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

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 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 practices (i.e., recycling, waste reduction and green 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. Research on social-symbolic work offers a potentially insightful lens to examine the construction and enactment of sustainable procurement by highlighting the value that social-

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symbolic objects play in the process. This perspective is particularly useful in revealing the interrelated dimensions of change such as how change in tangible elements of procurement such as procurement frameworks may prompt change in intangible but equally important elements such as supplier relationships. It presents an opportunity to examine how the intentional actions of procurement professionals serve as a bridge between tangible practices and the social construction of ideas and objects in organisational life, ultimately shaping how sustainable procurement is understood and embedded. Our study asks the question of "*How do procurement professionals engage in social-symbolic work to construct and embed sustainability within organisational procurement practices?*"

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.

Moreover, other aspects of organisation work and self-work have also featured within the field for decades but just have not been theorised as social symbolic work. For instance, several studies on organisation work have focused on the relational aspects of procurement, arguing that one of its strengths is the ability to take on a boundary spanning role (Ellram et al., 2020) to create value for organisations and its network (Boruchowitch & Fritz, 2022). As such, scholars have explored what competences are required for these professionals to efficiently and effectively build relationships which falls into the self-work category (Bals et al., 2019; Schulze et al., 2019). For instance, Schulze and colleagues (2022) in their development of a sustainable sourcing competence model found 'social oriented sustainable purchasing and supply management (SPSM) competences' which were defined as 'competences that enable the interaction with others to cope with sustainability issues, including the willingness and ability to experience and shape relationships to foster SPSM'. However, relational aspects of the purchasing and supply management is representative of only one dimension of social symbolic objects in the field, to gain a more comprehensive understanding, applying the SSW lens can

facilitate the exploration of various dimensions, including material and discursive elements. This approach can reveal how procurement can be leveraged as a strategic tool within organisations and the supply network. Procurement professionals are required to shape the narratives around purchasing (Knight et al., 2022), which have often been simplified to mere 'communication skills' (Schulze et al., 2022). Furthermore, they also shape the tools and frameworks that internal and external stakeholders adopt such as supplier code of conducts or monitoring and evaluation tools commonly coined in supplier selection and supplier relationship development (Agrawal & Lee, 2019; León Bravo et al., 2022).

This study adopts the SSW perspective in the context of sustainable procurement. Since its introduction, procurement professionals have been challenged to change and reshape traditional procurement practices to embed principles rooted in sustainability. This transformation necessitates a multifaceted understanding of how procurement operates as a social-symbolic object, encompassing not only relational dynamics but also the material and discursive dimensions that influence procurement processes. By applying the SSW lens, our study shows how procurement professionals can strategically embed sustainability into organisations' procurement and supply chain function by influencing the narratives, developing effective tools and frameworks, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

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.

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 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.

3.2 Data collection

A purposive sampling approach (Patton, 1990) was adopted to identify procurement professionals affiliated with Global SC whose roles explicitly involved sustainability-related responsibilities.

Potential participants were identified through LinkedIn by searching the Global SC's page. From the 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

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

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.

Although a LinkedIn Premium subscription was utilised to maximise outreach, the platform constraints on contacting individuals outside of one's network restricted the total number of professionals that could be approached. Consequently, 117 procurement professionals were contacted, of whom 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**	Gender	Years of Experience in Procurement	Location
SP-1	Director of Procurement	Professional Services	Male	25 years	UK
SP-2	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Construction	Female	10 years	UK
SP-3	Head of Procurement & Supply Chain	Technology & Communication	Male	15 years	UK
SP-4	Director Supplier Social Responsibility	Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare	Male	14 years	UK
SP-5	Head of Procurement Operations	Financial Services	Male	9 years	UK
SP-6	Director of ESG & supply chain	Retail	Male	29 years	UK
SP-7	Supply Chain Manager	Construction	Female	5 years	UK
SP-8	Global Procurement Lead	Professional Service	Male	15 years	Netherlands
SP-9	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Financial Service	Male	5 years	UK
SP-10	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Professional Service	Female	7 years	UK
SP-11	Sustainable Procurement Lead	Automotive	Female	1 year	UK
SP-12	Responsible Supply Chain Lead	Professional Service	Female	2.5 years	UK
SP-13	Sustainable Procurement Lead	Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare	Female	2 years	UK
SP-14	Senior Sustainable Procurement Manager	Construction	Female	4 years	UK
SP-15	Sustainable Procurement Lead	Technology & Communication	Female	12 years	UK
SP-16	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Media	Male	3 years	UK
SP-17	Global Head of Sustainable Procurement Supplier Management	Manufacturing	Female	11 years	UK
SP-18	Sustainable Procurement Manager	Construction	Female	1 year	UK
SP-19	Sustainable Procurement Specialist	Professional Services	Male	33 years	Belgium
SP-20	Vice President Sustainable Supply Chain	Beauty and Cosmetics	Male	27 years	USA
SP-21	Buyer	Professional Services	Male	2 years	UK
SP-22	Buyer	Consumer Goods	Male	2 years	UK
SP-23	Procurement Analyst	Professional Services	Male	3 years	UK
SP-24	Director Supplier Sustainability	Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare	Female	12 years	USA
SP-25	Head of Procurement and Supply Chain	Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare	Male	6 years	Kenya
SP-26	Supply Chain Sustainability Leader	Technology & Communication	Male	3 years	Germany
SP-27	Supply Chain &Procurement Director	Food Services	Female	1.5 years	UK
SP-28	Sustainable Procurement Director	Professional Services	Female	9 years	UK
SP-29	Procurement Sustainability Director	Manufacturing	Female	9 years	Switzerland
SP-30	Global Sustainable Procurement Lead	Engineering	Female	2 years	UK
SP-31	Executive Vice President of Global Procurement	Retail	Male	10 years	USA
SP-32	Chief Procurement Officer	Manufacturing	Male	30 years	UK
SP-33	Global Procurement Director	Professional Services	Female	14 years	UK
SP-34	Green Procurement Specialist	Professional Services	Female	13 years	UK

