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Empirical business research on modern slavery in supply chains: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Modern slavery is a persistent global practice, with an estimated 50 million people trapped in one of its many forms today. In the last decade, attention has shifted to how business facilitates modern slavery and plays a key role in eliminating it from its operations and supply chains. The purpose of this study is to provide a rigorous foundation for scholarly and practice-oriented research by systematically reviewing and synthesising the existing literature to identify key areas for future empirical business research on modern slavery in supply chains. Examination of 26 relevant studies provides an evidence base for future research and theory development to guide practice in addressing modern slavery in supply chains. The findings indicate that empirical business research on modern slavery is an emerging area of inquiry. To drive the global anti-modern slavery agenda, more empirical business research is needed that integrates the social, technological, and legal systems.

1. Introduction

The regulation of slavery has a long history, and the first international instrument condemning the practice was passed in the early nineteenth century ([Declaration Relative to the Universal Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1815](#)). Since then, over 300 international agreements have been implemented to outlaw slavery (see [Bales, 2005](#)), and half of the world's domestic jurisdictions have criminalised the enslavement of another person ([Anti-slavery in Domestic Legislation, 2021](#)). In spite of this, it is estimated that 49.7 million people today are trapped in some form of slavery, with 86% of those in forced labour working in the private economy ([International Labour Organization \(ILO\), Walk Free Foundation and International Organization for Migration \(IOM\), 2022](#)). This poses a major challenge to governments, businesses, and non-governmental organisations in the context of the United Nations (UN) Agenda on Sustainable Development, which aims to universally eradicate modern slavery by 2030 and among children by 2025 ([UN \[United](#)

[Nations\], 2015](#)) as modern slavery is considered “the very antithesis of social justice and sustainable development” ([International Labour Organization, Walk Free Foundation and International Organization for Migration, 2022](#), p. 1).

Modern slavery (also referred to as modern-day slavery or contemporary slavery or neo-slavery) has no legal definition under international law in contrast to historical slavery, which is defined under the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 1926 Article 1(1) as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised”. Modern forms of slavery, ranging from forced labour, human trafficking, and forced marriage to debt bondage and organ trafficking, bear many similarities to historical or chattel slavery in the sense that a person is considered the personal property of another.¹ Even though ‘ownership’ is no longer considered in this context, the key defining elements of the practice remain, namely, ‘control’ that is coercive in nature and ‘exploitation’ as its purpose, and whether it involves the use of force, duress, or the abuse of power or a

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¹ There have been scholarly attempts to define the term (e.g., [Mende, 2019](#); [Allain, 2012](#); [Bales, 2012](#)), as well as attempts to distinguish between free/unfree-labour and indecent work as distinct concepts from or not fully aligned with modern slavery (e.g., [Brass, 2011](#); [Brown and van Der Linden, 2010](#); [Fudge, 2017](#); [Brass and van Der Linden \(eds\), 1997](#)). For the purpose of this research, we consider the definitions of ‘modern slavery’ contained in relevant domestic legislation, including the United Kingdom Modern Slavery Act (2015), the Australian Modern Slavery Act (2018) (Cth), and international instruments on the various forms of modern slavery, including human trafficking (United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000)), forced labour (International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention no. 29 (1930)), and worst forms of child labour (ILO Convention no. 182 (1999)), as more persuasive regarding the practice of global anti-modern slavery efforts and, as such, believe that they provide a more practice-oriented framework, which also guided our analysis.

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position of vulnerability. The process of enslavement is often accompanied by other forms of human rights infringements, such as the restriction of the freedom of movement of migrant workers when their passports are confiscated by their employer or cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment of victims of sexual slavery. Consequently, the fight against modern slavery has mainly been framed as one aiming to protect and ensure human rights and freedoms, especially from corporate interference (see Szablewska, 2022a; Ford & Nolan, 2020; Hampton, 2019; Mende, 2019).

In recent years, in response to the private sector's role in facilitating and eradicating modern slavery, the regulatory approaches to business operations and supply chains have propagated globally (e.g., Szablewska, 2022b). Regulatory frameworks include Brazil's federal government introducing a 'lista suja' (dirty list) in 2004 that blacklists businesses using slave labour from receiving state loans and that banks use to assess credit risks (Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego, Portaria n° 540/2004). Some jurisdictions have introduced requirements for businesses to publicly report the steps they have taken to achieve transparency in their supply chains, as in the modern slavery legislation in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia. Others have relied on the human rights framework, understood here as encompassing rights and underpinning principles (Szablewska & Kubacki, 2019), including through the introduction of (mandatory) due diligence requirements and obligations to prevent violations of human rights in supply chains. Examples of this approach include the relevant legislation in France, recently passed laws in Germany and Norway, and forthcoming regulation in the European Union (EU). The introduction of these laws has dominated the regulatory landscape (albeit not to the exclusion of a myriad of non-compulsory measures), and there has been increasing emphasis on penalties and other punitive measures for non-compliance (e.g., Szablewska, Kingi, Armstrong, & Lake, 2022).

In line with these global developments, the literature on modern slavery, including studies on supply chains, has grown exponentially. However, the development of modern slavery research in the field of business and management has been described as slow and insufficient (e.g., Barrientos, 2013; Caruana, Crane, Gold, & LeBaron, 2021; Crane, 2013; Gold, Trautrim, & Trodd, 2015; New, 2015; Phillips & Mieres, 2015; Soundararajan, Khan, & Tarba, 2018). Scholarly supply chain management research has predominantly focused on supply chains as the flow of commodities from raw materials to end consumer products. To capture all relevant empirical studies, we apply a broader definition of the supply chain that encompasses labour supply chains as the flow of workers.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the concept and practice of modern slavery have been researched in empirical studies in the business and management field to offer a synthesis of existing knowledge about modern slavery in supply chains and guide the future research agenda in this area. Some conceptual efforts have been made to locate modern slavery as a management practice (Crane, 2013) and provide insights into the empirical and conceptual developments to date (Caruana et al., 2021). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, this is the first review of its kind aiming to provide an evidence base for scholarly debates on and practice in addressing modern slavery in supply chains. Our research makes two major contributions to the business and management literature: it advances the understanding of several key bibliometric characteristics of the empirical business literature focusing on modern slavery in supply chains and it identifies key research gaps that require urgent attention if the field is to succeed in making a significant impact on anti-modern slavery efforts. It is widely accepted that research-based policymaking and practice lead to better outcomes by informing new policy creation or improving existing ones (e.g., Oliver, Gough, & Copestake, 2017; Sutcliffe and Court, 2005), but context-sensitive evaluation of the evidence to recognise the variability of practice in context is required (Cornish, 2015). Young, Ashby, Boaz, and Grayson (2002) identified five models describing the impact of knowledge on policy processes (i.e., the knowledge-driven model, the

problem-solving model, the interactive model, the political/tactical model, and the enlightenment model) that can guide policy-oriented social sciences and contribute to the wider aims of an evidence-informed society. Therefore, this study aligns with Young et al. (2002) knowledge-driven and problem-solving models and is further motivated by the idiosyncrasy and methodological context of the subject matter.

Despite significant global efforts to produce reliable estimates about modern slavery, gaps remain in terms of data related to the practice, whether in relation to specific regions or forms of modern slavery (e.g., see Foundation, 2019). Consequently, one of the most important priorities is to "strengthen and extend national research and data collection efforts on modern slavery to guide national policy responses" (ILO and Walk Free Foundation, 2017, p. 12). Cockbain and Kleemans (2019), in their introduction to the Special Edition of *Crime, Law and Social Change*, consider that empirical research (in the context of human trafficking) is critical if we are to "shape nuanced, evidence-informed policy and practice" (p. 1). Furthermore, a better understanding of the risks modern slavery poses in supply chains is key to guiding businesses seeking to improve the transparency of their supply chains and their legal compliance with modern slavery legislation and related regulation. In that vein, developing a future research agenda based on evidence from the existing empirical research literature is important as it can inform the scholarly community on what is known about the practice of modern slavery, what and how it is reported, and what future research endeavours should focus on to fill existing gaps and respond to emerging trends in theory and practice. Therefore, employing a systematic review search in this area is highly appropriate to accurately record and assess the current state of knowledge about modern slavery in supply chains by ensuring that all relevant sources are captured, potential and actual biases in selecting these sources are methodologically addressed, and the available evidence is systematically analysed and comprehensively summarised to inform decision-making.

