Weightier Matters: Examining CEO Activism Issues in Ghana's non-Western Context

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ABSTRACT

Trendwatchers have spotted some seismic shifts in relations between business and politics. Particularly, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) are increasingly weighing in on greater good issues. Although a global phenomenon, current CEO activism scholarship reflects a Western focus; an ideological bias for modernist perspectives; a preponderance of White male CEO voices, and the relative elision of female activist CEOs. While, generally, no empirically-based typology of the sociopolitical issues that matter to activist CEOs exists, the specific range of causes of particular concern to non-Western CEO activists is neatly absent. This paper addresses all of these concerns, offering an inquiry into the emerging CEO activism phenomenon in the Ghanaian non-Western sociocultural milieu. Data collection entailed three separate rounds of fieldwork that saw long interviews with a corps of 24 self-identified informants, featuring an even split of men and women activist CEOs. The hermeneutic phenomenological theme-based approach guided data analysis. Following extant brand activism models, a typology of six clusters of CEO activism issues is offered that highlights the weightier matters of sociocultural activism, environmental activism, business/workplace activism, political activism, legal activism, and economic activism. Sociocultural issues include Ghana's fight against COVID-19, where activist CEOs pooled resources to construct and equip a new multimillion dollar 100-bed infectious diseases hospital facility, embarked on risk communication campaigns, donated critical health supplies, funded the screening and testing of employees, provided food and essential supplies to vulnerable groups, and called out the government for lapses in the management of this health crisis. Besides internationalizing CEO activism studies for the strategic communications, leadership, business ethics and responsible management fields, the results suggest the need to consider the perspectives of CEO activists in non-Western societies. This paper contributes mainly to current discussions in CEO activism (aka corporate social advocacy) and brand activism. It contributes to other theoretical and conceptual streams, including covenantal notions of public relations, Caritas, Ubuntu Philosophy, Africapitalism, and postmodern values in strategic communication. This paper contributes to the upper echelon perspective; insider activism; sustainability transitions; and current discussions concerning how to address issues of diversity, equity, inclusivity, and social justice in the public relations literature. Policy implications are laid out, and areas for future research are indicated.

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Conventional business wisdom holds that the realms of business and politics ought not to mix.[1] However, we are seeing significant shifts in this dictum, as the terrains of business and politics continue to coalesce much strongly than previously thought.[2] Thus, although corporations have not always been concerned about wider social, political, and environmental issues that are not directly related to their financial bottom line, some scholars have observed seismic shifts.[3]

Some business leaders recently signaled a reimagination of corporations' role in society when the *Business Roundtable* issued a statement that suggests that forward-leaning and future-ready businesses now focus on seeking long-term shared value for multiple stakeholders, rather than only for investors.[4] This is a major departure from the traditional profit-maximizing and investor-interest-seeking focus advocated by Milton Friedman.[5] The new position urges companies to be accountable to, at least, some five strategic constituencies, namely, customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders.

Corporations, brands, and business executives are taking public stances on diverse sociopolitical and environmental issues through various activist and advocacy campaigns.[6] Notably, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) now speak publicly on controversial issues that were once the preserve of politicians, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and other advocacy groups.[7]

CEO activism describes instances where CEOs– heads of profit-seeking corporations– speak publicly on social, political, and environmental issues that may not be directly connected to the operations of their companies or the ability of their businesses to make financial profits.[8] Sometimes, such public stances may run counter to the very business or profit-maximizing logic of companies.[9]

The widening gyre of corporate chieftains' public stances have included such issues as same-sex marriage, climate change, income fairness, immigration, racial discrimination and gender equality.[10] Oft-cited CEO activist exemplars tend to be White male Western (American) business bigwigs, including Tim Cook of Apple, Lloyd Blankfein of Goldman Sachs, Jim Rogers of Duke Energy, and Eric Schmidt of Google.[11] Others are Angie's List's CEO William Oesterle, Howard Schultz of Starbucks, and Dan T. Cathy of

1. D. C. Hambrick and A. Wowak. "CEO Sociopolitical Activism: A Stakeholder Alignment Model." Academy of Management Research, no. 46 (2021): 33–59. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2018.0084.

2. Global Strategy Group. Business and Politics: Do they Mix? (2016, January).http://www.globalstrategygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/GSG-2016-Business-and-Politics-Study_1-27-16-002.pdf

3. Aaron K. Chatterji and M.W. Toffel. The New CEO Activists. Harvard Business Review, January – March (2018): pp. 78 – 89. https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-new-ceo-activists.

4. Business Roundtable. Business Roundtable redefines the purpose of a corporation to promote 'An economy that serves all Americans,' (2019, August 19). https://www.businessroundtable.org/business-roundtable-redefines-the-purpose-of-a-corporation-to-promote-an-economy-that-serves-all-americans

5. Milton Friedman. The social responsibility of business is to make a profit. *New York Times Magazine* (1970, September 13), pp. 32–33, 122, 126; Milton Friedman, The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits. Berlin, Germany: Springer (2007).

6. Weber Shandwick, CEO activism in 2017: High noon in the C-suite (2017). https://www.webershandwick.com/uploads/news/files/ceo-activism-in-2017-high-noon-in-the-c-suite.pdf

7. Chatterji and Toffel, Starbucks'"Race Together" Campaign and the Upside of CEO Activism, (2015, March 24). https://hbr.org/2015/03/starbucks-race-together-campaign-and-the-upside-of-ceo-activism

8. Hambrick and *Wowak, CEO Sociopolitical Activism: A Stakeholder Alignment Model*, 33–59.

9. Eric Kwame Adae, Beyond Corporate Profits: Reminiscing about the Future of CEO Activism in Ghana. Doctoral dissertation, School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon, (2020). https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/25924.

10. Weber Shandwick, The Dawn of CEO activism, (2016). https://www.webershandwick.com/uploads/news/files/the-dawn-of-ceo-activism.pdf; Chatterji and Toffel, The power of CEO activism, (2016). https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/03/opinion/sunday/the-power-of-ceo-activism.html?_r=0

11. Chatterji and Toffel, *Starbucks' "Race Together" Campaign and the Upside of CEO Activism*.

Chick-fil-A.[12] The only exception appears to be the mention of a woman CEO activist, Marilyn Carlson, CEO of the global travel and hospitality firm Carlson Companies, who spoke out in 2004 against human trafficking.[13]

Buoyed by notions of brand responsibility, the Triple Bottom Line, and sustainability, corporate social responsibility has tended to serve the dual objectives of creating economic and social value simultaneously.[14] However, CEO activism is conceptualized as a unique expression of corporate sociopolitical involvement, as some CEOs may even intentionally court some controversy by weighing in on polarizing issues without any obvious pretense of raising corporate profits.[15]

CEO activism is fast emerging as a theoretical concept in scholarly circles.[16] This is due in part to the significant media spotlight on the phenomenon.[17] However, currently, scholars appear divided on various facets of CEO activism.[18] A disagreement appears to be what label to adopt.[19] Scholars say CEO activism possibly signals a shift in corporate public relations, since until relatively recently, most large companies have been cautious about offending sections of their stakeholders by avoiding controversies.[20]

Concentrated in the United States of America, a global prevalence of CEO activism is prognosticated.[21] Men and women CEOs from other parts of the world engage in activism, yet the bulk of current literature on CEO activism has focused on activist CEOs in Western (largely American) contexts.[22] Research on CEO activism displays an ideological bias for modernist perspectives that privilege consensus and the corporate and investor interests.[23] The field suffers a gender-blind spot, with many studies highlighting the activism of white, men CEOs, while eliding the voices and actions of women activist CEOs.[24]

Typologies for discussing the clusters of issues around which CEO activists plan their activism campaigns are currently nonexistent. Since scholars have yet to focus on the activist campaigns of CEOs in non-Western societies, there are no clear examples of the range of issues that matter to such activist CEOs in the Global South. Based on extant brand activism typologies,[25] this study examines the social resistance actions of both men and women who self-identify as activist CEOs in Ghana, with the view to providing some empirical basis for the development of a typology of sociopolitical issues in CEO activism, even while providing glimpses of specific issues that concern activist CEOs in a non-Western context.

