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CONSUMING MODERN SLAVERY

CONTENTS

> *This preliminary study investigates how consumers understand modern slavery and their role in perpetuating and/or eradicating modern slavery, bringing together a unique collaboration of investigators who are at the forefront of consumer research in consumption ethics.*

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WHAT IS MODERN SLAVERY?

Modern slavery involves: "a relationship in which one person is controlled by another through violence, the threat of violence, or psychological coercion, and has lost free will and free movement, is exploited economically, and is paid nothing beyond subsistence" (Bales *et al.* 2009, p. 31).

Despite commonalities in living and working conditions with earlier forms of slavery, modern slavery is different in certain critical ways (Bales *et al.* 2009). There is no legal ownership of slaves, and usually, wage-based markets under conditions of violence are used to recruit people. Master-slave relationships are shorter than the earlier more long-term master-slave ties, as markets shape contemporary relations and they can be easily terminated. Moreover, slaves come cheaply in the contemporary world with access to large pools of surplus labor in growing populations (Manzo 2005).

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that up to 1,243,400 people are modern slaves across Europe, working in industries such as domestic work, agriculture, restaurants/food service, and the sex trade. Within the UK, both academic (e.g., Crane, 2013; Skinner, 2008) and practitioner understandings of modern slavery have been increasingly nuanced, particularly after the introduction of the "Modern Slavery Act". Importantly, there is a surprising lack of consumer research despite the fact that there is no governmental body set to enforce compliance with the act. Rather, the act relies on the power of consumers to penalize non-complying companies (e.g., Nolan and Bott, 2018), an expectation that has been unprecedented in terms of UK legislation.

The purpose of our research is to address questions, including: What do consumers understand as modern slavery versus other forms of intense labour exploitation? How and why are UK consumers blinded to enslaved people even when they are interacting with them in their everyday consumption lives? How can consumers be empowered and mobilised in favour of slavefree consumption?

Fifteen exploratory interviews were followed by 40 in-depth interviews with consumers across 3 UK cities (London, Glasgow, Blackpool). We ensured maximum socio-demographic variation in terms of age, gender, education, cultural and socio-economic background.

Participants were asked to bring to the interviews images and/or objects that represented their thoughts and feelings about slavery. We took an open approach to the interviews and analysed the data using standard qualitative techniques.

> Oblivious consumption – concealed production: how can we remain blind to the plight of enslaved people when we are interacting with them in everyday consumption lives?

This report is organised into three sections. The first section focuses on consumer perceptions of modern slavery, the second on consumer accounts and justifications for (widespread) inaction in relation to modern slavery, and the third on questions of consumer trust and responsibility within a multi-stakeholder environment. For each section we combine our findings with related prior academic research and develop some key propositions. Author names are listed alphabetically and all authors contributed equally to this research.

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1. CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

1.1 Understanding Modern Slavery

The consumers in our study referred to a range of criteria that they used to categorise which individuals and categories of people were slaves, and those that were not.

In many interviews, there was considerable discussion and uncertainty as to the boundaries between labour exploitation and slavery. For most consumers, however, "removal of choice and freedom" and an inability to control their own lives and speak out was a key determinant of slavery.

"…where someone doesn't have the choice or doesn't have the free will, that for me would be slavery. Anything from the other side of that would just be exploitation of workers."
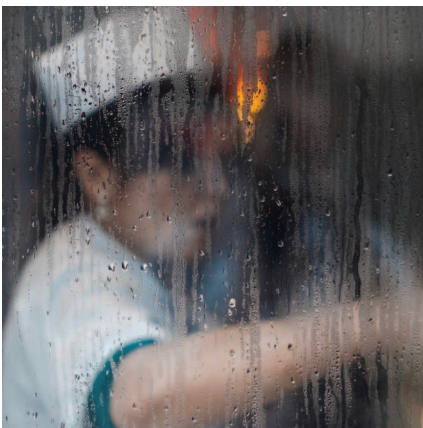
"…they cannot fight and they cannot talk."

