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Human Trafficking and Heroic Consumerism

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Abstract

Consumers are the new activists in the fight against modern slavery, with awareness campaigns urging citizens to use their consumer power to demand an end to labour exploitation. The contribution of political, or ethical, consumerism campaigns to the trafficking narrative is examined in this article through an analysis of the characterisation of consumers and corporations in campaigns from SlaveryFootprint.org, Stop the Traffik UK, and World Vision Australia. This article argues that campaigns urging political consumerism depict consumers as the heroic rescuers of enslaved victims, and embed solutions to modern slavery within a culture of unquestioned capitalism. This approach may have the unintended consequence of sidelining victims from the trafficking story as the focus of the narrative becomes the product, rather than the victim, of labour exploitation.

Keywords

Slavery; consumer; ethical consumerism; political consumerism; trafficking; narrative.

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Introduction

Understandings of human trafficking, and efforts to combat it, have evolved since the adoption of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Especially Women and Children) in November 2000.¹ Early efforts focused primarily on migrant women and girls forced into the sex industry. In recent years, a wider range of exploitative labour practices have been addressed under the label of 'modern slavery'. This term, though problematic in its broad definitional boundaries and appropriation of the historically resonant term 'slavery',² is now frequently invoked in attempts to locate the trafficking problem within the global marketplace, and address labour exploitation behind the production of a huge range of goods and services. 'How many slaves work for you?' is the direct question posed by SlaveryFootprint.org on their App and website, and is the implicit message underpinning a range of anti-trafficking campaigns that seek to address the consumer demand that fuels modern slavery in the global market. Emma Thompson, an internationally acclaimed actor and prominent anti-trafficking campaigner, also puts consumers at the centre of the trafficking problem, arguing that:

Much as we need international organizations, national governments, the police and courts to bring traffickers to justice, we must all examine how we behave. The solutions lie in all our hands. Businesses must ask searching questions about their suppliers and not let themselves be fobbed off with convenient answers. As consumers, we need to think about what we buy, where it comes from and under what conditions it's made. (Thompson in Newsweek 2008)

This explicit linking of consumer and slave reflects a growing trend towards the promotion of political consumerism as a tool to combat human trafficking. Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) have established campaigns raising consumer awareness and urging consumer action to ensure products are 'slavery-free', and businesses are encouraged to scrutinise their supply chains for exploitative practices. Political consumerism, meaning the decision by consumers to intentionally purchase, or refuse to purchase, certain products due to political motivations such as ethical or environmental concerns (Stolle et al. 2005) has a long history. However, it is only in recent years that consumerist strategies have explicitly been labelled as a tool against modern slavery.

This consumer-focused approach to fighting trafficking, or modern slavery, contributes to a narrative in which consumers are cast as the heroes, while both the cause of, and solution to, the problem of trafficking is located within the marketplace. Micheletti and Stolle (2007) have identified two different types of campaigns aimed at changing consumer behaviour in the context of the anti-sweatshop movement. 'Episodic campaigns' are said to be focused on 'triggering consumers to take immediate action' in relation to a particular issue. 'Thematic campaigns' are aimed at the underlying problems creating labour exploitation 'by embedding it in the larger context of the pervasive role of consumption in our lives' (Micheletti and Stolle 2007: 168).

Some anti-trafficking campaigns that target consumer behaviour could be described as 'episodic' when they promote specific products as 'slavery free' or 'fair trade', or when they urge boycotts of specific corporations believed to be using slave labour. Campaigns that ask the audience to consider their slavery footprint, and place emphasis on the supply chain, could be described as 'thematic' in that they attempt to change 'consumer thinking about consumer society and culture' (Micheletti and Stolle 2007: 168). While these campaigns take a more thematic, broad ranging approach, they are still embedded within a consumerist society in which the 'change in thinking' encouraged is ultimately consumerist. Consumers are urged to more carefully consider their choices, but the guiding narrative is that consumers should act within the market to effect change. Bernstein (2016: 54-55) describes this as 'redemptive capitalism' in which consumers, producers and even capitalism itself can be redeemed through 'locating morality in both the consumptive and the productive moments of capitalist exchange'.

Political consumerism campaigns contribute to building a public narrative by engaging in a process of problem representation (Bacchi 2007), casting certain elements as problematic, and implying or declaring specific solutions. A narrative analysis of the characterisation of certain actors as victim, villain or hero (Jones and McBeth 2010: 341) can aid in understanding why some behaviours are condemned while others are lauded as heroic. Characterisations typically adhere to meta-narratives (Mayer 2014: 86), locating the public's understanding of trafficking within deeper cultural assumptions about sex and gender, migration, and capitalism.