SP-35	Global Procurement Manager, Partnership & Social Procurement	Manufacturing	Female	11.5 years	Czechia
SP-36	Sustainable Procurement Lead	Professional Services	Female	14 .5 years	UK

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 and practitioners, offering practical guidance on implementing sustainability in procurement processes	10
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

3.3 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 (see Figure 1). 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).

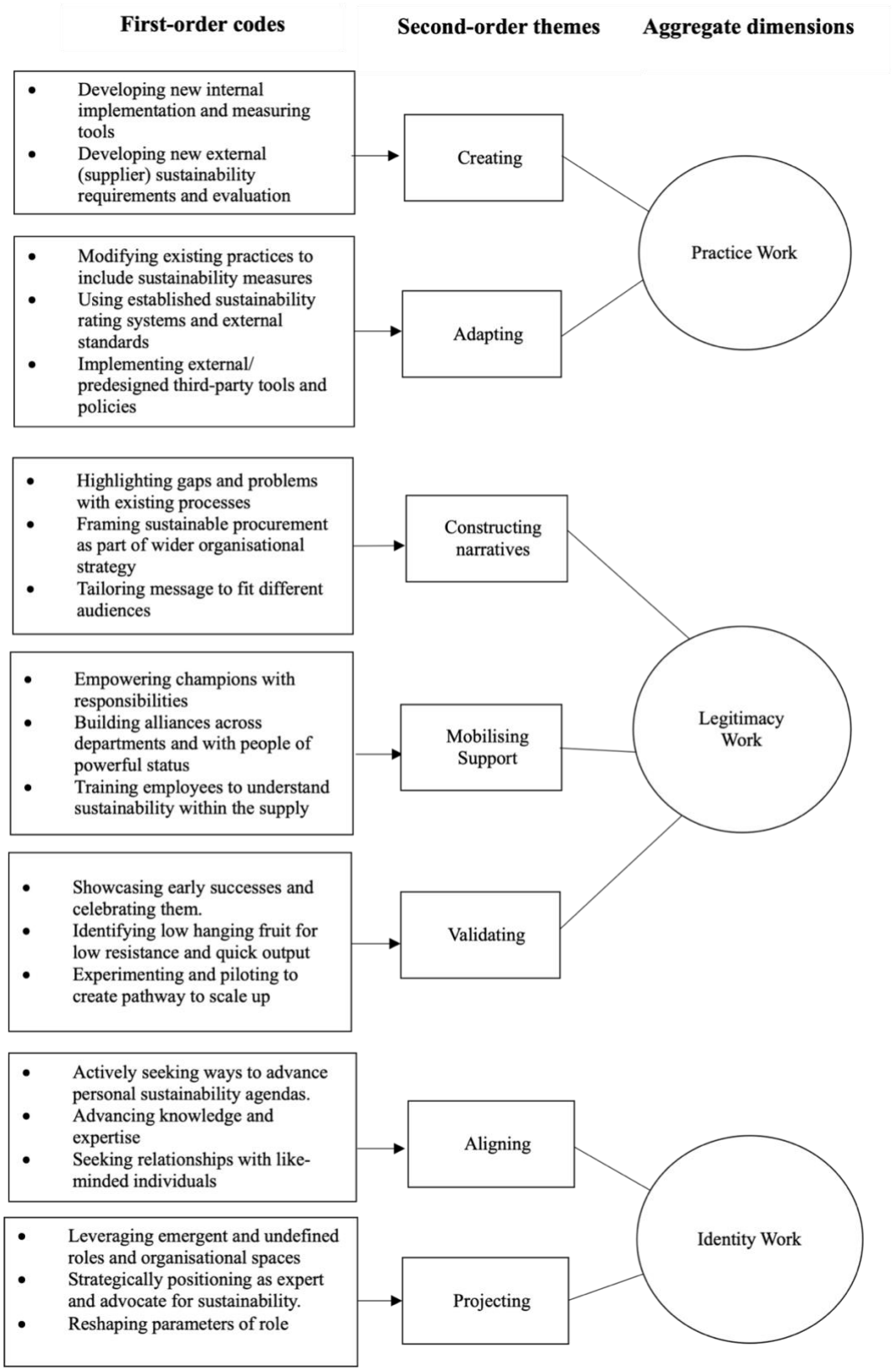


Figure 1- Data Structure

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. Many procurement professionals expressed the need to develop new mechanisms when existing tools proved insufficient for capturing complex sustainability metrics. We found that this often involved "*experimenting and DIY… to make [tools] that work*" (SP-15).

Creating new tools allows professionals to tailor sustainability practices to their organisation's specific needs, making abstract goals like '*reducing carbon emissions or minimising waste more actionable and trackable*' (SP-2). This process often begins with piloting smaller initiatives before scaling them into formal policies. In *The Scope 3 Podcast* (Episode 13), a Responsible Business Manager in the UK finance sector described how she developed a sustainability schedule to help her organisation address two-thirds of its suppliers' emissions. She started by integrating the schedule into contracts with 20 suppliers, requiring them to set their own science-based targets, record emissions, and report progress. The pilot aimed to gauge supplier reactions and refine the approach based on real-world feedback. However, the results exceeded expectations, with suppliers responding more positively than anticipated. As a result, the initiative was formally embedded into procurement processes, with additional adjustments to account for supplier size. Small and medium-sized suppliers were required to track Scope 1 and 2 emissions, while larger suppliers were expected to cover Scope 3 emissions as well.

The creation of tools like dashboards or performance tracking systems enables procurement professionals to materialise sustainability into concrete metrics. In doing this they make it accessible to non-experts within the organisation and foster transparency and accountability across departments. For example, a procurement sustainability director in manufacturing sector, SP-29, described how she created a new dashboard to visualise scope 3 emissions in order to help people in the organisation understand complexities of sustainability data and its impact on procurement decisions. She explained that by integrating real-time data and linking emissions figures directly to procurement choices, the dashboard shifted conversations from compliance-driven reporting to proactive decision-making. Procurement teams could now see how different suppliers contributed to overall emissions, allowing them to prioritise sustainability in supplier selection and contract negotiations. To make the data more tangible, the visuals were benchmarked against easily understood metrics, such as the equivalent number of trees saved or the reduction in car miles driven, helping non-experts grasp the real-world impact of procurement decisions:

> "*So I had to build a dashboard to show the scope 3 emissions in a way that people could visualise it…so I worked with a designer to illustrate the like impact by using relatable metrics, like the number of trees saved or the reduction in car miles driven… a certain percentage of emissions is then linked it to the data we have on our suppliers… so at least everyone internally can relate to it and now [the dashboard]'s like the most treasured thing because people can see how it all works*" (SP-29)

