Uncovering the dimensions of public value in public procurement: a systematic literature review

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Abstract

Public procurement is still loaded with challenges that involve a constant management of trade-offs, nevertheless, it can generate broader outcomes for all stakeholders. This systematic literature review investigates the integration of public value theories in public procurement processes, exploring a value-oriented approach that maximizes procurement outcomes. The research synthesizes diverse perspectives on public values within procurement, emphasizing the complexities of stakeholder interactions and the need for co-creation engagement. Procurement is moving from a traditional focus on cost minimization to embracing value multi-dimensional perspective. By analysing peer-reviewed articles, this review provides insights that leverage public procurement process, ultimately advocating for a strategic shift into a public values perspective.

Keywords: Public Value, Procurement, Systematic Literature Review

Introduction

The public procurement process is an integral part of the public sector organization and engaging it through a public value perspective is crucial for achieving better societal outcomes. In 2021, a substantial portion of the European Union's expenditure was represented by public procurement, accounting for 14.8% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (OECD, 2024). While traditionally viewed as a technical function focused on minimizing costs and being efficient, public procurement is increasingly recognized as a strategic instrument for organizations, demanding a shift from a purely transactional approach to one that considers the broader economic, social, and environmental impacts (Malacina et al., 2022). Additionally, it represents a significant strain for governments to achieve policy objectives (Erridge, 2007).

The concept of public value remains theoretically contested and practically challenging to implement (Alonso & Andrews, 2019). Scholars have debated the appropriate definition of public value (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Moore, 1995; Meynhardt, 2009) and the importance of competing value dimensions (e.g., stakeholder involvement & collaboration vs transparency & trust). For Jørgensen & Bozeman there

is “no more important topic in public administration and policy than public values” (2007, p. 355). Despite the growing recognition, the concept of public value within the procurement function remains relatively underexplored in academic literature (Storsjö, 2021; Grandia & Volker, 2023). In Canada, collaborative approaches in public procurement are being applied, resulting in more aligned stakeholders’ interests and more effective risk management (Brunet & Jobidon, 2024). Public-Private Partnerships are increasing in United States of America, for the procurement of large-scale infrastructure projects, shaping and changing all the dynamics of relations between stakeholders, ultimately affecting public values (Mayer & Yusuf, 2022). Given the significant economic and societal impact, exploring and understanding how public procurement can effectively deliver public value is of crucial importance to create benefits that extend beyond mere economic gains, encompassing broader stakeholder’s needs and demands.

This leads to the research question: How can a public value perspective improve public procurement? As noted earlier, the theme is ambiguous, with authors like Cabral et al. (2019) arguing that future research on value within public procurement requires a multifaceted approach that considers various theories, challenges, practices, and stakeholder dynamics. This combination of sources allows for a strong framework to improve public procurement through a public value lens. This review contributes to the public administration field with a deeper understanding of how public value can strategically leverage the public procurement process, promoting representative governance for stakeholders and improving the overall process. A systematic literature review (SLR) is conducted as it offers a comprehensive overview of important themes and patterns across the published body of knowledge on this topic. The next section describes the methodology employed in the systematic review and all the steps taken. Then, the key findings are presented and discussed, which detail the main theories of public value applied in procurement. This study concludes by suggesting avenues for future research.

Methodological Approach

This study uses a qualitative SLR approach to analyse public values perspectives within public procurement and the value emerging from this process. The present SLR was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method (Page et al., 2021). Articles were searched on the Web of Science, B-on, Scopus, and ProQuest databases to identify relevant studies published in peer-reviewed journals. These databases were selected considering they are leading sources for peer-reviewed research in public administration, management, and related fields. The search terms ("public valu*") AND ("procurem*" OR "purch*" OR "contract*" OR "sourc*") were used and adapted for each database as necessary, to mitigate cultural differences between countries and encompass synonymous words related to procurement, allowing for a comprehensive capture of relevant literature. The first eligibility criterion was that a study should contain the required search terms in the title, abstract, or keywords. The second criterion was that the study must discuss public procurement and explicitly address the concept of public value or related concepts (e.g., value for money in a public value context, public service values in procurement). Only articles of peer-reviewed journals were considered, and no date range restrictions were applied to the search. Search results from the databases were imported into Mendeley for de-duplication. Title and abstract screening were conducted independently by two researchers, based on the pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. Potentially relevant articles were then retrieved in full text. Full-text screening was conducted independently by the two

researchers to determine final inclusion based on the eligibility criteria. Data from the included studies were extracted using a pre-designed data extraction form in Microsoft Excel.

