

# Addressing consumer awareness and (in)action towards modern slavery

## Research Summary

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Research by:



This is a summary of the report: *Addressing Consumer Awareness and (In)Action Towards Modern Slavery*:

A Review of Existing Evidence, a Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (the Modern Slavery PEC) research project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The research was conducted by Dr Michal Carrington, Professor Andreas Chatzidakis and Professor Deirdre Shaw. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Modern Slavery PEC.

The full report can be found on the Modern Slavery PEC website at [www.modernslaverypec.org](http://www.modernslaverypec.org).

## Background

This research focused on understanding consumer (in)action towards modern slavery in the UK. Modern slavery and other forms of labour exploitation underpin the supply chains of many products and services—locally and globally. Consumers are implicated in modern slavery through market demand for forced labour-produced products and services, for example, by prioritising price consumers may be (un)knowingly fuelling exploitation. This consumer-driven market demand, however, can also be used to exert pressure for positive change through both market-based consumption choices and civic action, such, as lobbying and reporting. This research investigates how consumer attitudes, intentions and behaviour can be mobilised to address modern slavery and to identify what interventions are effective in operationalising consumer action on modern slavery.

## Methodology

This research was conducted between January and March 2021. First, comprehensive reviews of existing academic research in the areas of modern slavery and consumption, consumption ethics and anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns were undertaken to understand consumer behaviour and effective forms of intervention. Second, 12 interviews with experts representing 10 case study campaigns that sought to mobilise the consumer to address modern slavery, across the three sectors of services, agriculture and clothing were undertaken. The interviews added depth and insight to existing research.



## Key findings

- Responsibility for addressing modern slavery needs to be fairly distributed across different stakeholders, such as governments and businesses. Consumers need to be reassured that they aren't solely responsible for the causes of modern slavery but are co-responsible for addressing it.
- Raising awareness might be effective in shifting attitudes towards modern slavery, but will not necessarily impact on consumers' actual behaviour.
- Identifying clear actions to take relevant for particular audiences is essential to support and guide consumers to take action on modern slavery.
- Consumers are also citizens. Using consumer power does not always equate with asking consumers to buy (or not buy) specific services and products, but also they can be mobilised to act as a lever to pressure decisionmakers to implement policies and decisions that help to eliminate forced labour from supply chains.
- Campaigns seeking to mobilise consumer action need to apply marketing and evaluation principles to target specific audiences, improve effectiveness and enable learning from past experience.

## Consumer-citizen responsibilities

Currently there is a lack of clarity as to how much and what forms of responsibility should be attributed to the consumer in relation to modern slavery. In communication message framing, a balance must be found between assigning consumers some responsibilities for modern slavery, while not holding consumers solely responsible. A balanced multi-stakeholder approach assigns levels and actions of responsibility that are proportionate to their power in the supply and demand—production and consumption—within complex supply chains and marketplaces.

Consumers are also citizens. Leveraging consumer power does not always equate with asking consumers to buy (or not buy) specific services and products. Instead, it means analysing the source of consumer power and thinking creatively as to how to use it. As consumers-citizens, individuals have a very wide pool of actions to choose from: from reporting and petitioning to writing to local MPs or corporations to taking part in social movements mobilising to demand changes across digital and non-digital spaces.

**Campaigns are most effective when part of a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder strategy that aims to build coalitions between consumers and other key stakeholders. The [BooWho?](#) Campaign seeks to mobilise consumer-citizen action beyond purchase choices to engage more fully in civic actions.**

Campaigns can be subject to unintended consequences which come to light during and after the campaign. In the case of 'blood strawberries' in Greece, the existence of multiple opaque suppliers from differing geographical locations, meant that producers could rebrand their strawberries as being from the wider geographic region and export them to other destinations, thereby, bypassing local market boycotts.

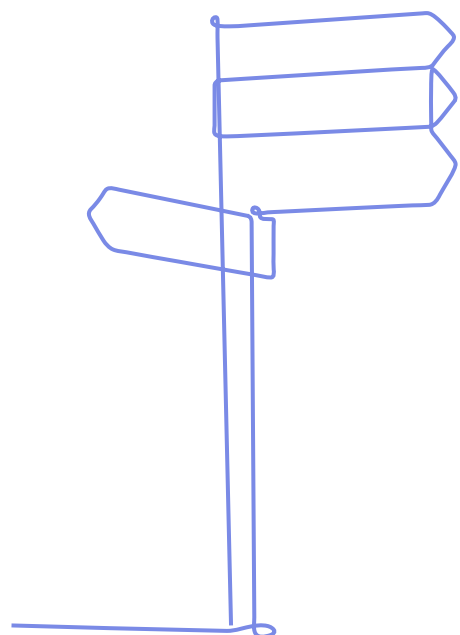
## Identifying pathways to action

Many modern slavery campaigns focus on raising awareness of modern slavery among consumers. Awareness raising, however, stops at consumer intentions, with little impact on actual behaviour.

