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Strategic marginalisation of local purchasing in multinational subsidiaries: the case of Morocco's automotive industry

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Abstract

This article examines why the professionalisation of local purchasing does not necessarily translate into strategic influence in multinational subsidiaries. Drawing on an abductive qualitative study of 64 semi-structured interviews conducted across 35 automotive firms in Morocco, it analyses how local purchasing teams remain confined to subordinate roles despite growing technical capabilities and economic relevance. The findings identify four interacting mechanisms that underpin this strategic marginalisation: asymmetries in decision rights between headquarters and subsidiaries, the categorical delegitimation of local purchasing by both headquarters and internal peers, the metric invisibility of local value beyond cost savings, and a set of organisational reproduction mechanisms that stabilise subordinate roles over time. Rather than treating centralisation, autonomy and functional identity as separate issues, the article shows how they combine to prevent the conversion of local capabilities into strategic recognition. By theorising strategic marginalisation as a socially and organisationally reproduced condition, the study contributes to research on multinational subsidiaries, functional legitimacy and the politics of performance evaluation. The Moroccan automotive industry serves as a revelatory context in which these dynamics become especially visible because globally integrated value chains coexist with strong headquarters control and low-cost positioning. The article concludes by outlining why isolated investments in professionalisation are unlikely to alter local functional roles unless accompanied by changes in decision-making authority, evaluative systems and organisational recognition.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a context of globalisation and intense competitive pressure, purchasing is widely expected to contribute to value creation, operational resilience and firms' competitive advantage (Luzzini et al., 2015; Bals et al., 2019; Ellram et al., 2013). Yet within many multinational subsidiaries, local purchasing remains confined to largely transactional and execution-oriented roles. This tension is particularly visible in emerging-economy settings, where corporate discourse increasingly emphasises "strategic purchasing" and firms invest in professionalisation through digital tools, training and certifications, while local teams continue to be treated as administrative executors rather than strategic actors (Rozemeijer et al., 2003; Trent & Monczka, 2003).

Existing research offers important but partial explanations for this tension. Studies have variously highlighted buyers' competencies (Bals et al., 2019; Herold et al., 2023), top management support (van Weele & van Raaij, 2014; Tchokogué et al., 2017), the sophistication of digital tools (Bienhaus & Haddud, 2018; Patrucco et al., 2017), and the hierarchical positioning of the function (Jia et al., 2020; Sobotkiewicz, 2024). However, these factors are most often examined in isolation. As a result, the literature provides a fragmented account of how purchasing develops within organisations. Digitalisation, for example, may improve purchasing performance in some contexts (Bienhaus & Haddud, 2018), yet its effects remain limited when broader organisational arrangements do not evolve in parallel (Patrucco et al., 2017). Similarly, top management support can act as an important lever of functional

development (van Weele & van Raaij, 2014), while proving insufficient when local decision-making autonomy remains sharply constrained (Foerstl et al., 2016). These tensions suggest that the issue cannot be reduced to a simple lack of skills, technology or managerial support.

The more fundamental question is why the professionalisation of local purchasing does not necessarily translate into strategic influence in multinational subsidiaries. Existing studies have examined centralisation, subsidiary autonomy, functional status and performance measurement, but often as separate dimensions. Consequently, we still know relatively little about how these conditions interact to maintain local purchasing in subordinate roles even when local teams become more technically capable and economically significant. Research on organisational inertia in purchasing (Ates et al., 2018) and on systemic resistance to functional change (Alem Fonseca et al., 2024) points to the possibility of self-reinforcing dynamics, yet does not fully explain how decision structures, evaluative systems and organisational categorisations combine to reproduce subordinate local roles at subsidiary level.

This gap becomes especially salient in emerging-economy subsidiaries. Research on purchasing in non-Western and emerging-economy contexts remains comparatively limited (Gelderman et al., 2015; Tangpong et al., 2015), even though such contexts may shape how authority, autonomy and risk are understood and enacted in practice (Hofstede, 2001; Gupta & Gupta, 2019). In these settings, local purchasing may be formally established and increasingly professionalised, yet still struggle to gain strategic legitimacy when key decisions remain concentrated at headquarters and local contributions are assessed through narrow, cost-centred metrics. Emerging-economy subsidiaries therefore provide a valuable vantage point from which to examine how organisational control, functional legitimacy and evaluative regimes interact to shape local roles within multinational firms.

Against this background, this article asks: **how does the professionalisation of local purchasing fail to translate into strategic influence in multinational subsidiaries, and through which organisational mechanisms are subordinate local roles reproduced over time?** We address this question through an abductive qualitative study based on 64 semi-structured interviews conducted across 35 automotive firms in Morocco. Morocco's automotive industry provides a particularly revealing setting because it combines deep integration into global value chains, a dominant presence of multinational subsidiaries and a strong low-cost industrial positioning. This configuration makes especially visible the tension between local capability-building and continued strategic dependence on headquarters.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops the analytical framing that guides the study. Section 3 presents the research design, the Moroccan automotive context, the sampling strategy, the data collection process and the abductive qualitative approach adopted. Section 4 reports the findings, showing how interacting organisational mechanisms contribute to the strategic marginalisation of local purchasing in multinational subsidiaries. Section 5 discusses the study's theoretical and managerial implications. The article concludes by considering its limitations and identifying directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

2.1. Beyond capability-based explanations of purchasing influence

Purchasing has increasingly been recognised as a function capable of contributing not only to cost reduction, but also to value creation, innovation, resilience and competitive advantage (Luzzini et al., 2015; Bals et al., 2019; Ellram et al., 2013). This evolution has encouraged a growing body of work on how purchasing can become more strategic within organisations. A substantial part of this literature has focused on capability-building levers, including buyers' competencies, professional training, digital tools and top management support (Bals et al., 2019; van Weele & van Raaij, 2014; Bienhaus & Haddud, 2018; Herold et al., 2023). The underlying assumption is that, once these enabling conditions are in place, purchasing should progressively gain influence and recognition.

However, empirical findings remain mixed. Professionalisation initiatives do not always produce a corresponding shift in functional status or organisational influence. Digitalisation, for instance, can improve procurement processes and information quality (Bienhaus & Haddud, 2018), yet its effects may remain limited when broader organisational arrangements do not evolve in parallel (Patrucco et al., 2017). Similarly, top management support can facilitate the development of purchasing capabilities (van Weele & van Raaij, 2014; Tchokogué et al., 2017), but may prove insufficient when the function lacks effective authority over key decisions (Foerstl et al., 2016). These inconsistencies suggest that capability-based explanations, while important, do not fully account for why some local purchasing teams remain marginal to strategic decision-making despite significant investments in their development.

This limitation becomes especially visible in multinational subsidiaries. In such settings, local purchasing may become more technically sophisticated without gaining commensurate strategic influence. The question is therefore not simply how purchasing capabilities are developed, but under what organisational conditions those capabilities are, or are not, converted into strategic recognition. Addressing this issue requires moving beyond a capability-centred view towards a broader examination of control structures, legitimacy dynamics and evaluative systems.

2.2. Headquarters control and decision-right asymmetries in multinational subsidiaries

The organisation of purchasing has long been analysed through the lens of structural contingency. Bals et al. (2018) identify several structural dimensions of purchasing organisation, including category, business unit, geography and activity. In principle, no single configuration is universally optimal; effectiveness depends on how structural arrangements fit broader organisational and environmental conditions (Rozemeijer et al., 2003; Bals et al., 2018). Yet this contingency perspective becomes more

complex in multinational corporations, where the distribution of purchasing authority is shaped by headquarters–subsidiary relations.

The literature on centralisation and decentralisation highlights the classical trade-off involved. Centralisation can generate economies of scale, stronger bargaining power, supplier-base optimisation and process standardisation (Karjalainen, 2011; Trent & Monczka, 2003; Trautmann et al., 2009). Decentralisation, by contrast, may improve responsiveness, local stakeholder alignment and knowledge of local supply markets (Arnold, 1999). Many multinational firms therefore adopt hybrid arrangements intended to combine the benefits of both approaches (Trautmann et al., 2009). However, such arrangements may also generate tensions when strategic decisions remain concentrated at headquarters while local subsidiaries retain only implementation tasks.

This issue is especially salient when strategic and operational activities are separated geographically. Activities such as supplier selection, contract negotiation and sourcing strategy may be centralised at headquarters, while local purchasing teams are left with purchase order processing, follow-up and procedural compliance. Although this division of labour may appear efficient from a corporate perspective, it can reduce the subsidiary function's scope of action, weaken its local responsiveness and narrow its perceived role over time. In this sense, the problem is not centralisation per se, but asymmetry in decision rights: local teams remain formally present, yet lack meaningful authority over the areas most closely associated with strategic influence.

