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MOBILISING ACTION AGAINST MODERN SLAVERY

Report 2026

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This research investigates how different framing used in anti-slavery campaigns influence consumers. The authors are internationally recognised researchers in the consumer perspectives of modern slavery and quantitative research and this research is conducted in collaboration with Anti-Slavery International the world's oldest human rights organisation.

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Introduction

Over 50 million people are estimated to be working in conditions of modern slavery and exploitation¹. Despite significant investments in consumer-focused anti-slavery campaigns by corporations, governments, NGOs and the media, campaign effectiveness in shifting consumer behaviour and attitudes has been negligible (Cyrus and Vogal 2018), with uncertainty among practitioners as to the key factors that determine communication effectiveness (Carrington, Chatzidakis, and Shaw 2021a).

The purpose of this research is to explore how anti-slavery communications should be framed to drive consumer action. In doing so we examine both the source of communication and factors that influence the consumer as receiver of the communication. We address: (1) what are the most prevalent frames currently utilised in consumer-focused anti-slavery communication campaigns? Given the influence of political orientation on consumer preferences and responses to persuasive appeals (Khan et al. 2013; Kidwell et al. 2013), we (2) examine how consumers’ political orientation influences their response to communication frames?

The research adopts a multi-method approach comprising: (1) systematic content analysis of anti-slavery campaigns from not-for-profit (government, NGOs, and media) and for-profit (corporate) sources to identify the dominant frames used by these stakeholders; (2) in collaboration with Anti-Slavery International we created and launched a multiple-ad campaign to test how audiences characterised by different political orientations react to different framing; (3) a Google Trends analysis to understand whether language usage based on political affiliation explains differences in effectiveness. These approaches are summarised in Table 1.

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This report is organised around these three approaches comprising five sections where we share our findings and identify key insights. Author names are listed alphabetically and all authors contributed equally to this research.

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Table 1
Research Program

Technique	Data	Purpose
Systematic content analysis of anti-slavery campaigns	761 consumer-focused units of analysis from 157 sources/campaigns	Developing an understanding of the dominant moral framing used in consumer-focused anti-slavery communication across source types
Multiple-ad study	4 parallel anti-modern slavery campaigns reaching over 28,000 UK citizens in 7 days	Testing the effect of different moral framings (civic vs. market) on the click-through ratio (CTR) for that campaign based on the political affiliation of the receiving audience
Google Trends analysis of discursive preferences	Google Trends search terms from September 2018 to September 2023 across 49 US states	Understanding whether differences in moral frames reactions are a function of individual search preferences based on political affiliation

1 <https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/05/17114737/Global-Slavery-Index-2023.pdf>

1. COMMUNICATION FRAMING

Communication frames enable individuals to make sense of events and experiences by serving as cognitive shortcuts, that support the navigation of complex situations through reliance on familiar schemata (Benford and Snow, 2000). Frames are not only tools for comprehension but also for inspiring action, especially in contexts where consumer behaviour aligns with ethical imperatives, including, modern slavery.

To examine what frames are most utilised in consumer-focused anti-slavery communication campaigns, a manual systematic content analysis was undertaken of communications from not-for-profit (government, NGO, non-profit media) and for-profit (corporate and industry-level) organisations in the UK directed at raising consumer awareness of modern slavery and/or mobilising positive consumer action in response to modern slavery. 157 communication sources were identified: UK government (28 sources); industry (43 sources), NGOs (36 sources), and non-profit

media (50 sources). Each of the 157 data sources yielded multiple units of analysis², with a total of 761 units of analysis identified including text, images and video. Using Boltanski and Thévenot's (1999, 2006) theorisation of moral framing each unit of analysis was coded as conveying a civic, market, domestic, inspired, opinion, and/or industrial communication framing. If an element contained more than one form of communication framing, it was coded in both analytic codes (Debenedetti et al. 2021).



2 - A unit of analysis refers to a "collection of words, sentences or paragraphs relating to the same central meaning" that enables manual coding analysis (Debenedetti et al. 2021, p 335).

