



# Corporate Visuals and the Representation of Labour

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# Acknowledgements

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# 1. Executive summary

## Research question

This research complements other Rights Lab research on the visual representation of labour exploitation. Whilst previously the Rights Lab has focused on how enslaved people have represented themselves in [Voices: Narratives by Survivors of Modern Slavery](#), here we consider how corporations have represented their workers.

The report analyses four videos representing workers created by corporations in four key industries: fashion, food, cosmetics and electronic. It interrogates how each industry creates a narrative around its supply chain and labour conditions in the wake of recent scandals and allegations in these areas.

## Results

The report highlights how the corporations seek to ‘other’ workers in the supply chain to justify poorer working conditions than workers in office spaces, or do not refer to the supply chain at all. Corporations showcase their ‘positive contribution’ to these communities in the form of wider social support and gender equality. However, as these companies have the power to define these contributions, and to end employment in these areas, such commitments should be carefully analysed by the consumer.

There is a clear inconsistency between the corporations’ narratives on their labour practices and their actions. While they presented themselves as supporting workers’ rights, there is clear evidence to the contrary in their supply chains. This demonstrates the power of discourse in focusing the consumer on positive contributions made by the corporations, while shielding the negative realities of their supply chain.

## 2. Introduction

This report explores how companies in the fashion, food, cosmetics and electronics industries represent labour in their supply chains through their own visual material. It also considers the implications of this representation.

The report shows how corporations attempt to construct their own identity as a business or brand through visual sources. In order to understand the context in which companies construct their own corporate identity, we also consulted corporate reports to complement the visual material.

By critically analysing the visual material produced by companies in the fashion, food, cosmetics and electronics industries, we hope to further understand how discourses around the issue of labour are communicated and constructed by large corporations.

The next section of this report will detail the methodology of the project. We then give an overview of each company and findings from each sector. Overall findings and patterns from across the sectors are subsequently presented thematically. This is not an exhaustive list of themes that emerged from the data, but rather a focus on our key findings. Finally, we reflect on the value of the project and suggestions for further research in this area.

# 3. Methodology

## Sampling: companies

We followed a method known as ‘generic purposive sampling’ (Bryman 2016). We established the criteria of our sample based on the research question, identified suitable cases and then sampled from those cases identified (Bryman 2016). From all the possible companies, we selected cases which have a history of allegations or ‘scandals’ regarding labour in their supply chains. This makes for an interesting comparison when looking at how they construct their identities as corporations and how they build a narrative about improved labour in their supply chains. We also selected the largest consumer facing companies as their constructed narratives would be likely to have a wider impact on consumers, and would be more likely to dedicate resources to constructing this narrative.

## Sampling: visual sources and corporate reports

We primarily focused on analysing visual sources which discuss labour in the companies’ supply chains. However, finding visual sources specifically relating to labour in supply chain was not always possible. Therefore, some of the sources analysed in this research may not specifically mention or convey issues relating to labour and/or their supply chain but are still useful for understanding how the company constructs a narrative about themselves.

We focused on collecting videos, as, in limiting our analysis to two visual sources per company, videos generally provided more scope for analysis. ‘Videos’ in this context can mean anything from short films, animations, interviews or any type of moving image. To acquire these sources, we searched each company’s official YouTube channel by keywords such as ‘labour’, ‘manufacturing’, ‘supply chains’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘human rights’. A list of the visual sources we used can be found below in Table one. We complemented this visual analysis with text analysis of relevant sections of companies’ reports, such as ‘Annual reports’ or ‘Sustainability reports’. A list of the corporate reports we analysed can be found in Table two.

