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Uncovering sustainability storylines from dairy supply chain discourse

Abstract

Food supply chains are key to ensuring sufficient nourishment of the population. For instance, taking a circular economy approach can help facilitate the adoption of sustainable practices, such as the use of technology to combat food waste issues. Yet, creating intrinsically sustainable production systems remains complex, given differing stakeholder perspectives, structures and approaches that can be entrenched along supply chains.

Based on an empirical investigation conducted in the UK dairy supply chain, and implementing a critical discourse analysis, this paper aims at gaining an understanding how sustainable storylines are either propagated or suppressed by different stakeholders. The paper contributes to the theoretical debate on power in supply chains through the lens of cultural hegemony and the discourse coalition concept, leading to the theoretical contribution of this work: an explanation of how a self-perpetuating cycle of legitimacy helps a storyline become, and remain, dominant.

Keywords and phrases

sustainable supply chains, cultural hegemony, discourse coalitions, critical discourse analysis, dairy industry

1. Introduction

Sustainability is more than just a jargonistic buzzword scattered throughout societal and organisational discourse. How is such a significant concept understood by others (Egan, 2019)? How do those in power shape the common understanding of sustainability? On a global level, the need for sustainable food systems that have the ability to support the world's ever-increasing population is critical (Govindan, 2018). As the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations Report (2014) on sustainable agriculture discusses, sustainability is an important and complex issue: greenhouse gas emissions, lower productivity, food safety concerns and transport issues are a sample of challenges identified in supply chains following a circular economy logic (Sharma *et al*, 2019). Food supply chains around the world are key to ensuring sufficient nourishment can reach a population safely and securely, without compromising quality of life (Dong *et al*, 2014; Koufteros & Lu, 2017). Taking a circular economy approach, where regenerative resources are contained within a closed system (Genovese *et al*, 2017), can help facilitate action on sustainable problems, such as the use of technology to combat food waste issues (Ciccullo *et al*, 2021). However, creating intrinsically sustainable supply chains remains rather difficult, given differing organisational perspectives, structures and approaches that can be found along the supply chain (Ha-Brookshire, 2017). As sustainable supply chain management advances in a meaningful direction, inspired by a circular economy paradigm (Genovese *et al*, 2017), it is fundamental to ensure understanding of sustainability as a concept.

Consider the UK dairy industry, where the low farmgate price received by producers has subsequently led to a continuous decline in the number of dairy farms (Glover, 2020; Anderson & Curry, 2016). The majority of these dairy farms are small

and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Great Britain. Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2020a; 2019), and it is these smaller sized businesses that are struggling to continue operating (Glover & Reay, 2015). Indeed, pricing of milk contracts has historically been an important issue for suppliers and buyers (Bates & Pattison, 1997), and farm income remains topical with the uncertainty around Brexit (van Berkum *et al*, 2016). Tied with the producers' economic success is their ability to invest in environmentally sustainable schemes on farm (Rodriguez *et al*, 2009), as well as in their local communities and their work-life balance, with life quality and societal impact being important social goals (Janker & Mann, 2020). These additional aspects typify the triple bottom line perspective to sustainability (Elkington, 1997), capturing a broader social and environmental viewpoint, rather than just considering economic issues in isolation.

The low farmgate price and decline in producer numbers in the dairy industry may appear unsustainable, but this notion is influenced by how sustainability is perceived by an individual. For instance, Figure 1 shows the number of cows in the UK and average milk yield per cow, shown by the red and blue lines respectively. It appears that the number of cows, and hence the total emissions from livestock, has slightly decreased, whilst yield, and thus productivity, has increased. Therefore, this relationship suggests that milk appears to have less emissions per pint than in the past, and could point to the decline of SMEs through vertical integration in the supply chain, as is discussed later in this study.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The economic pressure put on producers appears to have resulted in what, according to the dominant view of sustainability, is an environmentally sustainable improvement. However, such a framing does not acknowledge all the economic, social

and environmental aspects of Elkington's (1997) triple bottom line, with issues such as pollution (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2006) and animal welfare (Arnott *et al*, 2017) potentially leading to condemnation of the dairy industry. Gaining an understanding of how sustainability is synthesised and processed by the dairy industry leads to research question one:

RQ1: What storylines are formed for economic, social and environmental sustainability in the UK dairy supply chain by different stakeholders?

The economic pressure put on dairy farmers represents an instance of a power imbalance in the dairy industry found between SMEs and large dominant stakeholders (Glover & Touboulic, 2020; Glover *et al*, 2014). The dairy supply chain is broader and more complex than this simple pairwise relationship; often, several instruments are utilised in order to disseminate sustainability information along the supply chain, such as external standard guidance (Keller *et al*, 2013), corporate reports (Morali & Searcy, 2013; Turker & Altuntas, 2014) and web pages (Utgård, 2018). As is explored further in Section 2.3, these documents are tied to the transmission of power through the knowledge they convey (Hall, 2001). The context around such texts and utterances can be seen as an example of what is commonly referred to as discourse (Hajer, 2005; Mills, 2004). Such discourse will encompass the sustainable storylines identified in research question one. Given that power appears to be linked to the texts (Hall, 2001), and thus the associated sustainability discourse, research question two is formed:

RQ2: How is the power held by different stakeholders across the UK dairy supply chain transmitted through discourse to influence sustainable practices?

The structure of the paper will begin with a literature review that considers the triple bottom line, supply chain sustainability and power. Following this review, cultural hegemony is introduced as the theoretical lens through which any emerging dominant

and alternative storylines will be studied. By taking the methodological approach of critical discourse analysis, how organisations in powerful positions use language to influence sustainable storylines will also be explored. After the findings section, which will offer insights into approaches taken to sustainability by the dairy industry and the role of stakeholders within them, a discussion critiquing the dominant storyline will be undertaken. Finally, some concluding remarks will be offered on the theoretical contribution of this research to the supply chain field through the use of cultural hegemony, which leads to the identification of the sustainable storylines found in the UK dairy supply chain, as well as an explanation of how power helps storylines become dominant. Also, practical implications of the findings in relation to the UK dairy industry are derived.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Triple Bottom Line approach

Elkington's (1997) Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach to sustainability is utilised in this study to make sense of sustainable supply chain management practices. Given the regular use of the TBL in the sustainable supply chain domain (Miemczyk & Luzzini, 2019), an overview of existing research and debates in the field are captured in this section. A benefit of the TBL is the broad nature of the concept, which has the potential to encourage a range of sustainable behaviours (Longoni & Cagliano, 2018). However, this desired holistic overview is not always reflected in reality, with the economic, social and environmental pillars receiving differing levels of attention in research and practice (Huq & Stevenson, 2020), further echoed in calls throughout research for greater interconnectedness of the TBL dimensions when considering sustainable supply chain management (Morali & Searcy, 2013; Gopalakrishnan *et al*, 2012; Vurro *et al*, 2009).

This research responds to these calls by affording all three TBL pillars equal attention. When considering a circular economy approach through a TBL framing, economic factors seem to be paramount in implementation, which is driven by the associated environmental benefits, with associated social impacts being incidental (Geissdoerfer *et al*, 2017).

Although voluntary in its application, the TBL has the ability to create a competitive advantage for those who embrace the concept (Hussain *et al*, 2018), as well as fostering transparency of sustainable processes and collaborations with others (Glavas & Mish, 2015). The TBL concept is not without criticism, such as its inwardly facing approach to, and oversimplification of, sustainable issues (Milne & Grey, 2013). Rather than the current TBL approach of equally acknowledging each pillar respectively, calls have been made to move to an ecologically dominant approach when addressing sustainability, where environmental and social needs are met before economic considerations (Montabon *et al*, 2016). Whilst the TBL does not explore the interrelationships between the pillars, Milne & Grey (2013) do concede that the concept is a good introduction to managing sustainable issues, but warn about lack of the depth to foster significant change. Indeed, the instrumental interpretation of the TBL, where social and environment aspects are treated in isolation with the view of benefitting the supply chain, remains used widely (Montabon *et al*, 2016). Whilst the TBL approach to sustainable supply chain management has been explored in this section, ambiguity remains over both how sustainable supply chain management can be defined, and the impacts that sustainability supply chain management have on ensuring sustainable practices.

2.2 Sustainable Supply Chain Management

This research has assumed the definition of supply chain management as “*the strategic management of all the traditional business functions that are involved in any flows, upstream or downstream, across any aspect of the supply chain system*” (Mentzer, 2004). With such aspects including capital, information and product flows, sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) involves management of these flows whilst recognising economic, social and environmental targets (Seuring & Müller, 2008). In addition to defining SSCM, this section aims to highlight the many areas of SSCM research interest, as well as many ways in which SSCM is practised. There is no one clear way of implementing SSCM (Matthews *et al*, 2015), with different configurations affecting the development and adoption of SSCM practices, as demonstrated in the Saunders *et al* (2019) study on brokers and SSCM information flow. For instance, taking a circular economy approach to SSCM has been shown to aid in both emission and waste reduction (Genovese *et al*, 2017). Other sustainable benefits of the circular economy identified in contemporary research include reverse logistics (Dev *et al*, 2020; Frei *et al*, 2020) and improving supply chain resilience in the face of crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Nandi *et al*, 2021). Certainly, there are many motivations for implementing SSCM practices, both internal and external to the firm (Chen & Kitsis, 2017; Wolf, 2014). Relationships with other firms and ethical principles can both be drivers for SSCM, with players possessing higher levels of moral concern outperforming those lacking such motivations (Paulraj *et al*, 2017). Indeed, having a morally responsible mindset has been identified as a prerequisite for achieving true sustainability across all areas of a firm (Ha-Brookshire, 2017).

The seminal work of Seuring & Müller (2008) drew on many different articles to identify key characteristics of SSCM, highlighting major commonalities across the literature. The broad nature of these commonalities is striking as it gives scope for the definitions under consideration to vary greatly on an individual firm level. A key focus of SSCM research appears to be collaborative practices along the supply chain, suggesting it can strengthen and improve SSCM performance (Yawar & Seuring, 2017; Gimenez & Sierra, 2013; Drake & Schlachter, 2008). Building such practices on a foundation of trust and respect can further enhance collaboration through improved information flow and shared understanding (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020), with the effort put into trust in the precontractual phase being an efficient opportunity to establish and strengthen SSCM (Bird & Soundararajan, 2020).

When considering what motivates firms to adhere to SSCM practices, pressures can come from the buyer, the competition and through both education and training (Huq & Stevenson, 2020), which can be respectively referred to as coercive, mimetic and normative pressures, forming the basis of Institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000). However, the obligation expected in a coercive approach can send out negative signals to other firms (Marshall *et al*, 2019). Such institutional pressures are also reflected in the context of the implementation of sustainable practices inspired by a circular economy paradigm (Ranta *et al*, 2018; Fischer & Pascucci, 2017). The underlying message from this area of research appears to be that relationships within and between stakeholders are a complex and important consideration of successful SSCM adoption, development and adherence.