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. We observed that one common way procurement professionals engaged in adaptation is through the modification of existing procurement policies and evaluation frameworks. SP-21 highlighted the need for continuous refinement of policies to keep pace with evolving sustainability goals:

> "*The policies were already developed and set in place, so all I and the rest of the team needed to do was just implement and then take over, maybe pass on some improvement.*" (SP-21)

We observed that through adaptation, procurement professionals can effectively implement sustainability within the parameters of existing systems, making incremental changes that gradually align with evolving goals. However, in cases where deeper integration of sustainability is required, professionals must go beyond incremental improvements and strategically modify core evaluation mechanisms. A good example of this is expressed by SP-26, a supply chain sustainability leader working in the technology and communications sector who discussed how the procurement team adapted the supplier evaluation process by incorporating environmental performance into their pricing system. Suppliers with poor environmental scores would have their prices artificially inflated, while those with strong sustainability performance received price reductions. This method subtly encouraged procurement professionals to favour sustainable suppliers without overhauling the existing evaluation supplier evaluation process, demonstrating how sustainability can be embedded directly into financial decision-making:

> "*So, say somebody has a price of like 100, but they got a really terrible score in terms of environmental criteria. We would artificially make them 10% more expensive or something... so in the end the people will not choose them*." (SP-26)

In doing so, procurement professionals ensure that sustainability remains a key factor in supplier selection, even when cost is the dominant consideration. SP-26 noted that the system was designed to avoid complexity, which can lead to resistance or what he referred to an "*organic rejection*". In this case, adapting existing pricing mechanisms to incorporate sustainability scores allows procurement professionals to influence purchasing decisions in a way that feels natural to stakeholders, ensuring sustainability is not sidelined during supplier selection. He explains:

> "*Instead of creating something new for them to follow, this was kind of integrating the sustainability into the way that they're currently working*." (SP-26)

We also observed that procurement professionals also adapted their practices by implementing of external tools and frameworks that support the integration of sustainability into procurement processes. We found that procurement professionals often turned to established industry standards and certifications to guide their sustainability efforts. By adopting external standards, procurement professionals can align their sustainability initiatives with globally recognised benchmarks, such as those provided by '*EcoVadis or the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP)*' SP-11. These frameworks provide structured methodologies for assessing and managing sustainability across the supply chain, allowing procurement professionals to hold suppliers accountable and report on progress in a transparent and standardised manner.