Literature Review

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) adopted a new definition of the field in describing it as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics."[26] This new look highlights the ethical basis and the human-social dimensions of PR.[27] This is seen in the centrality of the community-preserving functions of PR for companies and institutions.[28]

Generally, the mission of present-day public relations remains building and sustaining mutually beneficial relations between organizations and their strategic constituencies. While socially responsible corporate behavior had traditionally been driven by strategic corporate self-interest, it has been stressed that it is imperative for companies to "upgrade the quality of life in a community" (26).[29]

Some scholars have argued that although corporate social responsibility has usually been somewhat motivated

12. Chatterji and Toffel, *The Power of CEO activism.*

13. Weber Shandwick, *The Dawn of CEO activism.*

14. Chatterji and Toffel, *Starbucks' "Race Together" Campaign and the Upside of CEO Activism.*

15. Ibid.

16. Nalick, et al., Corporate Socio-Political Involvement: A Reflection of Whose Preferences? *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 30(4), (2016), 384-403.

17. Melissa Dodd, Corporate Activism: The New Challenge for an Age-Old Question, (2016, April 18). https://instituteforpr.org/corporate-activism-new-challenge-age-old-question/.

18. Kirsten Livonen, Understanding CEO Activism: Actions and Implications. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, Vol. 2018(1), (2018).

19. Adae, *Beyond Corporate Profits: Reminiscing about the Future of CEO Activism in Ghana.*

20. Chatterji and Toffel, *The Power of CEO activism.*

21. Chatterji and Toffel, *The New CEO Activists.*

22. Adae, *Beyond Corporate Profits: Reminiscing about the Future of CEO Activism in Ghana.*

23. Erica Ciszek and Nneka Logan, Challenging the Dialogic Promise: How Ben & Jerry's Support for Black Lives Matter Fosters Dissensus on Social Media, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 30:3, (2018), 115-127, DOI: 10.1080/1062726X.2018.1498342.

24. Adae, *Beyond Corporate Profits: Reminiscing about the Future of CEO Activism in Ghana.*

25. See: Kotler and Sarkar, *Finally, Brand Activism!* (2017, January 9). http://www.marketingjournal.org/finally-brand-activism-philip-kotler-and-christian-sarkar/; Kotler and Sarkar, The case for brand activism. A discussion with Kotler & Sarkar, (2018b, November 15). http://www.marketingjournal.org/the-case-for-brand-activism-a-discussion-with-philip-kotler-and-christian-sarkar/

26. G. Corbett, Final Candidates for a Modern Definition of Public Relations, (2112a). http://prdefinition.prsa.org.; Corbett, G. (2112b). [Letter to membership]. New York: Public Relations Association of America.

27. D. Tilson, Current Research in Public Relations: A Critique and Questioning of Global Trends. *African Communication Research,* 2(3), (2009), 367-396.

28. Public Relations Association of America (PRSA), Accreditation Study Course. New York: Public Relations Association of America, (2003).

29. D. Tilson and D. Vance, Corporate Philanthropy Comes of Age. *Public Relations Review*, 11, (1985), 26-33.

by efforts to uphold the social contract,[30] serving the greater social good does not have to be prompted or encouraged by the expectation of satisfying a corporate goal since good corporate citizenship could be an adequate reward in and of itself.[31] Thus, such notions have created room for a covenantal model of strategic communications as a legitimate theoretical field of inquiry,[32] to serve authentic social ends deemed "desirable in its own right" such as "health, sanitation or justice" (197-199). [33]

Some Corporate Advocacy Conceptualizations

Activism entails efforts by social actors and institutions to promote, impede or direct sociopolitical, economic, and environmental reforms or stasis, to improve society.[34] Activism is a mechanism for applying political pressure geared towards altering policies in a given direction,[35] and pushing for social change. [36]

The roots of advocacy spring from the past participle of the Latin verb *advocare*, referring to a clarion call on others for help and contains "the Latin word for voice (vox)" (200).[37] Advocacy refers to promoting and voicing support for an individual, organization, or idea, and working to persuade and gain the support of others to embrace what is advocated.[38] Thus, by extension, corporate advocacy generally involves a corporation voicing and making explicit public support for an individual, organization, or idea, and persuading others to do the same.[39]

Scholars conceptualize corporations and various agents within the organizational set as having the capacity for engaging in activism.[40] Corporate sociopolitical involvement presents itself in various hues and flavors. In an agentic model of the field, it has been suggested that corporate advocacy may be spearheaded by several corporate actors, including corporations (corporate activism), shareholders (shareholder/investor activism), brands (brand activism), other corporate executives (insider activism), and CEOs (CEO activism).[41]

The field of corporate sociopolitical involvement is fast emerging as a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry, spawning several conceptualizations.[42] These conceptualizations include corporate political activity and corporate political advocacy;[43] corporate social responsibility and sustainability;[44] political corporate social responsibility; brand activism and brand responsibility;[45] insider activism; shareholder activism;[46] and corporate social advocacy,[47] sometimes referred to as CEO sociopolitical activism,[48] and CEO activism.[49]

30. D. Guth and C. Marsh, *Adventures in public relations: Case studies and critical thinking*. Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon, (2005).

31. T. Mescon and D. Tilson, Corporate philanthropy: A strategic approach to the bottom line. *California Management Review*, 29(2), (1987), 49-61.

32. D. Tilson, An alternative view of social responsibility: The ancient and global footprint of caritas and public relations. In B. St. John, M. Lamme, and J. L'Ethang (Eds.), *Pathways to Public Relations: Histories of practice and profession* (pp. 56-73), London, England: Routledge (2014).

33. S. Baker, The theoretical ground for public relations practice and ethics: A Koehnian analysis, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 35(3), (2002) 191-205.

34. Kotler, and Sarkar, Finally, Brand Activism! (2017, January 9). http://www.marketingjournal.org/finally-brand-activism-philip-kotler-and-christian-sarkar/

35. M. Smith, Activism. In: Heath RL (ed.) Encyclopedia of Public Relations. London: Sage, (2013) pp. 5-8.

36. Council of Europe, HRE and Activism, (2017). http://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/hre-and-activism.

37. Wettstein and Baur, Why should we care about marriage equality: Political advocacy as a part of corporate responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 138(2), (2016). 99-213. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2631-3.

38. Edgett, R. (2002). Toward an ethical framework for advocacy in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research,* 14(1), 1-26

39. Wettstein and Baur, *Why should we care about marriage equality,* 99-213.

40. A.J. Hillman, G.D. Keim, and D. Schuler, Corporate Political Activity: A Review and Research Agenda. *Journal of Management*, 30(6), (2004), 837-857. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jm.2004.06.003

41. Adae, *Beyond Corporate Profits.*

42. Nalick et al., *Corporate socio-political involvement,* 384-403.

43. Wettstein and Baur, *Why should we care about marriage equality,* 99-213.; D. Baur, and F. Wettstein, CSR's new challenge: Corporate political advocacy. In M.C. Coutinho de Arruda, & B. Rok (Eds.), Understanding Ethics and Responsibilities in a Globalizing World (2016), 171-187. Springer Publishing.

44. Donnalyn Pompper, *Corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and public relations: Negotiating multiple complex challenges*. New York: Routledge (2015).

45. N. Kim, What is brand responsibility? Interview with Kim Sheehan, (2018). https://we-are-next.com/collection/what-is-brand-responsibility

46. Pompper, *Corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and public relations.*

47. See e.g.: M.D. Dodd and D.W. Supa, Conceptualizing and measuring corporate social advocacy communication: Examining the impact of corporate financial performance. *Public Relations Journal*, 8(3), (2014), 2-22; M.D. Dodd, Corporate activism: The new challenge for an age-old question, (2016, April 18). https://instituteforpr.org/corporate-activism-new-challenge-age-old-question/; and M.D. Dodd and D.W. Supa, Testing the viability of corporate social advocacy as a predictor of purchase intention. *Communication Research Reports*, 32(4), (2015), 287-293.

48. Hambrick and *Wowak, CEO Sociopolitical Activism: A Stakeholder Alignment Model*, 33–59.

49. See e.g.: Chatterji, *Why Apple's Tim Cook and other CEOs are speaking out on police shootings;* Chatterji and Toffel, *Starbucks' "Race Together" Campaign and the Upside of CEO Activism;* Chatterji and Toffel, *The Power of CEO Activism;* Chatterji and Toffel, Do CEO activists make a difference? Evidence from a field experiment." Harvard Business School Working Paper, (2017). No. 16-100, March 2016. https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/26274858/16100.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Chatterji and Toffel, The new CEO Activists. Harvard Business Review (January – March), (2018), pp. 78 – 89. https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-new-ceo-activists; Chatterji and Toffel, The Right and Wrong Way to Do 'CEO Activism.' (2019, February 22). https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-right-and-wrong-way-to-do-ceo-activism-11550874530; and Livonen, Understanding CEO Activism: Actions and Implications. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, Vol. 2018(1), (2018).