1.1 Dominant Frames: Market and Civic

Civic (53% of total frames) and market (30% of total frames) frames were the dominant forms of communication framing in consumer-focused modern slavery campaigns by not-for-profit and for-profit organisations. The language used for both market and civic communication framing is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1



WORDS USED IN MARKET (LEFT) AND CIVIC (RIGHT) COMMUNICATION APPEALS

Table 2

HOW STAKEHOLDERS FRAME ANTI-SLAVERY COMMUNICATIONS			
	Not-for-Profit (Government, NGO, non-profit media) to Consumer	For-Profit (Corporate, Industry) to Consumer	Total
Market	150	78	228
Civic	310	119	429
Total	460	187	647

Civic communication framing and appeals to action were predominantly used in communication campaigns that seek to mobilise consumers. Table 2 summarises the instances of each form of moral framing and reports the percentages of market and civic frames relative to their total to illustrate the reoccurrence of these leading forms of moral framing. Our findings reveal civic and market communication framing as the two dominant forms of consumer-focused moral messaging in modern slavery communication across all sources, irrespective of whether they are for-profit or not-for-profit. These focused on actions that benefit others - directing consumer attention towards fairness, justice and the rights of others. Mobilisation appeals were directed towards action outside of markets, such as, signing petitions and reporting suspected instances of modern slavery. Table 3 provides illustrative examples from both not-for-profit and for-profits sources.

Table 3

EXEMPLAR TEXT AND IMAGES REPRESENTING CIVIC MORAL FRAMING IN ANTI-SLAVERY COMMUNICATIONS	
<p align="center">Government to consumer</p> <p>Campaign: UK Govt, 'Modern Slavery is Closer Than You Think'. "It is all of our responsibility to ensure that criminals don't get away with it and victims receive the support they are entitled to and need. We need to work together to continue to improve identification of victims, and to stop this horrific abuse". "Modern Slavery is complex, varied and hard to detect. However, there is a way to help bring these cruel acts to an end. Just by being aware of the signs to spot and by remaining vigilant, anyone can help to report suspicions about potential victims; the premises where victims might be held and businesses and workplaces in which victims might be forced to work."</p>	
<p align="center">Industry/Corporate to consumer</p> <p>Campaign: Ethical Consumer, 'Worker's rights in the clothing industry and what consumers can do'. "Sign the Traidcraft Exchange petition for a new #FashionWatchdog that will hold UK garment retailers to high standards...Share the petition with friends and family, and share the explainer video 'The cost of fast fashion #Fashion-Watchdog' by Traidcraft Exchange...Contact your MP – you can use the petition text as the basis of what you write."</p>	
<p align="center">NGO to Consumer</p> <p>Campaign: Anti-Slavery International, 'Slave trade or fair trade?'. "Much of the wealth of Europe was built on the slave trade and it helped set in place many of the inequalities in the world trading system that can still be seen today... the problem, the solution, and how you can take action... If your local retailer does not stock fairtrade products/Rugmark carpets write, asking them to!... Ask questions: Write to the four big UK chocolate companies, Nestlé, Mars Confectionery, Terry's Suchard and Cadbury's: expressing your concern at reports of slavery in the cocoa industry"</p>	
<p align="center">Media to Consumer</p> <p>Article: The Guardian, 'One in 200 people is a slave. Why?'. "Slavery is global but flourishes in places where the rule of law is weak and corruption goes unchecked... Key things to look out for are whether the person has freedom of movement; appears scared, withdrawn or shows signs of abuse; has few personal belongings or identifying documents with them; or seems under the control of someone else and scared to talk... If you think someone may tick these boxes, it is best to contact authorities directly."</p>	

Market framing was the second dominant frame. In these consumer-focused campaigns, market framing appealed to consumers to enact their moral concerns about modern slavery through consumption choices—to ‘vote with their money’. Still consuming, just differently. These forms of marketing communication have been called ‘spend shift’ or ‘boycott’ campaign appeals (Carrington et al. 2021a, 2021b). Examples of market communication framing are outlined in Table 4.