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). This approach strongly aligns with the discursive elements as it involves shaping how procurement is viewed by using narratives. Our data revealed that one of the ways these professionals did this was by identifying inefficiencies or gaps in the current procurement processes and presenting these as problems that can be solved through sustainability initiatives. This reframing shifts the focus away from "*traditional cost-saving measures*" (SP-14) and introduces sustainability as a strategic solution to deeper structural issues. For example, SP-2, a sustainable procurement specialist, described how he reframed a cost-saving waste reduction initiative during a pivotal meeting with the board of directors. SP-2 had been invited to the meeting after the organisation faced mounting external pressure to improve its sustainability performance. Initially, the board was keen to highlight the success of a recent waste reduction initiative, positioning it as a significant achievement in the company's sustainability journey. However, SP-2 used the opportunity to challenge this narrative by questioning the procurement decisions that had led to the waste in the first place:

> "*I went in and said 'that's great you've saved a bit of money, but why are you creating that waste in the first place? Then later when the [procurement] team went back to the supplier, and asked them if they can do this, the supplier said, 'well if you'd have come to us in the 1st place, we could have made you a custom [product] because you're such a big customer.*'" (SP-2)

In shifting the narrative from cost savings to addressing inefficiencies at their source, SP-2 positioned sustainability as a tool for systemic improvement, rather than a reactive measure. This reframing narrative allows procurement professionals to present sustainability not as an additional burden but as a solution. They also use this reframing as a way to demonstrate missed strategic opportunities that can negatively affect the organisations competitive position. Procurement professionals construct these narratives in ways that "*resonate with the audience*" (SP-11), who are often the decision-makers by building a 'businesses case'. SP-8 explains "*You need to show the business case. You need to show the whole picture to the user*". As such, procurement professionals strategically connect sustainability with factors that matter to organisational leaders.

Beyond rational arguments, procurement professionals also engage emotions to drive buy-in, recognising that sustainability narratives need to inspire rather than just inform. This perspective was echoed in *The Scope 3 Podcast* (Episode 11), where a director of supplier relationship management in the financial sector in Canada described the importance of framing sustainability in a way that captures emotions and inspires engagement. She reflected on how procurement professionals are often overwhelmed with hundreds of pages of contracts and operational tasks, leaving little space for broader strategic thinking. As such during her first years of sustainable procurement in her organisation, she sought to connect with her team

members by repositioning their role as procurement as the potential to create impact. She emphasised:

> "*When we look at procurement professionals, they have hundreds of pages of contracts that they have to go through on a daily basis, this is one small piece of what they have to absorb and know, and be able to influence with the suppliers…One of the biggest things I talked about in the beginning is, did you ever think about the power of procurement to change the world? Sometimes in our day jobs we can get really caught up in just do do do go go go satisfy. Its about you know comply instead of innovation. When we think about twisting it and being like you can leave your job at the end of the day and know that you had a part in changing something and having a real impact, starting from there kind of build inspiration, engagement and buy in*." (The Scope 3 podcast, episode 11)

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. This is often a behind-the-scenes process where relationships are cultivated to ensure a base of support exists before a project is publicly advocated particularly in instances where they are unable to secure dedicated resources and budgets. This process is rarely immediate and often involves a long period of dialogue, socialisation, and training to gain support. As a procurement sustainability director in manufacturing sector explains, "*You know, when you work at a company, programmes don't just start. So I would say there was like kind of a year of talking and socialising and trying to get like the whole plan situated* " (SP-29). We found that procurement professionals strategically identify allies who assist them in experimenting, adopting, adapting or simply advocating the sustainable practices particularly when they are not in positions of power within the organisation. A compelling example of this is seen in SP-35, a global procurement manager in the manufacturing sector, who successfully built a network of regional advocates to advance sustainability goals despite operating without direct authority or budgets. Recognising the challenges of working across a geographically dispersed organisation, SP-35 took a collaborative approach by identifying individuals in key regions who were passionate about sustainability, even though it was not part of their formal KPIs. SP-35 explained:

> "*I am not at director level where I have the influence and the resources and the budgets… What I did is getting champions who are made about the topic in the regions of focus. Yeah, well, as much as it was not on their KPI, there was no number on their KPI. I will go and find who in Kenya, who in South Africa, who in Thailand, etc. who is passionate about the topic. Can we bring them on board? Can they support with the baselining? Can they support with the local advocacy? Can they sort of engage the local teams when they're doing their tenders to include diverse businesses within the tender.*" (SP-35)

