Examining anti-modern slavery practices in business relationships and networks: power consequences and social value creation perspectives

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to develop a conceptual framework linking exemplar anti-modern slavery practices and their anticipated desirable and undesirable power consequences for social value creation within business relationships and broader networks.

Design/methodology/approach: This article adopts a conceptual approach to develop a comprehensive framework that integrates the theoretical concepts of social value, relationship competence development, and power asymmetry. This framework serves as a foundation for examining anti-modern slavery practices within business relationships and identifying directions for future research.

Findings: This article outlines a five-phase process for developing resources and competencies within business relationships and networks by examining ten exemplar anti-modern slavery practices. The analysis places particular emphasis on the dynamics between power asymmetry and these practices, along with their implications for social value creation.

Originality/value: The originality of this paper lies in establishing how exemplar anti-modern slavery practices, aligned with human rights due diligence principles, intersect with expected power dynamics and social value creation within business relationships and networks. We argue that dyadic and multi-actor business relationships represent the primary level of analysis for addressing modern slavery and promoting social value generation within business networks and broader society.

Keywords: business relationships, business networks, power asymmetry, social value creation, modern slavery, human rights due diligence

INTRODUCTION

With an estimated 50 million people globally trapped in forms of modern slavery (ILO, Walk Free Foundation, and IOM, 2022), the scale of this societal challenge and its impact on business operations and progress toward achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are profound (Caruana *et al.,* 2021; Moussa *et al.,* 2022; Szablewska, 2022). The increasing regulatory pressures at intergovernmental, national, and organizational levels compel both individual businesses and their broader networks to address modern slavery, particularly in sectors and industries known for their susceptibility to exploitative practices (ILO, Walk Free Foundation, and IOM, 2022). While modern slavery lacks a universally agreed-upon definition, it is widely recognized in various domestic and international legal frameworks—including the United Kingdom's Modern Slavery Act 2015, Australia's Modern Slavery Act 2018, and the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive 2024—as a broad term encompassing various forms of acute exploitative practices. These practices typically involve coercive control over individuals through threats, violence, deceit, or manipulation for personal or commercial gain.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the context in which these exploitative practices emerge, rather than their specific forms, determines whether businesses are complicit in or benefit from modern slavery. Given the interconnections within global business networks and the central role these networks play in value creation, it is essential to explore how these networks can be leveraged to combat modern slavery. However, research on modern slavery in business and marketing literature is still in its infancy (e.g., Carrington *et al.,* 2021). Therefore, our conceptual article contributes to this nascent field. Specifically, our analysis identifies a five-phase process for developing resources and competencies within business relationships and networks by examining ten exemplar anti-modern slavery practices aligned with human rights due diligence (HRDD) principles as mechanisms to mitigate modern slavery risks. Particular attention is paid to the dynamics between power asymmetries and these practices' desirable and undesirable power consequences (Merton, 1936) for social value creation. By addressing Möller et al.'s (2020) call for research on real-world business practices underpinning the microfoundations of business relationships, this article develops a conceptual framework that links various anti-modern slavery practices to their anticipated desirable and undesirable power consequences and wider implications for social value creation within business relationships and broader networks. This framework aims to enable businesses to better anticipate the power dynamics associated with adopting anti-modern slavery practices, thereby leading to more effective strategies and socially beneficial outcomes.

Various terms, such as social impact, corporate social responsibility, social performance, and social value, have been used to describe businesses' roles in addressing societal challenges (Haugh and Talwar, 2016; Rawhouser *et al.,* 2019; Zahra *et al.,* 2009). In this article, we adopt the concept of social value, which broadly encompasses efforts to tackle both social and environmental challenges (Phillips *et al.,* 2015; Ramani *et al.,* 2017). Social value manifests in various forms, such as improvements in public health, societal well-being (Agrawal *et al.,* 2015; Huq and Stevenson, 2020), and labor sector enhancements through the elimination or reduction of modern slavery within supply chains, particularly in emerging economies (Mani and Gunasekaran, 2018; Huq and Stevenson, 2020). Santos (2012) defines social value as an increase in the utility of members of society. In business research, social value is frequently examined through the lenses of social entrepreneurship (Hietschold *et al.,* 2023) and social innovations (Ozdemir and Gupta, 2021), with an increasing focus on systemic value creation both within and across organizations (Normann and Ramirez, 1993; Vargo and Lusch, 2011). Social value creation is often framed as a social effect (Ozdemir and Gupta, 2021), exemplified by Pol and Ville's (2009) characterization of it as the ultimate end of social innovation. In this article, we focus on how economic value creation can serve as a foundation for achieving social value, such as ensuring a living wage to combat modern slavery (Hietschold *et al.,* 2023; Kroeger and Weber, 2014). Addressing modern slavery—a critical manifestation of social value creation —requires collaboration between businesses and non-business stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local governments, and industry bodies (Kubacki *et al.,* 2024). Rodriguez *et al.* (2016) highlight how partnerships with NGOs enable buyers to achieve their social value creation objectives. Adopting a social value creation perspective when examining anti-modern slavery practices in business relationships or networks is therefore well justified. This approach aligns with Gummesson (2004) and Edvardsson *et al.* (2011), who contend that all value co-creation processes are embedded in a social context, with interaction and dialogue serving as fundamental elements.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: the next section provides the theoretical foundation, synthesizing key concepts including social value, relationship competence development, and power asymmetry. This is followed by the presentation of a comprehensive framework outlining five phases of resource and competence development alongside the adoption of anti-modern slavery practices. Particular attention is given to the interaction between power asymmetry and these practices, as well as their implications for social value creation. The article concludes with a discussion of future research directions and practical implications, offering guidance for businesses seeking to adopt responsible and ethical management practices.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Anti-modern slavery practices in dyadic and multi-actor business relationships

In the context of business relationships, modern slavery can occur at any stage of operations or supply chains. It may manifest in various forms, including forced or compulsory labor, human trafficking, debt bondage, or the worst forms of child labor. For instance, a recent discourse frames modern slavery as a global wicked problem, calling for a deeper consideration of power dynamics and policy interventions at institutional, market, and organizational levels to address the complexities of contemporary supply chains (Burmester, 2023; Rašković, 2023). Earlier, Szablewska and Kubacki (2023) highlighted the importance of examining power dynamics in business relationships, a concern that Burmester (2023) echoes by asserting that "modern slavery might be an unacknowledged reward to those that accumulate sufficient power in the global political economy" (p. 333). This assertion lays the groundwork for a more nuanced understanding of power asymmetries as a root cause of modern slavery. In contrast to Crane's (2013) portrayal of modern slavery as an immoral management practice, our contribution focuses on practices aimed at combating modern slavery as a potential pathway for social value creation.

Anti-modern slavery practices in business are extensively documented in reports published by various international and national organizations, both governmental and non-governmental (e.g., Ethical Trading Initiative, 2015; UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, 2018). These reports typically adopt a single organization perspective, often overlooking the relational structures in which such practices operate. Anti-modern slavery practices are broadly defined as activities that facilitate or enable the monitoring of specific indicators, information, or behaviors to evaluate and advance progress in eradicating modern slavery. Examples include (human rights) due diligence processes, audits, certifications, human rights impact assessments, and codes of conduct (Hicks, 2021). Participants in business relationships and networks use these practices to identify and address modern slavery within their relational structures. Furthermore, anti-modern slavery practices can also be viewed as activities that modify or integrate into broader business practices to achieve commercial objectives. For example, these include certification and licensing (Crane *et al.,* 2019; Lafargue *et al.,* 2021), incorporating human rights clauses in supplier contracts (Faracik *et al.,* 2020; Snyder and Maslov, 2023), and engaging in horizontal collaboration (Benstead *et al.,* 2018).

