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'Like drinking water after being in the desert': Social-Symbolic Work of Procurement Professionals in driving Sustainable Procurement

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Summary
This study examines how procurement professionals exercise agency in embedding sustainability within procurement processes, using a social-symbolic work lens. Drawing on 36 interviews and 15 observed meetings, it reveals that sustainable procurement is shaped through practice, legitimacy, and identity work. The findings highlight procurement professionals as change agents, driven by personal values, and challenge the view of procurement as purely operational. The study contributes a framework illustrating how these forms of work interact to drive systemic change, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for aligning sustainability with procurement practices and professional roles

Keywords: sustainability, purchasing and supply management, social-symbolic work, social-symbolic object

Submission Category: Working Paper

1. Introduction

Sustainable procurement aims to strategically embed environmental, social, and economic considerations into purchasing decisions to minimise negative impacts and generate positive outcomes across the entire supply chain (Kim et al., 2018; Meehan & Bryde, 2011; Zorzini et al., 2015). Rather than merely focusing on short-term costs, this approach prioritises addressing complex global challenges such as reducing carbon footprint (Correia et al., 2013), ensuring ethical sourcing (Kim et al., 2018), promoting circular economy practices (Farooque et al., 2023), and creating social impact (Razmdoost & Alinaghian, 2024). Recent studies have argued that procurement professionals can play a pivotal role in sustainable procurement by acting as change makers and implementers within their organisations (Knight et al., 2019; Luzzini et al., 2024). These individuals are uniquely positioned to influence organisation's procurement strategies and push for the integration of sustainable practices (Knight et al., 2022; Villena, 2019). However, to date, much of the scholarly debate has been on identifying the skills and competencies needed for these professionals to initiate change (Bals et al., 2019; Beske-Janssen et al., 2023; Schulze et al., 2022), or their attitudes toward sustainability adoption (Etse et al., 2023; Goebel et al., 2018; Mansi & Pandey, 2016). While these contributions are valuable, they tend to overlook the deeper question of agency, which demonstrates how procurement professionals actively navigate and reshape organisational processes and practices to embed sustainability (Luzzini et al., 2024; Miandar et al., 2024; Villena, 2019). Scholars have argued that we risk reducing their role to mere administrators rather than drivers of systemic change by overlooking how procurement professionals actively shape and influence organisational practices (Ellram et al., 2020; Ueltschy Murfield et al., 2021). This gap restricts our ability to fully understand how procurement can be strategically used to tackle complex and evolving global demands through initiatives such as sustainable procurement (Knight et al., 2022; Luzzini et al., 2024; Villena, 2019).

In order to explore procurement professional's agency in advancing sustainable procurement this research draws upon the concept of social-symbolic work, introduced by Lawrence and Phillips (2019, p.31), which refers to the 'purposeful, reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors and networks of

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actors to shape social symbolic objects', where a social symbolic object is considered 'a combination of *discursive*, *relational*, and *material* elements that constitute a meaningful pattern in a social system' (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019 p.24). This lens is argued to be useful to the purchasing and supply chain management literature owing to its ability to look at various elements as social symbolic objects. For instance, recently (Shourkaei et al., 2024) applied the social-symbolic work (SSW) lens to examine how sustainability practices within supply chains are shaped not only by technical and tangible actions such as regenerative product manufacturing but also by the socially constructed meanings and activities that organisations attach to sustainability. They highlight meaningful relationships and narratives as a social-symbolic objects within the supply chain which are actively shaped in constructing sustainable supply chains. Our study examines procurement as the social-symbolic object where the discursive elements encompass the language and narratives related to procurement practices. The relational elements pertain to the networks of relationships between procurement professionals, suppliers, internal departments, and regulatory bodies. Lastly, the material elements include the tools, technologies, policies, and procedures that enable procurement activities. Procurement professionals play a significant role in shaping the discursive, relational, and material elements towards behaviour embedded in sustainability principles. Research on social-symbolic work offers a potentially insightful lens to examine the construction and enactment of sustainable procurement. It brings great potential to explore diverse pathways through which intentional action can influence how ideas and objects in organisational life, such as sustainable procurement, are socially constructed. In doing this, it presents an opportunity to explore how the intangible aspects of procurement are shaped and offer a holistic understanding of the change process. Our study asks the question of "*How do procurement professionals engage in social-symbolic work to construct and embed sustainability within organisational procurement function?*"