This uncertainty and blurring of the boundaries between exploitation and slavery highlights the need for informational campaigns that directly target consumer awareness. Prior research (e.g., Papaoikonomou, *et al.,* 2016) also illustrates that when an issue is relatively new to consumers, a combination of mass and below-the-line media may be necessary.

1.2 Conditions that Enable Slavery

Consumers identified a range of underlying conditions that increased individuals' vulnerability to becoming slaves. These conditions included cultural, personal, environmental and financial factors.

Across our consumer accounts, key vulnerability conditions that worked to perpetuate modern slavery included: age (child versus adult), gender (female), lack of education, poverty and financial instability, mental incapacity, drug dependency, homelessness and language skills.

PROPOSITION 1.1:
Informational appeals through mass media seem necessary to raise consumer awareness of the scope and nature of modern slavery.

Most notably, consumers expressed a heightened sense of slave vulnerability when considering children. Child slaves were viewed as highly vulnerable in every sense, and without the abilities or resources to change their situation. Some consumers also included animals as vulnerable as they too lacked agency (e.g., in relation to the conditions they are kept in). It was interesting to note that consumers who spoke about animals were acutely aware of potential criticism:

"I don't tend to use that language because a lot of people would be very annoyed at that because of the injustices of slavery and they feel that they're worse for humans than for animals. And I can understand why they feel that way but I also have a question mark on whether I should be going with them on that or not."

Conversely, adults were viewed as more agentic and, thus, tended to receive less consumer sympathy. Indeed, adults were predominantly categorised by consumers as not slaves – rather as exploited workers with the ability to change their conditions.

A common tactic used by consumers to determine whether an individual or category of people were slaves, or not, was to *empathise* – to put themselves in the shoes of this person. This practice of empathising uniformly led to the definition of children as 'slaves' and, thus, worthy of concern and action. In contrast, putting themselves in the shoes of adults very often resulted in a determination of 'not-slave', because if placed in that situation they believed that they would speak-up and act. Thus, adults were often viewed as beneficiaries and complicit in their situation.

1.3 Locations and Sites of Slavery

We were interested in how slavery is viewed when regarded as near – happening in "my community", "my country" and also when distant, "somewhere else" – not least because of the implications for products and services considered.

In general, our consumers considered slavery to be something that takes place "far away" in locations "abroad". Five of our consumers claimed they had directly encountered local slavery in shops, nail bars, car washes, domestic help, and in some cases had routinely interacted with these people.

Irrespective of the location of slavery, consumers largely felt that the responsibility to fix the problem lay with someone external to them, such as, the government or the company involved. As an indicative trend, informant age was a key factor here, with older consumers being, generally speaking, more oblivious to the possibility of UK-based slavery.

In terms of local slavery, this was viewed primarily as hidden – domestic workers in private households, sex slaves kept in houses and not allowed to go out, agricultural workers transferred very early in the mornings to work unseen

Furthermore, boundary conditions weren't always clear-cut, for instance, some consumers often used the term prostitution without distinguishing sex workers from sex slaves. Considerations of local slavery generally focused on *services*, such as sex work and domestic services.

Many consumers highlighted that the problem is with the whole capitalist system fuelling greed, materialism and the normalisation of low wages:

"…neoliberalist ideology that we've got, it's all about the cheapest price."

"We need to have a look at what we're consuming as a society, as a country because we are consuming beyond our means, we've become a very materialistic society. And if this could change, it wouldn't solve the problems of slavery or exploitation but it would help to alleviate some of the pressures that increase the need for slavery and exploitation."

Emotional responses to local slavery contrasted significantly with emotional responses to distant slavery. Most consumers felt anger, outrage and sadness in response to local slavery and their emotions (in line with the above quotes) were outwardly oriented:

"Oh I feel very very upset. Because every child should be able to have an education at a young age… it makes me want to cry. I blame the government of the country where the boy comes from."

PROPOSITION 1.2: Questions of agency and choice for adult slaves are key in sensitising consumers.

PROPOSITION 1.3: Local slavery is invisible for some segments of the UK population. Those who have encountered local slavery did not respond to it.