Some anti-modern slavery practices can be developed and implemented internally, such as establishing policies (e.g., codes of conduct or ethics), conducting risk mapping and assessments, refining supplier screening, and improving recruitment and employment practices (Hicks, 2021; McGaughey *et al.,* 2022). Others require to be co-developed and executed collaboratively within relational structures involving multiple entities (Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Huq *et al.,* 2016). Given the limited attention modern slavery has received in business and marketing research (Caruana *et al.,* 2021; Crane *et al.*, 2019), and the centrality of business relationships as the basic units of value chains, this paper concentrates on relational practices. Specifically, we examine dyadic and multi-actor business relationships and their capacity to prevent modern slavery, mitigate its risks, and increase social value. Thus, we extend the analysis initiated by Siemieniako *et al.* (2022), whose research into the antecedents of social impact in inter-organizational relationships identified only a handful of studies on various forms of labor abuses and exploitation, with none explicitly focusing on modern slavery that is at the end of a continuum of exploitation. Yet, modern slavery often stems from power asymmetries in inter-organizational relationships, where vulnerable individuals are unable to resist the economic, social, and often political pressures that trap them in exploitative conditions (Kubacki *et al.*, 2023; Kubacki *et al.,* 2024). Consequently, the next section delves into the role of power asymmetry in business relationships.

Power asymmetry and social value creation in business relationships

Researchers in political science (e.g., Champlin, 1971; McClelland, 1971; March, 1966) and social psychology (Cartwright, 1959; Dahl, 1957; French and Raven, 1959) were pioneers in the study of power, laying the foundation for its examination in business relationships. Within the context of B2B relationships, research has demonstrated how power influences actor-to-actor interactions, the development of mutual relationships, and relationship outcomes (Blois, 2010; Cowan *et al.,* 2015; Cox, 2001; Siemieniako *et al.,* 2025). In business relationships, power asymmetry reflects an imbalance where one partner has a greater capacity to control or influence the terms and processes of the relationship. Power in these contexts is defined as "the potential to influence another's behavior" (Cowan *et al.,* 2015, p. 142), manifesting in structural and behavioral forms. Structural power resides within the organizational and social environment of the relationship, shaping the foundational influence potential (Oukes *et al.,* 2019). Behavioral power, or the active use of power, refers to actions by actors to reinforce or alter these structures (Lacoste and Johnsen, 2015; Makkonen *et al.,* 2023). From a dynamic perspective, power is fluid and shifts within broader networks as actors engage, negotiate, and sometimes resist influence (Cowan *et al.,* 2015; Hingley *et al.,* 2015). Thus, power asymmetries fundamentally affect how value is created, distributed, and perceived, shaping both economic and social outcomes within and beyond these relationships. Pioneering scholars in power studies (e.g., Dahl, 1957; March, 1966) have highlighted the inherent uncertainty in determining how power is distributed among actors in social relations. Recognizing this complexity, some authors (e.g., March, 1966; Siemieniako, 2024) advocated for focusing on analyzing the consequences of different power distributions. This article adopts that analytical lens to explore power dynamics in business relationships and networks.

While extensive research has explored power and value in B2B settings (Bouncken *et al.,* 2020; Minerbo *et al.,* 2021; Siemieniako *et al.,* 2025; Zolkiewski, 2011), the link between power dynamics and social value creation remains underexplored (Brauer and Bourhis, 2006).

Social dominance theory (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999) provides insights into how power asymmetries in hierarchical structures can perpetuate inequality and affect value outcomes. According to this theory, dominant groups typically command a larger share of resources (e.g., wealth, health), while subordinate groups are relegated to "negative social values such as poverty, poor health, and lack of control" (Brauer and Bourhis, 2006, p. 605). In business relationships, these dynamics imply that dominant actors may disproportionately capture value unless mechanisms ensure legitimacy in power use (Blois, 2010), which can affect both the "atmosphere" of the relationship (IMP Group, 1982) and the reactions of weaker actors. Legitimate power use, where power is seen as justifiable by both parties, is essential for achieving cooperative value creation rather than conflict or resistance, as illegitimate power use often leads to tensions and erodes trust.

The linkage between power, capabilities, and value creation is further illustrated by the value net concept (Ahtonen and Lintukagas, 2008). A value net is a dynamic, collaborative network that leverages specialized actors to co-create value through complex, multi-directional collaboration (e.g., Bovet and Martha, 2000). This conceptualization highlights how power, grounded in actors' capabilities and resources, can dictate not only economic value but also the distribution of social value. Such networks foster shared goals where value creation extends beyond profit to include social outcomes, as firms address societal challenges like sustainability, ethical labor practices, and social responsibility (Biggemann *et al.,* 2014; Ozdemir and Gupta, 2021).

Power asymmetry thus influences value creation in both economic and social dimensions. Dominant firms often leverage power to impose sustainability or ethical standards on partners, as in the case of cascading sustainability requirements within supply chains (Marttinen and Kähkönen, 2022). These standards, while driven by economic motivations, yield broader social value by promoting sustainable practices across the network, contributing to societal standards aligned with goals like the UN SDGs (Foss and Klein, 2023). Importantly, achieving meaningful value creation requires alignment with mutual goals and legitimate power use (Cuevas *et al.,* 2015), as misuse—such as "overpowering" or "underpowering" (Makkonen *et al.,* 2023)—may harm both economic and social outcomes. Therefore, effectively navigating power dynamics in these asymmetrical relationships supports a dual agenda, advancing economic value while reinforcing social contributions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conceptual approach within the context of anti-modern slavery practices in business relationships and networks characterized by power asymmetry to explore how the development of resources and competencies influences power dynamics and, in turn, impacts social value creation. A conceptual research methodology is particularly suited for addressing multifaceted phenomena (e.g., Corley and Gioia, 2011), such as modern slavery, in particular where empirical insights remain nascent and theoretical integration is critical at the early stage of theory development. The study synthesizes existing literature and theoretical perspectives to develop a framework that highlights the dynamics of anti-modern slavery practices, power asymmetries, and social value creation. This approach leverages theoretical insights from the application of network research and the HRDD framework, drawing on key contributions to the fields of business ethics, and business and industrial marketing.

To build the framework, this study employs an iterative process of literature analysis, conceptual abstraction, and model development. Sources of information include peer-reviewed academic articles, policy documents, and guidelines from international organizations, such as the United Nations. The analytical technique employed involved identifying patterns and relationships across diverse studies to establish the theoretical underpinnings of the five development phases—creation, development, combination, exchange, and divestment (Håkansson and Johansson, 1992). This methodology enables a holistic understanding of the interactions among actors, resources, and activities in business networks, highlighting their implications for addressing modern slavery and achieving social value.

Building on this conceptual foundation, the following section introduces a framework (Figure 1) that integrates these insights into a structured model. The framework centers on anti-modern slavery practices as a mechanism for social value creation and examines the interplay of power asymmetries within business relationships and networks.

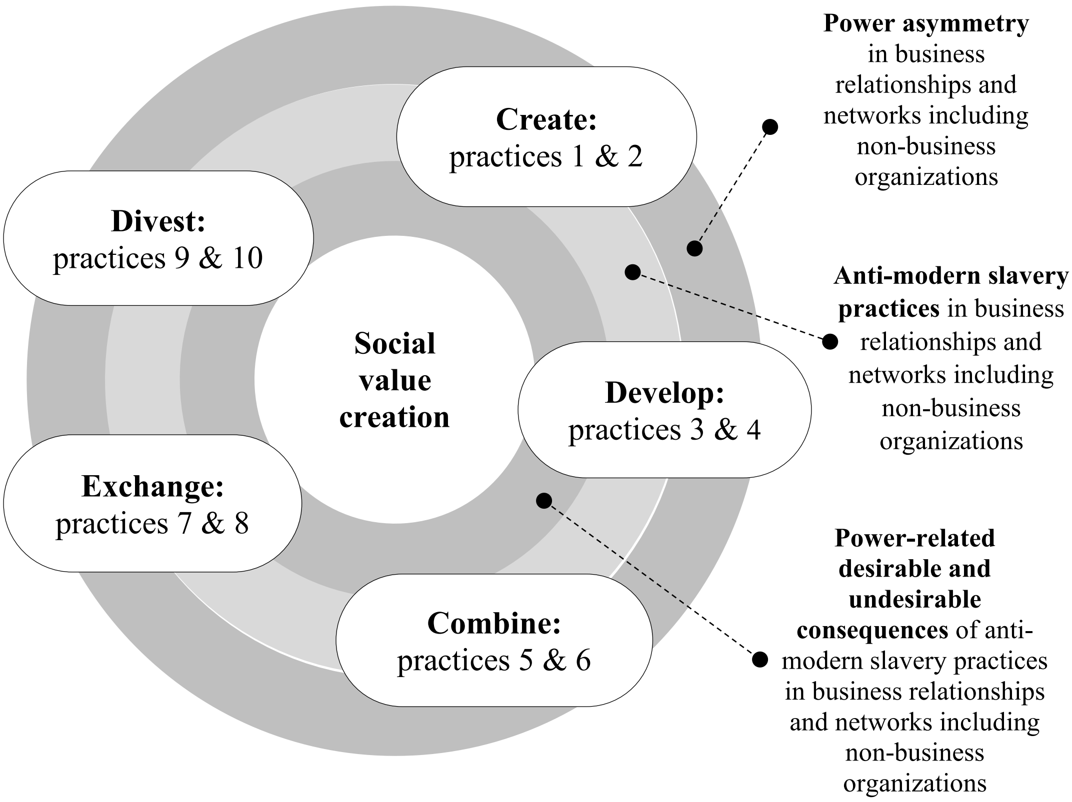
A framework for examining anti-modern slavery practices in business relationships and networks