The dominance of civic framing was most marked within the anti-slavery communications of not-for-profit stakeholders. This is not conceptually surprising as these government and NGO stakeholders (e.g., UK Home Office, Anti-Slavery International) are civic actors at the service of civil society with a focus on individuals as citizens of a wider society. Perhaps surprising was that the most dominant form of moral framing used within the for-profit anti-slavery communication campaigns was also civic framing. Here we observe for-profit stakeholders also seeking to transform consumers into citizens, to mobilise consumer action outside of the market and into civic realms. For example, Nestle UK use civic moral framing as they headline “Modern Slavery – Acting on Injustice” and appeal to consumers to become informed as to the forms of modern slavery that infiltrate daily life: “Many people are unaware of the scale and breadth of modern slavery in the UK and Ireland. In fact, all of us are touched by it, directly or indirectly – through the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the cars we drive or the buildings we live and work in.” Similarly, large UK-based gardening and landscaping firm Marshalls urge their customers to be on alert for the potential of exploited and enslaved workers who are engaged by sub-contractors to their firm, to spot “the main signs of modern

slavery and...to report anything you spot”. In this approach for-profit stakeholders are straddling profit generation with civic communication.

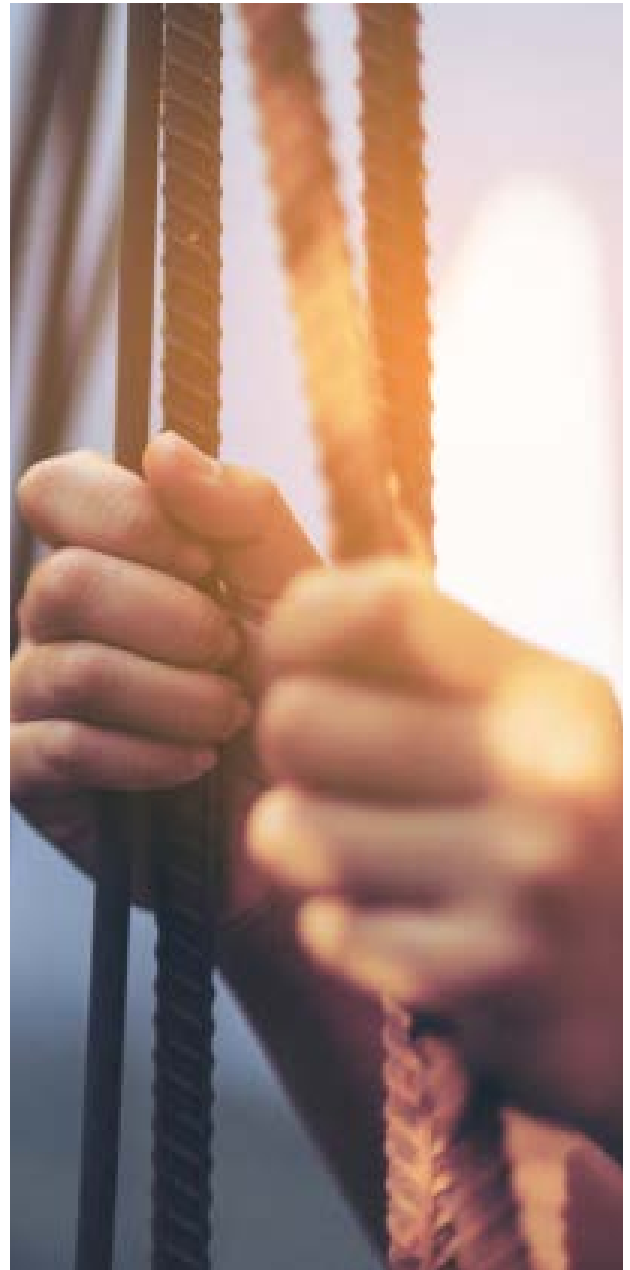





Table 4

EXEMPLAR TEXT AND IMAGES REPRESENTING MARKET MORAL FRAMING IN ANTI-SLAVERY COMMUNICATIONS

<p align="center">Govt to Consumer</p>	
<p>Campaign: UK National Crime Authority (NCA), 'Don't Buy into Modern Slavery'. "We live in a fast paced environment. As consumers, we prioritise our convenience and want to save time and money, but have you ever wondered at what cost?... Our demand for services drives supply and the profits for businesses. Criminals have grabbed this opportunity with both hands, disguising illegal labour practices and the exploitation of workers within public facing businesses....Victims are seen as little more than a money making opportunity, not human beings." "Human suffering...all made possible by the money we spend everyday unaware of the effect it can have... Being mindful of where we choose to spend our money, the power to stop their suffering is in our hands and out wallets".</p>	
<p align="center">Industry/ Corporate to Consumer</p>	