Both internal and external dimensions of SSCM can extend beyond relational factors, including shared responsibility and support from leaders inside a firm, as well as risk management (Wolf, 2011) and projection of an authentic sustainable image

(Amos *et al*, 2019). Framing and measurement of SSCM practices is another area of research interest, particularly given the importance placed on performance in SSCM (Wu *et al*, 2017). Whilst effective measurements can highlight areas that need improvement (Isaksson *et al*, 2010), superficial and inconsistent measurements on performance can complicate SSCM progress (Morali & Searcy, 2013). The wide scope of concepts found in the SSCM literature is such that it can be applied to a variety of research contextualised in the developing world, where focus primarily remains on economic factors, addressing issues of poverty (Khalid & Seuring, 2019). Indeed, when considering the TBL, studies on social sustainability appear to be scarcer in SSCM research than their economic and environmental counterparts (Rajeev *et al*, 2017; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). Rather than placing other dimensions second to economic issues, firms should instead focus on each pillar of sustainability objectively and equally (Yun *et al*, 2019), echoed by the previously discussed TBL SSCM research on interconnectedness.

As was established at the start of this section, there are many ways to approach SSCM. Indeed, various definitions exist in the literature on SSCM, with no consensus (Ahi & Searcy, 2013). It is important to establish the differing conceptualisations of sustainability, as the framing can impact outcomes, such as the social reform that could be borne from the circular economy concept (Genovese & Pansera, 2020). Given that the influential players within an industry can use their power to encourage certain sustainable practices (Touboulic *et al*, 2014), this study is interested in identifying what storylines are conceptualised and present in SSCM discourse, acknowledging which stakeholders the dominant storyline originates from and exploring how they use their power to maintain their preferred conceptualisation. Attention will now concentrate on the food sector, the context of this research, where

the distinct sustainable challenges faced by food supply chains are explored, as well as offering a critique on the stakeholder framing of existing research.

2.3 Sustainable Food Supply Chain Management

Stakeholders, both internal and external to the dairy supply chain, all face their own sustainability drivers and barriers (Govindan, 2018). A rationale for considering the sustainable actions of other stakeholders is given by Krause *et al* (2009), who posit that organisations are no more sustainable than their suppliers. Put differently, a supply chain is only as strong as its weakest component (Mamillo, 2014); a broad observation which relates to specific challenges faced by food supply chains, such as the importance of information flow for food safety quality assurance standards (Trienekens *et al*, 2012), as well as the perishability of the produce moving through the supply chain (Grunow & van der Vorst, 2010). Indeed, larger firms are recognising their power to go beyond first-tier suppliers and share vital resources with SMEs in the supply chain (Ağan *et al*, 2018).

Sustainability is an important element of contemporary research in food supply chain management, exploring issues such as the digital brokerage of food waste (Ciulli *et al*, 2019), as well as the setting of superficial and seemingly contradictory standards (Devin & Richards, 2018). When considering the circular economy approach to sustainability, challenges faced by food supply chains include issues of infrastructure, packaging and traceability (Sharma *et al*, 2019). Contemporary research specific to sustainability in the dairy supply chain, the context of this research, focuses on overcoming such traceability issues by utilising blockchain technology (Casino *et al*, 2020). Product perishability (Jouzdani & Govindan, 2021) and policy planning (Susanty *et al*, 2021) also represent recent research topics contextualised within the dairy supply chain. An aspect that unites these three papers is they gather data from larger, more

powerful players in the dairy industry, including processors (Jouzani & Govindan, 2021; Casino et al, 2020) and co-operative representatives (Susanty *et al*, 2021). Explaining how powerful actors are able to influence sustainable storylines and highlighting the suppressed sustainable storylines of weaker actors is the main contribution of this research, whose need is demonstrated by the illustrated proliferation of contemporary powerful actor perspectives. The issue of power in supply chain management is explored in greater depth in section 2.4, and the cultural hegemony lens that will be utilised for its explanatory power in this issue is discussed in section 3.

Although existing as independent entities, stakeholders that work together and collaborate can implement sustainable supply chain changes in an effective manner (Chen *et al*, 2017). Thus, documents between stakeholders, such as corporate reports, are a means for different parties to communicate their sustainability approach to each other (Tate *et al*, 2010). Gaining an insight into the main approaches taken towards sustainability across different stakeholders through their discursive practices could therefore provide a means of access to uncover conflicting worldviews, paradigms and assumptions related to sustainability practices. Identification of storylines in the sustainable supply chain management field can facilitate the understanding of specific supply chain archetypes, such as the topic of circular economy (Batista *et al*, 2018). Gamboa *et al* (2016) contextualise sustainability storylines in a food supply chain setting, demonstrating how differing levels of supply chain complexity, from local to global, have multiple storylines, which results in differing appraisals of sustainable practices based on their own idiosyncratic framing, and conflicting perceptions of success between stakeholders. It leaves a wondering of what storylines, if any, are neglected or suppressed by stakeholders as a collective, potentially preventing a

comprehensive account of sustainable performance of a supply chain. Although undertaking a discursive approach is apt for identifying different storylines, there remains a scarcity of material that utilises this approach in SSCM literature (McCarthy *et al*, 2018), highlighting a gap which this research aims to address. The ability of an actor to dominate in supply chain management and suppress the actions and ideas of others is linked with the concept of power, as the next section explores.

2.4 Power in Supply Chain Management

Emerson (1962) defines power as when an entity has the ability to exert influence over another, with the latter being dependent on the initial entity in question. This interpretation can be easily transposed to a supply chain context, where consideration of power remains an important issue (Reimann and Ketchen, 2017). This section considers the effect power has on supply chains, how it can be categorised and how power asymmetries can result in an unsustainable situation for weaker actors. Power in a supply chain context is a complex issue, and is certainly worthy of research, given the influence other stakeholders can have on both an organisation's internal direction and external practices (Park-Poaps & Rees, 2010). Indeed, power between organisations can affect information sharing (Zaheer & Trkman, 2017; Li & Lin, 2006), compliance with guidance (Delbufalo & Bastl, 2017) and financial performance (Elking *et al*, 2017). Power can also be misused in the supply chain, as dominant organisations can behave unethically and hypocritically, passing burdens onto stakeholders with less power (Glover & Touboulic, 2020). Ultimately, the power held in a supply chain can influence the framing of sustainability, where narratives can be imposed on less powerful actors. This is apparent in the emerging circular economy discourse and the structuring of closed-loop supply chains (Genovese & Pansera, 2020).

Power within the supply chain can be broken into different types, each with their own impacts and ability to influence one another, affecting the management of supplier relationships (Chae *et al*, 2017). For instance, when dealing with first-tier suppliers, coercive power appears effective at encouraging engagement with the sustainable agenda of a focal organisation. Conversely, second tier suppliers and beyond appear to respond better to non-coercive power (Meqdadi *et al*, 2018). Whilst some studies agree that mediated power, such as coercive power, can be effective in supply chain management (Mokhtar *et al*, 2019), others suggest non-mediated power, spanning knowledge sharing and admiration of exemplar organisations, is more effective (Marshall *et al*, 2019). Contrasting results like this indicate that research on power in supply chain management is continuing to develop and evolve. Power also has a practical application on the drivers of SSCM. Take knowledge acquisition along the supply chain; from a sustainability context, it can encourage stakeholders to share best practice amongst themselves (Beske *et al*, 2014). When considering the role power plays in such practices, using restraint when exercising any power can mean knowledge acquisition is more likely to take place between members of a supply chain (He *et al*, 2013).

There are multiple perspectives to examine power in supply chain management, such as resource dependence theory (Huo *et al*, 2017). When considering dyadic relationships, resource dependence theory can be drawn on to explain asymmetry in power distribution (Crook *et al*, 2017), which in turn can lead to complexity in collaborative practices (Brito & Miguel, 2017). Farmers in the dairy industry are familiar with the repercussions of such power asymmetries (Glover, 2011), the identification of which is important, as those in powerful positions can use their status to encourage sustainable behaviours across the supply chain (Touboulic *et al*, 2014). However, less

powerful supply chain members implementing these changes, such as SMEs, might have to take on a financial burden (Gimenez & Sierra, 2013), counterproductively creating an unsustainable economic situation. Farmers are not the only stakeholder to face such power asymmetries, with smaller processors in the UK pig meat industry facing tight margins when dealing with larger supermarkets, which in turn can lead to financial uncertainty being felt by processors, preventing any meaningful capital investments being made (Bowman *et al*, 2019). This backward flow of sustainable expectations in the supply chain in relation to power imbalances is illustrated in Figure 2. Indeed, even major retailers can be in the weaker position of a pair when faced with a key single supplier, which can lead to reputational damage, as evidenced through the European horsemeat scandal (Madichie & Yamoah, 2017). Whilst research on power in supply chains considers dyadic relationships, where two parties are considered, there are calls for research to go beyond this when investigating the complexity of power across the supply chain (Brito & Miguel, 2017; Reimann & Ketchen, 2017), such as within the dairy industry, which is what this paper sets out to do. A theoretical lens capable of capturing the multifaceted complexity of interorganisational power is the cultural hegemony concept (Kourula & Delalieux, 2016; Frundt, 2005), whose application would be novel in the SSCM field and represents a further contribution of this research. The following section explores cultural hegemony in greater depth, linking the concept with supply chain management and the research methodology.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

3. Theoretical lens: Cultural Hegemony & Discourse Coalitions

3.1 Cultural Hegemony: An Overview

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (Gramsci *et al*, 1971), whose application in the supply chain field is novel, is offered in this study to provide insights into how both dominant and suppressed storylines are influenced by particular groups, namely different stakeholders. Cultural hegemony as a concept looks at how those in less powerful positions come to accept a worldview crafted and communicated by those in powerful positions as common sense (Ransome, 2010). Gramsci's notion of hegemony has been previously drawn on in management literature when considering political corporate social responsibility, covering relationships between a focal company or stakeholder and wider society (Kourula & Delalieux, 2016; Levy *et al*, 2016). Indeed, while Gramsci was exploring politics and wider society when he offered his thoughts on cultural hegemony, it is proposed that this theory can provide an insightful lens through which a fuller picture of power relationships in industries and supply chains can be understood. For instance, just as Gramsci said that hegemonies found in individual nations are idiosyncratic in their character (Gramsci *et al*, 1971. pp. 240-241), so too could be the case between different supply chains and sectors. Equally, when considering what causes the cessation of a particular hegemony, *the chaotic and disorganised movement, without leadership* referred to by Gramsci *et al* (1971, pp. 229) could be seen as describing the proliferation of approaches to sustainability in supply chain contexts, as was discussed earlier (Matthews *et al*, 2015).