Central to the framework is the strategic role of anti-modern slavery practices in achieving social value—long-term impacts that reflect deep transformations in business relationships and networks (Hietschold *et al.,* 2023; Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014; Wry and Haugh, 2018). The framework encompasses five phases of resource and competencies development within the business relationship—creation, development, combination, exchange, and divestment (Håkansson and Johansson, 1992)—anchored by the HRDD principles (UN OHCHR, 2011; 2021).

The business relationship phases follow an evolutionary structure, allowing for sequential progression while also permitting certain phases to be omitted. However, these phases do not adhere to a strictly linear temporal order, as multiple phases can occur simultaneously. This nonlinearity is particularly relevant in the implementation of anti-modern slavery practices, which may be integrated at different stages depending on their level of advancement within buyer-supplier relationships, including engagement with non-business organizations. In our analysis, exemplar practices were assigned to specific phases based on their implementation status, with the recognition that this classification is contingent upon their stage of development, as well as integration within the broader framework of business and human rights governance.

The core premise of the framework is that social value creation emerges through the interplay of anti-modern slavery practices and the power asymmetries in business relationships and networks. As these relationships evolve across the five phases, the implementation of anti-modern slavery practices reshapes power dynamics, leading to both desirable and undesirable consequences for social value creation. By adopting a dual perspective—both focal company-centric and relational, networked—we position anti-modern slavery practices within broader business networks involving business and non-business entities.

Figure 1 presents the framework, illustrating the relationship between anti-modern slavery practices, their desirable and undesirable consequences for power dynamics in business relationships and networks, and their resultant impacts on social value creation.



Source: Authors own work

Figure 1. A framework for examining anti-modern slavery practices in business relationships and networks: links to power asymmetry, power-related consequences and social value creation

Business relationships, rather than discrete entities, are conceptualized as the primary unit of analysis, consistent with network research paradigms. This approach acknowledges the dynamic distribution of resources and activities within business networks to address the complex challenges posed by modern slavery. Moreover, the framework identifies the indispensable role of multi-stakeholder collaborations, particularly with NGOs, local governments, industry bodies and local communities, in achieving sustainable social value (Kubacki *et al.,* 2024). For instance, collaborative partnerships with NGOs have been shown to facilitate social value creation, advancing corporate social responsibility objectives and supporting anti-modern slavery agendas (Rodriguez *et al.,* 2016).

Recognizing the role of power dynamics in business relationships, the framework extends insights from prior studies on power-related actions and their influence on structural power and value creation outcomes (e.g., Pérez *et al.,* 2015; Siemieniako, 2024; Zolkiewski, 2011). Zolkiewski's (2011) application of the Activities-Resources-Actors (ARA) framework highlights the mediating roles of activity and resource configuration in shaping power dynamics and value outcomes. Similarly, Merton's (1936) concept of consequences of action informs the framework, distinguishing between anticipated desirable and undesirable outcomes. In the context of anti-modern slavery practices, this distinction highlights that even well-intended actions can yield both favorable and adverse consequences depending on the actors' objectives and power relations (De Zwart, 2015).

The framework focuses specifically on the anticipated consequences of anti-modern slavery practices, acknowledging that both desirable outcomes—such as positive shifts in social value—and undesirable ones may inadvertently exacerbate power asymmetries. For instance, while such practices aim to facilitate social value creation, their implementation may inadvertently increase operational costs, intensifying power imbalances as stakeholders negotiate cost-sharing arrangements. Within the context of this study, an example would involve buyers leveraging power over suppliers to enforce anti-modern slavery measures, which could provoke resistance or encourage coalitions among suppliers, allowing them to reinforce their structural power and resist such cost shifts.

The five phases around which the framework is built represent the evolving efforts of actors to address risks associated with modern slavery, promoting shifts in both structural and behavioral power across networks. Consequently, this framework facilitates a nuanced understanding of the interplay between anti-modern slavery practices and their consequences, providing a foundation for managing risks and fostering equitable power distribution in networks working toward modern slavery prevention. The subsequent section explores specific examples of anti-modern slavery practices across the five phases of development.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we examine selected examples of anti-modern slavery practices, focusing on their anticipated desirable and undesirable consequences concerning power dynamics in both dyadic and multi-actor business relationships and their implications for social value creation. For clarity and consistency, we aligned two types of exemplar anti-modern slavery practices with each of the five phases of resource and competencies development within the business relationship (Håkansson and Johansson, 1992). The practices were selected based on their alignment with the steps outlined in the HRDD framework (UN OHCHR, 2021) as part of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) (UN OHCHR, 2011), focusing on those with the greatest potential to generate social value.

The anticipated consequences of these practices are organized around three key aspects of power dynamics: structural power change, behavioral power change, and power perception change. These consequences may affect various stakeholders, including buyers, suppliers, non-business organizations, governments, individuals and communities vulnerable to modern slavery, and the broader public. A synthesis of these findings, organized into four aggregated dimensions —initiation, building, enhancement, and termination—is provided in Appendix 1.

Create

Practice 1: Establishing internal policies and procedures within the buying company

In response to the global challenge of modern slavery, businesses increasingly recognize the necessity of implementing robust internal policies and procedures. Establishing a comprehensive policy that explicitly prohibits modern slavery—or incorporating such a prohibition within a border human rights policy—is a foundational step to addressing this challenge across all facets of a company's operations and supply chains (UN Global Compact and UN OHCHR, 2015). This policy should adhere to relevant due diligence legislation and international standards, particularly the UNGPs (UN OHCHR, 2011), the International Labor Organization (ILO) labor standards and, when applicable, the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct (OECD, 2023).

Developing such a policy sets the groundwork for conducting a comprehensive risk assessment to identify potential areas of modern slavery within the supply chain. This assessment should include a thorough mapping of the entire supply chain and evaluating supplier locations, industries and labor practices susceptible to exploitation. To ensure continuous effectiveness, it is critical that the policy and procedures undergo regular reviews and updates, reflecting legislative changes, evolving industry standards and emerging practices for combating modern slavery.

In relation to desirable power consequences, strengthening buyers' structural power in alignment with internal regulations and broader legal frameworks increases their leverage over suppliers, facilitating effective measures to combat modern slavery (Huq *et al.*, 2016). This increase in structural power, coupled with enhanced reputational standing, not only reinforces buyers' commitment to addressing modern slavery but also yields secondary benefits such as attracting investment and favorable (public) procurement outcomes. Additionally, narrowing suppliers' perceptions of power asymmetry can motivate them to proactively adopt anti-modern slavery measures within their internal policies and operations.

However, an undesirable consequence may be an increase in the perceived asymmetry of informational power among suppliers, which can impede their ability to implement buyer-directed policies. Limited access to information or conflicting priorities may lead to a neglect of modern slavery risks within operations and lower-tier suppliers. This misalignment often results in structural tensions (Tura *et al.*, 2019), prompting buyers to rely on increased monitoring, which may deepen power asymmetry. Han *et al.* (2022) argue that the moderating role of instrumental and social communication can be crucial in minimizing suppliers' resistance to buyer initiatives. Excessive power asymmetry may even lead to 'mock compliance', where suppliers superficially adhere to anti-modern slavery initiatives while masking noncompliance (e.g., Hoque and Maalouf, 2022; Huq and Stevenson, 2020).