**Table one – visual sources**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Sector</b>
H&M in Bangladesh	H&M	2015	Fashion
H&M Conscious: Fair Living Wage	H&M	2014	Fashion
Mary's Story	Nike	Does not specify on website	Fashion
The Power of Teamwork Forms the Foundation for how we do Business	Nike	Does not specify on website	Fashion
Human Rights Policy - Interview with Emmanuel Lulin	L'Oréal	2018	Cosmetics
Share and Care	L'Oréal	2016	Cosmetics
P&G committed to responsible sourcing of palm oil.	Procter and Gamble	2019	Cosmetics
P&G A Force for Good and a Force for Growth	Procter and Gamble	2019	Cosmetics
Tackling Child Labour in Coco	Nestlé	2017	Food
Responsible Sourcing of Sugar	Nestlé	2019	Food
Unilever Global Supply Chain	Unilever	2013	Food
Forced Labour: setting employee standards	Unilever	2018	Food
Amazon Employee Work Life Balance   Jeff Bezos, CEO Amazon   Code Conference 2016	Amazon	2016	Electronics
5 Things you didn't know about safety in Amazon Warehouses	Amazon	2019	Electronics
Making the all new Mac Pro	Apple	2013	Electronics
Apple at work- the underdogs	Apple	2019	Electronics

**Table two – corporate reports**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Sector</b>
H&M Group Sustainability Report	H&M	2018	Fashion
H&M Annual Report	H&M	2018	Fashion
Nike Sustainable Business Report	Nike	2016-2017	Fashion
Nike Impact Report	Nike	2019	Fashion
Code of Ethics	L'Oréal	Unavailable- third edition	Cosmetics
Code of Business Ethics: Suppliers/Subcontractors and Child Labour	L'Oréal	2010	Cosmetics
Citizenship Report	Procter and Gamble	2018	Cosmetics
Human Rights Statement	Procter and Gamble	2019	Cosmetics
Creating Shared Value and Meeting Our Commitments	Nestlé	2019	Food
Nestlé Responsible Sourcing Standard	Nestlé	2018	Food
Responsible sourcing policy	Unilever	2017	Food
Human Rights Progress Report	Unilever	2017	Food
Amazon Annual Report	Amazon	2018	Electronics
Amazon Responsible Sourcing	Amazon	2019	Electronics
Apple Supplier Responsibility	Apple	2019	Electronics
Statement on efforts to combat human trafficking and slavery	Apple	2018	Electronics



## 4. Analysis

We use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to raise questions of power and ideology. CDA is not simply descriptive in nature, but asks how strategies that seem ‘neutral’ on the surface may be ideological and seek to shape the representation of people, events and goals (Machin and Mayr 2012; Bryman 2016). Discourses bring social reality to life; social reality cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourse that gives it meaning (Phillips and Hardy 2002 in Bryman 2016). CDA allows researchers to critically engage with language as a power resource and ask how it is used to convey certain ideas (Bryman 2016). Machin and Mayr (2012) argue that visual and textual data often communicate meaning together, they call this ‘Multimodal CDA’.

We devised a list of characteristics we would be looking for when analysing the data, and created a grid to analyse and compare the data. A screenshot of the grid (Figure 1) can be found below. Some of these headings were informed by specific academic papers, but also included standard information (for example; the year the source was published), observable traits (for example; editing), headings informed by our sociological background (for example; the representation of gender). Once we had started analysing the visual sources, we decided that two visual sources and two reports per company would be an achievable goal within the ten-week period of this research. After completing the grid and finishing the notes, we reviewed the data and identified key themes that appeared within and across sectors (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	General Information											
2	Source No	Visual Data	Form? (V)	Title	Duration	Year	No. of views	Link	Audience	Organisation	Sector?	Agenda?
3	1	YES	SHORT FILM	H&M in B	05:29	2015	753,561	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	Consume	H&M	Fashion	To inform
4	1											Praising I
5	2	YES	SHORT FILM	Our First I	02:06	2017	3,611	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	Consume	Nestle	Food	To show
6	2											To inform
7	3	YES	INTERVIEW	Human Ri	03:26	2018	1,108	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	consume	L'oreal	Cosmetic	To inform
8	3											
9	4	YES	SHORT FILM	Mary's Str	03:02	Doesn't S	Unknown	<a href="https://p">https://p</a>	Consume	Nike	Fashion	To evok
10	4											Nike as s
11	5	YES	ADVERTIS	Unilever i	02:00	2013	25,109	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	Consume	Unilever	Food	Promotir
12	5											
13	6	YES	SHORT FILM	P&G Com	02:53	2019	1,510	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	consume	Procter a	Cosmetic	To inform
14	6											
15	7	YES	SHORT AT	H&M Con	02:17	2014	17,943	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	Consume	H&M	Fashion	To praise
16	7											Also sim
17	8	YES	SHORT FILM	The Powe	03:14	Doesn;t s	Unknown	<a href="https://p">https://p</a>	Consume	Nike	Fashion	Very pos
18	8											
19	9	YES	SHORT FILM	Responsil	03:29	2019	578	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	consume	Nestle	Food	To inform
20	9											
21	10	YES	SHORT FILM	Share & C	04:06	2016	10,977	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	consume	L'oreal	Cosmetic	To inform
22	10											
23	11	YES	SHORT FILM	P&G A Fo	02:56	2019	1,662	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	consume	Procter a	Cosmetic	To inform
24	11											
25	12	YES	INTERVIEW	Forced La	01:30	2018	607	<a href="https://w">https://w</a>	consume	Unilever	Food	To inform
26	12											

