

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Social responsibility in micro businesses in an African context: Towards a theoretical understanding

Chijioke Dike Uba<sup>1</sup>  | Md Nazmul Hasan<sup>2</sup> | James Buba Mshelia<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Business and Law, The University of Northampton, Northampton, UK

<sup>2</sup>School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, UK

## Correspondence

Chijioke Dike Uba, Faculty of Business and Law, The University of Northampton, University Drive, Northampton NN1 5PH UK.

Email: [chijioke.uba@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:chijioke.uba@northampton.ac.uk)

## Funding information

Faculty of Business and Law, University of Northampton

## Abstract

Small businesses often engage in social responsibility (SR) without knowing it or without referring to their actions as SR. This is particularly the case in developing countries where the idea of SR is seen as synonymous with philanthropy. While the literature on small business social responsibility is growing, our understanding of the context-specific determinants of responsible practices in microbusinesses (those that employ less than 10 employees) that dominate the business landscape in many developing countries is still limited. In this paper, we address this gap and offer a theoretical understanding of how microbusiness owner-managers understand and approach SR by drawing on rich qualitative data collected from Nigeria—Africa's largest economy. We utilise Social Representations Theory to understand (1) how and why microbusiness owner-managers limit their understanding of SR to philanthropic activities and (2) the wide range of practices, including philanthropic activities, that account for their overall Responsible Business Practices (RBPs)—those practices that enable them to act responsibly towards their stakeholders and/or operating environments. We find that owner-managers' representations of SR are anchored primarily on an idiosyncratic ethical tendency and inclination towards the creation of social/communal harmony by 'giving back to society' and objectified via actions deriving from three 'giving back' orientations, namely Core Philanthropism, Social Problem Solving, and Empowering. We model microbusiness owner-managers' RBPs, highlighting the intersectional interplay of the voluntary (SR as philanthropy) and non-voluntary (self-regulatory and legal) dimensions of RBPs. Finally, we discuss the key findings in relation to the extant literature and to policymakers and managers.

## KEYWORDS

African context, CSR, developing countries, microbusiness, philanthropy, social responsibility

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Society demands that businesses, including micro, small and medium enterprises, act responsibly towards their stakeholders and operating environments. Size and nationality contexts determine how businesses understand and approach their social responsibilities.

Specific to size, evidence from the academic literature shows that small businesses understand the idea of social responsibility (SR) differently from large businesses. Small businesses may engage in SR without knowing it or without referring to their actions as SR (Hsu & Cheng, 2012). In other words, they may act responsibly towards their stakeholders and/or operating environments without labelling

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2022 The Authors. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

such actions as SR. This is particularly the case in the developing countries where the idea of SR is seen as synonymous with philanthropy. What this means is that the term '(corporate) social responsibility' may not be entirely appropriate for understanding and/or explaining the broader Responsible Business Practices (RBPs) of small businesses, that is those practices that enable them to act responsibly towards their stakeholders and/or operating environments in developing country contexts (Cronje et al., 2017). Although the academic literature on small business social responsibility (SBSR) continues to grow, very few studies have thus far focused on understanding why small businesses in developing country contexts may limit their understanding of SR to voluntary philanthropy, and how they understand and approach their other (non)voluntary social responsibilities (see Soundararajan, Jamali, & Spence, 2018).

Previous studies have reported the motivations for small business owner-managers to engage in RBPs (Cronje et al., 2017) and the aspects that affect their decision making with regard to RBPs (Dincer & Dincer, 2013; Lepoutre & Heene, 2006; Moore & Spence, 2006; Wong & Bustami, 2020). Findings from those studies suggest that SMEs have specific characteristics that distinguish them from larger businesses. There are also characteristics that differentiate the different business types (i.e. micro, small and medium) that fall within the SME acronym (Baumann & Kritikos, 2016). Overall, the degree of localisation of business practices and management tends to be more in microbusinesses, leading to, potentially, different courses of action when it comes to their engagement with SR. Furthermore, the said characteristics can differ between countries and cultures (Cronje et al., 2017), highlighting the need for a better understanding and articulation of how small businesses (micro, small or medium) operating in different nationality contexts perceive and approach SR. However, academic research on SBSR have consistently defined small businesses as those that are not large businesses (see Spence et al., 2018). The definition of small businesses as such fails to acknowledge the context-specific idiosyncrasies of the different SME business types and how these may impact on their approaches to SR in different nationality contexts (Jamali et al., 2017; Soundararajan, Jamali, & Spence, 2018). The current literature does not articulate SR and related concepts in a way that accounts for why the idea of SR is limited to philanthropy and what constitutes the broader RBPs of microbusinesses (those that employ less than 10 people)—the dominant SME category in developing countries. Our study contributes to the literature by addressing this gap.

In this study, we focus on the Nigerian context, Africa's largest economy, employing fresh theoretical insights from Social Psychology to provide a novel approach to understanding the context-specific determinants of SR by owner-managers of microbusinesses. Microbusinesses are dominant players in the economic and business landscapes of most African countries (Ilegbinosa & Jumbo, 2015). They account for over 95% of jobs created by SMEs in Lagos (Nigeria)—the site of the current study's data collection. With a population of over 20 million, Lagos is one of the mega cities in the world. It is also the main/largest business hub in the entire West Africa, with micro businesses operating in Lagos providing a

significant percentage of overall economic and social benefits in the city (Anudu, 2021). According to a 2019 survey by the National Statistics Bureau (see Anudu, 2021), there are about 3.3 million microbusinesses in Lagos. On the other hand, the combined number of small and medium businesses, according to the same study, is only 8329 (0.25% of the total number of SMEs in the city). Understanding microbusiness social responsibility in this specific context is, therefore, warranted not least because they dominate the Nigerian SME landscape, and the aggregate impact of their activities goes a long way in the creation of positive/negative social and economic impacts for the communities where they operate.

(Corporate) social responsibility ([C]SR) is 'an idea that travels' (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996)—an idea that has migrated from its original American, business-context to other countries. As it travels, (C)SR is interpreted, understood and approached in ways that are consistent with the socio-political and cultural contexts where it is received and incorporated by different stakeholders (Gjølberg, 2010). The idea of (C)SR has travelled to developing countries, including Nigeria, where it is specifically understood as voluntary philanthropy (Amaeshi et al., 2006; Visser, 2008). However, the extant literature fails to provide a clear explanation as to why microbusinesses in the developing country contexts limit their understanding of SR to philanthropy, a voluntary approach to 'giving back to society'.

Correspondingly, our first objective in this study is to understand how microbusiness owner-managers in the Nigerian context incorporate the idea of (C)SR, a foreign (Western) concept, within existing frames and/or modes of understanding and business practices. Specifically, we employ Social Representation Theory (SRT) in framing the collection and analysis of interview data. SRT is suited to uncover how concepts and ideas (e.g. corporate social responsibility [CSR]/SR) are represented by members of specific societies, on one hand, and how they are incorporated within existing frames knowledge and cultural practices, on the other. Second, we uncover other non-philanthropic practices that constitute the wider RBPs in microbusinesses—understood in line with the definition of Cronje et al. (2017). This definition of RBPs is synonymous with the essence of (C)SR in the academic literature (see Dahlsrud, 2008), which enables us to explore SR-related issues using a concept (RBP) that is non-limiting as in the Nigerian context where SR is synonymous with philanthropy.

The novelty of our study comes from the way that we have applied SRT, contributing to the literature in, at least, three significant ways. First, we provide an articulate clarification of how and why the concept of SR is understood and approached the way it is (i.e. as voluntary philanthropy) by an important, yet understudied and under-theorised, category of business owners-managers (i.e. microbusinesses) in a developing country context. We then draw from this to unpack the range of practices that, in conjunction with 'SR as philanthropy', explain the wider RBPs favoured by the microbusiness owner-managers. Second, we draw from the key findings to develop a model of microbusiness RBPs that provides a foundation for further studies, particularly those that aim to understand the context-specific determinants of microbusiness SR in developing country

contexts. Finally, we discuss how policy actors (government and managers) can enhance SR compliance by using policy-framing approaches that resonate with the core social representations that describe and prescribe good behaviour and relationship in the Nigerian context.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we provide a review of the relevant literature. Thereafter, we discuss the theoretical framework that we employed for the study. We then discuss the key methodological issues relevant to the current study. In the final two sections, we discuss the key findings and contributions of our study respectively.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

(C)SR is understood and applied differently by businesses in different countries (Idemudia, 2011; Jamali & Karam, 2018). The (C)SR practices of local businesses in developing countries tend to be less formalised and philanthropic (Jamali & Neville, 2011; Visser, 2008; Wong & Bustami, 2020). The philanthropic approach to (C)SR adopted by businesses in developing countries represent voluntary (charitable) activities carried out to address social issues such as enhancing the quality of education, healthcare and transport (Chetty et al., 2015). Such voluntary activities are mostly driven by informal institutions such as religion, trust, community relationship, altruism and so on, and can help filling the institutional voids (Khanna & Palepu, 1997) left by either an absence or inability of formal institutions to address social problems. In Nigeria, for example (C)SR is understood by local businesses primarily as corporate philanthropy and altruism aimed at addressing socioeconomic challenges (Amaeshi et al., 2006). In addition, there is evidence that businesses operating within the African context characterised by institutional voids also engage in RPBs in their own ways (Choongo et al., 2019; Demuijnck & Ngondjom, 2013). On the other hand, the Western approach to (C)SR is more formalised and depend more on formal institutions (laws, regulations and policies) (Visser, 2008). Businesses in developed countries are thought to operate within strong (formal) institutional environments where informal institutions and their impact on business activities including (C)SR are subdued by over-presence of formal institutional arrangements (Bothello et al., 2019). Strong formal institutions are therefore seen as prerequisite to (C)SR in developed countries (Amaeshi et al., 2016) where businesses prioritise adherence to ethical standards and formal institutional frameworks and plan their (C)SR activities accordingly (Saeidi et al., 2015).