Wettstein and Baur distinguish between corporate political *activity* and corporate political *advocacy*, based on three criteria: (i) whether the issue involves corporate strategic self-interest or eleemosynary/altruism; (ii) the nature of the outcome or consequence of the issue championed by the corporation; and (iii) the nature of profiling by the corporation, relative to the issue.[50] The notion of corporate political activity emerged in the management literature in the 1980s, focusing on corporate strategies to shape and influence government and/state policies, solely to help advance the realization of corporate goals.[51]

Corporate political *activity* involves diverse strategies such as constituency building, targeted campaign contributions, advocacy ads, lobbying, and coalition building.[52] Thus, the goal in corporate political *activity* remains the creation, maintenance and extension of private corporate value, rather than achieving public value for society. Conversely, corporate political *advocacy* is held as a distinctive form of corporate sociopolitical involvement that is unique because it is a voluntary and proactive corporate behavior that is driven by corporate values and relies on overt public advocacy in which the corporation fights for the common good.[53]

Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) is conceptualized as organizational stances on sociopolitical issues and straddles two realms in public relations: Strategic Issues Management (SIM) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).[54] Strategic Issues Management (SIM) embraces a multitude of organizational functions that highlight corporate social responsibility.[55] SIM is driven by the notion of organizational legitimacy that entails standards for considering whether the actions of a corporate body are acceptable or in tune with social values and norms.[56]

Social responsibility describes strategies and tactics aimed at ensuring that an organization (i) recognizes that it has linkages with multiple stakeholders, (ii) becomes aware of the economic, social, and environmental impacts of its operations and activities on members of its strategic constituency, (iii) manages the wider impacts of organizations on society and the environment, with the view to serving the greater good in ways that transcend the limited interests of owners and investors.[57]

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) concerns an organization "incurring responsibilities to society beyond profit maximization" (1).[58] Such care-based organizational duties include "the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole" (8).[59] Political Corporate Social Responsibility (PCSR) conceptualizes corporations as political actors while stressing the role and responsibility of organizations in alternative forms of governments within the para-constitutional domain, such as public-policy networks and multi-stakeholder initiatives.[60]

Sustainability extends the idea of social responsibility in demanding that organizations secure their long-term viability by balancing the need to maximize economic profit for investors with the need to positively impact employees, society, and the environment.[61] Sustainability thus seeks to align the competing interests of the plurality of members of an organization's strategic constituency. Sustainability focuses on ensuring prosperity for the organization, the environment, and the society at large. The assumption is that pursuing environmental and social prosperity can energize an organization's financial viability, hence the notion of the Triple Bottom Line.[62]

The concept of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) is a triple helix sustainability framework envisioned by John Elkington, who argued that rather than pursuing a single financial bottom line that privileges investors, corporations should pursue three bottom lines for (i) people (societal/community responsibility), (ii) planet (environmental sustainability), and (iii) profits (firm financial performance).[63] Elkington recently expressed second thoughts about his framework because of his perception that CSR is often diluted

50. Wettstein and Baur, *Why should we care about marriage equality,* 99-213.

51. Hillman, Keim, and Schuler, *Corporate Political Activity,* 837-857.

52. G.D. Keim and C.P. Zeithaml, Corporate political strategy and legislative decision making: A review and contingency approach. The Academy of Management Review, 11(4), (1986), 828–843.

53. Wettstein and Baur, *Why should we care about marriage equality,* 99-213.

54. Dodd and Supa, *Conceptualizing and measuring corporate social advocacy communication*, 2-22.

55. R.L. Heath, M.J. Palenchar, and H.D. O'Hair, Community building through risk communication infrastructures. In R. L. Heath & H. D. O'Hair (Eds.), Handbook of risk and crisis communication. London: Routledge, (2009), (pp. 471–487).

56. M.C. Suchman, Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review,* 20(3), (1995), 571-610.

57. Pompper, *Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Public Relations.*

58. Pava and Krausz, *Corporate Responsibility and Financial Performance.*

59. W.T. Coombs and S.J. Holladay, Managing Corporate Social Responsibility: A Communication Approach. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell (2012).

60. D. Baur, NGOs as Legitimate Partners of Corporations. A Political Conceptualization. Dordrecht: Springer (2011).

61. A.W. Savitz, Talent, Transformation, and The Triple Bottom Line: How Companies Can Leverage Human Resources to Achieve Sustainable Growth. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Wiley (2013).

62. Ibid.

63. J.B. Elkington, Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of the 21st Century Business. Oxford: Capstone, (1999).

by wider corporate self-interests and private profit priorities, without due concern *for people* and *the planet*.[64]

Some scholars suggest that CSR has fallen below expectations in positively driving changes in the society and the environment since it has largely become a tool for veiled corporate hypocrisy.[65] Thus, CSR is sometimes lampooned as an inauthentic veneer for preserving private firm value.[66] Some scholars challenge the argument that rises in industrial productivity (even with sustainable methods) can reduce current and future ecological externalities and negative social impacts.[67] CSR has tended to serve as a tool for preempting and circumventing democratic pressures for the environmental regulation and public scrutiny of corporations while fostering environmental degradation.[68] CSR also faces several marketing-oriented strictures, linked to perceptions that CSR is merely a corporate veneer and strategy for deception and corporate hypocrisy, designed to mask organizational self-interest.[69] These corporate inauthenticity-based censures include *"greenwashing,"*[70] *"pinkwashing,"*[71] *"bluewashing,"*[72] and *"wokewashing."*[73]

Distinctiveness of CEO Activism

Despite the various cognate conceptualizations of corporate advocacy, one of the least studied forms of corporate sociopolitical involvement is *CEO activism*.[74] CEO activism involves CEOs publicly speaking up on sociopolitical and environmental issues that may not directly have anything to do with corporate profitability, such as climate change, same-sex marriage, social injustice and inequality, and gun control.[75] CEO activism shares with corporate political activity the idea of corporations seeking to influence politics. It is noteworthy that the concept of corporate political activity entails lobbying to advance corporate self-interest or firm value.[76] However, CEO activism involves issues not directly related to the core business, and thus not salient to corporate objectives.[77] Corporate political activity is private, taking place behind closed doors, while CEO activism is public advocacy.[78]

CEO activism is akin to Political CSR (PCSR) in assuming it is not limited to the self-interest of corporations but is also concerned with the greater social good. However, while PCSR activities are externally driven but internally focused on the corporation's CSR policies and practices, CEO activism has an external focus, with corporate leaders seeking to instigate social change outside their corporations.[79] CEO activism is also different from CSR by being involved in culture wars that are quite different from the non-controversial activities, usually programmed as CSR efforts.[80]

I find many of the current labels for expressions of corporate advocacy rather confusing and unsuitable, especially when it comes to conceptualizing the genre of corporate sociopolitical involvements that are spearheaded by CEOs. CEO activism is a relatively unique nonmarket strategy and a new form of corporate sociopolitical involvement.[81] While the extant concepts of corporate involvement focus on the corporation and/or the brand as the archetype, CEOs are, by definition, not necessarily incorporated. Again, although CEOs may spearhead other corporate and brand activism, this may not always be the case as CEOs may find themselves engaging in activism purely out of their personal conviction.

64. J.B. Elkington, 25 Years Ago I Coined the Phrase "Triple Bottom Line." Here's Why It's Time to Rethink It, (2018, June 25). https://hbr.org/2018/06/25-years-ago-i-coined-the-phrase-triple-bottom-line-heres-why-im-giving-up-on-it.

65. Adae, *Beyond Corporate Profits.*

66. C. Sarkar, "Beyond the Triple Bottom Line" – An Interview with John Elkington, (2018, October 25). http://www.marketingjournal.org/beyond-the-triple-bottom-line-interview-with-john-elkington/

67. J.B. Foster, Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature. New York, NY: New York University Press, (2000).

68. S. Enoch, A Greener Potemkin Village? Corporate Social Responsibility and the Limits of Growth. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 18(2), (2007), 79–90. doi:10.1080/10455750701366485.

69. Pompper, *Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Public Relations.*

70. Kim Sheehan and L. Atkinson, Special Issue on Green Advertising: Revisiting Green Advertising and the Reluctant Consumer. Journal of Advertising, 41(4), (2012), 5–7. doi:10.1080/00913367.2012.10672453.