Fig 1 – screenshot of grid analysis

# 5. Industry overview

## Fashion industry

### Key findings for the fashion industry

- Both companies focus on gender equality and female empowerment
- Both appear to be in direct response to negative stories about the garment/ footwear industry
- The companies give the impression that people are their priority in supply chains

### H&M

The average number of people employed by H&M in 2018 was 123,283 (H&M 2018). H&M has consistently come under fire regarding conditions in the factories that manufacture their clothes. In 2012, workers in a Cambodian factory (who supplied to H&M) held a 'peoples' tribunal' to investigate working conditions and wages after it was discovered that hundreds of workers were fainting at work due to long hours and terrible working conditions (The Guardian 2012). The allegations have continued over the years, and are still emerging. In 2016, a factory in Myanmar which supplied to H&M was found to employ 14-year old children to work 12-hour days (The Guardian 2016).

### Nike

Nike had roughly 73,100 employees world-wide as of 2018 (Nike 2018). Since the early 2000's, Nike has had a stream of allegations about the working conditions in their supply chain. In 2000, Panorama exposed 'sweatshop' style working conditions and child labour in factories in Cambodia which manufacture shoes for Nike (BBC 2000). These allegations have continued to the present day. In 2014, thousands of employees from one of the factories that supplies for Nike, the Yue Yuen shoe factory in China, protested over unpaid social security payments (BBC 2014).

### Findings within the fashion industry

Two years before the 'H&M in Bangladesh' video was released, the Dhaka garment factory collapsed in Bangladesh. This was a well-publicised disaster in which an eight-story building collapsed killing over 1,000 people and injuring about 2,500 (BBC 2013). The factory supplied garments to huge Western retailers like Primark, Mango, Matalan and H&M (The Guardian 2013). The H&M source, however, though focused on Bangladesh, makes no mention of Dhaka. Instead, the video justifies H&M's industry in Bangladesh by discussing how useful and beneficial it is to workers. Similarly, the two Nike videos focus on the same Chinese shoe factory, with this area having been the source of controversies highlighted above. Both H&M and Nike therefore appear to use videos as a direct

public relations response to negative stories about garment manufacturing working conditions.

One of the most interesting findings within this sector is the almost identical story told from the central protagonist of a factory worker in H&M's 'H&M in Bangladesh' and Nike's video 'Mary's Story'. In both videos, we hear women recounting their story of leaving a poor, rural area and move to the city to escape poverty and search for work. Both protagonists started with menial jobs, but were promoted and received a pay rise. Both women talk about being able to support their husbands and how their children can now go to school. This indicates that both H&M and Nike want to be seen promoting gender equality and female career progression.

Within this sector, the visual data focuses on the human aspect of labour in supply chains. In three of the four fashion videos, we see labour taking place within factories (Figures 3 and 4), while all four videos either mention or show family (Figure 5). Three of the four videos discuss wages and give the impression that companies are well connected and invested in the wellbeing of workers in their supply chains. Both H&M and Nike talk about the specific programmes they are implementing, and in some cases, we are 'shown' these being implemented or training happening (Figure 2). Furthermore, both companies claim to have an open dialogue with their suppliers; indicating that supply chain workers are consulted or at least prioritised when developing programmes to improve their circumstances. This finding was reinforced by at least one official report from each company, which had extensive details about their policies and practices involving suppliers.