Our study makes several contributions to literature. We contribute to the literature exploring change within procurement and supply management by taking an individual level perspective (Villena, 2019; Walker et al., 2012). In particular, we complement studies that highlight the role of procurement professionals' skills and talent in addressing change (e.g. Bals et al., 2019; Schulze et al., 2022; Ueltschy Murfield et al., 2021) by demonstrating *how* the individual values and skills of procurement professionals serve as a motivation to drive changes within the procurement. Additionally, the study contributes to the sustainable purchasing and supply chain management literature (e.g. Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Tchokogué et al., 2018) by exploring how sustainable procurement is socially constructed and exists as a social reality. Specifically, by positioning sustainable procurement as a social-symbolic object, our study reveals different yet interrelated elements that constitute as sustainable procurement and can be shaped by individuals. Lastly, this study contributes to the literature on institutional theory in the operations and supply chain management literature (e.g. Aaltonen & Turkulainen, 2022; McLoughlin & Meehan, 2021; Razmdoost & Alinaghian, 2024) by exploring different types of social-symbolic work and demonstrating how they are interrelated.

2. Theoretical Background

Social Symbolic Work Theory

Although only formally introduced by Lawrence and Phillips in 2019, Social-Symbolic Work (SSW) has deep conceptual roots and strong connections to the institutional perspective. Institutional theory traditionally explores how social life is organised around enduring practices, norms, and shared understandings (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). SSW builds upon this foundation by providing a more nuanced lens through which to examine how actors engage in the deliberate construction and shaping of social symbolic objects. A social-symbolic object refers to an entity within the social context that holds meaning and value through its material, relational, and discursive dimensions (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). In the context of purchasing and supply management, scholars have argued that supply chains can be considered as social symbolic objects (Sauer & Seuring, 2018; Shourkaei et al., 2024; Wu & Jia, 2018). Sauer and Seuring (2018) define supply chains as relational spaces comprising of interconnected actors who collaborate, and exchange value guided by shared meaning and norms thereby co-creating the dimensions of a supply chain. This definition aligns with the underlying principles of SSW which argues that social-symbolic objects are not static; they are constructed and transformed through the continuous efforts of actors (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Emerging studies have begun building on this foundation by employing the SSW lens to understand how sustainable supply chain are created beyond the material tangible changes by considering the relational and

discursive elements that also make up the supply chain. For instance, Shourkaei et al., (2024) study the creation sustainable supply chain within the garment sector by exploring the SSW of Patagonia, a leading company in the sector. The study finds that Patagonia combines three forms of SSW aimed at changing the material, discursive and relational aspects of its supply chain in order to construct a sustainable supply chain. In a similar vein, this study views procurement itself as a social-symbolic object; constructed through physical tools and processes (material), relationships with stakeholders (relational), and the narratives and language used to define it (discursive).

A core principle of SSW is the agency of actors which is conveyed through their ability to act intentionally and purposefully to shape these social symbolic objects. Procurement professionals, for example, act upon the social-symbolic object of procurement practices, influencing how these practices are structured, understood, and enacted (Miandar et al., 2024; Villena, 2019). Schulze and colleagues (2022) conceptualised this form of agency as 'meta-oriented competences,' where procurement professionals not only critically reflect on their actions but also purposefully navigate and reshape the relationships, narratives, and tools that define their practices and influence broader processes. While the study of agency is not new, SSW presents an opportunity for a deeper exploration of how procurement professionals simultaneously engage with various forms of work to construct, maintain, or disrupt the social reality of purchasing and supply management (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). In contrast to other frameworks within the institutional perspective, such as institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), which primarily focuses on changing institutions, or institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009), which emphasises how actors leverage resources and networks to create institutional change, SSW takes a broader view. SSW acknowledges that shaping social realities and the structures within them often involves multiple forms of work aimed at multiple dimensions (i.e. relational, material or discursive) of the social objects existing in different contexts (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). As such Lawrence and Phillips (2019) propose that SSW can be classified into three distinct forms: self-work, which involves the efforts individuals undertake to construct, maintain, or alter their own identities and roles within social and organisational contexts; organisation work, which refers to the activities aimed at shaping, reinforcing, or transforming practices, structures and processes of an organisation; and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), which encompasses the broader actions taken to create, maintain, or disrupt institutions. Owing to its strong connections with institutional theory, which is widely recognised as one of the most extensively applied theoretical frameworks in purchasing and supply management literature (Johnsen et al., 2017) and the field's strong interest in examining institutional influences (Kauppi, 2013), institutional work is the only form of social symbolic work that has been explicitly explored. For instance, in their study of institutional change to shape social procurement, Razmdoost and Alinaghian (2024) found four institutional work practices that buying firms engage in to foster and sustain purchasing behaviour from social enterprises. Although the study primarily focused on the institutional work context, this study intersects with the organisation work context too by demonstrating boundary work (i.e. *crossing institutional boundaries*) that was employed within the organisation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