Table 1: Examples of Consumer Perceptions

Concept/Insight:	Examples From Interview Data
1.1 Understanding Modern Slavery: Criteria used to categorise individuals/groups as either 'slave' or 'not slave' – in latter case they are categorised as 'exploited worker'.	**Lack of choice, voice, control and free-will:** ● "That amounts to slavery because they have no other choice and no way to escape." ● "They are forced to do it, they have no choice." ● "…being owned by someone and forced to do something with no economic reimbursement at all or free will or the ability to leave." ● "Being held against your will, even if you're not physically restrained." ● "They are doing it to survive." ● "They can't speak out." ● "The difference is for a child – somebody has to stand-up for the children that have nobody to speak for them [no voice], for example a child that is working for his survival. While a grown man who is washing a car in a hand car wash – they have other options they can explore." ● "Using children to do the work that an adult should be doing – that's really slavery."
2. Conditions that Enable Slavery: A range of conditions – internal and external to the individual – that increase their vulnerability to slavery.	**Age, gender, cultural/social norms, economic resources, labour (surplus), innocence/naivety, level of education, citizenship status, social class, disability (e.g. mental health), drug dependence, psychological safety and feelings of worthlessness, detachment from outside community:** ● "A child should never be made to work." ● "They must feel like there is no point, might as well go along with it, there's no fight left in you." ● "…cut-off from the outside world." ● "People in vulnerable situations, these are the kinds of people most targeted for modern slavery – having food and warmth might be something chosen over being out on the streets or in other dangerous situations." ● "It's hidden, like on the dark web." ● "Young girls who are trafficked and forced into the sex industry." ● "being in a culture of non-engagement." ● "when drugs become involved." ● "With illegal immigrants – you can't regulate it, you don't know where they are living, they slip through the safety nets." ● "Young girls, like maybe 14 or 15, being sold for sex. The men having sex with these children are old enough to be their Dad."

Table 1: Examples of Consumer Perceptions (continued)

Concept/Insight:	Examples From Interview Data
1.3 Locations and Sites of Slavery	**Predominantly viewed as happening abroad, far away and at a distance, and representations of these forms of slavery were generally product-based. Slavery at a distance evokes inwardly focused emotive responses:** • "I associated this [child slavery] with developing Asian and African countries. They tend to produce a lot of products, and see children as a cheap form of labour." • "What mostly comes to my mind is places like Indonesia. Third world countries where they say they don't use child labour in sweatshops, but they do." • "It's in the products, because most things slaves produce are produced abroad." • "Very much in Africa, there are those who have and those who have not are treated like an animal. In fact, sometimes in India, they treat the animal better than the human slave." • "If it was in this country [UK] and happening all the time, it would be something that I would think about a lot more. But, being such a long distance away, I've never been around it, never associated with it. So, I've never really thought about it." • "When I do buy them [king prawns], I buy them with a sense of guilt." • "It makes me feel ashamed that we are ultimately promoting this [through consumption]." **Though limited, representations of slavery in local sites were generally service-based (e.g., sex trade, nail bars) and evoked outwardly focused emotive responses:** • "I don't know that there actually is modern slavery in the UK – it's more in Asian countries." • "I've never seen it here." • "It's more undercover in the UK, more under the radar – like young girls trafficked into the UK and forced to work as sex slaves." • "It's more the services, like the sex industry." • "[I feel] outrage and a sense that this is the government's fault." • "It's just shocking."

2. CONSUMER NEUTRALISATIONS

Section 2.1 focuses on issues relating to consumer awareness, including, slavery boundary conditions (e.g., slavery versus labour exploitation), questions of proximity and distance, and of services versus products. In section 2.2 we more directly examine the question of consumer action, or more commonly, *inaction* when it comes to modern-day slavery.

We find strong evidence that consumers use a range of "neutralisations" (Chatzidakis *et al.,* 2007) to justify indifference and inertia in relation to slave-based consumption. By neutralisations we mean the range of justifications and accounts that consumers employ to explain their behaviour both to themselves and significant others. Neutralisations may at times be viewed as excuses but they may also reflect valid explanations that underscore the living conditions of our consumers. We do not distinguish between the two here as our purpose was to understand the different ways in which awareness of modern slavery is explained away and normalised and does not translate into action.

