Improving mobilisation of anti-slavery activism through Facebook communications

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Editorial introduction

Anti-slavery organisations utilise social media, particularly Facebook, to raise awareness of the problem of modern slavery and build support for efforts to combat this persistent human rights abuse. This research identifies the three significant obstacles organisations face when trying to engage and mobilise individuals to participate in anti-slavery activism. The organisations' perceived credibility with Facebook users, the alignment of content to Facebook users' information needs and the style of the posts influence how individuals engage with and act on the post content. This research finds that to encourage increased participation and interest in the modern slavery cause, anti-slavery organisations must enlist strategies to build their reputation and credibility with Facebook users and provide information to direct active participation in the cause at the individual and collective levels.

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About the Collection

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Introduction

Due to Facebook's global popularity, many anti-slavery organisations now use this social media platform to communicate about modern slavery to their audiences. Facebook provides an effective and efficient channel for anti-slavery organisations to increase the reach of their messages to a worldwide audience without the limitations of geographic borders. However, while anti-slavery organisations use various communication strategies to engage and mobilise their Facebook audiences, it is unclear whether they successfully mobilise people to participate in the cause actively. While people may not visibly engage with anti-slavery Facebook content, this does not mean that the communication content has failed to affect or influence the Facebook user. For example, a Facebook user may want to immediately take action to further the cause after viewing the content. Other users may reflect on the content over time and consider taking future action, while others may see it and move on with their daily lives without a second thought to this new knowledge.

Our research examining Australian anti-slavery organisations' use of Facebook to raise awareness of and mobilise action on modern slavery identified that the absence of visible 'reactions' or clicktivist acts (Halupka, 2014) on modern slavery Facebook posts is not an indicator of people's interest in, or further activism for, a cause. Indeed, people participate in actions to help end modern slavery, like giving financial donations, volunteering their time and signing petitions, which may not be visibly indicated on Facebook. However, for others, anti-slavery Facebook communication is not providing them with the information they require to participate more in the cause. Most anti-slavery Facebook communication focuses on awareness-raising (Limoncelli, 2016) without providing people with a way to contribute to solving the problem. This can make people feel overwhelmed and even apathetic towards the issue (Kinnick et al., 1996).

Knowing the factors that limit peoples' participation in modern slavery campaigns can provide anti-slavery organisations with strategies to enhance their Facebook communication to engage people more effectively in the cause.

If more people are encouraged to participate, momentum will build, contributing to reaching the critical mass required to become a movement where large numbers of people work individually and collectively to end modern slavery (Diani, 1992; Martin, 2007). The more people who participate in online and offline action, the greater the chance that substantial change will occur to help end modern slavery. Thus, it is essential to identify the obstacles to engagement and mobilisation utilising social media tools like Facebook.

Our research involved a detailed examination of the Facebook communications of anti-slavery organisations, a survey and interviews with Facebook users interested in modern slavery and interviews with representatives from eight predominantly Australian anti-slavery organisations. Our research identified three significant factors that serve as obstacles to Facebook users increasing their active participation in the modern slavery cause. Online participation includes commenting on and sharing posts, signing e-petitions and sending emails to governments and corporations. Offline participation includes donating money, attending a protest march, or engaging in boycotts and buycotts. We found that obstacles to these forms of involvement include the organisations' perceived credibility with Facebook users, the alignment of content to Facebook users' information needs and the style of the posts.

Obstacle 1: A lack of trust and credibility in the post source

As the findings from the Facebook users' interviews highlighted, familiarity with and perception of the post source's credibility are key factors in determining whether someone reads the post. Thus, if the anti-slavery organisation is not familiar and/or perceived as credible, its Facebook posts will not be read by the intended audience. This, in turn, would have an adverse effect on participation. In addition, trust in the post source positively influences whether people read and believe the message content (Trivedi et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2021) and the likelihood of posts being shared across social networks (Buchanan & Benson, 2019).

The Facebook users who participated in our survey and research interviews were frequently unfamiliar with the anti-slavery organisations, contributing to their distrust of the post source and its content. While some Facebook users shared their strategies for predicting the credibility of the post source, such as checking how many followers the post source had, others found it easier to ignore the message entirely.

When the distrust and credibility of post sources were raised with anti-slavery organisational representatives, some did not perceive it as an issue for their organisation. However, their perceptions of credibility are based on their perceived reputable status within the sector itself, not necessarily their credibility within the Facebook community. However, the implicit credibility criteria employed by Facebook users do not come from prior knowledge of the anti-slavery organisations. For them, these organisations are just names in their newsfeed. Living in a world of fake news and misrepresentation on social media, Facebook users are rightfully cautious and hesitant to trust what they see online. Large organisations like Australian Red Cross, Oxfam and World Vision have name recognition. At the same time, smaller, more specialised anti-slavery groups are not as publicly known and thus may be distrusted due to a lack of recognition and related credibility. If this distrust stops Facebook users from reading anti-slavery organisations' posts, the posts will only be read by those already acquainted with the organisations. Thus fewer people will engage with the Facebook posts and share the information across their networks and subsequent participation in modern slavery activism will be limited.