<p>Campaign: LexisNexis, 'Dressed to Kill'. "Through the products that we buy and consume, the clothes we wear, the chocolate that we eat, the tea that we drink we are intimately connected with countless individuals and communities around the world. It is becoming ever more evident that human trafficking and exploitation are deep seated issues within the complex supply chains producing these products. As consumers in a globalised world... we have the power to stop human trafficking in our generation". "The global economy has given consumers across the world access to a diverse and ready supply of inexpensive goods including food, electronics, consumer goods, products and clothing...Forced labour is also found in fabric dying and mining of minerals for zippers and snaps... At the moment you can't make a perfect choice, but you can make a better choice"</p>	
<p align="center">NGO to Consumer</p>	
<p>Campaign: Stop the Traffik,, 'Supporting Garment Workers'. "Supporting companies like No Sweat is just one way we as consumers can show larger brands that there's earnest demand for clothing that's produced fairly. Aligning our spending habits to our ethics is one of the most powerful ways of instigating change... demand for clothing has skyrocketed. While this has made affordable, fashionable clothing more accessible, it has opened up a highly competitive market, driven by a large, invisible workforce. And, as the industry has evolved to deliver goods quickly and flexibly, the potential for this workforce to be exploited has increased... With fast-fashion so entrenched in our global purchasing habits, consumer demand can indirectly lead to corporate responsibility being either avoided or missed... find out more about how you can become a more ethical consumer"</p>	
<p align="center">Media to Consumer</p>	
<p>Article: The Guardian, 'How did we let modern slavery become part of our everyday lives?'. "How did slavery, which we thought was abolished, reach into our everyday consumption? ...there are also uncomfortable truths here for affluent consumers of personal services... Society abhors exploitation but we are complicit. The cheap goods and services consumers expect makes exploitation inevitable... Things that were until recently luxuries ... are now presented to us as affordable, everyday even. Where they have become so, it is in large part thanks to other people being badly paid at best, or victims of modern slavery at worst."</p>	

2. EFFECT OF POLITICAL ORIENTATION ON CONSUMER RESPONSE

Modern slavery is often positioned as a political issue and research has highlighted the distinction between conservative and liberal viewpoints in consumer preferences (Khan et al. 2013), in responses to persuasive appeals (Kidwell et al. 2013) and in terms of moral values (Goenka and Osselaer 2023).

In this section we investigate our second question; how consumers' political affiliation influences their response to the

dominant (civic, market) communication frames? To address this we conducted a large-scale multiple-ad study using Facebook Ads. Specifically, we launched two separate anti-slavery campaigns (see Figure 2), one distributed to users from predominantly conservative regions and one to users from predominantly labour regions within England³ and tested the effect of civic (vs. market) framing (see Table 1 for overview).