In the next section, we introduce the methodology of systematic review, including an overview of the approach taken in this study regarding the selection of databases, search terms, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and data extraction. We then offer a bibliometric overview of the relevant scholarly empirical literature to summarise key findings and historical developments in the field. Next, we focus our analysis on two central aspects of this review: identified solutions to modern slavery in supply chains and recommendations for future research. In the final section, our analyses provide a foundation for our discussion of several avenues for future research in this area, and we identify the main implications and contributions of our study and its limitations.

2. Research methods

Systematic reviews are considered the 'gold standard' in the process of evidence-seeking to inform policymaking (e.g., see Aromataris & Pearson, 2014; Liberati, Altman, & Tetzlaff, 2009). Unsurprisingly, there is growing interest among researchers to provide a rigorous foundation for scholarly and practice-oriented business research. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses are emerging across research areas and in leading journals (e.g., Palmatier, Houston, & Hulland, 2018; Snyder, 2019; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003); many recognise their contribution to scientific debates as these types of reviews and analyses provide a state-of-the-art understanding of the subject domain, following a widely accepted understanding in social sciences that "[t]he systematic review, while not universally appropriate, provides a powerful driver (and established quality standards) for more rigorous research review practices" (Young et al., 2002, p. 220). Leading business and management scholars have also called for comprehensive and rigorous reviews across diverse business disciplines to guide future empirical and conceptual work by identifying gaps in existing scholarly knowledge (Bouazzaoui, Wu, Roehrich, Squire, & Roath, 2020; Palmatier et al., 2018). While Caruana et al. (2021) observed in their recent overview that modern slavery research in business and management is still

underdeveloped, we believe there has been sufficient empirical research to warrant a systematic synthesis to offer evidence-informed guidance and direction to this emerging research area. In their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, [Hulland and Houston \(2020\)](#) provided insight into the many important contributions that systematic reviews can make. This study focuses on two of these: providing an overview and synthesis of the current state of knowledge and offering evidence-based impetus for avenues for future research.

Systematic reviews should be guided by specific research questions that define their focus and inform all review steps ([Nguyen, de Leeuw, & Dullaert, 2018](#); [Sackett & Wennberg, 1997](#)). Our analytical efforts were informed by three research questions: (1) *What are the main bibliometric characteristics of the empirical business literature focusing on modern slavery in supply chains?* (2) *What are the emerging solutions to modern slavery in supply chains and recommended future research areas identified in the review studies?* (3) *What are the key areas for future empirical business research on modern slavery in supply chains?*

We followed the review procedures described in the PRISMA-P Protocol ([Shamseer et al., 2015](#); see [Fig. 1](#)). The first step was to carry out a search of peer-reviewed journal articles published in English up to July 2021. To capture the historical development of the research area, we did not specify a start date for our search. We focused our search on four large databases containing a majority of the leading business journals, namely Scopus, Business Source Complete, Emerald Insight, and Web of Science, using titles, abstracts, and keywords. Two strings of search terms represented the two main research concepts included in our research questions, modern slavery and supply chain. Their most commonly used synonyms were included to ensure that all relevant studies were captured for further assessment: (“modern slavery” OR “modern-day slavery” OR “contemporary slavery” OR “neo-slavery”) AND (business OR “supply chain*” OR “value chain*”). As ‘modern slavery’ is not precisely defined, we refrained from using terms closely related to it but that, in practice, constitute different forms of modern

slavery, such as ‘human trafficking’ or ‘forced labour’, to avoid skewing the results in favour of certain forms of modern slavery. Additionally, as we were interested in the very *notion* of modern slavery and how it is understood in business studies on supply chains (covered by the first research question), we did not expand the search terms to these related but not synonymous terms of modern slavery. The combined searches delivered 282 records, which were imported into Endnote. All records were then reviewed using titles, abstracts, and keywords to remove duplicates, thereby reducing the number of eligible and unique records to 156.

In accordance with systematic literature review protocols reported elsewhere ([Siemieniako, Mitrega, & Kubacki, 2022](#); [Siemieniako, Kubacki, & Mitrega, 2021](#); [Vrontis & Christofi, 2021](#); [Leonidou, Christofi, Vrontis, & Thrassou, 2020](#)), we applied six exclusion criteria to identify studies that reported empirical business research on modern slavery in supply chains (see [Fig. 1](#)). Two researchers screened all abstracts, titles, and keywords to remove studies that were not in English, studies that were not peer-reviewed journal articles (e.g., conference papers), studies focusing on legal research, non-empirical business research, content analysis of modern slavery statements, and studies that either did not focus on modern slavery in business or used historical data to inform modern slavery discourse. The outcome of this step identified 26 eligible studies, and their full texts were downloaded into Endnote.

A coding sheet was developed to extract data systematically from the 26 studies, focusing on a broad set of information that, when aggregated, can provide information relevant to the study’s research questions ([Siemieniako et al., 2021](#)). An Excel spreadsheet was created to facilitate data extraction and analysis ([Nguyen et al., 2018](#)). It included categorised data (e.g., publication year, journal title, research methods, theoretical approaches, types of modern slavery, and industry) and qualitative data (i.e., identified solutions to modern slavery in supply chains and future research areas). The data was extracted from three studies selected at random by each researcher and a research assistant. To ensure consistency of the application of data categories across all

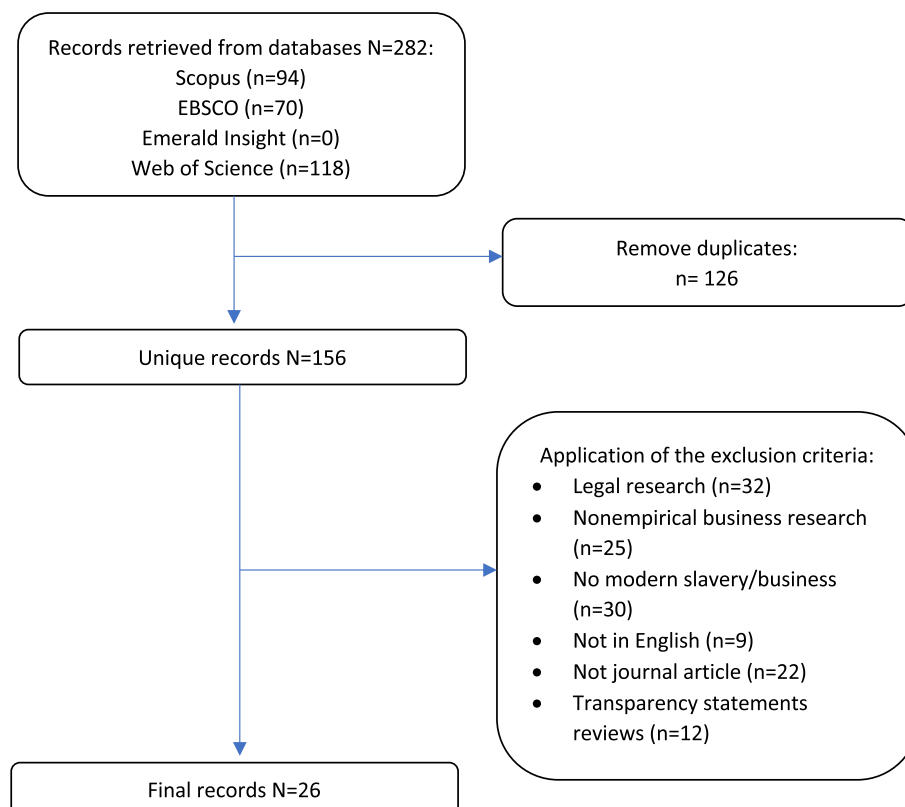


Fig. 1.

studies, any minor differences in interpretations were discussed and resolved. For example, a new category was added to one of the questions, and several questions were removed where meta-aggregation would not be possible due to a lack of relevant information being reported. The data were extracted from all studies, and each researcher checked the final dataset.