In this article, I examine the linking of consumer and slave within anti-trafficking activism, questioning the impact of a political consumerism narrative in trafficking discourse. First, I examine the framing of everyday consumers in the trafficking narrative by political consumerism campaigns from three prominent NGOs: SlaveryFootprint.org; Stop the Traffik UK; World Vision Australia. Second, I examine the characterisation of corporations within these campaigns, as well as in the context of recent legislation designed to improve transparency in supply chains. Finally, I consider some of the implications of the political consumerism narrative, arguing that the characterisation of consumers as universally heroic can work to absolve consumers of responsibility, and embed solutions to trafficking within a culture of unquestioned capitalism. Ultimately, this approach sidelines victims from the trafficking story by constructing the narrative of the product, not the narrative of the worker.

Consumers in the anti-trafficking narrative

The centrality of consumer demand as a causative factor in trafficking narratives is well established. The United Nations Trafficking Protocol refers to the need to address demand under Article 9 relating to the prevention of human trafficking. It states that governments should seek to 'discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation of persons, especially women and children, that leads to trafficking' (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2000). Debate about the role demand plays in fuelling trafficking has previously centred on the claim that demand for sex work fuels human trafficking (O'Brien 2011). In this causal narrative, the sex work consumer or client was argued to be responsible for the problem of sex trafficking because they had created the demand for sexual services, and that demand was being met with trafficked women.

Anti-sex work activists interpreted the 'end demand' provision of the Trafficking Protocol as an instruction that governments should thus criminalise the demand for sex work. This approach has been adopted in several countries around the world through the establishment of what is known as the Swedish or Nordic Model,³ in which the demand for sex work is criminalised, while the 'supply' side is decriminalised on the grounds of protecting women in the sex industry (Skilbrei and Holmström 2011: 480). The causal narrative this model rests upon fails to distinguish between the demand for sexual services, and the demand for trafficked sexual services; nevertheless, it is predicated at least in part on a narrative that problematises consumer demand.

The trend towards political consumerism extends the trafficking narrative to focus on consumers outside the sex industry. While the characterisation of consumers in the sex industry remains heavily vested in a debate over the legitimacy of the industry itself, consumerist campaigns in other industries focus on raising awareness and influencing consumer choice in industries that are legal and largely unquestioned in their legitimacy. Nevertheless they are connected in the trafficking narrative, as sex trafficking has remained a feature of corporate social responsibility approaches to anti-trafficking, imbuing labour exploitation with 'both moral urgency and authenticity' (Bernstein 2016: 66). However, while trafficking in previous decades has primarily been discussed in terms of links with illicit markets, illegal sex industries and organised crime gangs, the narrative has broadened to include a focus on legal industries and everyday consumers.

Harnessing consumer power to incentivise better labour practices has a long political history, especially in the context of movements against slave labour. During the 1790s, British consumers engaged in boycotts of sugar produced using slave labour while, in the 1820s, anti-slavery activists in the United States of America (USA) established 'free produce stores' selling goods produced by 'free labour' (Glickman 2004: 889-890). Since the 1970s, political consumerism has been resurgent (Neilson 2010: 214), becoming one of the most common ways in which citizens engage in political action (Copeland 2014: 172). Recent anti-trafficking efforts centred on mobilising consumer activism typically fall into the category of one of two forms of political consumerism: a boycott or a buycott. Boycotting is the refusal to purchase certain products or patronise specific brands, while buycotting is the intentional, politically motivated selection of a particular product or brand.

The political consumerism narrative works from the assumption that consumer power can incentivise change in labour practices, either through rewarding good or punishing bad behaviour. The power wielded by consumers is that of demand. The basic assumption is that, without a demand for products and a willingness to pay for them, supply will diminish. Within this narrative, the consumer is the central protagonist, acting to influence the outcome of a story. In this instance, the story usually begins by relating the experiences of victims of forced or exploitative labour. However, it is the actions of consumers that are the fulcrum on which the story's outcome will turn. In the following section, I analyse the narrative constructed by three consumer-focused campaigns, demonstrating that consumers are depicted as powerful and blameless.

Consumer-focused campaigns

Fighting labour exploitation through consumer action is evident in much anti-trafficking campaigning undertaken by NGOs. Capitalising on existing 'Fairtrade' movements, these campaigns aim to raise awareness of labour conditions for workers involved in the production of goods, and direct consumers to make different choices in their buying behaviours to either reward or punish producers. Three prominent organisations, SlaveryFootprint.org, Stop the Traffik and World Vision Australia, have made the relationship between consumers and 'modern slaves' the centrepiece of their trafficking narrative, producing materials and resources aimed at harnessing consumer power.

