

AUTHENTICITY AND NEGATIVISM: SOCIAL VALUE IN UK CONSTRUCTION

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Social value engagement in UK construction procurement provides contractors with a competitive edge. Arguably this serves to force contractor social value action. Whilst this is seemingly of benefit to the social value agenda and wider societal needs, the problem exists that there is gap in current research around the impact the perceptions of contractor leadership have on the social value delivered. The aim of this research is to understand if altruistic main contractor social value strategies result in greater social value activity than those strategies driven purely by procurement success. Sixteen interviews are conducted across four main contractors. These include a member of the leadership team from each contractor, with twelve of the interviews conducted from across the different contractor's social value delivery teams. The findings reveal social value authenticity and negativism exists. The leadership of some contractors see social value as a means of procurement success only, which filters down to the delivery team, resulting in minimal social value delivery. Contractor leadership with authentic social value intentions is easily identifiable by the social value delivery teams resulting in broader social value benefits achieved.

Keywords: procurement; narrative analysis; business responsibility; leadership

INTRODUCTION

Both government policy and societal expectations have significantly evolved over previous decades. Once (upon a time) arguably the primary focus of business was profit-maximisation and the role of government was societal welfare (Levitt, 1958). In modern society these roles and expectations are arguably becoming increasingly blurred (Carroll, 2015). Society now expects organisations to have a social conscience with government and local council spending under increased scrutiny with an expectation of financial competence and loss minimisation (Butler, 2024).

The requirements for business to be socially aware have been formalised with the introduction of the Public Services (Social Value) Act (2012). The Act mandates public sector bodies to consider social value as part of the procurement of all contracts alongside the criteria of time, cost, and quality (Loosemore, 2019). Construction management research has revealed that how effectively a contractor communicates their social value can be the difference between procurement success and failure (Watts *et al.*, 2019). However, research into the effectiveness of social value remains in its infancy. This especially applies to understanding the perceptions of those tasked with delivering the social value at an operational level. There is currently a gap in

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knowledge around the impact the perceptions of contractor leadership have on the social value delivered. The aim of this research is to understand if main contractor social value strategies perceived as authentic and altruistic result in more effective social value activity than those strategies perceived as being driven purely by procurement success. Arguably, if all social value strategies are driven by the need to achieve procurement success only, then the social value stipulations in procurement will act as a ceiling to what can be achieved. First, this paper introduces and explores social value, authenticity, and the concept of negativism. The research design is then outlined before the finding discussed, along with the contribution to both research and the construction industry.

Social Value in UK Construction

Since the introduction of the Public Services (Social Value) Act (2012) the concept of social value has been increasing in importance within the UK construction industry. One study considered the legal implications of the Social Value Act, and whilst described as a 'weak' legal duty, it has had a large impact on practice due to the way the Act mobilises the concept via public sector driven procurement (Craven, 2020). To help gain an awareness and greater understanding of social value, it has been explored from numerous perspectives. These include the evolution, of the concept from an organisation's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices (Carroll, 2015). Organisations frequently found it easier to evidence and communicate practices regarding the environmental aspects of CSR often at the expense of the social (Watson *et al.*, 2016). To address any unequal manifestations of business responsibility a focus on social value as a separate concept began to emerge (Loosemore, 2016). Whilst arguably this evolution remains in progress, the current focus on social value requires specific strategies and practices to address the specific social requirements of clients (through procurement) and society generally.

The communication of social value has been explored somewhat intensively in recent years as greater importance is now placed upon social value in procurement. How effectively a contractor's intentions are communicated is now often the difference between procurement success and procurement failure (Watts *et al.*, 2019b). Such communication can range from formal annual reporting, ad hoc social media updates, and tender submissions. One study reveals contractors' exhibit a spectrum of behaviour when communicating social value. This can range from accurately reporting social value undertaken to using broad terminology that obfuscates their actual practices resulting in contractors appearing to deliver more effective social value impacts than is accurate (Watts *et al.*, 2019a).