2.1 Moral Intensity

A first and necessary condition for ethical action is the recognition of an issue as having a significant moral nature; *moral intensity* (Jones, 1991). Moral intensity is underpinned by various dimensions and many of these are common across ethical issues, such as, lack of knowledge/awareness, confusion, wilful ignorance, the role of habits, differences between low vs high involvement purchasing contexts. In relation to felt moral intensity in relation to modern slavery, two dimensions stood out within our data: (a) whether the individual was morally worthy of action, and; (b) whether there was a clear path to action.

For sites where specific forms of slavery were deemed to be a cultural practice, such as, sex slavery in some Asian countries these were assessed to be of low moral imperative, as the moral frameworks in this foreign culture were assumed to be different from the consumer. In such situations, consumers express a relatively *low moral intensity.*

Sites of slavery where universal human rights were seen to be breached and the slave was viewed as highly vulnerable, especially children, evoked a sense of *high moral intensity.* Further, visualisations of impactful imagery provided an important recall and empathy trigger. The less abstract the slavery context the more likely consumers are to feel strongly about it. Media representations (e.g., Dispatches) played a key role in evoking moral intensity.

Conversely, adults were viewed as more agentic and, thus, tended to receive less consumer sympathy. Indeed, adults were predominantly categorised by consumers as not slaves – rather as exploited workers with the ability to change their conditions.

2.2 Consumer Neutralisations

As we note above, however, evocations of moral intensity in relation to modern slavery rarely translated into action. More commonly, consumers came up with a series of justifications or neutralisations that allowed them to remove any sense of personal guilt or responsibility in relation to modern slavery. Within our data, we identify four key neutralisation techniques, namely, denial of victim, denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners and dehumanisation of modern slaves.

PROPOSITION 2.1a: Assumptions of lesser/different moral and cultural norms evoke lower moral intensity. Related campaigns should directly tackle misconstrued consumer perceptions.

PROPOSITION 2.1b: Media representations are key in evoking moral intensity within the context of modern slavery. A combination of above – and below-the-line media campaigns are needed in order to sensitise consumers more effectively.

2.2.1 Denial of Victim

This is a technique whereby consumers place the responsibility, blame and guilt for their enslavement onto the slave themselves. For example, suggesting that modern slaves were not taking opportunities presented to them, or seeing the choices that they have:

"....there must be people who are working as domestic slaves. But they don't do anything about it because they just don't want to...They have options, they have choices."

2.2.2 Denial of Injury

This is a technique whereby consumers trivialise the experiences of slavery For example, suggesting that they themselves were 'enslaved', that the working conditions of some slaves were acceptable, or that the slavery in certain supply chains was only 'slight':

"...I feel like the phone – we are all slaves to technology as human beings."

"I don't think it's a big deal."

2.2.3 Condemning the Condemners

This is a technique whereby consumers deflect personal responsibility or blame by pointing to the inefficiency or hypocrisy of those who would potentially condemn then; most notably, governmental and business actors:

"This is the government's problem to sort out."

"Realistically the complexity of modern life means that it's very difficult for you to make the most ethical choice all of the time, so you have to rely on the government to take away the worst excesses and then you have to hope that the reputation of other companies and their own values would, you know, take away the rest."

PROPOSITION 2.2.1: There is a need to counter widespread beliefs about the options and choice slaves have.

PROPOSITION 2.2.2: There is a need to counter widespread beliefs about the options and choice slaves have.

2.2.4 Dehumanising Slaves

The 3 techniques noted above have been reported in other ethical contexts (with some variations; e.g., Chatzidakis *et al.,* 2007). Beyond them, we noted a fourth prevalent technique that was specific to the context of modern slavery. It involved consumers, to a varying extent, recognising that slaves are somewhat inferior to them (i.e., "Western" or "affluent" consumers) and are, therefore, worthy of their fate. Some consumers (although a minority) rather readily stripped modern slaves of their "humanness", "othering" them and reducing them to a somewhat brutal cost-benefit calculus:

"It's a cost-benefit analysis. There are these problems [modern slavery], but I get so much benefit from it that I continue doing it."