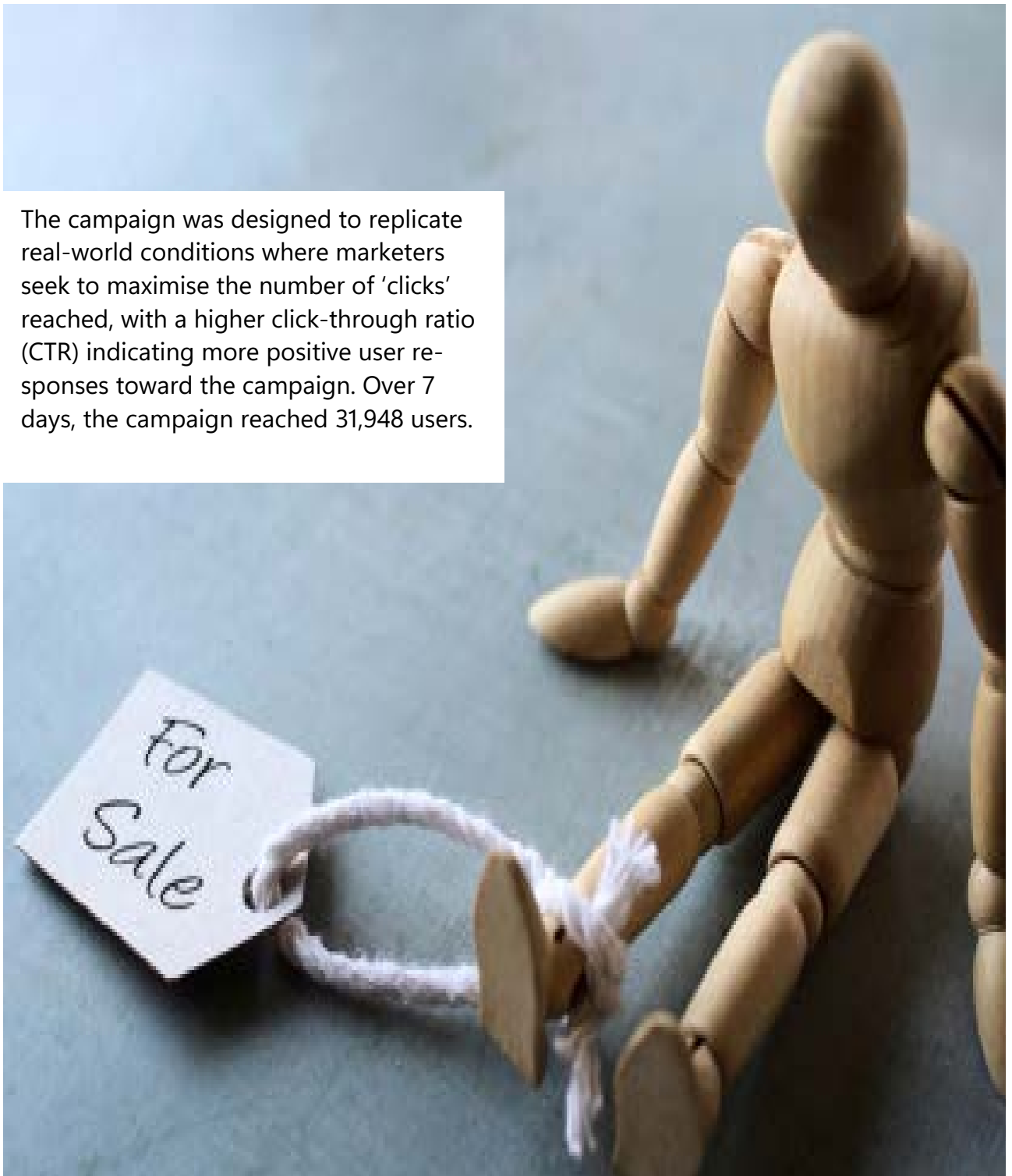
Figure 2

CIVIC FRAMING (LEFT) AND MARKET FRAMING (RIGHT) STIMULI USED IN MULTIPLE-AD STUDY



3. We selected citizens 18 years of age+ that lived in three areas characterised by a conservative majority (City of Westminster [London], High Wycombe [Buckinghamshire], Wokingham [Berkshire]) and three areas characterised by a labour majority (Liverpool, Sheffield, London Borough of Hackney, based on <https://electionmaps.uk/nowcast>). We selected these areas to ensure that the number of reachable users was similar (2.6 million Meta users across both political orientation groups). Since place of residence is an exclusive segmentation variable, there was no risk that the same user would be exposed to both campaigns.

The campaign was designed to replicate real-world conditions where marketers seek to maximise the number of 'clicks' reached, with a higher click-through ratio (CTR) indicating more positive user responses toward the campaign. Over 7 days, the campaign reached 31,948 users.