To investigate how procurement professionals construct and embed sustainability within organisational procurement practices, this study adopts an inductive research design, enabling a qualitative and exploratory investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This design is particularly useful for exploring under-researched areas or novel concepts

A purposive sampling approach (Patton, 1990) was adopted to identify procurement professionals actively engaged in sustainability initiatives or whose roles explicitly involved sustainability-related responsibilities. To focus on individuals demonstrating agency and influence in embedding sustainability, the study targeted participants who were members of "*Global Sustainability Commitment*[1]" (hereafter termed as Global SC) a globally recognised bottom-up initiative promoting sustainable procurement practices. The initiative was launched in 2019 by two procurement professionals with the mission to empower other procurement professionals to integrate sustainability

[1] The original name of the initiative has been pseudonymised to maintain confidentiality and protect the anonymity of the participants and their affiliations.

into their procurement practices. In 2024, the initiative was recorded to have over 15,000 members globally representing diverse range of sectors, including manufacturing, retail, pharmaceuticals, financial services, energy, and technology. This initiative provided an ideal empirical setting as it offered access to a diverse, global community of procurement professionals actively integrating sustainability across multiple sectors.

Potential participants were identified through LinkedIn by searching the initiatives page. On the initiative's LinkedIn page, 672 associated members were listed as publicly affiliated with the initiative, as they had displayed the initiative badge or referenced their affiliation in their profiles (e.g., through headlines, summaries, or certifications). To refine the sample, only those whose profiles explicitly highlighted integrating sustainability as part of a procurement and supply chain-related role were included. The initiatives page analytics revealed that 463 of the associated members were involved in purchasing or operations (while the other categories included sales, marketing, media and communication, just to mention a few). Upon further screening roles such as researchers, sustainability officers, and consultants were excluded, as their primary responsibilities were not directly tied to procurement practices. The sample was further limited to individuals who had been in their roles for at least one year, ensuring they had sufficient experience to provide meaningful insights into embedding sustainability within their organisations. After excluding an additional 105 individuals who did not meet these criteria, the resulting sample consisted of 358 participants. To capture diverse perspectives, the sample was not restricted to senior professionals. Including individuals in various levels of their careers allowed for exploration of how sustainability is integrated across different levels of decision-making and operational responsibility. Given the global nature of the initiative, the sample was not limited by industry or region, seeking to uncover a wide range of perspectives from diverse industries and geographic contexts.

In total 117 procurement professionals, who were identified as members of this initiative were contacted via LinkedIn. Of these, 31 agreed to participate. During the interview process, participants were asked to recommend colleagues or contacts who also met the study criteria, leading to the recruitment of an additional 5 participants through snowball sampling. This process resulted in a total sample of 36 participants (see table 1). The interviews were conducted between June and August 2024 and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants the freedom to share their experiences and insights while addressing targeted questions such as: “How did you become involved with sustainable procurement and what motivate(s/d) you?” “How do you incorporate sustainability into procurement practices?”; “What challenges do you encounter in promoting sustainable procurement?”; and “What sort of things have you done or currently do to influence others to embrace sustainable procurement?” The interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised to protect confidentiality. Collectively, the transcribed interviews provided over 250,000 words of primary data.