When describing cultural hegemony as being able to provide a fuller picture of power relationships, this alludes to the *dual perspective* on power (Gramsci *et al*, 1971, pp. 169), encompassing authoritative and hegemonic power. Whilst authoritative power is forced without consent, hegemonic power is imposed and consented to via the *prestige which the dominant group enjoys* (Gramsci *et al*, 1971, pp. 12). This outlook on power is similar to that of Michel Foucault, who saw power constantly

featuring throughout all social exchanges (Lynch, 2014). Indeed, cultural hegemony is closely linked to Foucault's concept of biopower, however whilst biopower places importance on each individual interaction (Taylor, 2014), cultural hegemony appears more concerned with the binary relationship of dominance and submission, better aligning with Emerson's (1962) definition of power.

Foucauldian thought is drawn on in this study when considering the nature of power, as well as its relationship to knowledge. The nature of power refers to the idea that power is not just a negative force, but can also be wielded positively; Foucault acknowledges this by identifying resistance as a form of power that is found alongside dominance (Feder, 2014). This resistance will be highlighted in the discourse of those dairy industry stakeholders outside the dominant storyline. When considering the relationship between power and knowledge, Foucault is clear about their inextricable relationship (Feder, 2014). In fact, *that knowledge is always the historical and circumstantial result* of external forces of power is given as a fundamental concept by Foucault (1973, pp. 13).

Common sense at a particular epoch is conveyed through discourse, the origin of which represents the source of knowledge, and therefore power (Hall, 2001). Indeed, discourse is identified by Foucault (1973, pp. 5) as an arena in which power is transmitted. Hence, texts being produced by different stakeholders in the UK dairy supply chain will be drawn on to offer insight into what the dominant approach towards sustainability is, as well as identifying any counter-hegemonic storylines. Similar work on the conceptualisation of sustainability from discourse in an organisation setting has been undertaken (Allen *et al*, 2012), but this remains internally focused, concentrating on employee perceptions. In this research, the discourse under consideration is found

in grey literature on sustainability published externally by stakeholders in the UK dairy supply chain.

3.2 Discourse Coalitions

The concepts behind cultural hegemony will be primarily applied in this study by drawing on Hajer's (1993) discourse coalition framework, which builds an effective link between Gramsci's cultural hegemony and the use of critical discourse analysis as a method. Hajer defines a discourse coalition as "*the ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors that utter these story lines, and the practices that conform to these story lines, all organised around a discourse*" (Hajer, 1993, p. 47). The concept of discourse coalitions has been successfully applied in existing management literature to make sense of power dynamics, such as understanding how think-tanks enact policy change (Pautz, 2011), and highlighting the diverse perspectives that can exist on an issue, such as waste management (Duygan *et al*, 2018) and the circular economy (Alvarado *et al*, 2021). In this study, the interest is in how actors of the industry transmit their power through discourse to influence sustainable supply chain management practices in the industry. Uncovering such structures through application of cultural hegemony and discourse coalitions represents a novel contribution of this research.

Hajer takes a Foucauldian and Gramscian approach towards discourse analysis, considering the power and political relations underlying environmental discourse (Hajer, 2005; Hajer, 1995). Hajer sees the environmental crisis as a discursive one, where understanding can be sought through uncovering many individual interpretations of the same complex issue (Hajer, 1995). Such individual interpretations can take the form of a story, where complex issues are distilled into an account,

allowing the narrators to address and make sense of a topic. Hajer refers to these understandings as storylines (Hajer, 2005), which are used in this study to distinguish between the different interpretations of sustainability found within a discourse grouping. The concept of discourse coalitions focuses on the alignment of actors with these storylines through the language used (Alvarado *et al*, 2021), examples of which are evidenced in this research through the use of quotations from the sustainability literature in the dairy industry. This study defines discourse as the context and practices around a specific grouping of texts and utterances (Hajer, 2005; Mills, 2004), such as the traditions used in the formation of sustainability-related texts in the dairy industry. Furthermore, any discussion around the concept of common sense relates to underlying knowledge that is accepted in society without critical thought, and is embraced by most as a generally positive concept (Gramsci *et al*, 1971). For clarity, these key definitions are summarised in Table 1, with the link between them illustrated in Figure 3.

An assumption when drawing on a neo-Gramscian lens, such as discourse coalitions, is that the exertion of hegemonic power is conceptualised as domination, rather than a liberal framing of leadership (Persaud, 2016). In a sustainable supply chain context, this research will demonstrate that the contextual nature of the research is important when implementing this framing. The adverse effects shown and felt by several stakeholders in the dairy supply chain due to hegemonic power motivate the categorisation of forceful domination, rather than effective leadership. Persaud (2016) suggests what unites these categories is legitimacy, and it is the mechanisms behind the securing of this legitimacy in the dairy supply chain that are uncovered and exposed in this research.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

4. Research design and methodology

4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

As justified previously, discourse has been selected as the unit of analysis for this paper. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been chosen as it specifically puts a focus on power relations (Silverman, 2014), linking well with the topic under consideration and power-focused cultural hegemony theoretical lens. Indeed, the method has been previously utilised in the literature to explore topics of power and class (Dunn & Eble, 2015), as well as the intentions and structures of institutions (Wang, 2019). CDA has also demonstrated the important role context plays in understanding an issue (Siltaoja & Vehkaperä, 2010), as well as facilitating the comparison of different players and perspectives (Wang, 2019; Winkler, 2011). Whilst CDA has begun to be used in a management context to explore marginalisation of narratives (McCarthy *et al*, 2018), the use of CDA in relation to power dynamics in a sustainable supply chain management context is novel to this research, and therefore is another original contribution that this paper makes. A recent demonstration of the usefulness of taking a discourse analysis approach in the wider supply chain management field (Hardy *et al*, 2020) suggests that the method facilitates a holistic overview of an issue, incorporating the views of previously neglected stakeholders.

The critical aspect of CDA comes from the positionality of the researchers throughout the analysis, which sit from the perspective of those in the weaker position (Van Dijk, 1986; Wodak, 2001). Following Glover *et al*'s (2014) findings, this would be from stakeholders that have little power over the supermarkets, such as SMEs. It is the

highlighting of attitudes and beliefs of these weaker parties that drives the motivation to use CDA as a method in this case. The discourse formed by dominant players, which is fed to both stakeholders in the dairy supply chain and external interested parties, shapes a conceptualisation of sustainability that does not capture the attitudes of less powerful stakeholders. This choice of methodology links closely with cultural hegemony, demonstrated in this research through the belief that the definition of sustainability, as well as associated practices, is influenced by the hegemony imposed by the most powerful players. Through CDA, this paper aims to identify both dominant and suppressed storylines found in sustainability discourse.

Although there are several ways of undertaking a CDA, this paper is following the approach given by Fairclough (2001), complemented by extra details ascertained from Bloor and Bloor (2007). Figure 4 illustrates an overview of the CDA process undertaken. The problems relating to the current approach taken towards sustainability in the dairy supply chain are of a social nature, so the context of each document is considered first. Although context was considered individually during analysis, a succinct summary is presented in the findings to give an overview of the topics discussed at this stage. After this, the language is considered in detail to highlight how the approaches towards sustainability are communicated and positioned. A wider critique of how contemporary society facilitates the existing dominant approach to sustainability is then given, followed by some suggestions on how the dominant approach could be enhanced.

Gioia *et al* (2013) suggest an inductive approach of coding that aids in demonstrating the rigour and development of the analysis process in qualitative research, which formed the framework utilised in this study. Figure 5 has been created to capture an overview of this process, highlighting how concepts found in the texts

were aggregated into themes. NVivo 12 software has been used to analyse the documents. All texts have been included in the same project folder and the same set of codes used for each document, adding and modifying codes iteratively as the analysis of each document took place.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

4.2 Selection of Documents

Following the categorisations by Patton (2015), the sampling strategy selected for this research was a maximum variation (heterogeneity) purposive approach. Drawn from the internet, the main criteria for selection were that each document had to originate from and relate to sustainability in the UK dairy supply chain, as well as representing a unique stakeholder grouping. To ensure the approaches being compared in the documents are all of a contemporary nature, the other restriction placed on selection was that they had to be published in or after 2017. Table 2 highlights the different documents that have been selected for analysis.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The 17 documents selected for this study include examples of annual reviews, sustainability reports, a campaign leaflet and webpages relating to company sustainability policy. All documents could be accessed digitally from the internet. The use of grey literature to investigate sustainability in a supply chain context has been implemented effectively in existing academic literature (Stewart and Niero, 2018). However, unlike Stewart and Niero's (2018) study, this research is not concerned about general trends in the industry, with emphasis instead on the idiosyncratic storylines produced by different players across the supply chain.

4.3 Ethics in critical discourse analysis

Although no participants were approached in the primary data collection, there are still several ethical issues to consider when undertaking a critical discourse analysis. Indeed, the first issue comes from this very lack of participant interaction, relating to the initial collection of the documents. As all the documents were publicly available and intended for public use, there appears to be no barrier to their inclusion in this study. Furthermore, as the discourse analysis is critical, it is important from a moral perspective that the position of the authors is made clear, so as not to deceive the reader (Graham, 2018). To reiterate for emphasis, this discourse analysis comes from the perspective of the least powerful in the dairy industry, including SMEs such as farmers and smaller processors (Glover *et al*, 2014).

Although a critique will be offered against the powerful players in the dairy industry that control the dominant sustainability storyline, the authors do not want to cause reputational damage to any one particular organisation. Hence, the identities of the document authors will remain anonymous, with an acronym based on stakeholder category used in place of an organisational name, as shown in Table 2. As long quotes may result in identification of the author, they will be limited to as small a word count as possible. Rather than thinking about a particular real-world organisation, the author wants the reader to consider the documents as from a generic organisation representative of their particular stakeholder group. Ultimately, the aim of critical discourse analysis is ethical, as it intends to act as an enabler of social action to produce greater equality in society (Graham, 2018). As such, this research has been undertaken with this aim weaved throughout.

5. Findings

5.1 Context

As was emphasised in the methodology section, the critical analysis is coming from the perspective of those stakeholders who have least power, relative to those who can exert the greatest control over other stakeholders. This is important to remember when considering this discussion on any findings. Before exploration of the storylines emerging from the critical discourse analysis, the context in which the documents are situated needs considering.