Practice 2: Assigning responsibility for anti-modern slavery to a senior representative

A designated senior executive or compliance officer should lead anti-modern slavery efforts, ensuring due diligence across the organization's operations. This role encompasses setting supplier standards, conducting audits and enforcing compliance with anti-modern slavery expectations and regulations. Delegating responsibility at this level provides essential oversight, ensuring that modern slavery risks receive adequate attention and proactive measures are taken to mitigate these risks across the supply chain.

From a power perspective, enhancing a buyer's expert structural power (French and Raven, 1959) facilitates the application of power within both internal processes (e.g., supplier selection or auditing) and the management of external business relationships. At the same time, potential undesirable power consequences may arise if the role is implemented merely as a regulatory formality where there is minimal behavioral follow-through despite high structural power (Makkonen *et al.*, 2023). Such superficial engagement undermines the intended power benefits both within the organization and in supplier interactions.

Develop

Practice 3: Establishing grievance mechanisms

Grievance mechanisms align with the UNGP Pillar III of 'access to remedy' (UN OHCHR, 2011) by providing channels for workers, suppliers and other stakeholders to report grievances, including instances of modern slavery (UN OHCHR, 2024). Effective grievance mechanisms require businesses to develop clear procedures and ensure workers as well as wider community members feel secure in reporting concerns without retaliation. To that end, businesses should establish clear policies outlining how grievances related to modern slavery will be received, investigated and resolved, and such policies should be communicated effectively across the organization, supply chain and externally. For the remediation efforts to be effective and for systemic changes preventing future occurrences of modern slavery to ensue, there need to be thorough and impartial investigations into reported grievances, which requires the involvement of relevant stakeholders, such as NGOs and experts (e.g., Electronics Watch, 2020).

Grievance mechanisms will have important desirable power consequences. Incorporating non-business entities and local communities into the development of grievance mechanisms enhances the structural power of both individuals exposed to modern slavery and external stakeholders assisting them. This increase in structural power stems from establishing a formal and reliable foundation for the grievance process. Consequently, individuals affected by modern slavery practices perceive a rise in their power, which incentivises further actions to alter their circumstances, fostering their empowerment (Kubacki *et al.*, 2024). This diminishes the perceived power asymmetries between workers and business organizations.

Conversely, grievance mechanisms can have undesirable power consequences if designed in ways that disadvantage individuals affected by or reporting modern slavery, such as imposing onerous evidence requirements, undermining the structural power of these individuals and the non-business organizations and communities that support them. Such practices, often stemming from business models based on ensuring low costs (Crane *et al.*, 2022), not only weaken the position of workers but also hinder anti-modern slavery efforts by potentially discouraging other victims from coming forward. Consequently, the buyer's structural power to enforce anti-modern slavery commitments in its supply chain is also undermined, diminishing the effectiveness of these initiatives and the company's brand credibility.

Practice 4: Incorporating human rights clauses in supplier contracts

Incorporating human rights, or specifically modern slavery, clauses in supplier contracts—setting expectations for supplier compliance with anti-modern slavery standards—is an increasingly common practice (e.g., Australian Government, 2020; Faracik *et al.,* 2020; Snyder and Maslov, 2023). Such clauses typically outline the actors' commitment to upholding fundamental human rights, including the prohibition of modern slavery and forced labor, and often require suppliers to comply with international standards, such as the UNGPs, and stipulate specific obligations regarding labor practices, worker treatment and supply chain transparency. Contracts may also include provisions for regular monitoring, audits and reporting mechanisms to ensure compliance with human rights standards.

Considering desirable power consequences, practices based on legal obligations provide the basis for legitimate sources of power and, as a result, increase the mediated power of buyers, as has been studied extensively in the B2B relationship marketing literature (e.g., Benton and Melloni, 2005). These contractual obligations establish a robust foundation for buyer influence, encouraging accountability, transparency and responsible practices throughout the supply chain, and thus can enhance suppliers' alignment with organizational standards, fostering social value creation and emphasizing modern slavery prevention. In terms of power dynamics, this represents a link between micro-narratives at the individual level (workers) and macro-narratives at the organizational decision-making level (Makkonen *et al.*, 2023).

However, enforcing these clauses may compel suppliers to outsource work further downstream in the supply chain or adopt superficial compliance strategies, e.g., hiding violations or involving more blatant cheating (see, for example, Huq and Stevenson, 2020). There is also a risk of buyers' power underutilization (Makkonen *et al.*, 2023) in ensuring suppliers' compliance by, for example, overlooking clause violations by suppliers. This could stem from buyers' concerns about increasing labor costs at the supplier level which, in turn, could result in suppliers raising prices in the future or making contracts not economically viable for suppliers if prices are maintained. In relation to the risk of supplier business discontinuation, Sadeghi *et al.* (2022) evidence that buyer coercive power can increase the effectiveness of monitoring supplier's business continuity management and thus facilitates the mitigation of this risk. There is also a risk of buyers overusing their power (Makkonen *et al.*, 2023) with first-tier suppliers by strictly enforcing contractual clauses rather than supporting first-tier suppliers in eliminating practices that foster modern slavery among dependent downstream suppliers, which is not aligned with the HRDD expectations.

Combine

Practice 5: Establishing partnerships to lobby for regulatory and social changes

Businesses are encouraged to form partnerships with NGOs, industry and community groups, and government agencies to lobby for stronger anti-modern slavery regulations that promote ethical sourcing and human rights protections, as well as share best practices. By engaging with diverse stakeholders, businesses can work towards systemic changes that address the root causes of modern slavery. Partnerships in advocacy can create pathways for co-creating social value, balancing power between business and public or non-profit entities (Gray *et al.*, 2022; Schneiberg and Soule, 2005) and encourage consumers to make informed purchasing decisions (Szablewska *et al.,* 2020).

Focusing on the desirable power consequences, it is important to recognize the need for power shifts between actors in developing private-public partnerships. This power shift trajectory is seen by Gray *et al.* (2022) to take place within four types of fields (identified originally by Gray and Purdy, 2018) arranged in a matrix according to two dimensions in which multistakeholder partnerships can emerge, i.e., the extent of power difference and the degree of goal congruence. While trajectories, such as cooperation and disagreement, result in low power differences, congruence and consciousness-raising result in significant power differences. Since power asymmetries may be a root cause of many grand challenges (Gray *et al.*, 2022), including modern slavery (Kubacki *et al.*, 2023), the key in public-private partnerships is to reduce these power differences between the most powerful buyers and the less powerful public organizations, whether in relation to organizational size and resources (Gillett *et al.*, 2019) or access to information (George *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, trajectories of collaboration or contention to shift power are more effective in public-private partnerships aiming for social goals. Similarly, when the orchestrator is a public entity, the key challenge is to recognize the power asymmetries between the participants and how these participants can use these asymmetries for their individual goals (Gray *et al.*, 2022). Achieving a greater balance in structural power between the business side and the public side can be fostered by establishing an appropriate scope for private and public responsibilities (George *et al.*, 2024), ranging from small to intensive collaborations (Roehrich *et al.*, 2014). Social value co-creation that meets government agencies' or NGOs' goals with the focal buyer and other buyers reduces the need for these non-business entities to exercise power against such buyers. Finally, establishing partnerships with NGOs helps buyers achieve goals in substantive actions for social value creation (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016), which improves their reputations through broad public acceptance (Mani and Gunasekaran, 2018), leading to an increase in buyer's referent power.

Nonetheless, an undesirable consequence might arise when there is a significant asymmetry of power at the outset of a partnership that favors the business side, limiting the non-business side's influence on social value creation (Gray *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, insufficient transparency from business partners can further undermine the non-business actors' structural power. Another undesirable consequence in the context of advanced and intensive cooperation is that the dependence of an NGO on a business entity may increase, leading to the NGO compromising on its social objectives to align more closely with the large/influential buyer's business goals (George *et al.*, 2024). In situations of strong dependence, there can be a loss of self-identity, particularly in cases where a hegemonic relationship prevails within the business network (Johnsen et al., 2020). To address the power imbalances and preserve the integrity of social objectives in business-NGO partnerships, NGOs can build collaborative alliances with other non-business stakeholders, such as other NGOs, public bodies or advocacy groups, to decrease dependency on a single business partner and reinforce their negotiating position. This is an important realization as building effective partnerships is considered an important, yet often underdeveloped, pathway for modern slavery prevention efforts (e.g., Such *et al*., 2022).