71. K. McVeigh, Susan, G Komen's "Pinkwashing" Problem a Black Mark on Charity. *The Guardian*, (2012, February 15).

72. Pompper, *Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Public Relations*

73. Kim Sheehan, Companies Promoting Causes can be Accused of 'Wokewashing' – Allying. Themselves only for Good PR, (2019, August 9). https://theconversation.com/companies-promoting-causes-can-be-accused-of-wokewashing-allying-themselves-only-for-good-pr-120962; P. Adams, The Year of 'Woke-Washing': How Tone-Deaf Activism Risks Eroding Brands (2019, July 8). https://www.marketingdive.com/news/the-year-of-woke-washing-how-tone-deaf-activism-risks-eroding-brands/557606/

74. Livonen, *Understanding CEO Activism: Actions and Implications.*

75. Chatterji and Toffel, *The New C*

76. Hillman, Keim, and Schuler, *Corporate Political Activity,* 837-857.

77. Chatterji and Toffel, *The New CEO Activists.*

78. Livonen, *Understanding CEO Activism: Actions and Implications.*

79. Ibid.

80. A.G. Scherer, D. Baumann-Pauly, and A. Schneider, Democratizing corporate governance: Compensating for the democratic deficit of corporate political activity and corporate citizenship. Business and Society, 52(3), (2013). 473–514.

81. Baur and Wettstein, *CSR's new challenge: Corporate political advocacy,* 171-1

Besides, as observed by Kotler and Sarkar,[82] corporate activism may find expression in various domains beyond the social and the political realms, such as championing environmental causes. Thus, a more specific and heuristic label is required for the phenomenon. Yet, the extant perspectives of corporate social responsibility, corporate social advocacy, and corporate political advocacy all assume the corporate imperative, while others continue to split hairs by labeling such involvements as "sociopolitical,"[83] "political,"[84] and "social,"[85] among others. I am persuaded to concur with Chatterji and Toffel and Livonen in referring to the phenomenon as "CEO activism."[86]

This labeling is not only pithy, direct and punchy but also more specific in describing this unique form of corporate sociopolitical engagement in the public sphere, exercised through the agentic role of CEOs. For instance, in its study of corporate reactions to the US travel ban on citizens of selected nations, Weber Shandwick found that for 84% of the companies that made public pronouncements on the matter, such corporate articulations were directly made by the CEOs, using their personal names rather than the corporate brand names.[87]

A unique label must be consistently applied to the unique phenomenon that subsists when CEOs weigh in on wider social, economic, political, legal, business/workplace, and environmental issues that may not be directly related to the profitability or operations of the corporations they lead. I argue that that phenomenon must be labeled "CEO Activism," to help distinguish it from other forms of corporate sociopolitical activism, such as those expressed by brands, investors/shareholders, other corporate executives and corporate bodies.

The Brand Activism Perspective

Brands that are managed by corporations sometimes display agency for activism.[88] Brand Responsibility is deemed to be a progressive or forward-leaning brand stance that demonstrates a brand's commitment to a crucial social mission or purpose, stemming from the very core of the brand DNA, and not as an add-on or a contrived veneer-like activity.[89] Brand responsibility is a brand's resolve to contribute meaningfully to the creation of a better world by helping to solve some of the biggest problems by taking leading roles in conscious conversations in the public sphere.[90] Brand activism runs counter to the profit-maximization philosophy of corporations and embraces a values-driven multi-stakeholder agenda for brands' concerns for society's future, the planet's sustainability, and justice for all, especially those issues that remain unresolved by CSR.[91]

Brand activism is an expression of brand responsibility and a corporation's response to the market's expectation of brands to stand for something, even if it means sacrificing some other market segments in order to resonate with core segments.[92] While brand responsibility is regarded as purpose-driven and stemming from the very heart of the brand's purpose, CSR is widely regarded as inauthentic, contrived, and a veneer-like add-on, aimed at corporate hypocrisy and realizing corporate private value.[93]

Nalick and colleagues conceptualize sociopolitical issues as "… salient unresolved matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate across groups" (386).[94] There is the lack of societal consensus because such issues border on "contentious unsettled social matters on which opinions are split" (386).[95] Such sociopolitical issues are among the most controversial and sensitive topics, threatening the social, religious, economic, ethnic, partisan, or some historical sociocultural or geopolitical order.[96] They are also characterized by low information rationality, as information asymmetry and low information

82. See: Kotler and Sarkar, "The Regressive Brand: The Dark Side of Brand Activism" (2018a, August 20). http://www.marketingjournal.org/the-regressive-brand-the-dark-side-of-brand-activism-philip-kotler-and-christian-sarkar/, Kotler and Sarkar, The Case for Brand Activism. A Discussion With Kotler & Sarkar (2018b, November 15). http://www.marketingjournal.org/the-case-for-brand-activism-a-discussion-with-philip-kotler-and-christian-sarkar/

83. See: Hambrick and Wowak, *CEO Sociopolitical Activism: A Stakeholder Alignment Model*, (2021), 33-59; Nalick et al., *Corporate socio-political involvement*, (2016), 384-403.

84. See: Wettstein and Baur, *Why Should We Care about Marriage Equality*, 99-213; Baur and Wettstein, *CSR's New challenge: Corporate Political Advocacy*, 171-187.

85. See: Dodd and Supa, *Conceptualizing and Measuring Corporate Social Advocacy,* 2-22; Dodd and Supa, *Testing the Viability of Corporate Social Advocacy,* 287-293.

86. See: Chatterji and Toffel, *Starbucks' "Race Together;"* Chatterji and Toffel, *The Power of CEO Activism;* Chatterji and Toffel, *Do CEO Activists Make a Difference;* Chatterji and Toffel, *The New CEO Activists*; Chatterji and Toffel, *The Right and Wrong Way to Do CEO Activism;* Livonen, *Understanding CEO Activism: Actions and Implications.*

87. Weber Shandwick, *CEO Activism in 2017: High Noon in the C-suite.*

88. Adae, *Beyond Corporate Profits.*

89. Kim, *What is Brand Responsibility?*

90. Lirtsman, *Brand Activism Built on Purpose*, (2017). https://www.interbrand.com/best-brands/interbrand-breakthrough-brands/2017/articles/brand-activism-built-on-purpose/

91. Kotler and Sarkar, *The Regressive Brand: The Dark Side of Brand Activism.*

92. Kotler and Sarkar, *The Case for Brand Activism.*

93. Kim, *What is Brand Responsibility?*

94. Nalick et al., *Corporate Socio-Political Involvement*, 384-403.

95. Ibid.

96. D. Haider-Markel and K. Meier, The Politics of Gay and Lesbian Rights: Expanding the Scope of the Conflict. *The Journal of Politics*, 58(2), (1996). 332-349. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2960229.

structures tend to curtail credible information and reasoning relative to the issue. Such issues are further marked by evolving viewpoints and issue salience.[97]

A sizeable section of Americans (47%) believe that CEOs have a duty and a responsibility to speak out on contentious issues, despite the mixed blessings of potential risks and rewards.[98] Nearly 60% of Millennials think that business leaders have a greater responsibility to speak now than in years past regarding issues of wider social significance.[99] Americans are overwhelmingly supportive of corporate advocacy, with 88% of respondents agreeing that corporations have the power and responsibility to influence social change, and 78% agreeing that companies should act to address important issues facing society.[100]

Kotler and Sarkar identified six broad categories of issues/causes in brand activism. These include (i) social brand activism (including brand concerns regarding equality, LGBTQ, race, age, gender, and education); (ii) political brand activism (including brand concerns for lobbying, and campaign financing); and (iii) legal brand activism (including brand concerns for taxation issues and employment laws, etc.). The rest comprise (iv) economic brand activism (including brand concerns for minimum wage and related tax policies); (v) workplace activism (including corporate governance and corporate organization, CEO pay, worker compensation, labor and union relations, supply chain management, governance, and gender diversity in the upper echelons of corporations); and (vi) environmental brand activism (including brand concerns for climate change, land use and land degradation, air quality, conservations, and excessive damming).[101]

Motivations for CEO Activism

Generally, the motivation for activist CEOs is the desire for social change in such areas as race relations and gender equality and other areas of social life that are unrelated to the core businesses of corporations.[102] Nalick and co-workers argue that there are three main classes of motivations for corporations to become involved in sociopolitical issues, including (i) betting on future stakeholder benefits, (ii) responding to current stakeholder pressures, and (iii) pursuing ideological inclinations.[103] Companies are finding it hard to remain apolitical in the bid to engage their stakeholders in an increasingly polarized political climate.[104] Besides, most corporate leaders have genuinely strong convictions about contemporary social issues, partly due to a new wave of business education that stresses inclusive capitalism, social responsibility and sustainability and the general need for corporate leaders to think beyond financial profits.[105]