Through spreading out the advocacy across regions or departments, procurement professionals create a grassroots network of champions, ensuring that their initiatives do not rely solely on "*top-down endorsement but are supported across [all levels of the] organisation*" (SP-5). In addition, we also observed that the procurement professionals also deliberately establish relationships with individuals with power (i.e. those on the board of directors) who can become allies in advancing sustainability within procurement. For instance, SP-33 strategically partnered with the Chief Sustainability Officer at her company after realising her potential to support her change initiatives:

> "*When [the Chief Sustainability Officer] joined, she completely transformed how sustainability was perceived at the organisation…She strategically repositioned the social impact agenda and somehow managed to like manoeuvre herself in the organisation and promote the role that she had up onto the board… and back then I was trying to grow the remit of my team, of which sustainability was top of my list so I was really trying to use [the Chief Sustainability Officer] to my advantage, so I partnered with [her]. Like I kind of, you know, made friends with her if you like. But I really did that sort of like that corporate networking to make sure that she knew who I was. She trusted me, she respected me... So that when I went to ask for resources [for my team], it wasn't just me asking on my own, I had her like support as well.*" (SP-33)

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. Our data showed that in environments where sustainable procurement is met with scepticism, procurement professionals often focus on delivering quick wins to demonstrate immediate value. SP-5 highlights this strategy, describing how they focused on early results:

> "*The way that I operate, when I start something new, especially if I'm doing it off the side of my desk, so I don't have the budget for it, or there is some scepticism at an executive level, I identify which things I can hit quickly. So where can I start to deliver value fast?*" (SP-5)

Moreover, beyond delivering quick wins, some professionals ensure these successes are celebrated to further cement the initiative's momentum and visibility across the organisation. While other professionals mentioned starting small and piloting in order to minimise rejection and showcase viability, for instance, SP-15 recently convinced her organisation to include shift from compliance and risk strategy to a more proactive approach by onboarding diverse suppliers and explained how to she convinced her board through piloting smaller spend categories. She explained: "*I'm taking baby steps to convince them, so I had a couple of smaller pilots to try to see how can we work with them [diverse suppliers], because frankly, I think we are too big and I had to minimise the risk of it being shut down completely*". This approach assists the procurement professionals in collecting evidence that can be presented to a wider audience, as SP-6 noted: *"I use data I get from any small pilot... so we use logic and emotion to influence people… I made sure to celebrate every success publicly."* Publicly acknowledging and celebrating each achievement helped these procurement professionals build credibility and also galvanise further support and excitement around their sustainable procurement initiatives, turning small wins into a broader organisational movement.

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. This is evident in the narrative shared in the *Sense and Sustainability podcast* (Episode 36) by a sustainable procurement specialist working in a laboratory setting. She described how her dedication to sustainability in the science field stems from her childhood interests and a deep connection to the natural world, saying "*If I go way back, even as a child, I have always had a connection with the earth and while other children were playing on the beach, I was kinda that child who was instead picking up trash*" (Sense and Sustainability, Episode 36). Such accounts illustrate how personal values rooted in early experiences can profoundly shape professional identities, motivating individuals to integrate sustainability into their work and champion its importance within their organisations. We found that these professionals engaged alignment efforts to integrate these personal beliefs into their daily work, allowing their professional responsibilities to reflect their ethical convictions and desire to create social and sustainable impact. For instance, a director of supplier social responsibility in pharmaceuticals and healthcare sector, describes how his personal life and professional responsibilities began to intersect in a meaningful way:

> "*So I kind of had this, there was this amazing crossover between home and work. For me, that actually comes through because 12 years ago my eldest son was born and when he was diagnosed with autism at the age of three and you know, you start it kind of makes you think a little bit about as a parent about things like employment opportunities. So I got very interested in autism and sort of start learning about autism and it's very it's fascinating. It's also extremely depressing 85% of people with autism are unemployed, yet many are very willing and able to work... I then learned about social enterprises that employ people with autism… so working in procurement I kind of started thinking about this as a bit of a, you know, where work and home and everything started connecting*." (SP-4)

We also observed that such personal experiences serve as motivation for these individuals to engage in deeper work to action their personal goals within their work by finding networks and colleagues who possess similar values so that they learn from them. For instance, a sustainable procurement lead working in the technology and communication sector recalls struggling to make progress in her organisation and needed to find a way to validate her interests, so she resorted to joining a network of procurement professionals that are interested in sustainability:

> "*I wasn't fitting in… so I started doing research to see if I can find other people who have been in a similar position or at least have the same passion as me so that's how I found [Sustainable Network], So they have some amazing webinars that you know people like me are talking about what have they done? You can steal some of their ideas but it also helped me realise that I can actually do this and found really good friends that I connect with…*" (SP-15)

