

# **Socially Responsible Purchasing in the Supply Chain Industry: Meanings and Influences**

## **Abstract**

Organisations are increasingly expected to respond to societal and environmental issues within their supply chains. The nuances of this expectation necessitate the consideration of the disparities in corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices within supply chains. Drawing on the stakeholder theory, this paper examines the meanings and influences on socially responsible purchasing (SRP) in supply chains. It adopts an interpretivist qualitative methodology, relying on data from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with practitioners from multinational and indigenous organisations in Nigeria. Our findings present a useful understanding of SRP based on specific endogenous-level and exogenous-level influences. In particular, we develop an encompassing scope for SRP's meaning, outlining its key components, clarifying its boundaries, and highlighting inconsistencies in its description. Our study provides a fresh understanding of SRP, with attendant contributions to the broad literature on CSR, corporate governance, and supply chain management. It also offers insights to managers, purchasers, suppliers, financial analysts and policymakers in embedding SRP.

**Keywords:** Socially responsible purchasing, corporate social responsibility, endogenous-level influences, exogenous-level influences, supply chain, stakeholder theory

## 1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) implies that organisations, in addition to making profits, are expected to address societal and environmental issues (Johnston et al., 2019). Given the nuances of this expectation, there are disparities in CSR practices across firms and countries (Idemudia, 2011; Osemeke, Adegbite & Adegbite, 2016). The need to address these variations accelerates the emergence of innovative concepts, including socially responsible consumer behaviour (Han & Stoel, 2017), socially responsible supply (Quarshie, Salmi & Leuschner, 2016), and consumer social responsibility (Vitell, 2015). While the central incentive driving the emergence of these innovative social responsibility concepts lies in their distinctiveness, an alternative and interesting social responsibility theme is socially responsible purchasing (SRP) (Leire & Mont, 2010; Paulikas & Brazdauskaite, 2010). SRP seeks to infuse CSR orientation into purchasing and supply chain processes. Leire and Mont (2010) note that SRP focuses on how organisations source materials whilst adhering to sustainable practices, safety, and human rights at supplier plants. SRP offers a financial, strategic, and responsible organisational tool (Paulikas & Brazdauskaite, 2010), given its emphasis on the utilisation of the purchasing power of private and public sector organisations to acquire goods and services that engender positive social impacts (Lobel, 2006). Its implementation results in substantial supply chain transformation, as it prompts alterations to processes and systems for supplier selection, product design and maintenance (Fang & Zhang, 2018).

However, the SRP concept has attracted limited scholarly attention (Subramaniam, 2019). Thus, scholars (e.g., Deng & Xu, 2017; Lin & Niu, 2018; Mohammad et al., 2020) have called for further investigation into the social responsibility elements in supply and purchasing activities. While these calls acknowledge the limited understanding of the meaning and influences underlying SRP coupled with the increasing awareness of environmental sustainability, labour rights, and ethical business practices, a robust comprehension of SRP and its drivers is needed to guide stakeholders towards more responsible decision-making. By investigating these influences, we can identify the drivers and barriers to SRP adoption, inform policy-making, support the development of strategies that promote socially responsible and sustainable purchasing practices, and, more importantly, establish a suitable description of the concept that accommodates its key components. Therefore, drawing on the stakeholder theory with evidence from a developing economy, this research examines the question: *What does SRP mean for stakeholders in the Nigerian food purchasing and supply chain industry?*

This research adopts the food and beverage industry in a developing economy (Nigeria) as the study context. Nigeria is the largest economy in Africa and has attracted considerable traction among scholars investigating CSR (Amaeshi et al., 2016) and supply chain (Orji, U-Dominic & Okwara, 2022) concepts. Furthermore, the country's socio-economic attributes are similar to those found in many developing and emerging economies, hence, findings from this study have substantial generalisation prospects. Moreover, the food and beverage industry represents an area of business critical to human existence (Sperry, 2014) and relies on the planet's resources. Changes in consumer behaviour trigger significant pressure on the industry, especially in food security, distribution, wellness, wastage, delivery systems, labour standards, environmental degradation, source traceability and fair pricing (Lodorfos et al., 2018). Besides, government regulations significantly impact food manufacturers and their business strategies, and these regulations differ across markets (Lodorfos et al., 2018; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2020). Relying on semi-structured interviews with senior and middle-level managers in the Nigerian food and beverage industry, we find that experience, industry type, and the business environment influence participants' understanding of SRP. Furthermore, we unpack two categories of influences that shape the description and comprehension of SRP. First, we establish endogenous-level influences representing the internal elements organisations seek to exploit to achieve their SRP objectives. Second, we show how exogenous-level influences shape SRP conceptualisation. Unlike endogenous-level forces, exogenous-level factors embody external variables that oblige organisations to incorporate CSR attributes in their purchasing actions.

In achieving the above, this research contributes to the extant CSR and supply chain literature by articulating an empirical account of SRP practices. The study addressed the meaning of and influences on SRP relative to the success of organisational supply chains from a developing economy perspective. The study further offers a framework for SRP in the food and beverage sector, shedding valuable insights into its effective implementation. The article proceeds with a review of relevant theoretical and empirical literature to problematise our investigation, followed by a presentation of the methodology, findings, discussions and conclusion.