In the following sections, the results of our analysis are structured using metasummary techniques, including grouping, formatting, and tabulation of descriptive findings (Sandelowski, Barroso, & Voils, 2007). Addressing each of our research questions, we first provide a descriptive analysis and synthesis of several of the bibliometric characteristics of the studies to identify gaps and trends in the published research (Donthu, Kumar, Mukherjee, Pandey, & Weng Marc, 2021). In our bibliometric analysis, we focus on three areas of interest:

- (1) the evolution of research in the domain, focusing on the publication trend (year of publication), the leading host journals for research in the domain (publication outlets), the most prominent topics discussed (citations), where the research originates from (countries of authorship), the type of empirical research conducted (data collection methods), and theoretical approaches;
- (2) the contextual dimensions related to the key areas of interest in the field of modern slavery (countries of focus; types of organisations in supply chain tiers; forms of modern slavery; types of industries with a heightened risk of modern slavery);
- (3) the key macro-level factors impacting anti-modern slavery efforts (technology; UN Sustainable Development Goals; UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; legal regulation).

Our thematic analysis followed an inductive coding process; that is, it was data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A number of themes emerged in the process of analysis of the literature identified via systematic review; the two most prominent ones are: a) identified solutions to modern slavery and b) recommendations for future research areas. Our approach to the data analysis followed Altheide and Johnson (1994) approach of ensuring the validity and reliability of qualitative research and focusing on accessing, collecting, analysing, and interpreting data as an integral process in achieving consistency (see also Altheide & Johnson, 2011).

We then discuss emerging areas for future empirical business research using a framework previously employed to signal future research avenues: theory, context, and methodology (Gupta, Chauhanb, Paulc, & Jaiswald, 2020). This framework provides a comprehensive and practical approach to identify and articulate knowledge gaps to develop a comprehensive future research agenda (Siemieniako et al., 2022).

3. Bibliometric analysis of the literature

This section summarises the 26 studies identified in this systematic review (see Appendix 1). We address here our first research question: What are the main bibliometric characteristics of the empirical business literature focusing on modern slavery in supply chains?

3.1. Evolution of the research domain

3.1.1. Year of publication and publication outlets

The 26 identified studies were published between 2017, when the first two publications meeting the inclusion criteria were recorded (LeBaron, Lister, & Dauvergne, 2017; Parente, Lucas, & Cordeiro, 2017), and July 2021, when the searches were conducted. While initial interest in the topic appears to have been gradual, with only two studies published in 2017, a steady interest in the topic is evident more recently: seven studies were published in 2018, five in 2019, six in 2020, and six in the first half of 2021. However, the overall number of studies remains relatively small, indicating that empirical business research on modern slavery in supply chains is still a niche research area, despite frequent

calls for more engagement with the social issue from management scholars (Caruana et al., 2021), businesses (Trautrim, 2020), and society as a whole (Bermudez, 2020).

Despite the recent increase in interest in scholarly management research on modern slavery, the 26 studies were published in 24 different journals, indicating no specific journal in which the relevant scholarly conversations convene. Two journals, *Business Strategy and Development* and *Regulation and Governance*, each contained two studies.

Given that no scholarly journal exists that would attract relevant studies on modern slavery and provide an intellectual platform for resulting conversations, the SCImago Journal & Country Rank was used to classify the journals where each of the 26 studies was published into no more than two subject areas. When a journal was identified as belonging to more than two subject areas, descriptions on journal websites were used to determine which area it should be classified into. Two journals did not feature in the SCImago Journal & Country Rank; based on their descriptions, they were classified into the Social Sciences area. The two largest subject areas represented in our sample were *Business, Management and Accounting* and *Social Sciences*, each with 14 studies. This reflects the fact that modern slavery is both a social issue and a business challenge (UN [United Nations], 2015). Unsurprisingly, these two subject areas were also the most popular combination, represented in five studies. Other areas with strong representation in our sample included *Economics, Econometrics and Finance* and *Decisions Sciences* (four studies each) and *Environmental Science* (three studies).

3.1.2. Citations

According to Google Scholar (as of 28 October 2021), the total number of citations linked to the 26 studies is 437. This number indicates that the overall sample has had a relatively modest impact on the broader scholarly discussion. Most of that impact was created by the top 10 cited studies, which attracted over 88% of all citations (386). Nearly half of the citations (218) were from the top three cited studies (Crane, LeBaron, Allain, & Behbahani, 2019; LeBaron et al., 2017; Tickler et al., 2018). While the majority of the scholarly impact came from this subsample, none of the top three cited studies had attracted more than 83 citations, indicating there are as yet no seminal empirical studies in this subject domain.

3.1.3. Countries of authorship

Across all 26 studies, we identified authors affiliated with institutions in 13 countries. To avoid artificial inflation of the results, the specific country was counted only once for each study, even when multiple co-authors were from institutions in the same country. Authorship origin appears to be dominated by the UK (with 17 studies), followed by Australia (seven studies), and Canada (four studies). Only one study was authored by scholars based in a Global South country, Brazil (Parente et al., 2017). This is clear evidence that, although modern slavery affects all countries, the perspectives that can be brought to the scholarly discussion by academics from non-Western, low- and medium-income economies are currently underrepresented.

3.1.4. Theoretical approaches and research methods

Only 10 studies reported using theories, models, or theoretical or conceptual frameworks, which confirms our earlier observation that empirical research on modern slavery in supply chains is an emerging area of research lacking a dominant theoretical perspective. The reported theoretical approaches related predominantly to management (e.g., Benstead, Hendry, & Stevenson, 2018; Chesney, Evans, Gold, & Trautrim, 2019; Rosile, Boje, Herder, & Sanchez, 2021), with individual studies reporting approaches from criminology (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018), economics (LeBaron et al., 2017), sociology (Salmon, 2020), and psychology (Trautrim, Gold, Touboulic, Emberson, & Carter, 2020).

The dominance of qualitative methods in our sample is further evidence of the emerging nature of research on modern slavery in supply

chains. Qualitative interviews were the most common data collection method, reported in 18 studies. Next, archival and/or desk research was reported in 16 studies. While observations and the case study method were identified in nine and eight studies, respectively, only a handful of quantitative studies involved primary data collection (surveys: three studies) and secondary data collection (two studies). A wide range of other methods and methodologies was identified: action research (two studies), ethnography (one study), fieldwork trips (two studies), expert panels (one study), retail geography (one study), and satellite imagery (one study). Reflecting the complexity of modern slavery in supply chains as a social and business issue, 21 out of 26 studies employed two or more data collection methods.

3.2. Contextual dimensions

3.2.1. Countries of focus

One study involved online interviews and email exchanges with experts and did not specify the data collection location (Berg, Farbenblum, & Kintominas, 2020). Of the remaining 25 studies, 17 reported data collection in a single country, and eight reported data collection in two or more countries. Two countries dominated the locations for data collection: the UK, with 12 studies, and the United States (US), with four studies. Primary data was also collected twice in six countries: India, Thailand, the Netherlands, China, Spain, and Australia. In total, data was collected and reported in 37 countries; however, this large number is due to one study that reported data collection in 39 different countries and regions (Tickler et al., 2018). Data collection was also reported in Asia (e.g., Benstead et al., 2018) and South-East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa, Europe (excluding the UK), and Scandinavia.

3.2.2. Types of organisations involved in research and supply chain tiers

Modern slavery in supply chains is a complex, multifaceted issue that affects businesses, governments, and non-governmental organisations (UN [United Nations], 2015). Our analysis shows that all but two studies (Salmon, 2020; Tickler et al., 2018) involved business organisations in the private sector; others showed a predominant interest in multinationals (10 studies), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (three studies), or looked at both multinationals and SMEs (two studies); one study focused on a multi-billion pound turnover company (Benstead, Hendry, & Stevenson, 2021). When other organisations were involved in the studies, they included non-profit and non-governmental organisations (17 studies) and government and governmental organisations (15 studies). Thirteen studies reported the involvement of other groups such as trade bodies (Benstead et al., 2018), unions (e.g., Berg et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2019), social enterprises (Berg et al., 2020), academics (Christ & Burritt, 2018; Crane et al., 2019), lawyers, social auditors, journalists, and experts (Crane, LeBaron, Phung, Behbahani, & Allain, 2021), a business association (LeBaron et al., 2017), and activists (Salmon, 2020). Again, reflecting the complexity of modern slavery, only five studies involved one type of stakeholder, namely business organisations (Chesney et al., 2019; Cousins, Dutordoir, Lawson, & Neto, 2020; Crotty & Bouché, 2018; Parente et al., 2017; Russell, Lee, & Clift, 2018).