SP-15's experience reflects a broader pattern we observed in discussions during in some of the *Global SC* meetings, where procurement professionals articulated how the initiative served as critical space for identity formation and reinforcement. Many participants described this initiative as more than just professional affiliation and that it functioned as

safe space for identity negotiation, where they could express their sustainability commitments as well as learn how to navigate change without the resistance or scepticism often encountered in their respective organisations. In addition to finding social relations with people that aid them in aligning their sustainability values with their identities, we also observed that these professionals sought to deeply interweave sustainability through all parts of their life. A vice president of sustainable supply chain in the beauty and cosmetics sector expressed how he ensures that his behaviour in his personal life reflects his sustainability values, which he then carries into his professional life:

> "*So I personally believe sustainability should not be a KPI. It should be a personal drive for everyone to achieve. I strongly believe the way how you behave or act in your personal life will affect how you perform your job or the way how you perform your job at your workplace.*" (SP-20)

Similarly, a buyer working in the consumer goods sector shared how his sustainability work has profoundly transformed both his professional and personal life. The responsibilities he has embraced in his role have reshaped his perspective, influencing not only his ways of working but also his identity and lifestyle choices. Despite having limited authority within the organisational hierarchy, he remains committed to practising sustainability within the boundaries of his role, such as prioritising local sourcing to reduce environmental impact. This professional commitment has also inspired significant changes in his personal life. He shared how he has adopted sustainable habits, including becoming vegan to minimise his carbon footprint and relying on local transportation or walking whenever possible. By aligning his personal values with his professional responsibilities, he demonstrates how sustainability work can extend beyond the workplace, creating a sense of purpose and integrity that influences all aspects of his life.

> "*I mean it brought changes in me in my ways of working, even as a person…this role has changed me a lot and this has been the learning curve that I decided to follow...sourcing locally isn't one of my KPI's…but I ensure to find a local supplier whenever I can… even in my personal life, my electricity and things I buy, I look for renewable energy and recyclable stuff… I have recently even changed my diet… now I try to eat more plant-based meals… it opened my eyes to the impact I can make…so even in work if I'm in a role then sustainability would be my backbone, so anything and everything would be driven by sustainability, whether I have the opportunity to use sustainable procurement. I'll make sure that I'll create one. So that is what I drive myself to do.*" (SP-22)

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. We observed that one of the ways procurement professionals did this was through leveraging on emergent or unstructured roles to create new career paths around sustainability. In these fluid spaces, where traditional boundaries and expectations may not yet be established, professionals have the flexibility to shape their roles and how they are viewed by others. A director of supplier sustainability working in the pharmaceuticals sector exemplified this when she took ownership of an emerging sustainable supply chain programme in her organisation, which had very few formal expectations. By shaping the programme to reflect her sustainability values, she effectively projected herself as a leader in sustainability:

"*It was just a kind of beginning programme, so they weren't looking for anybody with expertise... I had a lot of questions about why things are cheaper, and these are not questions that anybody wanted to ask or cared about earlier in my career. But it really bothered me. So, when this programme came up and no one wanted to do it, I took it and thought, 'yes, this is exactly what I've been looking for... I used this as an opportunity to make the changes I wanted to see.' I describe it as like it was like drinking water after being in the desert*" (SP-24)

In this way, SP-24 strategically used an undefined role to project herself as a sustainability advocate, embedding sustainability into her professional identity and signalling her leadership in this area. A supply chain and procurement director working in the food services sector actively projected her identity as a sustainability leader during the hiring process for her current role, ensuring that sustainability would be embedded in her responsibilities from the outset. Although sustainability was not originally part of the role's formal requirements, she recognised an opportunity to shape the position to reflect her values and expertise. Rather than waiting until she was in the role to push for sustainability initiatives, she used the interview process to signal her commitment and negotiate sustainability as a core expectation.

"*So [during the interview] I said, 'look, I can help with making things more strategic and commercial etcetera, but I'm actually really passionate about this as well. Could I also bring that to the table?*'" (SP-27)

We also found that procurement professionals strategically reshape their roles to project their identities as sustainability leaders. SP-15, who is a sustainable procurement lead working in the technology sector, exemplifies this through her deliberate positioning as a champion of sustainable procurement. Rather than waiting for sustainability to gain traction within procurement, she actively crafted her professional identity around it, ensuring she was seen not just as a procurement professional, but as someone who drives sustainability. Although sustainability was initially a small part of her formal role, SP-15 made it the defining feature of her work. She embedded herself in environmental strategy discussions, ensured her contributions were highly visible, and positioned herself as the go-to expert for sustainable procurement particularly as her organisation sought to create a new decarbonisation framework. She explains:

"*When I joined, sustainability wasn't seen as a priority in procurement…In the early years, I was essentially running it alone while juggling other responsibilities. But when the company made its decarbonisation commitment, I seized the opportunity… I pushed to increase sustainability's weighting in supplier evaluations… I managed to get rid of 1/2 of my job so I was able to focus on...starting to build the [decarbonisation] framework because again these frameworks didn't exist and we had no external ones so I made sure to show them that I can do it… now my role has completely change so I have freedom to drive sustainability in procurement*" (SP-15)

This was not simply about making sustainability more legitimate in procurement. It was about ensuring that she, personally, was recognised as a sustainability leader.