One of the most prominent political consumerism anti-trafficking campaigns is the online survey and App initiated by SlaveryFootprint.org in 2011, in partnership with the State Department of the USA. Visitors to the site, or users of the App, are able to 'measure' their slavery footprint by answering survey questions. This mirrors the very popular concept of measuring your carbon footprint by answering questions about resource usage and eco-friendly behaviours. The slavery footprint survey begins by asking 'How many slaves work for you?' (Slavery Footprint 2017). The question alone is notable for immediately putting consumers into the frame of the trafficking narrative, while simultaneously demonstrating a breach between the survey-taker's assumption that they are not linked to slavery, and the reality of trafficking supply chains. Clicking on 'Take the Survey' leads to a series of questions about where you live, your gender and age, and then the consumer products you own and use. Each question page includes a text box to provide information about a specific element of modern slavery relevant to the question being asked. For instance, in answering a question about what is in your medicine cabinet, the following blurb appears:

How do I look in this dirt?

Every day tens of thousands of American women buy makeup. Every day tens of thousands of Indian children mine mica, which is the little sparklies in the makeup (Slavery Footprint 2017).

There is a strong emphasis on child victims of modern slavery in the awareness raising contained within the survey. In the ten information boxes presented during the survey, five of them (half in total) relate information about children enslaved and exploited. This is consistent with the vast majority of anti-trafficking campaigns, which focus on children as emblematic of the trafficking problem, reflecting notions of ideal victimhood (Chapkis 2003: 931; Jahic and Finckenauer 2005: 26; O'Brien 2013: 320). On completing the survey, visitors to the site are directed to the main site for the NGO 'Made in a Free World', which urges consumers to #buybetter to fight human trafficking.

Stop the Traffik, an NGO group with a global presence and websites in a number of countries including Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the USA, urges consumers to use their 'powerful voice' to end exploitation of workers in several key industries. The UK website focuses on three consumer products: chocolate, tea and clothing. The Stop the Traffik campaign concerning child labour exploitation in chocolate production asks individual consumers to 'influence change with your wallet' by buying chocolate certified by the Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade, or UTZ. In all of the campaigns, the organisation encourages consumers to be informed about the source of the goods they are buying, to make ethical consumer choices, and to play a part in raising awareness more widely.

World Vision Australia's 'Don't Trade Lives' campaign adopts a similar approach in urging consumers to 'help end exploitation through your consumption, choices and voice' (World Vision Australia 2017). The 'Buy ethical, end exploitation' section of World Vision Australia's website points to specific products, directing visitors to the site to read fact sheets about exploitation in industries producing chocolate, tea, coffee, palm oil, cotton, seafood, jewellery and electronic devices. The website also provides an 'ethical chocolate scorecard' reporting on the ethical practices of prominent chocolate brands available in Australia including Cadbury, Lindt, Nestlé and Haigh's.

While SlaveryFootprint.org is primarily aimed at raising consumer awareness and could be described as a 'thematic' campaign, Stop the Traffik and World Vision Australia have targeted or 'episodic' campaigns to utilise consumer power to effect change in labour conditions for specific products. All three campaigns contribute to the narrative of trafficking by casting consumers in a particular light. Consumers are first and foremost framed as powerful and heroic in the trafficking narrative, even in the absence of action. Second, they are characterised as innocent, or blameless, in the trafficking narrative.

Powerful potential heroes

A political consumerism approach to human trafficking rests upon the assumption that consumers have the power to effect change. In trafficking narratives, victims are almost universally passive. They are depicted as helpless and lacking in agency (Andrijasevic 2014). The active characters in the narrative are those who can change the status quo: they are villains or heroes. The villains take action to enslave victims, or the heroes take action to free them. Consumers are claimed to be powerful actors in the trafficking narrative, in a position to take action to free victims of modern slavery.

The NGO behind SlaveryFootprint.org constructs this narrative by declaring, 'We empower the heroes of the global economy by helping everyone #buybetter'. In this statement, the implication is that consumers in the global economy are heroes in waiting, to be empowered through greater awareness. The World Vision 'Don't Trade Lives' campaign also emphasises the position of consumers as active protagonists in the trafficking narrative, declaring that, 'As a consumer, you can help end exploitation through your consumption, choices and voice' (World Vision Australia 2017).

For Stop the Traffik and World Vision Australia, the target of this consumer power is primarily corporations. World Vision Australia casts consumers as heroes whose 'voice and purchasing power can put a lot of pressure on companies to improve their business practices' (World Vision Australia 2012: 2). This power narrative is reinforced by Stop the Traffik, which declares that 'As consumers we have a powerful voice, we can use it to urge companies to change their behaviour, so that they can tell us that the clothes we are buying are Traffik-free' (Stop the Traffik 2017c). All three of the campaigns position consumers as powerful to act because they are the end-consumer of goods being produced under exploitative conditions. The framing of consumers as powerful to act to prevent trafficking puts them clearly in the category of hero within the narrative. But what must a consumer do in order to act heroically?