Practice 6: Multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as certification and licensing

Certification and licensing schemes are critical tools in addressing modern slavery within supply chains by establishing clear standards and mechanisms to monitor compliance (Crane *et al.*, 2019; Lafargue *et al.*, 2021). Through audits, inspections, performance reviews and sharing good practice examples, these initiatives aim to detect non-compliance and highlight areas for improvement, fostering responsible labour practices and supply chain transparency. By adhering to international human rights standards and ensuring ethical labor practices, such schemes allow businesses to demonstrate their commitment to combating forced labor and impact consumers' choices (Caruana *et al.*, 2021).

The schemes may have several desirable power consequences. Non-business organizations play a key role in tracking and monitoring companies' efforts to combat modern slavery within supply chains (Carrigan *et al.*, 2017), and their efficacy hinges on possessing adequate structural power to reliably identify non-compliance (George *et al.*, 2024; Gray *et al.*, 2022). While Practices 2 to 5 focus on bolstering non-business organizations' structural power, the desirable consequence in Practice 6 centres on ensuring that this power remains sufficient to support authoritative action during audits or inspections. A key challenge, however, is for major buyers to uphold the credibility of these certifications, and licenses, as independent and enforceable sources of structural power. This credibility is essential for generating normative pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Grewal and Dharwadkar, 2002), as in this context, on other buyers to adopt these principles, amplifying the influence of certification as an expected and shared standard. Consequently, it is increasingly common for companies within supply chains to voluntarily undergo certification or licensing, demonstrating compliance and adopting CSR initiatives that enhance labor rights governance (Caruana, *et al.*, 2021; Lafargue *et al.*, 2021).

Despite their strengths, certification and licensing schemes also present challenges and can lead to undesirable power consequences. In cases where companies lack a genuine commitment to addressing modern slavery, there is a risk that certifications or licenses may be undermined, reducing this source of power within industry networks. When the structural power of non-business organizations acting as auditors and inspectors is too low, this can lead to improper issuance of certifications and licenses (George *et al.*, 2024) which, in turn, further weakness their credibility, especially when adversarial relationships develop between auditors and companies (Huq and Stevenson, 2020).

Exchange

Practice 7: Increasing transparency in supply chains

Increasing transparency in supply chains—primarily through supplier disclosure—is a crucial strategy for addressing modern slavery risks in business operations and supply chains. By providing visibility to the origin of goods and services, businesses can better identify risks of exploitation (Cho *et al.,* 2019), while promoting accountability and ethical standards that prioritise human rights and worker well-being. Transparency initiatives typically involve disclosing information about suppliers, subcontractors and production facilities, such as through publishing supplier lists, supply chain maps, and audit reports, which provide valuable insights to stakeholders (Sodhi and Tang, 2019).

Greater transparency in supply chains has desirable power consequence, including positive market reactions (Doorey, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2023), enhancing referent power of both buyers and suppliers. It also fosters the potential for mimetic and normative pressures within professional networks (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983). Increased transparency can strengthen the informational structural power of non-business entities, allowing national and local governments, for example, to pressure the informal sector to formalize, thereby bolstering socio-political legitimacy within relational business structures (Assenova and Sorenson, 2017).

However, transparency efforts can also lead to undesirable power consequences. Increased scrutiny may pressure suppliers into 'mock compliance' (Huq and Stevenson, 2020), which can damage their reputation and risk their ongoing relationships with buyers. Consequently, some suppliers may prefer to remain hidden from disclosure practices (Li *et al.*, 2018; Sodhi and Tang, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Unregistered companies, including those supplying formal buyers (Beladi *et al.*, 2016), are typically found at the lower tiers of supply chains (Colovic *et al.*, 2022). Such entities often evade scrutiny, leading to exploitative conditions exacerbated by limited economic opportunities available to participants in the formal sector. Furthermore, reluctant suppliers may offer additional trade credit to compensate for buyers' diminished financial support from capital markets and banks (Wang *et al.*, 2023), reinforcing power asymmetries by eroding their structural power and increasing their dependence on buyers (Fabbri and Klapper, 2016).

Practice 8: Horizontal collaboration

Horizontal collaboration, or peer-to-peer cooperation among businesses, represents a strategic approach to addressing modern slavery in business operations and supply chains (Benstead *et al.*, 2018). By pooling resources and sharing knowledge, businesses can conduct more thorough risk assessments, audits and monitoring activities to identify and address instances of modern slavery.

Horizontal collaboration among different supply chain actors adhering to anti-modern slavery principles creates desirable power consequences by exerting normative pressure across professional networks, as explained by institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Grewal and Dharwadkar 2002). By establishing a collective standard for labor practices, companies influence others to adopt similar practices, ensuring fair competition on labor costs. For example, Caro *et al.*'s (2019) quantitative study showed that a consortium of buyers conducting joint audits could increase a supplier's compliance with social standards, as failure to meet such requirements can harm buyers' public image and lead to consumer backlash. Mimetic pressure, as proposed within institutional theory, also arises when suppliers imitate successful anti-modern slavery practices to align with buyers' preferences for suppliers that meet higher ethical standards (Huq and Stevenson, 2020). The success of horizontal collaboration in combating modern slavery relies on building relational capital, underpinned by trust and commitment among actors (Benstead *et al.*, 2018). These relationship characteristics are linked to how power asymmetries in actors' resources are arranged, which in turn fosters social value (Siemieniako *et al.*, 2022).

Nevertheless, horizontal collaboration can also lead to undesirable power consequences. Power asymmetry among similar supply chain actors can create obstacles to the development of effective rules. This asymmetry often results in the adoption of standards that favor the interests of the more powerful participants in horizontal collaborations which, in turn, reduces trust and commitment within such collaborations (Benstead *et al.*, 2018). As Benstead *et al.*, (2018) point out in the context of modern slavery, poor (formal and informal) management of horizontal collaboration can lead to power struggles, with business actors prioritizing their internal objectives rather than collective anti-modern slavery goals. Excessive power exertion by a group of participants may undermine the long-term success of horizontal cooperation, as suppliers could consolidate their collective power and act in opposition to buyers' demands (Touboullic *et al.*, 2014). As such, to mitigate the risk of excessive power use by dominant participants in horizontal cooperation, leading to supplier resistance or coalition-building against buyers, could involve establishing performance metrics (see also Pinnington, Benstead and Meehan, 2023), co-developed by all parties, that measure contributions based on anti-modern slavery achievements rather than relative market power, reinforcing a collaborative rather than competitive power dynamic.

Divest

Practice 9: Removal of suppliers unable or unwilling to address modern slavery

Removing non-compliant suppliers from a company's supplier chain may become necessary when suppliers fail to uphold anti-modern slavery standards. However, according to the UNGPs (UN OHCHR, 2011), businesses should first engage with suppliers, providing them with opportunities for dialogue and support for remediation before resorting to termination.

Removal of non-compliant suppliers has significant desirable power consequences. Research shows that buyers can use coercive power to enforce social sustainability requirements among suppliers (Hall, 2000; Touboulic *et al.*, 2014). In these instances, trust and cooperation within supplier relationships become essential for implementing sustainability (Geffen and Rothenberg, 2000; Vachon and Klassen, 2006). A critical consideration here is to determine whether a supplier is willing but unsure how to implement commitments for modern slavery eradication. Consequently, the phase of terminating relationships with suppliers when they fail to meet non-economic conditions, such as compliance with anti-modern slavery requirements, often involves intensified power dynamics. During that period, the buyer may impose conditions threatening to end the cooperation (Siemieniako *et al.*, 2023), reflecting a mix of structural and behavioral power dynamics (Makkonen *et al.*, 2023). By ending relationships with uncooperative suppliers, buyers can enhance their structural power and potentially shift towards more ethical suppliers, therefore reducing dependency on non-compliant actors (Siemieniako *et al.*, 2023; Touboulic *et al.*, 2014).

However, supplier removal can also have undesirable power consequences. When dominant buyers shift costs for social sustainability onto less influential suppliers, it may generate resentment and hinder long-term commitments to combatting modern slavery (Touboulic *et al.*, 2014). Such actions can provoke resistance from suppliers, ultimately impeding collaborative efforts for ethical supply chain management with negative impacts for all involved parties.