5. Discussion

Our study sought to investigate how procurement professionals engage in purposeful actions aimed at shaping procurement processes towards sustainable practices. Our results revealed

that procurement professionals engage in two intertwined forms of social symbolic work that shape two different yet interrelated objects: the procurement practices and their own identities. We demonstrate that these two objects are recursively connected, where efforts to shape one inherently influence the other (see figure 2).

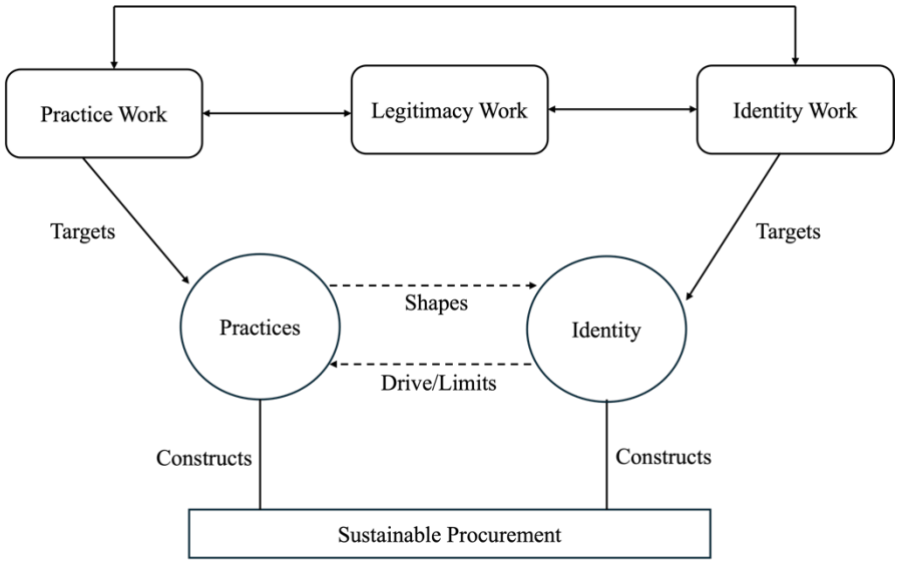


Figure 2- Recursive Relationship between Practices and Identities in Construction of Sustainable Procurement

5.1 Sustainable Procurement as a Multi-Object Construct

Our study suggested 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, our study identified two objects that co-exist within procurement, thereby influencing how sustainability is embedded.

The first object that our 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). In our study we found 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, we observed 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 the procurement function. 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, our 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 we observed 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). Our 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. For instance, SP-23, a procurement analyst described how they had little prior exposure to sustainable procurement but became deeply engaged with it after being tasked with supplier diversity and Scope 3 emissions work. Initially, these were just reporting requirements, but as they worked on implementation, they developed a stronger understanding of sustainability principles. "*So, this whole thing started just right about when I joined... at first, it was just about reporting spend, but the more I worked on it, the more I understood why it mattered... Now, when I'm running an RFP, I always try to include diverse suppliers not just because it's a KPI, but because I see the impact."* On the other hand , SP-17 described how her background in environmental science made it easier to incorporate sustainability into procurement. She noted that many procurement professionals lacked this foundation, which made it difficult for them to see beyond compliance. In contrast, she was able to embed sustainability naturally into procurement processes because it was part of her identity: "*I actually studied environmental science, so when I moved into procurement, sustainability was*

already a priority for me. I could see immediately where things needed to change, but for others, it was different. Many of my colleagues saw it as extra work rather than something that should be at the core of decision-making."

These examples highlight how procurement professionals' engagement with sustainability is not uniform but shaped by their prior identities and lived experiences. While some undergo an identity shift through practice-based learning**,** others enter procurement with a sustainability-driven identity, which enables them to integrate sustainability into procurement more instinctively. This dynamic highlights the importance of both practical exposure and individual identity in shaping procurement practices. The concept of identity as an object within purchasing and supply management has recently garnered attention. For instance, Bals and colleagues (2019) identified '*sustainability*' as one of the key competencies required for the future of purchasing and supply management. They also identified a new range of interpersonal skills that are closely connected to personal traits such as '*dealing with ambiguity*', '*self-confidence*' and '*curiosity*'. These future competencies represent the required shift in the not just the operational skills of PSM professionals but also signal the emergence of new identities that are a part of their personal lives. In another example, Ueltschy Murfield and colleagues (2021, p.8) proposed that PSM professionals need to 'work on recreating their self-identity within organisations in order to influence domains perceived as important by those in the C-Suite and other areas of the business.' Consistently, our study suggests that identity is an independent object that co-exists with practices within sustainable procurement.