The dairy industry is one of historical importance for the UK, with the price of milk being determined by locality and technological advances (Taylor, 1974). The image traditionally conjured up in the public imagination is one of cattle being milked in a rural farmhouse setting (Taylor, 1987). The images of cows out to pasture in fields feature in several of the documents, suggesting this rural ideal is something the intended audience still expects to see. In the UK, milk was historically stored in churns, then picked up by milk lorry, or taken into urban areas by rail. Eventually, milk tankers were introduced, and as longer shelf life became expected of milk, supermarkets were favoured over delivery from the localised milk man (Wilbey, 2017).

Another key historical institution in the UK dairy industry is the Milk Marketing Board (MMB), which ran from 1933-1994 and acted as an intermediary between small farmer business and large powerful processor organisations. The MMB was a large organisation that helped SMEs by encouraging best practice, sharing new scientific techniques, publicising the dairy industry and ensuring milk was bought from farmers. The eventual demise of the MMB was coherent to the implementation of free-market

and deregulation reforms in the 1980s (Empson, 1998). Several institutions have filled the void created by the cessation of the MMB, including lobbying groups and collaborative organisations. A diagram comparing a contemporary milk supply chain with that of a past configuration including the MMB is shown in Figure 6.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

Two points of interest relating to these industrial organisations are their focus on economic issues and difficulty in obtaining a consensus over what sustainability is. As demonstrated through the activities of the MMB and the evolution of milk delivery and purchase, the dairy industry has been historically concerned with economic issues of sustainability, mirroring the prevailing economic paradigm in society. As a shift takes place to consider social and environmental issues of sustainability, their validity may initially have to be backed up by an economic argument to ensure acceptance. Secondly, the multiple organisations acting on behalf of different stakeholders in the dairy industry all have the potential to champion sustainability on behalf of the dairy industry, but the different, and sometimes competing, agendas of the organisations mean approaches to sustainability are inherently idiosyncratic; there is an absence of a unifying body.

A contemporary issue facing the UK dairy industry has been the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, a process known as Brexit. The European Union has played a key role in UK dairy industry, from the introduction, and later abolishment, of milk quotas in 1984 (Wilbey, 2017), to the farming subsidies paid through the Common Agricultural Policy (Downing, 2016). Uncertainty in the dairy industry has therefore been heightened in recent years, with concerns expressed over regulatory changes, self-sufficiency capabilities (Bellamy, 2016), increase in trade costs and labour market changes (Bakker and Datta, 2018), as well as the announcement of the gradual

phasing out of farming subsidies (Great Britain. Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2020b). Given this uncertainty, worries about the economic sustainability of the dairy industry might be forgiven, but this should not be at the expense of the social and environmental equals.

5.2 Approach taken to sustainability

From analysis of the documents, two main separate sets of themes seem to have emerged, as shown in Figure 5, and are illustrated graphically in Figure 7: approach to sustainability practices and role of stakeholder. It is at the nexus of these two themes where the dominant and alternative storylines emerge, which are given in Table 3 alongside illustrative quotations from the analysed documents. The following section will offer evidence of the storylines in the texts through linguistic and grammatic analysis. Blending this detail together with a broad industry approach, considering both the position and power held by the stakeholder authors within the dairy industry, as well as the contextual information shown in section 5.1, the commonalities and differences in approaches taken by stakeholders became apparent and were grouped into the storylines presented. A criticism of taking a neo-Gramscian approach is that it can overly structure a topic, not fully appreciating the complexity of a situation (Andréé, 2011). Whilst further levels of division and apportionment of importance appeared to vary between specific stakeholder groups, the division into two storylines is intentional, to highlight the suppression of an alternative narrative with clear and undiluted emphasis. The dominant approach taken by powerful stakeholders towards sustainable practices, who take an instrumental approach towards the TBL, forms the basis of the dominant traditional development storyline.

The documents from TA1 and TA2 both talk about sustainable goals in general terms, only providing specific examples to highlight certain case studies. Examples of such generic terms used regarding stakeholder purpose include “*collaboration with partners*”, “*striv[ing] for environmental best practice*”, *shar[ing] ongoing activities*” and “*ensur[ing... a] thriving dairy industry*”.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Given that these documents were designed for multiple stakeholders in the dairy industry to consume and utilise, the broad nature of the written voice may well be unsurprising. However, this creates a knowledge gap that may place smaller members of the supply chain, such as SMEs, at a disadvantage. By creating a general ‘one size fits all’ approach to sustainability that needs to be tailored by the end user, organisations that have access to more resources will have the time and money to be able to act on framework recommendations quicker and more effectively than a small organisation or sole trader that lacks the appropriate resources and expertise. Furthermore, the use of ambiguous adjectives, such as *best* and *thriving* in the previous quotations, can lead to misinterpretation through the subjective opinion of the reader.

When considering the context in which these documents were created, the boards that steer the agenda of these groups are formed of key representatives from large supermarkets, processors and other trade associations. Hence, it would make sense for them to put forward suggestions that are achievable for their respective organisations, without putting in as much thought for others. In a country that historically values a neo-liberal economic policy (Jones *et al*, 2005), serving only yourself may be tolerated as acceptable.

INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE

However, take into consideration what Krause *et al* (2009) said about only being as sustainable as your suppliers; clearly in a world where the paradigm is shifting towards holistic consideration of the triple bottom line, aid and assistance need to be offered to those in less powerful positions. This is where socially sustainable actions could effectively be implemented, linking with the importance of collaboration in facilitating effective sustainable supply chain management (Yawar & Seuring, 2017; Gimenez & Sierra, 2013; Drake & Schlachter, 2008) and the implementation of circular economy practices (Ciccullo *et al*, 2021).

The bespoke approach is the next part of the traditional development storyline; rather than the responsibility lying with the general guidance to stakeholders, sustainability is so idiosyncratic and location-dependent that stakeholders need to accept responsibility themselves without the need of an intermediary. Examples from P1 and P2 demonstrating this bespoke ideal include *“us[ing our own] standards to drive continuous improvement”*, *“developing our own plan”*, *“buy[ing] products and services from local businesses”* and *“zero waste to landfill... which we are very passionate about”*. This location-dependent stance comes across clearly with P2 documents, which use imagery around family and community to embed themselves within their location and are responsive to the environment, rather than frameworks. By using *“local farmers”* that utilise *“traditional farming methods”*, and implementing *“regional supply chains”* to *“keep food miles to a minimum”*, the interlinkage between sustainable practices and locality becomes apparent. Just the use of *“local”* connotes a positive environmental image, not dissimilar to that of organic food (Paloviita, 2010). However, it is SMEs in these rural settings that find themselves in a weaker position than large corporations, but are expected to address challenging environmental issues imposed on them (Glover & Touboulic, 2020).

The reality is that an external body that behaves flexibly and acknowledges the idiosyncrasies faced by businesses would indeed need to enforce a minimum of sustainability standards if the bespoke approach became the sole dominant storyline. The onus would then be on the individual business to comply to standards and behave sustainably, rather than to voluntarily opt into frameworks that may improve business prospects. Indeed, Section 2.3 explores the effect that power over other stakeholders can have on supply chain management. In the current broad-to-bespoke approach, the intertextuality employed in P1 and P2 documents aims to strengthen the rationale for their behaviour to the external reader, as well as legitimising their sustainable efforts. Examples of this include being “*compliant with Red Tractor*”, supporting the Prince’s Countryside Trust or undertaking work “*facilitated by WRAP¹ and Dairy UK*”.

S1 and S2 act as an intermediary between both the approaches identified so far; they take the broad guidelines and translate them into a set of expectations they expect from their suppliers and themselves. This intermediary role is highlighted through the importance S1 and S2 place on collaboration and creating standards along the supply chain, as demonstrated in “*We’ll only achieve [the Sustainable Development goals] through creativity and collaboration*”, “*We’ll use [existing sustainability data] to shape future production standards*” and “*work[ing] more closely together [between farmer and retailers]*”. S2 demonstrates the supermarkets’ perceived role in being an intermediary by interpreting what supply chain sustainability means to them, then “*building farm systems to meet these principles*” by creating their own set of standards. When talking about their own standards, intertextuality plays an important role for both S1 and S2 in legitimising their activities

¹ WRAP is a UK-based charity that promotes and encourages a transition in industry towards a circular economy approach (WRAP, 2019)

by discussing where *“measures are adapted from”* and which standards they *“100%... comply with”*.

As well as flowing from broad to bespoke, both S1 and S2 identify bespoke challenges being faced and how they are overcome with broad guidelines, highlighting a gap in existing frameworks for trade associations to work on. However, this appears to be for self-serving promotional reasons, rather than for any altruistic motivation. For instance, when discussing the importance of having *“to be able to afford high standards”* if the industry demands them, S1 highlights how they have found a solution for a sustainability issue whilst showing off their credentials as an *“empowering”* and *“trusted retailer”*. S2 makes a similar statement on how an action taken contributes to them being the *“most trusted”* outlet. Furthermore, when considering the lack of consensus around what sustainability means in the dairy industry, as mentioned in the context section, S1 is filling this gap by clarifying a definition that unifies their suppliers in their understanding of the concept. Whilst this still falls short of an industry-wide unification, it represents a move in a promising direction.

Countering this traditional development storyline is the revolutionary change storyline taken by AW and LG. They have been labelled as revolutionary as their sustainable ideal would be unable to coexist with the dominant sustainable storyline. AW comes from the animal welfare perspective that *“there’s no reason to drink cow’s milk”*, and that dairy cows are *“manipulated”* and exposed to *“abnormal physiological demands”*. On the other hand, LG reasons that the existence of a dairy industry is sustainable, but greater consideration needs to be taken of certain factors. This includes campaigning for *“contracts that are fit for purpose”*, helping farmers *“better manage risk”* and supporting greater farmer representation, as well as arguing that

appreciating sustainability involves the “*contextualising of environmental impact[s]*” and rejecting claims against dairy produce based on “*a dearth of traditional science*”. These two revolutionary stakeholders represent the lost voices from the dominant storyline; how these lost voices are challenging the dominant storyline is discussed in more detail in the applying the cultural hegemony lens section.

5.3 Stakeholder identity in the dairy industry

Besides the approach taken towards sustainability, the other main theme which has emerged from the analysis is that of stakeholder identity. As with the previous theme, the different stakeholder identities are illustrated in Figure 7. The stakeholder identities emerging in this analysis are those of leader, supporter, enforcer and protester; the first three align with the traditional development storyline, whilst the protester identity lies in the revolutionary change storyline. The documents by TA1 and TA2 have been interpreted as leaders. The stance they present is that of an innovator, a collaborator and an agenda setter. This is echoed through phrases used in the documents, such as “*provid[ing] a template replicated around the world*”, “*remain[ing] committed to improvement*”, “*collaborative spirit*” and “*ambitious targets*”. Assuming the role of a leader has been linked with the broad approach taken to sustainability by TA1 and TA2, where their place in the traditional development storyline is to provide wider guidelines and targets for others to follow and draw inspiration from.