## **2. Theory and Literature Review**

Stakeholders represent persons or groups that can affect or be affected by organisations while pursuing their corporate interests (Freeman, 1984). The stakeholder theory stresses that wealth

is created, captured for, and distributed by various stakeholders (Johnson et al., 2017). In this way, the firm is considered as one actor among many others (Donaldson & Preston, 1995), with their interests aligning as well as opposing (Helmig, Spraul & Ingenhoff, 2016) in relation to organisational activities and objectives. Clarkson (1995) splits stakeholders into primary and secondary, with primary stakeholders (e.g., employees, directors, shareholders) having a greater ability to influence organisational outcomes through direct engagement with the organisation. In contrast, secondary stakeholders, such as the media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have indirect relationships with the organisation. Yet, they can influence corporations via campaigns and public opinions (Helmig et al., 2016).

Given the study's interest in understanding the meaning and drivers of SRP, it is pertinent to engage diverse stakeholders, hence the adoption of stakeholder theory. As Bonnafous-Boucher and Porcher (2010) note, stakeholder theory encompasses the interests of overlooked or under-represented actors who do not directly participate in corporate decision-making. The theory advocates a consciousness towards social responsibility that mandates organisations to support sustainable development (Schaltegger et al., 2017). The theory is institutionally embedded, and CSR is more closely linked to formal institutions of stakeholder participation (Brammer et al., 2012). Furthermore, stakeholder theory enables an understanding of the multifaceted aspects of CSR in ways that extend the focus of traditional management to integrate other stakeholders and respect societal expectations (Yekini, Adelopo & Adegbite, 2017). Therefore, through the interaction of buying and supplying organisations, SRP offers a focal point through which stakeholders influence policies and procedures for implementing social responsibility in purchasing and supply chain activities. As public awareness evolves through social changes, media influence, and cultural shifts, the power of stakeholders to demand socially responsible actions strengthens. In this sense, the stakeholder theory provides a strategic viewpoint that, despite being unorthodox, forms the basis of business ethics (Bonnafous-Boucher & Porcher, 2010).

The foregoing underpins the link between stakeholder theory and responsible purchasing. Hence, Haltsonen, Kourula and Salmi (2007) contend that stakeholder theory and responsible purchasing share a symbiotic relationship. While stakeholder theory posits that businesses should account for the interests of all parties impacted by their actions, Haltsonen et al. (2007) argue that responsible purchasing aligns with stakeholder theorising by recognising the impact

of procurement decisions on various stakeholders. When firms engage in responsible purchasing, they are compelled to consider the social, environmental, and ethical implications of their choices (Kogg & Mont, 2012; Ferri & Pedrini, 2018). This directly relates to stakeholders, including suppliers, employees, customers, communities, and future generations. By prioritising responsible purchasing, organisations can build stronger stakeholder relationships, mitigate risks, and enhance their reputation, ultimately aligning with stakeholder theoretical principles for long-term sustainable success.

Stakeholder theorising has also informed CSR scholarship. Reflecting on Hoffman's (2018) CSR paradox, CSR may not be just seen as the 'right thing to do' but can also be expressed as a win-win strategy leading to increased efficiency (Flores-Araoz, 2011; Rangan, Chase & Karim, 2012) among stakeholders and in corporate processes such as supply chains and purchasing. Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) and Bianchi, Bruno and Sarabia-Sanchez (2019) established that purchasers are affected most by the social activities of companies. Other studies (Butt, 2016; Öberseder, Schlegelmilch & Gruber, 2011; Castaldo et al., 2009) suggest that consumers' interest in firms' social behaviour impacts their purchasing decisions. Businesses are persuaded by societal pressures (stakeholders' demands), such that when transacting with their suppliers, they are obliged to address environmental (Xia et al., 2015; Lin & Niu, 2019) and social issues (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2020), such as slavery in the supply chain process (see Gold, Trautrim & Troddet, 2015). Graham (2020) emphasised the need for firms to develop capabilities to reduce negative environmental impact on their supply chain.

The supply chain is an "open and dynamic socio-economic system formed by the interactions among actors and stakeholders such as suppliers, producers/manufacturers, distributors, retailers ..." (Abbassi, 2017; p.262). Consequently, it is challenging for purchasing firms to detect exploitative practices along the chains, such as the possibility of slave labour (Gold et al., 2015). Stakeholder theorising can help capture innovative business practices related to sustainability and SRP in supply chains (Quarshie, Salmi & Leuschner, 2016), allowing a grasp of the roles and impacts of diverse stakeholders. This enables SRP to depart from the traditional purchasing activity, which merely describes the process of acquiring raw materials, components, products, services, or other resources from suppliers to empower such organisations to execute their productive activities (Ogunyemi, Ayios & Spiegler, 2016). In traditional purchasing, incorporating sustainability in the purchasing activity remains limited

and patchy, especially in the public sector (Leire & Mont, 2010; Preuss, 2007). However, Murray (2003) found that the extent of deploying and integrating social responsibility policies differs significantly among private sector organisations. The short-term cost implications of transforming existing supply chains impact organisations' adoption of sustainable practices (Blowfield & Murray, 2014; Gray, Adams & Owen, 2014).

Nonetheless, growing stakeholder pressure has led to organisations accepting sustainability practices and attempting to act responsibly at every level of their supply chain. This is captured in the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (Rendtorff, 2019; United Nations, 2023). While Rendtorff (2019) suggests that the SDGs are important for business ethics and CSR, van Weele (2010) notes that the fusion of sustainability and purchasing through SRP compels firms to account for environmental, social, ethical, and economic elements in managing the organisation's external resources. Such practices ensure that the supply of goods and services will provide value to the organisation and society. SRP utilises the purchasing influence of organisations to procure products and services that engender positive social effects. In that way, Leire and Mont (2010) explain that SRP accounts for the public consequences of an organisation's purchasing activity. The general significance of SRP enables the coalescing of human rights, safety, diversity, philanthropy, and community considerations (Carter & Jennings, 2004; Blount, 2021).