The study selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram, Figure 1. The initial search across Web of Science, B-on, Scopus, and ProQuest databases yielded 214 records. After deduplication, 45 duplicate records were removed, resulting in 169 unique records for title and abstract screening. Based on title and abstract screening against the pre-defined eligibility criteria, 140 records were excluded. The remaining 29 records were assessed for full-text eligibility, and 3 were excluded for being out of focus. The final samples of selected articles consisted of 26 publications. A narrative synthesis approach was employed to synthesize the extracted data. The synthesis focused on identifying the theories presented in the literature that support value creation in public procurement. The findings are presented based on the key categories and patterns identified across the included studies.

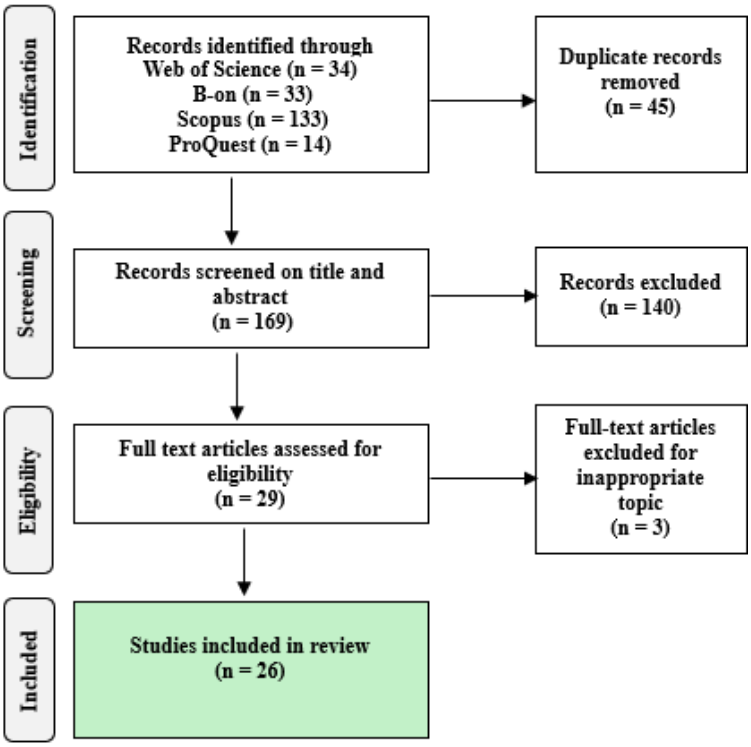


Figure 1- PRISMA flow diagram.

Results of the Systematic Review

Descriptive results

The included studies span a period of over two decades, from 2002 to 2025. Figure 2 displays the distribution by date of publication and methodology applied, to illustrate the development of the field and its methods through time. This distribution suggests an increasing trend in publications from the 2000s to the 2020s, with a continued significant number of publications in the most recent period (2020-2025), indicating sustained scholarly attention to the topic over time. The methodologies employed in the included studies are varied, reflecting the different research questions and objectives. The most common methodologies are qualitative methods with 16 articles (e.g., Turrell, 2013; Cordella & Willcocks, 2012) using literature reviews, semi-structured interviews, case studies, etc. Mixed methods with 7 articles (e.g., (Patrucco et al., 2023) applying practice-

based view, surveys, content analysis, etc. Qualitative methods with 3 articles (e.g., Piatak & Jensen, 2024) applying multinomial logistic regression, structural equation modelling, and difference-in-differences. The prevalence of qualitative methods, particularly case studies and literature review, suggests that the field is still developing and seeking to build conceptual understanding and exploring the complex phenomena in context. The growing use of mixed and quantitative methods in the last decade indicates a growing trend towards empirical testing and quantitative analysis.