Hierarchical reporting lines may further intensify these asymmetries. Research suggests that direct reporting to top management tends to strengthen purchasing's strategic visibility and organisational influence (Johnson et al., 2014; Luzzini & Ronchi, 2016). By contrast, where purchasing is subordinated to finance, tensions may arise between supplier relationship management and short-term cash-flow priorities (Glock & Hochrein, 2011; Bals & Turkulainen, 2017). Rather than treating such reporting arrangements as a universal explanation, however, they can be understood as one possible pathway through which broader decision-right asymmetries become organisationally consequential.

2.3. Functional legitimacy and the categorical positioning of purchasing

Beyond formal authority, strategic influence depends on whether a function is recognised as legitimate within the organisation. Research on purchasing has shown that the function often suffers from a persistent gap between its potential contributions and how it is actually perceived (Ellram et al., 2013). Murfield et al. (2021) conceptualise this as a cost-focused identity trap, in which purchasing becomes primarily associated with cost reduction at the expense of wider contributions such as innovation, resilience and risk management.

This argument resonates with broader work on social identity and organisational categorisation. Social identity theory suggests that organisational actors are classified and evaluated through socially shared categories that shape expected roles, status and access to resources (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ashforth &

Mael, 1989). Once stabilised, such categories may become difficult to reconfigure (Brown & Lewis, 2011). In the case of purchasing, the function may be categorised internally as a support activity rather than a strategic partner, thereby limiting its participation in key decisions and its ability to shape organisational priorities (Schiele, 2007).

In multinational subsidiaries, questions of legitimacy may become even more complex because local purchasing can be categorised from multiple directions simultaneously. Headquarters may view the subsidiary function as an execution interface rather than a strategic actor, while internal peers may also associate it primarily with administration, compliance and price pressure. Such categorical positioning matters because it shapes whether local purchasing is consulted early, invited into strategic forums or considered capable of contributing beyond transactional tasks. Strategic marginalisation is therefore not only a matter of restricted authority; it is also a matter of how the function is socially defined and institutionally recognised within the firm.

2.4. Evaluative regimes and the visibility of local value

Performance measurement systems play a central role in defining what counts as organisational value (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). In purchasing, the literature has long distinguished between performance drivers, such as supplier collaboration or sourcing practices, and outcomes, such as savings, quality, lead times and innovation (Saranga & Moser, 2010). Yet many organisations continue to rely heavily on cost savings as the dominant indicator of purchasing performance (Pohl & Förstl, 2011). This emphasis can be understandable from a managerial standpoint, since price reductions are relatively visible and easy to quantify. However, it also narrows the recognised contribution of the function.

Several studies suggest that when cost reduction becomes the main criterion of evaluation, purchasing is more likely to be associated with short-term price pressure than with broader forms of value creation (Hartmann et al., 2012; Van Weele, 2010). This may push buyers towards negotiating cheaper prices at the expense of other levers such as supplier development, standardisation, specification optimisation or risk mitigation (Cousins et al., 2006; Ellram et al., 2002). It may also encourage the inflation of reported savings or the neglect of hidden costs, including quality deterioration, greater vulnerability to disruption and weakened supplier relationships (Nollet et al., 2012; Schiele, 2007).

For multinational subsidiaries, the issue is not only that cost metrics are dominant, but that local contributions beyond savings may remain institutionally invisible. Purchasing teams that implement contracts negotiated elsewhere may be evaluated mainly on compliance, process efficiency and reported savings, rather than on local problem-solving, continuity assurance, supplier qualification or risk containment. As a result, evaluative regimes do not simply measure performance; they shape whether local purchasing is seen as strategically relevant at all (Van Weele & van Raaij, 2014; Luzzini & Ronchi, 2011).

2.5. Towards an analytical framing of strategic marginalisation in multinational subsidiaries

Taken together, these strands of literature suggest a broader problem than purchasing “maturity” understood as an internal capability level. They point instead to the possibility that local purchasing becomes strategically marginalised when technical development is not matched by authority, legitimacy or visibility. In this article, strategic marginalisation refers to a condition in which a local function with growing capabilities and economic relevance remains denied substantive strategic influence, limited in decision rights and weakly recognised as a legitimate contributor to organisational direction.

This perspective differs from maturity-stage approaches in two respects. First, it does not assume that functional development follows a linear progression from operational to strategic roles. Second, it directs attention towards the organisational conditions that mediate whether local capabilities are converted into influence. The literature reviewed above suggests three particularly important analytical domains: decision-right asymmetries between headquarters and subsidiaries, the legitimacy of purchasing as a categorised organisational actor, and evaluative regimes that determine whether local contributions are made visible or remain obscured. It also suggests that these domains may become mutually reinforcing, producing organisational arrangements that are difficult to alter once stabilised (Ates et al., 2018; Alem Fonseca et al., 2024).

Emerging-economy subsidiaries provide a particularly useful setting in which to examine these dynamics. Their local functions may be increasingly professionalised while still positioned within global governance structures that privilege headquarters authority and low-cost mandates. Rather than formulating deductive propositions in advance, the present study uses the literature as an analytical framing to investigate how these dimensions interact empirically and what organisational mechanisms emerge from Morocco’s automotive industry. In doing so, it seeks to explain not only why local purchasing remains subordinate, but how such subordination is reproduced over time despite ongoing capability-building efforts.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Epistemological positioning and methodological choices

This study adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance and an abductive qualitative research design. An interpretivist approach is appropriate when the objective is to understand how organisational actors make sense of roles, hierarchies and power relations in context, rather than to test predefined causal relationships through standardised variables (Gioia et al., 2013). This positioning is particularly suited to the present study, which examines how local purchasing functions in multinational subsidiaries experience and interpret their strategic marginalisation in everyday organisational life.

In line with the analytical framing developed in Section 2, the study did not seek to validate a pre-established conceptual model. Rather, it moved iteratively between prior literature on purchasing influence, decision-right asymmetries, functional legitimacy and evaluative regimes (e.g. van Weele and

van Raaij, 2014; Murfield et al., 2021) and the empirical material gathered in Morocco. In this sense, the research followed an abductive logic (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012): concepts drawn from the literature served as sensitising devices, while the analysis remained open to empirical refinement, reformulation and re-specification in dialogue with the data.

Methodologically, the study combines a qualitative multiple-case design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) with the systematic coding procedures associated with the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). Each subsidiary was treated as a case, while the local purchasing function within that subsidiary constituted the focal unit of analysis. The 64 interviews were therefore not considered as 64 separate cases, but as embedded sources of evidence used to understand variation within and across 35 subsidiaries. This design was appropriate for two reasons. First, it enabled an in-depth examination of a phenomenon that remains under-theorised and is deeply embedded in organisational structures, reporting systems and identity processes. Second, it allowed recurrent patterns to be identified across firms differing in ecosystem, tier, size and age, while preserving enough within-case depth to interpret how strategic marginalisation is enacted locally.

A qualitative design was especially relevant because previous research has largely explained purchasing influence through capabilities, tools, digitalisation or top-management support (van Weele and van Raaij, 2014; Murfield et al., 2021), while paying less attention to how strategic influence may be blocked by organisational arrangements and symbolic categorisations. The present design was therefore chosen not to assess whether local purchasing is objectively strategic in a universal sense, but to understand how its role is framed, constrained and reproduced in subsidiary contexts.

3.2 Research context: Morocco’s automotive industry

Morocco’s automotive industry provides a particularly revealing empirical context for examining the strategic marginalisation of local purchasing in multinational subsidiaries. Over the past decade, the sector has become one of the country’s leading industrial and export activities, with annual production exceeding 700,000 vehicles, export revenues above €10 billion, and an industrial base of more than 250 firms employing around 220,000 people (AMICA, 2022; Benchekroun and Boumane, 2025). The industry is structured around five main ecosystems, including wiring, interiors and seats, batteries, metal and stamping, and engines and transmission, with strong territorial concentration in the Tangier and Casablanca-Kenitra areas.

This setting is analytically important for three reasons. First, it is highly integrated into global value chains and is dominated by subsidiaries of multinational groups, making the question of headquarters-subsidiary coordination particularly salient. Second, the sector combines advanced industrial requirements with strong pressures for cost competitiveness, making purchasing both operationally important and potentially vulnerable to cost-centred evaluation. Third, Morocco occupies a strategic yet subordinate position in many international production systems, which makes it a relevant site for observing how local capabilities may develop without being translated into equivalent strategic recognition.

The Moroccan automotive sector was therefore selected not because it is culturally exceptional, but because it offers a setting in which the tensions identified in the literature—between centralisation and autonomy, technical competence and strategic influence, and local contribution and organisational recognition—are particularly visible. In this sense, it constitutes a revelatory rather than merely convenient field site for investigating the mechanisms through which subordinate functional roles may be stabilised over time.

3.3 Sampling strategy and case selection

The sampling strategy was purposive and theoretically driven. The objective was not statistical representativeness, but analytical variation and informational richness. Case selection sought to capture differences in organisational configuration while keeping constant the broader industrial setting. This made it possible to compare how similar structural tensions were expressed across subsidiaries with different profiles.