Undoubtedly, the descriptions of SRP in the literature continue to develop in reaction to shifts in the socio-economic sphere. Remarkably, this development has produced a glut of SRP narratives, creating opportunities for potential misunderstanding of the concept. Furthermore, these descriptions of SRP (see Lobel, 2006; Leire & Mont, 2010) are limited in scope. For example, the SRP descriptions provided by Leire and Mont (2010) do not sufficiently address critical environmental, social and ethical considerations when making a purchasing decision (Silvola, 2017; Hanaysha, 2018). Moreover, some elements in the SRP descriptions of Carter and Jennings (2004) and Lobel (2006) have found expression in the broader social sustainability literature. This warrants contestations among scholars and practitioners, given the need to stress the distinction between SRP and social sustainability purchasing. Drawing from Sarkis et al. (2010), a long-term orientation underpins social sustainability with respect to purchasing as it emphasises the management of purchasing activity while minimising damage to its social elements. In contrast, Lobel (2006) suggested that the operating locus of

SRP is narrower owing to its focus on ‘upstream life cycle stages’ production methods and conditions, such as employee rights, health and safety, minorities, gender, and modern slavery issues while paying scant attention to downstream elements, for example, environmental that impact assessment. The intersectionality of the elements in both SRP and social sustainability heightens the challenge of delineating a definition and scope for SRP.

A further area of contestation originates from the economic objective of organisations. Carter and Jennings (2004) posit that SRP serves as a vital source of organisational sustainable competitive advantage as firms pursue the maximisation of shareholder wealth. However, questions remain regarding the effect of sustainability processes on firm performance (Adegbite et al., 2019), with studies reporting positive, negative, as well as inconclusive relationships between corporate sustainability and financial performance (Alshehhi, Nobanee & Khare, 2018). As such, Carter and Jennings (2004) maintain that SRP consists of ‘stand-alone activities’ that may not broadly reflect the expectations of SRP. This way, SRP is not expected to focus primarily on improving corporate financial performance, even though companies with SRP are more likely to perform well in all dimensions, including financial performance (Clarkson, 1995; Waddock & Graves, 1997). However, reports of customers and suppliers pressurising organisations to embrace SRP may indicate that corporate managers’ understanding of SRP does not reflect its widely reported positive effect on corporate performance.

The stages of implementing SRP may also provide a basis for inconsistencies in the SRP literature. Leire and Mont (2010) articulated five steps: developing internal policies, setting purchasing criteria, applying assurance policies, managing supplier relations, and building internal SRP capacity. However, these stages discount the integration of the economic criterion into the various stages presented. Scholars have argued that robust SRP initiatives should reflect the overarching economic goal of the organisation (Maignan, Hillebrand & McAlister, 2002; Worthington et al., 2008) to extend the SRP horizon. Indeed, stakeholder relationships, which encompass interests such as SRP issues, have been critical to the success of contemporary organisations (Russo & Perrini, 2010).

This is especially important, given the dearth of research and limited understanding of SRP in weak institutional contexts, creating a challenging environment for corporate responsibility

(Amaechi et al., 2016). Weak institutional settings arise from specific combinations of societal values and cultural systems, local-level ecosystems, governance, and financial arrangements (Jamali & Karam, 2018). Associated outcomes include a lack of transparency, a shortage of reliable information, and unpredictable judiciaries and contract enforcement, to the extent that markets are poorly supported and trading risks are perceived to be higher (Lamin & Livanis, 2020). Hence, our research asks: *What does SRP mean for stakeholders in the Nigerian food purchasing and supply chain industry?*

### **3. Data and Methodology**

We adopt a qualitative approach (semi-structured, face-to-face interviews) to facilitate an in-depth exploration of SRP in Nigeria. The selection of organisations was purposive (Suri, 2011), as we focussed on firms that meet our defined characteristics, which include firms deploying SRP strategies in the Nigerian food and beverage sector. This sector has eight sub-sectors (alcoholic beverage, non-alcoholic beverage, confectionery, dairy product, processed food, oil and fats, fruits and vegetables, and mills and starch products). From these sub-sectors, we focused on five sub-sectors (alcoholic beverages, non-alcoholic beverages, confectionery, dairy products, and processed food) to ensure that samples were drawn from a representative population and to minimise bias when recruiting participants. These five sub-sectors include major multinationals and indigenous organisations with branches nationwide.

Table 1 shows the demographic information of each key informant, comprising thirty-one key informants (22 males and 9 females) from multinational and indigenous firms. The age range is from 28 to 57, with most respondents in the 38-47 age bracket. The key informants ranged from executive managers to staff level. Their departments cut across the purchasing, production & packaging, quality control, marketing/sales, health & safety, human resources, and finance units. Most informants had been in the organisation for 4 to 6 years, and all had at least a year on the job. This shows that most informants are experienced and can shed diverse, in-depth information on the subject matter. Table 1 summarises the data in percentage terms.

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Table 1 also shows that the majority of the key informants were male. This is because private companies are male-dominated compared to government parastatals. Many of the informants



were from the purchasing department. This can be attributed to the focus of the research, which investigates SRP in the supply chain process. The table also shows that more informants were at the managerial level and had long years of experience on the job. This data evidence the ability of the informants to give in-depth information to the interview questions since they have access to company information and activities. The chosen companies were primarily indigenous, as the research focuses on Nigeria. The sub-sectors that had the highest percentage were Confectionery and Non-alcoholic drinks. This is explained by the high demand for these products.