In addition to the interviews, supplementary data were gathered by reviewing 20 episodes of podcasts centred on sustainable procurement, as well as by attending 15 meetings, webinars, and conferences organised by the *Global SC* between February 2024 and September 2024 (see Table 2). The podcasts featured procurement professionals discussing their experiences, strategies, and reflections on embedding sustainability into procurement functions. Unlike the interviews, these podcasts were not guided by a structured protocol nor shaped by the researcher’s direct involvement in shaping the conversation. Nevertheless, the narratives captured through these discussions provided a richer, more diverse set of perspectives of how procurement professionals shape and construct sustainable procurement. Two primary podcasts were selected for this analysis. At the time of data collection, *Sense and Sustainability* had 54 episodes available, while *The Scope 3* podcast had 13 episodes. From these, 8 episodes of *Sense and Sustainability* and 12 episodes of *The Scope 3* were chosen as they featured procurement professionals engaged in substantive conversations and narratives about their motivations and purposeful efforts in constructing more sustainable procurement practices. Similarly, participating in the webinars, and conferences organised by the *Global SC* as a passive observer offered additional opportunities to observe real-time discussions and interactions between procurement professionals, thus further enriching the overall data and providing a more contextualised understanding of individual level insights on sustainable procurement initiatives.

Table 1- Data Collection Sources

Label	Title	Sector
SP-1	Director of Procurement	Professional Services
SP-2	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Construction
SP-3	Head of Procurement & Supply Chain	Technology & Communication
SP-4	Director Supplier Social Responsibility	Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare
SP-5	Head of Procurement Operations	Financial Services
SP-6	Director of ESG & supply chain	Retail
SP-7	Supply Chain Manager	Construction
SP-8	Global Procurement Lead	Professional Service
SP-9	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Financial Service
SP-10	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Professional Service
SP-11	Sustainable Procurement Lead	Automotive
SP-12	Responsible Supply Chain Lead	Professional Service
SP-13	Sustainable Procurement Lead	Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare
SP-14	Senior Sustainable Procurement Manager	Construction
SP-15	Sustainable Procurement Lead	Technology & Communication
SP-16	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Media
SP-17	Global Head of Sustainable Procurement Supplier Management	Manufacturing
SP-18	Sustainable Procurement Manager	Construction
SP-19	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Professional Services
SP-20	Vice President Sustainable Supply Chain	Beauty and Cosmetics
SP-21	Buyer	Professional Services
SP-22	Buyer	Consumer Goods
SP-23	Procurement Analyst	Professional Services
SP-24	Director Supplier Sustainability	Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare
SP-25	Head of Procurement and Supply Chain	Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare
SP-26	Supply Chain Sustainability Leader	Technology & Communication
SP-27	Supply Chain &Procurement Director	Food Services
SP-28	Sustainable Procurement Director	Professional Services
SP-29	Procurement Sustainability Director	Manufacturing
SP-30	Global Sustainable Procurement Lead	Engineering
SP-31	Executive Vice President of Global Procurement	Retail
SP-32	Chief Procurement Officer	Manufacturing
SP-33	Global Procurement Director	Professional Services
SP-34	Green Procurement Specialist	Professional Services
SP-35	Global Procurement Manager, Partnership & Social Procurement	Manufacturing
SP-36	Sustainable Procurement Lead	Professional Services

Table 2- Additional Data Sources

Source	Details	Number
Global SC Webinars	Webinars aimed at empowering procurement professionals to integrate sustainability into their practices. They feature insights from experts	10

	and practitioners, offering practical guidance on implementing sustainability in procurement processes	
Global SC Meetings	Meetings that are often region or industry specific to allow procurement professionals to network, share challenges and best practices on embedding sustainability into procurement	4
Global SC Conference	24-hour virtual conference connecting global procurement professionals to celebrate progress and share insights on various topics surrounding sustainable procurement.	1
Sense and Sustainability Podcast	Series that features discussions with experts and influencers worldwide, addressing myths and sharing insights on sustainable procurement practices	8
The Scope 3 Podcast	Podcast series focusing on narratives of business leaders looking to share solutions, insights and best practices to address their scope 3	12