Modern supply chains consist primarily of (complex and often fragmented) multiple tiers that depend on the closeness of a particular supplier to the buying organisation (Lambert & Cooper, 2000). The diminishing visibility in the lower tiers affects supply chain mapping (Gardner & Cooper, 2003). However, in 14 of the studies in our sample, we were unable to identify whether organisations involved in the research were tier-1 or lower-tier suppliers. Only one study was an organisation identified explicitly as a tier-1 supplier (Benstead et al., 2021), while 11 studies considered modern slavery in multi-tiered supply chains, mostly limited to tiers 2 and 3. Eleven studies identified the supply chains they were empirically investigating as either global or international. Nine studies focused on domestic supply chains only, three on mixed supply chains, and three did not specify the

location of their supply chains.

3.2.3. Types of modern slavery and industries

Modern slavery involves various forms of exploitation, and, in our sample, forced labour was the most commonly identified form (featuring in 20 studies), followed by human trafficking (13 studies), debt bondage (eight studies), and child slavery (seven studies). Much less prevalent in our sample were sex trafficking and domestic servitude (each reported in two studies), and sexual slavery was reported in a single study (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018). Eight studies focused on only one specific form of modern slavery.

Modern slavery can occur in any industry, and some sectors are considered at higher risk (ILO, Walk Free Foundation and IMO, 2022). This was reflected in the studies in our sample, which focused predominantly on agriculture and horticulture (six studies), construction (five studies), and textiles, fashion, and apparel (three studies). The hospitality and tourism, fisheries and seafood, and food and commercial cannabis cultivation industries were represented by two studies each. Other industries identified once each in our sample of studies included the manufacturing and facilities management sectors. Seven studies considered modern slavery more broadly but did not identify any specific industry as a context for empirical research.

3.3. Macro-level factors

3.3.1. Use of technology

The use of technology was explicitly commented on in only eight studies, with six studies describing technology's positive impact on modern slavery and two studies recognising that it can be used to affect modern slavery in both positive and negative ways. Three studies (Benstead et al., 2021; Berg et al., 2020; Rosile et al., 2021) identified the use of mobile devices and smartphone apps in supply chains as technologies that can be used to effectively monitor working conditions (e.g., recording working hours and linking the data with a payroll app) and identify and report potential instances of modern slavery using interactive voice response technology or unstructured supplementary data services. One study broadly considered how technology should be used in partnership with businesses to combat forced labour (Fransen & LeBaron, 2019) but did not describe any specific technological solutions. Other studies were more specific; for example, they described remote sensing technologies that can facilitate the "screening of remote areas that are difficult to access and so prone to sustainability risks" (Koukoulou et al., 2021, p. 2) by using radio station broadcasts in indigenous languages (Rosile et al., 2021) and creating an online skills platform to increase knowledge and skills about modern slavery in the construction industry and its supply chains (Russell et al., 2018). Of the two studies that described the mixed impact of technology on modern slavery, one found that while online trading makes it difficult to identify suppliers and subcontractors, thereby increasing the risk of modern slavery, the provision of mandatory online disclosure statements on modern slavery may provide insights into an organisation's performance (Christ & Burritt, 2018). The other study identified user-generated online reviews as a way of detecting instances of modern slavery in illicit massage businesses, which was considered as an environment potentially conducive to increasing the illicit commercial sex trade (Crotty & Bouché, 2018).

3.3.2. Framing of the social issue

Only seven of the 26 studies explicitly referenced the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the references predominantly intended to provide support for a specific focus on modern slavery, several studies identified forced labour as a form of modern slavery that impedes the achievements of multiple goals, including Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), Goal 1 (no poverty), Goal 3 (good health and well-being), Goal 10 (reduced inequalities), Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), Goal 13 (climate action), and Goals 14 (life

below water) and 15 (life on land) (Chesney et al., 2019; Kougkoulos et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2018; Trautrimms et al., 2020).

Only two studies referenced the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) (Berg et al., 2020; Fransen & LeBaron, 2019). However, 16 studies included references to other international and domestic business guidelines, including the Ethical Trade Initiative (Benstead et al., 2021; Berg et al., 2020; Korkmaz, 2019; LeBaron et al., 2017), the UN Global Compact (Chesney et al., 2019; Christ & Burritt, 2018; Crane et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2018), the Caux Principles (Chesney et al., 2019), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (Christ & Burritt, 2018), different organisations' codes of conduct/practice and other internal policies and multi-stakeholder initiatives (Christ & Burritt, 2018; Hewamanne, 2020; LeBaron et al., 2017; Rosile et al., 2021; Trautrimms et al., 2020), the international standard ISO 34,101 Sustainable and Traceable Cocoa (Lafargue, Rogerson, Parry, & Allainguillaume, 2021), transnational certification standards (LeBaron et al., 2017), the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018), national and international programmes and initiatives (Parente et al., 2017; Tickler et al., 2018), and various lists of indicators of forced labour (Schenner, 2018).

Twenty-three studies made references to different laws and regulatory frameworks. The UK Modern Slavery Act (2015) was mentioned in 18 studies, the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act (2010) in 11 studies, the Australian Modern Slavery Act (2018) in three studies, and the French Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law (2017) in two studies.

4. Thematic analysis of the literature

Following the descriptive analysis of the literature, a thematic analysis of all the identified studies was conducted to provide further context for emerging issues and inform our discussion on future research. Specifically, our analysis in this section focuses on the second research question: What are the emerging solutions to modern slavery in supply chains and recommended future research areas identified in the review studies?

4.1. Solutions to modern slavery in supply chains

All 26 studies identified solutions to modern slavery in supply chains, some indicating more than one solution. This section discusses the eight most common solutions: collaboration and cooperation; changes to business culture; legislation; punishment for non-compliance or sanctions; self-regulatory or normative tools; employee-driven initiatives; raising awareness of modern slavery; and technology.

The most commonly identified solution concerned the importance of collaboration and cooperation. Some studies emphasised the need for better horizontal collaboration between businesses and their global suppliers (Benstead et al., 2018, 2020; Crane et al., 2021; Korkmaz, 2019; Lafargue et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2018; Trautrimms et al., 2020). Others highlighted the benefits of collaborative partnerships between the different stakeholders (Benstead et al., 2018, 2020; Korkmaz, 2019; Parente et al., 2017; Tickler et al., 2018). The main strength of cross-sectoral and issue-focused collaboration was considered the sharing of knowledge and expertise (Christ & Burritt, 2018; Tickler et al., 2018); studies mainly focused on the role of non-governmental organisations (Benstead et al., 2018, 2021), encouraging consumers and shareholders to apply financial pressure (Parente et al., 2017), improving intra-government agency coordination, in particular between labour and immigration law enforcement (Crane et al., 2019), and offering leverage for initiating a state-level adoption of international standards (Korkmaz, 2019). However, the limitations of multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as certification (Lafargue et al., 2021) and licensing (Crane et al., 2019), were also noted.

Eight out of 26 studies called for changing the business culture and

overhauling the “exploitative character of global production” (Hewamanne, 2020, p. 668). For example, Wray-Bliss and Michelson (2021) argued that business responses to modern slavery today often resemble the opposition to limits on commercial freedoms during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. Thus, the disruption of existing business models by developing a strong(er) culture of modern slavery prevention, with actors enhancing social values and creating decent conditions of work, was seen as necessary to collectively change industry's mindset (Benstead et al., 2018; Chesney et al., 2019; Cousins et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2021; Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018; Parente et al., 2017). This solution was closely linked to the perceived need for a structural critique (Howard & Forin, 2019) that would bring about systemic change, going beyond the use of current business models and moving towards an improved understanding of power relations and dependencies between employers and workers (Salmon, 2020), the application of ethical approaches to supply chain management (Trautrimms et al., 2020), and environmental and social issues needing to be jointly addressed (Wilhelm, Kadfak, Bhakoo, & Skattang, 2020). Hewamanne (2020) also raised the matter of unintended (mis)interpretation and (mis)application of modern slavery legislation in a country with a different cultural context. In a Sri Lankan factory, to prevent a loss of orders from UK-based companies, workers' lives beyond the factory floor came under scrutiny to ensure that they did not engage in outside sex work. This led to “even more stressful work cultures shaped by moral surveillance, fear, and anxiety” (p. 671).