2.1. Labour vs Conservative Consumers

The campaign reached a total of 15,538 labour users. These users clicked on market-framed ads 1,003 times and on civic-framed ads 578 times. These results suggest that, through algorithmic optimisation, the advertising platform found it easier to reach labour users with market-framed messages. However, metrics including CTR (market-framed: 6.34% vs. civic-framed: 9.37%; see Figure 3) and cost-per-click (market-framed: £0.084 vs. civic-framed: £0.061) suggest that it was easier, and hence less costly, to persuade labour users to click on the ad by using civic framing.

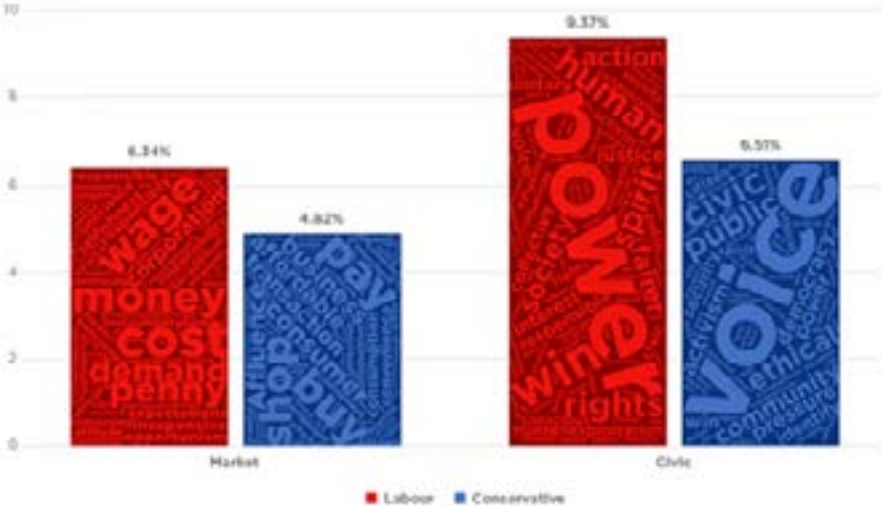
The campaign reached 16,410 conservative users. These users clicked on market-framed ads 559 times and on civic-framed ads 650 times. From a managerial perspective, CTR (market-framed: 4.82% vs. civic-framed: 6.51%; see Figure 3) and cost-per-click (market-framed: £0.11 vs. civic-framed: £0.089) suggest that it was easier, and hence less costly,

to persuade conservative users to click on the ad by using civic framing. However, CTR was 1.52% lower and cost-per-click was higher compared to the same metrics used to estimate the effectiveness of the same frames in mobilising labour consumers.

The results of this multiple-ad study demonstrate that, on average, civic frames were more effective than market frames in mobilising consumers to action, irrespective of consumer political orientation. For labour users, civic-framed messages achieved a +3.03% CTR compared to market-framed messages. For conservative users, civic-framed messages achieved a +1.69% CTR compared to market-framed messages, almost half the effectiveness of that for labour users. In addition to insights on the impact of political orientation, these results also inform budget allocations as ads with higher CTR are more effective in attracting users' clicks.

Figure 3

MULTI-AD STUDY CTR ON POLITICAL ORIENTATION



3. FRAMING PREFERENCE BASED ON POLITICAL ORIENTATION - EVIDENCE FROM GOOGLE TRENDS

In this section we seek to understand the difference in effect sizes of civic frames for those with a labour/conservative political orientation. Linguistic stereotyping theories (Kang and Rubin 2009) suggest that political orientation (conservative vs. labour/liberal) should be associated with different linguistic styles, with conservatives (vs. labour/liberals) associated with more search interests in market (vs. civic)-related words. This difference in search preference and language use could explain the different receptiveness to civic frames based on political orientation across geographical regions characterised by those orientations.

To examine this we used Google Trends⁴ search interest scores to create a proxy for citizens' discursive interests in different geographical states in the US. We selected 7 market-framing words (namely, "buy," "sell," "economy," "consumer," "individual," "factories," and "production") and 7 civic-framing words (namely, "institution," "collective," "community," "prevention," "equality," "welfare," and "responsibility"), in line with literature on market and civic framing and find-

ings outlined in section 1. Google Trends was used to access the search interest scores of these words from September 1, 2018, to September 1, 2023, across the 48 continental states plus the District of Columbia.