Practice 10: Withdrawal from operating in countries with weak regulatory environments

Withdrawal from countries that lack effective regulatory frameworks to address modern slaver, or where state-imposed forced labor exists, may become necessary for businesses adhering to ethical standards. Regulatory pressures, such as the U.S. Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (2020) and the EU Forced Labour Regulation (2024), emphasize the growing expectations for companies to avoid complicity in regions with significant labor abuses.

Desirable power consequences of withdrawing from such markets include leveraging the structural power of NGOs, regulatory agencies and public opinion to pressure businesses into ethical decision-making. For instance, scrutiny from NGOs and consumers amplifies the normative power behind the withdrawal, deterring companies from operating in high-risk regions to avoid reputational damage, potential boycotts and regulatory penalties (Reuters, 2023). In doing so, businesses can enhance their structural power, while creating industry-wide pressure for peers to follow suit. Additionally, strategic withdrawal may empower other stakeholders—such as governments and local advocates—to act on structural changes in the labor system, potentially setting new precedents for accountability in global supply chains. Thus, when assessing the risk of operating in a particular region, it is crucial to weigh power factors, such as inadequate law enforcement or deep socio-economic disparities (Huq and Stevenson, 2020).

However, withdrawal can also have undesirable power consequences. When buyers leave markets with weak regulatory frameworks, less ethical actors often fill the void, potentially exposing local workers to greater exploitation. This shift can exacerbate power imbalances, as unscrupulous actors may exercise increased control over vulnerable labor populations without the moderating influence of international oversight. Moreover, this departure from high-risk regions can reduce the structural power of companies to advocate for systemic change from within, forfeiting the opportunity to drive gradual improvements in labor standards and protections in collaboration with local authorities and organizations (Huq and Stevenson, 2020). While ceasing operations in countries where the government mandates or condones such practices may serve as a statement against forced labor, it can lead to economic hardships for communities that rely on the company's presence. Like in Practice 9, withdrawal does not address the underlying causes of modern slavery as buyers lose their influence to advocate for change from within (drawing parallels with other contexts, e.g., Dardati and Saygili, 2012), leaving vulnerable workers and their communities to face even harsher conditions. Thus, the decision to withdraw should carefully balance ethical commitments with the potential for unintended power consequences on local populations, aiming to minimize negative impacts while supporting efforts to address modern slavery more sustainably.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article is to develop a conceptual framework linking exemplar anti-modern slavery practices, aligned with HRDD principles, and their anticipated desirable and undesirable power consequences for social value creation within business relationships and broader networks. Although we recognize the limitations of our analysis, examining anti-modern-slavery practices and their power consequences offers valuable theoretical and practical insights that can shape future research in this area and inform organizational practices in dyadic and multi-actor business relationships. The main contributions of this study and their implications for social value creation are outlined in the following section.

Theoretical implications

Literature emphasizes the importance of business practices that promote social sustainability (Abbasi, 2017; Alghababsheh and Gallear, 2021). Within supply chain management, addressing modern slavery is critical for attaining an acceptable level of social value and achieving socially sustainable supply chains (Gold *et al.*, 2015). However, despite growing efforts to implement domestic and international regulations and standards, current measures to combat modern slavery within supply chains remain inadequate (Ishaya et al., 2024; Kubacki *et al.,* 2024; McLaren *et al.*, 2024; Strand *et al.*, 2024; Szablewska and Kubacki, 2023). This represents a substantial gap, as anti-modern slavery practices are integral to advancing social sustainability. Yet, the theoretical and practical focus has often been on the economic and environmental aspects of the sustainability agenda, overshadowing its social dimensions (e.g., Govindan *et al.*, 2021; Missimer and Mesquita, 2022).

Based on our proposed framework (Figure 1), we examined ten exemplar practices for combating modern slavery in dyadic business relationships as well as multi-actor inter-organizational relationships, including both business and non-business entities. Our analysis and discussion focused on how the power dynamics within these practices can lead to both positive and negative outcomes for tackling modern slavery as a form of social value creation. We structured the analysis according to the five phases of resource and competencies development within the business relationship (Håkansson and Johansson, 1992), aligning it with the HRDD principles (UN OHCHR, 2011; 2021). The summative Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the five phases of resource and competencies development, alongside the corresponding anti-modern slavery practices. These practices are classified into two categories based on their structural context: 1) monitoring and responding, which involve engagement with non-business entities, and 2) implementing and strengthening, which focus on buyer-supplier relationships. The first category encompasses practices explicitly designed to counter modern slavery, typically involving external oversight, advocacy and corrective actions, such as establishing grievance mechanisms (Practice 3). The second category includes practices that embed commitments and reinforce standards within the buyer-supplier relationship, largely independent of non-business actors. These practices are often integrated into broader business practices, such as incorporating human rights clauses in contracts (Practice 4). This dual categorization highlights the framework's capacity to address both immediate risks and long-term organizational integration of sustainable practices. Categorising certain types of anti-modern slavery practices as monitoring and responding—where interactions extend beyond buyer-supplier relationships—adds value to the management of business and non-business organizations. Furthermore, this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of how both categories of types of practices influence power dynamics, shaping both desirable and undesirable power consequences.

The explanatory effect of the proposed framework is enhanced by four aggregated dimensions of social value creation: initiation, building, enhancement and termination (outlined in Table 1 and Appendix 1). The initiation dimension (Practices 1 and 2) involves practices developed internally within the organization, establishing foundational processes and enhancing intra-organizational capacities, thereby strengthening structural and behavioral power on the buyer's side. The building dimension (Practices 3 and 4) focuses on establishing formal structures within business relationships, which includes increasing the structural and behavioral power of non-business actors and ensuring buyers apply just and reasonable behavioral power. The enhancement dimension (Practices 5 to 8) is the most comprehensive, addressing the promotion and implementation of practices across various dyadic and multi-actor business relationships. In this dimension, it is essential to mitigate extreme power asymmetries by enhancing the structural power of less dominant actors, such as small and medium enterprise (SME) suppliers, non-business organizations or communities, alongside an intensification of behavioral power dynamics. Finally, the termination dimension (Practices 9 and 10) highlights the increased significance of behavioral power among buyers and non-business entities, emphasizing their role in ending relationships with suppliers or disengaging from countries that condone modern slavery.

Anti-modern slavery practices	Types of anti-modern slavery practices		Aggregated dimensions of social value creation			
	Focusing on buyer-supplier relationships involving non-business entities: monitoring and responding	Focusing on buyer-supplier relationships: implementing and strengthening	Initiation	Building	Enhancement	Termination
1. Establish internal policies and procedures within the buying company		x	x			
2. Assigning responsibility for anti-modern slavery to a senior representative		x	x			
3. Establishing grievance mechanisms	x			x		
4. Incorporating human rights clauses in supplier contracts		x		x		
5. Establishing partnerships to lobby for regulatory and social changes	x				x	
6. Multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as certification and licensing	x				x	
7. Increasing transparency in supply chains		x			x	
8. Horizontal collaboration		x			x	
9. Removal of suppliers unable or unwilling to address modern slavery		x				x
10. Withdrawal from operating in countries with weak regulatory environments	x					x

Source: Authors own work

Table 1. Types of anti-modern slavery practices and aggregated dimensions of social value creation in business relationships and networks

We argue that business relationships —both dyadic as well as multi-actor, such as those within business networks —represent a primary analytical level for addressing modern slavery as a dimension of social value creation in business. Consequently, further research that scrutinizes business relationships through relevant theoretical frameworks is essential. However, there has been limited engagement among business and management scholars in discussions on preventing modern slavery and mitigating its consequences within business relationships. Only a handful of studies have integrated this issue into broader discussions on topics such as social sustainability (Rahman *et al.*, 2023), social impact (Siemieniako *et al.*, 2022), or the UN SDGs (Voola *et al.*, 2022) in the context of B2B marketing and business relationships. Recently, scholars have called for a business relationship perspective to examine social influence (Wirtz and Kowalkowski, 2023), particularly in relation to modern slavery (Johnsen *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, studies that apply a power perspective to business relationships within the context of sustainable development remain scarce (e.g., Touboulic *et al.*, 2014).