*Fig 2 - H&M in Bangladesh, H&M, 2015*



*Fig 3 - Mary's Story, Nike*



Fig 4 - The Power of Teamwork, Nike

Fig 5 - H&M Conscious, H&M, 2014

## Food industry

### Key findings for the food industry

- Stereotypical and distinctive racial and class boundaries are reinforced
- Focus of this industry's videos is on sourcing of raw materials rather than labour
- Videos are therefore set in rural landscapes.

### Nestlé

As a meta-organisation which owns many different products and brands, Nestlé employs 308,000 people worldwide (Nestlé 2018). In recent years, Nestlé has appeared on various news headlines concerning labour rights and child labour. For instance, The Guardian published a report detailing labour conditions on farms in the Ivory Coast, which produces the raw ingredient of cocoa for Nestlé (The Guardian 2015). According to this source, there were 56 child workers found over 260 farms in this specific region. More recently in 2019, there have been allegations that Nestlé are abusing labour rights in Turkey, on hazelnut farms (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre 2019), with workers having 'little legal recourse or protections'.

### Unilever

Unilever, another meta-organisation, has 155,000 employees worldwide (Unilever 2018). There have been both positive and negative allegations against Unilever regarding its supply chain. For example, Amnesty International claimed that forced labour and child labour are prevalent in Unilever's palm oil plantations (Amnesty International 2016). Amnesty International reports that these plantations force children as young as eight to work, and that workers have to work long hours with inadequate protective gear. Interestingly, Amnesty International also include Nestlé in this publication, asserting that there are many different 'corporate giants' that

contribute towards this urgent problem. However, it ought to be noted that Unilever was among the 2018 Responsible Business Awards winners, winning the Human Rights award for its 'highly admirable' work with the palm oil industry (Ethical Corporation 2018). This is an obvious contrast to Amnesty International's allegations and makes for an interesting case when analysing how Unilever represent 'labour' in their supply chain.

### Findings within the food industry

Unlike the fashion industry, which has a clear focus on people progressing in their occupational roles (for instance, Mary's Story, Nike), the food industry visuals portray clear class boundaries. This means that workers, such as plantation farmers, are not showcased as eventually pursuing higher occupational positions. For example, Nestlé shows farmers being given the relevant tools and gear to complete their jobs to a sufficient standard (Figure 7). This suggests that the workers ought to stay where they are and succeed in that specific job.

Unilever further emphasises the idea of class boundaries, where scenes constantly flick between black people working on plantation farms, and white people working in a professional office environment.

Moreover, the food industry repeatedly presents their sourcing of raw materials in a rural setting (Figure 6). This portrays a different stage of the supply chain to the fashion industry, which often shows a factory workplace. This finding is echoed in the food industry reports, where they regularly reference and illustrate an agricultural environment, typically alongside ethnic minority individuals.

Finally, only one of the food industry's videos dedicates a significant amount of time to showing labour being done, as depicted in Figure 8 (Nestlé's 'Responsible Sourcing of Sugar' video). However, this video primarily focuses on the training that workers receive whilst at work, and therefore only shows labour occurring with much intervention. This contrasts with many of the fashion industry visual sources, which tend to simply show people working without interruption.



Fig 7 – Responsible Sourcing of Sugar, 2019



Fig 6 – Tackling Child Labour...



Fig 8 – Responsible Sourcing of Sugar, 2019

## Cosmetic industry

### Key findings for the cosmetic industry

- Labour is not the main focus of visual sources but is presented as a subtopic
- Minimal labour in supply chains is represented
- Visual sources have a stronger focus on full time employees than people who work in early stages of the supply chain.

### L'Oréal

L'Oréal owns various personal care brands and employs 86,000 people (L'Oréal 2018). Many previous allegations against L'Oréal have focused on its use of mica, a mineral used in most make-up products. Mica mines have been heavily linked to child labour and L'Oréal has been widely criticised for failing to comment on this issue. According to The Independent (2017), around 20,000 children work in mica mines across northeast India, and these mines are included in L'Oréal's supply chain.