3.3.1 Selection criteria

Four criteria guided case selection. First, firms had to be subsidiaries of multinational groups, since the study focuses on the relationship between local purchasing functions and headquarters-based control structures. Second, firms had to operate as Tier 1 or Tier 2 automotive suppliers rather than original equipment manufacturers, in order to ensure a comparable position within the value chain. Third, firms had to have been operating in Morocco for at least three years, so that local organisational routines and role configurations had had time to stabilise. Fourth, the sample was designed to cover the main ecosystems of the Moroccan automotive industry in order to avoid restricting the analysis to a single technical segment. These criteria were complemented by a search for variation in company size, subsidiary age and supplier tier. Such variation was important in order to explore whether strategic marginalisation appeared as an isolated feature of certain firms or as a more recurrent organisational condition across the field.

3.3.2 Sample composition

The final sample comprised 35 companies distributed across the five major automotive ecosystems in Morocco. Of these, 12 operated in wiring, 9 in interiors and seats, 4 in batteries, 6 in metal and stamping, and 4 in engines and transmission. The sample included 22 Tier 1 suppliers and 13 Tier 2 suppliers. In terms of size, 8 firms employed fewer than 500 employees, 18 employed between 500 and 1,500, and 9 employed more than 1,500. With regard to subsidiary age, 6 firms had been operating in Morocco for fewer than five years, 15 for between five and ten years, and 14 for more than ten years.

Across these 35 subsidiaries, 64 semi-structured interviews were conducted, representing an average of 1.8 interviews per company. This interview density was sufficient to combine cross-case breadth with a minimum degree of within-case triangulation. Respondents included purchasing managers or heads of purchasing (35), indirect procurement managers (18), and senior buyers or commodity buyers (11). On average, respondents had 8.5 years of experience in the purchasing function and 4.2 years of tenure in

their current company, which provided access to both operational and retrospective accounts of organisational evolution.

The sample was considered appropriate for theory development through qualitative comparison. It was large enough to capture recurring patterns across subsidiaries, while remaining manageable for detailed coding and interpretation. It also provided variation across organisational profiles without losing the sectoral coherence necessary for analytical depth.

3.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

The empirical material is based primarily on 64 semi-structured interviews conducted with managers and professionals involved in purchasing activities in the selected subsidiaries. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, with an average duration of 72 minutes. Approximately 85% were conducted face to face, while the remainder took place remotely when access constraints required it. Interviews were conducted in French or Arabic, depending on respondents' preferences and the interactional context.

The interview guide was designed to remain sufficiently structured to ensure comparability across cases, while leaving room for emerging themes and case-specific developments. It explored five broad areas: the trajectory and development of the local purchasing function; governance arrangements and relations with headquarters; decision-making processes and areas of autonomy; performance evaluation practices and reporting systems; and the role, image and perceived legitimacy of purchasing within the subsidiary. This flexible structure was consistent with the abductive design of the study, as it allowed recurring themes identified in early interviews to be probed more systematically in later ones. Data collection proceeded until no substantially new themes emerged from the interviews. Saturation was reached after 48 interviews, corresponding to 75% of the final corpus. The remaining interviews were nevertheless retained because they were useful for consolidating pattern robustness, capturing variation across ecosystems and checking the consistency of emerging interpretations.

3.3.4 Coding and analytical procedure

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo 14. The analytical procedure followed the iterative logic associated with Gioia et al. (2013), while being applied within an explicitly abductive research strategy. The analysis unfolded in three main stages. First, an open coding phase was conducted using respondents' own terms and expressions as far as possible. This stage generated 187 first-order codes reflecting how interviewees described their position, responsibilities, constraints, interactions and perceived contributions. Second, these codes were progressively grouped into 24 second-order themes through constant comparison across interviews and subsidiaries. At this stage, the analysis moved from informant-centred descriptions towards more analytical categories, while remaining grounded in the empirical material. Third, the second-order themes were consolidated into broader aggregate dimensions that captured recurrent organisational mechanisms contributing to the strategic marginalisation of local purchasing.

Importantly, these dimensions were not treated as pre-validated constructs or as the confirmation of prior propositions. Rather, they were developed as empirically grounded abstractions that connected field-based insights to the analytical concerns identified in the literature, notably decision-right asymmetries, functional legitimacy and evaluative regimes. This approach allowed the analysis to remain faithful to respondents' accounts while also generating a higher-level interpretation of the organisational processes through which subordinate roles are reproduced.

To strengthen analytical consistency, a subset of the material corresponding to 15% of the corpus (9 interviews) was independently coded by a second coder. Initial intercoder agreement reached Cohen's kappa = 0.78. Following discussion and refinement of coding boundaries, final agreement rose to kappa = 0.92. These procedures increased coding reliability without reducing the interpretive character of the analysis. Finally, where frequency indicators are reported in the findings, they are used only to signal the salience of a theme within the corpus and not to claim statistical representativeness. Likewise, numerical estimates reported by respondents—such as the share of spending perceived to be controlled by headquarters or the limited proportion of local autonomy—are treated as convergent organisational assessments rather than audited accounting measures. In this respect, the purpose of quantification in the study is descriptive and interpretive, not inferential.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Overview of the data corpus and analytical progression

The findings are based on a corpus of 64 semi-structured interviews conducted across 35 multinational automotive subsidiaries operating in Morocco. As indicated in Section 3, the corpus spans several hundred pages of fully transcribed material and captures respondents' accounts of purchasing responsibilities, reporting arrangements, decision-making authority, performance evaluation practices and perceived organisational legitimacy. Interviews lasted between 58 and 94 minutes, with an average duration of 72 minutes. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the sample. Consistent with the abductive qualitative design adopted in this study, the analytical process moved iteratively between empirical material and the analytical concerns identified in the literature. In line with the Gioia methodology, first-order coding generated 187 in vivo codes, which were progressively consolidated into 24 second-order themes and then into four broader analytical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). Rather than being treated as fixed constructs, these dimensions are presented here as empirically grounded mechanisms that help explain how local purchasing remains strategically marginalised despite processes of professionalisation.

Theoretical saturation was reached after 48 interviews, as the remaining interviews did not generate substantially new codes or themes but further reinforced the robustness of the patterns identified (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Inter-coder reliability was assessed on 15% of the corpus through independent coding by a second researcher, yielding an initial Cohen's kappa of 0.78, which increased to 0.92 after discussion and refinement of coding boundaries, in line with accepted quality standards for

qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). The frequencies reported in this section are used descriptively to indicate the relative salience of themes across the corpus, rather than to claim statistical representativeness. Likewise, numerical estimates reported by respondents concerning spending authority, degrees of autonomy or the prevalence of specific organisational practices are treated as convergent organisational assessments rather than audited measures.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample (N=35 companies, 64 interviews)

Dimension	Category	N (companies)	%	N (interviews)
Wiring	12	34.3%	23	
Interiors & Seats	9	25.7%	16	
Ecosystem	Batteries	4	11.4%	7
Metal & Stamping	6	17.1%	10	
Motors & Transmission	4	11.4%	8	
Tier Level	Tier 1	22	62.9%	42
	Tier 2	13	37.1%	22
< 500 employees	8	22.9%	11	
Company size	500-1,500 employees	18	51.4%	34
> 1,500 employees	9	25.7%	19	
< 5 years	6	17.1%	9	
Subsidiary age	5-10 years	15	42.9%	27
> 10 years	14	40.0%	28	
Purchasing Manager/Head	35	-	35	
Respondent profile	Indirect Procurement Manager	18	-	18
Senior Buyer/Commodity Manager	11	-	11	
Average Experience	In purchasing function	-	-	8.5 years
	In current company	-	-	4.2 years

Source : Authors' elaboration based on interview data

4.2. Data structure: from empirical material to analytical dimensions

Tables 2a to 2d present the analytical structure of the findings, showing the progression from first-order concepts to second-order themes and broader analytical dimensions. This mode of presentation follows the transparency principles associated with qualitative theorisation and makes visible how respondents' formulations were progressively interpreted into more abstract analytical categories (Gioia et al., 2013; Gehman et al., 2018).

Taken together, the data structure suggests that strategic marginalisation cannot be reduced to a single constraint or isolated deficiency. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of four mechanisms:

decision-right asymmetries that restrict local action, categorical delegitimation that weakens the functional standing of local purchasing, metric invisibility that obscures its broader value creation, and organisational reproduction processes that stabilise subordinate roles over time.

Table 3 reports the salience of these four dimensions across the interview corpus. Figure 1 complements this overview by showing the most frequently occurring second-order themes. The most recurrent themes include centralised decision-making, the reduction of purchasing to cost-cutting, delegitimation by headquarters and local peers, restricted scope of action, invisible contributions, and the autonomy-legitimacy vicious circle.