Conversely, P1 and P2 appear to present themselves as supporters, not only of behaving sustainably by being “*aligned with... frameworks*” and “*help[ing] both the public and private sector*” address climate change issues, but also taking “*an active role supporting*” local community, charities and employees. The supporters appear to present themselves as helpful, caring and diligent. Given that sustainability is not the expertise of the supporters, they also appear to have transferred authority to those who

set guidance and accreditations, demonstrated by the intertextuality of organisations such as the Red Tractor, WRAP and Free-Range Dairy. Being a supporter has been linked up with the bespoke approach mentioned earlier; a supporter of guidance produced by a leader interprets and applies any given standards in their own situation.

The role of the enforcer seems to be assumed by S1 and S2, which marries up with the intermediary approach taken by the supermarkets towards sustainability. The stance presented by the enforcers is one of being trustworthy, responsible and strong. Phrases used throughout the texts displaying these characteristics include “*strengthens our commitment to address [sustainability issues with] bold new targets*”, “*our goal remains clear: to be the most trusted retailer*” and to be “*agriculture’s most trusted partner*”. In an S2 sustainability report, repetition is utilised as a rhetorical device when discussing the pillars of their sustainability plan, which adds to the intensity of the point being made (Bazzanella, 2011). Furthermore, S1 and S2 discuss “*indicators*”, “*measures*” and “*performance scorecards*” based on guidelines issued by the leaders, used to assess the sustainable performance of their suppliers, which in the dairy industry include processors and farmers.

The flow of information consumption can start with TA1 and TA2 with broad guidelines, which are then interpreted and enforced by S1 and S2 and supported by P1 and P2. There is then a ‘*cycle of legitimacy*’, as the processors report back to the supermarkets, who in turn liaise with the trade associations. However, the processor and supermarket members of the trade associations that set the frameworks somewhat blur the distinction between the roles of leader, enforcer and supporter. Whilst trade associations hold influence in their role as a leader, a supermarket or processor may find it easier to be an enforcer or supporter of an external agenda that they have been able to shape; a *self-perpetuating* cycle of legitimacy is created. This

point exemplifies the importance of considering the origin of a document when assessing if it is independent and altruistic in nature. Although this ambiguity exists, it remains apparent that stakeholders seem to play specific characters in the traditional development storyline.

The stakeholders remaining are the lost voices of the revolutionary change storyline: AW and LG. AW has been labelled as a protester, which is borne from the stakeholder's belief that the dairy industry can never be sustainable as cows' milk is "*not for humans*", with the dairy industry "*inflict[ing] unacceptable and unavoidable pain on cows*". LG has also been labelled as a protester against the dominant storyline, but believes the dairy industry can be sustainable, advocating for "*transforming the environment*" to create "*a better future*" for farmers, as well as suggesting the multitude of arguments in the dairy industry "*can become a headache for consumers*" trying to behave sustainably. Whilst they differ on their opinion of whether the dairy industry can be sustainable, both LG and AW remain united in their desire for challenging the dominant sustainable storyline, possessing the protester characteristics of concern, passion and determination. A review of the results is given in Table 4, which links together the approaches to sustainable practices and stakeholder identities to their respective storylines.

The summary of the dominant and alternative sustainable storylines in Table 4 succinctly responds to research question 1. As has been shown throughout this section by initially identifying the approaches taken to sustainability, and matching them up to the proposed identity of their authors, the sustainable storylines were formed and drawn on to characterise both the text and its author. The stakeholder identities emerged through both close analysis of syntax employed, as well as taking a broader contextualised overview of the positionality of stakeholders within the dairy

industry. A contribution made in answering research question one is the effective use of critical discourse analysis in exploring sustainable supply chain management issues, in particular highlighting the presence of more than one sustainable storyline in a supply chain. The findings also respond to research question 2, which considers the transmission of power through discourse via the *self-perpetuating cycle of legitimacy*, which forms another original contribution of this study. This cycle is further explored through the cultural hegemony lens in the discussion section.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

6. Discussion

As previously stated, the concept of discourse coalitions looks at the storylines, actors, language and practices around a discourse (Hajer, 1993). Therefore, when applying this hegemonic lens to the dairy industry, there are several factors that need specific consideration, as per the critical discourse analysis process shown in Figure 4. Firstly, how the text promotes the traditional development storyline through the linguistic features used will be considered, followed by a critique of the traditional development storyline. This critique will be framed around the power dynamics evident in dairy industry sustainability discourse, culminating towards a discussion on vertical supply chain integration. Finally, the revolutionary change storyline from AW and LG will be discussed, alongside suggestions of how they could be integrated into the dominant storyline of the dairy industry.

Focusing on linguistic features, quantification and scientific imagery appear regularly throughout the documents, featuring in the dominant storyline, from justifying the setting of a target to exemplifying the scope and size of an organisation. The use of numeric symbols and specialist language enhances the perceived legitimacy of an

organisation, as the scientific method has been central to developing new knowledge for centuries. Perceived legitimacy is specifically alluded to, as remembering the literature on effective measurements and targets in SSCM (Isaksson *et al*, 2010), any measurements may well be superficial and could consequently hinder sustainable progress (Morali & Searcy, 2013). Specialist language and statistics present a perception of being knowledgeable, which Foucault would link to being powerful (Smart, 1985). Hence, the organisations using this imagery are perceived as powerful and are able to perpetuate the existing dominant hegemony.

Rhetoric features are also used to promote the power status of the author to the reader, such as repetition and intertextuality. Repetition can be used as a rhetorical tool to emphasise certain words and make them more memorable (Davison, 2008). Words are frequently repeated to emphasise perception of size, such as “*global*” and “*world leading*” in TA1 and TA2, as well as strength, such as “*pillar*” and “*commitment*” in S1 and S2. Both aspects create an image of a powerful author in the reader’s mind, which is then further reinforced in the framework documents by the presence of multiple logos of partners and affiliates found throughout dairy industry texts. These pages of logos act as pictorial lists that not only emphasise the support given to these documents by the names on list, but suggest to the reader that the support is continuing to grow, along with the list (Davison, 2008). The presence of these logos suggests collaboration with other members of the dairy supply chain, which is known to enhance SSCM practices (Yawar & Seuring, 2017; Gimenez & Sierra, 2013; Drake & Schlachter, 2008).

The motivation for applying the discourse coalition concept was not only to expose how dominant stakeholders maintain a hegemony through language, but also to provide a critique of the traditional development storyline. As is clear from the

findings section, the storyline is controlled by those in power. Given that processors and supermarkets are the main constituents of industry trade associations, there follows a self-perpetuating cycle of legitimacy, which creates a duality of stakeholder identity. For instance, a group of processor supporters can make up a trade association leader, which adds to the complexity of the dairy industry and makes it more difficult to introduce sustainable guidelines that the supporters would be reluctant to endorse, such as a pay increase to farmers. The uncovering of the self-perpetuating cycle of dominant storyline legitimacy through a duality of stakeholder identity on trade association and standards boards is a key contribution to emerge from this research. Such boards may be inclined to recommend a circular economy approach to the industry, if implementation is economically favourable (Geissdoerfer *et al*, 2017), Whilst a circular economy approach has been shown to help with emission reduction (Genovese *et al*, 2017), reverse logistics (Dev *et al*, 2020; Frei *et al*, 2020) and supply chain resilience (Nandi *et al*, 2021), the sustainable benefits need to be felt by those in powerful positions for trade associations to recommend such practices, seemingly at the expense of those weaker parties in the supply chain. The context of the dairy industry certainly influences this conclusion, as industries with truly independent trade associations and standards boards might be able to introduce sustainable practices, such as the circular economy, that benefit players other than the powerful in supply chains.

The self-perpetuating legitimisation of the dominant sustainable storyline is emphatically exemplified in S2. When discussing their sustainable efforts in the dairy industry, S2 reminisces about the “*gate price for milk plummeting and serious risks*” that dairy farmers faced in 2007. What S2 does not mention is in 2007, in the wake of dairy price fixing accusations (Davies, 2007), supermarkets were directly contributing

to the plummeting milk price by taking a larger portion of profit margin (Lawrence, 2007). Instead, S2 discusses how they have been collaborating with farmers *and* “*unlocking insights*” to “*understand... challenges*”, which suggests they have simply been speaking with one another. From a hegemonic perspective, S2 is implying they are liaising with those in less powerful positions when contributing to the dominant storyline discourse. In essence, they are implying they can be trusted, thereby silencing any stakeholders in a less powerful position that disagree.

Another application of power in the dairy industry text comes from the emphasis on collaboration with farmers. From P2 working “*closely with their farmers*” to ensure quality and standards, to the “*long-standing relationships*” and “*partnership*” with farms of S1 and S2 respectively, the integration of farmers into the dominant storyline is clearly shown. The emergence of supermarket dairy groups, where a dairy farmer sells milk to a supermarket, so long as they adhere to the standards set, is a major outcome of this collaboration. However, through such adherence, the farmer is effectively being vertically integrated into the supermarket; SMEs therefore lose their autonomy by being absorbed by large corporations. Relating this back to the self-perpetuating cycle of dominant storyline legitimacy, SMEs may be less likely to resist unfavourable sustainable practices suggested by trade associations if their supermarket customer is on the board, serving only to further weaken their position in the supply chain.

If the farmers were treated as employees, there would certainly be an associated improvement in supply chain efficiency and visibility (Guan & Rehme, 2012), as well as improving certain supplier issues, given the stronger level of collaboration, such as information sharing (Zaheer & Trkamn, 2017). For the retailer, greater efficiency would aid with the sustainable agenda, and greater visibility would make sustainable reporting easier. However, there is the livelihood and lifestyle of the

farmer to consider; they may want the autonomy of working for themselves and not as an employee. As Glover & Touboulic (2020) also point out, this imbalanced power dynamic leads to removal of farmers' agency. If farmers do not like the remuneration offered by their employer, they would not be able to seek a new employer in the same way a new customer can be sought. For those farmers who do not sell milk to supermarkets, there may be barriers to knowledge exchange as sustainable efficiencies gained by farmer employees may create a competitive advantage and thus be kept internally within the organisation. The power imbalance between SMEs, such as farmers and smaller processors, and supermarkets is already known (Touboulic *et al*, 2014), and such vertical integration may only serve to formalise such a dynamic.

