

News in Consumer Ethics

UK: Modern Slavery: Consumer Perspectives

It is estimated that up to 60,000 people are currently enslaved in the US, and that at least 1,243,400 people are modern slaves across Europe⁹. Many of these people are victims of human trafficking and are enslaved in industries such as domestic work, agriculture, restaurants/food service, and the sex trade, with women and girls representing the largest share of forced labour victims¹⁰. In contrast to traditional and overt forms of slavery, modern slaves are often recruited and controlled with psychological and economic forms of coercion¹¹. These covert and non-material methods of intimidation and control can work to render modern slaves invisible to our eyes. Focusing on the ethics of production, consumption and supply chains, recent anthropological and geographical schools of thought point to the tyranny of distance between sites of consumption and production in enabling social inequities and environmental degradation between privileged consumers in

9 Global Slavery Index

(<http://www.globallslaveryindex.org/>)

10 International Labour Organisation (ILO). "ILO 2012 Global estimate of forced labour Executive summary."

11 Dando, C. J., Walsh, D., & Brierley, R. (2016). Perceptions of psychological coercion and human trafficking in the West Midlands of England: beginning to know the unknown. *PloS one*, 11(5).

the global north and disadvantaged populations in the production sites of the global south (e.g. Kleine 2016; Lutchford 2016), calling for the distances between production and consumption to be bridged. In situations of modern slavery, however, many of these enslaved people are working and living amongst us – in our local communities. In contrast to the global North-South divide, modern slaves are often physically intimate in the daily consumption lives of Westernised communities. They wash our cars, pick our vegetables, clean our houses, polish our nails, prepare our food, and provide sexual services. Despite this physical – and often intimate – proximity, we fail to see them or their plight. These localised enslaved people remain invisible even when the distance between production and consumption has been bridged. We term this paradoxical invisibility in situations of intimate proximity *oblivious consumption—concealed production*.

This modern slavery *oblivious consumption—concealed production* paradox raises an important question: how can we, as affluent westernised consumers, remain blind to the plight of enslaved people when we are interacting with them in everyday consumption lives, and how can this invisibility shrouding modern slaves in our communities be removed? We call for a multi-stakeholder approach to responding to this challenge that enmeshes researchers, industry, communities and governmental bodies. Towards this outcome we

are running a series of seminars and studies to bring these stakeholders together, beginning with an ESRC supported seminar in London on Friday 21st April

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/business/research/researchevents/management/ethicsinconsumption/seminarsandevents/consumer/>

UK: ESRC ECRA Glasgow Collaborative PhD scholarship on clothing

It has long been acknowledged that everyday consumption practices of Western societies are environmentally unsustainable. Clothing is important as evidenced by a global garment industry valued at around US \$1.7 trillion and employing approximately 75 million people (Fashion United; International Labour Organisation). There are significant environmental costs from resource inputs, manufacture, use and disposal of clothing. Purchase and use of clothing has a significant carbon footprint from emissions and water use. The Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow has been awarded a prestigious Economic and Social Research Council funded PhD Scholarship in collaboration with the Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA) for a project entitled 'Closing the Loop: Driving Circularities in Clothing Consumption'. This PhD will commence 1 October 2017.

This research will engage with key stakeholders to build the critical insights currently pertinent

but neglected in shifting consumers towards more sustainable consumption practices. This research seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do consumers understand clothing acquisition, (re)use and disposal?
- What are the current barriers to participating in these practices?
- How do consumers respond to, manage and maintain more sustainable approaches to clothing consumption?
- How can these consumer insights shape consumer and retail practice?

The scholarship will run for 3 years and covers a PhD researcher stipend at the Research Council recommended rate, which is £14,296 for 2016/17. It will also cover tuition fees.

Applicants are required to make two applications: one for a place of study for a PhD in Management at the University of Glasgow; the second application is for the scholarship. Both applications must be complete by 17:00, Monday 3 July 2017.

UK: Southampton University and Sustainable Haircare

Within Southampton Business School at the University of Southampton there has been an ESRC grant-funded project called "Embedding Sustainability in the Hairdressing Curriculum - Sustainable Solutions for the Hair & Beauty Sector". This follows on from a previous ESRC

funded project: 'Engaging Hairdressers in Pro-environmental behaviours'.

As part of this project, a new 'Sustainable Stylist' and 'Sustainable Salon' certification have been developed with industry partners (Habia, VTCT) and the All Party Political Group on the hairdressing sector.

To make this work, they have developed an online salon training programme and associated sustainable stylist/salon certification which was launched at an event in Southampton on April 5th this year.