In addition to uncovering the import of country/nationality context, there is growing recognition that size matters when it comes to how (C)SR is understood and approached by businesses. This has led to focus on Small Business Social Responsibility (SBSR) as an emerging trend in (C)SR. The case for a specific focus on SBSR is justified by, at least, two very powerful streams of evidence. First, with SR activities becoming more widespread and society expecting more from businesses, SMEs (particularly in developed countries) are becoming pressurised to showcase commitment to social and

environmental issues and are responding in ways that are different from those adopted by large businesses (Spence, 2016). Second, small businesses differ from their large counterparts in many respects, including their perceptions of (C)SR and business-ethics-related concepts (see Fassin et al., 2011); their approaches to social responsibility (Soundararajan, Spence, & Rees, 2018; Spence, 2016; Spence & Rutherford, 2003); the nature of small business CSR orientation and the relationship between CSR orientations and time/effort committed to CSR activities (Burton & Goldsby, 2009). A key implication is that use of theories and approaches suited for exploring the (C)SR practices of large businesses may not capture clearly, and in enough detail, the organisational idiosyncrasies that underpin small businesses' understanding and approaches to SR (Fassin et al., 2011).

Studies in the broad mainstream, as well as specific African context, tend to conceptualise small business from the perspective of SMEs. We, however, consider that this approach draws from a reductionist dichotomy, one that lumps a wide range of different business types/sizes and defines them in terms of their size distinction from big businesses. For instance, Soundararajan, Jamali & Spence's (2018, p. 935) definition of small businesses as 'firms that have no more than 250 employees' covers all small business categories (micro and small) and all medium-sized businesses. A similar definition is re-echoed in the works of prominent authors and researchers in the area (see Spence et al., 2018). This binary approach to differentiating small businesses from large ones limits the possibility of capturing the nuanced context-based understanding and approaches to (C)SR by the owner-managers of the different categories of small businesses, for example micro business (Wong & Reevany, 2019).

Compared to large businesses, SMEs tend to be largely independent and operate based on personal relationships. Specific to their management styles, decision making lies with the owner-manager who often depends on internally generated sources for business growth. Also, small businesses are mainly localised in terms of their areas of operation and relationship. Ownership and control mostly reside with same person, and this lends legitimacy to the personal decisions made on how to expend company resources, such as in SR-related initiatives (Jenkins, 2006). This suggests that small businesses may not necessarily approach SR-related initiatives in the same way. In fact, the reasons, or aspects, that influence owners/managers in their decision-making process to decide which activities to participate in may differ from one SME to the next, and between the decision-makers as individuals. This is because, even though acting responsibly as a business takes place at organisational level, it is individual actors who make decisions and execute these initiatives when it comes to SMEs (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). This is particularly the case for microbusinesses given that ownership and control always rest with the owner-manager (Xu et al., 2020; Ya'nez-Araque et al., 2021).

Quantitatively, the SME is subdivided as follows; microbusiness (0 to 9 employees), small companies (10 to 49 employees), medium companies (50 to 249 employees), and companies with more than 249 employees are classified as large companies (Loecher, 2000). Qualitatively, the 'Smaller' (micro and small) companies differ from

the medium-sized ones (Baumann & Kritikos, 2016). The 'smaller' business company manager is often the owner, and s/he works predominantly in production or in the technical department, while the commercial/organisational duties are carried out mainly by self (if microbusiness) and/or family members. In 'medium' companies, the company manager is not restricted to the production or technical areas as s/he performs other functions to an increasing degree. Also, the company manager may not necessarily be the owner, meaning that decision making regarding use of resources for SR may be more diffused. By implication, the smaller the business, the more the degree of localisation of business management and practices, and centralisation of decision making. This will inevitably lead to different courses of action (e.g. orientations towards resource allocation and use) when it comes to doing SR.

SMEs are one of the most significant contributors to individual income and national development of developing countries (Hasan et al., 2020; Rasak, 2012). They contribute significantly to job creation and poverty alleviation, given their labour-intensive production processes and significant employment growth rates (Deijl et al., 2013). However, they do not provide economic and social benefits in a vacuum. SMEs in developing countries are entrenched in their local socio-economic environment, interacting with key stakeholders (local communities, clients, employees, regulatory bodies, etc.) in manners that are uniquely distinctive from those adopted by their other counterparts (Spence, 2016). More specifically, studies have found that the activities of small businesses in developing African countries are characterised by very high-level embeddedness in the cultures and values of their milieu (Demuijnck & Ngnodjom, 2013). Also, because they possess very high levels of awareness of the local practices and social issues existent in their local communities, they are likely to approach SR in manners that are uniquely driven by their social milieu and consciousness. In other words, how SR is understood and approached is partly determined by the expectations and corresponding customs and conventions of society/local communities where the business operates (Jamali & Karam, 2018).

In sum, (C)SR is understood as philanthropy (a voluntary practice) by businesses in the developing country context. By implication, it is not normally used to account for responsible business practices that are non-voluntary. However, the literature fails to provide an articulate and/or definitive explanation as to why businesses in the said context limit their understanding of SR to philanthropy and how this understanding of SR fits within their broader responsible business practices. Correspondingly, our study addresses these gaps in the literature using the theoretical lens of SRT to understand how and why microbusiness in the Nigerian context understand the concept of SR the way they do, and to uncover their broader RBPs.

### 3 | THEORETICAL FRAMING

SR is understood and approached differently by small and large business. The nationality context within which the business is

situated accounts, even if partly, for the variances in how business types understand and approach their social responsibilities. Thus, there may not be one best theoretical approach towards obtaining a deeper understanding of how and why small businesses in developing countries understand and approach SR the way they do. We argue that more comprehensive understanding of SBSR in developing country contexts would benefit from fresh theoretical insights, particularly those can capture the essence of what is currently under-researched and under-theorised; that is why micro business owner-managers in developing country contexts understand and approach SR the way they do (i.e. as philanthropy), and to uncover their overall (non)voluntary RBPs. Accordingly, the theoretical framework applied in the current study is underpinned by SRT (Moscovici, 1961, 1973) and its more recent explication (Abric, 1993, 2001).

SRT is a broad theoretical framework, characterised by subtle definitional distinctions and variations. In essence, a social representation is 'a system of values, ideas and practices' concerning a social object (Moscovici, 1973, p. 8), and 'the elaborating of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating' (Moscovici, 1961, p. 251). Social representations provide individuals, in their specific social groups, with a shared reality (and collective consciousness) of particular social object/s, including prescriptions of how to behave and communicate in respect of the social object/s. Primarily, a social representation serves the function of allowing 'something unfamiliar and troubling, which incites our curiosity to be incorporated into our own network of categories and allows us to compare it with what we consider a typical member of this category' (Moscovici, 1981, p. 193). Thus, for micro business owner-managers in developing (non-Western) countries, social representations of SR will facilitate meaning making of an 'imported' Western concept by situating it within existing frames and/or modes of understanding and practices.

Social representations are formed through two psychological processes: *anchoring* and *objectification*. *Anchoring* pertains to the categorisation of unfamiliar objects by comparing or fitting them within repertoires of existing objects that are familiar and socially cum culturally accessible. Accordingly, microbusiness owner managers will understand SR in line with existing and accessible socio-cultural objects. In other words, for microbusiness owner-managers to develop their understanding of SR, they will attribute familiar characteristics to the concept, and these familiar characteristics will determine, as well as facilitate, how they understand and communicate about the concept of SR. *Objectification* makes that which is unknown to be known by transforming it into something concrete and objective. By objectifying, individuals in their social setting materialise new and abstract ideas into familiar frames of reference; the new and abstract is transformed into a concrete and objective common-sense reality. Moscovici (1973) identifies three sub-processes of objectification. In the first, *personification of knowledge*, the new and abstract object is linked to a person or group, thereby providing a concrete existence to the object through this association. Translating this to the context of our study, personification

pertains to the unique way that SR is associated with the micro-business owner-manager, on one hand, and recipients of SR-related initiative, on the other. *Figuration* is about the process whereby the abstract object (SR in this case) is dominated by metaphorical imagery, making it more culturally and psychologically accessible while the process of *Ontologisation* attributes physical characteristics to non-physical notions. In other words, it is the process of making the immaterial, material.