The consumer action promoted by Slavery Footprint, Stop the Traffik and World Vision could most clearly be categorised as a boycott. Initially, they encourage consumers to be more aware of what they are purchasing, and the exploitative labour that may have been used in its production. This campaign approach, best described as an 'informational model' (Barnett et al. 2005: 42) offers consumers their first opportunity to act heroically without needing to take any action at all. Justin Dillon, founder of Slavery Footprint, best summed up the awareness-raising component of consumer heroism as 'the first thing to do is to know' (CNN 2014). What consumers are expected to do once they know is not explicit from the Slavery Footprint campaign, whereas Stop the Traffik and World Vision make clear suggestions for what informed consumers should do. Primarily, they suggest a boycott, in which consumers should seek out products that are certified as slavery-free in some way. The team behind Slavery Footprint seems to endorse this approach, utilising imagery on their website that puts the slogan 'Made in a Free World' on the graphic representation of a product tag.

Stop the Traffik UK and World Vision Australia do not exclusively promote a boycott approach. Both organisations' chocolate campaigns also provide the impetus and encouragement for a boycott. World Vision names and shames chocolate producers that have not certified their chocolate as ethically sourced, or have not provided a timeline by which they have committed to doing so. The Easter Chocolate Campaign from Stop the Traffik adopts both a boycott and boycott approach, offering the reward of the carrot or the threat of the stick to major British supermarket chains. They congratulate supermarket chain Tesco for committing to stocking ethically sourced Easter chocolates, thus encouraging consumers to boycott the store. They also name and shame supermarket chain Sainsbury's for failing to make a commitment to stock ethically sourced chocolate, thus implying that consumers concerned about modern slavery should boycott the store at Easter time. This approach could be termed a 'dualcote' (Copeland 2014: 177), in which consumers engage in both boycotting and boycotting activities.

The promotion of boycott or boycott actions frames consumers as heroes within the narrative. While all the campaigns emphasise the power of consumers, and the importance of their voice in anti-trafficking efforts, the tangible act of using purchasing power puts consumers at the centre of the action in the narrative, acting heroically to punish villains and reward other heroes. The choice to boycott a particular brand or product is a punitive act in which businesses are punished for behaviour that is perceived to be undesirable or unethical, while a boycott adopts a 'reward orientation' to incentivise and reward businesses for behaving in a more desirable manner (Copeland 2014; Neilson 2010). The role of consumers in both actions is consistently heroic. They are empowered by their consumer dollars, and taking action within the narrative to reflect a moral value and impose a preferred outcome, or resolution.

The clear message in the narrative is that, if only consumers were aware of trafficking, they would, of course, act to stop it. This may be true; however, in this characterisation, consumers are constrained only to the category of hero. Far from being depicted as to blame for the demand that fuels trafficking, consumers are described as an untapped force for good, to be empowered by

political consumerist campaigns. Consumers are not villains, just heroes or potential heroes. They are either accessing their hero story, or they are not.

Innocent and ignorant

Consumer choices tend to be framed dichotomously as either an ethical choice, or an uninformed choice. The campaigns that call for ethical consumerism, or ask consumers to consider their slavery footprint, clearly suggest that they could be making more ethical choices. The implication might be that a consumer who does not opt for the ethical choice promoted by the awareness campaign might be making an unethical choice; however, the narrative framing does not actually make that determination. Rather, the implication is that, at worst, consumers who do not currently make ethical choices are uninformed bystanders, but certainly not villains.

The characterisation of consumers on the World Vision site heralds the heroic possibilities of consumer power rather than condemning unethical consumer choices. The site declares:

As members of a society that relies on international goods and services, there are many ways we could be supporting and furthering the use of forced, child and trafficked labour without even knowing it. Fortunately, there are plenty of ethical alternatives. As a consumer, you can help end exploitation through your consumption, choices and voice. (World Vision Australia 2017)

The declared ignorance of consumers acts as a discursive shield against culpability, which is reflected several times in the campaign materials. SlaveryFootprint.org operates on the assumption that consumers have no idea about the origins of their consumer goods, and thus seeks to educate them through the information blurbs accompanying each question. Stop the Traffik's campaign website for ethically produced clothing says, '... we don't know if the clothes we wear have been made by someone who has been trafficked' (Stop the Traffik 2017c), while World Vision Australia notes that consumers 'may be indirectly supporting the use of forced or child labour' (World Vision Australia 2012: 1). Describing consumers as 'indirectly' contributing to the problem or unaware of the exploitation characterises them as innocent or ignorant bystanders who merely lack the knowledge necessary to behave heroically, as opposed to directly engaging in an act that causes exploitation.