3.2 Data Analysis

The analysis was guided by the Gioia method, which provides a structured and rigorous approach to qualitative research, enabling the development of theoretical insights while staying grounded in participants' narratives (Gioia et al., 2013). The analysis was first conducted independently by the first author who began with open coding to capture descriptive, participant-driven terms and actions. Interview transcripts, observation notes from 15 meetings, and narratives from 20 podcast episodes were systematically reviewed. Each source was coded to reflect the participants' perspectives, capturing key elements such as their experiences, motivations, and challenges in advancing sustainable procurement. The process initially yielded 63 first order codes. The first author then revised and arranged the first-order codes by paying particular attention to repetitions and overlaps to ensure each code was distinct and retained 20 codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the second stage of analysis, first-order codes were grouped into higher-order themes identifying patterns and conceptual relationships across the dataset (Gioia et al., 2013). This process yielded 7 second order themes which were then distilled further into three aggregate dimensions. To ensure robustness, the second and third authors reviewed the codes, themes, and data structure. Additionally, a summary of the findings and data structure was shared with selected participants to validate interpretations, further enhancing the credibility and reliability of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Findings

Our study reveals that procurement professionals engaged in three intertwined forms of social symbolic work: *practice work*, *legitimacy work*, and *identity work.* Through their efforts to embed sustainability, they not only reshaped organisational processes but also redefined their own professional identities.

4.1 Practice Work

We found that procurement professionals engage in practices that are aimed at constructing new processes and (or) altering existing processes to embed sustainability which we refer to as practice work. This work was essential in helping procurement professionals in transforming abstract sustainability goals into practical, measurable actions that permeate the organisation's procurement function. We found that this was done through two ways: *creating* and *adapting*.

The first type, *creating*, involves the constructions of new tools, frameworks and systems that enable the procurement function to track, measure, and integrate sustainability more effectively. The second type we observed was *adapting* existing systems to incorporate sustainability goals. This approach involves modifying and improving established procurement processes rather than creating entirely new ones.

4.2. Legitimacy Work

Procurement professionals engaging in sustainable procurement must often legitimise new practices within their organisations. This work goes beyond advocating for change; it involves a series of deliberate and strategic actions that aim to anchor sustainability as a legitimate, rational, and valuable pursuit within procurement processes. The analysis revealed three ways that procurement professionals engaged in legitimacy work: *constructing narratives*, *mobilising support*, and *demonstrating validation.*

The first approach, constructing narratives, involved procurement professionals strategically shaping how sustainability is understood and valued within their organisations. These narratives help reposition sustainability "*from being a 'nice-to-have' initiative to a core part of the organisation's supply chain*" SP-1. In addition to constructing narratives, procurement professionals must mobilise support to ensure that their sustainability initiatives gain traction. This involves engaging both formal and informal networks within the organisation to gather momentum for change. Beyond the narratives and support, we found that these procurement professionals found ways to demonstrate that sustainable procurement initiatives deliver tangible value to the organisation. This form of demonstrating validation was essential to assist them in gaining credibility and broader organisational acceptance.

4.3 Identity work

We observed that procurement professionals engaging in sustainable procurement were not only reshaping organisational practices but also actively constructing and negotiating their professional identities. This process, which we term identity work, involves aligning personal values with professional responsibilities and projecting these identities within their organisations. Our analysis revealed two forms of identity work undertaken by procurement professionals: *aligning and projecting*. These processes reflect both the internal work procurement professionals do to reconcile their values with their professional roles, and the external efforts they make to be seen as strategic contributors to their organisation's sustainability goals.

The first form, identity alignment, refers to the internal efforts enacted by which procurement professionals reconcile their personal values with their professional roles. For many, sustainability is not just a professional requirement; it is also a deeply held personal commitment. The second form, *identity projection* involves the external presentation of this identity within the organisation. Procurement professionals actively work position themselves as key players in sustainability initiatives within their organisations. This projection allows them to shape how they are perceived by colleagues, leadership, and external stakeholders.

5. Discussion

This study sought to investigate how procurement professionals engage in purposeful actions aimed at shaping procurement processes towards sustainable practices. The findings revealed that procurement professionals engage in two intertwined forms of SSW that shape two different yet interrelated objects: the procurement practices and their own identities. The study demonstrates that these two objects are recursively connected, where efforts to shape one inherently influence the other (see Figure Error**! No text of specified style in document.**-1).