Abric (1993, 2001) provides a succinct outline of the structure of social representations, consisting of *core* and *peripheral* elements. The *core* is central to the structuring of social representation in the sense that it attributes value and meaning to the other elements. It equally determines the nature of the links between the different elements. The *peripheral* elements are the context providers—they are built around the core, to concretise its context and to make it comprehensible and communicable. The peripheral elements are characterised by mutability and versatility, meaning they can incorporate new information which are added onto the stock of peripheral elements. In this way, the peripheral elements of social representations are continuously responding to individual and (social) collective histories.

In sum, differences in social and cultural systems imply that there will be variations in terms of how SR ('an idea that travels') is contextually represented. This also ties-in with the view that in certain situations, different social representations might be at play, leading to different behavioural outcomes. For example 'for somebody to call the police when hearing a gunshot, a social representation of law and order prohibiting the use of guns is required' (Sammut et al., 2015, p. 4). We draw from this preliminary understanding of how Social Representations reflect context-specific understanding and approaches to SR, and then apply the theory to guide the collection and analysis of interview data from microbusiness owner managers in the Nigerian context.

## 4 | METHODS

We collected rich qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with microbusiness owner-managers as part of a wider research project on better understanding of the relationship between business and society in the African context. To ensure that the study sample enabled us to address the second research question, particularly uncovering the non-voluntary (legal) dimensions of owner-managers RBPs, we only recruited tax-paying microbusiness owner-managers. However, tax compliance among Nigerian microbusinesses is very low (see Aladejebi, 2018). To guarantee that we sampled owner-managers who are confirmed taxpayers, we adopted a purposive sampling approach to recruit 15 microbusiness business owner-managers who were interviewed in their places of business practice at a National Technology Incubation Centre (TIC). TICs are government run centres that 'nurture and grow new and small businesses, products, innovations and entrepreneurs by supporting them through the early stages of development' (National

Board for Technology Incubation, 2021) so that they can, ultimately, assist in growing the Nigerian economy. This, however, means that compared to non-TIC entrepreneurs, TIC-entrepreneurs may have a greater sense of responsibility to stakeholders such as government (as taxpayers) and immediate community. Given the nature of our study, and in line with in-depth studies on understanding SR in developing country contexts (e.g. Demuijnck & Ngnodjom, 2013; Soundararajan, Spence, & Rees, 2018), we attempted to capture a diversity of voices and perspectives, adopting a snowballing technique (Handcock & Gile, 2011) to identify five additional tax paying non-TIC microbusinesses. In our quest to get non-TICs, the TIC Manager introduced us to Nigerian Association of Small-Scale Industrialists (NASSI) director who allowed us to recruit participants during their meeting. We went for five as this number is considered sufficient when the aim of the researcher is to qualitatively explore/unpack the differences among respondent categories (see Saunders & Townsend, 2016, p. 4). In total, we interviewed 20 microbusiness owner-managers. The selection of a sample comprising TIC and non-TIC entrepreneurs ensured that we interviewed only registered tax-paying microbusiness owner-managers, enabling us to use paying tax as proxy of non-voluntary legal business responsibility (the flip side of SR as voluntary philanthropic responsibility). Table 1 below presents the profile of the study respondents.

We used a semi-structured interview guide for the interviews. However, we did not rely entirely on the guide; rather, we let the conversations flow in a natural, conventional way (Piacentini et al., 2012; Uba & Chatzidakis, 2016). The interview with each respondent lasted between 45 and 60min and were mostly conducted in English, which is widely used in Nigeria. However, some respondents used native language (Pidgin, Yoruba or Ibo) when they wanted to make specific points clear. The use of native language, particularly puns and proverbs, was mutually beneficial for the interviewees and the researcher; enabling the former to communicate *topoi*, and the latter to unpack these in relation to social representations. *Topoi* are the context-specific background assumptions and value premises to which owner managers appeal when presenting arguments (Žagar, 2010). Unpacking *topoi*-focused discourses enabled us to capture the social representations that are unique to, and underpin, the microbusiness owner-managers' understanding and approaches to SR as philanthropy, and their overall RBPs.

We started with the proposition that respondents may understand (C)SR differently from the dominant Western and/or academic context. Correspondingly, we started by asking respondents to talk about their understanding of the concept of (C)SR. Subsequently, we asked them to account for what they do in terms of (C)SR. During the discussions, it became apparent that microbusiness owner-managers used CSR and SR interchangeably. Also, we found that the language and discussion on (C)SR were limited to the idea of 'giving back', the different ways of giving back, and respondents' justifications for the 'giving back' initiatives they favour. The remaining part of the interviews focused on identifying other non-(C)SR practices that enable them to act responsibly towards their stakeholders and/or operating environments (i.e. other dimensions of RBP). To ensure that



TABLE 1 Profile of microbusiness owner-managers

Respondent ID	Gender	Type of business activity reported	Number of employees	Years in business	Education
MB1	Female	Electroplating engineer	8	10	University Graduate
MB2	Male	Fish farming	6	9	University Graduate
MB3	Male	Furniture construction	4	12	Secondary School
MB4	Female	Organic food sales and delivery	1	1	University Graduate
MB5	Male	Confectionary manufacturing	8	11	University Graduate
MB6	Female	Dietician	1	3	University Graduate
MB7	Female	Tigernut drink production	3	1	Secondary School
MB8	Female	Ready-to-go Egusi soup packs	NSN*	5	University Graduate
MB9	Male	Fruit Drink Production	9	10	University Graduate
MB10	Female	Food packaging and retail	NSN	3	University Graduate
MB11	Female	Healthy smoothies and juices producer	NSN	5	University Graduate
MB12	Male	Fruit drink producer	9	10	University Graduate
MB13	Male	Biofuel stove producer	5	18	University Graduate
MB14	Male	Fashion/garment manufacturer	5	6	University Graduate
MB15	Male	Souvenir bags manufacturer	NSN	NSN	University Graduate
MB16	Male	Manufacturer of brick makers	8	30	University Graduate
MB17	Female	Wax crayon manufacturer	NSN	4	University Graduate
MB18	Female	Pharmacognosist	10	6	University Graduate
MB19	Male	Spray starch manufacturer	6	4	University Graduate
MB20	Male	Cosmetics manufacturing and retail	4	9	University Graduate

Note: Respondents with NSN\* (no specific number) reported hiring employees on contractual basis, with fluctuating numbers based on need.

respondents' accounts adequately explored different dimensions of RBP, we asked simple questions, in ways that were understandable by the respondents, around their relationship with their main stakeholders; employees, consumers and (in)formal institutions. Specifically, we asked respondents to account for levels of adherence to formal institutional obligations (specifically, paying tax—a non-voluntary responsibility). We also asked about their health and safety practices and remuneration initiatives (employee relationship); initiatives aimed at creating and maintaining positive relationship with their consumers (customer relationship); waste disposal and willingness to adopt green energy (environment); Focusing on the said questions allowed us to apply a lens of social responsibility consistent with ISO 26000 and relevant for understanding small business responsible action in the developing country context (Hasan, 2016). More specifically, it enabled us to uncover how microbusiness owner-managers perceive, think, and talk about their RBPs in their own contexts.

The interviews were recorded, following interviewees consent that we do so, transcribed verbatim and uploaded into the Nvivo software program for subsequent analysis. We employed 'theoretical thematic analysis', with themes identified at both semantic and latent levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Uba & Chatzidakis, 2016). For consistency, the first author conducted line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts in NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). The first author repeatedly read the data categorised under semantic and latent themes on NVivo to gain familiarity with the context of the research and described it to the other authors. Although the

first author carried out coding, the transcripts were read by the entire author team, who were consulted regularly to help refine and sense-check the codes as the analysis progressed. Analysis at the semantic level enabled us to unpack how microbusiness owner-managers make sense—either through anchoring or objectification—of the (C)SR concept and their overall RBPs, and the range of stakeholders to which these responsibilities are assigned through the three sub-processes of objectification suggested by Moscovici (1973). At the latent level, we revisited respondents' accounts to uncover the *topoi* underpinning their actual and/or potential approaches to (C)SR and RBP.