### Procter and Gamble

Worldwide, Procter and Gamble (P&G) employ 92,000 people (P&G 2018). P&G's scandals have mainly centered around labour conditions in its palm oil supply chain. The nonprofit organisation SumOfUs declared that many palm oil plantation workers have their passports confiscated and work under conditions in which they are 'trapped' (SumOfUs 2016). SumOfUs urged P&G to stop modern slavery occurring within its supply chain.

## Findings within the cosmetic industry

A common theme across the cosmetic industry videos was that labour was discussed as a sub-topic. Many videos referenced the issue of labour conditions as a 'one-liner' and as a side-issue included in their wider discussions of corporate responsibility. For instance, in L'Oréal's 'Human Rights Policy' video 2018, the Senior Vice President and Chief Ethics Officer said, "when you speak of Human Rights, the subject of labour conditions naturally comes to mind." This diminishes the importance of the issue of labour conditions, which is framed as a sub-topic. Similarly, this finding is applicable to the cosmetic industry reports, as these were less engaged with the issue of labour than reports from the food industry, for example. One of the cosmetic industry reports did not even have a whole page dedicated to labour conditions, from a typical total report length of 40 pages.

Similarly to the food industry, the cosmetic industry does not focus on supply chain labour. P&G displayed more supply chain labour than L'Oréal, who only exhibited an office environment (Figure 11). In fact, L'Oréal barely mentions its suppliers in either of its videos. Instead, the company focuses on its direct employees (Figure 9). Again, this finding is also prevalent in cosmetic industry reports, where L'Oréal only dedicates a page and a half to loosely addressing the topic of child labour in its supply chain.

Additionally, L'Oréal generally puts on a more sleek, professional front compared to P&G in its visual sources (Figure 10). This may be because L'Oréal products can be described as higher end and appealing to a specific audience. Contrastingly, P&G has a wider range of audiences, and may feel as though their approach ought to be more casual and informative, compared to other company approaches such as L'Oréal's.



*Fig 10 – Human Rights Policy, L'Oréal, 2018*



Figure 9

Fig 9 – Share and Care, 2018



Figure 11

Fig 11 – P&G Responsible Sourcing of Palm Oil, 2019

## Electronic industry

### Key findings for the electronic industry

- Very limited mention of supply chain or labour in visual sources
- Heavier focus on office work/ full time employees
- Visual sources focus on technology and how technology has changed the workforce.

## Amazon

In their annual report, Amazon reported employing 647,500 full-time and part-time staff (Amazon 2018). Amazon has been scrutinised for its treatment of warehouse workers in America, with accounts of workers receiving injuries at work, leaving them unable to work and having to fight for benefits and income (The Guardian 2019). Furthermore, in the United Kingdom, employees have protested outside an Amazon warehouse in Doncaster over unsafe working conditions and unfair productivity targets (The Guardian 2019). However, the poor working conditions do not begin and end at the warehouse. In June 2018, Amazon admitted that thousands of agency workers who make their 'Echo speakers' were hired and paid illegally at a Foxconn Factory in China (The Guardian 2018). An investigation into the factory found that they hired an illegally high number of employees, and that 40% of the employees at the factory were agency staff- meaning they were not entitled to sick pay, holiday pay and could be dismissed during production lulls with no wages (The Guardian 2018). More recently, in August 2019, it was revealed that children as young as 16 in China were recruited by Foxconn, the largest electronics manufacturing company in the world, to make Amazon 'ALEXA' devices (The Guardian 2019). Although the legal age of work in China is 16, young people were required to work long hours, including overnight, to meet production targets, which is illegal for school children (The Guardian 2019).



## Apple

As of 2018, Apple had 132,000 employees (Apple 2018). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the controversy regarding Apple supply chains tends to stem from the same supplier as Amazon; Foxconn. In 2017, it was reported that ‘students’ were working 11 hour days. Foxconn were accused of ignoring their own labour standards whenever their production targets called for it (The Guardian 2017). Foxconn gained global notoriety in 2010, when 18 assembly line workers threw themselves off company buildings to protest the working conditions inside the factory (The Guardian 2017). There has been a continuous stream of allegations against the supplier, who manufacture iPhones, criticizing them for their poor treatment of employees. Apple responded to these events in their annual report at the time, but it seems that no response has had a lasting impact on the treatment of its workers.