To understand whether the extent of search and use of words representative of different frames is associated with general levels of civic engagement, we obtained political orientation (Republican (conservative) or Democrat (liberal)) based on the 2020 presidential election results (The New York Times 2020). In the absence of state-level metrics on support for anti-slavery initiatives, we used proxies for civic engagement, including state-level population statistics on formal volunteering (% of population that was formally affiliated with a volunteering organisation) and charitable donation from the U.S. Census 2022. Combining aggregated state-level data from different sources, this study provides evidence for a significant association between political orientation and discursive search interest. Specifically, we find that states with a Republican majority are significantly less associated with searching for civic (vs.

4. Google Trends counts the frequency a particular word is searched for on Google over a period of time (in our case, five years) across different geographic regions. The output is a standardised score capturing how often the word is searched for relative to the total search volume (range: 0 to 100).

market) words than states with a Democrat majority (see Figure 4).⁵

We also explored whether discursive search interest and political orientation were associated with civic engagement. Through a general linear model we found no significant difference in terms of civic engagement levels based on political orientation in those states where search interest for market-framing was dominant. However, there was a significant difference based on political orientation in those states where search interest for civic-framing was dominant, with an average additional 8% of the population reporting to formally engage in civic duties in Republican states compared to Democratic states (see Figure 5). These findings demonstrate that higher discursive search framing scores are significantly and positively associated with state-level civic engagement. We also note, however, that these findings reveal that those Republican states with higher search interest for civic-frame words report the highest population-level civic engagement across the US. This suggests that some Republican states could be more sensitive to civic framing than market framing.

We repeated the analysis using charity levels as the dependent variable, finding the same effects (see Figure 6). We, thus, reveal that there are limits to expected political alignment. A tipping point exists where engagement in civic activities, such as, volunteering or charity donation where the consumer is sacrificing time or money for others overrides the ideological positions of conservative pro-market political orientations that align with market framing.

Figure 4
CIVIC VS MARKET SEARCH TERMS FOR
REPUBLICAN VS DEMOCRAT



Figure 5
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR REPUBLICAN
VS DEMOCRAT



Figure 6
CHARITY DONATION FOR REPUBLICAN
VS DEMOCRAT



5. In figures 4-6 Republican states are represented by the colour red and Democrat states by the colour blue. Greater civic engagement is illustrated by darker colour shading.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This research reveals how differing moral framing in modern slavery communication campaigns can increase campaign effectiveness and the efficiency of marketing investments in mobilising consumer action. In addition, the research illustrates that civic moral framing emphasising citizenship motives and pathways is more effective in mobilising consumer-citizen action.

Civic framing prioritises other-interest over self-interest as this action is generally directed towards the benefit and wellbeing of others. When consumers are transformed into their citizen-self

through civic moral framing, mobilisation in response to modern slavery can be manifest in non-consumption actions, such as, petitioning and reporting in civic domains. Sacrifices can be made with resources, such as, giving time, without sacrifice being made within the marketplace—in the short term at least, it is business (and consumption) as usual. We suggest, however, that there exists a multiplicity of direct and indirect routes for consumer-citizen action (inside and outside market systems) that may be most effective when used in combination through a multi-stakeholder, multi-domain approach. In