5.2 Interplay of Practice work, Legitimacy work and Identity work

Our 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 social symbolic work 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 social symbolic work such as discursive work with employees and customers, as well as relational work with business and non-business actors. In our 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.

6. Theoretical contributions, practical implications and areas for future research

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it adds to the body of work on change in procurement and supply management (e.g., Luzzini et al., 2024; Pagell et al., 2010; Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014). by examining this change from an individual perspective, which has been less explored (Villena, 2019; Walker et al., 2012). Specifically, we explore the motivations and strategies of procurement professionals in embedding sustainability within the procurement function, showing how their agency drives change and enables purposeful actions to advance sustainability. Our findings align with studies highlighting the talents, skills, and personal attributes required for these changes (e.g., Bals et al., 2019; Goebel et al., 2018; Khan & Hinterhuber, 2024; Schulze et al., 2019) demonstrating that their motivations are key to this process.

Second, our study contributes to literature on sustainable purchasing and supply chains by examining how procurement professionals embed sustainability in their organisations. While extant studies have focused on minimising harm within supply chains (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014), we argue that achieving sustainability requires a fundamental shift in underlying norms and values, exploring systemic change (Knight et al., 2022; Luzzini et al., 2024). As a result, there has been an emerging trend of research exploring how to organisations adapt their purchasing function norms and values to create sustainability impact in society (Razmdoost & Alinaghian, 2024), and how they can diffuse these new norms embedded in sustainability across their supply networks (Miandar et al., 2024). By adopting a social symbolic work lens, our study identifies practices and identity as two distinct yet interrelated objects that constitute procurement. Building on works such as Van Hoek et al., (2014) and Ueltschy Murfield et al., (2021), who argue that practices and identities co-exist within the procurement function, we

show how sustainable procurement emerges from the recursive relationship between transforming practices and evolving professional identities.
Lastly, we contribute to the literature applying the institutional theory to explain change within operations and supply chain management (e.g. Aaltonen & Turkulainen, 2022; McLoughlin & Meehan, 2021; Razmdoost & Alinaghian, 2024) by identifying three forms of social-symbolic work: practice work, legitimacy work and identity work. We argue that procurement professionals engage in these three forms of social-symbolic work simultaneously in order to shape their practices and identities.

6.2 Practical Implications

Our study also offers several practical implications. Firstly, by demonstrating that construction of sustainable procurement involves two shaping both practices and identities, we bring to light the importance of addressing both in driving change. This suggests that in addition to updating and changing procurement policies and processes, organisations should also support the identity transformation of procurement professionals and other stakeholders that adopt these policies. This may require parallel investments in initiatives aimed at practice change such as introduction of new sustainability criteria and implementing monitoring systems and also initiatives aimed to facilitate and support the identity transformation such as mentorship programme, cross-functional sustainability projects, leadership and sustainability course enrolment. Similarly, this suggests that procurement professionals should actively work to align their identities to the new sustainability perspective and can internalise it by aligning it with their personal commitments. Secondly, our study provides practical implications for policymakers, educational institutions, and third-party organisations that play a role in supporting the development of procurement skills and sustainability competencies. Policymakers can facilitate this transformation by introducing standards and incentives that promote the adoption of sustainable procurement practices. This could include sustainability certification schemes for procurement professionals and funding for sustainability-focused training programmes. Educational institutions and professional bodies can contribute by designing curricula that balance technical procurement skills with an emphasis on sustainability, ethics, and leadership. For instance, embedding sustainability as a core component of supply chain management courses and offering specialised training in sustainable procurement can prepare the next generation of professionals to navigate and drive the dual transformation of practices and identities. Similarly, professional organisations can create peer networks and platforms for knowledge sharing, enabling procurement professionals to learn from each other's experiences and best practices.

6.3 Limitations and areas for future research

Our study and its inherent limitations offer a foundation for several compelling avenues of future research. First, while we identified the interplay between procurement practices and professional identities, a deeper exploration of how these dynamics unfold over time would enrich our understanding of sustainability integration. A longitudinal research design could capture the evolving nature of these interactions, particularly how initial shifts in practices influence long-term identity transformation, and vice versa. Second, our study focuses on the actions of procurement professionals, but it leaves room to examine the cognitive and emotional underpinnings driving these actions. Future studies could investigate how procurement professionals perceive, interpret, and reconcile tensions between cost-driven and sustainability-oriented procurement, offering insights into their decision-making processes. Finally, a more granular analysis of external influences, such as industry norms or regulatory

pressures, could uncover how these shape the social-symbolic work undertaken by procurement professionals.

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