In other cases consumers talked about the cultural setting(s) and geographies of modern slavery:

"I think here people talk about modern slavery because it's more about people not getting the jobs that they want. But I think in terms of countries that are still developing, people here don't call those countries modern. They're still like developing you know. So everything there, you could say, is still very backwards."

PROPOSITION 2.2.3:
There is need to emphasise governmental and business initiatives in a way that calls the consumer to do their own bit in the fight against modern day slavery.

Table 2: Examples of Moral Intensity

Concept/Insight:	Examples From Interview Data
2.1 Moral Intensity (High-Low) The level of recognition that the enslaved individual has a significant moral claim.	**Key dimensions: (a) moral worth; and (b) a clear path to action:** • "It's due to them having a different way of life than what we live in the Western World. They probably live in very simple mud huts." • "In Africa [site of modern slavery]. They have their own tribal rituals and tribal ways." • "I don't really feel anything about it. I forget about it. There are so many stresses going on in my own life." • "I think it happens all over the world. But countries like the UK and America, there the systems are quite decent – they have pride in themselves and are looked up to, I reckon they carry themselves better than people in countries like Africa or China because the laws are not as strict." • "In that country, it is not morally wrong." • "It's not our fault. I don't really feel anything about it." • "Anything about children [as slaves] will always take first priority with me." • "The barrier is that I do not know who to approach, I don't know where to go when it's not happening abroad, it's happening in this country [UK]." • "I wouldn't know what to do if I saw it – the signs of how to spot it and what you can do to help it." • "I'm not aware of how they are produced, and I don't even really think about it."

Table 3: Examples of Types of Consumer Neutralisations

Concept/Insight:	Examples From Interview Data
2.2 Consumer Neutralisations	**Denial of injury, denial of victim, condemning the condemners, dehumanising the slave:** • "They are getting paid enough, only they want to be greedy." • "They actually make good money…these people can actually be making quite a lot of money [car washers]." • "In the UK they have the opportunity to get a proper job. If they don't take it, it's their choice." • "If they don't do anything about it, it's because they don't want to." • "I think that we are all slaves." • "There are so many people on the breadline in this country, they will buy the cheapest thing they can get, they don't have a choice." • "I'm the one who is a slave to the system, a slave to the economy." • "Being paid a little is better than nothing. Some people do choose to go down that route." • "It's part of the way of life for their background, where they've come from…it's just a way of life for them [car washers]." • "They are earning a bit of money, they're happy with that. They have choices and they feel like this is the better option for them." • "Except in cases where it involves children, I don't think it's all that important. Because those people [adults] doing the work are quite happy doing it – hand car washes, on the farm, domestic services." • "It's better than nothing, they would rather get something." • "Well, those people [localised modern slaves] should report it themselves to the police." • "It's not all the company's responsibility, it is entirely up to them [UK slaves] to accept the job there, they don't have to accept that payment." • "It's the people who are undergoing it [slavery], experiencing it, that have to try and eradicate it themselves. They have to be the ones to initiate it, have to take the first step." • "It's between the masters and their workers. It has nothing to do with me as the consumer." • "Everyone is making use of modern slaves, and I have to get it somewhere. I'm not going to make it myself."

3. CONSUMER TRUST AND RESPONSIBILITY

In section 3 we turn to issues of consumer trust and responsibility within a multi-stakeholder environment.

3.1 Labels

We exposed our consumers to different labels and probed their beliefs and attitudes about them, including, Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance, Child Labour Free (http://www.childlabourfree.in) and Slavefreetrade (https://slavefreetrade.org/eliminating-business-slavery).

In general consumers recognised and trusted the Fair Trade label, whereas they were considerably more confused about Rainforest Alliance. They were very sympathetic towards Child Labour Free (echoing our earlier observations about adult versus child slavery) and less so about a potential label by Slavefreetrade1 where more clarity was needed as to the scope and nature of what being free from slavery actually meant.