There are some exceptions to this dominant narrative of consumers as innocent bystanders, with Stop the Traffik coming closer to some condemnation of consumer behaviour in declaring that, 'When you buy a product, you essentially endorse it and everything that went into producing it' (Stop the Traffik 2017a). However, the responsibility for exploitative practices is not placed on the consumer, but rather on the producer:

Most retailers and fashion labels either don't know where they buy their cotton from or choose not to make that information public. This isn't good enough. We want to be able to choose Traffik-free and help change the lives of the women and girls trapped in this scheme. (Stop the Traffik 2017c)

The lack of knowledge on the part of retailers also serves to shield them from responsibility; however, in this instance, the Stop the Traffik campaign is seeking to pierce that shield by demanding further information. Corporations are thus characterised as responsible for providing information to consumers to enable them to make ethical choices, but not necessarily responsible for the victimisation of workers in the industry. In this political consumerist narrative, consumers may be the beneficiary of labour exploitation, but they are certainly not cast as the villains responsible for the victims' exploitation. They are the victims' potential salvation, but not the cause of their enslavement. This is in stark contrast to the characterisation of consumers in the

dominant sex trafficking narrative who, as noted earlier, are condemned as a major cause of the trafficking problem, and criminalised under the Nordic Model.

Corporations in the trafficking narrative

Political consumerism strategies implore consumers to exert pressure on the next link in the chain, the retailer, who in turn is expected to pressure the wholesaler and, ultimately, the producer to end exploitative labour practices. It could be assumed, therefore, that corporations profiting from the sale of items produced using forced labour are the villains in the narrative. NGOs have led the charge in urging businesses to end exploitative practices, with the Stop the Traffik UK and World Vision Australia campaigns aimed not only at impacting individual consumer choices, but also encouraging businesses to adopt more ethical practices. The emphasis of these campaigns is primarily focused on encouraging consumers to engage in boycotts of those failing to ethically source produce, or buycotts of those companies that do promote their products as slavery-free. However, the World Vision Australia campaign also calls on businesses, investors in business, and employees to play a role in changing corporate culture (World Visions Australia 2012: 2). In 2014, the team behind the Slavery Footprint website and survey shifted their focus from individual consumers towards influencing the consumer behaviour of corporations, with the development of the FRDM™ software. The software program aims to help companies to utilise data to conduct due diligence and investigate supply chains (Made in a Free World 2016). The introduction and promotion of the software to businesses was done in partnership with the USA State Department, with the ultimate aim being to 'leverage consumption' to combat human trafficking over time (Dillon cited in CNN 2014).

Corporations are framed within the trafficking narrative both through these NGO campaigns, and also in the context of recent legislative changes directed at incentivising corporations to conduct due diligence of supply chains in an effort to combat modern slavery. In the next section, I highlight the characterisation of corporations within the trafficking narrative, demonstrating the tendency to heroicise, rather than demonise, corporations.

Villains or heroes?

Corporations are put into the frame as both potential hero and potential villain in the NGO campaign materials. Stop the Traffik declares that 'We know brands and retailers will only listen and change when we join together with our collective voices and take action' (Stop the Traffik 2017c). World Vision Australia calls on consumers, investors and employees to encourage businesses to avoid exploitative labour practices, and suggests that individuals should lobby their Member of Parliament to 'ensure that Australian businesses are acting responsibly at home and abroad', and to push them to update government procurement policies in line with International Labor Organisation (ILO) standards (World Vision Australia 2012: 2).

Stop the Traffik UK has also targeted corporations more specifically. In 2015, the organisation ran a 'Traffik Free Easter' campaign by encouraging supporters to send emails or postcards to supermarkets asking them to stock Easter products made with certified cocoa. They indicate that, 'Unfortunately Sainsbury's was unable to make a commitment to stocking more certified fair trade Easter products for 2016, however, Tesco has announced that all of their own brand chocolate Easter eggs sold this year have been made with certified cocoa' (Stop the Traffik 2017b).

World Vision Australia takes a more condemnatory tone when discussing businesses. In their 'Don't Trade Lives' factsheet, they suggest that consumers make enquiries of businesses to determine whether their products are ethically sourced. They suggest that there might be some negative consequences for companies that do not respond adequately, stating:

If companies do not respond to your enquiries or make statements that you reasonably believe are misleading or deceptive, tell regulators like the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission or your state consumer law regulator. (World Vision Australia 2012: 2)

Notably, the wrongdoing implied here is the failure to respond to an enquiry, or misleading or deceptive conduct in responding to the enquiry, not their involvement in sourcing products from enslaved people.

The punishing action of consumers in a boycott stance does, however, disrupt the hero characterisation of corporations. In this framing, the consumer is acting as the hero against the villainous corporation, which is positioned as failing to act heroically unless the consumer forces them to do so. This is distinct from the framing of the boycott stance in which the heroic corporation receives a reward from consumers for behaving ethically. In this narrative, corporations are not necessarily accused of being directly responsible for slavery, but of failing to act unless forced to do so by consumers. They are both hero, to be rewarded by boycott, and villain to be pushed into becoming a hero by boycott. This mirrors the assumption in the consumer characterisation that corporations would tap into their own heroic power if only they were aware of the exploitation in their supply chains, or incentivised to source products more ethically by heroic consumers.