Many of the studies commented on, and some more closely analysed, the role of legislation in combating modern slavery. Beyond setting a number of expectations for businesses to report on modern slavery risks or conduct due diligence, legislative changes were seen as creating new governance mechanisms that encourage businesses to introduce improvements (Benstead et al., 2018; Christ & Burritt, 2018; Fransen & LeBaron, 2019; Rosile et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2018; Tickler et al., 2018; Trautrimms et al., 2020) and attach more importance to slavery risk indicators (Cousins et al., 2020; Crotty & Bouché, 2018; Schenner, 2018). Crane et al. (2021) also highlighted the impact of legislative reforms in other areas on increasing the detection of illegal behaviour, such as when landlord property inspections enable the identification of forced labour in cannabis production. Regulatory changes have also emphasised the role of auditing, including emerging social, ethical, or multi-stakeholder auditing (Berg et al., 2020), in the delivery of mitigation actions and the curbing of exploitative practices (Berg et al., 2020; LeBaron et al., 2017; Schenner, 2018).

However, a number of studies noted the limitations of laws in this area. For example, entities operating outside multinational supply chains are not captured by legislation. In addition, even when consumers have information about instances of modern slavery, they typically take little action (Crane et al., 2021). It was also perceived that a focus on criminal justice can impede the effectiveness of coordination between different government agencies (Crane et al., 2019) and that the influence of large corporations on the direction of transnational and national labour governance agendas needs to be accounted for (Fransen & LeBaron, 2019). Wray-Bliss and Michelson's analysis of business submissions related to the inquiry into the Modern Slavery Act in Australia highlighted “the ways that these texts reproduce a neo/liberal privileging of freedom for the propertied over and above those who are without – or those who are, symbolically or actually, property themselves” (2021, n.p.). In a wider sense, Wray-Bliss and Michelson (2021) reasoned that, although the discourse on freedoms can be facilitative, it can also impede anti-modern slavery efforts. In a similar vein, Howard and Forin (2019) pointed out how limitations on the rights of migrant workers create conditionalities that enable their exploitation; the structural distribution of value across the supply chain pushes suppliers to rely on “illegal, underpaid, migrant labour” (p. 596) to make ends meet.

Another important area for creating an employer's normative mindset is using punishment or sanctions in general and fines in

particular. Some studies identified the lack of penalties in modern slavery legislation as a factor that weakens compliance with requirements (Christ & Burritt, 2018; Trautrimis et al., 2020). However, using fines was seen as insufficient to deter employers from engaging in illegal activities. Instead, preventive actions and avoiding worker victimisation (Parente et al., 2017) were considered more appropriate, as were prison sentences accompanied by authentic changes to management structures (Chesney et al., 2019).

Looking beyond legal or compulsory measures, self-regulatory or normative tools frequently featured in several studies, whether in the form of international commitments and various industry-led guidelines and codes of conduct (Berg et al., 2020) or as methods of increasing overall transparency and improving accountability in business decision-making (Christ & Burritt, 2018). Although the role of consumers in disrupting the business models of modern slavery was recognised, the direct protection of workers was considered more useful for regulating market mechanisms (Crane et al., 2021).

A number of studies highlighted the critical role of employee-driven initiatives in improving work conditions and, in turn, business practices, ranging from whistleblowing (Benstead et al., 2021) and unionisation of the workforce (Chesney et al., 2019; Christ & Burritt, 2018) to worker-driven corporate social responsibility (Rosile et al., 2021). Empowering workers by giving them more voice in the detection and remediation of modern slavery practices was deemed instrumental (Benstead et al., 2021; Berg et al., 2020; Christ & Burritt, 2018; Crane et al., 2021; Howard & Forin, 2019).

Raising awareness of modern slavery, whether this occurs among the general public (Parente et al., 2017; Chesney et al., 2019), within the business sector (Benstead et al., 2018, 2021; Chesney et al., 2019; Christ & Burritt, 2018; Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018; Trautrimis et al., 2020), or within the labour sector (Benstead et al., 2018; Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018), was regarded as important. Yet, only a handful of studies explicitly identified awareness-raising as part of the solution. This suggests that, beyond the initial stages, there is a growing need for more sophisticated ways of informing and educating the different actors and stakeholders, affecting their beliefs and behaviour.

In more recent studies, technology was clearly recognised as important for the disruption of modern slavery, in particular the use of blockchain (Berg et al., 2020; Tickler et al., 2018), various digital worker reporting tools (Berg et al., 2020), remote sensing of informal settlements (Kouggoulos et al., 2021), the use of biomarkers to increase the visibility of product supply chains (Lafargue et al., 2021), and the use of cell phones and apps to monitor work hours and calculate pay (Rosile et al., 2021).

4.2. Future research areas

Future research areas were explicitly identified in 17 out of 26 studies. The most frequent recommendation, made in eight studies, was to extend the existing research to involve a more diverse group of stakeholders. The stakeholders identified included trade bodies, non-governmental organisations and not-for-profits (Benstead et al., 2018; Christ & Burritt, 2018), third-party recruitment agencies (Benstead et al., 2021), regulatory intermediaries (Fransen & LeBaron, 2019), workers (Benstead et al., 2021; Christ & Burritt, 2018; Lafargue et al., 2021), and consumers (Christ & Burritt, 2018; Parente et al., 2017). Salmon (2020) argued for more research into “difficult to reach” cases involving criminal activities, the access to court transcripts of which is too expensive for most researchers and access to the data of which may be restricted. An extension of research into previously unexplored and under-explored groups has been suggested to obtain new insights into the challenges and new approaches related to detecting and remediating modern slavery in supply chains.

A closer examination of various solutions to modern slavery was the second most frequently identified area for future research. Seven studies recommended more research in the following areas: audit and

remediation processes (Benstead et al., 2021); investigation of good and bad practices in supply chains and factors leading to higher standards (Chesney et al., 2019; Christ & Burritt, 2018); the benefits of corporate social responsibility (Christ & Burritt, 2018); various criteria of labour exploitation (Kouggoulos et al., 2021); awareness-raising and training of employees enabling them to recognise the potential signs of modern slavery and create reporting systems, intervention strategies, and organisational cultures that disrupt it (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018); and empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of various anti-slavery measures and their impact on supply chain management (Trautrimis et al., 2020).

The most comprehensive list of research questions urgently needing the attention of governments and businesses was provided by Christ and Burritt (2018). The list includes questions related to disclosure regulations, taxation, corporate self-regulation, the best set of modern slavery indicators, penalties and greater rewards through enforcement processes, gain/loss of corporate reputation, financial risks, the role of small- and medium-sized businesses, business education, ethical supply chain toolkits, and incentives and disincentives for modern slavery in supply chains. Among the technological solutions identified for future research are smartphone applications (Benstead et al., 2021), novel sources of data, such as remote sensing, identifying labour exploitation in informal settlements (Kouggoulos et al., 2021), and ledger technology and barriers to its adoption (Lafargue et al., 2021). In addition to the research into solutions for modern slavery, four studies recommended further research into the effectiveness of anti-modern slavery legislation (including due diligence and disclosure requirements) and how organisations are responding to it (Benstead et al., 2018; Fransen & LeBaron, 2019; Parente et al., 2017; Wilhelm et al., 2020).

Other areas for future research identified in our analysis include the need for more empirical research in other developed and developing countries (Crane et al., 2019; Crotty & Bouché, 2018; LeBaron et al., 2017), other industries (Benstead et al., 2018; LeBaron et al., 2017; Tickler et al., 2018), domestic supply chains (Crane et al., 2019), and the lower tiers of supply chains (Benstead et al., 2021). Finally, three studies argued for more cross-disciplinary, participative, and engaged research, noting that improved and reliable data are urgently needed (Salmon, 2020; Tickler et al., 2018; Trautrimis et al., 2020).

5. Critical analysis to shape the research agenda

In this section, we provide propositions for future research by integrating and critically analysing the reviewed literature. We reflect on the main findings from the bibliometric and thematic analyses using the three-part framework proposed by Gupta et al. (2020): theory, methodology, and context. Thus, we address the third research question: What are the key areas for future empirical business research on modern slavery in supply chains?