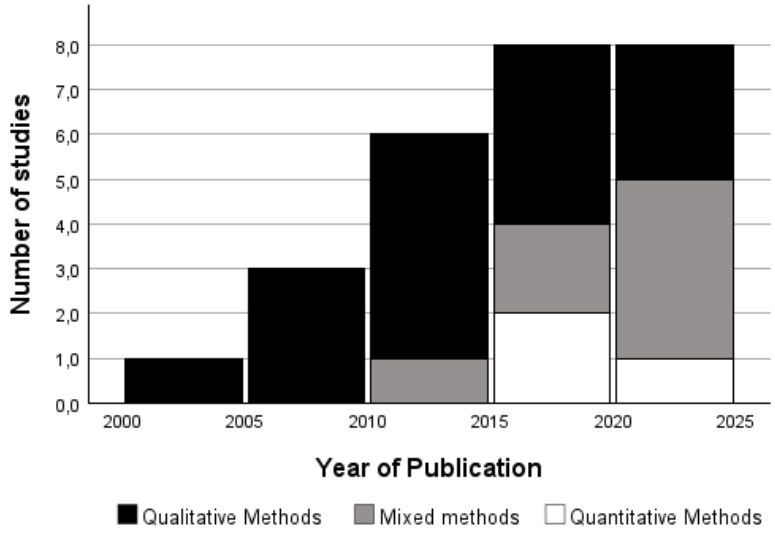


Figure 2 - Temporal development of the field and its methodologies through time.

Table 1 - Journal of publication

Journal of publication	Frequency
Journal of Public Procurement	3
Public Administration Review	2
Public Money and Management	2
Strategic Management Journal	2
Administração Pública e Gestão Social	1
Canadian Public Administration	1
Construction Management and Economics	1
Criminal Justice Ethics	1
Gestão & Planejamento	1
International Journal of Managing Projects in Business	1
International Journal of Public Sector Management	1
Journal of Local Self Government	1
Journal of Public Affairs Education	1
Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management	1
Journal of Strategic Information Systems	1
Management, Procurement and Law	1
Public Administration	1
Public Integrity	1
Public Management Review	1
Public Works Management & Policy	1
Revista de Administração	1

The articles were published in a wide range of journals, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Table 1 displays the distribution of journals of publication. The diversity of top-ranked journals, including those focused on public

administration, strategic management, and procurement, implies that the topic is important for the field and has theoretical and practical significance to attract rigorous academic inquiry.

The link between public value perspective and public procurement

Several articles in this review explicitly engage with well-known theories of public value, adapting them to their specific context (see Table 2). Studies like Piatak and Jensen (2024), about values preference in the public sector service delivery, cite Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) praising their inventory of values and choosing the most suitable ones in the search for their presence, interplay, and impact in governance for their research context. Others, like Hawkins et al. (2016), for the creation of a conceptual model to study fear of bid protest adopted the strategic triangle framework presented by Moore (1995) and (2013), defining public value as "the purpose of the organization", arguing that "in essence, value in a governmental organization equates to mission" (Hawkins et al., 2016, p.157). Malacina et al. (2022) in their practice-based view for value creation in public procurement emphasized public value from the perspective of individuals and their social relations as argued by Meynhardt (2009), defining public value as value generated by and for the public through co-creation and co-production among stakeholders. Nevertheless, authors like Santos et al. (2019) focus on the constitutional principles to study the challenges for hiring outsourced services, where they defined public value as the Constitutional Principles of The Federal Government of Brazil, referring to them as the ethical standards presented in legal norms and that public administration must adopt (e.g. legality, impersonality, morality, publicity and efficiency). Additionally, some like Kuitert et al. (2019), Cabral et al. (2019), Inamine et al. (2012) and others, cited two or three of these theories ultimately acknowledging the difficulty of finding a common and unified public value definition that is hindering the development of a consistent value measurement approach. Figure 3 displays a Venn diagram with the interaction between each theory and the articles of this SLR.

Some articles, such as Karttunen et al. (2024), Patrucco et al. (2023), Alonso and Andrews (2019), McArdle & Gunning (2018), Grandia & Meehan (2017), Stanger (2012), Charles et al. (2008) and (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2002) do not explicitly cite or apply any of the most known public value theories, but imply values in their research citing other authors related to the same context. In their study of dynamic capabilities associated with public value in procurement, Karttunen et al. (2024) infantized that "regarding the specific value components that can be achieved, Malacina et al. (2022) offer the most comprehensive synthesizing of them to date by reviewing more than 170 articles on public procurement" (Karttunen et al., 2024, p. 117), however, as noted earlier Malacina et al. (2022) supported their literature review with the Public Value Landscape theory from Meynhardt (2009). Other different approach is used by Alonso and Andrews (2019) and Stanger (2012) that used other authors prior research related to their context of investigation to deduct the understanding of public value, in the search to fulfil a gap identified in prior literature. The same strategy has used by McArdle & Gunning (2018) to support the argument that measuring public value may provide a more appropriate assessment of the effectiveness of public procurement policies, as opposed to solely focusing on achieving value for money.