This article provides a response to the aforementioned scholarly gap, elucidating the connection between exemplar anti-modern slavery practices—viewed as manifestations of social value creation—and the desirable and undesirable consequences of these practices on power dynamics among diverse stakeholders in business relationships. As literature demonstrates, power asymmetry and power dynamics within business relationships are crucial for achieving the goals of the involved actors (Lacoste and Johnsen, 2015; Siemieniako *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, the conceptual framework for examining anti-modern slavery practices in business relationships and networks proposed in this article is highly relevant to both business relationship participants and wider stakeholders.

Our article also provides further theoretical contributions towards understanding power dynamics within B2B relationships and their impact on social value creation via a novel examination of the interplay between anti-modern slavery business practices and the power dynamic consequences of these practices. Understanding these power dynamics is essential for appreciating the complex interactions that emerge across various stakeholder groups when such ethical practices are implemented. Applying emergent insights across the five phases of resource and competencies development as outlined by Håkansson and Johansson (1992), we explored the mechanisms through which these practices shape stakeholder interactions and influence the generation of social value in business contexts.

We adopt a comprehensive perspective on power in business relationships involving non-business actors, analyzing power asymmetry as an antecedent to these practices, the perceptions of multiple actors regarding power in relation to practice implementation, and the subsequent effects of these practices on power dynamics between multiple actors. To frame our analysis, we drew on two key mechanisms used in prior studies of business relationships: the structure-to-action interaction (e.g., Buvik & Reve, 2002; Oukes et al., 2019), which explains power asymmetry as a precursor to business practices, and the action-to-structure mechanism (Siemieniako et al. 2023), which accounts for the consequences of these practices on power dynamics. By integrating these perspectives, our study also provides a methodological contribution to the examination of power in business relationships, offering an approach that can be tested in other contexts of business relationship research.

Our analysis and discussion extend the extant literature by providing a nuanced examination of the pivotal role played by multinational purchasing entities in the fight against modern slavery (e.g., Huq *et al.*, 2016; Huq *et al.*, 2014; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2016), recognizing that suppliers, particularly SMEs, encounter numerous barriers and challenges in this endeavor (Jardine, 2021). Our findings suggest that, in initiating efforts to combat modern slavery, influential buyers should prioritize foundational intra-organizational capabilities (Practices 1 and 2 within the initiation dimension). This approach enhances both structural and behavioral power dynamics, facilitating more effective implementation (see Appendix 1 and Table 1). For example, assigning a senior representative to oversee the identification of modern slavery risks (Practice 2) aligns with Siemieniako *et al.* (2023), who advocate for a nuanced exploration of power dynamics by bridging individual-level macro-narratives with broader organizational decision-making frameworks (Makkonen *et al.*, 2012). This alignment highlights the importance of embedding anti-modern slavery initiatives within organizational power structures.

Our findings elucidate the critical role of altering actors' perceptions of other actors' power in B2B relationships, a perspective informed by Emerson's (1962) view of power as an attribute of social relations rather than an inherent trait of individual actors. Concurrently, we focus on the contextual and subjective nature of power, emphasizing both its objective attributes and its perception by the less powerful party in the relationship (see, for example, Kähkönen and

Lintukangas, 2011). We find that in anti-modern slavery business practices (such as Practices 3 to 8, and Practice 10), the engagement of non-business entities is essential for achieving meaningful social value—a conclusion supported by previous studies (e.g., Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, power dynamics within business relationships, which can foster social value, are of central importance to these non-business entities. However, for three of the practices (Practices 1, 2, and 9), the impact of power dynamics among non-business actors appears comparatively limited. For instance, in multi-stakeholder initiatives such as certification and licensing (Practice 6), the structural power of non-business organizations is critical for effective behavioral influence when collaborating with the business sector.

This article shows that the acknowledgement of perceived power is vital, not only by non-business organizations but also by influential buyers; the perceived power of non-business entities can significantly shape their actions in support of social value creation. This contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions (Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Szablewska and Kubacki, 2023) regarding the effectiveness of business practices aimed at combatting modern slavery. Thus, our second theoretical contribution differentiates between the favorable (desirable) and unfavorable (undesirable) consequences of anti-modern slavery practices within power dynamics in business relationships and networks.

Previous literature on power dynamics within relational structures in the context of sustainable development often focuses on the antecedents of power in business relationships, such as its sources (Marttinen and Kähkönen, 2022), consequences (Dabhilkar *et al.*, 2016), or both (Touboulic *et al.*, 2014). In this article, we specifically investigated the consequences for power dynamics, applying Merton's (1936) concept of the consequences of action to anticipate the desirable and undesirable impacts of business practices. We demonstrated how these dynamics can either support or hinder social value creation.

In alignment with the literature on desirable consequences of power dynamics, we highlighted the importance of both intentional and unintentional business practices that positively influence power relationships, often through the value generated within those relationships (Lacoste and Johnsen, 2015; Siemieniako *et al.*, 2023). For instance, developing grievance mechanisms (Practice 3) can positively shift power dynamics by enhancing the structural power of those vulnerable to modern slavery, thereby enabling them to exert influence against economic actors. An increase in the structural power of non-business organizations can further facilitate institutionalization processes, shifting from micro-narratives at the individual level to macro-narratives at the organizational level (Makkonen *et al.*, 2012). This is evident, for instance, when non-business organizations advocate on behalf of individuals at risk of modern slavery, reinforcing the bottom-up application of the mediated power of these individuals.

Moreover, our findings confirm that adopting business practices with positive implications for power dynamics can initiate a cascade of subsequent power-related consequences, as discussed by scholars employing the concept of consequences of action (De Zwart, 2015; Merton, 1936). For instance, improving transparency in supply chains (Practice 7), such as through supplier list disclosure, enhances the informational structural power of non-business organizations and communities, thereby increasing their capacity to exert pressure on large buyers.

This article complements the work of Gray *et al.* (2022), who outlined power shift trajectories in multi-stakeholder partnerships, and that of Siemieniako *et al.* (2023)'s research on power trajectories in buyer-seller relationships. By identifying undesirable power consequences, our research highlights potential warning signals for avoiding the undesirable trajectory of power dynamics in multi-stakeholder business relationships. For instance, excessive power exerted by a dominant entity in horizontal collaboration (Practice 8) can risk destabilizing cooperative efforts, as noted also by Benstead *et al.* (2018).

Practical implications

This study offers several important practical implications for the development and implementation of anti-modern slavery practices in power asymmetric business relationships, offering insights for managers of both dominant and less influential businesses—whether buyers or suppliers. Additionally, it highlights key practical considerations for non-business organizations, including NGOs, non-profit organizations, industry bodies, and government institutions, that engage in efforts to mitigate modern slavery risks.

From the perspective of dominant buyers, these insights are particularly relevant for orchestrators of relational structures and business ecosystems that rely on outsourced manufacturing in regions with weaker regulatory frameworks, especially in industries prone to modern slavery, such as textiles, agriculture, and electronics. The findings of this study also have relevance for less powerful suppliers operating in such environments.

Managers of both less and more powerful entities should adopt a strategic approach when designing and implementing anti-modern slavery practices, taking into account how these practices influence power dynamics among various actors. This approach should extend beyond the mere development and implementation of anti-modern slavery practices by buyers, suppliers, and non-business organizations. It should also consider and actively manage both the desirable and undesirable power consequences of these practices from a social value creation perspective.

The study highlights the need for buyers to take an active role in embedding anti-modern slavery practices at multiple levels. At the strategic level, companies should appoint dedicated senior-level personnel responsible for integrating these initiatives into corporate strategy (Practice 2; see also World Benchmarking Alliance, 2023). At the operational level, procurement functions, such as the buying center with employees in designated roles (Johnston & Lewin, 1996; Johnston et al., 2022) must incorporate anti-modern slavery compliance into their decision-making processes. For instance, gatekeepers can filter incoming information through the lens of anti-modern slavery compliance, ensuring alignment with corporate objectives. Additionally, boundary spanners (Spekman, 1979; Tushman & Scanlan, 1981; Jemison, 1984)—who operate within either the buying or selling center—play a critical role in facilitating inter-organizational interactions, including engagement with non-business entities, to further support the implementation of anti-modern slavery practices.