While expecting corporations to deliver good products and services en-route to recording profits, consumers also now expect corporations to do much more than make consistent financial profits and returns for investors.[106] There is a greater realization among corporations, governments, states, the civil society, and market segments of the need for corporations to maintain a careful balance between the profit maximization maxim with optimization of returns for people and the planet.[107] Linked to these are concerns for sustainable business practices, and the need for corporations to achieve and maintain societal consent and legitimacy.[108]

Generally, there is a growing gap between the promises of governments and their ability to deliver much needed social services, and, modern consumers are displaying a higher expectation of corporations.[109] Customer segments such as Millennials are protesting online and through street marches about many social issues.[110] Most consumers expect corporations, their brands, and leaders to step up to the plate and fill this democratic gap/deficit, by taking up issue with some of the most important social, political and environmental issues of the day.[111]

For some CEO activists, speaking up is driven by their personal convictions such as religious beliefs, pandering to the

97. Nalick et al., *Corporate Socio-Political Involvement*, 384-403.

98. Weber Shandwick, *CEO Activism in 2017: High Noon in the C-suite.*

99. Ibid.

100. Global Strategy Group. (2016, January). Business and Politics: Do they Mix? http://www.globalstrategygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/GSG-2016-Business-and-Politics-   Study_1-27-16-002.pdf

101. See Kotler and Sarkar, *Finally, Brand Activism;* Kotler and Sarkar, *The Case for Brand Activism.*

102. Chatterji, *Why Apple's Tim Cook and other CEOs are Speaking out on Police Shootings.*

103. Nalick, et al., *Corporate Socio-Political Involvement*, 384-403.

104. Chatterji, *Why Apple's Tim Cook and other CEOs are Speaking out on Police Shootings.*

105. Pompper, *Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Public Relations.*

106. Weber Shandwick, *CEO Activism in 2017: High Noon in the C-suite.*

107. Savitz, *Talent, Transformation, and The Triple Bottom Line.*

108. Kotler and Sarkar, *Finally, Brand Activism.*

109. A.M. Cronin, Public Relations Capitalism: Promotional Culture, Publics, and Commercial Democracy. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan (2018).

110. Ricardo J. Valencia and Patrick Jones Jones, Networks of Radical Contention: The Co-Constitutive Relations Between Structural Conditions and Public Relations Strategies and Tactics in the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. *PR Inquiry*, 7(3), (2018), 199-223. https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X18788704

111. Cronin, *Public relations capitalism: Promotional culture, publics, and commercial democracy.*

aspirations of Millennials, standing with and for the masses, and showing courage and sincerity.[112] Thus, there is a new breed of younger business leaders emerging who are favorably predisposed to social liberalism, as more business leaders are aligned to the left side of the political divide and tend to identify with social and cultural issues, as opposed to economic issues only.[113]

Some activist CEOs point to their corporate values to justify their advocacy,[114] while others suggest that they and their companies should have a higher purpose beyond maximizing shareholder value.[115] Others are motivated by Caritas, Ubuntu, Africapitalism, a postmodern orientation, personal background factors, and calculated business motives.[116]

Research Question

CEO activists develop a strong sense of social-mindedness when personal/psychological factors interact with social/situational factors.[117] Once motivated to undertake CEO activism, sections of the literature on CEO activism suggests that the next step would be for CEOs to select a range of sociopolitical issues that would serve as the fulcrum for their resistance actions. [118]

Kotler and Sarkar posit that there are six broad classes of such issues that a brand could advocate. In their brand activism typology, these scholars identified political issues, social issues, economic issues, legal issues, environmental issues, and business/workplace issues.[119] I posit

that this typology on brand activism could be adapted and extended to the realm of CEO activism. Currently, no such typology exists for describing the clusters of issues that CEO activists generally concern themselves with. Especially the range of causes pursued by men and women activist CEOs in non-Western contexts is non-existent. How does the extant brand activism typology of Kotler and Sarkar extend to CEO activism?

The focus of the research question is to address this lacuna in CEO activism literature concerning the classes of issues for CEO activists, even while unearthing some of the specific weightier matters of concern to activist CEOs in a non-Western society.

Research Question: What clusters of sociopolitical issues do CEO activists in Ghana focus on?

Methods

A qualitative epistemological route was selected for this inquiry. My preference for the human science, rather than quantitative approaches, was motivated by the aim of gaining deep insights on CEO activism.[120] This epistemological approach focuses on contributing to theory-building and examining how human social actors interpret and make sense of society.[121]

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected and analyzed data from long interviews with activist CEOs

in Ghana, who were purposively selected for this study. The snowball sampling technique was also employed to include more informants, in addition to those primarily included through purposive sampling. In all, 24 men and women self-identified CEO activists served as my informants.

The selection/inclusion criteria were that participants should be (i) men and women CEOs who are leading/have led companies that operate in Ghana (be they Ghanaian nationals or not), and (ii) who have embarked on some form of CEO activism in Ghana. Thus, a purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who meet the selection criteria. As stated, this technique was augmented by snowball sampling, where participants were asked to recommend other activist CEOs they knew in Ghana who could be contacted for inclusion in this study.

The University of Oregon Human Subjects Board approved all the research protocols and instruments for this study. There were three separate rounds of data collection, comprising a pilot study in 2018, a main data collection phase in 2019, and a follow-up effort between December 2020 and January 2021. The mode of data collection was long interviews, in the sense of semi-structured conversations with the selected participants.[122] The pilot study involved 7 participants and the main data-gathering saw 17 CEO collaborators. The follow-up effort involved interviews with 12 of the

112. Chatterji and Toffel, *The New CEO Activists,* 78 – 89.

113. Chatterji, *Why Apple's Tim Cook and other CEOs are speaking out on police shootings.*

114. Chatterji and Toffel, *The New CEO Activists,* 78 – 89.

115. See: L. Gaines-Ross, What CEO Activism Looks Like in the Trump Era, (2017, October 2). https://hbr.org/2017/10/what-ceo-activism-looks-like-in-the-trump-era; Chatterji and Toffel, *The New CEO Activists,* 78 – 89.

116. Eric Kwame Adae, *Brewed in the African Pot: Examining the Influences of Caritas, Ubuntu, Africapitalism, and Postmodern Values on CEO Activism in Ghana*. In D. Pompper (Ed.) *Public Relations for Social Responsibility: Affirming DEI Commitment with Action*, (in press, 2021), pp: 83-100. Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Publishing.

117. Adae, *Beyond Corporate Profits*

118. Ibid.

119. See Kotler and Sarkar, *Finally, Brand Activism;* Kotler and Sarkar, *The case for brand activism*.

120. See: M. van Manen, Researching Lived Experiences: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy (2nd. Edition). Ontario, Canada: The Althouse Press (1997).; and M. van Manen, Researching Lived Experiences: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy (2016), (2nd. Edition, eBook version). Albany, NY: Routledge.

121. N.K. Denzin, and Y.S. Lincoln, Introduction – The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research. In Denzin. N.S. & Lincoln, Y.S., eds. (2018). Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 5th ed. (pp. 1-26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

122. S. Brinkman, *The Interview*. In N. S. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.) (2018). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (2018). (pp. 576-599). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

previous pool of 24 participants who were available for this mop-up exercise.

The conversations with informants produced digitally recorded narratives that I transcribed and prepared for data analysis. Data analysis was informed by the hermeneutic phenomenological thematic method of van Manen.[123] Positionally, the participants were regarded as collaborators, co-investigators, informants, and co-creators of this inquiry, rather than subjects.[124] The mission of data analysis was to organize the voices of informants in ways that highlighted specific lines of inquiry, as a prelude to rhetorically examining and interrogating their perspectives to provide insights that addressed the research question.[125]

Findings

Based on the data collected the brand activism typology postulated by Kotler and Sarkar, was invoked to help organize the range of issues that informants in this study disclosed. While most of the study participants pursued a cocktail of causes at a time, some specific issues emerged that could be classified according to the six brand activism clusters postulated by Kotler and Sarkar.[126]

Socio-cultural Activism

It was found that a sticking issue for most participants in this study involved diverse forms of sociocultural issues, including risk communication concerning the fight against COVID-19 in Ghana. It also emerged that in a predominantly patriarchal Ghana, an overwhelming majority of participants in this study have been addressing many forms of gender-based injustices.

Taking Action Against COVID-19

It emerged that various CEOs and companies in Ghana had joined forces with various sections within the society, including the Government of Ghana, political parties, the media, civil society organizations, the expatriate and the diplomatic community, and the wider Ghanaian public, to wage a war against COVID-19.