Throughout this entire discussion, the voice of the cattle themselves has been suppressed, only being drawn upon when they can be utilised as a sustainable success story. Plant-based milk alternatives are challenging traditional cows' milk, following along the logic of AW that the dairy industry is inherently unsustainable. Whilst cows' milk holds the dominant share in the UK milk market, the share held by plant-based products continues to increase (Mintel, 2019). As an AW report states, "*humans don't need cows' milk to survive*". Such a statement is made based on a common sense assumption that cows' milk does not primarily exist for human consumption, creating a storyline that directly challenges the existing dominant storyline of sustainable cows' milk.

Whilst it seems the *revolution* desired by AW is beginning, the sustainable future sought by LG is yet to be addressed. On the side of the dairy farmers, it seems difficult for LG to move beyond superficial dealings with trade associations comprised of producers and supermarket: the cycle of legitimacy ensures the dominance of the storyline. Thus, to challenge this storyline, a leader stakeholder that issues broad

sustainable guidelines needs creating where there is no duality of stakeholder identity of the board members: a truly independent trade association. Such an organisation would then work with other stakeholders to shape the sustainable storyline, rather than work on behalf of them. Rather than being optional to follow, with the backing of government, such an organisation should act as a statutory authority when it comes to sustainable matters. Consider the voluntary code of practice, which was a voluntary code designed in 2013 to create fair pricing mechanisms between buyer and supplier, hence addressing an economic sustainability issue of the dairy industry. As the government report states, interpretation of the processors was vital for successful adoption and if not effective, statutory intervention should be considered (Great Britain. Welsh Affairs Committee, 2013). Six years later and the continual decline of dairy farmers in the industry suggests statutory action does indeed need taking, with an independent trade association best placed for undertaking this action fairly for all stakeholders. Moreover, such an intervention would also answer the call made by Glover & Touboulic (2020) for policymakers to assume greater responsibility in the dairy supply chain.

Another recommendation to break the cycle of legitimacy is to challenge the interpretation of the concept on which it relies: the triple bottom line (TBL). When analysing the documents, the focus placed on environmental issues was notable, with social considerations also being acknowledged. Indeed, when considering the purpose of the documents in question, such as the sustainability reports and specific webpages of the supermarkets and processors, the environmental and social issues are discussed independently of economic concerns. If the three aspects of the TBL are to be considered equally, then they should be reflected on together and with equal rigour. In reality, this does not seem to be the case, with LG exemplifying the underlying issue:

the consumer “*help[s] support an industry*” with its environmental practices. Alongside LG’s calls for fairer farmer pay, the clear message seems to be that economic considerations remain intrinsically connected with environmental and social factors. The need to acknowledge the interrelationships within the TBL, as well as a desire to challenge the prevailing precedence bestowed to economic factors, leads to the recommendation for the wider dairy industry to embrace an ecologically dominant approach if it truly wishes to be sustainable in the long term, agreeing with Montabon *et al* (2016).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shown that discourse coalitions between stakeholders in a supply chain context are significant when reinforcing sustainability practices, with different storylines of sustainability existing within stakeholder grey literature, and highlighted some of the techniques utilised by stakeholders to project and sustain power through the dairy supply chain. A dominant traditional development storyline of broad sustainability guidelines set by industry leading associations emerged, which are in turn enforced by supermarkets and supported by processors. In moving along this storyline, it becomes more bespoke as it moves from trade association to processor, and ultimately producer. A self-perpetuating cycle of legitimacy in the discourse was identified, powered by a duality of stakeholder identity of those in power, which is used as a means for suppressing resistance to the dominant storyline. The use of this mechanism to solidify power and influence regarding sustainability across the supply chain is a key contribution of this research. The alternative storyline can be an approach to sustainability that places greater emphasis on the struggles faced by

farmers, as well as the animal welfare logic that the dairy industry is fundamentally unsustainable.

Not only does the discourse transmit the traditional development storyline, but it also reinforces the power held by certain stakeholders in the UK dairy supply chain. This is done through linguistic means, such as quantification and specialist jargon, and rhetorical devices, such as repetition and power-related imagery. Intertextuality is also utilised to further legitimise the dominant storyline. However, trade associations used as part of this intertextuality were not always independent, due to the duality of stakeholder identity. The level of control these stakeholders have over farmers was likened to vertical supply chain integration, which only further lessens the power held by farmers to resist the dominant storyline. To address this issue, a managerial implication to emerge from this study is the recommendation of a truly independent trade association in the dairy industry. Furthermore, such a trade association should be statutory in nature, in order to increase effectiveness and uptake beyond voluntary mechanisms already seen in the UK dairy industry.

A potential limitation of this study might be the lack of impartiality in the researchers' voices throughout the application of the critical discourse analysis. However, every effort has been made to clearly state the positionality and views of the researcher in relation to the documents, providing transparency to the reader regarding the conditions under which the analysis took place. Furthermore, the lack of a farmer stakeholder is notable, due to the dearth of available grey literature. Whilst the LG stakeholder was introduced to ensure a general farmer voice was included, a future research recommendation is the comparison of the output of different dairy stakeholders regarding sustainability, including the differing stances of farmers, on a platform where such data is available, such as social media. Additional future research

recommendations include the use of critical discourse analysis as a methodological approach to sustainability supply chain management, as well as the utilisation of cultural hegemony, and specifically the discourse coalition concept, as a theoretical lens to understand supply chain power. Due to its focus on power and context in a stakeholder setting, critical discourse analysis facilitated tangible suggestions to improve practice in the dairy supply chain, namely the formation of an independent trade association. The hegemonic focus of discourse coalitions was shown to work alongside the critical discourse analysis, being instrumental in helping to identify and explain the workings of the supply chain power dynamics, notably the existence of the self-perpetuating cycle of legitimacy.

Ultimately, this study has contributed to the existing supply chain literature by demonstrating the important role discourse coalitions play in a supply chain context when influencing sustainable practices, particularly through the identification of the self-perpetuating cycle of dominant storyline legitimacy, as well as highlighting how discourse can be manipulated by those in powerful positions within a supply chain to control a hegemonic storyline.

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9. Figures and Tables

Figure 1: A graph showing the number of UK dairy cows and average annual milk yield per cow. (AHDB Dairy, 2019a; AHDB Dairy, 2019b)

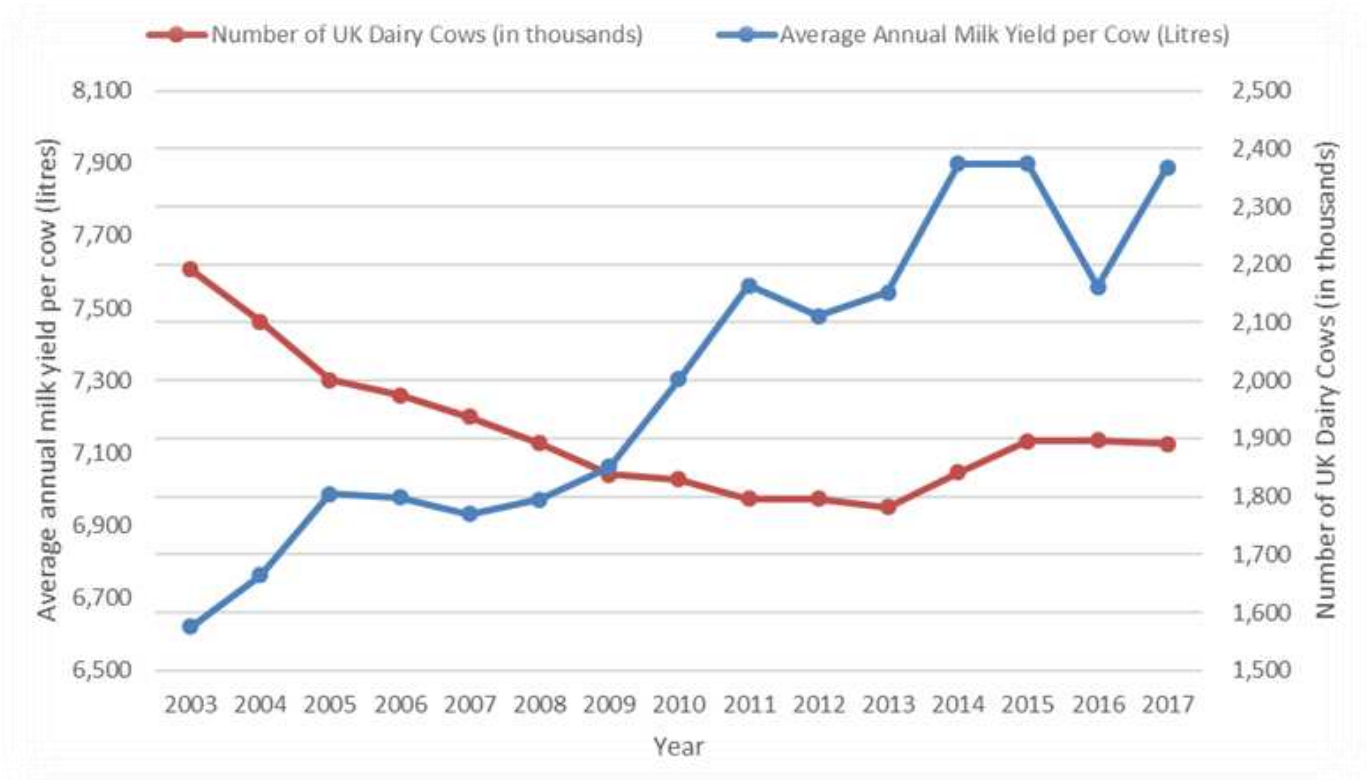


Figure 2: The flow of expectations, influence and margins in a supply chain with power asymmetries