To recruit participants, we contacted individuals with appropriate profiles within these organisations through emails, telephone calls, personal contacts, and the snowballing technique.<sup>1</sup> Participants had to meet our predetermined characteristics, including holding a relevant position in the organisation, extensive work experience, and an understanding of SRP (Nakpodia & Adegbite, 2018). This procedure culminated in collecting data from employees (across different managerial levels) in twelve food and beverage companies, including nine indigenous organisations and three multinationals involved in manufacturing and delivering food and beverage products. The size of these organisations ranges from between 50 to 100,000 employees. To ensure the collection of rich data, we also interviewed employees of relevant regulatory organisations as we sought to uncover the multi-construction of the meanings of SRP across the industry. The interviews helped capture how respondents perceive, interpret and define SRP in their supply chain based on practices in their respective organisations. The semi-structured interview offered an effective means of collecting valuable data, including personal feelings, perceptions, and opinions. This approach also allowed us to ask detailed questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) about the complexities of SRP in the country's food and beverage sector.

We collected data from employees involved with SRP (including operational, middle-level, and executive staff members. Before the interviews, an interview guide was sent to potential participants, outlining the areas that would be covered during the interview (King, 1994). The interview guide also permitted participants to withdraw from the interview if they felt uncomfortable with the questioning. This helped address possible ethical concerns relating to a lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and possible deception (Diener & Crandall, 1978), anonymity, and confidentiality.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, pseudonyms (e.g., CAU1, PAU1, Mineg2)

have been used to conceal participants' identities. In sum, 29 interviews were tape-recorded as consent was granted, and detailed notes were taken in the other two cases, where consent was not given. After conducting the last (31<sup>st</sup>) interviews, we were satisfied that additional data collection was predictable and repetitive regarding the breadth and depth of participants' responses. At this data saturation point, we had learned and understood the SRP phenomenon to sufficiently address the research objectives (Mason, 2010; Nakpodia & Adegbite, 2018).

We used the content analysis methodology to analyse the data. Our data analysis strategy was inductive and interpretative, aimed at generating deeper insights into the meanings and contestations of the SRP concept. Elo and Kyngas (2005) note that using the conventional content analysis procedure is appropriate in studies exploring a phenomenon where prior knowledge is fragmented, as with SRP. Our data analysis process was split into three phases (see Figure 1). The first phase is data preparation, which helped familiarise ourselves with the data. This was done by repeatedly listening to the recorded interviews and transcribing them. The transcription was done manually, and the transcribed data were read repeatedly to check for errors and ensure completeness. The transcribed text was then loaded into NVivo software - a qualitative data analysis software that expedites a systematic analysis of qualitative data and allows effective data management. NVivo permits the comparison and cross-comparisons of codes and themes needed to generate more in-depth insights from the data and aids in articulating coding categories from the transcribed data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

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The second data analysis phase is the coding phase, involving data coding and categorisation. The first step here was open coding, where subcategories are developed. We turned to NVivo for an extensive iteration of the data during this step. Using the 'query' tool in NVivo, we generated a word cloud highlighting the most frequently-cited themes in the data. While these themes provided our first area of analysis, we employed these themes in building 'nodes', which allowed us to identify and bring together every response from interviewees relating to a specific theme (see Figure 1).

Once the subcategories were created and populated with appropriate responses, we proceeded to the second step, i.e., the axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where we reclassified

subcategories into more focused categories. We examined the relationship among the subcategories to facilitate the creation of categories. In the third step, we used selective coding methodology to generate a higher-level category. This step demands that we examine the relationship between the categories created in the second step and the articulation of the main categories therefrom. This step aided in categorising the primary drivers influencing the meaning and contestations in SRP practice. This step proceeds beyond the description of categories, allowing for the interpretation of emerging issues (Green *et al.*, 2007) as they relate to our research objective.

The final phase of our data analysis was the reporting phase. This phase depends on an abstraction procedure that articulates a general description of the research objective relying on the categories generated (Polit & Beck, 2004). This phase enabled the writing up of the results generated from the second data analysis phase. Based on the coding and categorisations, inferences were articulated by identifying subcategories with related characteristics, combining them and establishing the main categories from the linkages. The outcomes of the grouping and categorisation processes are reported in the next section.

#### **4. Findings**

From the data, we articulate two categories of influences (endogenous and exogenous levels) that underpin the understanding of SRP in Nigeria's food and beverage sector (Figure 2).

##### ***4.1 Endogenous-Level Influences***

These influences originate from the firm's internal capabilities and approach to SRP. They emerge from organisations' competencies and emphasise their SRP policies concerning their internal stakeholders. In Figure 2, we identify four endogenous-level influences, i.e., due process purchasing, avoidance of harm, health and safety, and responsible sourcing.

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##### ***Due Process Purchasing***

An essential factor in SRP is due process. Organisations are expected to ensure due diligence and comply with relevant standards. A purchasing manager emphasises this expectation:

*We source from local suppliers... However, they must be registered, have their certificate of incorporation and meet the standard requirements given by the company (Manager, Purchasing, CAUI, indigenous).*

The interviewees consistently referred to due process when discussing SRP activities in their organisations. They define ‘due process’ as a set of standards relating to behaviour, integrity, and procedures that must be adhered to in an organisation’s supply chain process.