Table 2a. Data structure for Dimension 1: Decision-right asymmetries and non-autonomous local execution

1st Order Concepts (in vivo codes)	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
“Headquarters decides everything on direct purchasing”	Centralised strategic decision-making	DIMENSION 1: Decision-right asymmetries and non-autonomous local execution
“We have zero autonomy on supplier selection”		
“Suppliers imposed by the group”		
“Prices already negotiated at corporate level”		
“We just execute what they decide”		
“Our role is purely administrative follow-up”	Local execution without decision-making power	
“We receive orders, we process them, nothing more”		
“No margin for local negotiation”		
“Even small purchases need headquarters approval”		
“Direct purchasing: 50% of revenue, 0% autonomy”	Severely restricted scope of strategic action	
“Only 3% of revenue with real autonomy”		
“60% of indirect purchases are free, the rest imposed” “We manage tactical stuff, not strategic”		

Source : Authors' analysis of interview data (Gioia methodology)

Table 2b. Data structure for Dimension 2: Categorical delegitimation and identity tension

1st Order Concepts (in vivo codes)	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
“Headquarters sees us as executors”	Delegitimation by headquarters	DIMENSION 2: Categorical delegitimation and identity tension
“Called ‘local support’, not strategic partners”		
“Never invited to strategic procurement meetings”		
“They don’t trust us with strategic decisions”		
“Geography erases expertise in their eyes”		
“Local functions see us as administrative”	Delegitimation by local peers	
“Not invited to executive committee meetings”		
“Perceived as back-office, not strategic contributors”		
“Colleagues think we just place orders”		
“I don’t know how to define myself anymore”	Identity tension and role ambiguity	
“Huge gap between what I learned and what I do”		
“It’s a permanent frustration”		

Source : Authors' analysis of interview data (Gioia methodology)

Table 2c. Data Structure for Dimension 3: Metric invisibility and the non-recognition of local value

1st Order Concepts (in vivo codes)	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
“We guarantee supply continuity but it’s invisible”	Invisible contributions	DIMENSION 3: Metric invisibility and the non-recognition of local value
“We develop local suppliers but nobody measures it”		
“We manage risks daily but it’s not valued”		
“Only KPI requested: cost savings”		
“Everything else is invisible: continuity, quality, RSE”	Reduction to cost-cutting only	
“Savings is the only language they understand”		
“We have no metrics for broader value creation”	Lack of comprehensive value measurement systems	
“Impossible to demonstrate strategic contribution”		
“Supply chain has visibility, we don’t”		

Source : Authors' analysis of interview data (Gioia methodology)

Table 2d. Data Structure for Dimension 4: Organisational reproduction and the stabilisation of subordinate roles

1st Order Concepts (in vivo codes)	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
“No autonomy = no opportunity to prove strategic value”	Autonomy-legitimacy vicious circle	DIMENSION 4: Organisational reproduction and the stabilisation of subordinate roles
“How can we prove we’re capable if never given the chance?”		
“Treated as executors, we behave as executors”	Self-fulfilling prophecy	
“Strategic skills degrade when only doing admin work”		
“Headquarters has no interest in delegating power”	Organisational inertia and power preservation	
“Empowerment initiative: nothing changed in reality”	Cognitive biases and Geographical stereotypes	
“Morocco = low cost = low skills in their minds” “Two standards: our mistakes vs their ‘external factors”		
“I have no ally at corporate level to advocate for us”	Absence of internal champions and strategic sponsors	
“Even local GM doesn’t fight for purchasing autonomy”		

Source : Authors' analysis of interview data (Gioia methodology)

Table 3. Salience of analytical dimensions across the interview corpus

Aggregate Dimension	Respondents Mentioning	%	Coded Segments	Average Segments per Interview
D1: Decision-right asymmetries and non-autonomous local execution	62/64	96.9%	342	5.3
D2: Metric invisibility and the non-recognition of local value	58/64	90.6%	278	4.3
D3: Absence of Recognition of Strategic Value Potential	60/64	93.8%	295	4.6
D4: Organisational reproduction and the stabilisation of subordinate roles	55/64	85.9%	231	3.6
TOTAL	-	-	1,146	17.9

Source : Authors' analysis of interview data

Figure 1 provides a graphical overview of the most salient second-order themes identified across the interview corpus.

4.3. Dimension 1: Decision-right asymmetries and non-autonomous local execution

The first analytical dimension concerns the asymmetrical distribution of decision-making authority between headquarters and subsidiaries. Across the corpus, respondents described a governance configuration in which strategic purchasing decisions remained concentrated at headquarters, while local teams were expected primarily to execute, coordinate and report. This dimension appeared in 62 of the 64 interviews, making it the most salient pattern in the data.

4.3.1. Centralisation of direct purchasing and restricted local scope

The clearest expression of this asymmetry concerns direct purchasing. Respondents repeatedly explained that supplier selection, price negotiation and major sourcing decisions were determined at group or regional level, leaving local teams with little or no room for strategic intervention. Direct purchasing, which respondents often described as representing around half of subsidiary turnover, almost entirely escaped local control. A purchasing manager in the wiring ecosystem described this arrangement in particularly explicit terms:

“For production purchasing, we decide nothing. Absolutely nothing. Suppliers are already defined at global level, prices negotiated by European headquarters, and we just receive orders to place. Our role is purely administrative follow-up, nothing more.” (PM, Wiring, Tier 1)

Across respondents’ accounts, there was strong convergence around the view that almost all strategically significant spending was controlled by headquarters, leaving only a very limited share of

expenditure under genuine local discretion. Respondents frequently estimated that around 97% of total purchasing spend remained under headquarters control, leaving only a narrow perimeter—often described as roughly 3% of turnover—under real local autonomy. Even where local teams retained some autonomy over indirect purchasing, this autonomy tended to be confined to lower-risk or lower-visibility categories. Several respondents also noted that a substantial share of indirect spend remained tied to group-mandated suppliers under framework agreements pre-negotiated at corporate level. This restricted scope of action contributed directly to strategic marginalisation. Local purchasing teams were expected to ensure supply continuity, manage supplier relations and solve operational disruptions, yet without the authority normally associated with such responsibilities. In that sense, professionalisation did not translate into corresponding influence over core sourcing decisions.

4.3.2. Control devices and informational asymmetries

Beyond formal centralisation, respondents described a broader set of organisational devices that reinforced local dependence on headquarters. These included pre-determined supplier portfolios, approval bottlenecks, asymmetrical information flows, exclusion from strategic decision-making and unequal access to developmental resources. Table 4 summarises the main manifestations observed.

Table 4. Organisational devices reinforcing decision-right asymmetries: representative quotes

Mechanism	Representative Quote	Prevalence	Profile
Pre-determined supplier portfolio	“Direct purchasing is 100% locked. We have suppliers imposed by the group, with contracts already signed at corporate level. Even if we find a local supplier cheaper or better quality, we can’t do anything. The system gives us no margin.”	58/64 (91%)	PM, Interiors, Tier 1
Approval bottlenecks	“Even on indirect purchasing where I supposedly have autonomy, I must follow group procedures, use their tools, respect approval processes. If I want to onboard a new supplier, even for small amounts, it takes months because HQ approval is needed.”	51/64 (80%)	PM, Motors, Tier 1
Asymmetric information flow	“We report KPIs every week to HQ: purchased volumes, supplier service rates, savings achieved, number of disputes. But we receive almost nothing in return. We don’t know group purchasing strategy, ongoing projects, we discover new imposed suppliers at the last minute.”	48/64 (75%)	PM, Wiring, Tier 2
Exclusion from strategic decisions	“We learned we were changing main supplier for electronic components three weeks before implementation. No consultation, no preparation with us. They decide in Europe and we must apply, regardless of local impacts.”	54/64 (84%)	PM, Interiors, Tier 1
Resource asymmetry	“HQ invests massively in training European purchasing teams: CIPS certifications, leadership programs, international conferences. We have none of that. How are we supposed to develop strategic capabilities?”	46/64 (72%)	PM, Motors, Tier 1

Source : Authors' synthesis based on interview data

Several interviewees emphasised that even where some formal autonomy existed, group procedures and approval chains substantially reduced its practical significance. As one respondent explained:

“Even on indirect purchasing where I supposedly have autonomy, I must follow group procedures, use their tools, respect approval processes. If I want to onboard a new supplier, even for small amounts, it takes months because HQ approval is needed.”
(PM, Motors, Tier 1)

Respondents also highlighted a marked asymmetry in information circulation. Local teams were required to report indicators and operational developments upwards on a regular basis, but were rarely included in upstream discussions concerning wider purchasing strategy. Strategic decisions were often communicated only after they had already been made, turning local purchasing into an implementation relay rather than a participating actor.

This asymmetry was further reinforced by unequal access to training, strategic workshops and corporate-level exposure. In respondents’ accounts, this created a paradoxical situation in which local

teams were judged insufficiently strategic while simultaneously being denied some of the conditions required to build recognised strategic authority.