Barriers to consumer action towards modern slavery are both contextual (e.g. availability of appropriate opportunities in the consumer's everyday environment, constraints pertaining to time and money, habitual behaviours, views of influential others) and psychosocial (e.g. the presence of readily available neutralising and legitimisation tactics that can defend choices, such as, nationalism and 'othering' of certain ethnicities).

Currently, it is unclear what tangible actions consumers can take towards modern slavery. Clear pathways to action are essential to support and guide consumers to take action on modern slavery. Consumers lack a sense of power, agency and purpose in (non)consumption choices and actions to address modern slavery. Consumers also need support to develop new habits that do not include the consumption of forced labour-made products and services.

**Awareness does not necessarily result in action. For awareness raising to be effective, it needs to be accompanied by clear communication of specific actions that can be taken. The [Helping Not Helping](#) campaign provided consumers with a range of templated options to petition and target institutions and utilise social networks to support the campaign.**



## Building effective campaigns using marketing principles

The concepts used in anti-slavery campaigns towards informing, persuading, motivating and mobilising consumer action are aligned with components of overarching marketing principles – in particular, advertising and communication.

Many modern slavery campaigns lack an identified target audience. Rather, they tend to be broadly concerned with raising awareness of modern slavery more generally, or in a specific product or service context, such as, modern slavery in hand car washes.

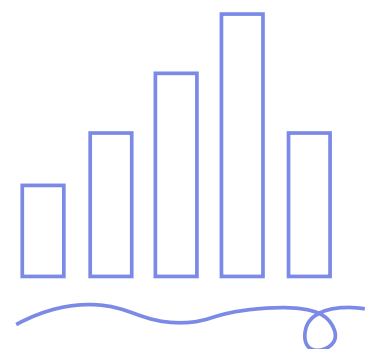
While modern slavery campaigns often identified a goal(s), this was not always supported by corresponding objectives, evaluation and measurement of effectiveness, thus, limiting the ability to measure their impact.

**Supporters who are willing to act in an advocacy capacity for the campaign to reach others and like-minded campaign organisations are key in facilitating campaign reach and goals. For example, [Dressembler](#) invite supporters to become advocates or university campus ambassadors for the campaign. The campaign's network includes a wide range of anti-trafficking organisations, Dressembler partner with ethical brands and support partner organisations as part of a cross promotional strategy.**

## The importance of a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder outlook

Attempts to mobilise the consumer work best when they are part of a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder strategy that aims to build coalitions among workers, NGOs, businesses, investors, governments, regulatory bodies and not least, consumers. A multi-stakeholder outlook is also in line with consumers' own need to know that their actions are part of a more holistic approach, as opposed to a way of shouldering the responsibilities of business and governmental actors.

The way forward is concerted actions both at the points of consumption and production, as well as within the civic realm. The 'consumer' can be mobilised in multiple, and often creative, ways that escape the pitfalls of both ineffective action and disproportionate responsabilisation.



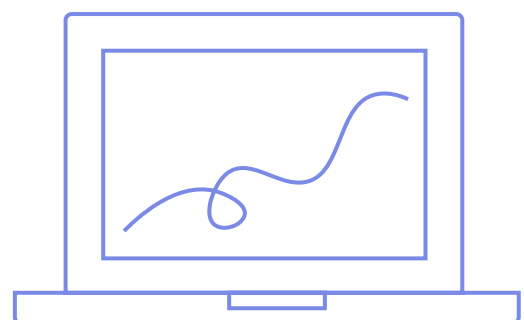
## Context matters

Attempts to mobilise the consumer are always embedded within specific institutional and socio-economic contexts. For example, a monopsony (a market situation where there is only one buyer) present different modern slavery risks to address and different campaign strategic responses than a situation with many buyers.

## Role of key interest and support groups

The presence of clearly identifiable and targetable support groups, such as, young consumers are key in mobilising the consumer. Any social cause, including, modern slavery, needs enthusiastic supporters that have the time and resources needed to act as advocates and to represent early adopters of suitable pathways to action. Directly reaching consumers is important, but at times that reach is supported by other organisations who coalesce around the campaign to form a network or coalition. This is important in extending the reach of the campaign both in terms of supporters but also activities.