To ensure complete anonymity, we adopted a naming convention in line with McLellan et al. (2003) in identifying the respondents. The findings are discussed next, and we have used cleaned-up quotations (i.e. repeated words and 'ums', 'ers' are removed) in the presentation of findings to enhance readability (following Hasan et al., 2020). In presenting and discussing the findings, we focus mainly on the import of the expectations and corresponding customs and conventions of society/local communities where the businesses operate. These contextual factors largely determine how microbusiness owner-managers understand and approach (C)SR-related issues (Jamali & Karam, 2018).

## 5 | FINDINGS

We present the key findings under three main sections that follow from our overarching aim in this study and the way the interview

discussions flowed: (1) Microbusiness owner-managers' understanding and approach to C(SR); (2) Drivers of C(SR) in microbusinesses; and (3) The wider RBPs adopted by microbusinesses. For analytical and theory development purposes, we present these sections as exclusive categories, but we cannot discount variations and overlaps in characteristics. We did not find any differences in terms of how TIC and non-TIC micro businesses understood and/or approached C(SR) as Philanthropy, and their broader RBPs.

## 5.1 | Microbusiness owner-managers' understanding and approach to C(SR)

### 5.1.1 | Microbusiness owner-managers' understanding of C(SR) as a concept

Our analysis shows that most of the microbusiness owner-managers (except two) have knowledge and understanding of the C(SR) concept and engage in C(SR) activities. Consistent with evidence from previous studies (e.g. Amaeshi et al., 2006), microbusiness owner-managers understand C(SR) as Philanthropy and define the concept in terms of 'giving back to the society'. We provide some representative definitions below:

It's like doing something for people on behalf of your business, on behalf of your company (MB6)

Social responsibility (is) what you give back to society. It means I should look for opportunities to assist (MB12)

The quotes above highlight the generally shared view that C(SR) is anchored on the imperative of 'giving back' to society. It is imperative to highlight three key features of C(SR) as understood by the microbusiness owner-managers. First, when respondents talked about C(SR) as 'giving back to society', society is understood as the 'other' member(s) of their community or society, often residing outside of the small business. Second, SR is understood as a voluntary responsibility and as synonymous with CSR. Finally, all respondents believe that businesses (small and big) should voluntarily engage in 'giving back' to the society. Interestingly, we found that even though some respondents understood C(SR) in line with the Western definition, the way they practice it tied in with the unique emphasis and understanding of 'giving back'. We provide the following excerpt to elaborate:

**Moderator:** What do you think it [(C)SR] is?

**MB6:** It's like doing something for people on behalf of your business... probably it can be part of the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals].

**Moderator:** Part of the SDGs? That's interesting, why did you mention SDGs specifically?

**RES:** Yes, even if you check CSR online, it brings (this idea) out. At least, if you are doing anything under CSR, it has to fall under the

SDGs, maybe one just out of the SDGs...whatever thing you want to do should fall under it.

This initial reference to the SDGs suggests that the owner-manager has a more nuanced understanding of the C(SR) concept that ties-in with the Western conceptualising of CSR as business responsibility to all relevant stakeholders, including the natural environment as primordial stakeholder (Dahlsrud, 2008; Halkos & Skouloudis, 2017). However, subsequent discussions with this owner-manager confirm that, despite being aware of possible links between C(SR) and the SDGs, her personification of C(SR) is like those of other respondents, that is 'giving back' to members of the society (people).

**Moderator:** So how about you? What does C(SR) mean to you as a business?

**MB6:** Well to me it means giving back to the community to give visibility to my brand... me now, as a dietician, can decide to say 'okay, let me go to communities; maybe 3 times in a year. I will go to 3 communities (and) teach pregnant women what to eat'.

Like all the other owner-managers, MB6's view is that C(SR) should, ultimately, aim to create positive impact for people in the community. What this shows is that even when respondents may have been exposed to the Western-type definition of CSR (i.e. linked to the SDGs as in this case), they still approach it in a way that ties-in with the dominant C(SR) *anchor* of 'giving back' to society. This is largely because this way of 'giving back to society' existed before they encountered the concept of CSR: 'CSR is not new. We have always been doing it without calling it CSR' (MB15).

The findings presented so far suggest that C(SR) is anchored on voluntary 'giving back to society' and *personified* in terms of the relationship between the giver (the owner-manager) and the recipient (person/people in their society/community) of C(SR) initiatives. In the following section, we present findings that highlight the *ontologisation* and *figurations* of C(SR), that is the unique ways in which the owner-managers, by engaging in different forms of giving back, concretise and materialise C(SR).

### 5.1.2 | Microbusiness owner-managers' approach to C(SR)

When the owner-managers talked about 'giving back' to society, they mentioned a wide range of C(SR) activities, indicating that the decision to embark on a specific C(SR) initiative depends on the perspective of the owner-manager. This is very well captured in the quote below:

... (SR behaviour/s) depends on either the business owners, or founders or organisation. Because everybody sees things from different perspectives, and the perspective you see it from is more likely where you will focus on (MB13).

Be that as it may, when the owner-managers were asked to account for their C(SR) activities, the majority emphasised activities oriented towards solving social and individual problems, and/or empowering people, using their individual skills and experiences. Interestingly, only a few owner-managers mentioned charitable monetary donation or provision of infrastructure when asked to account for their C(SR) activities. The de-emphasis on C(SR) as 'conventional philanthropy' (i.e. charitable monetary donations) by respondents marks a significant deviation from how big businesses tend to employ philanthropy as CSR. While big businesses in developing countries tend to donate money towards enhancing the quality of education, healthcare and transport, and to be models of sound governance (Chetty et al., 2015), the microbusiness owner-managers sampled tended more towards self-involvement in their giving back initiatives; using their skills and other non-financial resources to empower individuals and/or to address social issues.

A more detailed analysis of the interview data highlights that microbusiness owner-managers engage in one or more of three distinct types of C(SR) action/initiatives, and that these actions are tied to how resources are employed in giving back to society. Correspondingly, we categorise microbusiness owner-managers as Core Philanthropist, Problem Solver and Empowerer based on their given back orientations while indicating the extent that respondent categories subscribe to specific 'giving-back' orientation/s (Table 2).

Owner-managers categorised as Core Philanthropists favour making charitable (financial) donations, for example paying

the hospital bills of community members who are unable to do so, donating materials to schools and so on. They contribute by using financial resources to address the individual or collective needs of members of their society, particularly those identified as needing help. The social problem solvers (e.g. MB8), on the other hand, identify specific social problems and go about addressing them using their skills and experiences. The Empowerers, on the other hand, employ their skills and experiences in ways that equip individuals in their communities with the wherewithal they need to fend for themselves. Like the Social Problem Solver, the Empowerer tends to employ non-financial resources, albeit differently. However, they tended to transfer their entrepreneurial skills to members of their society in line with 'imu ahia'—the Igbo Trade Apprenticeship System—whereby the apprentice learns a trade, often living and providing services to their 'nna m ukwu' (master) and is set up by the master with all the resources needed to start their own business after the agreed period of apprenticeship (Alike & Umunze, 2019; Ejo-Orusa & Mpi, 2019). What is particularly interesting is that the Empowerer does not appear to be bothered by the fact that teaching and encouraging other members of their community to embark on the same entrepreneurial activity as they may increase competition in their line of business. This would appear to counter the dominant Resource Based view that businesses operating in the same industry compete by way of using their resources to outperform their rivals (Barney, 1991), and that imitation plays a key role in explaining performance outcomes: if competitors are able to imitate a resource, they 'hurt a given firm's performance' (De Carolis, 2003, p. 28) because the ability

TABLE 2 Microbusiness owner-manager categorisation based on their 'giving back' orientations

MB owner-manager category	'Giving back' orientation	Sample quotes
Core Philanthropist	Strongly advocates the promotion of the welfare of individuals and groups, especially by the donation of money to good causes.	We have people in the hospitals who ask for help. We contributed our own widow's mite. We at times distributed exercise books to students, school bags, even some foods. These are some of the things we have done (MB9) So sometimes when I see people that their babies do not really look well, like in my church, sometimes I tell them to remind me to bring pap for you on Sunday to give their baby because I know the product is very good for their baby, and they cannot afford to buy it so sometimes I give them for free (MB7)
The Social Problem Solver	Strongly advocates solving social and individual problems, especially using their own skills and experiences	For example I see a deficiency in the area of understanding so that is why I would like to tell stories in pictorial forms for people to see. I'd rather organise recreative activities for young people because I feel there is not enough recreation (MB8) I should be a solution provider, I should provide like you know because erm, I should study my community, like what is their problem let me solve it for them. I should be like a solution provider. I should look around and (be) like, people need this thing, and I can do it (for them) (MB4)
The 'Empowerer'	Strongly advocates using own skills and experiences to equip individuals with the wherewithal that enables them to fend for themselves	I have trained many people, boys, you know, for this [business]. they learn from me, they start this [business]—they are on their own or another company will employ them to be their operator (MB3) I've paid for JAMB <sup>a</sup> , for school certificates of people working for me. My children are going to university, why should they be tied down to a job with me. And I think that's one thing- so that they are working well for you does not mean that they should not progress too. You can make them progress and call in another person to take over their job, but not doing that is to take a selfish position as an industrialist (MB2)

<sup>a</sup>Joint Admissions Matriculation Board—It organises the entrance exams to universities in Nigeria.



of firms to imitate their competitors dilutes the possibility of generating uniquely above-average returns (Spender et al., 2010). Approaching C(SR) this way does not necessarily mean that the implications of encouraging imitations are not fully understood by the empowering microbusiness owner-manager. However, it raises the question of what drives microbusiness owner-managers to subscribe to the different C(SR) orientations? We explore this in the next section.