Considering the rising COVID-19 case counts globally, Ghana's private sector was proactive to recognize the deleterious pressures of this virus on Ghana's social and medical system and the already strained fiscal policy and private sector productivity. Among the interventions of Ghana's private sector was an initiative that was conceptualized and co-managed by Informant #14, a man CEO of an association of firms in Ghana's downstream petroleum sector. This was an intervention to augment the nation's frail medical system by providing a new multimillion dollar 100-bed isolation and treatment facility specifically for addressing the rising COVID-19 case load:

> Ghana's healthcare delivery system is under pressure. The existing facilities are already inadequate and this virus will only make the situation worse. We set up the COVID-19 Private Sector Fund to mobilize resources for the construction of a 100-bed treatment and isolation facility for our people.

Many CEOs and their companies rallied to the call, making cash donations and in-kind giftings of building materials, equipment and other hardware. Within six weeks, this infectious disease facility was ready for use by the people of Ghana. Other CEOs and their businesses made significant donations to a fund established by the Government of Ghana to support the nation's fight against COVID-19.

Many players in Ghana's private sector led in efforts to screen and provide COVID-19 testing facilities for employees, while some CEOs in this study had mass media advocacy campaigns to educate the public. Many participants served as opinion-leading talking heads in public service announcements on COVID-19 in the official language of English and many local dialects.

Other participants got their com-

panies to fund the rollout of billboards and other out-of-home media channels with key messages on COVID-19. Some participants led campaigns to stem the stigmatization of Ghanaians who are infected by COVID-19. Others, including Informant #15, woman CEO of a chamber of firms in the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors testified that they published various poems about the pandemic. Informant #13, a woman CEO of a film awards company, appeared on many radio and television programs to deepen public education on the pandemic and mainstream public discussions on the subject. Many participants disclosed that they donated cash and valuable resources, including Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs) to selected hospitals and also sponsored the training of front-line health workers to combat COVID-19.

With the COVID-19 case count escalating, the Ghanaian government imposed a lockdown that negatively impacted the movement and livelihoods of sections of the population, notably *Kayayei*, commercial head porters (mainly females) who operate at many markets and lorry stations. Some participants in this study indicated that they were part of *Feed-A-Kayayo* Campaign launched in April 2020 as a public-private partnership with the Government of Ghana to feed some head porters in the most populous parts of Ghana. Informant #19, a woman CEO of a technology and software training firm provided further details:

> This project sought to alleviate the harsh challenges confronting head porters because of the recent imposition of the lockdown. We fed about 10,000 head porters each day. This is a private sector-led initiative, but we are seeking the support of everyone. We must stand together to beat COVID-19.

Despite a season of heated campaigns in the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections on December 7, 2020, the CEOs who led this project

123. See: van Manen, *Researching Lived Experiences.*

124. W.F. May, Doing Ethics: The Bearing of Ethical Theories on Fieldwork. *Social Problems*, 27(3), (1980), 358-370.

125. van Manen, *Researching Lived Experiences.*

126. See Kotler and Sarkar, *Finally, Brand Activism;* Kotler and Sarkar, *The Case for Brand Activism.*

testified that they were able to unite the two bitter political parties in Ghana, the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in efforts to feed some of the most vulnerable sections of Ghana's population, as some political party bigwigs took to the streets on this initiative.

Some participants candidly spoke truth to power and expressed concern about the sub-optimal efforts by the government to manage COVID-19 in the lead up to the December 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana. Many participants said the government was guilty of negative role modeling in creating a false state of normalcy during the electioneering campaign. For instance, Informant #1, a woman CEO of a group of companies in media and news publishing disclosed that:

> We started well, but we are now seeing a loss of urgency because of inadequate government communications and a general dropping of our guards in the management of COVID-19. The government must be up to the task and lead public education, so that the people would realize the seriousness of this disease.

Other participants blamed the government of deceptive reporting and the suppression of COVID-19 prevalence statistics.

Other Sociocultural Issues

Several participants indicated that they had been taking steps to promote the empowerment of women. Informant #3, a woman CEO of a media production company testified to acting in resistance to a plethora of cultural and institutional barriers in Ghana that limited the empowerment and advancement of women and children. These include sexual harassment, unacceptably poor pay and employment conditions of working women, and the abysmal representation of women in Ghana's party-political spaces:

> I speak on issues that concern women and children. My purpose is to empower women holistically, while I speak truth to power. I

advocate and make noise; I agitate, and I push for the right policies to be developed and implemented that would advance the rights and position of women and children. Yes, my target is always the woman – the Ghanaian woman and her emancipation, empowerment, and advancement.

Others disclosed that their activism had revolved around issues connected with the well-being of girls and women in Ghana, including economic empowerment through livelihood support and efforts to address teenage pregnancy by educating young girls. In this vein, Informant #23, a woman CEO of a major financial industry regulator had been working to promote women's empowerment with campaigns to better equip a critical mass of women to help build the nation:

> If you empower the woman, you are building a nation. I created the Akoma platform in 2014 to encourage like-minded women to aspire to greatness, provide useful information to each other and help them network and share ideas that would make them more impactful and successful in society.

Many participants' actions involved conditioning and empowering the Ghanaian youth to become more entrepreneurial. Informant #16, a man CEO of a human capital development firm, had been focusing on youth investment and personal development, entrepreneurship, and talent development:

> I've engaged with 18 to 35-year-olds over 12 years now, through nationwide roadshows … a weekly radio broadcast on diverse themes that will develop people who are ethical and very purpose-driven.

Others disclosed that they had been active in deepening financial literacy among huge sections of the Ghanaian population. For instance, Informant #20, a man CEO of a management accounting and business advisory firm, testified that they had been working on getting the Ghanaian to become more competent in personal finance matters:

> Since 2008, I have been promoting

financial literacy in Ghana. I have a radio program that seeks to deepen financial literacy among the population.

Many participants disclosed that their activities included fighting the government to provide essential services for Ghanaians. Some indicated that the main impetus for the formation of Occupy Ghana (a pressure group promoted by some participants in the study) was the myriad of systemic failures in the country in the run-up to the 2016 presidential and parliamentary polls. What had become popularly known as *Dumsor*, a *Twi/Akan* term for *'power frequently coming on, but then going off,'* a reference to the erratic electric power situation in Ghana, was the chief trigger for the formation of Occupy Ghana and its various protest actions. These participants said they were dissatisfied with what they saw as the generally low standard of governance in Ghana.

A great majority of activist CEOs in this study revealed that they had been instrumental in the passage of Ghana's Right to Information Bill into law in the middle of 2019. Informant #24, a woman CEO of an agro-processing firm, talked about how this bill was kept on the back burner for well over a decade. However, through the mounting of consistently stronger resistance action, the hand of the NPP administration of President Addo-Dankwa and the 7th Parliament of the current 4th Republic in Ghana cowered under the pressure and finally passed this important law:

> We got the Right to Information Law passed in the middle of 2019. We had the Right to Information Bill for well over 10 years. We kept pressing and blowing the matter open. We now have the Right to Information passed into law partly because of our activism.

Environmental Activism

A handful of participants had made environmental causes the mainstay of their work as activist CEOs. It emerged that within the broad field of environmental concerns in Ghana, CEO activist causes include climate change, checking the use of plastic waste, san-

itation, and pollution. One of the chief environmental concerns is the issue of *Galamsey*, a *Ghanaianism* for illegal small-scale (typically gold mining) operations that occur in all manner of mineral-rich locations across the country (sadly, even within forest reserves). Such illegal mining activities have been responsible for environmental degradation in Ghana, including the pollution of rivers, streams, lakes and other water bodies.

Informant #6, a man CEO of a chamber of telecommunications firms, indicated that they had spearheaded fights against *Galamsey*. Such struggles held substantial significance for them, asserting that pursuing such a cause was more about being a responsible African community elder, and not merely a business leader:

> I took on environment and causes to transform society, including working against illegal mining activities and the adverse impact of such irresponsible operations on the environment. I consider myself an elder. I can't look on when things go wrong in society. That'd be irresponsible of me.

Other participants had been working with various civil society organizations to press against the continued operations of *Galamsey* activities in Ghana. Some participants reported working in the area of the environment and sanitation matters, including speaking out against poor waste management culture, poor sanitation, and bad plastic waste disposal practices in Ghana. Some testified they had been advocating for a cleaner environment and society, leading national discussions on plastic littering, advocating for the banning of single-use plastic products, and promoting a culture of recycling and sustainable manufacturing and consumption practices.

Business/Workplace Activism

Several business/workplace activism issues engaged the attention of some of the participants. Glass ceiling issues ran through the resistance activities of many of the women CEOs in Ghana. It was found that most women CEO activists in this study have been working for the promotion of gender diversity and pushing against the under-representation of women in management positions and on the boards of most Ghanaian companies.