**The specific institutional and socio-economic context within which a campaign is situated is important. In the case of the [Fair Food Campaign](#), the presence of fewer buyers, which can increase risk of exposure and reputation damage, was used as leverage to encourage brands to sign up to the campaign.**



## Recommendations

- It is important that consumers see calls for action on modern slavery as positioned within a holistic multi-stakeholder environment, that assigns responsibilities and actions from production through to consumption across different stakeholders. This is important in assigning consumers appropriate levels and areas of responsibility that are balanced in consideration of the power of different stakeholders to enact change.
- A balance of responsibilities should be reflected in communication message framing. Consumers need to be reassured that responsibility is distributed proportionately and fairly across different stakeholders.
- Consumers need to be assured that they can continue to consume, just differently. The range of possible consumer actions extend beyond decisions to (not) buy. Consumer-citizen actions can take the form of broader civic and political mobilisation, where the consumer voices and actions can be supported and collectivised.
- Barriers to consumer action can be both contextual (e.g., availability of opportunities to act) and psychosocial (e.g., neutralising and legitimisation tactics). These need to be recognised and addressed.
- The communication of clear, plausible and transparent pathways to action is vital to support individual and collective consumer-citizen mobilisation. This is essential in enabling consumers to take action, feel a shared sense of responsibility and to consume differently. These pathways to action can be focused on: changing consumption behaviours (abstaining from consumption, shifting to alternatives); and/or, civic actions, such as, reporting instances of modern slavery and signing petitions. Reminding consumers of actions and triggering these actions at point of purchase can reinforce new habits.
- In a multi-stakeholder environment, modern slavery campaigns need to be strategically tailored and targeted to the most appropriate audience/s with the ability to act. This may be directly (via consumers) or indirectly (via e.g. media influencers, branded producers) used to influence consumer action. The credibility of the source is important.
- Campaigns must be supported by clear objectives, goal setting and evaluation measurement. A strategic approach to evaluation is essential to learn from and continuously improve upon the impact of campaigns that seek to mobilise consumer-citizen action.
- Marketing principles (e.g. segmentation and targeting, branding, advertising and communication) should be engaged to support campaigns in informing, persuading, motivating and mobilising consumer action and implemented through the design, development and evaluation of modern slavery campaigns.



## Barriers and unintended consequences

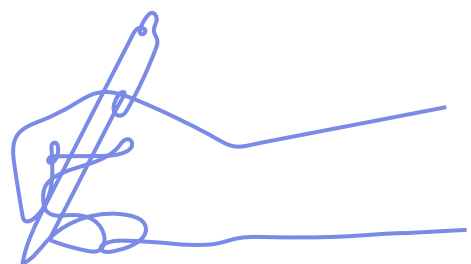
- Attempts to mobilise consumer action towards addressing modern slavery can result in a number of significant and harmful unintended consequences:
- Stereotyping of victim, perpetrator and/or industry.
- Reinforcement of harmful assumptions, such as, conflating modern slavery with migration and/or trafficking with prostitution.
- Sexualisation and/or erotisation of women through imagery.
- Stigmatisation (e.g. sex work) that not only marginalises the individuals involved in these forms of modern slavery and exploitation, but also impacts willingness to report cases.
- Oversimplification of highly complex situations and phenomena.
- Placing too much responsibility on the consumer may result in the ignorance and evasion of the structures and systems that support modern slavery and, also, the responsibilities of other stakeholders.
- In contrast, an over-focus on reporting modern slavery obscures the consumers' role in creating demand for products of modern slavery.
- Failing to recognise consumer responsibilities presents the consumer as only part of the solution, not part of the problem.
- Consumer confusion as a result of conflicting communication messaging (e.g. contrasting pathways to action), mixed use of labelling and lack of knowledge depth.

## Further research

Further research into modern slavery campaigns and message framing is needed to identify the most effective communication approaches, and the effectiveness of these message frames across time and under differing conditions.

Research is needed to identify and guide effective consumer pathways to action. This investigation should be across on/offline formats, market and civic actions, effectiveness of different actions and varying consumer motivations and influences.

More research is needed that includes measures or observations of actual consumer behaviour.





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The Centre is a consortium of six academic organisations led by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law and is funded by the Art and Humanities Research Council on behalf of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

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