4.4. Dimension 2: Categorical delegitimation and identity tension

The second analytical dimension concerns the ways in which local purchasing is symbolically and organisationally delegitimised. Respondents described a dual process of categorisation: headquarters tended to frame local purchasing as an operational support function, while local peers often treated it as an administrative or back-office service. This dimension appeared in 58 interviews and represents one of the clearest mechanisms through which strategic marginalisation is reproduced.

4.4.1. Delegitimation by headquarters

A recurring theme in respondents' accounts was the perception that headquarters did not regard local purchasing teams as legitimate strategic actors. Interviewees referred to exclusion from strategic meetings, reductive labelling, limited trust in local judgement and a persistent assumption that strategic thinking resided elsewhere. Table 5 synthesises the main manifestations observed.

Table 5: Delegitimation by headquarters: representative quotes

Manifestation	Representative Quote	Prevalence	Profile
Exclusion from strategic forums	"When there are strategic purchasing meetings at group level, we're never invited. Discussions on new sourcing strategies, supplier partnerships, purchasing innovations – all happens without us. We just receive presentation slides afterwards."	58/64 (91%)	PM, Motors, Tier 1
Reductive labeling	"In group org charts, our function is called 'Local Procurement Support'. The word 'support' says it all: we're not considered strategic actors but operational support. It's humiliating."	52/64 (81%)	PM, Batteries, Tier 1
Explicit devaluation	"The regional procurement director calls us 'the executors'. Literally. In emails, in conf calls: 'local executors will do the follow-up'. That's our official identity for them."	46/64 (72%)	Senior Buyer, Interiors, Tier 2
Non-recognition of competencies	"I have 12 years purchasing experience, including 6 years in Europe before returning to Morocco. But for HQ, once you're in Morocco, you've become junior again. They don't value our competencies, as if geography erased expertise."	49/64 (77%)	PM, Metal, Tier 1
Resource discrimination	"HQ organizes regularly 'Procurement Strategy Workshops' with European plant purchasing managers. We're never invited. The message is clear: strategy is decided among Europeans, you just apply."	51/64 (80%)	PM, Wiring, Tier 1

Source : Authors' synthesis based on interview data

One senior buyer described this dynamic in the following terms:

“We have local purchasing professionals with MBAs, international purchasing certifications, who speak three languages. But HQ treats them as administrative staff. There’s an implicit contempt: ‘You’re in Morocco, you can’t understand global strategic stakes.’”
(Senior Buyer, Wiring, Tier 2)

These accounts suggest that strategic marginalisation is not only a matter of formal authority, but also of categorical positioning. Respondents repeatedly indicated that geographical location shaped how their competence was perceived: once purchasing professionals were located in Morocco, they felt that their expertise was downgraded, regardless of their qualifications or experience. The result was a form of external delegitimation in which local purchasing remained structurally and symbolically excluded from strategic recognition.

4.4.2. Delegitimation by local peers

This external delegitimation was mirrored internally within subsidiaries. Respondents reported that other local functions—especially production, finance, supply chain and quality—often regarded purchasing as a support service rather than as a strategic contributor. Purchasing was frequently excluded from executive committees, involved late in cross-functional projects and recognised primarily when savings were delivered. Table 6 summarises these recurrent patterns.

Table 6: Delegitimation by local peers: representative quotes

Manifestation	Representative Quote	Prevalence	Profile
Exclusion from executive decision-making	“In my subsidiary, there’s a monthly management committee with GM, production director, quality director, supply chain director, finance director. Me, purchasing, I’m never invited. I’m not considered a strategic function on par with others.”	56/64 (88%)	PM, Interiors, Tier 1
Late involvement in projects	“When there are strategic projects – new product launch, industrial reorganization, performance plan – purchasing is solicited at the end, just to execute orders. We’re not associated with strategic thinking upstream.”	54/64 (84%)	PM, Batteries, Tier 1
Perception as “back-office”	“Production colleagues see us as people doing paperwork: placing orders, tracking invoices. They don’t understand we could have a strategic role in supplier selection, risk management, innovation. For them, purchasing = administration.”	56/64 (88%)	PM, Wiring, Tier 2
Reduction to cost function	“The only time we’re recognized for value is when we make savings. ‘Purchasing saved X thousand euros.’ But everything else – supply continuity we guarantee, supplier relationships we develop, compliance we ensure – all invisible.”	59/64 (92%)	PM, Motors, Tier 1
Unfavorable comparison with other functions	“Local supply chain has real strategic recognition. They participate in executive meetings, consulted on industrial decisions, have substantial budgets. Why? Because they manage a visible issue: delivering customers on time. Us, purchasing, our value is less visible, therefore less recognized.”	48/64 (75%)	PM, Wiring, Tier 1

Source : Authors' synthesis based on interview data

As one purchasing manager explained: “Production colleagues see us as people doing paperwork: placing orders, tracking invoices. They don’t understand we could have a strategic role in supplier selection, risk management, innovation. For them, purchasing = administration.” (PM, Wiring, Tier 2)

A particularly striking pattern was the contrast respondents drew between purchasing and supply chain. Whereas supply chain was often perceived as visibly connected to customer service and plant performance, purchasing was considered less directly legible, except when it reduced cost. Strategic marginalisation was therefore reinforced not only by what purchasing did, but by how its role was categorised relative to other functions whose contributions were seen as more central or more immediately visible.

4.4.3. Organisational configurations and contractual powerlessness

The data further show that symbolic delegitimation was intensified by specific organisational arrangements that weakened purchasing's ability to honour the commitments it negotiated with suppliers. In several subsidiaries, respondents described a dissociation between contractual responsibility and enforcement power, especially with regard to payment terms.

A purchasing manager summarised this contradiction as follows: "We negotiate 60-day payment terms with suppliers. It's in the contract, signed. But Finance systematically imposes 90–120 days for cash flow optimisation. We promise something we cannot deliver. When suppliers call to ask why payment is late, I have no answer. It destroys our credibility completely." (PM, Wiring, Tier 1)

Even where purchasing did not formally report to finance, many respondents described a similar inability to ensure that negotiated terms were respected in practice. As one respondent explained: "When I remind Finance that a supplier invoice is due according to the 60-day terms I negotiated, they tell me: 'Payment timing is our perimeter, not yours. We decide when to pay based on treasury optimisation.' But I'm the one who signed the contract. When the supplier sees I cannot enforce what I promised, my credibility collapses. How can I negotiate the next contract?" (PM, Interiors, Tier 1)

Another respondent highlighted the strategic consequences of this inconsistency : "Suppliers now factor in our payment unreliability. They tell me openly: 'Your company never respects terms. We know you'll pay in 90–120 days regardless of what you promise, so we adjust our prices accordingly.' We lose our negotiation leverage because Finance destroyed our credibility." (PM, Motors, Tier 1)

Some respondents also referred to a climate of moral suspicion surrounding purchasing-supplier relations. In such cases, insisting on contractual compliance could itself become suspect, as though defending agreed terms implied hidden personal interests. One respondent illustrated this slippage as follows: "When I insist that Finance should pay a supplier on time because it's contractually due, colleagues – even my own general manager sometimes – insinuate: 'What's between you and this supplier? Why do you care so much about their invoice? What are you getting from them?' It's humiliating. Defending basic contractual integrity becomes suspicious behaviour." (PM, Wiring, Tier 2)

Another respondent described the resulting dilemma: "I'm caught in an impossible dilemma. If I don't fight for respecting payment terms, I betray my professional integrity and destroy supplier relationships. If I fight too hard, I'm suspected of personal corruption. Either way, I lose legitimacy. The safest strategy is to stay silent and let Finance do whatever they want, but then suppliers see me as powerless." (Senior Buyer, Interiors, Tier 2)

Taken together, these elements—sometimes unfavourable hierarchical positioning, structural inability to enforce contractual commitments, and recurrent moral suspicion—profoundly undermine the legitimacy of the local purchasing function. Supplier relationship management, which should be central to the role, is weakened by the organisation itself.

4.4.4. Identity tension and adjustment strategies

Faced with this combination of external delegitimation, internal downgrading and practical powerlessness, respondents often expressed deep uncertainty about how to define their role. One purchasing manager captured this tension succinctly:

“I no longer know how to define myself. Strategic purchasing ? No, since I decide nothing strategic. Operational purchasing ? Yes, but it sounds like a regression compared to what I did before. Administrative ? It’s humiliating but it’s close to reality.” (PM, Wiring, Tier 1)

The data suggest that respondents responded to this tension in different ways. Four broad adjustment strategies were identified: resigned acceptance of a limited role, concentration on the few areas where some autonomy existed, attempts at performance-based legitimation, and projection towards exit from the function. Table 7 summarises these strategies.

