



*8th International Conference in Corporate
Responsibility, Sustainability, Governance and Innovation*
"Innovation shaping a sustainable future"

Track 03: Innovation for Tackling Modern Slavery in Corporate Supply Chains

Modern slavery is affecting over 40 million individuals around the world (Andersson, Lindebaum, & Pérezts, 2019, p. 135) working as part of multi-tier, complex production and consumption value chains. These individuals work in extremely harsh conditions, being underpaid, deprived of freedom and at often very risky situations that can affect both their physical and mental health (Crane, 2013, p. 51; Gold, Trautrim, & Trodd, 2015, p. 487). Standard definitions of modern slavery tend to exclude situations of human trafficking and servitude, but boundary definitions are difficult to produce because of the intersecting levels of inequality and injustice (Greco, 2019). Modern slavery is a social problem reflected in a number of UN sustainable development goals and affects the most vulnerable in our societies, particularly women and children, who constitute 70% and 25% of modern slaves respectively (Andersson et al., 2019, p. 135). It also affects individuals along the cleavages of racial (Logan, 2019) or national inequalities (Fritz & Silva, 2018), and in industries where workers are particularly unprotected such as the fishing (Tickler et al., 2018) and clothing industries (Soundararajan & Brammer, 2018).

The concept of modern slavery despite its historical account is relatively new, with the first instances of research pointing in the direction of this issue being from just ten years ago (Dahan & Gittens, 2010). However, naming the issue has been a first step forward towards its recognition, and different legislations have been produced to precisely tackle this problem in the last 10 years, such as the US-California Transparency Act (2010), the UK Modern Slavery Act (2015) or, more recently, the Australia Modern Slavery Act (2018). Modern slavery is difficult to detect (Stevenson & Cole, 2018) because its roots are often buried in the supply chain of big corporations—e.g., Apple (Clarke & Boersma, 2017). In fact, many studies point to more empirical research needed about modern slavery and the supply chain (Benstead, Hendry, & Stevenson, 2018; Gold et al., 2015). Part of the solution to this problem has been related to corporations being able to escalate transparency and provide supply chain-wide information to disclose modern slavery cases in response to legislative demands (Stevenson & Cole, 2018). From this perspective, ideally corporations should be able to regulate themselves and develop corresponding organizational structures, helping the legal system to pinpoint modern slavery practices in the industry, and institutionalize “ethical behaviour” (Lin-Hi & Blumberg, 2017). However, research has shown that this problem transcends corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices (New, 2015), calling for more collective ways or holistic approaches for solving the issue. In this regard, for example,

Benstead et al (2018) investigate how horizontal collaboration between different firms—even competitors—is used to tackle the problem of modern slavery.

Relevant to the debates on modern slavery risks in supply chains is the notion of trust. Companies may declare that they treat their workers fairly and report the same via disclosure mechanisms, but they do otherwise in practice. Research should explore this space as well, and the ways through which human rights can be embedded and normalized within socio-technical configuration of industries. In this context, the role of innovative technological solutions such as the creation of blockchain (Cole, Stevenson, & Aitken, 2019)—a form of cryptocurrency used in organisational contexts—presents a promising line of inquiry. Blockchain has been labelled as a “democratic” form of technology that precludes malicious actors in the supply chain from being anonymous and thus affecting the destiny of many unprotected workers. However, the use of technological solutions is not entirely unproblematic. For example, blockchain has been linked to generating other forms of oligarchy in organisations, where individuals who concentrate technological resources still can rule over others (Tozzi, 2019). Technological solutions have also the potential of being used for surveillance and control of workers rather than helping them in what sociologists call “surveillance capitalism” (Booth, 2019; Gray, 2019).

Given the complex and pervasive nature of modern slavery in corporate supply chains and the need for more research in the field, we call for papers from a wide range of disciplines (e.g., management, sociology, legal studies), and from both empirical and theoretical perspectives, that seek to tackle the issue of modern slavery risks in innovative ways. We understand innovation as broadly conceived, whether innovation is seen as a new way of framing the issue, new business models/paradigms, and technological solution such as the ones discussed above about horizontal collaboration or the use of blockchain. We understand that diagnosing the problem is also part of its solution, so papers that provide empirical or theoretical research about innovation and modern slavery in corporate and supply chain contexts are also highly valued.

Suzanne Young - s.h.young@latrobe.edu.au

Associate Head of the La Trobe Business School – Partnerships

Sajad Fayezi - s.fayezi@latrobe.edu.au

*Associate Professor in Supply Chain Management
La Trobe Business School*