## 5.2 | Drivers of C(SR) in microbusinesses—Core and peripheral elements of social representations

Our analysis uncovers a wide range of C(SR) drivers that explain why microbusiness owner-managers understand and approach C(SR) the way they do. Responses to the question of why they subscribe to the C(SR) orientations that are favoured highlight that most owner-managers consider that their C(SR) action should be consistent with social and individual normative imperatives that describe and prescribe good behaviour and relationship. Specifically, the owner-managers justified their C(SR) approaches and actions in line with the dictates of their religion, socio-cultural (ethnic) expectations, normative expectations and personal norms. We present representative quotes that capture the said key drivers of C(SR) actions below:

Just the way God created me. Not that I even regard it as if I am doing a favour to somebody, I do not even regard it [as a favour]. It is just the normal thing (MB3)—Religion

There is a Yoruba proverb that says the rich people, they are created because of the poor so that you can raise them from the dust (MB2)—Socio-cultural (ethnic) expectation

I have my conscience, I have to live right, I told you when we started; I must live right... its important (MB1)—Personal norm

I'm in the ministry, I'm a pastor. If you train your children alone and you feel you are secure; they are going to mix outside. If they mix with miscreants, there will be rub over effect. So, train as many as you can train so that society will get better (MB15)—Normative expectation

For instance, an interesting finding along this line, highlighting a unique metaphorical objectification (*figuration*), is the argument in the proverb that rich people (businesspeople in this case) have a duty to take care of the poor (to 'raise them from the dust' implies giving 'life to someone'). The appeal to this longstanding proverb is a powerful *topoi*, indicating the *figuration* of C(SR) practice. More specifically, we see how C(SR) representations (*personification* and

*figuration*) are framed. Each respondent draws from the broad dynamic context of worldviews, ideas and values, employing them to make sense of reality. This *figuration* of C(SR) also highlights a unique intersectional interplay between traditional ethnic beliefs and values (e.g. 'responsibility of the rich to the poor'), and dominant religious beliefs (e.g. 'giving back' as recommended by Christian/Islamic values), and how such values that drive C(SR) are negotiated and internalised by the individual to become 'the normal thing' (MB3). This explains why the owner-managers unequivocally argued that all business owners should give back to society: '...it is not as if I would be penalised for not doing it, but it is just a sense of obligation. It is a sense of obligation' (MB11). Uba and Nwoga (2016) highlight how traditional beliefs and worldviews in the Nigerian context have, overtime, become infused into Christianity, enhancing their legitimacy and moral imperative. Correspondingly, MB2 appeals to an ethnic worldview (the rich having responsibility to the poor) and legitimises this way of speaking by appealing to a corresponding *peripheral element* - Christian values: '...it is a personal concern that whatever you're doing, do it well. Think of others in your business. You may make money, but you may not make heaven'. Ultimately, this way of representing C(SR) shows how the concept has become incorporated into existing networks of shared categories and situated within a stable core ('giving back') and dynamic *peripheral elements* (ethnicity and religion).

## 5.3 | The wider RBPs adopted by microbusinesses

We found that the owner-managers distinguished between C(SR) and other forms of RBPs. When they talked about C(SR), the discussions were limited to 'giving back' and the different ways of giving back, and justifications for the giving back initiatives adopted by them. This did not mean, however, that the owner-managers do not engage in other RBPs. On the contrary, all the owner-managers reported different self-regulatory behaviours, including health and safety initiatives (cleaning of factory floors, provision of face masks and hand gloves); paid maternity leave for workers (not all); responsible waste disposal and willingness to adopt clean energy, if they could afford it; keeping their external environment clean and so on. While most respondents justified their self-regulation approaches in line with the deontological/moral case (duty) of taking care of workers and customers, they also made business-case arguments for their self-regulation practices. Many respondents noted that taking care of their staff and/or their operating environment enhanced productive performance: 'If I do not take care of my employees and they fall sick or I do not keep the environment clean, I will lose a lot of money' (MB20).

Perhaps, the most striking finding can be seen in the distinction that was made between CSR/SR and legal responsibilities. While most of the owner-managers clearly identified their legal responsibilities and agreed that they abide by business laws and regulations set out by formal institutions, they considered those

to be duties and obligations, not part of their C(SR). The excerpt below is representative of the views of respondents on C(SR) as ‘giving back to society’ and tax paying as legal non-voluntary obligation and/or duty.

**Moderator:** So, for you, as a small business, do you think paying tax should be or can be classified as corporate social responsibility?

**MB5:** No, by law it's not a social responsibility. Paying tax in Nigeria is not social responsibility. You must pay tax... if you are a small business, you must pay tax. There is what we call direct assessment; its mandatory. You must pay, it's not voluntary. That's the position of the law.

Along similar lines, tax paying was contrasted from C(SR) in terms of the focus; where C(SR) is aimed at individuals and social groups while tax paying is legal obligation to the government.

**Moderator:** So, let me ask you one more question when you say one of your duties is to pay your tax, how is it different from SR?

**MB15:** Well taxes is to the government. It must actually... well this is Nigeria, so it might not meet the people that are really in need, but the CSR is to a targeted number of people. Maybe targeted at some people that are deficient in this and they need this.

Unsurprisingly, all the owner-managers claimed that doing business responsibly was something of a key concern to them. The challenges to achieving responsible practices were attributed to their employees' behaviours, a lack of government support and mistrust of government and formal institutions. A detailed exploration of these issues (challenges and justification for [non] engagement in doing business responsibly) fall outside the scope of the current study, so will form the focus of a different paper.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Using the theoretical lens of SRT, our study explores how microbusiness owner-managers in a developing country context understand

and approach voluntary SR (CSR as philanthropy) and their broader RBPs. We now discuss the key findings in relation to the overarching aims of our study.

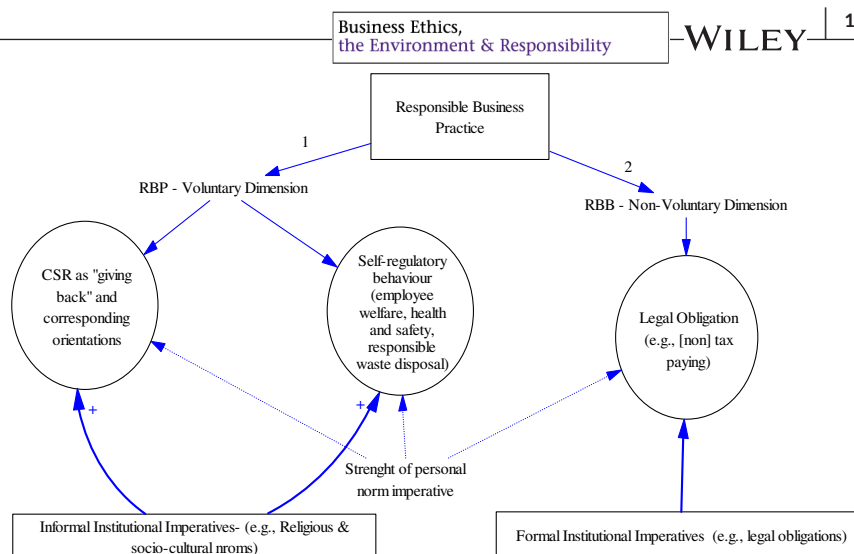
Our analysis suggests that microbusiness owner-managers' understanding of C(SR) is anchored on the idea of giving back to their society and/or community and objectified by context-specific figuration (worldviews on care and responsibilities of the privileged towards the non-privileged that intersect primarily with religious beliefs and personal/social norms), personification (relationship between owner-manager and ‘others’ in society) and ontologisation (different giving back orientations). Table 3 provides a summary of the social representation of C(SR) by the microbusiness owner-managers sampled.