5.1. Theory

Proposition 1. *Extending theoretical approaches will advance our understanding of modern slavery in supply chains as a complex and multifaceted issue that requires interdisciplinary solutions.*

Modern slavery in supply chains is a complex and multi-layered social, legal, organisational, and managerial issue. Our findings reveal that empirical studies have predominantly been exploratory and atheoretical in nature so far; when theories are used in these studies, they remain limited to a handful of disciplinary approaches such as management, economics, sociology, criminology, and psychology. The dominant management approaches can be broadly classified into two theoretical perspectives: the first focuses within organisations on modern slavery as a management practice (Chesney et al., 2019) in which individual organisations engage in labour exploitation to achieve competitive advantage (Crane, 2013); the second focuses on inter-organisational

relationships to explore the emergence of modern slavery in multi-stakeholder settings via, for example, the relational view (Benstead et al., 2018), global value chains (Crane et al., 2019), regulatory intermediaries (Fransen & LeBaron, 2019), and institutional theory (Lafargue et al., 2021).

While management theories investigating modern slavery within and between organisations provide important insights, we call for more diverse theoretical approaches that recognise modern slavery in supply chains as a complex, multifaceted issue – not just a management challenge. For example, future research should investigate the effectiveness of different regulatory approaches and their impact on organisational behaviours and industry practice, not only in relation to compulsory reporting requirements and standards but also in terms of their actual impact on labour supply chains, i.e., labour practices *within* and *between* organisations. Furthermore, when it comes to buyer–supplier relationships in supply chains, power asymmetry is identified as a critical factor in developing high-performing relationships (Makkonen, Siemieniako, & Mitreğa, 2021). Applying the power asymmetry lens to better understand the power dynamics in relationships involving buyers and suppliers at lower tiers, where modern slavery is often present (Baderschneider & Friedman, 2021), will lead to more effective use of different types of power, including reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and informational power (see Kubacki, Szablewska, & Siemieniako, 2020; French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). This, in turn, will allow for the development of interventions to ensure a more level playing field between businesses and workers, governmental and non-governmental organisations, and non-profit organisations. Finally, interdisciplinary research into modern slavery in supply chains, possibly engaging systems thinking (Moon & Kim, 2005), is urgently needed to capture, in a holistic way, the interactions between various components, including production management and labour practices, inter-organisational relationships, legal and regulatory frameworks, criminal behaviours, and the psychology and sociology of exploitative business practices.

Proposition 2. *Engagement with international standards and global agendas will drive solutions to modern slavery.*

Modern slavery is intrinsically a human rights issue as it relates to specific protected rights, such as the rights of workers, children, migrants, and women. Nevertheless, it also touches on the key underlying principles of human dignity and non-discrimination, which, if not achieved, will perpetuate inequality, including the inequality in wealth increasing worldwide (Addison, Pirttilä, & Tarp, 2019; UN [United Nations], 2020). Historically, states were considered the only duty-bearers in upholding human rights, but more recently, especially in the last decade, non-state actors have been more readily recognised as carrying specific responsibilities in the realisation of human rights. Given the role that business plays in facilitating and mitigating modern slavery risks, the theoretical framing of human rights in business has become increasingly common. The introduction in 2011 of the UNGPs, consisting of 31 principles and preceded by decades of international negotiation, marked the beginning of the UN-endorsed global recognition of corporate responsibility for human rights. In that sense, the minimal engagement among the identified studies with the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the UNGPs and the wider business and human rights discourse is a cause for concern. Only two of the identified studies referenced the UNGPs directly (Berg et al., 2020; Fransen & LeBaron, 2019), and only one of those engaged to any degree with the nature and purpose of these non-legally binding but highly authoritative principles. Therefore, we call for future empirical research on modern slavery in supply chains to better engage with the global framework on business and human rights, as this will be instructive for both theory and practice.

Likewise, more research is needed that places modern slavery within the wider discourse on sustainability (for details on sustainable supply chain management, see Galal & Moneim, 2016; Tachizawa & Wong,

2014; Walker & Jones, 2012). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Developments, which, in targets 5.2, 8.7, and 16.2 specifically, aims to eradicate modern slavery in all forms, and links environmental risks to human rights abuses. The emerging recognition of the compounding and mutually reinforcing human–environment nexus, not least in supply chains (e.g., BHRRC, 2019), is an important framework for contextualising global and domestic regulatory developments. However, only seven of the identified studies referenced the SDGs, with just one (Wilhelm et al., 2020) explicitly recognising the connection between social and environmental sustainability. Recognition of the bi-directional relationship between modern slavery and environmental degradation has increased (e.g., Brown et al., 2021), yet it is still significantly under-conceptualised and under-researched. Therefore, future studies would benefit from considering supply chains in the context of modern slavery in the wider sustainability agenda and against the backdrop of the global call for holistically responsible business conduct.

Proposition 3. *The effectiveness of domestic legal and regulatory frameworks in mitigating the risks of modern slavery will require empirical evaluations.*

Corporate commitment to managing social, environmental, and economic outcomes began to appear in the literature in the 1930 s, eventually leading to the theoretical framing of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Bowen, 1953). Since then, many theories and approaches on business action have emerged to make a positive social impact (Garriga & Mele, 2004; Siemieniako et al., 2021). More recently, there has been a growing realisation that business self-regulation aiming to contribute to societal goals is not sufficient, and in many instances, CSR is seen as a mere branding exercise (Moan, Swaen, & De Roeck, 2021). Accordingly, since the 1990 s, the use of ‘human rights clauses’ in trade agreements has increased (for the EU context, see Bartels, 2013). With it, the discourse of corporate respect for human rights and the promotion of sustainable development. Corporate social responsibility (emphasising ‘responsible’ behaviour on the part of business) and business and human rights (prescribing commitments and actions to promote the realisation of human rights) are linked but not identical, and the emergence of human rights in business discourse was very much instigated by the perceived failures of CSR (e.g., Ramasastry, 2015). Consequently, the global movement to extend human rights and sustainable development obligations to corporations, including prescribing access to remedy as a measure of corporate accountability (e.g., AusNCP, 2020), has generated legislative and regulatory developments at the domestic level that build on and implement the UN’s ‘protect, respect and remedy’ framework. The increase in the legal regulation of corporate-related modern slavery, starting with the Modern Slavery Act (2015) in the UK, has been met with burgeoning literature, as evidenced in our review, with the majority of studies being published since 2018. The number of domestic legislative initiatives has recently accelerated; in 2021 alone, Germany and Norway passed acts on corporate-related human rights due diligence, and the EU adopted a proposal for a Directive on corporate sustainability (covering human rights and environmental) due diligence. With these developments comes the need for future studies to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of legal regulation on mitigating the risks of modern slavery in business operations and supply chains and inform policy developments and legal reforms in this area. This is reflected in the number of studies in this review that explicitly identified the limitations of the existing legislative measures in this area as matters for further attention and empirical validation. Furthermore, remediation processes and improvements in corporate grievance mechanisms (as prescribed under Pillar III of the UNGPs) need to be further conceptualised and empirically explored, as observed by a number of studies in this review.

5.2. Methodology

Proposition 4. *Establishing an interdisciplinary field will address the risk of further fragmentation of research into modern slavery.*

Our review shows that empirical research on modern slavery in supply chains is an emerging area of research. Although modern slavery has been repeatedly identified as one of the most pressing social issues (O'Connell Davidson, 2015), the overall number of empirical studies in the fields of business and management remains low, and the majority of them have been published in the last four years (2018–2021). Available studies are scattered across diverse research areas, and even within the two largest subject groupings (*Business, Management and Accounting* and *Social Sciences*), journals that could provide an intellectual home for relevant conversations and attract other early-career and/or interdisciplinary researchers do not exist at present. As a result, while the amount of business research on modern slavery is likely to grow exponentially in the next decade, there is a risk of further fragmentation of the field. To integrate multidisciplinary research into an interdisciplinary field, platforms such as special issues of business and management journals, book series, and conferences need to be established to create opportunities for collaboration, cross-fertilisation, and rigorous debate. Effective solutions to the complex and multi-layered challenges posed by modern slavery in supply chains can only be developed with input from various disciplines, including, but not limited to, law, technology, and social sciences. Furthermore, the studies in our sample have made only a modest impact on the scholarly debate, with just three studies attracting nearly half of all citations (Crane et al., 2019; LeBaron et al., 2017; Tickler et al., 2018). This is partly a reflection of the emerging nature of the research area and its significant fragmentation. Therefore, what we would like to see in the future is more rigorous problem-driven research that builds on, synthesises, replicates, and expands the existing research in this area.