The importance of social value communication has risen in parallel with the increasing importance placed on social value in procurement. However, arriving at a widely agreed definition of social value has proved problematic, with the numerous stakeholders involved each holding their own interpretations which often conflict and contradict with one another (Watts *et al.*, 2019b). One study found that in these competing approaches to social value, common meanings are ascribed and agreed on a project-by-project basis allowing social value practices to be delivered (Craven, 2020). This procurement perspective of social value is arguably the most explored in research given the variety of research undertaken (see Loosemore, 2016). One study consisting of an in-depth literature review and survey of 50 Northern Irish construction contractors found that contractual obligations imposed through procurement and driven via legislation are delivering significant social value (Murphy

and Eadie, 2019). The study also identified the procurement challenges that exist as contemporary social value procurement needs are restricted by traditional procurement systems and calls for more robust measurement of social value procurement outcomes and impacts (Murphy and Eadie, 2019).

Broader social value measurement has also been increasingly explored in the literature. The mechanisms developed that are currently the most predominately adopted are those that financially quantify social value (Watson *et al.*, 2016). However, attempts have been made to introduce non-financial social value measurement that seeks to explore alternative methods of social value impact quantification and communication. (Watts *et al.*, 2019b).

Despite its relatively recent emergence as a specific concept to be investigated, it can be argued that social value has been researched from a variety of perspectives. However, one gap that remains underexplored in the literature, is the effectiveness of social value practices from the perceptions of the operational staff tasked with delivering social value. Specifically in how staff enact management strategies, and if these strategies are perceived as authentic, are they then considered more effective than strategies perceived as driven purely by procurement requirements.

Authenticity and Negativism

In the context of innovation, negativism is described as “the degree to which an innovation’s failure conditions a potential adopter to reject future innovations. When one idea fails, potential adopters are conditioned to view all future innovations with apprehension” (Rogers, 2003, 225). One study by Saad *et al.* (2023) traces the history of innovation negativism and identifies its contemporary uses in research yet reveals the terms lack of traction in construction management research. The term innovation negativism has been used across a broad spectrum of disciplines with its connotation flexibly adapted to suit the context in which it is used. For example, in one study pertaining to vaccinations in healthcare settings, the term described the suspicion and rejection of anything new, specifically relating to anything mandated (Todorova *et al.*, 2014). Essentially negativism is a threat of anything perceived 'against the norm' which is therefore rejected (Thornhill *et al.*, 2009). In the context of social value, this research posits that social value negativism describes when a social value strategy or initiative fails in achieving its anticipated goals, with this failure then influencing organisational apprehension and increased perceptions of failure when faced with similar future social value strategies and initiatives.

Authentic leadership can be described as staying true to one's own character in creating a positive work environment, promoting trust amongst teams, being aware of and addressing shortcomings, and reinforcing positive behaviours and attitudes (Batra, 2020). Whilst authentic leadership has been widely explored in medical fields (Mrayyan *et al.*, 2023) and athlete performance (Kavussanu *et al.*, 2024), it is still maturing in construction management literature (Batra, 2020). Through questionnaires distributed to construction project senior and middle management one study concluded that an increased perception of authentic organisational leadership led to increased organisational performance and employee satisfaction (Alnasseri *et al.*, 2013). Research based on comprehensive data collected from 686 IT sector employees found a clear indirect link between perceptions of authentic leadership and employee turnover (Singh *et al.*, 2024).

Authentic leadership has also been shown to increase employee innovation (Dominguez-Escrig *et al.*, 2022) and enhance general job satisfaction (Cortes-Denia *et*

al., 2023). Significantly, studies have also revealed that organisational authentic leadership both increases the pro social behaviours of employees (Teng and O-Yang, 2022) and results in a more positive and cohesive 'team voice' where employees illustrate consistent awareness and knowledge of higher management level policies (Zheng *et al.*, 2022). The awareness of organisational policies throughout the different organisational hierarchal levels has also been explored from a social value perspective in the construction management literature. Through interviews with main contractor employees one study found as you move down the organisational hierarchy that the awareness of social value strategies decrease yet the ability to impact social value delivery increases. The study revealed those at the operational level had limited broader social value strategic knowledge yet the highest potential direct impact on social value delivery. It was found that unclear and inconsistent internal communication strategies and methods were the root of such inconsistent knowledge transfer (Watts *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, authentic leadership can arguably influence the communication of key messages throughout an organisational hierarchy, and potentially result in more effective and consistent delivery of social value strategies by operational level professionals. However, a gap remains in current literature as to the impact of perceived authentic leadership and the influence negativism can have on social value strategy delivery. This research seeks to explore this gap and understand how social value strategies can be more effectively enacted by construction main contractors.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Attempts have been made to objectify social value through industry led measurement tools (Watson *et al.*, 2016). However, the concept is arguably constructivist due to the numerous perspectives held, lending itself to be one comprised of socially constructed meanings. Therefore, such meanings are best understood through qualitative research data collection (Clark 2021). Purpose sampling was adopted, as specific professionals were required to participate and so are selected intentionally for their ability to inform the research through their contribution (Robson and McCartan, 2017). The top 30 construction contractors by turnover were identified, and four picked at random. The websites of these four were then reviewed and either annual or specific social value reports downloaded. Once it was confirmed the reports contained social value information, and the contractor won some part of their workload from public sector clients, the contractor was then formally selected to be part of the research.