Several of the women CEOs indicated that they had been exploring ways of providing effective avenues for more women to climb the corporate ladder in Ghana. Given that many systemic and institutional barriers worked against the progress of women across many fields in Ghana, Informant #1 indicated that helping more women to break the glass ceiling:

> Here, few women rise the corporate world … we're poorly represented in management and on the boards. I thought it was important that having gone through that process and risen to the top, it was essential to help others to also get them up there.

Some activist CEOs have been advocating for a more vibrant and robust service culture in Ghana. Several participants indicated that they had been advocating for higher standards of customer service, as a way gaining competitive advantage for Ghana.

Political Activism

Among the range of measures that some activist CEOs had been advocating for in their bid to fight endemic corruption in Ghana was the need to promote greater transparency by compelling politicians and public office holders in the country to declare their assets. Informant #10, a man CEO of a major law firm explained their work in this regard:

> I am working with others on compelling asset declaration in Ghana because currently, nobody is complying with the law that requires

public officers to declare their assets. We will write to the Attorney-General of Ghana, drawing attention to this blatant contravention of the laws of the land … we are going to drag the Attorney-General to court.

Following their childhood experienced during the Liberian civil war, Informant #13 became concerned about the growing pattern of electoral violence in Ghana that was generally attributed to political vigilantes. This participant embarked on a solo protest march #WHYIWALKFORGHANA on February 26, 2019 and petitioned the leadership of the Parliament in Ghana, issuing an ultimatum for the absolute disbanding of such militia within one month:[127]

> I went on a march … I said we would keep protesting until things changed. I could not imagine living at peace within myself with that explosive situation that such political vigilantes and electoral violence could bring to Ghana. If I don't act and something horrible happens, can I live with myself? Can I look at my children in the face, knowing I could have taken steps to neutralize the situation?

Several other informants had been actively working for the promotion of democracy and transparency in Ghana's electoral processes. Informant #8, a man CEO who leads a law firm and a business consultancy had seen the need to take some actions to help reform Ghana's electoral system:

> I decided to rally around some lawyers for us to challenge this in the courts before any new election was held in Ghana. The Supreme Court was surprised, and it was surprising to me that they were surprised because they had not noticed the anomaly. The Supreme Court ruled in our favor, stating that the Electoral Commissioner should provide all political parties with the pink sheets – evidence of valid votes

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127. Informant #13 employed the hashtag #WHYIWALKFORGHANA to protest against private militia groups that wreak mayhem during elections in Ghana. This hashtag underscores the informant's realization of what they describe as *"Power of One,"* which emboldens them to speak up and take actions in a manner that could not be ignored by the Ghanaian authorities. They indicated that they were energized to act because of their unpleasant experiences during the Liberian civil war that saw many lives and property lost and a once prosperous West African nation utterly destroyed. This informant thus described a personal responsibility to help protect Ghana's democracy and ensure a safe country for all.

cast from every polling station to the political parties. Looking at Ghana's electoral history, I think that was a significant development.

Legal Activism

Through legal activism, several participants reported resistance to the pattern of state capture that had taken hold in Ghana. These participants were disheartened to note that individuals who had a significant influence - including those in government and others in policymaking positions – used such connections and privileges to change the rules of engagement, for the benefit of private individuals, very much against the state interest.

Many participants indicated that they had formed the Occupy Ghana pressure group to help highlight some of the failures of the government. Most of these participants spoke about holding the government to account by speaking truth to power through diverse resistance activities. One of the chief activities of Occupy Ghana had become a test case in legal activism in Ghana, involving a case the group brought against the state to compel the Auditor-General to crack the whip to check endemic corruption in Ghana. Informant #8 offered some insights into the nature of Occupy Ghana's anti-corruption drive:

We sued the Auditor-General in the Supreme Court, asking for an order to compel him to do his job well. His job was to surcharge and disallow it when people have corruptly or improperly used government funds. The Auditor-General is using that law and last week, he surcharged a government official for some expenditure that the Auditor-General disallowed. That was historic in Ghana and a big win that I feel proud to have been a part of.

Some participants have taken actions to probe and question the propriety of some procurement agreements. These include the 2018 deal between the Government of Ghana and Haitian ICT firm Kelni-GVG to implement and develop a common platform for the monitoring of mobile phone traffic and the revenues

accruing to the state thereof. Several participants described this as a controversial multimillion-dollar agreement involving the award of a 10-year contract worth nearly US $180 million to Kelni GVG as a 'rape' of Ghana. For instance, it emerged that a participant in this study, acting as a public interest lawyer, commenced multiple lawsuits against the government of Ghana on the grounds of financial maladministration. Informant #8 had this to say:

Take the Kelni-GVG scandal in 2018 that exposed the controversial multi-million-dollar deal, signed between the Government of Ghana and the Haitian firm, Kelni-GVG. We saw so many irregularities and decided to take the State to court, to compel them to account to the people of Ghana.

Economic Activism

Several CEOs in this study focus on issues concerning better economic management in Ghana. Some had pressed the government for more effective management of the Ghanaian currency, the Cedi, that had the unfortunate penchant for suffering huge depreciations against the major trading currencies. Informant #5, a man CEO of a leasing and wealth management firm, who has taken on the persona of an unofficial shadow finance minister of Ghana, disclosed that they had been questioning the soundness of some of the economic policies of the Government of Ghana:

I've been speaking on economic issues since 2013. I have been talking about economic and financial management issues in Ghana, breaking them out and highlighting the failures in some of our national economic matters in ways that the ordinary Ghanaian would understand.

Informant #4, a man CEO of an association of upstream petroleum companies revealed that they had been deliberate in highlighting a range of economic and financial matters, including the weak competitiveness of Ghanaian companies, high unemployment rates and unsustainably huge import bills facing Ghana:

I've spoken generally on economic

issues in Ghana; things that have got to do with the economy and their impact; I've spoken about Ghanaian companies not being productive enough; why companies in Ghana are not competitive, and the reasons why that is the case. One of my pet peeves has been about the Ghanaian currency, the Cedi.

Many participants expressed concern about uncontrolled government expenses by Ghanaian and African governments. Some informants disclosed that they had recently objected to huge amounts incurred by African governments in attending various summits with their bilateral partners. It became evident that those economy-focused CEO activists had been interested in weighing in on some government of Ghana programs and policies, such as the One District One Factory (1D1F) program, and other begging issues including hunger and national food security matters.

Many activist CEOs said they had engaged in intellectual debates with the Government of Ghana on diverse public procurement deals and agreements with some international institutions. Such public debates have been based on the perception that these public procurements and agreements did not meet the value-for-money criterion and did not serve the best interest of the generality of Ghanaians. These included the STX Housing agreement, a failed project launched in 2009 to construct 200,000 houses in Ghana over five years, at an estimated project cost of $10 billion.

The Komenda Sugar Factory was flagged as another flawed government project that had engaged the attention of some participants. Informant #8 explained some of the worrying aspects of this project:

I expressed the view that the Komenda Sugar Factory was going to produce more propaganda than sugar! We broke it down and explained it in very simple terms. The Government of Ghana did not listen to us, and at the end of the day, more than US $36 million of Ghana's money is down the drain, with totally nothing to show for all

that investment. Everything we had said had come true.

Discussion And Conclusion

This paper was energized by the mission of rethinking facets of the current scholarship on CEO activism by considering some alternative approaches. The overall goal was to address the perceived dearth of scholarly research on how the phenomenon of CEO activism is evolving in non-Western societies. Specifically, the purpose is to contribute to literature on CEO activism by establishing a typology of CEO activism issues, while introducing specific examples of non-Western CEO activism issues into the literature.

A deliberate decision was made to select a non-Western context, to adopt a non-quantitative method, and to have parity of the voices and lived experiences of both men and women activist CEOs. Data collection involved three entrées into the field for long interviews with 24 purposively selected self-identified CEO activists.

Extant brand activism typologies were invoked to highlight the issues involved in *CEO activism.*[128] While many of the participants typically took on a plethora of issues and causes, extant six clusters of brand activism proved robust and adequate in describing CEO activism issues in Ghana. Based on the findings, I make a case for a fresh typology of CEO activism issue clusters.

Although Kotler and Sarkar's typology of brand activism clusters - comprising environmental activism, social(cultural) activism, legal activism, economic activism, business/workplace activism, and political activism - was developed specifically for brand activism, the find-

ings in this study suggest that they were applicable to CEO activism. Adopting these categories for the range of causes of activist CEOs in Ghana proved adequate. However, this typology had to be somewhat modified by extending the "social activism" category to include cultural issues. Thus, for this study, there was a need for the inclusion of "sociocultural issues" as a cluster of CEO activism issues.