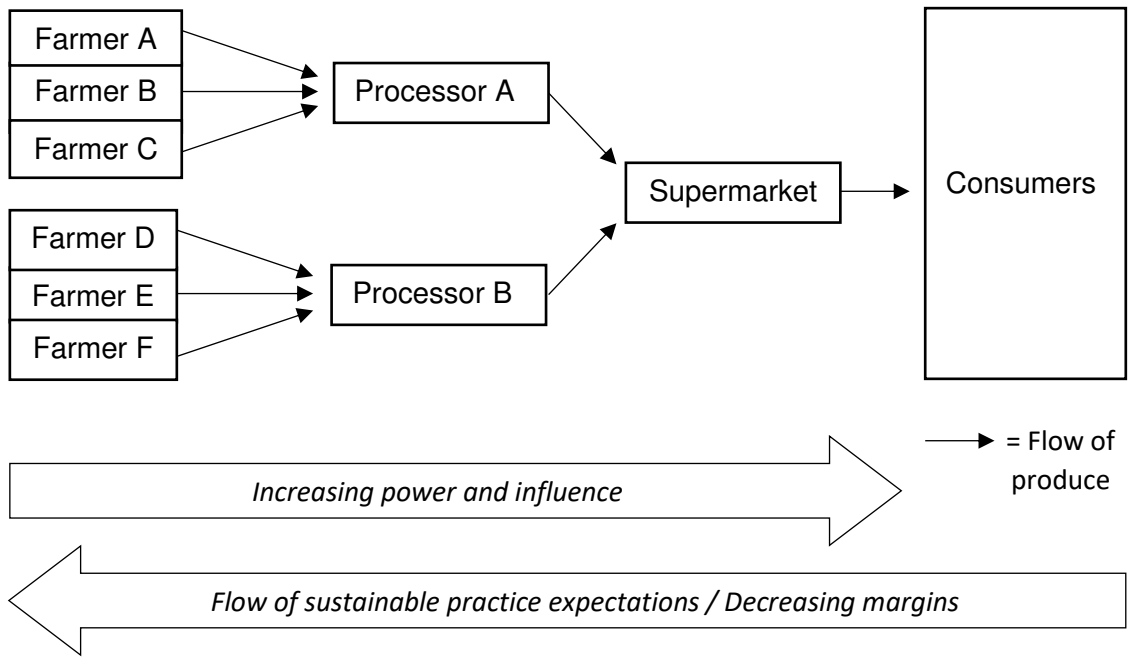


Figure 3: The relationship between key concepts utilised in this study

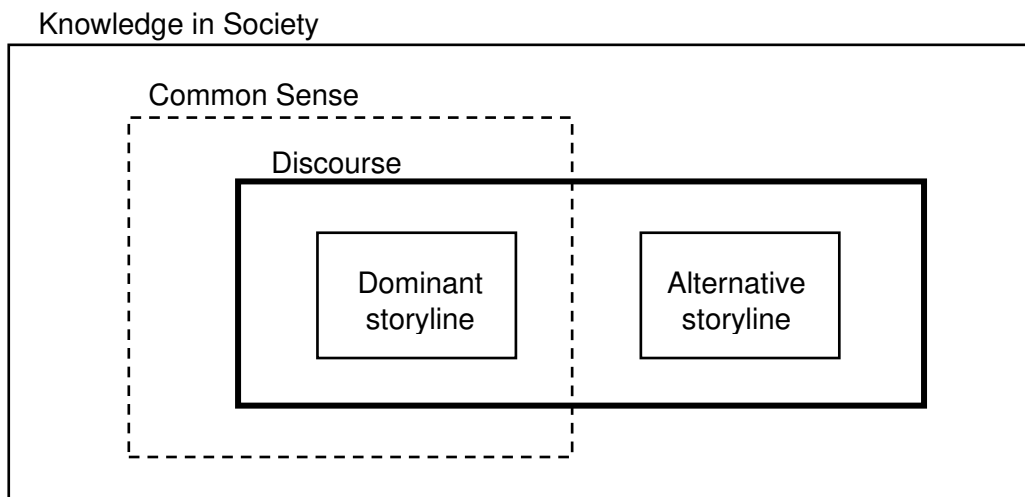


Figure 4: An overview of the critical discourse analysis process, based on Fairclough (2001) and Bloor and Bloor (2007)

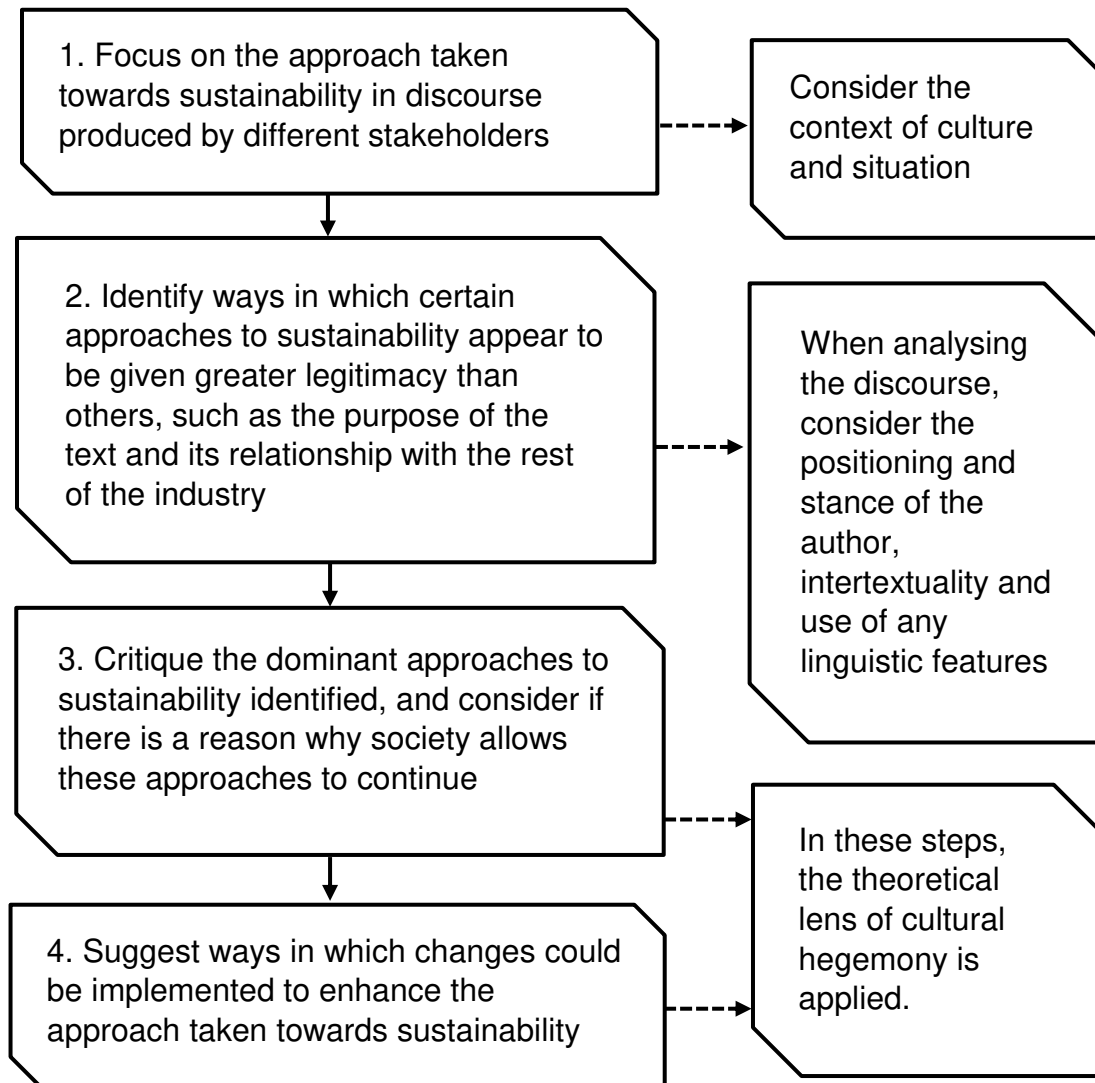


Figure 5: Development of Coding in the Critical Discourse Analysis, based on Gioia *et al* (2013)

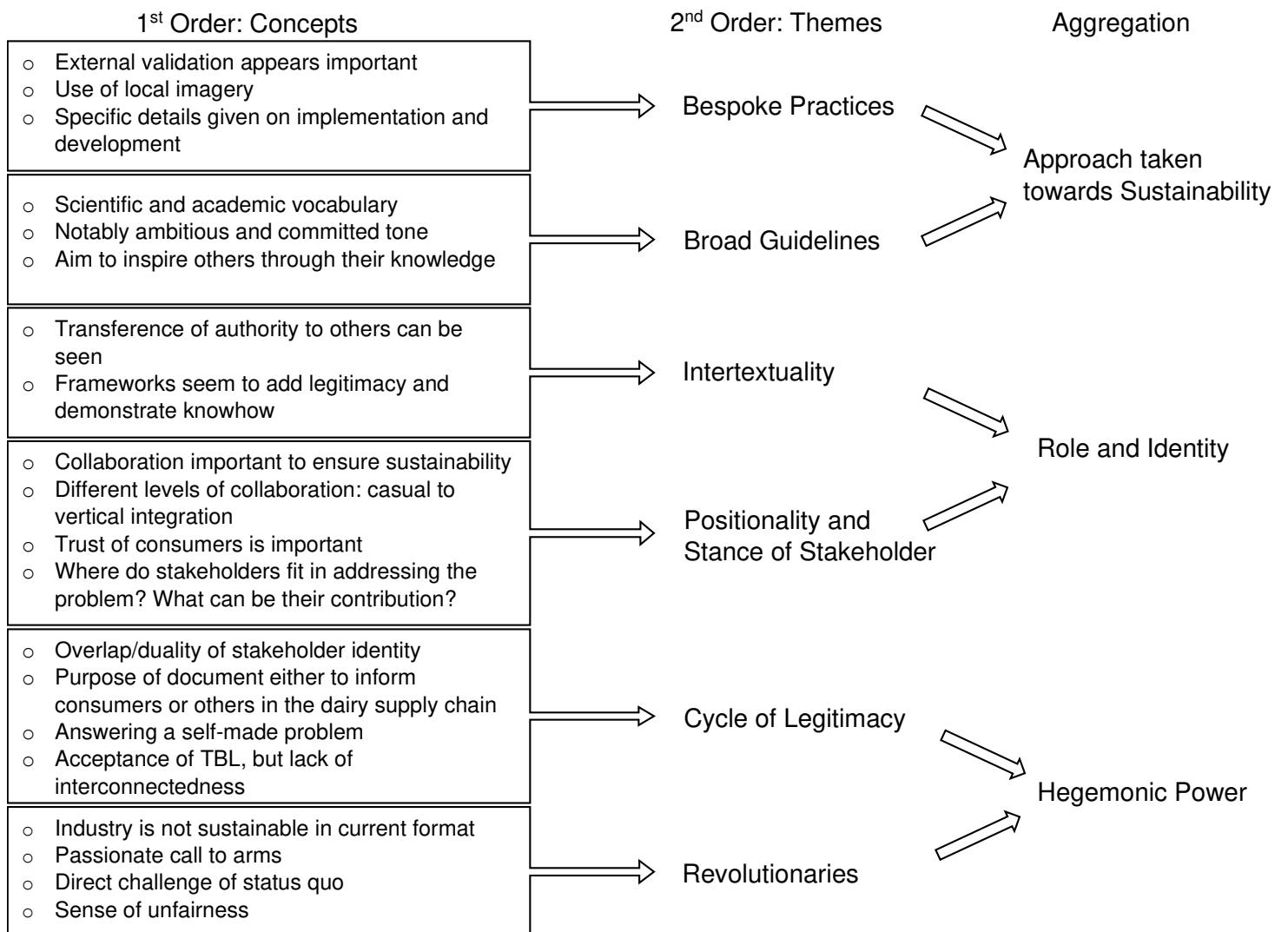
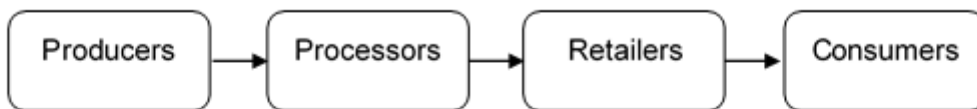
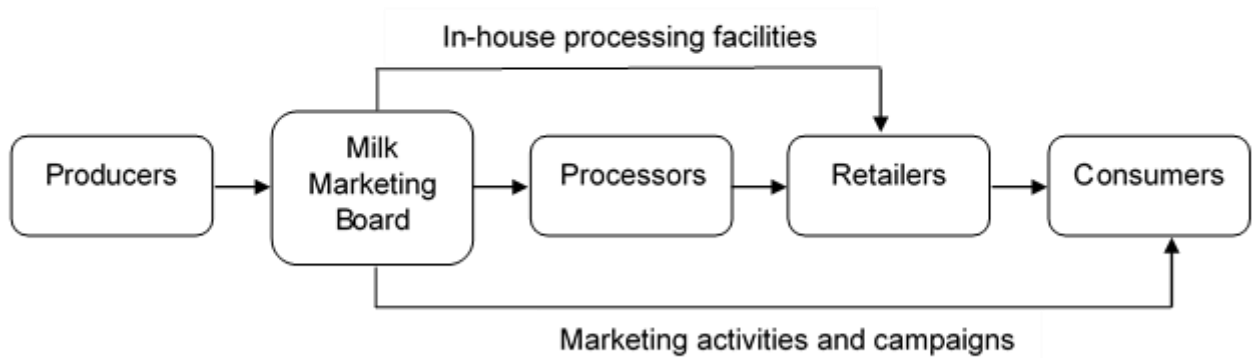