## Findings within the electronic industry

This sector puts technology and technological advances at the centre of their visual sources; the data analysed for this project are essentially adverts for their products rather than about their workforce. Neither company provided any videos about labour in the early stages of their supply chain (for example sourcing raw materials or component manufacturing). Instead, the language around ‘labour’ focused on their full-time employees in retail or office environments.

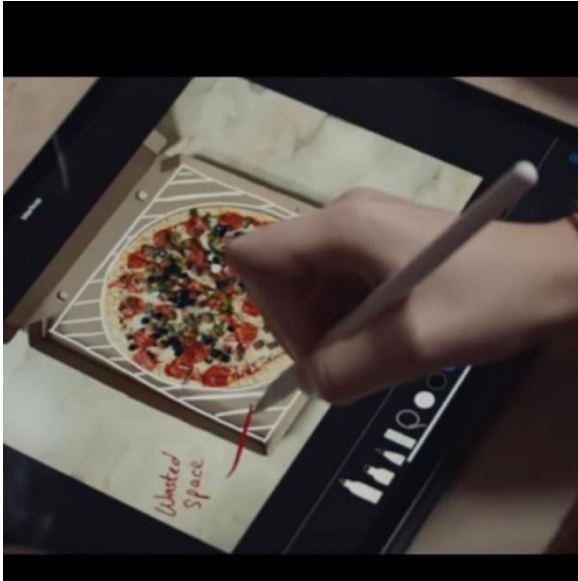
In all four of the videos, the company discusses the ‘work culture’ in America, whether that be in office spaces, or warehouses. When manufacturing is portrayed (in one video), hardly any people are participating in labour, but the text reads, ‘assembled in the USA’ (Figure 14). This feels disengaged from the earlier stages of their supply chain, which we know happen in other countries. Furthermore, it gives Amazon and Apple the opportunity to talk about how well they treat their staff, whilst ignoring the responsibility they have to their outsourced manufacturers.

Both Apple and Amazon see themselves as ‘pioneering’ companies, who have redesigned the way people work with technology. Amazon show us how their own technology has made their warehouses safer and more efficient (Figure 12); whilst Apple show us how their technology is used in an office environment (Figure 13), and how their assembly line utilised ‘new’ technology to create the Mac Pro. Within the electronic industry’s visual sources, discourse about work is therefore intertwined with technology and there is no critical engagement with labour abuses within their own supply chain.

Little additional detail is available when we triangulated these sources with the companies’ written reports. Apple have an official report titled ‘Supplier responsibility’, which details what they do to make their supply chain more ethical, as well as the results of their assessments. We could not find an up-to-date equivalent report for Amazon; who detail their ‘responsible sourcing’ expectations and practices on their website, but provided no evidence of the results of these. This further positions Amazon as appearing disengaged or indifferent to the lives of those working in their supply chain.



*Fig 14 – Making the all new Mac-Pro, Apple, 2013*



*Fig 13 – Apple at Work, 2019*



*Fig 12 – New tech for warehouse safety, Amazon, 2019*

## 6. Overall findings across industries

### **Orientalism, post colonialism and power**

The strongest theme that emerged from this research is the prevalence of orientalism and how this feeds into a pronounced narrative of colonialism and power. According to Said (1978), who coined the phrase ‘orientalism’, our culture is often accepting of a fundamental binary between the West and the East, and uncritical of the idea that ‘we’ are different to ‘them’. These constructions are often stereotypical and simplistic in nature; depicting ‘the orient’ as uncivilised and lesser (Said 1978).

Throughout the data analysis, we found numerous examples of orientalising imagery and discourse. At the basic level, many workers depicted in the videos were made to appear fundamentally different to consumers in the West. This dichotomy was reinforced through farmers and factory workers often wearing ‘traditional’ clothing, with ‘traditional’ music playing in the background, and through differences in landscapes (Figure 18), often showing settings like outdoor markets, or rural villages.