Incentives, not punishments

NGOs and individual consumers are not the only avenue through which corporations have been urged to address labour exploitation. In recent years, the role of legitimate corporations in supporting trafficking through their supply chains has been increasingly scrutinised at a government level (Dryhurst 2013: 644). In the past, illicit markets and illegal industries were the focus of efforts to consider the economics and address the demand dynamics of human trafficking (Akee et al. 2014). Prosecutions of traffickers, especially in the US, have shown a clear attempt to curtail the trafficking activities of criminal gangs and organised crime groups, while failing to 'capture otherwise legitimate corporate organizations that benefit from trafficker labor' (Dryhurst 2013: 650). However, several countries have recently shown a greater interest in examining the links between the criminal world of human trafficking and legitimate business, and in encouraging businesses to give greater consideration to the extent to which labour exploitation is helping to fuel corporate profits.

In the USA, California introduced a *Transparency in Supply Chains Act* in 2010 (Crane et al. 2017: 16), while the Federal government has established 'voluntary guidelines and best practices' to prevent exploitation in the agricultural industry (Dryhurst 2013: 644). Recent anti-trafficking legislation adopted in the UK also places increased emphasis on the role of corporations in trafficking prevention efforts. The *Modern Slavery Act 2015* includes a requirement for businesses operating in the UK with an annual turnover of more than £36 million to provide a report on their efforts to improve transparency in supply chains. At the time of writing, the UK legislation reporting requirements were being considered for adoption in Australia, through a Federal Parliamentary Inquiry (Parliament of Australia 2017).

On face value, the *Modern Slavery Act 2015* seemingly establishes an important principle that corporations can clearly be responsible for trafficking, and have a role to play in the prevention of human trafficking. However, the legislation is largely symbolic and certainly not condemnatory. First, the legislation actually demands little of corporations. Their obligation under the law is merely to report on what efforts have been made to identify and address labour exploitation in supply chains. This means that a corporation could, in fact, do nothing to address trafficking so long as that lack of action had been reported (McCormack and Nelson 2016). Second, there is no severe penalty for corporations that are delinquent in their reporting, or found

to have engaged trafficked labour in their supply chains. The penalty for failing to provide a report is that they may be found by a judge to be in contempt of court and thus fined. However, the impetus to act comes more from the threat of reputational risks to businesses than from punitive action by governments. One law firm offering commentary on the new legislation highlights the framing of political consumerism as central to the approach by the UK government:

... the government envisages that consumers, investors and NGOs will need to engage and/or apply pressure where they believe a business has not taken sufficient steps to address slavery and human trafficking in its supply chains. (Latham and Watkins 2015)

The French National Government has adopted similar legislation seeking to hold corporations to account for exploited labour used within their supply chains. As with the UK legislation, the French legislation adopted in 2017 requires multinational corporations to conduct due diligence and report on their efforts to prevent human rights abuses in supply chains and operations. In contrast to the rather toothless UK legislation, France-based corporations failing to adequately report on their efforts to prevent abuses may be liable for fines of up to €10 million (Audeyev, Carroll and Davis 2017). Admittedly, this may be a rather small sum considering the vast profits of many multinational corporations; however, it does apply a clear monetary penalty for failing to comply with the legislation.

These efforts by governments to encourage corporations to be more diligent in ensuring that their supply chains are 'slavery free' are tentative and incremental at best. Rather than condemning the role of corporations in profiting from slave labour, intentionally or otherwise, these policies instead ask corporations to simply be more aware, to investigate further, and to consider making changes. The emphasis is on 'voluntary' changes to business practices to adopt 'best practice' and to 'report' on efforts to scrutinise supply chains. These measures are encouraging and incentivising, rather than punitive. The clear narrative positioning of corporations is not as villains in the trafficking story but as potential heroes, well placed to harness their market power to address the problem of trafficking, as distinct to condemning and penalising these corporations for their role in the abuse of trafficking victims.

Questioning the political consumer narrative

The casting of consumers, whether individual or corporate, as heroes or potential heroes able to use their position in the chain of trafficking to exert influence to end modern slavery is an empowering, though problematic, narrative. I now turn to a contemplation of the implications of this narrative, arguing that political consumerist strategies may absolve consumers of responsibility and entrench a simplistic market-based solution to a more complex problem. Ultimately, the heroic consumer's narrative may serve to sideline victims from the trafficking story altogether.

Distancing consumers from slaves

In the past, the ethical consumerism movement has been criticised for reducing 'local, national, and global processes to a simple producer-consumer dichotomy' (Robins 2012: 594). Campaigns and initiatives that invoke the supply chain concept may go some way to demonstrating complexity in the process, though they are still primarily aimed at illustrating the relationship between the exploited producer and the end-consumer. These campaigns are clearly well intentioned in attempting to show just how close consumers are to the trafficking problem. However, a possible effect of this approach is to actually distance consumers from the problem. The 'supply chain' concept locates the problem of trafficking as several steps, or links, in the chain away from retailers, and away from the buyer. Campaign materials emphasise the fact that consumers cannot possibly be aware of the exploitation involved in producing goods, and this distancing from the reality is often extended to corporations as well. The framing of consumers

and corporations as heroic or potentially heroic reinforces this distance, with the supply chain links insulating all from responsibility.