Table 7: Identity adjustment strategies among local purchasing managers

Strategy	Description	Representative Quote	Prevalence
1. Resigned acceptance	Internalisation of a limited role, reduction of aspirations, and focus on task execution	“I ended up accepting that my role isn’t strategic. I do my execution job correctly, I no longer ask existential questions. It’s less frustrating.”	18/64 (28%)
2. Focus on autonomy niche	Concentration of efforts on the few areas where real autonomy exists (especially part of free indirect purchasing)	“I concentrate on the 60% of indirect purchasing where I have real autonomy. On this perimeter, I try to do good work, develop local suppliers, demonstrate value. The rest, I’ve set aside.”	24/64 (38%)
3. Performance-based legitimation attempts	Proactive initiatives to demonstrate strategic capabilities despite structural constraints	“I try to prove we can do better than what’s asked. I launch optimization projects, propose initiatives. Hope is that one day HQ will recognize we’re capable of more.”	15/64 (23%)
4. Exit projection	Intention to leave the purchasing function (internal mobility or sector change) due to a perceived career dead-end	“Honestly, I’m looking to leave the purchasing function. Either move to another function in the company, or change sector. Staying in purchasing in this configuration is a professional dead-end.”	7/64 (11%)

Source : Authors' synthesis based on interview data

4.5. Dimension 3: Metric invisibility and the non-recognition of local value

The third analytical dimension concerns the difficulty local purchasing functions face in making their broader contributions visible and legitimate within the organisation. This theme appeared in 60 interviews and points to the central role of evaluative regimes in the production of strategic marginalisation.

4.5.1. Multidimensional but weakly recognised contributions

Respondents described a wide range of contributions extending beyond price negotiation. These included ensuring supply continuity, managing supplier risk, developing local suppliers, reducing lead times, supporting regulatory compliance and contributing to local economic development. Yet they also stressed that such contributions were seldom formally recognised as strategic value. Table 8 summarises the main forms of value creation identified in the corpus and their levels of recognition.

Table 8: Types of local purchasing value and levels of recognition

Value Dimension	Concrete Contributions Identified	Recognition Level	Representative Quote	Prevalence
Supply continuity and risk mitigation	• Crisis management (supplier failures) • Daily disruption resolution • Alternative sourcing in emergencies	**Very Low** (rarely measured or communicated)	"Last year, we had a potential disruption on a plastic components supplier. In 48 hours, I identified and qualified a local backup supplier, avoiding production shutdown. It saved the plant from huge losses. But in annual report: no mention. As if it was normal."	55/64 (86%)
Local supplier development	• SME capability building • Quality standard implementation • Local supply base expansion	**Low** (not tracked in group KPIs)	"On indirect purchasing, I developed a panel of quality Moroccan suppliers: industrial maintenance, supplies, logistics services. We reduced costs by 20% and improved lead times. But HQ doesn't care, they only track direct purchasing."	51/64 (80%)
Logistics optimisation	• Lead time reduction • Regional sourcing strategies • Inventory optimisation	**Low** (attributed to supply chain, not purchasing)	"By working with regional rather than European suppliers on certain indirect categories, we reduced delivery lead times from 3 weeks to 3 days. It improves plant agility. But nobody measures it as purchasing value creation."	48/64 (75%)
Compliance and regulatory management	• Local regulatory compliance • Certification management • Customs compliance	**Very Low** (seen as "administrative", not value creation)	"We ensure local regulatory compliance: Moroccan standards, certifications, customs compliance. Without us, the plant would be in permanent violation. But it's seen as 'administrative', not value creation."	56/64 (88%)
CSR and local economic development	• Local content development • SME empowerment • Social impact	**Minimal** (not in purchasing value narrative)	"We've supported local SMEs to build capabilities and meet our quality standards. It's local economic development, CSR, social innovation. But it appears nowhere in group purchasing KPIs."	46/64 (72%)

Value Dimension	Concrete Contributions Identified	Recognition Level	Representative Quote	Prevalence
Cost savings	• Price negotiation • Should-cost analysis • Specification optimisation	**HIGH** (only recognized and measured dimension)	"The only indicator we're asked to report is savings amount. How much you saved this month, this quarter, this year. As if purchasing function only served that purpose: reducing costs."	64/64 (100%)

Source : Authors' synthesis based on interview data

One respondent described this invisibility in relation to disruption management: "Last year, we had a potential disruption on a plastic components supplier. In 48 hours, I identified and qualified a local backup supplier, avoiding production shutdown. It saved the plant from huge losses. But in annual report: no mention. As if it was normal." *(PM, Interiors, Tier 1)*

Across the corpus, local purchasing emerged as a function producing operational, relational and institutional value, but operating in an environment where only a narrow fraction of this value was acknowledged. Contributions linked to resilience, compliance or supplier development were often perceived as routine background work rather than as strategic achievements, even when respondents considered them crucial to plant continuity.

4.5.2. Cost-centred evaluative regimes and limited value measurement

A major explanation for this invisibility lies in the dominance of cost-centred metrics. Respondents overwhelmingly reported that savings remained the main, and often the only, recognised indicator through which purchasing performance was assessed. Other dimensions of performance were either absent from reporting systems or treated as secondary.

As one purchasing manager put it:"We have no indicators on supplier relationship quality, on our supply base resilience, on our contribution to innovation, on risks avoided. If we don't measure, we don't value." (PM, Wiring, Tier 2)

Several respondents reported attempts to develop broader dashboards integrating alternative metrics, such as supplier service levels, dispute resolution lead-times, local supplier development and regulatory compliance. Yet such efforts were often met with indifference from decision-makers. As one respondent explained: "I created a dashboard with 12 indicators: savings of course, but also supplier service rate, average dispute resolution time, number of local suppliers developed, regulatory compliance rate. I send it monthly to GM and HQ. Nobody looks at it. They only want to see savings." (PM, Batteries, Tier 1)

In this sense, metric invisibility did not simply reflect an absence of measurement tools; it reflected a more selective evaluative regime that defined what counted as legitimate purchasing value in the first

place. The findings therefore suggest that strategic marginalisation is sustained not only by restricted authority and weak legitimacy, but also by the narrow categories through which performance is rendered visible and meaningful inside multinational organisations.

4.6. Dimension 4: Organisational reproduction and the stabilisation of subordinate roles

The fourth analytical dimension concerns the processes through which strategic marginalisation is reproduced over time. This dimension appeared in 55 interviews and captures the dynamic aspect of the findings: the role of local purchasing does not remain subordinate by accident, but through recurring organisational mechanisms that tend to reinforce one another.

4.6.1. Self-reinforcing circles

Respondents repeatedly described circular dynamics through which limited autonomy, low legitimacy, weak visibility and underinvestment became mutually reinforcing. The most recurrent of these was the autonomy-legitimacy circle: local teams were denied strategic discretion because they were not considered sufficiently legitimate, yet could not demonstrate legitimacy precisely because they lacked opportunities to act strategically. Table 9 summarises the main self-reinforcing circles identified in the corpus.

Self-reinforcing circle	Mechanism	Representative Quote	Prevalence
1. Autonomy ↔ Legitimacy	Lack of autonomy → No opportunity to demonstrate strategic value → No legitimacy gain → Centralization maintained → Lack of autonomy	"It's a vicious circle: we're not given autonomy because we haven't proved we were capable of managing strategically. But how can we prove we're capable if we're never given the opportunity to do so? We're trapped."	54/64 (84%)
2. Self-fulfilling prophecy	Treated as executors → Behavior as executors → Strategic skills degradation → Validation of initial perception → Maintained executor treatment	"If you treat someone as an executor, they end up behaving as an executor. If you remove all autonomy, responsibility, challenge, they lose strategic competencies. That's what's happening to us. Centralization creates the incompetence it claims to justify."	51/64 (80%)
3. Invisibility ↔ Investment	Invisible value → No investment in local purchasing capabilities → Limited capabilities → Continued low value → Invisible value	"HQ invests massively in European purchasing training. We have nothing. How are we supposed to develop strategic competencies without training, without tools, without resources? And then they say we're not strategic enough. It's circular reasoning."	46/64 (72%)
4. Power preservation	HQ purchasing managers have no interest in delegating → Maintain centralized control → Local teams remain weak → Justifies centralized control → HQ power preserved	"The problem is that people at HQ who have power to give us more autonomy have no interest in doing so. It would reduce their own power. Why would a European purchasing director delegate prerogatives to Morocco? It would diminish his scope, budget, team."	48/64 (75%)

Table 9: Self-reinforcing circles contributing to strategic marginalisation

Source : Authors' synthesis based on interview data

One interviewee expressed the autonomy-legitimacy circle very clearly: "It's a vicious circle: we're not given autonomy because we haven't proved we were capable of managing strategically. But how can we prove we're capable if we're never given the opportunity to do so? We're trapped." (PM, Wiring, Tier 1)

Other recurring circles were also visible in the data. Some respondents described a self-fulfilling prophecy in which teams treated as executors gradually behaved as executors, thereby appearing to confirm the original judgement. Others highlighted a visibility-investment dynamic in which the absence of recognised value reduced investment in local capability development, which in turn limited the possibility of future recognition. Still others pointed to power-preservation logics at headquarters, where the delegation of authority to subsidiaries was perceived as threatening existing prerogatives.