The next stage was to contact key construction professionals from each main contractor. In the first instance LinkedIn was used to identify and contact Director level professionals at each contractor to participate in an interview. Once an interview with a director from each contractor had occurred, interview requests were then issued to those responsible for, or engaged with, social value delivery from each of the four contractors. Both purposive sampling and snowball sampling were adopted for this stage. Snowball sampling involves asking existing participants for recommendations on who to contact to request further interviews based on their knowledge of who can best inform the research (Robson and McCartan, 2017). Where potential participants were not provided or did not respond to interviews in the time required, further participants were identified via LinkedIn and contacted to participate. Table 1 outlines the professionals who participated in the research. In total sixteen interviews were conducted across four main contractors (contractor A, B, C, D). All interviews were conducted via Teams and lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. Narrative analysis was used as both a means of structuring the interview questions and of data analysis.

Table 1: Participant Group

Interview Participant	Job Role	Interview Participant	Job Role
A1	Commercial Director	C1	Quality, Environment and social value Director
A2	Social value Manager	C2	Quantity Surveyor
A3	Quantity Surveyor	C3	Project Manager
A4	Project Manager	C4	Construction Manager
B1	Sustainability and social value Director	D1	Managing Director
B2	H&S Manager	D2	Social value Manager
B3	Social value Manager	D3	Social value Manager
B4	Project Manager	C4	Project Manager

As a form of interview question structuring, narrative analysis phrased the questions from the perspective of a story request. Relevant information is then extracted from these story requests to allow a deeper insight into the participants perspectives and understanding (Sandelowski, 1991). To analyse the data collected the stories were reviewed and any common elements and trends recorded, with similar stories and perspectives grouped together. Narrative analysis is increasingly used in construction management research over previous years to gain such insights via an informative and encouraging interview manner (see Loosemore, 2016). The interview questions asked included "Why is your company involved in social value?", "Can you tell me about the most recent social value activity you have been involved with?", and "What communications and messages do you get from management, regarding social value?".

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the findings revealed the following key themes:

The Effectiveness of Authentically Perceived social value Strategies

This paper echoes earlier findings regarding organisational social value communication in that the clarity and consistency of social value strategies appear to become lost as they are translated down the organisational hierarchy (Watts *et al.*, 2015). However, this paper develops this idea further and finds that the perceived authenticity of the social value strategy influences the strategy's effectiveness. Participant A1 discussed how "this company is my legacy...we have the opportunity to help people through what we do...social value is something we all should be doing as much of as we can". This view was reinforced by participant A2 who believed "the directors definitely want us [the contractor team] to generate a lot of social value...often they don't even shout about what we do...you can tell it's important". Participant A4 was of the same opinion "it sometimes seems like I spend more time [on social value] than on managing the building" and "what we deliver is really good, you can tell it makes a real difference".

This is contrasted with responses from participant C1 who openly stated, "at the minute it's all about winning work...we'll do what the client asks". This is echoed by participant B1 who claims, "we are involved with social value, but at the moment our big driving force is winning work...if we don't [do social value] then we don't win work". These sentiments are then evidenced further from the respective contractors with participant B2 stating "we do what we need to, but there's no pressure on us to do any more than that [regarding social value]". Participant C2 is of a similar opinion

"management want us to do our jobs first and foremost...social value 'stuff' is around that...maybe at the start of projects to tick the box'.