In contemplating the perhaps unintended consequences of the supply chain motif in political consumerist campaigns, focus should be placed on what it is, exactly, that consumers are being asked to do. As explored earlier in this paper, they are being asked to improve their awareness of what goes into the production of their goods, and they are being asked to use their consumer power to demand better standards. But the linear supply chain clearly demonstrates that consumers are only really empowered to demand better standards from the businesses that supply them at the retail end of the market. The assumption is that those businesses will then pass that demand down the supply chain; however, the chain-link framing actually emphasises the division and limits of influence of consumers. The 'Don't Trade Lives' campaign by World Vision Australia reflects this very clearly in discussing the relationship between businesses and producers:

Australian businesses may encounter forced or child labour in many aspects of their business, such as when suppliers or sub-contractors use forced or child labour to make products that the business then uses or sells on to consumers. Businesses may also encounter forced or child labour if staff are overseen by a third party, such as labour brokers, and they cannot fully assess whether the conditions of employment meet minimum labour standards. (World Vision Australia 2012: 1)

This quote repeats a refrain also evident in SlaveryFootprint.org's Made in a Free World approach, and some Stop The Traffik materials, that businesses find it very difficult to ascertain if exploited labour is being used down the chain. This narrative framing externalises the problem of trafficking as essentially beyond the control of consumers, and even corporations, located at the producer's end of the chain, specifically in countries of the Global South.

A further potential consequence may be a resurgence in 'buy local' campaigns. Because of the asserted difficulties in scrutinising every aspect of the supply chain, consumers may assume that buying local is better. However, this is premised on the assumption that local industries in countries of the Global North are exploitation free, which is certainly not the case. Meanwhile, the implication remains that exporters in the Global South are slavers and abusers, and thus the ones primarily responsible for the problem of human trafficking. This perpetuates the idea that trafficking is very much a problem 'over there'.

Consumers are further absolved of responsibility in the supply chain narrative through boycott or buycott campaigns essentially critiquing only one aspect of the supply/demand relationship. In the political consumerist construction, power in the supply chain can only be exerted downwards, meaning that changing consumer demand for goods produced without labour exploitation is considered powerful, but existing consumer demand for these goods is not castigated. This conceals the responsibility consumers may bear for generating demand for these goods in the first place. Campaigns that seek to empower consumers are, admittedly, far more likely to be successful in gaining traction than campaigns that chastise and condemn. However, locating the problem at the supply end rather than the demand end results in the conceptualisation of demand as a powerful force for good, but not a contributor to the problem. Consumers are thus further distanced from the exploitation taking place 'over there', and thus cannot possibly be the villain, only the hero.

Political consumer or anti-consumerist?

In asking why consumers are so protected within the narrative, the metanarrative of consumerist culture that underpins the empowerment of consumer demand must be considered. To cast

consumers as villains would simply create too great a breach with the worldview that consumerism is good, and that capitalism can be a force for good. The overriding metanarrative at play in the political consumerist construction of these campaigns is that the market will provide the solution, without the need to problematise consumerist culture. As noted earlier, some anti-trafficking campaigns urging political consumerism could be described as 'episodic' in aiming to target a particular company or product, while others are more 'thematic' in their emphasis on changing how consumers think about their role in the global marketplace (Micheletti and Stolle 2007: 168). The campaigns analysed for this research represent examples of both episodic and thematic campaigns, yet both work within the bounds of the current marketplace and consumerist culture.

Consumerism itself is not problematised by these campaigns. Indeed, the boycott approach establishes shopping as activism. SlaveryFootprint.org encourages people not to stop buying, but to #buybetter. Stop the Traffik's chocolate campaign offers the suggestion that supporters should host a fondue party, and 'buy, eat and give certified chocolate, lots of chocolate' (Stop the Traffik 2017a). This reflects the consumerist approach to trafficking where individuals are encouraged to not only buy more but the right kind of more. Activism is thus diverted towards consumerism (Bernstein 2016: 54), rather than consumerism becoming activism. Political consumerism thus works within a neoliberal conceptualisation of freedom in which the economic context in which slavery occurs is 'not identified as a problem from which people need to be freed' (Kempadoo 2015: 16). Instead, an end to labour exploitation is deemed only possible through the redemptive power of capitalism (Bernstein 2016: 54).