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest a pattern of organisational reproduction rather than a simple accumulation of isolated constraints. The findings do not establish path dependence in a strict historical sense, but they do indicate the presence of self-reinforcing processes that help stabilise subordinate roles over time.

4.6.2. Absence of internal champions and political isolation

A final element of this reproductive dynamic concerns the political isolation of local purchasing. In many interviews, respondents noted the absence of internal champions capable of defending the function in strategic forums, whether at headquarters or at subsidiary level.

As one purchasing manager explained: “I have no ally at group executive committee level. Nobody carries the voice of local purchasing. We’re invisible in strategic discussions.” (PM, Wiring, Tier 2)

Even at local level, subsidiary general managers were often described as giving little priority to the empowerment of purchasing. As one respondent put it: “Even my local general manager doesn’t fight to give more autonomy to purchasing. For him, it’s a secondary topic. He focuses on production, quality, customers. Purchasing is the least of his worries.”
(PM, Interiors, Tier 2)

This absence of sponsorship matters because it limits the function’s ability to convert operational contributions into recognised strategic claims. Even where purchasing managers attempted to broaden performance narratives or propose new initiatives, such efforts often remained unsupported by actors with sufficient organisational influence to alter decision structures or evaluation criteria.

Overall, the results show that the strategic marginalisation of local purchasing is produced through the interaction of four mechanisms: restricted decision rights, categorical delegitimation, metric invisibility and organisational reproduction. Rather than reflecting a lack of local competence alone, this marginalisation appears as a socially and organisationally sustained condition within multinational subsidiary settings.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Summary of the main findings

This study set out to understand why and how purchasing functions in automotive subsidiaries located in an emerging economy remain confined to largely operational roles, despite a strategic potential widely acknowledged in the literature (van Weele and van Raaij, 2014; Ellram et al., 2013) and a significant economic weight within firms. The findings from the abductive qualitative analysis of 35 automotive subsidiaries (64 interviews) show that this situation cannot be reduced to a localised skills deficit or a temporary lack of internal recognition. It is embedded in a broader organisational configuration that produces and sustains the strategic marginalisation of local purchasing.

This configuration combines four interacting mechanisms, each empirically documented with high salience across respondents. The first mechanism concerns strong decision-right asymmetries between headquarters and subsidiaries (mentioned by 96.9% of respondents), whereby the vast majority of purchasing spend is controlled at European headquarters, leaving local teams with very limited genuine autonomy. This decision architecture reduces subsidiaries to operational execution roles with no substantial involvement in strategic decisions on supplier selection, contractual negotiation or budget allocation. The second mechanism reveals a process of categorical delegitimation (90.6% of respondents), which undermines the standing of the function both vis-à-vis headquarters—who tend to perceive local teams as executors lacking strategic vision—and vis-à-vis other functions within the subsidiary—who view purchasing as an administrative service without distinctive value creation.

The third mechanism documents metric invisibility (93.8% of respondents), linked to evaluative regimes that focus almost exclusively on cost savings. Nearly all respondents report being evaluated primarily, if not solely, on cost savings, which obscures their contributions to supply continuity, development of local suppliers, risk management and regulatory compliance. Finally, the fourth mechanism identifies organisational reproduction processes (85.9% of respondents) taking the form of self-reinforcing circles: the autonomy-legitimacy loop, the self-fulfilling prophecy, the invisibility-investment loop and the power-preservation dynamic. Taken together, these elements shed light on the persistence of the gap between the discourse on the strategic role of purchasing and the reality experienced by local teams, and explain why, in this context, investments in professionalisation do not translate into a corresponding increase in strategic influence.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

5.2.1. From purchasing maturity to strategic marginalisation

The literature review highlighted a recurrent gap between the strategic role assigned to purchasing in theoretical models and the way the function is actually positioned and evaluated in organisations—particularly through persistent cost-focused metrics (Murfield et al., 2021), centralised decision structures (Trautmann et al., 2009) and professional identities that are difficult to transform (Brown and Lewis, 2011). The present results allow us to clarify the nature of this gap.

Empirically, the subsidiaries studied have invested substantially in professionalisation: recruiting profiles trained in international best practices, formalising processes aligned with recognised standards, deploying integrated IT systems and participating in certification programmes. Yet this increase in technical capabilities coexists with decision-making authority limited to a very narrow perimeter and with an organisational identity that remains largely administrative in the eyes of both headquarters and local peers. This paradox of professionalisation without empowerment constitutes the central empirical contribution of the study.

These findings suggest that the strategic position of purchasing should be conceived less as an internal capability level—as in stepwise maturity models (Schiele, 2007; Luzzini et al., 2015)—and more as the outcome of a relational configuration linking at least four dimensions: the degree of structural autonomy actually granted, the way the function is named and categorised in day-to-day interactions, the visibility of its contributions in reporting systems, and its position in power relations within the global firm. This reconceptualisation extends the work of Bals et al. (2019) and Herold et al. (2023) on purchasing capability development, while specifying that the cost-focused identity trap analysed by Murfield et al. (2021) is inseparable from choices in decision architecture and measurement systems. It also suggests that trajectories of functional influence cannot be understood or steered without considering headquarters-subsidiary relations and the political trade-offs that structure the distribution of autonomy, thereby advocating for more configurational rather than sequential models of functional positioning.

The concept of strategic marginalisation proposed here differs from maturity models in an important respect. Whereas maturity frameworks tend to imply a developmental trajectory in which functions progress through stages towards greater strategic influence (Schiele, 2007; Cousins et al., 2006), marginalisation draws attention to the possibility that professionalisation may occur without corresponding recognition—and that the gap between capability and influence may be actively sustained rather than merely reflecting a transitional state. By shifting the analytical focus from internal readiness to organisational reproduction of subordinate roles, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how functional positions are maintained in multinational organisations.

5.2.2. Self-reinforcing mechanisms and organisational reproduction

A second theoretical contribution concerns how subordinate roles are reproduced over time. The empirical results show a high degree of centralisation of decisions relating to direct purchasing at headquarters, while subsidiaries are essentially in charge of operational execution of centrally negotiated contracts. Local managers describe processes in which supplier portfolios are predefined at global level, negotiation strategies are designed by corporate teams, and budget envelopes are allocated through top-down logics, which drastically limits the ability of on-site teams to initiate or support genuinely strategic orientations.

This decision architecture creates a context that is particularly conducive to self-reinforcing dynamics. The absence of initial autonomy reduces the possibility of generating tangible evidence of strategic capability; this lack of evidence then serves to maintain centralisation and reluctance to delegate further, thereby reinforcing the initial pattern. As this cycle repeats over several years, practices, organisational routines and cognitive representations stabilise around the idea that purchasing in subsidiaries is naturally geared towards operational implementation rather than strategic contribution. Some interview accounts even suggest that centralisation ends up producing the very limitations it purports to prevent, by systematically depriving teams of opportunities to exercise and develop more advanced decision-making capabilities.

These observations resonate with theoretical work on path-dependent dynamics (Arthur, 1989; David, 1985; Sydow et al., 2009; Vergne and Durand, 2010) and on organisational inertia in procurement (Alem Fonseca et al., 2024). However, the cross-sectional design of the present study does not allow us to establish path dependence in a strict historical sense. What the data do show is that the four mechanisms identified do not operate in isolation but interact in ways that tend to stabilise the existing distribution of authority, legitimacy and visibility. The autonomy-legitimacy circle, the self-fulfilling prophecy, the invisibility-investment loop and the power-preservation dynamic form a mutually reinforcing configuration that makes it difficult for any single intervention—such as training programmes or local optimisation projects—to alter the broader organisational equilibrium.

This finding contributes to the literature on purchasing organisation (Glock and Hochrein, 2011; Bals and Turkulainen, 2017; Bals et al., 2018) by showing that the structural position of purchasing is not simply a design variable that can be adjusted in isolation, but is embedded in a wider web of decision rights, identity categories and evaluative practices that tend to reproduce one another. It also extends observations by Pohl and Förstl (2011) and Saunila et al. (2024) on performance measurement systems, by specifying their systemic consequences in a multinational subsidiary context: cost-centred metrics do not merely fail to capture broader value; they actively contribute to the reproduction of subordinate functional roles by defining what counts as legitimate purchasing performance.

5.2.3. Emerging-economy subsidiaries as amplifying contexts

The results relating to categorical delegitimation (Dimension 2, Section 4.4) shed particular light on the role of geography in dynamics of organisational legitimacy. On the headquarters side, subsidiaries located in emerging economies such as Morocco are frequently associated with execution sites designed primarily to exploit cost advantages rather than with strategic competence centres. This representation strongly influences how expectations are formulated, how mandates are defined and how performance is interpreted.