Following extant brand activism models, a typology of six clusters of CEO activism issues is offered that highlights sociocultural activism, environmental activism, business/workplace activism, political activism, legal activism, and economic activism (see Figure 1 below). In this wise, this paper extends extant brand activism notions.[129]
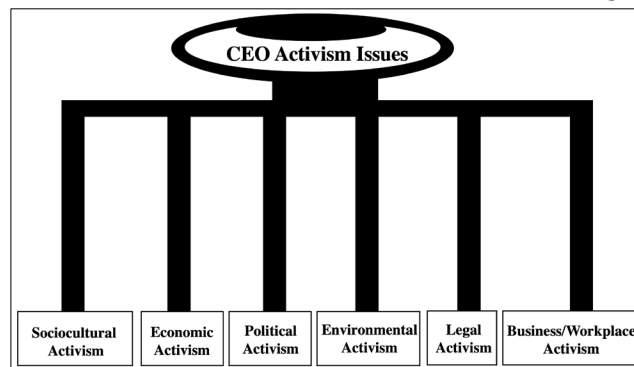

Figure 1: Taxonomy of CEO Activism Issues (Adapted from Kotler & Sarkar).[130]

(The motif is motivated by the ancient Ghanaian Adinkra symbol, The Duafe, which depicts a wooden comb. Duafe is an Adinkra symbol of femininity, love and care. It is emblematic of good hygiene and grooming.)

The findings effectively internationalize the literature on CEO activism and contribute to the literature on issues in CEO activism. Specifically, it enriches the literature on CEO activism[131] and the

notion of *sustainability transitions.*[132]

These findings on the issues involved in CEO activism in Ghana, hitherto unarticulated in CEO activism literature, introduce specific context-specific weightier matters of interest to activist CEOs in a developing country. Sociocultural issues include Ghana's fight against COVID-19, where activist CEOs pooled resources to construct and equip a new multimillion dollar 100-bed infectious diseases hospital facility for Ghana, embarked on risk communication campaigns, donated critical health supplies, funded the screening and testing of employees, provided food and essential supplies to vulnerable groups, and called out the government for lapses in the management of the crisis.

Environmental issues include illegal (gold) mining activities in Ghana popularly called Galamsey. Business/workplace issues involve the low representation of women in corporate Ghana, particularly issues concerning breaking the glass ceiling. Political issues include political vigilantism and electoral violence, democracy and civil rights. Legal issues include enforcing asset declaration by public officers, corruption, and murky public procurement deals. Economic issues entail sub-optimal performance of Ghana's economy, perceived bad government policies and programs, unemployment, huge import bills, and unjustifiably large public expenditures.

These findings contribute to CEO activism literature by introducing specific examples of issues advocated by CEOs within an African society. So far, the literature on CEO activism only contained examples of issues from Western contexts. Thus, these findings would serve as a launchpad for more incisive studies

128. See Kotler and Sarkar, *Finally, Brand Activism;* Kotler and Sarkar, *The case for brand activism*

129. See Kotler and Sarkar, *Finally, Brand Activism;* Kotler and Sarkar, *The case for brand activism.*

130. Ibid.

131. See: Dodd and Supa, *Conceptualizing and Measuring Corporate Social Advocacy,* 2-22; Dodd and Supa, *Testing the Viability of Corporate Social Advocacy,* 287-293; Chatterji, *Why Apple's Tim Cook and other CEOs are Speaking Out*; Chatterji and Toffel, S*tarbucks' "Race Together" Campaign and the Upside of CEO Activism*; Chatterji and Toffel, *The Power of CEO activism*; Chatterji and Toffel, *Do CEO Activists Make a Difference*; Chatterji and Toffel, *The New CEO Activists*; and Chatterji and Toffel, *The Right and Wrong Way to Do 'CEO Activism.'*

132. M.A. Delmas, T.P. Lyon, and J.W. Maxwell, Understanding the Role of the Corporation in Sustainability Transitions. Organization & Environment, 32, (2019), 87-97.

on CEO activism from the Global South, as well as comparative studies between Western and non-Western societies.

The findings provide some indications for future research in the area of the pathways through which gender dynamics shape CEO cause selection, as well as differences in issues chosen by men CEO activists in Africa, relative to those selected by women CEO activists. These findings further contribute to contemporary discussions in the strategic communication literature, including notions about the confluence of Caritas and Public Relations.[133] I also contribute to similar commentary about the African philosophy of Ubuntu as a basis for the sustainability movement.[134]

Besides contributing to the literature on a covenantal and care-based definitions of modern-day and cutting-edge public relations,[135] these findings contribute to literature on the nascent concept of Africapitalism and illustrates the argument that place is not to be ignored or simply consumed.[136] Beyond the value of context in theory building, examining whether or not the issues addressed by African CEOs are different goes beyond context.

This paper contributes to the insider activist perspective.[137] It contributes to the literature on the postmodern values in public relations, which casts corporations and their executives as being concerned with greater good issues, even if doing so requires opposing dominant corporate power structures to which corporate executives belong.[138] It also straddles current discussions on giving force to issues of diversity, equity, inclusivity (DEI) and social justice issues in the public relations and responsible management literature.[139]

This paper has implications for corporate policies.[140] The literature points to a growing popularity of CEO activism. The findings reported herein could inspire companies seeking to engage in corporate activism to provide policy guidelines for the specific types of causes that their CEOs could pursue. This paper contributes to the business ethics and responsible management literature by deepening understanding of alternative routes for companies to become more socially and authentically responsible to multiple stakeholders.

Despite the useful insights provided, some limitations exist. As a qualitative study, the findings are only relevant to the participants of this study. Besides, the participants were purposively selected, making the findings scarcely generalizable. Still, the findings may not hold for CEO activists in a different socio-cultural context.

By considering the voices and experiences of women activist CEOs in Ghana, this paper only scratches the surface in contributing to feminist theory, especially the strands of feminist theory pertaining to intersectionality and African feminist thought. A stronger theory-based, gender-centric analysis systematically examining the behaviors and motives of men and women activists is advisable. Future work that seeks to develop a framework and elicit questions to better understand gendered views and initiatives is recommended.

By virtue of their status and other characteristics, CEOs are a unique activist archetype. The current tactics employed by social movements may not suitably serve activist CEOs. Yet, little is currently known about the tactical repertoire of activist CEOs. Scholars could seek to unearth the range of strategies and tactics employed by CEO activists.

It is unclear the range and depth of effects produced by the activist campaigns of CEOs. A fertile domain of research could be an examination of the varieties of consequences produced by CEO activists. Scholars are still grappling with the relationship between CEO activism and the specific ways in which it impacts companies. Future CEO effects studies could focus on the diverse pathways in which CEO activism is related to such organizational outcomes as employee morale, employee loyalty, customer brand preference, and brand equity.

133. Tilson and D. Vance, Corporate philanthropy comes of age. *Public Relations Review*, 11(1985), 26-33.

134. Adae, *Beyond Corporate Profits.*

135. See: Corbett, *Final Candidates for a Modern Definition of Public Relations*; Corbett, *Letter to Membership*; and Public Relations Association of America (PRSA), *Accreditation Study Course*.

136. See: Kenneth Amaeshi and U. Idemudia, Africapitalism: A Management Idea for Business in Africa? *Africa Journal of Management*, 1(2), (2015), 210-223, DOI: 10.1080/23322373.2015.1026229; and E. Adegbite, O. Daodu, and J. Wood, Will Africapitalism work? *Africa Journal of Management*, 6(4), (2020), 419-434, DOI: 10.1080/23322373.2020.1830697

137. See: Pompper, *Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Public Relations*; F. Briscoe, M. Chin, and D.C. Hambrick, CEO ideology as an Element of the Corporate Opportunity Structure for Social Activists. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57, (2014), 1786-1809; and D.R. Holtzhausen, and R. Voto, R, Resistance from the margins: The postmodern public relations practitioner as organizational activist. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 14(1), (2002), 57-84, DOI:10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1401_3.

138. See: D.R. Holtzhausen, Postmodern Values in Public Relations, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(1), (2000), 93-114. Doi: 10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1201_6; and Holtzhausen and Voto, Resistance from the margins: The postmodern public relations practitioner as organizational activist, (2002), 57-84.

139. Adae, *Brewed in the African Pot*, pp: 83-100.

140. Chatterji and Toffel, Starbucks'"Race Together" Campaign and the Upside of CEO Activism.

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