In relation to why C(SR) is understood as philanthropy in the context explored, our findings confirm that C(SR) is a concept used by the owner-managers to explain long-standing approaches to philanthropy in existence prior to their encounter with the Western concept of CSR. When microbusiness owner-managers talk about C(SR) as giving back to society or community, they implicitly refer to their already perceived relationship with their community and its members. More specifically, society or community tends to be understood in terms of the identity it confers on individuals as being responsible for others in their communities as well as the demands for acting in ways that create harmony and balance for all members of society. Correspondingly, their language of communicating the prescriptive norm imperative of C(SR) is personal (what ‘I do’ and not ‘what my business does’). By engaging in the philanthropic acts (as Core Philanthropists, Problem Solvers or Empoweres) they favour, owner-managers are able to negotiate and merge their identities as businesspeople and responsible members of their communities. In fact, respondents used words like ‘ezigbo mmadu’ and ‘better pesin’ in explaining why they engage in philanthropic C(SR) during the interviews. *Ezigbo madu* (a ‘good person’ in Igbo Language), synonymous with *omoluabi* in Yoruba (Fayemi, 2009) and *mutumin kirki* in Hausa (Buba, 2020) is one who ‘is just, honest, and hospitable; s/he is also an individual who shows respect to elders and cooperates with other members of the group to ensure that social order prevails in the community’ (Agulanna, 2011, p. 147). By implication,

TABLE 3 Microbusiness owner managers' social representation of C(SR)

Social representation process	Microbusiness owner social representation of C(SR)
Anchoring of C(SR)	C(SR) is anchored on the idiosyncratic ethical tendency of microbusiness owner-managers to respond to the normative imperatives and communal ascription of responsibility to create social/communal harmony by ‘giving back’ to society
Objectification	<p>The Process of C(SR) concretisation and materialisation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Personification of Knowledge—C(SR) is relationship between owner-managers and society, driven by idiosyncratic ethical tendency and inclination towards the creation of social/communal harmony</li> <li>2. Figuration—microbusiness owner-managers employ metaphorical imagery (i.e. proverbial quotes about responsibility of rich to the poor and references to religion—‘making heaven’) to make CSR culturally and psychologically accessible</li> <li>3. Ontologisation—the abstract (Western) concept CSR is materialised in the distinct forms of apprenticeship, training, etc., reflecting specific giving-back orientations</li> </ol>

**FIGURE 1** Microbusiness owner managers' understanding and approaches to RBP.



C(SR) is seen as instrumental to reducing the risk to the individual of being perceived as 'irresponsible'. For larger businesses, however, the consequences of risk from 'irresponsibility' falls squarely on the business as an entity. Therefore, and in line with the qualitative and quantitative differences between business types, risk from non-compliance with socially responsible business practices will increase along the M (micro)—S (small)—M (medium)—L business size continuum, and vice versa.

Regarding microbusiness approach to RBP, our findings (Section 5.3) confirm that a distinction is made between C(SR) and RBP—a broader encompassing concept. Microbusiness owner-managers engage in a wide range of RBPs that are either voluntary or non-voluntary, and different from C(SR) as philanthropy. We summarise this in Figure 1 below and discuss subsequently.

The voluntary dimension of their RBP include C(SR) as Philanthropy and self-regulatory activities while the non-voluntary dimension covers legal obligations. Specifically, the voluntary dimension of RBP incorporates C(SR) and other self-regulated behaviours aimed at enhancing good business practices. On the other hand, there is the non-voluntary dimension of RBP that stipulates legal obligations as integral to doing business responsibly. In addition, the extent that microbusiness owner-managers behave according to the dictates of the said normative imperatives (informal/formal institutional) depends on their level of socio-ethnic/cultural embeddedness and subscription to the different social representations of the good (business) person/business at play. Correspondingly, the very high levels of embeddedness in socio-cultural values and engagement with informal norm imperatives tend to differentiate the voluntary RBPs adopted by microbusinesses from those of their larger business counterparts.

## 6.1 | Contributions and implications

Drawing from discussions in the foregoing sections, we now turn our attention to discussing the study's contribution to the academic literature, and to policymakers and managers.

### 6.1.1 | Contributions to the academic literature

The study's contributions to the academic literature are discussed under three main thematic areas. First, our findings re-emphasise the need for context-specific theorisations of microbusiness RBPs, particularly those that capture how C(SR)-related concepts are understood and approached by business types in different nationality contexts. The current study highlights that the voluntary RBPs adopted by microbusinesses in the Nigerian context are driven by informal intuitions and informal institutional pressures, that is local identities that compel individuals to identify with their local communities and ethnic groups. However, the Nigerian and broader African contexts are characterised by a multiplicity of ethnic groups and culture. This means that it is necessary for researchers to recognise that there will be significant differences between national and continental regions and their local contexts. In the current study, we employed SRT to identify and analyse *topoi* that can explain how C(SR) is contextually represented and to unpack features that are distinctive to C(SR) understanding and approaches in the context explored. We recommend similar approaches to use of theory that enable context-specific understanding to help identify common denominators of RBPs in other nationality contexts. This will enhance the possibilities of a unified and coordinated approach to management research in the African region.

Second, our findings shed specific light on how dominant theories and conceptualisation of the concept of C(SR) may not adequately explain what happens in African contexts. The way C(SR) is understood by the sampled microbusiness owner-managers contrasts with the basic assumptions of the most popular CSR theories (i.e. Stakeholder theory and the CSR pyramid) taught in most business schools. Carroll (1991, 2016) includes legal obligations as part of a business's CSR; the owner-managers in the current study did not consider legal obligations (e.g. paying taxes) as part of their C(SR). While Stakeholder theory assumes that socially responsible businesses cater to the interest of all relevant stakeholders, the microbusiness owner-managers' limit C(SR) to specific forms of 'giving back' initiatives. This, however, does not mean that the

owner-managers have a limited approach to doing 'CSR'. Our analysis suggests that while they may see and approach the concept of C(SR) differently from their counterparts in other parts of the world, they too subscribe to doing business responsibly. In our view, the time has come for management educators to do more in terms of translating the implication of findings such as ours in the classroom. Specifically, we argue for the use of concepts and models that reduce conceptual vagueness while enabling the creation of unified approaches to understanding C(SR) in different contexts. For instance, substituting CSR with BSR (Business Social Responsibility) to allow for teaching that captures social responsibility as a management practice for all business firms. The findings from our study, particularly our model of microbusiness owner managers' understanding and approaches to RBP, provide a strong basis for management educators and students in terms of clarifying how CSR-related concepts are understood and approached in developing country contexts and for different business categories.

Finally, we highlight the import of formal and informal institutional pressures for engagement with RBP in the developing and developed country contexts. For Western developed countries, strong formal institutions play a key role in driving RBPs, and C(SR) is synonymous with RBP, that is doing business responsibly. However, for the microbusiness owner-managers sampled, C(SR) is not synonymous with RBP, and it is the informal institutions (usually unwritten socially shared rules, which are created, communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels—North, 2005) that appear to drive C(SR) initiatives. Thus, the assumption in the literature that 'strong institutions' are prerequisite to C(SR) is correct, but only in so far as a clear distinction is made in terms of the nature/type of institutions, and the business-size and/or nationality context that are talked about. Accordingly, our study contributes to the institutional voids literature that emphasises on formal institutions (rules, regulations and government policies) and assumes that rich formal institutions are necessary for addressing social matters such as C(SR) initiatives (see Bothello et al., 2019; Doh et al., 2017). The voids literature assumes that non-Western developing/emerging countries are dysfunctional regions, and their industries are often portrayed as evidence of institutional voids where C(SR) initiatives are less probable (Bothello et al., 2019). Such initiatives are thought to be taken by intermediaries such as non-governmental organisations, charities or multinational enterprises (Doh et al., 2017). Our analysis, however, demonstrates that informal social structures and values can drive the voluntary dimension of RBP for microbusinesses in developing regions without the help of any market intermediaries, and when formal institutions are incapable of delivering social goods.

### 6.1.2 | Contributions and implications for policymakers and managers

Microbusiness owner-managers in our study tend to negotiate formal institutions based on 'trust'. Our findings suggest that there is very low level of trust of government due to formal institutional

void, and this may lead to non-compliance with formal institutional demands. For instance, arguments, such as MB15's, that claim taxes paid to government tend not to be used to provide basic amenities to citizens was cited by a different respondent as 'others' justification for non-compliance with formal regulative obligation (e.g. tax avoidance). Specific to SR, the responses of the Nigerian government to negative corporate activities (e.g. gas flaring) has not portrayed it to be sincere enough in ensuring the practise of SR. The discontent and mistrust of government and formal institutions mean that policies aimed at enhancing RBP in the context explored are more likely to be successful if they key into the dominant informal representations that drive RBP. This is because business and individual responsibilities are seen as virtually identical and driven by the same social representations that describe and prescribe good behaviour and relationship. Microbusiness owner managers in the developing country context explored are, therefore, more likely to affirm and respond positively to C(SR) policies (e.g. environmental protection) that are framed in ways that resonate with the informal, ethno-social (and religious) values, such as those of a 'good person', that they favour. For instance, policies framed in ways that emphasise taking part in pro-social initiatives (e.g. apprenticeship and skills development programmes) as characteristics of a 'good person' are more likely to nudge microbusiness owner-managers towards engagement with RBP compared to those that emphasise penalty for not doing so. Similarly, managers of all business sizes can enhance employee engagement with RBPs by adopting a similar policy framing approach. This approach to policy framing is particularly relevant given that the few legislations around SR in Nigeria (and other countries in the West African region) are poorly managed and/or unenforceable. Also, the framing of these laws and policies, particularly its enforcement approach, concentrates on generating income from defaulting corporate organisations (Mordi et al., 2012). This focus, however, encourages non-compliance, and a passive attitude of businesses towards their social responsibilities since monetary compensation is accepted in place of objectionable acts of corporate irresponsibility. Our recommended policy framing approach, however, encourages compliance and active participation with RBP because alignment of policy with the identities and behaviours that business managers already favour is at its core.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

We employ SRT to uncover the unique ways that microbusiness owner-managers in the Nigerian context understand and approach C(SR) and broader RBPs. Our findings demonstrate why and how microbusiness owner-managers' understanding of C(SR) is anchored on 'giving back' to society and objectified by context-specific figuration, personification and ontologisation. In addition, we provide a model that explains the overall approach of microbusiness owner-managers to RBP in the Nigerian context.