Table 2 - Application of public value theories in procurement.

Theory and authors	**Description**	**Cited by**
"Strategic Triangle" (Moore, 1995) (Moore, 2013)	Emphasis on the principle that public managers should act as "explorers" or "entrepreneurs" who strategically define and pursue public value, similar to how private managers maximize shareholder value. Moore's developed a strategic model, known as "strategic triangle", for government managers focus managerial attention on three elements: 1. Value (the substantive goals or outcomes that justify an organization's existence); 2. Legitimacy and Support (the environment of stakeholders, including political and citizens, whose approval sustains operations) and 3. Operational Capacity (the resources and capabilities required to achieve the desired outcomes). The organization's vision and mission define what is the value to provide for stakeholders and public value is considered a dynamic co-produced construction, resulting from the interplay of managerial strategies, citizen expectations, and political scrutiny.	(Ferreira & Oliveira, 2022) (Mayer & Yusuf, 2022) (Tirronen et al., 2020) (Cabral et al., 2019) (Kuitert et al., 2019) (Hawkins et al., 2016) (Turrell, 2013) (Inamine et al., 2012) (Cordella & Willcocks, 2012) (Cordella & Willcocks, 2012) (Staples & Dalrymple, 2011) (Erridge, 2007)
Framework of "Public Values Universe" (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007)	Public values are referred to as guides of the behaviour of public organizations and reflectors of societal priorities. They are considered dynamic, shaped by political processes and societal changes. The authors provide a tool for analysing values presence, interplay, and impact in public governance. They identified seven constellations of values: 1. Public sector's contribution to society (e.g., common good); 2. Transformation of interests into decisions (e.g., democracy); 3. Relationship between administrators and politicians (e.g., accountability); 4. Intra-organizational dynamics (e.g., efficiency) 5. Administrator-citizen relations (e.g., responsiveness); 6. Organizational behaviour toward the environment (e.g., sustainability), and 7. Operational ethos (e.g., integrity).	(Brunet & Jobidon, 2024) (Piatak & Jensen, 2024) (Kuitert et al., 2019) (Cabral et al., 2019) (Inamine et al., 2012) (Furneaux et al., 2008) (Erridge, 2007)
"Public Value Landscape" (Meynhardt, 2009)	Public value seen from the perspective of individual and social relations, departing from the psychologically oriented needs theory. Value is defined as a subjective and relational concept based on psychological and social dynamics. Departing from challenging Moore's managerial focus, Meynhardt posits that public value arises from individuals' evaluations of how actions contribute to the common good across four dimensions: 1. Moral-ethical (justice, fairness); 2. Political-social (cohesion, trust); 3. Utilitarian-instrumental (efficiency, benefits) and 4. Hedonistic-aesthetic (emotional well-being, identity).	(Malacina et al., 2022) (Tirronen et al., 2020) (Cabral et al., 2019) (Kuitert et al., 2019)
Constitutional principles or legislation of each country	Public value, in this context, refers to the ethical principles presented in each country's constitution that public organizations must adhere to fulfil the collective interests of society effectively. It is both a guiding principle and a practical outcome, mediated by the interplay of constitutional ideals and legislative implementation. Values are shaped by historical, legal, and political forces.	(Santos et al., 2019) (Fourie, 2017) (Snider & Rendon, 2012)

As shown in Figure 3, there is a greater proliferation, use, and contrast between Moore's managerial focus (1995) and Jørgensen and Bozeman's pluralistic inventory (2007) theories. Less research was supported on Meynhardt's psychological-relational approach (2009) and the ones who did it do not contrast it with Jørgensen and Bozeman's (2007) theory. This may happen because Meynhardt theory departs from challenging Moore's notion of value, arguing that there is a need for a better explanation of what is "desires and perceptions of individuals" (Moore, 1995, p. 52), making the connection to a psychologically oriented need. The lack of consensus highlights the inherent social nature of public values, reflecting the diverse and often conflicting interests of stakeholders. Public value researchers tend to adapt to specific institutional and cultural

contexts rather than adhering to a universal standard. This challenges academia to embrace methodological pluralism and integrating insights from contestant theories to address practical governance dilemmas. Public value is a challenging terrain, shaped by stakeholders' judgment in an ongoing need for synthesis that may bridge this theoretical division.