Beyond individual brands we note that awareness is key to understanding different labelling schemes. There was a sense of consumer overload and uncertainty given the often conflicting and competing range of ethical brands.

3.2 Modern Slavery Statements

We exposed consumers to two different MS statements one by John Lewis and one by Clinton Cards. Somewhat surprisingly, although most consumers appreciated John Lewis's commitment to minimising the risk of slavery, they were equally positive about the Clintons statement, because of its simpler, shorter content.

PROPOSITION 2.3.1: There is early indication that a slavefree label would not be effective from a consumer perspective unless it is simple and focused on more specific forms of slavery (most notably child labour). Alternative schemes (e.g., QR codes, Continuous Improvement Certification) should be considered.

PROPOSITION 2.3.2: There is early indication that lengthy MS statements are not effective for consumers. Summary pages or executive abstracts would work better in terms of dissemination to the broader civic/consumer society. This should refer to wider evidence for those who demand it.

3.3 Roles and Responsibilities of Consumers within a Multi-Stakeholder Environment Modern Slavery Statements

We probed consumers on their perceptions of responsibility across different scales and institutional actors, such as, the government, companies and NGOs.

In general, we observed varying faith in the current UK *government*. Consumers expected the UK government to tightly regulate *all* businesses with a view to ameliorating the risk of domestic slavery. They also expected their government to connect with other governments and translational organisations to address slavery as a global problem.

Consumers also had varying faith in *businesses*. They were unanimous in their expectation that they investigate their supply chains to provide consumers with slave-free products and services.

Nearly all consumers agreed that *NGOs* play an important informing role. They noted, however, that they often address (rather inevitably) the symptoms rather than causes of slavery and, therefore, closer interaction with business and governmental actors is necessary.

Finally, *consumers* accepted varying degrees of responsibility for themselves. Some passionately denied any sense of personal responsibility, whereas others agreed to do more if and when they can afford it. A significant portion of our consumers declared that they were ready to do more but pointed to the need for better and clearer information.

Some consumers also noted that reporting slavery is challenging as they were unsure where to report it. Those consumers who claimed they had directly encountered modern slavery (see section 1.3), were reluctant to report it as they were unsure about the legal status of the persons in question and how police would have dealt with it. Many hoped that someone else would take action.

PROPOSITION 2.2.3:
There is need to emphasise governmental and business initiatives in a way that calls the consumer to do their own bit in the fight against modern day slavery.

Table 4: Examples of Roles and Responsibilities

Concept/Insight:	Examples From Interview Data
3.3 Received Roles and Responsibilities within a Multi-Stakeholder Environment	**Assigning various levels of responsibility across government, corporate, NGO and consumer stakeholders:** **Government** • "Responsibility lies with the government." • "It is the government's responsibility to regulate this." • "I feel like the government should be doing everything in its power to stop all of this." • "To legislate and enforce." • "I currently see them [Govt] as part of the problem." **Corporate** • "To be transparent to slavery in their supply chains." • "To pay employees adequately and provide minimum work security." • "They have the responsibility to act, but it's obvious that many aren't acting." • "I think that they have a massive responsibility to "ensure that their products are ethically sourced and that their workers are being treated fairly." **NGOs** • "To be vigilant and informed." • "Create awareness amongst students or would-be students." • "Auditing and making slavery visible." • "Support government in making informed decisions." • "Hub of communication in and out to new stakeholders." • "Lobby government and perform research." **Consumer** • "A lot of the core problems that result in modern slavery start with consumers and high demand." • "If something like that exists [slavery], it exists because of our [consumer] actions." • "I do feel personally responsible to do what I can to help." • "At the end of the day, I don't think that it's the consumer's issue, that's just passing the blame again. It's at the top end, and that should be controlled. It's really not our [consumer's] fault."

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5. FURTHER INFORMATION

The findings in this report represent preliminary research which is now being taken forward into the larger scale proposed study.

If you would like any further information on the current research and the work going forward, to discuss the research or to request hard copies of this report, please do email: contact@consumingmodernslavery.com

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