*I see (SRP) as exhibiting integrity and transparency in the purchasing process and respecting the company’s principles, standards, and due process in achieving its purchasing objectives. (Senior Manager, Purchasing, AUBI, indigenous).*

This understanding of SRP moves the concept beyond the boundaries of a specific organisation as it shows that due process extends to the activities of suppliers and their impact on the quality of the final product and the speed of product delivery. SRP should seek to procure the materials when needed at the lowest costs and from a reliable source (van Weele, 2010; Wisner, Tan & Leong, 2014). Furthermore, an SRP process incorporating a due process methodology ensures the effective monitoring of suppliers and the provision of quality materials that satisfy legal and ethical principles. This, in turn, enhances an organisation’s capacity to conform to acceptable standards of social and professional behaviour in its production process. This resonates with SDG 12– responsible consumption and production.

#### *Avoidance of Harm*

As previously indicated, stakeholder concerns underpin many SRP descriptions. For instance, Carter and Jennings (2004) contend that SRP seeks to ensure that organisations consider the broader interest of stakeholders in their business decisions. By extension, organisations should implement operational approaches that minimise harm to their stakeholders, some of which represent those noted in Bonnafous-Boucher and Porcher (2010). This prospect was evident in our data. Regarding terms such as friendliness to people and society, participants indicated that SRP adoption by many organisations represents an attempt to eliminate (or minimise) harm to stakeholders. This connects with SDGs 3 and 11. A participant notes that:

*SRP focuses on practices that involve being friendly with stakeholders and society during purchasing and manufacturing. This is necessary as the environment and the people need to be protected from hazardous substances during the purchase of*

*materials and the production process (Staff, Production and Packaging, Mineg4, Indigenous).*

In line with the preceding, other respondents described SRP as a technique for eliminating the possible negative impact of the supply chain on society:

*SRP ... ensures that the supply chain process (in organisations) does not negatively affect society. (Staff, Production and Packaging, Mineg2, Indigenous).*

The preceding, which seeks to minimise negative externalities while promoting positive externalities, has attracted minimal interest in the CSR literature (Amaechi et al., 2016). This may be connected to the non-economic proposition (see Fontrodona & Sison, 2006), which underpins the link between SRP and avoidance of harm. However, corporate success benefits from stakeholders' disposition to an organisation. Hence, activities aimed at minimising harm to stakeholders might be viewed positively, creating economic payoffs (see Longo, Mura & Bonoli, 2005; Famiyeh, 2017).

#### *Health and Safety*

In addition to the economic, social, and environmental benefits associated with SRP, the growing use of SRP approaches among organisations aims to allow organisations to promote the health and safety of their stakeholders in their purchasing and supply chain. A respondent notes thus:

*Our SRP approach ensures that our health and safety policies are designed to make people safe at work by evaluating hazards, ...ensuring an excellent job environment, adjustable workspace, ... The SRP approach also helps to ensure hazard prevention, especially for our employees. We developed safer and more efficient ways to handle/move heavy products. As a result, injuries are limited (Senior Manager, Health and Safety, CBNII, Indigenous).*

Given the increasing importance of health and safety among firms, SRP offers an opportunity to reinforce the need to commit resources to health and safety (Leire and Mont (2010) while providing an avenue to broaden the SRP scope. The embeddedness of health and safety in SRP compels organisations and their stakeholders to commit to safety regulations. An interviewee explained that:

*All employees and the organisation's suppliers must adhere to the safety rules because of their impact on the organisation's performance. We ensure that health and safety measures are obligatory and mandatory in our company and our suppliers. Failure to follow safety rules on the part of our suppliers results in our company not patronising the non-compliant company because when they fail as a business, we will be affected one way or the other (Senior Manager, Purchasing, AUB, indigenous).*

#### *Sourcing Responsibly (Child Labour)*

As the concept implies, an underlying principle of SRP is purchasing materials while being socially responsible. Therefore, it is unsurprising that participants stress the importance of responsible procurement in their conceptualisations of SRP. However, a recurring theme in the discussion of responsible sourcing is the focus on using appropriate personnel in the entire chain. An interviewee stresses the concern, referencing the use of child labour (Gold et al., 2015), which aligns with SDG 16:

*It (SRP) involves considering the people involved throughout the supply chain process, from buying the raw materials to transporting them to the warehouse and the production and final distribution to the end consumers (Manager, Quality Control, Mineg3, Indigenous).*

#### **4.2 Exogenous-Level Influences**

In addition to endogenous-level influences, participants further imply that various elements external to organisations combine to influence SRP conceptualisations. These elements, identified in Figure 2, typify an organisation's reaction to the opportunities and threats provided by the business environment concerning its purchasing activities.

##### *Environmental Consciousness*

Participants suggest that the conceptualisation and operationalisation of SRP in their organisations support a consciousness towards the environment (see also Graham, 2020; Hanaysha, 2018; Lin & Niu, 2018). This follows the belief that environmental awareness in buying decisions minimises stakeholders' exposure to various health hazards while maximising customer patronage (Xia et al., 2015; Lin & Niu, 2019). For instance, a respondent expressed that:

*Socially responsible purchasing includes sourcing from suppliers ...while ensuring that the purchase process does not negatively impact the environment and people.” (Manager, Quality Control, Levuni2, Multinational).*

Other interviewees offered further evidence on how environmental consciousness drives SRP:

*We consider the environment when sourcing raw materials. For example, we try to source for papers which are eco-friendly and biodegradable rather than polythene” (Manager, Purchasing, CAUI, Indigenous)*

Having provided insights into the importance placed on the environment in the description of SRP, participants provided two useful definitions. The first states that:

*SRP ensures that sourcing (of materials) is from suppliers that do not impact the environment negatively, i.e., suppliers that are not involved in environmental degradation” (Executive manager, Purchasing, Levuni, Multinational).*

The second definition acknowledges the sustainability goal of SRP practices:

*“I understand (SRP) to mean dealing with a company on sustainable pricing method, that is, businesses which are sustainable even when the environment is put into consideration and money is spent to ensure suppliers comply with the rules of sustaining the environment by not exhausting resources or releasing harmful chemicals into the air” (Manager, Marketing/Sales, Stlenest, Multinational).*

### *Supplier Diversity*

There is a growing interest in diversity issues in the business place (e.g., Blount, 2021; Blount & Li, 2021), hence the inclusion of diversity concerns in various descriptions of SRP by interviewees. Evidence shows that participants engage with multiple suppliers, but this is considered a voluntary expectation and not a legal responsibility. Consequently, it is more of a commitment by some organisations to encourage diverse suppliers. Thus, participants drew on different dimensions of diversity to propose a definition of SRP. The first dimension relates to small and medium-scale (SME) suppliers. In this instance, SRP is described as:

*A purchasing system that seeks the good of society by promoting, among others, the survival of small businesses. An SRP policy must be designed to promote the public*

*good, which means it must consider SMEs given their contribution to societies such as ours (Manager, Purchasing, CBNI2, Indigenous).*

Further interrogation of the preceding comment indicates that the social focus of SRP demands that it is implemented to enhance the common good (Johnston et al., 2019). Therefore, the prevalence of SMEs in the business context requires that SMEs attract more patronage from purchasers. This contributes to social growth and development.

#### *Waste Reduction*

The extant SRP literature has paid little attention to waste and pollution reduction. This concern featured substantially in our data. The desire to establish an environmentally friendly purchasing policy enhances the relationship between organisations and their stakeholders, especially customers and society. This ensures that emissions and waste are lowered while customers and the community are protected from harm. When asked about their perception of SRP, an interviewee focused on waste reduction:

*I see SRP as a way of ensuring that waste is reduced to the minimum when purchasing raw materials.” (Staff, Production and Packaging, Mineg2, Indigenous).*

Furthermore, an informant extended the SRP horizon, highlighting the necessity for waste reduction practices among its suppliers:

*We visit suppliers frequently to ensure that they commit to waste reduction.... This ensures that in the long term, we are engaged in purchasing practices that help my organisation to remain socially responsible (Manager, Quality Control, Levuni2, Multinational).*

#### *Corporate Philanthropy*

Sarkis et al. (2010) note that organisations are projected to contribute to developing a sustainable society and advance the fulfilment of social needs. The contribution to society exemplifies the concept of philanthropy, which may be through various activities of an organisation, including SRP (Bjorklund, 2010). From our data, there is an understanding that philanthropy is core to SRP. The rationale for this thought originates from participants' perceptions of philanthropy in the same way as CSR. A participant informed that:



*Socially responsible purchasing is seen as being part of corporate social responsibility (Staff, Production and Packaging, Mineg 2, Indigenous).*

Consequently, given the connections between CSR and SRP (Mohr, Webb & Harris, 2001), the descriptions of SRP provided by interviewees document the concept of philanthropy. In this instance, participants view SRP as a combination of activities (that includes purchasing) in an organisation that offers opportunities to support the community (Carter & Jennings, 2004; Blount, 2021). This is shown in the following account:

*Our SRP objective means we carry out community projects to support them. We also try ... to employ people from the local community. The community sometimes requests that we carry out specific projects and strive to meet their demand. As a result, they appreciate us more and are interested in our products” (Senior Manager, Health and Safety, CBNI3, Indigenous).*

The preceding description emphasises the role of corporate philanthropy in fostering a good relationship between organisations and their immediate communities. This relationship not only translates to increased patronage for the organisation but may equally be helpful when negotiating purchasing deals with suppliers in the community. Therefore, SRP may provide a strategy for community profiling, which is highlighted below:

*SRP benefits from philanthropy. SRP represents a strategy by which we attempt to develop our profile in the community, and the demonstration of some philanthropic gestures helps achieve that objective. We donate to the communities around us, support the local communities by providing social amenities like medical facilities and helping to repair some roads” (Manager, Marketing/Sales, Stlenest, Multinational).*

#### *Equality in Stakeholders (employees and suppliers) Relations*

Carroll's (1979) pyramid advocates that equality in an organisation and its entire supply chain represents a legal responsibility for such organisations. The equality theme in the supply chain activity provides a further rationale for understanding SRP. Here, SRP permits equality and fairness in purchasing, especially concerning the organisations' employees and suppliers. Ensuring equal opportunities in the supply chain for stakeholders connects with the core principles of SRP and contributes to the overall corporate performance. Equal treatment of employees emerged consistently in the description of SRP by participants. These positions

were stirred by the belief that an SRP environment compels employers to exhibit some commitment to their employees through minimising indicators of discrimination such as age, race, religion, marital status, sex, or personal belief. An executive manager offered that:

*Our SRP approach has an immense impact on our operations. For example, our SRP strategy requires ensuring equality in employees' pay or compensation. Partiality is not encouraged, and employees are promoted based on performance” (Executive Manager, Purchasing, Levuni, Multinational).*

Participants added that their SRP practices are not restricted to their organisations but also ensure that their suppliers embrace SRP fundamentals. A participant informed that:

*When we visit a supplier's factory, we look for adherence to workplace equality to check if such suppliers engage in child labour, not male or female-dominated. ... equality at a workplace where employees are not segregated but motivated, and benefits are not given based on gender, age, or colour” (Executive Manager, Purchasing, Levuni, Multinational).*

Our data suggest discriminatory practices based on gender in the selection of suppliers. Thus, the plan to monitor equality issues among suppliers provides an additional channel for organisations to strengthen collaboration in their supply chain. This is particularly important in relation to SDG 5. Given the reported benefits of supply chain collaboration (Cao & Zhang, 2011), it could be argued that SRP, by seeking equality among suppliers' employees, contributes to such collaboration's success.