The pro-consumerist approach to activism is particularly exemplified through the creation of Shopnate.com.au in Australia, where consumers can 'Donate to charity for free. Simply by shopping online' (Shopnate 2017). This approach is not specifically an anti-trafficking strategy, though users of Shopnate can donate to anti-trafficking organisations, and the more users purchase, the more money charities can receive. This approach is not necessarily encouraging users to #buybetter, but could more accurately be described as #buymore to achieve change.

One of the immediate problems with the #buybetter approach is that it grants an ethical free pass to those who can afford to purchase products that are marketed as 'slavery free', and thus usually cost a premium. A more systemic problem is that the consumerist narrative in anti-trafficking campaigns obscures an alternative in which the consumer market is itself problematised, and an anti-consumerist agenda adopted as a means through which to effect social change (Bramall 2011). There is certainly potential for an anti-consumerist approach to work alongside the existing efforts of consumer awareness campaigns. For instance, the Stop the Traffik (2017d) fashion campaign suggests that supporters could hold a clothes swapping event with friends. The stated purpose of the event is to raise awareness of trafficking in fashion, and raise money to assist Stop the Traffik. Read a different way, however, this event could easily be framed as an alternative to the relentless consumption of clothes that are cheaply produced, barely worn and quickly discarded.

The pro-consumerist narrative asks relatively little of consumers with sufficient disposable income to make a 'slavery-free' product choice, and demands no greater scrutiny of the capitalist structures that have entrenched inequality leading to worker exploitation. Instead, the embrace of redemptive capitalism by corporations allows consumers to assuage their guilt by lining their pockets.

Conclusion: The product's narrative?

In this article, I have analysed the political consumerist narrative in recent attempts to combat modern slavery. Throughout, consumers are framed as either uninformed potential heroes or empowered heroes, armed with better information with which to make more ethical consumer

choices. The casting of consumers as heroes, and the emphasis on either buying 'slavery free' products, or boycotting products where labour exploitation may have been involved, undoubtedly puts consumers at the centre of the narrative. They are the hero protagonists, fighting to change the world through their consumer choices. However, most anti-trafficking consumer campaigns attempt to motivate this change by drawing attention to the plight of victims, whose labour has been exploited in the production of consumer goods. It could be assumed, therefore, that the political consumerist narrative is a shared narrative, a story of both victim and hero.

Anti-trafficking campaigns that emphasise transparency in supply chains and greater consumer awareness of product sources are aimed at demystifying or defetishising commodities (Cook et al. 2007). In pointing to the various practices used in the production of products and denoting the steps between the producer and the consumer, these campaigns go some way to reversing what Jameson (1971: 408) described as the obliteration of 'the signs of work on the product' (cited in Bramall 2011: 76). In effect, these campaigns seek to make the labour—and, in particular, the exploited labour—visible to the consumer. But they do not afford agency to the victims as primary producers (Robins 2012: 594) who are not empowered within this narrative to seek their own freedom. As Page (2017: 48) writes, 'the First World consumer buys it for them'. Victims are given no real power within the consumer narrative. In fact, they are sidelined from the narrative altogether. In focusing on the supply chain, cycle, or the journey of a product, these campaigns are not primarily concerned with reflecting the narrative of the victim, or even the consumer. They are engaged in constructing the narrative of the product, not the narrative of the worker.

The trend towards ethical consumerism as a tactic in the fight against modern slavery is increasingly embraced as a marketing strategy, with several products and brands advertising themselves as either 'slavery free' or sourcing fair trade produce (Page 2017). This action is, of course, laudable. However, explicit declarations that a particular product is 'slavery free' demonstrate a preoccupation with the origins and journey of the product itself. In this narrative, the exploitation involved in the creation of that product becomes the problematic element to be excised, with the immediate aim the creation of products that are slavery-free, rather than slaves that are free.

Political consumerism may well be a useful tool in the fight against human trafficking; however, it is necessary to move beyond a simple narrative that positions consumers as only ever heroic. The casting of consumers, whether individual or corporate, as heroes or potential heroes in the trafficking narrative resonates with an entrenched worldview in which the causes of trafficking are externalised, the solutions to trafficking lie within a consumerist culture, and the product's narrative becomes the central concern. While it may be more prudent to incentivise individuals to act rather than lambast them for their actions, the uncritical heroicising of consumers in the Global North along with the villainising of producers in the Global South must be avoided, and influence exerted beyond consumers' link in the chain.

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¹ The Protocol defines the crime of trafficking as the forceful, coercive, deceptive or fraudulent 'recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons' for the 'purpose of exploitation' (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2000).

² See O'Connell Davidson (2016) for a detailed analysis of the use of the term 'modern slavery'.

³ For critiques of the Nordic Model, see Sanders and Campbell (2014: 539) and the special issue of *Criminology and Criminal Justice* Volume 14, Issue 5 on 'The Governance of Commercial Sex: Global Trends of Criminalisation, Punitive Enforcement, Protection and Rights'

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