Figure 6: A comparison between an example contemporary and historic UK dairy supply chain

A contemporary UK dairy supply chain



A historic UK dairy supply chain featuring the Milk Marketing Board



→ = the flow of milk through the supply chain

Figure 7: A diagram of the storylines in relation to the identified themes

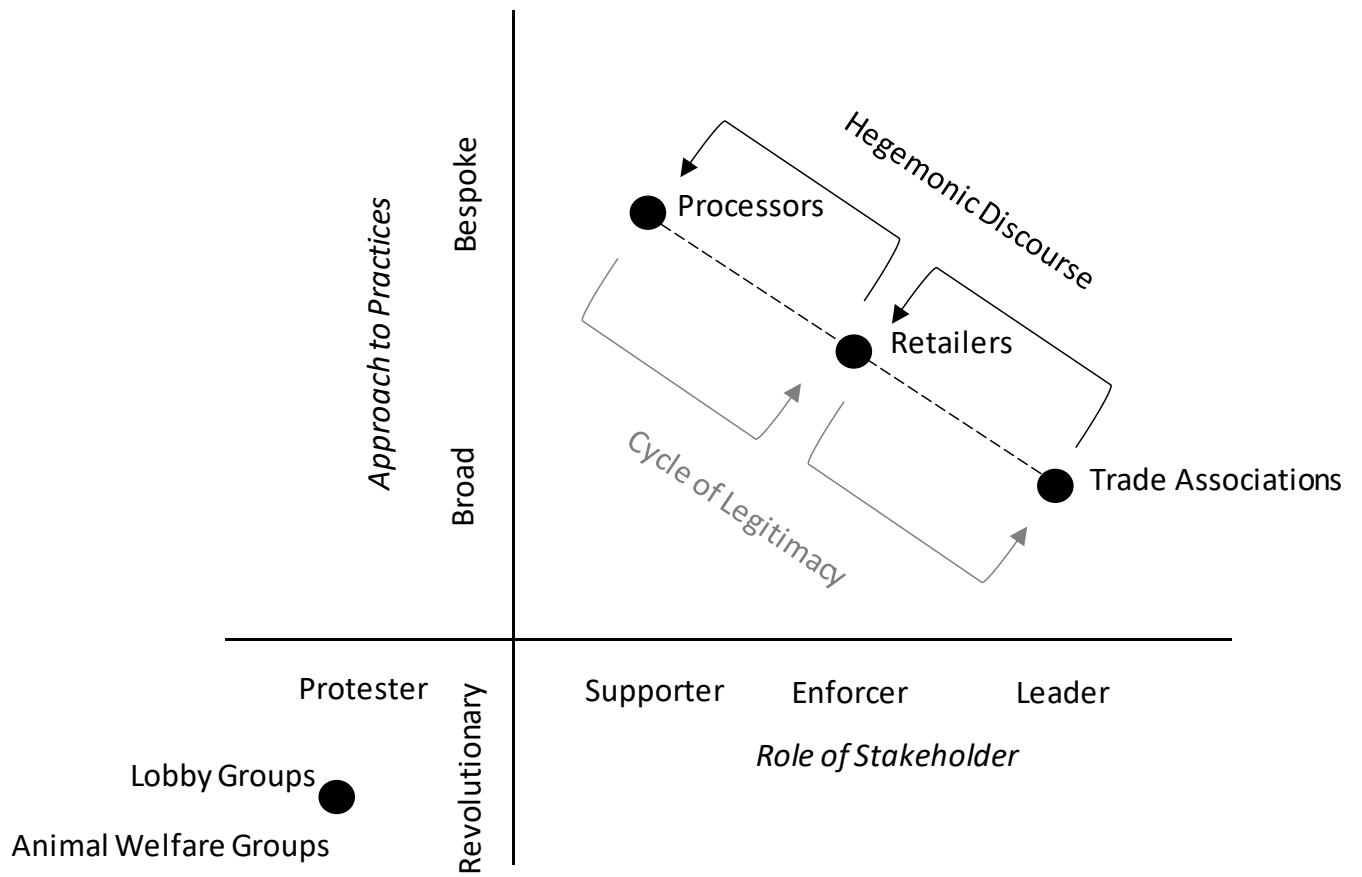


Table 1: Key definitions utilised throughout the study

Concept	Definition	Link between concepts
Storyline	A condensed account of facts related to a complex topic, helping the narrator to interpret and make sense of the subject. Multiple individual storylines can exist for the same topic (Hajer, 2005)	Within a particular discourse, multiple storylines can exist. Groupings of stakeholders can share storylines and produce their own interpretations, referred to by Hajer (2005) as discourse coalitions. Common sense links with how the dominant storyline is perceived by society.
Discourse	The context and set of practices around a specific group of texts and utterances (Hajer, 2005; Mills, 2004)	
Common Sense	Underlying knowledge held in society that is accepted without critical thought (Gramsci <i>et al</i> , 1971)	

Table 2: Categories of documents analysed

<i>Stakeholder*</i>	<i>Acronym**</i>	<i>Type(s) of Document</i>
<i>UK trade association</i>	<i>TA1</i>	<i>Annual Review, Guidelines</i>
<i>International trade association</i>	<i>TA2</i>	<i>Annual Review, Sustainability Report</i>
<i>Premium supermarket</i>	<i>S1</i>	<i>Sustainability Report, Webpages</i>
<i>Mid-range supermarket</i>	<i>S2</i>	<i>Sustainability Report, Webpages</i>
<i>National processor</i>	<i>P1</i>	<i>Sustainability Reports</i>
<i>Localised processor</i>	<i>P2</i>	<i>Sustainability Policy Webpages</i>
<i>Industrial lobby group</i>	<i>LG</i>	<i>Sustainability Related Webpages</i>
<i>Animal welfare group</i>	<i>AW</i>	<i>Campaign Leaflet, Report</i>

** Based in the UK unless specified otherwise*

*** Acronym is used to refer to stakeholders in the Findings and Discussion sections*

Table 3: Definitions of the dominant and alternative sustainability storylines

	Dominant Storyline	Alternative Storyline
Definition	<p>A traditional “box ticking” development approach to sustainability, where social and environmental issues are isolated and reported on separately.</p> <p><i>“[We have] achieved great success including higher milk yields, improved animal welfare, and a price guarantee.”</i></p> <p><i>“The aim of achieving nutrition and socio-economic improvement goals is widely recognized.”</i></p> <p>Validated by external industry standards and goals.</p> <p><i>“We have implemented a series of initiatives to ensure [our sustainable] objectives are delivered”.</i></p> <p><i>“[Dairy Farmers] all work to a detailed set of animal welfare standards”</i></p>	<p>A revolutionary approach to sustainability, where economic, social and environmental concerns should be valued equally and embedded in practices.</p> <p><i>“When trying to resolve the sustainability issue, there is a wider context [than the environment] to consider.”</i></p> <p><i>“The only reason to zero graze or intensively farm animals is to lower production costs and increase product yield”</i></p> <p>Validated through intrinsically fair and respectful treatment of all living beings in the dairy industry.</p> <p><i>“Farmers have become commodity slaves”</i></p> <p><i>“Building better, fairer supply chain relationships”</i></p> <p><i>“Dairy cows in farms that operate limited or no time at pasture are deprived of their</i></p>

	<i>[An assurance scheme] is the foremost example of the sector acting with initiative to improve and drive forward farm standards for animal health and welfare, food safety and environmental protection.”</i>	<i>natural environment for much or all of their lives and endure the physical and mental strain of living indoors.”</i>
Sustainability scope	<p>Economically-driven sustainability</p> <p><i>“We believe that becoming a truly consumer centric organisation is key”</i></p> <p><i>“Sustainability builds brand trust and customer loyalty”</i></p> <p><i>“We pay guaranteed prices and agree long term contracts.”</i></p>	<p>Ecologically-driven sustainability</p> <p><i>“When trying to resolve the sustainability issue, there is a wider context to consider.”</i></p> <p><i>“The sheer size of the [dairy] industry has also placed great strains on the environment.”</i></p>
Associated Stakeholders	Supermarkets, Large Processors, Trade Associations	SMEs, Farmers, Lobby Groups, Animal Welfare Groups

Table 4: Summary of Storylines

	Dominant Traditional Development	Alternative Revolutionary Change
Associated stakeholders	Trade associations Processors Supermarkets	Lobby groups Animal rights organisations
Summary	Broad targets are set by external organisations for other stakeholders to action and translate into bespoke practices, who then report back progress	The current approach is not adequately addressing the needs of all stakeholders from all aspects of the TBL
Sustainable outlook	Through meeting external targets, sustainable practices are progressing and in development	Change is needed, as the industry approach is inherently unsustainable
Stakeholder identity	Leader Enforcer Supporter	Protester
TBL alignment	Instrumental approach	Ecological approach