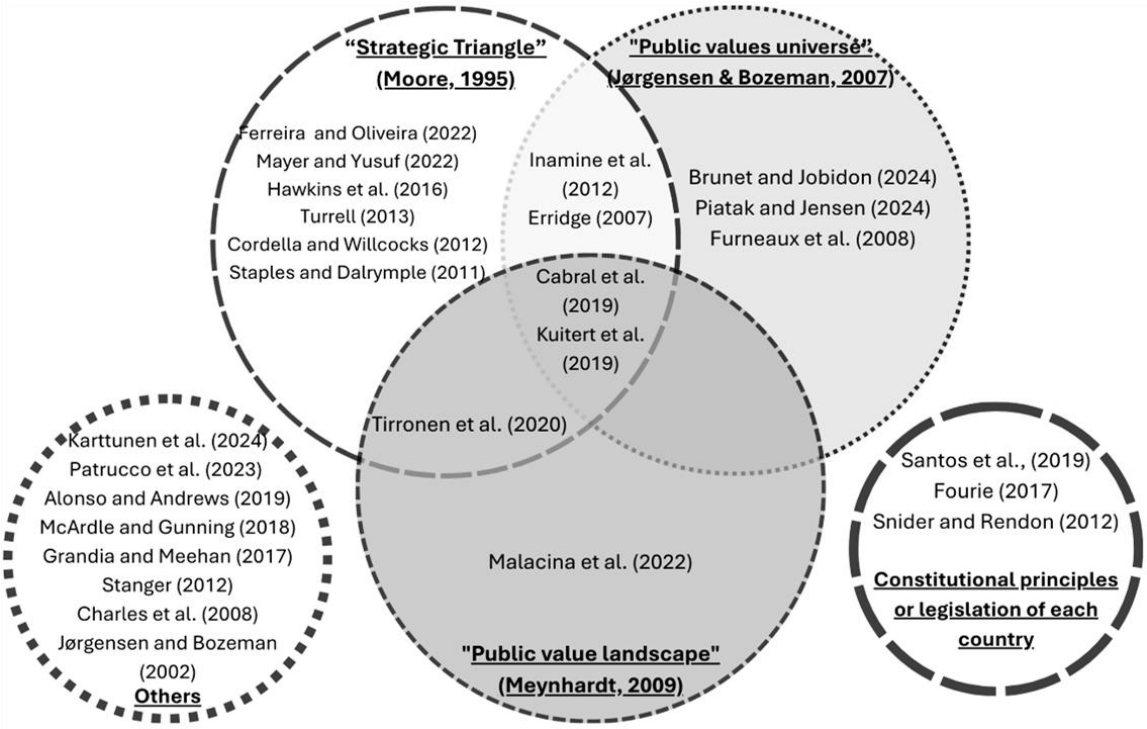


Figure 3- Interaction between each theory and the articles of this SLR.

Discussion

This systematic review reveals several critical insights. Firstly, the definition of public value is still very broad, with diverse theories that highlight the inherently political nature of procurement decisions confirming what Snider affirmed in 2012. All the cited authors provide a comprehensive framework for reorienting public procurement to broaden societal objectives. The Strategic Triangle's emphasis on legitimacy, operational capability, and public value creation highlights the need for procurement processes to balance stakeholder support with organizational capacity, ensuring alignment with public priorities. Similarly, the Public Values Universe underscores the multiplicity of values (e.g., equity, transparency) that procurement must address to get support from stakeholders. However, Public Value Landscape emphasizes the subjective, relational nature of value creation in public sector operations, where value derives from psychological and social dynamics, considering stakeholders' satisfaction from moral, political, utilitarian, and emotional perspectives. Constitutional principles further anchor procurement in country-specific legal and ethical norms to enhance accountability, ensuring that value is yielded by legal adherence and intrinsic moral and ethical behaviour.