We demonstrate how microbusiness owner-managers engage in voluntary C(SR) initiatives by leveraging informal institutions in

contexts characterised by formal institutional voids (absence or underdevelopment of formal institutions). Thus, our work contributes to the institutional voids literature by (1) offering clearer understanding of how strong informal institutions can deliver social goods in contexts characterised by vivid formal institutional voids and (2) by providing empirical evidence for how informal institutions operate within the non-Western country context that is thought to have weak (formal) institutional arrangements. In addition, we discuss the implications of the findings for policymakers and managers, highlighting the need for managers and policy makers to adopt approaches that resonate with the informal institutional (normative) imperatives that describe and prescribe good behaviour and relationship.

However, we acknowledge that our findings are somewhat limited by the nature of the sample—mostly highly educated micro-business owner-managers operating in the formal economy. This defining characteristic of the sample is likely to have accounted for the widespread conversance with the C(SR) concept. However, since social representations reflect shared realities, we opine that the way of understanding C(SR) uncovered in the current study will make sense to other microbusiness owner-managers, irrespective of their level of education, in contexts like the one explored. In addition, given that the peripheral elements of C(SR) representations are dynamic (as we see in the intersection of dominant socio-cultural and religious values), the way that C(SR) is talked about and understood may change. One would expect that its core (the way that C(SR) is anchored on ('giving back')) will persist over time, in line with SRT.

Our work, it is hoped, lays the foundations for studies that can further delay the import of contexts (i.e. business size, particularly, 'smallness', for engagement and non-engagement in C(SR)). Specifically, our focus and approach to questioning around contested concepts of C(SR) offers opportunities for enhancing the quality of future research and education by clarifying new concepts, neglected phenomenon, perspectives or assumptions. For instance, rather than considering SMEs as homogenous business category, it would be interesting to compare the extent that microbusinesses differ from other categories of small businesses in terms of their giving back orientations and (non)voluntary dimensions of their RBPs. Finally, it would also be interesting to explore how the infusion of traditional beliefs into Christianity/Islam has led to semi-formal institutions (e.g. Churches and mosques) capable of influencing the behaviours of individuals and businesses. The role of these semi-informal institutions in terms of their description and prescription of socially responsible behaviour is an area that warrants further exploration.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

Faculty of Business and Law (University of Northampton) Small Research Grant.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest to report.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Chijioke Dike Uba  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9590-8462>

James Buba Mshelia  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9649-7004>

## REFERENCES

- Abric, J. C. (1993). Central system, peripheral system: Their functions and roles in the dynamics of social representations. *Papers on Social Representations*, 2, 75–78.
- Abric, J. C. (2001). A structural approach to social representations. In K. Deaux & G. Philoge'ne (Eds.), *Representations of the social* (pp. 42–47). Blackwell.
- Aguinis, H., & Glavas, A. (2012). What we know and don't know about corporate social responsibility: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Management*, 38(4), 932–968.
- Agulanna, C. (2011). Ezigbo Mmadu: An exploration of the Igbo concept of a good person. *The Journal of Pan-African Studies*, 4(5), 139–161.
- Aladejebi, O. (2018). Measuring tax compliance among small and medium enterprises in Nigeria. *International Journal of Accounting and Taxation*, 6(2), 29–40.
- Alike, M., & Umunze, I. O. (2019). Socio-economic philosophy of contemporary Igbo apprenticeship system. *Nnadiesube Journal of Philosophy (NJP)*, 3(1), 35–48.
- Amaeshi, K., Adegbite, E., & Rajwani, T. (2016). Corporate social responsibility in challenging and non-enabling institutional contexts: Do institutional voids matter? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 134(1), 135–153.
- Amaeshi, K. M., Adi, B. C., Ogbachie, C., & Amao, O. O. (2006). Corporate social responsibility in Nigeria. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, 24, 83–99.
- Anudu, O. (2021). *Lagos microbusiness in the grip of "area boys"*. International Centre for Investigative Reporting. <https://www.icirnigeria.org/lagos-micro-businesses-in-the-grip-of-area-boys/>
- Barney, J. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99–120.
- Baumann, J., & Kritikos, A. S. (2016). The link between R&D, innovation, and productivity: Are micro firms different? *Research Policy*, 45(6), 1263–1274.
- Bothello, J., Nason, R. S., & Schnyder, G. (2019). Institutional voids and organization studies: Towards an epistemological rupture. *Organization Studies*, 40(10), 1499–1512.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Buba, M. (2020). Mutuntaka 'Personhood' as a paradigm of African epistemology and its implication as a framework of governance. *Asian Journal of African Studies*, 47, 145–170.
- Burton, B. K., & Goldsby, M. (2009). Corporate social responsibility orientation, goals, and behaviour: A study of small business owners. *Business & Society*, 48(1), 88–104.
- Carroll, A. B. (1991). The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders. *Business Horizons*, 34(4), 39–48.
- Carroll, A. B. (2016). Carroll's pyramid of CSR: Taking another look. *International Journal of Corporate Social Responsibility*, 1(1), 1–8.
- Chetty, S., Naidoo, R., & Seetharam, Y. (2015). The impact of corporate social responsibility on firms' financial performance in South Africa. *Contemporary Economics*, 9(2), 193–214.
- Choongo, P., Paas, L. J., Masurel, E., van Burg, E., & Lungu, J. (2019). Entrepreneurs' personal values and CSR orientations: Evidence