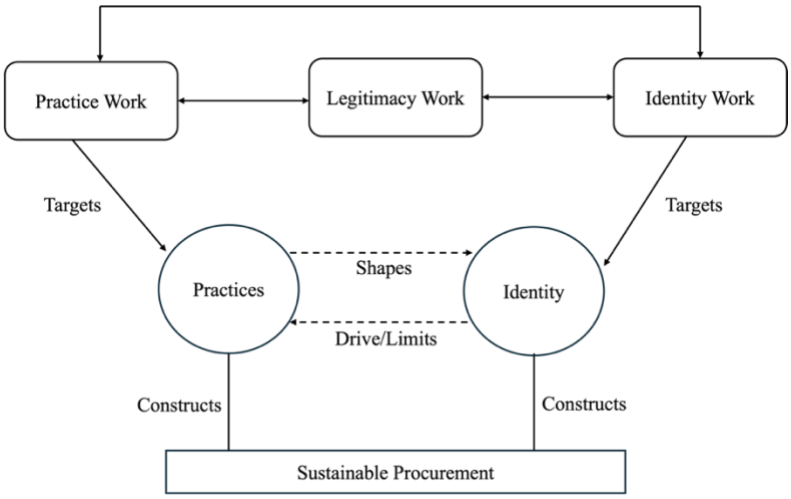


Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.**-1 Recursive Relationship between Practices and Identities in Construction of Sustainable Procurement**

5.1 Sustainable Procurement as a Multi-Object Construct

The study suggests that sustainable procurement has multiple interrelated social symbolic objects, and collectively, they contribute to its development as a legitimate practice. Previous studies have shown that social realities rarely constitute of only one element i.e. practice, institution, boundary, identities, rules etc., rather, these are made up of multiple distinct objects which each serve a unique purpose to make up a pattern of meaning and thereby constructing the social reality (Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Wu & Jia, 2018). For instance, in study of institutional change and stability in coastal forest industry in British Columbia, Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) show that the organisational field that guides the harvesting and decision making of the coastal forest industry comprised of mainly two objects, the boundaries and the practices, that co-exist in recursive relationship as part of the organisational field. Arguing that each object is distinct yet interdependent of the other, they demonstrate how each object represents different features of a social reality. In a similar vein, this study identified two objects that co-exist within procurement, thereby influencing how sustainability is embedded.

The first object that the study revealed are the procurement practices themselves which represent a tangible object of change. Practices have been defined as 'shared routines or recognised forms of activity that guide the behaviour of actors according to the requirements of specific situations' (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, p. 218). These practices are defined and shaped by a group rather than individuals as such they must conform to the social expectation set by the group (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). The results showed that the procurement process is characterised by long standing traditional routines and activities that have been deeply embedded within organisational operations. These routines, such as supplier selection, contract negotiation, and cost evaluation, often prioritise efficiency, cost-saving, and risk management. However, introducing sustainability into procurement disrupts these established practices, requiring significant adaptations to incorporate new sustainability criteria. Furthermore, the study revealed that procurement practices emerge not from isolated efforts but through a networked set of activities enacted by a diverse group of stakeholders, including budget holders, suppliers, and the procurement professionals. Each stakeholder brings unique resources, perspectives, and constraints that shape and define these practices. As such, embedding sustainability into procurement practices requires more than just changes within procurement processes. It requires a holistic shift in the routines and activities of all involved stakeholders. Procurement professionals can act as boundary spanners, that bridge the gaps between different meaning and interpretations inherent in the diverse stakeholders and facilitate a new shared understanding that translates into sustainable procurement. This is in line with previous research that have demonstrated that embedding sustainability into procurement and supply chains requires procurement professionals to adapt and shape the activities carried out by multiple stakeholders within the organisation and across the supply (Miemczyk et al., 2012). Additionally, they need to manage the tensions that arise due to the varied understanding and priorities regarding sustainability in the purchasing process (Fayezi et al., 2018). By adopting a social symbolic lens, the study highlights that these on-going interactions with and between stakeholders constitutes into the formation of new shared routines and activities which can replace the traditional practices inherent in procurement. Procurement professionals alter the practices, through by adapting and creating new practices and they create new expectations by engaging in legitimacy work. In doing so, sustainable procurement practices become a shared endeavour, shaped and reinforced through repeated interactions and mutual expectations with these stakeholders.