## **5. Discussions**

From our data, we identify four endogenous-level influences that underpin how SRP is understood. Due process purchasing focuses on compliance with standards established by organisations in executing their purchase and supply transactions (Kumar, Manrai & Manrai, 2017; Lin & Niu, 2018). While this concept has received sparse interest in the literature, participants suggested that SRP practices in organisations benefit from a clearly defined due process methodology. Our data also examined due process purchasing in the light of Carroll's CSR pyramid, suggesting that it supports organisations in responding to their legal and ethical

responsibilities. Participants also indicated that proper SRP architecture must eliminate harm to stakeholders involved in the purchasing activity. While this is consistent with Carter and Jennings (2004) and Bianchi et al. (2019), our findings emphasise the implication of harm to corporate reputation, as incidences of harm may result in high employee turnover and increased legal costs. Health and safety and responsible sourcing/purchasing are the other endogenous-level features driving the SRP concept.

Indeed, SRP emphasises that the management of 'human beings' symbolises a critical element of social sustainability. Responsible purchasing ensures that management is conscious of the implications of its supply chain activities on humans and the environment (Deng & Xu, 2017). To our knowledge, responsible sourcing has been examined as a distinct concept in the literature (Guo, Lee & Swinney, 2016; van den Brink et al., 2019) while overlooking its importance as a subset of SRP, thereby limiting the broader exploration of the SRP literature. Also, socially-oriented purchasing obliges organisations to visit suppliers regularly to ensure laid-down principles are respected. This, among others, promotes the health and safety of employees, customers, and the general public. This expectation can be considered ethical, given the implicit contract between organisations and society (Fang & Zhang, 2018). Furthermore, such expectations could also attract legal consequences, mainly where health and safety lapses result in injuries to stakeholders.

Our data also identifies exogenous-level influences that complement and contribute to a robust understanding of SRP. In this instance, we present five external elements that underpin SRP. Some of these external elements have featured in existing descriptions of SRP. For example, environmental consciousness, waste reduction and corporate philanthropy were visible in SRP proposals in Maignan et al. (2002), Leire and Mont (2010), Sarkis et al. (2010), and Cha and Rajadhyaksha (2021). Considering the growing consciousness towards environmental sustainability, these studies acknowledge that the reported exogenous-level elements signify substantial ethical, legal, and economic implications amongst organisations. Several informants linked corporate philanthropic initiatives to their explanation of SRP. This trend is also apparent in recognising environmental consciousness as a fundamental driver of SRP. However, uncertainties imposed by the type of business (indigenous/foreign) and years of experience, among others, have contributed substantially to inconsistencies in the meaning of SRP. Furthermore, Blount and Li (2021) and Blount (2021) reported supplier diversity

concerns. However, while Blount and Li (2021) focused on the impact of an organisation's purchasing activity regarding their engagement with minority-owned suppliers, this study offers a broader scope as our data highlight gender diversity problems in the supply chain. In effect, our data uncovered discriminatory practices based on gender in the selection of suppliers. Indeed, we posit that SRP must allow stakeholders equal opportunities to engage with organisations concerning their purchasing activities, which will foster economic transformation.

However, our data did not provide sufficient evidence of normative stakeholder ideas as the generality of the descriptions barely offered insights into issues of morality or the consideration of 'right' and 'just' in articulating SRP. Similarly, our data did not indicate that participants have legitimate stakes in their organisations' SRP processes, which may impact their intrinsic interest (Donaldson & Preston, 1995) in the entire supply chain (Kogg & Mont, 2012). In contrast, there is an expectation among interviewees that SRP activities should result in the attainment of core entrepreneurial objectives, such as increased profitability, which underpins the instrumental stakeholder model of CSR. This may be due to the research context where the consciousness towards sustainability remains low. Also, given the descriptions of SRP, it was apparent that participants exposed descriptive stakeholder thoughts as they were interested in describing and explaining the characteristics of SRP without always linking it to their respective organisations.

As such, SRP offers an alternative channel to understand the stakeholder theory (Haltsonen et al., 2007). It should not be viewed as a *subset* (a feature) of the theory, as preserving its distinction in corporate strategy scholarship is crucial. Instead, we observe that SRP *complements* the stakeholder theory. Relying on SRP descriptions that emphasise environmental consciousness, equality in stakeholder relations and responsible sourcing, we contend that SRP complements the theory as these corporate goals are consistent with the stakeholder notion in Johnson et al. (2017). Therefore, based on stakeholder theoretical anchorage, we define *SRP as a framework combining a broad range of endogenous-level and exogenous-level influences that enhance organisations' supply chain-related capacity to maximise the wealth of its stakeholders over the long term. The endogenous-level influences include due process purchasing, minimisation of harm, health and safety, and responsible sourcing. At the same time, exogenous-level impacts are connected to the business's external*

*environment, which provides for environmental consciousness, supplier diversity, waste reduction, corporate philanthropy, and equality in stakeholder relations.* In addition, in line with our theoretical underpinning, we posit that organisations that are involved in responsible purchasing are creating value for themselves, their suppliers, employees, customers and the community in line with the views of Freeman and Liedtka (1997) and Rendtorff and Bonnafeous-Boucher (2023).

