestions are however lacking, as no previous studies have (to the best of the researchers' knowledge) examined directly, the relationship between consumer rights awareness and CSR.

4. Research Propositions

Based on the review of literature showing the historical linkage between CSR and consumerism, as well as the specific insights from Nigeria, this paper presents some research propositions, which may be useful in conducting empirical studies into the relationship between consumer rights awareness and CSR.

First and foremost, a number of previous researchers⁴²⁻⁴⁵ have acknowledged the fact that increased consumer rights awareness is one of the major reasons for companies' adoption of CSR. The literature also provides documented evidences to show that consumers' display of negative ethical consumerism, in the form of boycotts can be used to 'force' companies to adopt CSR^{46,47,60}. On these bases therefore, we propose that:

P1: *Increased consumer rights awareness will lead to increased demand for CSR by consumers.*

Increased demand for CSR by consumers will in-turn positively impact on perceived CSR practices of the companies, as it is expected that consumers who demand for CSR will better appreciate companies who show commitment to CSR. On this basis, the study proposes that:

P2: *Increased demand for CSR will likely lead to favorable perceived CSR of companies, particularly if the companies adopt CSR practices due to the consumers' demands for CSR.*

Research findings from several studies conducted on the implications of companies' CSR practices and consumer behavior have shown that consumers are likely to extend their favorable responses to companies that are perceived as socially responsible^{5,49,51,61}. The consumers' favorable responses cuts across a wide range of attitudinal and behavioral responses such as favorable corporate and product evaluation^{51,62}, increased purchase intention^{49,63}, and customer loyalty^{6,64}. Based on these reported findings therefore, this study proposes that:

P3: *Consumers' positive perception of CSR will result in higher favorable responses towards the companies and their products/services.*

Despite the promising results from studies reporting positive associations between perceived CSR and consumer responses, researchers have pointed out that these relationships may not be direct and straightforward^{44,65}. This opinion is driven by the results from studies, which have reported limited or totally insignificant effects of CSR on consumer behavior^{15,66,67}. Researchers have thus called for the examination of the influences of mediator and moderator factors in the CSR – consumer behavior relationships. These mediators/moderators include

factors that may be related to the company, customers, industry, culture, and context^{42,68,69}.

Within the context of developing countries⁴², proposed consumer rights awareness as one of the contextual variables that can possibly influence consumer reactions to CSR. Recent happenings in Nigeria, particularly in the banking and telecoms sectors, where customers have been calling for increased commitments to CSR, due to increasing awareness of rights also provide justification for the possible influence of consumer rights awareness on consumer response towards CSR. We therefore make the following proposition:

P4: *Increased consumers rights awareness will strengthen or weaken the relationship between perceived CSR and consumer responses.*

A model showing the proposed effects and relationships is shown in Figure 1. The model indicates that adequate consumer rights awareness and consumerism will result in increased demand for CSR. The model also shows that increased demand for CSR by consumers will result in favorable perceived CSR of the companies, which will in turn lead to favorable consumer responses. Furthermore, increased consumer rights awareness

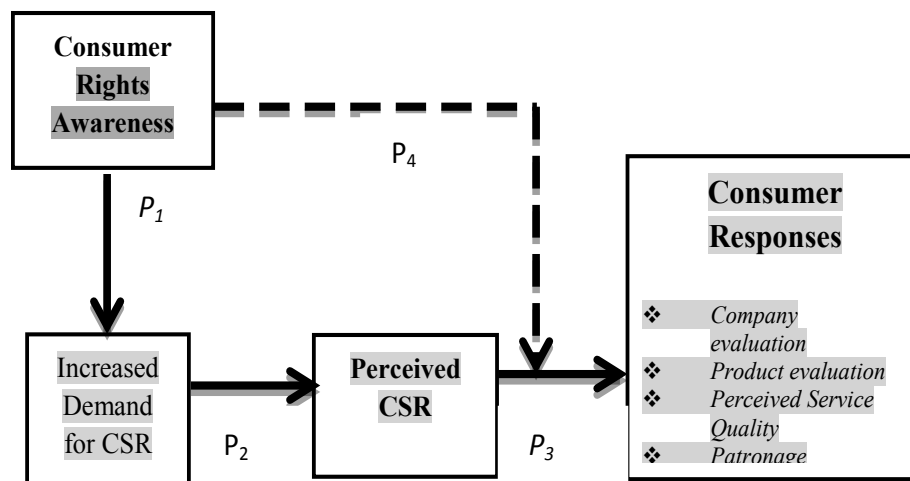


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

will moderate the effect of perceived CSR on consumer responses, thus strengthening the relationship between them. The expected consumer responses include favorable company and product evaluation, enhanced perceived service quality, patronage intention, among others.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

Discussions from previous researches and scholarly works have highlighted the importance of CSR, both to the companies as well as their customers and the larger society; thus, leading to sustained research interests on consumer reactions towards companies' CSR efforts.

In the same vein, researchers have emphasized the importance of consumerism and consumer awareness in promoting effective consumer behavior, aimed at ensuring adequate protection of rights and enhanced company – customer relationship. Although the conclusions arisen from these two streams of research tend to suggest a link between CSR and consumerism, empirical validation of such links are yet to be established. This paper has developed general propositions, with an accompanying research model, which can possibly be used for empirical verification of the links that have been deduced from the literature.

In addition to the research model and propositions, this study also suggests a potential research context. As a starting point, customers in the banking and mobile telecoms sectors in Nigeria can be used as the target respondents. The banking and mobile telecoms sectors are currently regarded as the most active sectors in the Nigeria^{54,58}. The banks and telecoms companies have large customer bases, which are in constant interaction and engagement with the companies; and are thus, highly susceptible to frequent complaints on issues bothering on consumer satisfaction and rights abuses. Companies in the banking and telecoms sectors also engage in extensive CSR programs, which are highly dispersed across the country⁵⁸. The fact that these CSR initiatives also enjoy constant and widespread publicity, via several media, also makes it plausible that the customers would be in the position to respond to questions relating to the companies' CSR, and how it relates to consumerism issues.

Based on the general propositions developed in this paper, we expect that higher consumer rights awareness will lead to consumers demanding increased CSR from the companies. This increased demand for CSR, if met with positive responses from the companies, will result to favorable perceived CSR, which will in turn lead to positive attitudinal and behavioral responses from the consumers. We hope that the proposed research would make significant contributions to the business – society literature, by further enhancing our knowledge on the importance of consumer rights awareness and consumerism in advancing improved relations between companies and their customers.

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