Differences can also be seen in the reflection and measurement of social value. For example, participant A4 discussed how 'dashboard' reports were compiled to show all the social value activity undertaken, these were reported upon monthly, and the contractor was ongoing in their efforts of understanding how to improve their social value delivery. Whereas participants C3, C4 and B4 all reported that social value was not measured by their respective contractors' and no reflection took place regarding if the strategies and actions were delivered effectively. Arguably, this illustrates that where contractor leadership is perceived as authentic regarding social value delivery, the social value strategies and actions are themselves delivered more effectively with more reflection and reporting. There is also clearer understanding of the social value strategies across the organisational hierarchy with staff knowing what is to be delivered and why. Where inauthentic social value leadership is perceived, the social value delivery is treated like an addition to the role, not reflected or reported upon, and leads to less effective social value that only delivers to the minimum client requirements. The broader contractor team are less aware of social value generally, and the social value strategies of their organisation.

Social Value Negativism

Building on, and adapting, the work of innovation negativism by Saad *et al.* (2023), and the definition first proposed by Rogers (2003), this paper found social value negativism does exist. Analysis of the interviews revealed Contractors B and C illustrated examples of social value negativism. Interview participant B1 described their considerations in planning future social value strategies "if something didn't resonate with a client in a bid...we didn't win the work, or score highly in the social value section, then we won't make the mistake again". When this was explored further 'the mistake' in the story told was the contractor's use of a specific social value practice. This was reinforced by participant B3 who confirmed "management aren't very adventurous with what they let us [Social Value Managers] do" and "we [the contractor] put more effort into social value a few years ago...we put more money into what we did...when that didn't make any difference to the projects we won, they really cut back". Equally, participant (C1) was open with their lack of willing regarding new social value strategies and practices being adopted. Their social value apprehension was primarily based upon previously unsuccessful social value practices: "there's no point us including a big focus on social value [in tenders] ...we've done that before and clients are just focused on cost". This was reinforced by participant C4 who states, "I get asked to do very little [social value] anymore...we did try it for a while, but now we're back to just doing the CCS (Considerate Constructors Scheme) as we have to". When asked what social value activities were undertaken, the response included "visiting local schools" and "work experience placements". All participants from contractors B and C shared a reluctance to engage with ambitious social value strategies above and beyond the minimum levels of social value they believed the tender was asking for. This was illustrated by participant B3 who states, "we definitely do exactly what we're asked [by clients], but there's no point going above and beyond in our [social value] bids...it just costs us more money but doesn't get any more points". It appears social value negativism is in full force for some contractors who are apprehensive and therefore limit their current and future social value aspirations and practices due to perceived feelings of failure regarding previous social value strategies.

CONCLUSION

Social value in the construction industry is increasing in importance. This is reflected in the diversity of research undertaken. However, one current gap is understanding the perceptions of the social value strategies and wider management, by those professionals tasked with delivering social value. Understanding this research gap is of key significance as it could determine and influence the effectiveness of the social value delivered. Interviews were conducted with sixteen professionals from four main contractors. It was revealed that professionals working for a contractor with authentic social value leadership are more likely to be aware of and understand the contractor social value strategies. The social value strategies are also more likely to be reported and measured as to their effectiveness so improvements can be made. These strategies are more likely to go above and beyond the client social value requests found in procurement documentation. Professionals who view their leadership as inauthentic and only engaged with social value for work winning purposes are less likely to measure and reflect on the social value achieved, be unaware of the broader social value strategy of the contractor and are only going to deliver the social value requested by clients, treating this as the maximum to achieve and not deliver any social value benefits above and beyond this. Such contractors effectively view the client social value procurement requests as a ceiling of what can be achieved, and do not strive to improve on this further. Social value negativism is also witnessed, with contractors driven by inauthentic leadership more likely to view social value negatively, and more likely to view future social value strategies and actions with apprehension based on what they perceive to be previous social value strategy failures.

The ramifications for the construction industry of this research are that authenticity needs to be encouraged in social value strategies to increase the effectiveness of social value delivery. Public sector clients need to be aware their social value requirements are often viewed as a ceiling of expectations not to be exceeded by some contractors. These 'ceilings' may perhaps need to be 'higher' to ensure maximum social value delivery is achieved. Hoping some contractors will go above and beyond what is requested may not occur depending upon the contractor. The research also introduces the term 'social value negativism'. The contractors who currently view social value with a degree of negativism need to be aware of this self-limiting concept, and how their future social value strategies may be held back by previous perceived failures without their overt awareness. Where awareness exists, it needs to be challenged by clients to ensure maximum effective social value can be delivered. For research, this paper contributes and develops upon existing studies and starts to explore a significant gap in current research pertaining to the authenticity perceptions of contractor professionals. This phenomenon should be explored in greater depth across more contractors so a greater awareness of its prevalence can be ascertained.

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