Proposition 5. *Methodological pluralism will increase to reflect the complexity of modern slavery.*

The emerging nature of empirical research on modern slavery in supply chains is also confirmed by the dominance of qualitative studies involving interviews and archival and desk research. While these methods are useful in extending our understanding of the issue and its contexts, developing hypotheses for testing, conducting large-scale, multi-stakeholder and multi-tier quantitative studies that provide generalisable findings, and building models that reflect the complexity of modern slavery in supply chains are necessary. Given the qualitative character of the research so far, there are limited opportunities for emerging solutions (e.g., technological solutions, legal and regulatory frameworks, voluntary initiatives) to be tested rigorously to evaluate their effectiveness across cultural and organisational contexts and industries. Consequently, we call for more research that can provide formative evaluations to facilitate the development of feasible solutions, inform their later multi-stakeholder process and outcome evaluations, and ultimately assess their overall social impact and contribution to reducing modern slavery in supply chains. Furthermore, as the majority of the identified studies involve single case studies, future research needs to go beyond the immediate short-term effects of identified solutions and move towards a better understanding of their long-term sustainability and impact and their generalisability across different contexts. Finally, although most of the studies involved more than one data collection method, these were usually limited to a combination of qualitative data collection and desk research. An urgent requirement entails multi-method empirical studies that combine quantitative and qualitative methods within a single, multi-stage research project and provide more holistic and complete insight into a case study or multiple case studies.

5.3. Context

Proposition 6. *Moving beyond the Western world will reflect the global character of modern slavery.*

Modern slavery is a complex social, economic, and legal issue that affects every corner of the world. Every country is affected by some form of slavery (ILO, Walk Free Foundation and IOM, 2022) and/or contributes to these exploitative processes through the global supply chains of its businesses and the purchasing activities of its consumers (for an example on New Zealand, see World Vision. (2021), 2021). As modern slavery is a clandestine activity, researching it presents a myriad of difficulties, especially in collecting empirical data. Therefore, it is important that multiple viewpoints are presented to provide a more balanced understanding of drivers for and solutions to modern slavery in supply chains. Given that the reviewed studies, with one exception (Parente et al., 2017), are dominated by researchers based in institutions in the Global North, we call for a better representation of non-Western institutions in the scientific discourse of the subject matter, including on supply chain management in general (e.g., Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Touboullic, McCarthy, & Matthews, 2020), to challenge dominant discourses and increase the diversity of voices and perspectives.

Similar concerns apply about the countries of focus in empirical studies, which our review identified as predominantly the UK and the US. Such a focus is, to some extent, understandable; the UK was the first country to introduce comprehensive modern slavery legislation prescribing transparency in supply chains, modelled on US state legislation that requires retailers and manufacturers doing business in California to disclose their efforts to eradicate slavery and human trafficking from their supply chains. However, given that modern slavery is most prevalent in Africa, followed by Asia and the Pacific region (Walk Free Foundation, 2018) and that global supply chains are predominantly located in developing countries (Nicita, Ognitvsev, & Shirotori, 2013), more empirical research focusing on the Global South is warranted. A better understanding of the implications of legal and regulatory regimes on countries beyond where the specific laws have been passed would significantly improve comprehension of the barriers and catalysts in addressing modern slavery in supply chains globally. In particular, this would help to generate more culturally sensitive responses, given that “legislation formulated in Western centers can have unintended and sometimes harmful consequences at different nodal points of their global influence networks” (Hewamanne, 2020, pp. 671–72).

Proposition 7. *Focusing beyond the horizon will inform a more comprehensive understanding of modern slavery throughout the entire global supply chain.*

The risk of modern slavery increases along the supply chain (Initiative, 2017; LeBaron et al., 2017; Stevenson & Cole, 2018), and statutory guidance encourages businesses to “engage their lower tier suppliers where possible” (The Home Office, 2015, p. 32). However, studies reviewing modern slavery disclosure statements under UK legislation clearly indicate that the majority of entities either do not provide details or, if they do report on their supply chain mapping, they only focus on relations with their immediate suppliers (Blindell, 2021; Dean & Marshall, 2020; Meehan & Pinnington, 2021; Rogerson, Crane, Sundararajan, & Grosvold, 2020; Stevenson & Cole, 2018). Future studies should therefore examine the processes and relationships between the entities and subcontractors further down the supply chain, especially as these are considered more complex to manage (Berg et al., 2020), given the limited access to transparent data (Gold et al., 2015; Guth, Anderson, Kinnard, & Tran, 2014; New, 2015) even for large firms (Barna, 2018). This is also a recognised practical issue; although most investment and efforts take place downstream of the supply chains, away from where most of the risks of modern slavery lie, upstream (mainly smaller) supply chain actors bear the majority of the costs of due diligence (OECD [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development], 2021).

Proposition 8. Research focusing on SMEs will drive anti-modern slavery efforts.

The wider impact of transnational corporate-related exploitation has come under scrutiny, and the big players have influenced the shaping of debates in this space (Fransen & LeBaron, 2019). The draft UN Convention on Business and Human Rights (draft title: *Legally Binding Instrument to Regulate, in International Human Rights Law, the Activities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises*), which has been under negotiation since 2014, presents a number of contentious issues, including whether it should apply to all types of businesses or only to transnational corporations. Some concerns are justified, including that multinational companies have more resources and better leverage over their supply chains than SMEs. However, businesses of all sizes can take action to prevent modern slavery in their operations, but SMEs undeniably require more support and guidance to do so. As this is an area of growing interest and importance for anti-modern slavery efforts, there is a need for more research on the barriers and challenges that SMEs face in addressing the anti-modern slavery agenda (e.g., Jardine, 2021). Nevertheless, our review indicates that empirical business research on modern slavery in supply chains has focused predominantly on large and/or multinational enterprises, with only a handful of studies focusing on SMEs. For theory and practice to move forward, a better understanding of how SMEs can tackle modern slavery is urgently needed.

Proposition 9. Technology will have a positive effect on anti-modern slavery efforts.

Modern slavery is believed to account for annual profits of around \$150 billion, more than one-third of which is generated in the developed world (Hodal, 2019). Given this profitability, it is increasingly common for perpetrators of modern slavery to use technology to facilitate exploitative practices (Crotty & Bouché, 2018), from the use of online platforms for sexual exploitation to the surveillance of workers via mobile phones and webcams. However, technology can also be used to detect and support victims, as in using remote sensing to identify sites of modern slavery (Boyd et al., 2018; Kougkoulos et al., 2021). The evidence emerging from the reviewed studies is that technology is increasingly seen as both an enabler and a disruptor of modern slavery practices. Nonetheless, only eight of the reviewed studies engaged in this debate explicitly. Therefore, we call for a more substantial contribution to understanding the role technology plays in the context of modern slavery in supply chains. Data gaps should be addressed, and data sharing enabled to improve cross-sectoral coordination of anti-modern slavery efforts.

6. Conclusions and implications

The purpose of this study was to examine how the concept and practice of modern slavery have been researched in empirical studies in the business and management field to offer a synthesis of existing knowledge about the practice in supply chains and guide the future research agenda in this area. Our research contribution lies in its holistic overview of modern slavery in supply chains as a business and social issue. Our review shows that this is still a relatively new and emerging research area. The existing body of research indicates that empirical business research is predominantly reactive to and driven by global developments in this space rather than a driver of those developments. This has direct implications for the business and management field as they aspire to stimulate innovative solutions to modern slavery in supply chains rather than merely providing empirical data about known issues and problems.

Our systematic review offers a hybrid of bibliometric and thematic analysis, generating insights into 10 key trends in the published research and analysing data pertaining to identified solutions and future research areas. These findings provide theoretical and practical implications

within several research propositions that will advance the evidence base to address modern slavery and help integrate the social, technological, and legal systems.

From a theoretical implications perspective, our findings indicate a need to expand the scope of the theoretical frameworks and approaches employed to account for the complex and multifaceted nature of modern slavery in supply chains. To allow the field to dynamically increase its contribution to the debate, further engagement with the global frameworks of business and human rights and sustainable development is necessary, along with a closer examination of the power dynamics in relationships involving buyers and suppliers at lower tiers of supply chains and evaluation of domestic legal and regulatory structures. Future research should also ensure a methodological pluralism that would allow for better integration of multidisciplinary research into this interdisciplinary field.