While the stakeholder theory has gained considerable traction in the business and management literature, the same argument does not hold for SRP (Leire & Mont, 2010). This neglect may be due to its nascency in the sustainability scholarship. As far as we know, this research represents the initial attempt to examine SRP, drawing on the stakeholder theoretical underpinning. Furthermore, stakeholder theorisations have proposed various classifications of stakeholders, including internal and external stakeholders. By uncovering the exogenous and endogenous influences that inform SRP practices, we demonstrate how organisations' internal and external sustainability activities may affect internal and external stakeholders. For example, endogenous influences, such as avoidance of harm, enable organisations to establish protocols that minimise harm to their employees and management. In contrast, exogenous forces, such as environmental consciousness, assist organisations in implementing an operational model that limits environmental damage.

Indicators reflecting the aggregate influence of economic agents (stakeholders) on, for instance, climate change and social situations (e.g., inequality and poverty) continue to be unsustainable. Given the increasing urgency of transformation in line with sustainability, we advance responsible purchasing in the face of constraints in developing economies. There is a focus on leveraging SRP principles to promote social change and transform society. Indeed, the issue of social justice arose from our data, which is a promising avenue for further research on social responsibility and sustainability. The dimensions of SRP, such as the environment, ethical issues, diversity, human rights, safety, philanthropy, and CSR discussed earlier, suggest the concept of social justice Haltsonen et al. (2007). Social justice is a value-based attitude that people hold about the unequal life opportunities of social groups compared with others in a given society and how these opportunities are negatively affected by the existing social conditions (Borras & Franco, 2018; Xie et al., 2019). As Xie et al. (2019) posit, social justice relates to the belief that society should offer individuals fair treatment and a fair share of the

benefits of society without the unfairness of class, gender, ethnicity, and culture. The environmental issue is related to social justice. For example, polluting the air or dumping waste indiscriminately is unfair to society because of the negative impact on health. The stakeholder theory enabled us to uncover and explain these social justice issues.

## **6. Conclusions**

Despite the nascent SRP literature, the understanding of the concept is unclear owing to various attempts at systematising the wide-ranging factors that characterise the concept and its implementation. Given the increasing demand for sustainability among businesses, this paper sets out to acknowledge the inconsistencies in SRP description, identify the rationale for the discrepancies and provide a working definition that encapsulates the variables emerging from analysing stakeholders' understanding of SRP. In doing this, we broaden SRP's theoretical and conceptual scope to include stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility, and social sustainability while adopting an interpretivist qualitative methodology.

With empirical insights from the weak institutional context of the Nigerian food and beverage sector, we highlight two main categories of influences that impact the understanding of SRP. The first category is the endogenous-level influences, focusing on internal drivers of SRP for which management typically exercises control. Paying attention to endogenous-level effects can help organisations maximise their competitive advantage. The second category, i.e., the exogenous-level influences, enhances an organisation's corporate citizenship profile. Combining these two categories enabled a useful description of SRP. Our findings reveal a broad understanding as well as an encompassing scope for SRP, outlining its key components and clarifying its boundaries. Our study provides fresh insights into the understanding of SRP, with attendant contributions to the literature on corporate social responsibility and supply chains, especially in developing economies. In particular, the practitioners' perspective on the meaning of SRP provided new insights into the area with phrases such as 'following guiding principles, standards and due process in the purchasing and supply process'. This helps to expand the scope of SRP, unlike prior studies (e.g., Paulikas & Brazdauskaite, 2010; Lobel, 2006; Carter & Jennings, 2004), that refer to SRP as sourcing from minority-owned suppliers, environmentally sensitive purchasing, and paying attention to health and safety, equality, human rights, and philanthropy.

Moreover, this study comprehensively examined internal and external factors shaping SRP practices. While previous studies (Haltsonen et al., 2007; Leire & Mont, 2010; Ferri & Pedrini, 2018) often focus on singular aspects, this holistic approach provides a richer grasp of the complex dynamics at play. The findings unpack the unique challenges and opportunities within the Nigerian food and beverage industry, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of SRP in a developing economy context. These outcomes can inform organisational strategies to enhance SRP, fostering sustainable practices, ethical sourcing, and more robust community engagement within the Nigerian food supply chain.

We further contribute to SRP practice by providing sustainability professionals and policymakers with a deeper understanding of SRP to promote its successful adoption and implementation. Such knowledge will help sustainability experts to comprehend the organisation's SRP perspective and advise firms accordingly. Besides, policymakers who design and implement guidelines on social sustainability programmes will be able to make appropriate decisions regarding their social sustainability approaches. While we anticipate that this research will provoke more debate around the concept, we note that our study is limited in terms of its focus (meaning, influence, and components of SRP), context (Nigeria) and methodology (subjective). Future research can engage multinational samples and deductive empirical designs to investigate aspects of SRP and their implications for firm outcomes. For example, we invite scholars to explore the relationship between organisational performance and the individual SRP components identified in this paper. This will extend the SRP literature and, more importantly, promote an understanding of the implications of each SRP element. Also, we believe that the SRP dimensions and description established in this study broaden opportunities for scholars to explore the SRP concept, especially in incentivising further theoretical explorations in the currently limited SRP literature.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## **Informed Consent**

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## **Endnotes**

1. The initial participants were accessed with limited difficulty, as the researchers have useful professional links with the empirical setting of the study. However, to engage an appropriate sample size in this research, we employed the snowballing strategy by asking initial participants to introduce us to other participants that fulfil the eligibility criteria for this study (Morgan, 2012).
2. Participants were reminded of their right to participate (or decline) and that they could end their participation at any stage of the interview process. Participants were also informed that the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses would be protected.

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