The findings suggest that procurement processes must be designed to be participatory, allowing for meaningful deliberation and negotiation among stakeholders, also defended by Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) and Brunet and Jobidon (2024). Public value is a socially constructed concept shaped by competing stakeholder interests and power dynamics that play a critical role in decision-making, not only for public managers

but also for other stakeholders involved in procurement. This interaction underscores the importance of considering broader societal impacts when evaluating procurement outcomes because both stakeholders and public procurers can achieve mutual benefits through value generation and promotion. Stakeholders can gain improved innovativeness, overall economic growth, competitive advantages in foreign markets and others, while procurers benefit from a well-functioning supplier market, an idea supported by authors like Malacina et al. (2022) and Brunet and Jobidon (2024). Sustainability is another key area for the accomplish of vital citizens expectations, where all actors involved in procurement can derive significant value that impacts on market solutions. In their framework of values Malacina et al. (2022) inserted environmental and social sustainability as a key value component for the user value perspective, given the same level of importance that is given to quality and availability of the product or service. Moreover, Karttunen et al. (2024), Patrucco et al. (2023) and Kuitert et al. (2019) strengthened the sustainability importance in procurement process with the implementation of practices that prioritize environmental responsibility and social equity. Furthermore, integrating these frameworks into procurement strategies allows public organizations to move beyond cost-efficiency towards value co-creation with citizens, suppliers, and policymakers. With these, collaboration emerges as a key practice for enhancing public value like researched by Ferreira and Oliveira in 2022 and Alonso and Andrews in 2019.

By prioritizing values, public entities can enhance stakeholder trust, however, some trade-offs between stakeholders' expectations and needs must be carefully managed. There could be some tension between the values held by the organization and those of the stakeholders, a problem identified by several authors (e.g. Tirronen et al., 2020; Mayer & Yusuf, 2022 and Kuitert et al., 2019). Additionally, some specific situations and contexts may bring to light the strong power dynamics that guide procurement decisions. One of them is the sensitivity of military procurement due to their need for confidentiality, a topic that is addressed by Fourie in 2017. Complexities like these, leads to low transparency and social accountability in the detriment of national strategic security and defence, interests that demand some stakeholders to be removed for the process.

Practitioners should now focus on a broader conception of value, explicitly considering the multi-dimensional components identified in this review, a taught defended by Kuitert et al. (2019), Cabral et al. (2019) and Inamine et al. (2012). This requires incorporating into procurement strategies and evaluation criteria a little from all the discussed topics, starting from ethical principles like transparency and accountability to societal goals such as environmental sustainability and social equity.

In summary, defining and conceptualizing public value in procurement involves addressing complexities related to stakeholder interactions, mutual benefits through collaboration, sustainability considerations, and effectiveness measurement frameworks. These elements collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of how a public value perspective can enhance public procurement processes.

Conclusion and Future Research

By analysing 26 peer-reviewed articles this literature review contributes to the public administration field by identifying and categorizing the main theories of public value that enhance procurement process, highlighting critical research gaps and suggesting directions for future research. The findings underscore the evolving understanding of public procurement as a strategic tool for achieving broader societal goals, moving beyond a traditional focus on cost minimization to embrace a multi-dimensional perspective of value. Public procurement holds significant potential for delivering value

for stakeholders, but realizing this potential requires a more nuanced understanding of the concept.

Like all research, this review has certain limitations. Firstly, the review is limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, potentially excluding relevant insights from grey literature such as government reports and industry publications, which may offer practical perspectives and case examples. Our goal was the theoretical perspective, and choosing only articles from peer-reviewed journals allows for academic rigor while minimizing bias from non-validated sources. It also provides transparent methodologies and datasets, enabling future replication studies, compared to grey literature that often lacks detail for systematic evaluation. Secondly, while a comprehensive search strategy was employed across multiple databases, there is always a possibility of missing relevant studies, particularly those published in less-indexed journals.

Future research should focus on several key areas. First, while this review identifies key theories for value creation, empirical studies are needed to validate and refine these theories, creating practical tools for assessing public value outcomes in procurement practice. Second, comparative studies across different governance systems and cultural contexts could enrich our understanding of the context influence in the priorities and practices of procurement process.

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