- from SMEs in Zambia. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 26(4), 545–570.
- Cronje, L., Ferreira, E. J., & van Antwerpen, S. (2017). Responsible business practices: Aspects influencing decision-making in small, medium, and micro-sized enterprises. *African Journal of Business Ethics*, 11(1), 23–42.
- Czarniawska, B., & Sevón, G. (Eds.). (1996). *Translating Organisational Change*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Dahlsrud, A. (2008). How corporate social responsibility is defined: An analysis of 37 definitions. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 15(1), 1–13.
- De Carolis, D. M. (2003). Competencies and imitability in the pharmaceutical industry: An analysis of their relationship with firm performance. *Journal of Management*, 29(1), 27–50.
- Deijl, C., de Kok, J., & Essen, V. V. (2013). *Is small still beautiful? Literature review of recent empirical evidence on the contribution of SMEs to employment creation*. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).
- Demuijnck, G., & Ngnodjom, H. (2013). Responsibility and informal CSR in formal Cameroonian SMEs. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 112(4), 653–665.
- Dincer, B., & Dincer, C. (2013). Corporate social responsibility decisions: A dilemma for SME executives? *Social Responsibility Journal*, 9(2), 177–187.
- Doh, J., Rodrigues, S., Saka-Helmhout, A., & Makhija, M. (2017). International business responses to institutional voids. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 48(3), 293–307.
- Ejo-Orusa, H., & Mpi, D. L. (2019). Reinventing the 'Nwabo'i' apprenticeship system: A platform for entrepreneurship promotion in Nigeria. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences*, 8(9), 98–130.
- Fassin, Y., Van Rossem, A., & Buelens, M. (2011). Small business owner-managers' perceptions of business ethics and CSR-related concepts. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98, 425–453.
- Fayemi, A. K. (2009). Human personality and the Yoruba worldview: An ethico-sociological interpretation. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2(9), 166–176.
- Gjølberg, M. (2010). Varieties of corporate social responsibility (CSR): CSR meets the "Nordic model". *Regulation & Governance*, 4(2), 203–229.
- Halkos, G., & Skouloudis, A. (2017). Revisiting the relationship between corporate social responsibility and national culture: A quantitative assessment. *Management Decision*, 55(3), 595–613.
- Handcock, M. S., & Gile, K. J. (2011). Comment: On the concept of snowball sampling. *Sociological Methodology*, 41(1), 367–371.
- Hasan, M. N. (2016). Measuring and understanding the engagement of Bangladeshi SMEs with sustainable and socially responsible business practices: An ISO 26000 perspective. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 12(3), 584–610.
- Hasan, M. N., Anastasiadis, S., Spence, L. J., & Uba, C. D. (2020). Environmental attitudes of polluting SMEs: Qualitative insights from a low-income developing country. *Business Strategy & Development*, 3(4), 554–566.
- Hsu, J., & Cheng, M. (2012). What prompts small and medium enterprises to engage in corporate social responsibility? A study from Taiwan. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 19(5), 288–305.
- Idemudia, U. (2011). Corporate social responsibility and developing countries moving the critical CSR research agenda in Africa forward. *Progress in Development Studies*, 11(1), 1–18.
- Ilegbinosa, I. A., & Jumbo, E. (2015). Small and medium scale enterprises and economic growth in Nigeria: 1975–2012. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 10(3), 203–216.
- Jamali, D., & Karam, C. (2018). Corporate social responsibility in developing countries as an emerging field of study. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20(1), 32–61.
- Jamali, D., Lund-Thomsen, P., & Jeppesen, S. (2017). SMEs and CSR in developing countries. *Business & Society*, 56(1), 11–22.
- Jamali, D., & Neville, B. (2011). Convergence versus divergence of CSR in developing countries: An embedded multi-layered institutional lens. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 102(4), 599–621.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). Small business champions for corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 67(3), 241–256.
- Khanna, T., & Palepu, K. (1997). Why focused strategies may be wrong for emerging markets. *Harvard Business Review*, 75(4), 41–51.
- Lepoutre, J., & Heene, A. (2006). Investigating the impact of firm size on small business social responsibility: A critical review. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 67(3), 257–273.
- Loecher, U. (2000). Small and medium-sized enterprises—delimitation and the European definition in the area of industrial business. *European Business Review*, 12(5), 261–264.
- McLellan, E., MacQueen, K. M., & Neidig, J. L. (2003). Beyond the qualitative interview: Data preparation and transcription. *Field Methods*, 15(1), 63–84.
- Moore, G., & Spence, L. (2006). Editorial: Responsibility and small business. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 67(3), 219–226.
- Mordi, C., Opeyemi, I. S., Tonbara, M., & Ojo, S. (2012). Corporate social responsibility and the legal regulation in Nigeria. *Economic Insights-Trends & Challenges*, 64(1), 1–8.
- Moscovici, S. (1961). *La psychoanalyse: Son image et son public*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Moscovici, S. (1973). Forward. In C. Herzlich (Ed.), *Health and illness. A Social Psychological Analysis* (pp. 1–8). Academic Press.
- Moscovici, S. (1981). On social representations. *Social cognition: Perspectives on everyday understanding*, 8(12), 181–209.
- National Board for Technology Incubation. (2021). History. Author. <https://nbt.gov.ng/history/>
- North, D. C. (2005). The contribution of the new institutional economics to an understanding of the transition problem. In *Wider perspectives on global development* (pp. 1–15). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Piacentini, M. G., Chatzidakis, A., & Banister, E. N. (2012). Making sense of drinking: The role of techniques of neutralization and counter-neutralization in negotiating alcohol consumption. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 34(6), 841–857.
- QSR International Pty Ltd. (2018). NVivo (Version 11). Author. <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/support-services/nvivo-downloads/older-versions>
- Rasak, B. (2012). Small and medium scale enterprises (smes): A panacea for economic growth in Nigeria. *Journal of Management and Corporate Governance*, 4(6), 86–98.
- Saeidi, S. P., Sofian, S., Saeidi, P., Saeidi, S. P., & Saeidi, S. A. (2015). How does corporate social responsibility contribute to firm financial performance? The mediating role of competitive advantage, reputation, and customer satisfaction. *Journal of Business Research*, 68(2), 341–350.
- Sammur, G., Andreouli, E., Gaskell, G., & Valsiner, J. (2015). Social representations: A revolutionary paradigm? In G. Sammur, E. Andreouli, G. Gaskell, & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *Cambridge handbook of social representations* (pp. 3–11). Cambridge University Press.
- Saunders, M. N., & Townsend, K. (2016). Reporting and justifying the number of interview participants in organization and workplace research. *British Journal of Management*, 27(4), 836–852.
- Soundararajan, V., Jamali, D., & Spence, L. J. (2018). Small business social responsibility: A critical multilevel review, synthesis and research agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20(4), 934–956.
- Soundararajan, V., Spence, L. J., & Rees, C. (2018). Small business and social irresponsibility in developing countries: Working conditions and "evasion" institutional work. *Business & Society*, 57(7), 1301–1336.
- Spence, L., & Rutherford, R. (2003). Small business and empirical perspectives in business ethics. (editorial). *Journal of Business Ethics*, 47(1), 1–5.
- Spence, L. J. (2016). Small business social responsibility: Expanding core CSR theory. *Business & Society*, 55(1), 23–55.

- Spence, L. J., Frynas, G. J., Muthuri, J. N., & Navare, J. (2018). *Research handbook on small business social responsibility: Global perspectives*. Edward Elgar Limited.
- Spender, J. C., Kraaijenbrink, J., & Groen, A. (2010). The resource-based view: A review and assessment of its critiques. The resource-based view: A review and assessment of its critiques. *Journal of Management*, 36(1), 349–372.
- Uba, C. D., & Chatzidakis, A. (2016). Understanding engagement and disengagement from pro-environmental behaviour: The role of neutralization and affirmation techniques in maintaining persistence in and desistance from car use. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 94, 278–294.
- Uba, C. D., & Nwoga, K. A. (2016). Understanding stigma from a socio-cultural context: mothers' experience of stigma directed towards children with special educational needs. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(9), 975–994.
- Visser, W. (2008). Corporate social responsibility in developing countries. In A. Crane, A. McWilliams, D. Matten, J. Moon, & D. Siegel (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of corporate social responsibility* (pp. 473–479). Oxford University Press.
- Wong, T. A., & Bustami, M. R. (2020). A case study of micro businesses in jelutong wet market in Penang, Malaysia: Implications for CSR scholarship. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 165(3), 535–546.
- Wong, T. A., & Reevany, B. M. (2019). Understanding corporate social responsibility (CSR) among micro businesses using social capital theory. *International Journal of Business and Society*, 20(2), 675–690.
- Xu, B., Costa-Climent, R., Wang, Y., & Xiao, Y. (2020). Financial support for micro and small enterprises: Economic benefit or social responsibility? *Journal of Business Research*, 115, 266–271.
- Ya'nez-Araque, B., Hernández, J. P. S. I., Gutierrez-Broncano, S., & Jimenez-Estevez, P. (2021). Corporate social responsibility in micro-, small-and medium-sized enterprises: Multigroup analysis of family vs. nonfamily firms. *Journal of Business Research*, 124, 581–592.
- Žagar, I. (2010). Topoi in critical discourse analysis. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 6(1), 3–27.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Chijioke Dike Uba** is a Senior Lecturer in International Business at the University of Northampton. He has held academic appointments at Royal Holloway, University of London, and University of Manchester. His research interests are in the broad areas of Individual and Business Sustainability. Within these broad perspectives, he focuses on exploring the ethical, social, and psychological dimensions of sustainable practices and lifestyle at individual and business organisational levels. His work has appeared in reputable journals such as *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, *Business Strategy and Development*, and *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.

**Md Nazmul Hasan** is a Research Fellow in Organisational Sustainability, Health and Urban Development at the University of Bath. Previously, he held academic appointments at University of Northampton, University College London (UCL) and Royal Holloway, University of London (2014–2019). His research focuses on the role of business in society as conceptualised through the concepts of (environmental) sustainability, business ethics and corporate social responsibility. His recent research works aim to understand small firms' behavioural choices, social and environmental responsibility in SMEs, environmental policymaking in developing country contexts and critical realism in organisational research. Hasan is an Associate Editor of (a) *Annual Review of Social Partnerships* (Routledge) and (b) *Environment, Development and Sustainability* (Springer).

**James Mshelia** is a Senior Lecturer in International Business Strategy at the University of Northampton, Faculty of Business and Law. James was awarded a PhD in political risk assessment by multinational firms from the University of Huddersfield, where he also graduated with postgraduate certificates in research methods and higher education. He is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the United Kingdom. James holds a master's degree in transport management from the Ladoke Akintola University, Ogbomosho, and an advanced diploma in security operations and management from the University of Lagos. James, from a military background, started his early academic career with a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the Nigerian Defence Academy and worked mostly as a training officer. His research interests include the determinants, assessment, and management of political risk dynamics in an African context and the internationalisation strategy of African firms.

**How to cite this article:** Uba, C. D., Hasan, M. N., & Mshelia, J. B. (2022). Social responsibility in micro businesses in an African context: Towards a theoretical understanding. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*, 00, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12476>