The certification addresses issues like low-energy lighting, energy-saving technologies (e.g. hairdryers), renewable energy suppliers, water-saving technologies, advice to consumers about sustainable hair practices and products, and using products containing sustainable palm oil. More than 20 workshops have already taken place at colleges around the country, and a similar number are planned in the future. More information is available at the project website: <http://ecohairandbeauty.com/>

AUS: Consumers and tax avoidance

Professor Richard Eccleston is Director of the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of Tasmania and has written widely on international tax issues. He is currently leading a project 'Paying their fair share? Corporations, community activism and the new politics of tax justice'. This is planned to culminate in the publication, by Oxford

University Press, of a collaborative book of chapters addressing the issue.

He writes: "Communities the world the over continue to suffer from the consequences of the global financial crisis. While we continue to face significant challenges, there is some cause for cautious optimism. In many cases the condemnation of world leaders did translate into action and, as a result, banks are better regulated and the most egregious forms of tax evasion are coming to an end.

Yet we can't be complacent as much of the progress which was made during the acute phase of the crisis is being undone. Trump is dismantling the Dodd-Frank Act and the prospects of international cooperation and coordination both in Europe and beyond seem to be diminishing by the day.

What, then, can be done to promote a more equitable and sustainable world in an environment in which national governments are increasingly unwilling or unable to act?

Now, more than ever, citizen and consumer activism and other forms of private governance are an important way to help ensure that firms act ethically. While acknowledging that there are countless firms whose claims to act ethically or sustainability are little more than a symbolic gesture in public relations, there are also examples, such as environmental certification schemes, where consumer and activist campaigns have made a real difference in terms of changing corporate behaviour for the better.

The key here is to create robust and objective means of reporting corporate behaviour so that consumers and investors alike can make informed decisions which will help hold corporations to account. One positive outcome of the financial crisis and its aftermath is that there is much greater awareness of the extent of corporate tax avoidance and the fact that it denies governments in the developed and developing world at least USD 500 billion per year.

Creating awareness of the problem is a start, and the fact that most world leaders have given an undertaking to tackle the problem is heartening. However, it is necessary to be eternally vigilant as powerful forces are constantly trying to undermine the implementation and enforcement of measures designed to improve the integrity of the corporate tax regime.

This is where transparency and promoting awareness among consumers and investors is critically important.

Yet there are real challenges. For a start, all corporate tax avoidance strategies are designed to conceal where and how much tax a large MNC actually pays.

Second, the tax strategy of a firm is both abstract and contestable. Whereas with appropriate standards and independent oversight it is possible to certify that a timber product, for example, has been produced sustainably, it is arguably much more difficult to

demonstrate that a large corporation has paid their 'fair share' of tax.

Academics and activists have also made a lot of progress in outlining what a fair and sustainable corporate tax system might look like. For example, reporting economic activity, profits and taxes paid on a country by country basis is the foundation for a fair corporate tax system.

The greatest challenge is making this data freely available so any interested party can assess the tax strategy of large firms. While the OECD is now committed to so-called Country by Country reporting, sadly large firms will not have to disclose this information publicly.

Fortunately there are other ways to skin a cat. In the UK activists have established the Fair Tax Mark certification scheme whereby firms which do publicly disclose their tax affairs can apply for certification.

Another important initiative is the Open Data for Tax Justice scheme which aims to develop an open database outlining the tax strategies of large corporations which any third party can use.

While both of these initiatives are in their infancy it seems clear that they will help provide the tools to enable consumers and investors to make ethical decisions which will play an increasingly important role in holding large corporations to account."

AUS: Children more ethical than their parents

In September 2016, Kate Neale was awarded her Doctor of Philosophy for her PhD thesis *Children and Ethical Consumption*, which examined the ways children learn about and practise ethical consumption. Ms Neale, from Southern Cross University, interviewed children between the ages of eight and 12, and their parents, in Brisbane, Sydney, and across the New South Wales north coast.

Speaking to ABC News North Coast, she said the children and adults often had different ethical priorities. "Parents were very concerned about the health and wellbeing of their family, but children took a much more altruistic perspective about being helpful and kind. The children were concerned about looking after the welfare of animals, and they were also really concerned about the working conditions of overseas workers in factories. I was surprised that kids knew so much about the welfare of animals, factory farming, and overseas working conditions, and I was a little bit surprised that parents were as conscious about their health and wellbeing but weren't really thinking about translating that into ethical consumption."

Ms Neale said, overall, the children were much more aware of global issues than some adults gave them credit for. "Kids are seen as impulsive and irrational, the nagging kid at the checkout is a pretty common thing that we think of when we talk about kids as consumers.

I did my research around the time of when there was a massive factory collapse in India and the kids were really aware of this issue and that was something they were really concerned about. Interestingly, when I spoke to those parents those particular issues were the ones they thought they needed to protect their children from – that they were too shocking, age-inappropriate, or big ticket concepts that kids wouldn't be able to get their heads around. Yet I had those children telling me they had those concerns."