Figure 7
CONSUMER MOBILISATION: DIRECT AND INDIRECT ROUTES

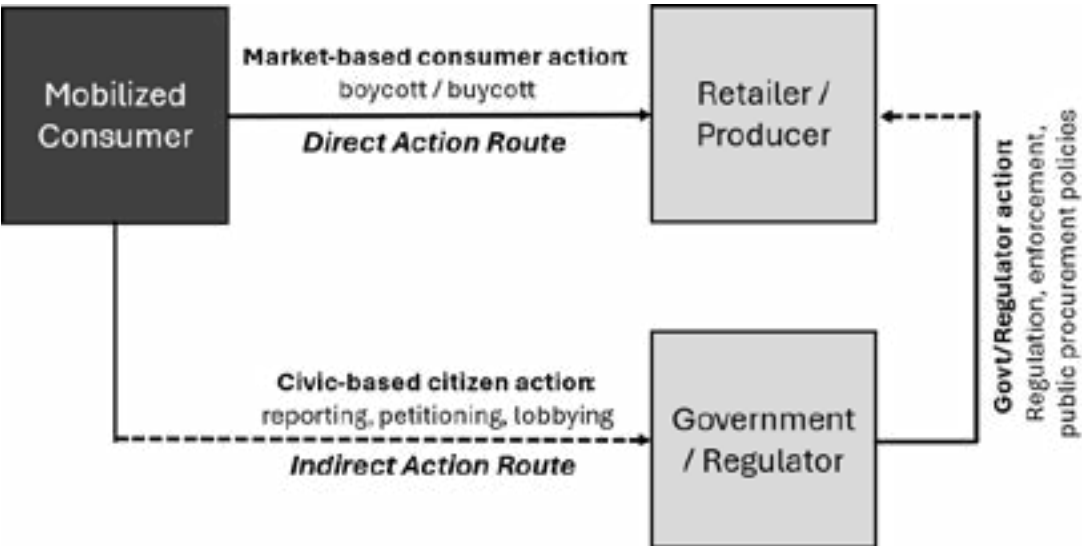


Figure 7, we suggest that a direct route, such as spend shifting in the form of boycott or buycott, directly impacts production-consumption systems through changes to market demand. In contrast, an indirect route is one where civic pressure on government and institutions can indirectly impact corporate activities via regulation or large-scale public procurement policies (e.g., large-scale organisational consumption). While potentially slower to enact, mobilising collective civic action toward indirect impacts on markets can have significant and lasting positive consequences.

While the dual pathways of direct and indirect action have the potential to address modern slavery, evidence of the growing prevalence of modern slavery suggests that presently these routes to positive transformation of market systems are not working. The links between civic-induced citizen indirect action, government policy and regulation, and corporate response are not effective either because governments are not willing or able to regulate, or because corporations are not changing their operations in response to these issues. For example, the territorial limitations of national gov-

ernments may impede their ability to regulate or penalise the globalised operations of corporations. Contemporary 'grand challenges', such as, modern slavery are embedded within globalised production-consumption systems that cross borders and boundaries, impeding visibility, traceability and regulation.

In addition, the use of civic communication frames by for-profit organisations may assist in building their corporate responsibility reputation, but this civic mobilisation is meaningless unless these corporations are willing to positively transform their operations. Without corporate action in response to modern slavery, firms are arguably shifting responsibility to the consumer-citizen and abdicating their own responsibility to take action. In contrast, using market framing to focus consumer action on a direct route to market transformation would require corporations to clean-up their own operations first before directing consumers to shift their spending to positive consumption choices—or risk losing these activated consumers and accompanying profit. Thus, the reach of direct consumer action in the market currently remains very limited.



5. IMPLICATIONS FOR ANTI-SLAVERY ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS

This research provides the following actionable insights into the design of anti-slavery advertising campaigns:

- a** Market and civic framing are the most prevalent in anti-slavery communication, with civic framing most dominant across all sources regardless of profit orientation and of the source campaign organisation—for profit (corporations) and not-for-profit (government, NGOs, media).
- b** Civic-framed message ads significantly outperformed market-framed messages in mobilising consumer action. This difference underscores the resonance of civic appeals, even among audiences traditionally aligned with market-based values.
- c** The cost-per-click (CPC) for civic-framed ads was notably lower, averaging £0.061 compared to £0.084 for market-framed alternatives, demonstrating enhanced cost efficiency. This outcome has critical implications for advertising campaign design and resource allocation. When targeting conservative regions, civic-framed campaigns can maximise engagement while reducing costs, creating a more effective pathway for mobilising support against modern slavery

These results challenge traditional assumptions about political orientation by illustrating that collective appeals emphasising shared responsibility and justice resonate across political divides

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If you would like further information on this research, to discuss this and/or other research on modern slavery please email: contact@modernslavery.com

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