Recommendations

Anti-slavery organisations could consider adopting strategies such as sharing (and giving commentary) on news articles from reputable news organisations and securing endorsements from well-known people (e.g., celebrities, politicians and social media influencers) to enhance their credibility (Johnstone & Lindh, 2021). However, we acknowledge that the celebritisation of campaigns (Haynes, 2014) can also be counterproductive if viewed as inauthentic.

Anti-slavery campaigners could consider enlisting the support of people their Facebook audience knows, like friends within their social networks, to share modern slavery posts on Facebook to enable communication across potentially closed social networks.

Obstacle 2: A misalignment between anti-slavery organisations' content and Facebook users' information needs

Another significant concern anti-slavery organisations face is balancing communication about their core business activities with Facebook users' need for practical information to participate in the modern slavery cause. Not only does the core business of anti-slavery organisations determine the strategies they employ to achieve their goals and overall mission, but it also influences the communication objectives and target audience they aim to reach with their Facebook content. Further, if the anti-slavery organisation relies on funding from supporters, their social media communication will probably reflect this need. Therefore, if an organisation's stated aims do not explicitly focus on mobilising people to participate in individual and collective action, this will not be reflected in their communication strategies. As a result, a disconnect occurs between what anti-slavery organisations post on Facebook and the information Facebook users need to take to support the cause.

Facebook users want anti-slavery organisations' Facebook communication to help them know and understand how modern slavery affects their lives and what actions they could take in their everyday lives to stop it. Ethical consumerism, or the alignment of consumption behaviours with political and social values (Huh & Kim, 2012), was a strategy that both Facebook user survey respondents and interviewees felt could provide them with a practical way they could participate in helping to end modern slavery. However, because of their busy lifestyles and difficulty accessing practical advice on consuming products that do not have slavery in their supply chains, people are looking to anti-slavery organisations to help fill that void. While anti-slavery organisational representatives confirmed the contributing role ethical consumerism plays in helping to abolish human slavery, it may not be a strategy that aligns with their core business function and communication goals. Unfortunately, this deficiency has left Facebook users without the information they need to participate in the modern slavery cause actively.

Recommendations

Anti-slavery organisations' Facebook communication could include practical advice and steps to guide people on becoming more involved in the cause, such as how to consume more ethically by not buying products with slavery in their supply chains. For under-resourced organisations, this may entail referring Facebook users to existing tools and information to support ethical consumerism. However, our research finds that while some anti-slavery organisations refer to tools and information on their websites, these are rarely featured in Facebook communications.

Obstacle 3: Limited use of strategic communication strategies to motivate people into action

The third and final factor that hinders anti-slavery organisations from effectively engaging with people about modern slavery on Facebook is the limited use of communication strategies to inspire and motivate Facebook users into action. While our research found that 81.8% of survey respondents were aware of modern slavery, the findings from the online survey and Facebook users' interviews indicate that this awareness has yet to develop into ongoing, active participation in the cause.

Existing research shows that an activist organisation's ability to convey its messages effectively and the ongoing interactivity and sharing of those messages on social media are strongly related to fostering solidarity and continued participation (Gerbaudo, 2012; Milan, 2015). Strategies such as collective identity language and collective action framing can be incorporated into anti-slavery Facebook communication to encourage participation. For people to want to be involved in a cause, they must first be aware that the problem exists. Our research shows that many are aware, but they need to feel moved to want to act and be optimistic that they, along with others, can do something to rectify the situation (McAdam et al., 1988).

Recommendations

Anti-slavery organisations should consider making explicit calls to action that utilise collective identity language and collective action framing in their Facebook content. These calls to action should provide clear, concise and actionable instructions tailored to the specific audience and aligned with the organisation's primary goals.

To increase the likelihood of people participating in modern slavery campaigns, anti-slavery organisations must not only direct people to the actions required to further the cause but motivate people to want to participate and show them how that action will positively contribute to ending modern slavery. Without calls to action, there is no impetus or instruction to act; thus, the messaging is unlikely to inspire or motivate people into action (Kende et al., 2016). Using specific and targeted calls to action within a message encourages higher engagement levels (Chae, 2021).

Conclusion

Facebook users want to participate in actions to help end modern slavery; they just need to know what to do. Anti-slavery campaigners can make small changes to their online communications to harness the valuable contribution individuals can make to further the cause. While anti-slavery organisations face significant challenges in achieving their goals with limited resources, small changes to social media strategies that help establish their credibility and move beyond awareness-raising by providing explicit calls to action may generate real impact.

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