Furthermore, we saw numerous shots from various videos of black or brown skinned people smiling and appearing content (Figure 15, Figure 17). Labourers in the video praised the corporations and were appreciative of their contribution to local communities. Nestlé’s ‘tackling child labour in cocoa’, exemplifies this perfectly, when a group of women wearing traditional clothing are seen dancing whilst picking coco (Figure 16).



*Fig 15 – tackling child labour, Nestlé, 2017*



*Fig 16 – tackling child labour, Nestlé, 2017*

*Fig 17 – Responsible Sourcing of Sugar, 2019*

*Fig 18 – H&M in Bangladesh, 2015*

Perhaps exposing a more unconscious bias, much of this data also has a clear divide between who is shown in office environments and who is shown in rural or factory spaces. When employees from office environments are shown, they are nearly always white skinned, but when workers from earlier in the supply chain are seen they are nearly exclusively brown or black skinned (Figures 19, 20, 21, 22).



*Fig 19 – Unilever Global supply chain, 2013*



*Fig 20 – Unilever Global supply chain, 2013*



Fig 21 – Share and Care, 2016



Fig 22 – P&G Committed to the...

Echoes of colonisation are discernible throughout this data. Companies with their headquarters in the West can dictate what their suppliers in other countries do, because they 'know best'. They demand that those workers report back to them on their progress, highlighting a real disparity in power. By exaggerating difference and encouraging hierarchy, orientalism also creates justification for Western 'intervention'; promoting the idea that the West is well placed to 'help' people in poorer countries through their own mechanisms and ideas (Said 1978). This is supported by the discourse we see in the corporate reports, as, whilst the corporations promote 'open dialogue' with their suppliers, they have the power to end their livelihood whenever they want, within a related culture of dependency.

### **'Positive contribution'**

The data also demonstrate that big corporations claim to be able to help the development of poorer countries through the implementation of their own social programs. This not only creates a 'savior' narrative in favour of the corporation, but also creates a culture of dependency. Across all sectors analysed, 'positive contribution' or some derivative of the term, was used in many of the data sources. Companies claimed they wanted to make a 'positive contribution' to the countries in their supply chain. By this, they mean that they want to wholly enhance the lives of workers through tackling social problems, not just focusing on their labour conditions or work life. Examples of social problems that companies pride themselves on tackling include; improving access to education, providing clean water, natural disaster relief (Figures 23, 24 and 25). Furthermore, some companies want to be seen as 'industry leaders' in their approaches, aiming to be trailblazers for other companies, and transform their industry. Many of the videos use bright colours and upbeat music, focusing on happy dialogue from workers. Considering the severity of the claims made against many of these industries and the seriousness of labour abuses in supply chains, it could be argued that these overly positive videos sugar coat the reality of life in farming or factory work.



Fig 23 – Mary’s Story – children at school, Nike



Fig 24 – Responsible Sourcing of Sugar, 2019



Fig 25- Share and Care- captions include: ‘skin cancer detection, fruit baskets to employees, AIDs prevention program, medical insurance, university scholarships for employees.’, 2016

## Gender equality and the construction of empowerment

Most of the visual sources analysed for this research endorse the promotion of gender equality. This was mentioned in the fashion industry specifically, but also has relevance across most sectors (Figures 26, 27, 28). Interestingly, the common theme amongst the sectors is that gender equality equates to getting women into paid employment. This may not be problematic, but it reminds us that large corporations have the power to dictate the narrative about what 'empowerment' is and getting people (regardless of gender) to work in their supply chains undoubtedly involves an element of self-interest. This echoes what was said in the previous sections; that whilst large corporations may have good intentions, their portrayal of knowing what is best for the communities in which they operate is an explicit display of how much power they have.



Fig 28 – P&G a force for good and a force for growth, 2019



Fig 27 – H&M in Bangladesh, 2015



Fig 26 – Mary's Story, Nike

## 7. Recommendations

- Academic and civil society researchers need to analyse how corporations represent their labour practices and compare these representations against their policies. The narratives on labour practices produced by corporations should not be accepted at face value but analysed critically to highlight inconsistencies between corporate policies and the representation of labour practice.
- Researchers should consider corporate communication beyond official policies and statements to analyse labour practices in supply chains and consider the impact of corporate communication on managerial attitudes and behaviours towards labour practices.
- A critical research approach should consider how power is displayed in corporate visuals and whether workers are given a voice in the narratives.
- Corporations should analyse how they represent labour practices in their corporate narratives and evaluate whether they align with their policies and ambitions.
- Corporations who report that they make a 'positive contribution' to local communities should explain how this positive contribution is defined and measured.