In terms of practical implications, the creation of more opportunities for the development of feasible solutions to modern slavery and the assessment of their overall social impact on reducing the risks and practices of corporate-related exploitation requires more robust formative evaluations incorporating input from diverse stakeholders and cross-sectoral actors. It is also necessary to consider the more diversified contexts within which modern slavery practices can and do take place. There is an urgent need to tackle the complex issues of diminished visibility and limited access to information in relation to lower tiers in supply chain management, as well as the practical barriers and challenges SMEs face in addressing modern slavery. Without this, the ability of future studies to contribute, theoretically or practically, to global development in this field will be limited.

Our analysis in relation to the context domain revealed the rather limited engagement of empirical business studies with technology's role in facilitating and addressing modern slavery in supply chains. Given the significant increase in technology-mediated interventions, including initiatives such as Tech Against Trafficking, which brings together a global coalition of technology companies and which has identified nearly 200 tools used globally to combat human trafficking (Tech Against Trafficking, 2019), the need for empirical studies to evaluate and monitor the use of combative technologies, in particular in the Global South, will only increase. Finally, despite modern slavery having affected all regions of the world, intellectual contributions to the debate have been dominated by Western institutions. Thus, there is a need for non-Western insights and perspectives and more focus on the Global South countries as case studies in empirical research.

Despite our adherence to common standards and practices, this systematic review has several limitations associated with the research method. However, some of these limitations can be considered opportunities for further research. First, because of time and funding constraints, we excluded grey literature, which can provide important future insights to inform theory and practice in emerging research areas. Therefore, future studies should seek to include this body of literature. Second, despite the researchers' best efforts to undertake informed deliberation and wide consultation on the key search terms and choice of databases, there may be some unintended limitations on the scope of the review. Thus, expanding the search terms and/or databases might produce additional relevant literature. Finally, although we focused on studies written in English for practical reasons, we encountered several in other languages during the review process (e.g., Portuguese); thus, exploring studies in different languages will provide opportunities to extend our work further.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Natalia Szablewska: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Krzysztof Kubacki:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A

Authors	Year	Journal	Citations	Countries of authorship	Data collection method	Country/region of focus	Type of organisations	Type of modern slavery	Industry	Use of technology	UNSDGs	UNGPs	Laws
<i>LeBaron et al.</i>	2017	Globalizations	83	UK, Canada	Interviews; Observations	China, USA, UK	Business; Government; Other	Forced labour	Manufacturing	n/a	No	No	Yes
<i>Parente et al.</i>	2017	Revista de Administracao Mackenzie	3	Brazil	Quant secondary data	Brazil	Business	Foced labour; Child slavery	Not specified	n/a	No	No	Yes
<i>Crotty and Bouché</i>	2018	Papers in Applied Geography	7	USA	Case study; Observations; Archival	USA	Business	Human trafficking; Sex trafficking	Hospitality	Mixed	No	No	Yes
<i>Schenner</i>	2018	Economia Agro-Alimentare	1	Austria	Interviews	UK	Business; Non-profit; Government; Other	Forced labour; Debt bondage	Agriculture (Horticulture)	n/a	No	No	Yes
<i>Tickler et al.</i>	2018	Nature Communications	67	Australia, Canada	Quant secondary data	39 countries and regions	Non-profit; Government	Forced labour	Fisheries and seafood	n/a	No	No	Yes
<i>Benstead et al.</i>	2018	International Journal of Operations and Production Management	37	UK	Interviews; Observations; Other	UK, India, Thailand, Asia	Business; Non-profit; Other	Forced labour	Textiles/fashion/apparel	n/a	No	No	Yes
<i>Paraskevas and Brookes</i>	2018	Tourism Management	22	UK	Interviews; Focus groups; Quant survey	Finland, UK and Romania	Business; Non-profit; Government	Human trafficking; Sex trafficking; Forced labour; Sexual slavery; Child slavery; Domestic servitude	Tourism; Hospitality	n/a	No	No	Yes
<i>Christ and Burritt</i>	2018	Business Strategy and Development	19	Australia	Archival	Australia	Business; Non-profit; Government; Other	Human trafficking; Forced labour; Child slavery	Not specified	Mixed	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Russell et al.</i>	2018	Sustainability	20	UK	Interviews; Case study; Observations; Quant survey; Archival	UK	Business	Human trafficking; Debt bondage	Construction	Positive	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Howard and Forin</i>	2019	Economy and Society	5	UK, Switzerland	Interviews; Case study; Observations; Archival; Other	Italy	Business; Non-profit; Government; Other	Forced labour	Agriculture	n/a	No	No	No
<i>Korkmaz</i>	2019	Siyasal-Journal of Political Sciences	1	UK	Interviews; Case study; Archival; Other	Turkey, Turkmenistan	Business; Non-profit; Other	Forced labour	Textiles/fashion/apparel	n/a	No	No	No
<i>Crane et al.</i>	2019	Regulation and Governance	68	UK, Canada, Australia	Interviews; Case study; Archival	UK	Business; Non-profit; Government; Other	Forced labour; Debt bondage; Child slavery	Construction; Food; Commercial cannabis cultivation	n/a	No	No	Yes
<i>Chesney et al.</i>	2019	Journal of Cleaner Production	21	UK, Germany	Other	Spain	Business	Other	Agriculture	n/a	Yes	No	Yes

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Authors	Year	Journal	Citations	Countries of authorship	Data collection method	Country/region of focus	Type of organisations	Type of modern slavery	Industry	Use of technology	UNSDGs	UNGPs	Laws
Fransen and LeBaron	2019	Regulation and Governance	36	Netherlands, UK	Interviews; Case study; Archival	UK	Business; Non-profit; Government	Human trafficking; Forced labour; Child slavery	Not specified	Positive	Yes	Yes	Yes
Salmon	2020	Journal of Family Business Management	0	UK	Interviews; Case study; Archival	UK	Government; Other	Forced labour; Debt bondage	Construction	n/a	No	No	Yes
Cousins et al.	2020	Management Science	13	UK	Archival; Other	European countries (excluding the UK)	Business	Not specified	Not specified	n/a	No	No	Yes
Hewamanne	2020	Signs	6	UK	Interviews; Focus groups; Observations	Sri Lanka	Business; Non-profit; Government	Human trafficking; Forced labour	Not specified	n/a	No	No	Yes
Wilhelm et al.	2020	Marine Policy	8	Netherlands, Sweden, Australia	Interviews; Archival	Thailand	Business; Non-profit; Government	Human trafficking; Forced labour; Other	Fisheries and seafood	n/a	No	No	Yes
Trautrim et al.	2020	Business Strategy and Development	0	UK, Germany	Interviews; Archival	UK	Business; Other	Human trafficking; Other	Construction; Facilities management sector	n/a	Yes	No	Yes
Berg et al.	2020	Anti-Trafficking Review	4	Australia	Interviews; Archival; Other	Not specified	Business; Non-profit; Government; Other	Human trafficking; Forced labour	Not specified	Positive	Yes	Yes	Yes
Benstead et al.	2021	Production Planning and Control	7	UK	Interviews; Observations; Archival; Other	South East Asia, UK	Business; Non-profit	Human trafficking; Forced labour; Debt bondage	Textiles/ fashion/ apparel	Positive	No	No	Yes
Lafargue et al.	2021	Supply Chain Management	0	UK	Interviews; Other	Ecuador, Netherlands	Business; Non-profit; Government	Forced labour; Child slavery	Agriculture	n/a	No	No	No
Crane et al.	2021	Journal of Management Inquiry	3	UK, Canada, Australia	Interviews; Case study; Archival	UK	Business; Non-profit; Government; Other	Human trafficking; Forced labour; Debt bondage; Child slavery	Construction; Food; Commercial cannabis cultivation	n/a	No	No	Yes
Wray-Bliss and Michelson	2021	Journal of Business Ethics	0	Australia	Archival	Australia	Business; Non-profit; Government; Other	Human trafficking; Forced labour; Debt bondage; Forced marriage; Domestic servitude; Other	Not specified	n/a	No	No	Yes
Rosile et al.	2021	Business and Society	5	Denmark, USA	Interviews; Observations; Archival; Other	USA	Business; Non-profit	Human trafficking; Forced labour; Debt bondage	Agriculture	Positive	No	No	Yes
Koukoulou et al.	2021	Production and Operations Management	1	France, UK, USA, Greece, Germany	Observation; Quant survey; Other	Greece	Business; Other	Other	Agriculture	Positive	Yes	No	Yes

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