Ms Neale also said that the consumer behaviour of some parents was also being influenced by their children's ethics. "In some instances, kids were coming home and saying 'I learnt about palm oil cultivation, or we learnt about fair trade,'" she said.

Ms Neale concluded by saying that "Children are consumers in today's market, they're wanting to purchase their own products, they're getting pocket money or some disposable income, but they also influence a lot of parents' purchasing decisions. They're also consumers of tomorrow, so it's really important for us to understand how they're being socialised as consumers because that will give us an idea of what sort of adult consumers they'll be."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-22/study-shows-children-are-ethical-consumers/7868104>

NZ: Consumers embracing minimalism

According to the website www.stuff.co.nz, a study at Otago University in Dunedin New Zealand, into consumer attitudes and choices running since 1979 has identified a marked increase in the numbers of so-called "progressive" consumers who make buying decisions based on their impact on the environment and other people. In the past decade this progressive consumer group has more than doubled in size to the point where one in five of the study's 2000 subjects share the view. Meanwhile the more hardcore "greens" cohort is steady at 8 per cent.

"The strength of that change, and how mainstream those concerns and attitudes are becoming, was surprising," says lead researcher Leah Watkins. "The biggest segment now is defined by progressive characteristics.

Essentially they are very socially minded. They are defined by this idea that they are non-materialistic, they are very concerned with the environment. They tend to be politically left."

Accompanying the growth of the progressive consumer is the view that business should act responsibly, and not simply focus on profit.

Watkins believes the 2008 global financial crisis and its long-term impact have played a role in that.

The web article went on to reference a successful new business start-up in Auckland which was helping people to declutter, and the influence in New Zealand of the Japanese decluttering author Marie Kondo (who has sold

4 million books). Two American bloggers, Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, known as "The Minimalists" to their 4 million readers, were also apparently popular.

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/well-good/inspire-me/89181063/Why-Kiwis-are-embracing-minimalism>

USA: Conference on The Good Consumer: Consumption, Ethics, and Subjectivity

In March 2017, Brandeis University Boston hosted a conference called "The Good Consumer: Consumption, Ethics, and Subjectivity". The event was a cross-departmental collaboration including the English Department, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Mandel Center for the Humanities, and the Brandeis Departments of Comparative Humanities, Psychology, Theater Arts, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies.

The aim of the conference was to "rethink modern subjectivity through the lens of consumption, whether it be of food, luxury goods, or the media. In the process of consumption, the consumer and the consumed interact and perhaps trade roles, an act entailing moral and ethical dimensions. We seek to explore these dimensions, asking the question, "Is consumption a 'good' interaction between the self and the other?" This topic is particularly

relevant today, in light of the prominence of consumption and of concerns about its ethics."

USA: Purdue University study on Exploring Relationships between Ethical Consumption, Lifestyle Choices, and Social Responsibility

Research at Purdue University in Indiana and published in May 2016 has drawn a connection between lifestyles choices and demographics of consumers and how they view not only their own social responsibility in their buying decisions but also that of corporations. The study on "ethical consumerism" brings attention to how consumers' attitudes regarding socio-ethical issues might align with their expectations for corporate social responsibility, or CSR.

"Collectively, this analysis suggests that a wide array of ethical concerns are considered by many U.S. consumers in their current purchasing behaviours and that the values underlying their actions may indeed hold implications for consumer perceptions of and support for corporations and their CSR initiatives," the researchers wrote in their report "Exploring Relationships between Ethical Consumption, Lifestyle Choices, and Social Responsibility."

The research was conducted by Nicole Olynk Widmar, associate professor of agricultural economics in the College of Agriculture;

agricultural economics master's student Carissa Morgan; and Candace Croney, associate professor of comparative pathobiology and animal sciences in the Colleges of Veterinary Medicine and Agriculture.

Their study builds on existing research involving consumer social responsibility behaviours. The researchers conducted an online survey of 1,201 U.S. consumers in April 2015, targeted to be representative of the U.S. population in gender, age, income and geographic region of residence.

Women, younger respondents and more educated respondents were more likely to value and support environmental protection aspects of social responsibility in their consumption behaviours, the researchers found.

Women and younger respondents also were more sensitive to animal welfare concerns, as were vegetarians and vegans, who also strongly supported environmental protection through their consumption behaviours.

Those who travelled, volunteered or engaged in charitable giving also reported more highly valuing the environmental, animal welfare, corporate responsibility and philanthropic dimensions of social responsibility.

All demographics reported avoiding companies that used advertisements that were deceptive or depicted minorities negatively.

The research was published in the May 2016 issue of the journal *Advances in Applied Sociology*. The full report is available at

<http://www.scirp.org/Journal/PaperInformation.aspx?PaperID=66443>