## 8. Conclusion

It comes as no surprise that this research reinforces the notion that large corporations have an inequitable amount of power over those in their supply chains. The findings of this report demonstrate that those who work in the early stages of large corporate supply chains are both marginalized in real life, and on screen. Corporations give them no power to create their own narratives, they are told what to do, what to wear and most likely, what to say. In many of the visual sources analysed, they are omitted from the process all together, and we do not see or hear of them at all. For example, the videos analysed from the electronics industry completely erased their supply chain workers from their videos.

The visual data indicates that companies want to be seen as having an 'open dialogue' with those who work in their supply chains, prioritizing workers' best interests. However, the corporate reports contain statements such as; 'Amazon may terminate its relationship with any supplier that violates our Supplier Code or does not cooperate during assessments.' (Amazon 2019), or 'If a supplier is unwilling, or unable, to correct a Core Violation, or in the event of a repeat Core Violation, the supplier is removed from Apple's supply chain. [Core Violations, including debt-bonded labour and child labour, trigger a notification of the supplier's CEO and an immediate placing on probation and commercial penalties.] To date, 20 manufacturing supplier facilities have been removed from our supply chain.' (Apple 2019). Large corporations have the power to plunge people into unemployment, if the rules and regulations *they* have set and imposed are not carried out properly.

Large corporations give the impression that their manufacturers' or suppliers' lives are bettered once employed in their supply chain. Companies using their economic capital and power to assist in social projects is probably well intentioned. However, it becomes sinister if this 'aid' creates a culture of dependency on large corporations and leaves local communities disempowered: reliant on corporations for basic needs. Evaluating the usefulness of these social programs warrants a separate piece of research. Furthermore, the narrative of huge organisations (mainly from the West) imposing what they believe to be 'help' on countries who are perceived to need it, has an echo of colonial sentiment. Many of the videos analysed work on the assumption that people who live and work in the global south are somehow in 'need' of help from the corporations that employ them. These consumer facing companies have the power to define and control what is understood in the workers' best interests. For example, they can define 'gender equality' as getting women into the workplace, which ultimately serves the companies' own interests.

The videos also represented different ethnicities in different occupational spaces. Aside from the obvious problems associated with showing black or brown skinned people working in the early stages supply chain jobs, juxtaposed against white skinned people working in corporate office jobs; it also gives the impression that labour abuse is something that happens 'in those countries'. This diminishes our responsibility, and shapes what labour abuse looks like in the viewer's imagination.

The disparity in power between those who work in early stages of supply chains and the heads of large corporations' trickles down into the imbalance of power in representation. These data suggest that corporations need to be held accountable for the working lives of those in their supply chains. This includes ensuring they are represented accurately and authentically, with the power to choose their own narrative.

## 8. Reflection

This analysis of corporate visuals was a necessary component of understanding how large corporations construct their identity. Visual data is a medium through which ideology can be constructed and conveyed. Companies with the power to create popular, visual sources have a responsibility to communicate labour issues accurately and sensitively. We as researchers and consumers also have a responsibility to critically engage with these sources and not take their information or claims for granted. By creating this project, we are holding companies to account for the discourses they are producing and replicating around modern labour. For this reason, we believe this is an important project which is worthy of continuation.

To extend upon this project in the future, we would use a wider sample to include still images and a wider range of sources. These data could be used to answer more specific questions. For example, we could ask how different styles of editing and music are evocative of different moods when representing labour and the implications of this representation. Is the representation of certain social groups as 'victims' or 'experts' problematic, and if they are, how can we remedy this? Also, research could be done asking why the electronics industry specifically omits supply chain workers from their videos. Arguably, their products are more intricate and difficult to manufacture, making it harder to be totally transparent, but this alone does not seem like a reasonable justification.

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