For suppliers, the findings highlight the importance of anticipating both the desirable and undesirable power consequences of implementing anti-modern slavery practices. By doing so, supplier managers can better evaluate the immediate and long-term implications for social value creation as well as their overall business performance. Moreover, an increased awareness of the power dynamics within these practices will allow suppliers to guard against the risk that powerful buyers may shift the financial burden of compliance onto less influential supply chain actors. By proactively addressing these dynamics, suppliers can strengthen their negotiating position and improve their resilience within global supply chains.

A key challenge in implementing human rights due diligence standards, which seek to enhance business accountability and promote responsible corporate conduct, is the reluctance of some stakeholders due to concerns over increased costs, reduced profitability, or reputational risks. As argued in our article, anti-modern slavery audits offer a critical opportunity to assess patterns of power dynamics—whether desirable or undesirable—among both business and non-business actors. Auditors can use this analysis to gain deeper insights into social value creation and to cross-verify claims made by various involved actors. If reported findings appear overly favourable or contradict observable power dynamics between actors, it may indicate potential issues with the reliability of disclosures. Thus, incorporating power dynamics assessments into

HRDD audits can serve as an additional verification mechanism to enhance credibility and accountability in corporate reporting.

There are, therefore, multiple opportunities and insights that practitioners might draw from this study, particularly in understanding and managing power dynamics in business relationships when implementing anti-modern slavery practices. These range from businesses designing strategies to proactively mitigate the risk of power dynamics leading to undesirable power consequences; to non-business organizations, including auditors, integrating power dynamics assessments into HRDD processes to enhance the reliability of modern slavery reporting and strengthen accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, industry bodies and policymakers can use these insights to refine governance frameworks, ensuring that anti-modern slavery initiatives promote equitable and sustainable business practices. By recognizing and actively managing the power consequences of these interventions, the various actors in business relationships and networks can create more effective and socially sustainable supply chain practices.

Limitations and future research

A limitation of this conceptual paper is its partial coverage of practices to combat modern slavery. Guided by HRDD expectations for corporate action, we chose ten exemplar practices to examine anticipated desirable and undesirable power consequences within business relationships and their implications for social value creation. These practices represent each of the five phases of resource and competencies development, as outlined in our framework.

Our study primarily analyzed the flow from practice to power consequences, with addressing feedback loops. Future research could explore the interplay between actions and their power consequences, which may reveal unanticipated phenomena, as noted in prior studies on the consequences of action (Crecelius *et al.*, 2022; De Zwart, 2015; Merton, 1936; Siemieniako, 2024). Such research could delve into how power dynamics within business relationships affect anti-modern slavery initiatives, uncovering both desirable and undesirable consequences.

Future studies should prioritize qualitative approaches to capture perspectives across different stakeholder groups. It is essential to investigate the obstacles and difficulties that suppliers—particularly SMEs—face in complying with anti-modern slavery practices imposed by dominant buyers. Examining the anticipated desirable and undesirable consequences of power dynamics, as explored here, can enhance understanding of the factors that either support or impede social value creation over time.

In addition, we call for quantitative research involving all relevant stakeholders. Given the complexities of quantitatively assessing power dynamics in buyer-supplier relationships, future research might examine relationship categories as a proxy for understanding power dynamics (Caniëls and Gelderman, 2007).

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Appendix 1. Structure of the results

<table>
<tr><th>Stages in business relationships</th><th>Anti-modern slavery practices</th><th>Anticipated desirable and undesirable consequences for power in business relationships regarding social value creation</th><th>Aggregated dimensions for social value creation</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Create</td><td>P1. Establishing internal policies and procedures within the buying company</td><td>Desirable:
- increasing the structural and behavioural power of buyers,
- reducing the gap in perceived power asymmetry from the suppliers' perspective.
Undesirable:
- suppliers lack of awareness and neglecting the risk of modern slavery incidents,
- suppliers attempts to delay or undermine buyers' initiatives, which arise from complex power dynamics
- buyers increasingly recognize the risk of modern slavery in their supply chains with limited opportunities to effect change,</td><td rowspan="2">I. INITIATION</td></tr>
<tr><td>P2. Assigning responsibility for anti-modern slavery to a senior representative</td><td>Desirable:
- improving the expert structural power on the buyer's side,
- the responsible person can exert pressure to ensure compliance with internal regulations and also in relationships with suppliers can apply pressure during contract negotiations or audits.
Undesirable:
- underutilization of power of senior representative can occur both in internal processes and in managing external relationships with suppliers.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Develop</td><td>P3. Establishing grievance mechanisms</td><td>Desirable:
- The perception by people exposed to modern slavery of an increase in their structural power raises the effectiveness with which affected people can exercise power against economic actors,
- the increase in strucutral power of non-business organizations,
- increase buyers' power of referent,
Undesirable:
- undermining by buyers the structural power of individuals exposed to modern slavery as well as non-business organizations, making any efforts by aggrieved individuals to put pressure on business organizations futile,
- this approach also undermines the structural power of buyers to enforce action against modern slavery at suppliers.</td><td rowspan="2">II. BUILDING</td></tr>
<tr><td>P4. Incorporating human rights clauses in supplier contracts</td><td>Desirable:
- increase in mediated power of buyers based on legal-legitimate sources of power will improve the effectiveness of execution in supply chains,
- strengthening of the potential for developing relationships between buyers and various stakeholders sensitive to issues of modern slavery.
Undesirable:
- risk of power underutilization / overutilization by buyers in ensuring suppliers' compliance,
- negatively evaluated clauses in contracts by non-business organizations can pose a reputational risk for buyers and suppliers and may result in penalties from regulatory agencies, as well as refusals of settlements from business support stakeholders.</td></tr>
</table>

Appendix 1 continued

Combine	P5. Establishing partnerships to lobby for regulatory and social changes	Desirable: - evolving role of power in the development of partnerships between businesses and non-business organizations in terms of maximizing social value outcomes. Undesirable: - significant asymmetry of power at the outset of a partnership, favouring the business side, the non-business side may generate reduced social value, - in the context of advanced and intensive cooperation, the dependence of non-business organizations on business entities may increase.	**III. ENHANCEMENT**
	P6. Multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as certification and licensing	Desirable: - high degree of structural power is required for non-business organizations to exert power during audits or inspections that are crucial for issuing certificates or licenses, - strengthen normative pressure throuhg establishing by powerful buyers the credibility and enforceability of certifications and licenses as independent entity and sources of structural power. Undesirable: - diminishing of certificates or licences as a source of power by different actors, - low structural power of non-business organisations acting as auditors and inspectors can lead to the improper issuance of certificates and licences.	
Exchange	P7. Increasing transparency in supply chains	Desirable: - increase in referent structural power of buyers and suppliers, - increase in informational structural power of non-business organizations - increase in behavioural power of government, non-business organizations and the wider public. Undesirable: - the use of power by buyers can increase the invisibility of suppliers and informal structures of supplier operations, - eroding suppliers' own structural power and deepen their dependence on buyers, thereby increasing power asymmetries through providing trade credits for buyers.	
	P8. Horizontal collaboration	Desirable: - increase in normative pressure of professional bodies on buyers and suppliers - between suppliers cause mimetic pressure on other suppliers, - between buyers intensifies coercive pressure on suppliers. Undesirable: - substantial power asymmetry between horizontal actors lower the effectiveness of their collaboration, - power struggles and delays in terms of ineffective management, - building strucutral (group) power and join forces of suppliers against the buyer.	

Appendix 1 continued

Divest	P9. Removal of suppliers unable or unwilling to address modern slavery	Desirable: - increase in intesiveness of power dynamics - buyers enhance their structural power and extensively use power against suppliers, especially against those who are unwilling to comply with the rules of countering modern slavery. Undesirable: - buyers use power to burden suppliers with the costs of the social program and capture the economic benefits for themselves, - buyers use power for longer contracts.	**IV. TERMINATION**
	P10. Withdrawal from operating in countries with weak regulatory environments	Desirable: - public pressure and the substantial structural power of non-business organizations, - the level of importance of decoupling of commercial and sustainability measure factors in concrete country. Undesirable: - appearance of the gap that will be filled by other buyers who are not under strong pressure to respect human rights.	