The second object that was revealed that contributes to the construction of sustainable procurement are the identities of the procurement professionals who engage in these boundary spanning roles. Identity has been defined as the 'as the various meaning attached to an individual [constructed] by the self and others' (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, p. 46). Traditionally, the roles and identities of procurement professionals were viewed primarily as transactional, focused on cost reduction, compliance, and operational efficiency (Ueltschy Murfield et al., 2021; Van Hoek et al., 2014). As a result, the procurement professionals themselves often reinforced this ideology by embodying a low-cost mentality and internalising a perception of their role as primarily operational or peripheral within the organisation (Van Hoek et al., 2014). This demonstrates the identities of the procurement professionals align were shaped by the way other stakeholders viewed them and how they perceived themselves too and as such leads to them enacting activities that align with this identity (Ellram et al., 2020; Ueltschy

Murfield et al., 2021). The study found that the identity of procurement professionals is another object that can be shaped and drives or limits how practices are shaped when embedding sustainability into procurement process. In addition, Figure 2 demonstrates practices and identity have a recursive relationship, wherein, practices can shape the identity of procurement professionals, and simultaneously, the identities can drive or limit the adaptation and development of these practices. =

5.2 Interplay of Practice work, Legitimacy work and Identity work

The findings suggest an interplay between practice work, legitimacy work, and identity work in the construction of sustainable procurement. Procurement professionals who engage in practice work to embed sustainability often encounter tensions between the traditional procurement routines and their evolving identities. To resolve this tension, they engage in identity work, aligning their sense of self with the new practices. This alignment strengthens their commitment to sustainability and drives further adaptation and innovation in practice work. Simultaneously, legitimacy work supports both practice and identity work by ensuring that the changes to procurement practices and professional roles gain acceptance and credibility among stakeholders. This interplay is recursive and non-linear, with changes in one area triggering shifts in the others. For example, procurement professionals may begin by reshaping procurement practices but find that their efforts are constrained without a corresponding shift in their professional identity. As they adopt sustainability-oriented identities, they become more effective in advocating for and legitimising these practices. Conversely, some professionals start by aligning their identity with sustainability and realise that this shift necessitates changes in their procurement practices to ensure congruence.

For instance, SP-15 described how their focus on decarbonisation influenced both their identity and their approach to procurement: "*I started seeing myself as a driver of decarbonisation rather than just a buyer. That shift in mindset pushed me to challenge our traditional supplier engagement practices and focus on sustainable alternatives*." This highlights how identity work can drive practice change, enabling procurement professionals to align actions with their self-perception. Similarly, SP-19 shared how initial efforts to change practices revealed a need for greater alignment with their professional identity: "*We revamped our supplier selection criteria to include sustainability metrics, but I realised that unless I fully embraced sustainability as part of my role, it felt like I wasn't the right person to lead this change*." This demonstrates how practice work can prompt identity work, reinforcing the professional's ability to lead sustainability initiatives effectively. Legitimacy work is equally critical in this interplay. SP-33, who collaborated with senior leadership, noted: "*I worked closely with the Chief Sustainability Officer to position sustainable procurement as a strategic priority. Once leadership endorsed it, it became easier to embed these practices across the organisation*." This underscores how legitimacy work provides the organisational support needed to sustain changes in both practices and professional identities. This concept of interplay aligns with previous studies, such as Gawer and Phillips (2013), who demonstrated how Intel adapted to industry changes by engaging in both practice work to reshape operations and identity work to align with evolving practices. This concept of interplay aligns with previous organisational and operations management studies. Similarly, Shourkaei et al., (2024) demonstrated how Patagonia's SSW primarily involved material work, such as redesigning supply chains to embed environmental sustainability. However, to diffuse and legitimise this material work, Patagonia also engaged in complementary forms of SSW such as discursive work with employees and customers, as well as relational work with business and non-business actors. In this study, procurement professionals similarly engage in these interconnected forms of work and the SSW lens provides a framework for examining the interaction between multiple objects that these professionals shape in constructing sustainable procurement. Their primary focus may initially be reshaping procurement practices through practice work, but this is complemented by legitimacy work to gain acceptance from internal and external stakeholders and identity work to align their professional roles with sustainability. For instance, when procurement professionals introduce sustainability criteria, they not only adapt practices but also craft narratives to legitimise these changes within their organisations and reframe their professional identities to position themselves as strategic contributors to organisational goals. This recursive interplay ensures that sustainable procurement does not emerge from isolated efforts but rather as a dynamic and collective process, shaped through the interrelation of these three forms of work and the multiple social-symbolic objects they construct and transform.

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'Like drinking water after being in the desert’: social-symbolic work of sustainable procurement professionals

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