Within subsidiaries, the purchasing function is often perceived by peers as an administrative service mainly responsible for enforcing corporate procedures, managing pre-negotiated contracts and delivering budget savings, rather than as a strategic partner capable of contributing to complex problem-solving or innovation. This double distancing produces a situation that is distinctive in light of research on organisational identity (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Brown, 2015; Alvesson et al., 2017) and subsidiary roles in multinationals (Talpová, 2023; Jaklič et al., 2024). Purchasing managers benefit neither from strong support at headquarters that would recognise their potential strategic capabilities, nor from a solid identity anchor among local peers who would regard them as essential contributors to performance.

Interview data suggest that geographical stereotypes operate as powerful cognitive shortcuts that pre-judge local capabilities independently of actually observed performance. The implicit association between an emerging-economy location and limited strategic capacity acts as an interpretive filter that

renders manifestations of local strategic competence less visible to headquarters. Significant contributions to supply continuity, local sourcing development or proactive risk management may thus go unrecognised if they do not fit the categories of value legitimised by headquarters—typically, quantifiable cost savings.

This dynamic is further reinforced by a form of moral delegitimation observed in several cases (Section 4.4.3). The past or present existence of corrupt practices in parts of the ecosystem creates a negative reputation that spills over onto the entire function, even when individuals are not directly involved. Professionally legitimate behaviours—such as insisting that contractual payment terms be respected—may be interpreted as suspect rather than as expressions of professional integrity. This moral delegitimation adds an ethical dimension to the identity tension: buyers are not only perceived as technically limited due to their geographical location (cognitive dimension), but also as potentially compromised (moral dimension). This dual stereotype makes bottom-up re-legitimation strategies, as documented by Talpová (2023), extremely difficult to implement.

This mechanism extends existing work on subsidiaries by showing that localisation in an emerging economy affects not only coordination costs and physical or cultural distance, but also—and perhaps above all—how capabilities are anticipated a priori and ultimately recognised or systematically overlooked in evaluation and promotion processes. The Moroccan automotive context is therefore not merely a convenient empirical setting; it is a revelatory one, in which the tensions between professionalisation and marginalisation are particularly visible and analytically instructive.

5.2.4. Identity adjustment strategies under structural constraint

The empirical findings (Section 4.4.4, Table 7) show that local purchasing managers do not passively endure strategic marginalisation. They develop four recurrent types of responses that can be interpreted in the light of research on adaptation to structural constraints (Merton, 1938), work identity (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) and exit-voice-loyalty dynamics in organisations (Hirschman, 1970).

The first strategy, resigned acceptance (28% of respondents), resembles the ritualism described by Merton (1938). Managers continue to perform assigned tasks correctly but gradually abandon the ambition to play a strategic role. They lower their expectations in order to reduce the tension between their initial training and organisational reality. Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) work on how some professionals redefine their identity to cope with devalued roles sheds light on this mechanism: identity adjustment helps preserve psychological balance but sustains the previously described vicious circles by reinforcing the image of a purely execution-oriented function.

The second strategy, focusing on niches of autonomy (38% of respondents, the modal strategy), consists in heavily investing in the few areas where some room for manoeuvre exists, often a limited subset of indirect purchases or local projects. This posture is close to job crafting: individuals redesign the margins of their work content to introduce more meaning and initiative (Wrzesniewski and Dutton,

2001). However, because these niches concern a small and weakly visible share of the purchasing volume at headquarters level, the successes achieved often remain confined and do not alter the broader representation of the function.

The third strategy, attempts at legitimation through performance (23% of respondents), is more proactive. Some managers launch optimisation projects, supplier risk mitigation initiatives or risk-reduction programmes beyond their formal mandate, then try to secure recognition for these achievements by promoting them in various internal forums. This behaviour is akin to issue selling, whereby mid-level actors seek to push ideas and projects onto the strategic agenda (Dutton et al., 1994). However, our data suggest that this approach faces two structural limits: first, evaluative regimes focused on cost savings alone do not value these contributions; second, geographical stereotypes sometimes lead headquarters to attribute local successes to their own steering rather than to subsidiary-level initiative.

Finally, the fourth strategy, projection of exit (11% of respondents), corresponds to the exit option in Hirschman's (1970) framework. Some managers consider leaving the purchasing function, the company or even the sector altogether, on the grounds that the scope for transformation is too limited and that voice attempts remain ineffective. For the organisation, this option is particularly problematic because it disproportionately leads to the departure of the most ambitious and critical profiles, leaving behind the most resigned ones—a dynamic that resonates with the logic of adverse selection (Akerlof, 1970) and with research on voluntary turnover among qualified employees (Maertz and Campion, 2004).

Taken together, these four strategies show that strategic marginalisation does not stem from individual inertia but from a persistent misalignment between actors' adjustment efforts and structural constraints. Resigned acceptance and exit projection effectively remove a substantial proportion of respondents from strategic engagement. The focus on autonomy niches and attempts at performance-based legitimation remain confined within a system where autonomy is narrowly constrained, non-financial value is weakly measured, and geographical stereotypes are entrenched. These findings confirm that reducing strategic marginalisation cannot primarily rely on the individual resilience of purchasing managers, but requires coordinated adjustments across the structural, identity-related and evaluative dimensions identified in this study.

5.3. Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings call for a substantial nuancing of the idea that increasing the strategic influence of local purchasing can be achieved mainly through internal professionalisation—technical training, certifications, deployment of digital tools—without coordinated adjustment of the broader organisational frameworks that structure autonomy, recognition and performance measurement. In the case studied, such initiatives are already widely in place, yet they have limited impact as long as decision-making remains highly centralised, evaluative regimes remain focused exclusively on cost savings, and the function's identity continues to be defined in administrative terms by both headquarters and local peers.

A first implication is the creation of framed autonomy spaces within perimeters where perceived risk for headquarters is moderate but local knowledge constitutes a genuine advantage. For example, selected categories of indirect purchasing (local services, proximity maintenance, non-critical supplies) could serve as experimentation fields where local teams are allowed to make decisions, track outcomes and document results. The aim is less to implement abrupt decentralisation than to establish controlled experimentation zones in which local teams can produce tangible evidence of strategic capability. These spaces would help address the paradox revealed by the data: demanding proof of strategic capability while granting almost no latitude to produce such proof.

A second implication concerns the gradual broadening of performance dashboards so as to integrate, alongside cost savings—which will legitimately remain a central indicator—metrics relating to currently invisible dimensions: supply continuity, development and performance of local suppliers, risk management, regulatory compliance and contribution to corporate social responsibility objectives. Even a modest initial weighting of these dimensions in performance evaluation would send a strong signal regarding the institutional recognition of value created beyond savings alone.

A third implication relates to the internal legitimation work around the purchasing function. The interviews suggest that more systematic capitalisation and dissemination of concrete cases—interventions that avoided costly disruptions, rapid qualification of new sources of supply, documented reductions in critical risks—could progressively reshape perceptions at both headquarters and local peer levels. The challenge is not to turn buyers into communication specialists, but to ensure that precise, documented examples of strategic value created locally are made visible in decision-making forums.

Finally, identifying and supporting internal sponsors with sufficient legitimacy to carry these issues into decision arenas appears crucial. Without explicit backing from subsidiary general management or influential champions at headquarters, initiatives driven by the purchasing function risk remaining confined to a narrow scope. The results thus suggest that reducing strategic marginalisation requires coordinated adjustments across the four identified mechanisms—decision-right allocation, categorical positioning, evaluative regimes and reproduction dynamics—rather than a simple accumulation of actions targeting only the technical skillset of purchasing teams.

5.4. Limitations and directions for future research

The findings of this study should be interpreted as analytically grounded insights into the mechanisms shaping the positioning of local purchasing functions, rather than as universally generalisable conclusions. In this perspective, several limitations should be considered.

First, the analytical focus privileges the perspective of subsidiaries: we did not interview central decision-makers directly (group chief procurement officers, supply chain vice-presidents, executive committee members). This limitation restricts the ability to explain how headquarters justify centralisation choices, which risks they associate with delegation, and what types of signals they consider credible when deciding whether to expand a subsidiary's autonomy. Complementary studies focusing on headquarters'

representations would help clarify the strategic rationales underlying the observed decision architectures.

A second limitation concerns the primarily perceptual nature of the data. The high level of convergence across respondents may reflect a robust structural reality, but also possible desirability or selection biases. Combining qualitative material with more objective data—analysis of actual rights within information systems, formal approval circuits or delegation matrices—would help corroborate or nuance these perceptions.

Third, the empirical grounding in the Moroccan automotive sector, although analytically rich (a highly integrated industry, demanding global standards, subsidiaries located in an emerging economy), limits the immediate generalisability of the findings. Studies conducted in other purchasing-intensive industries that are strongly embedded in global value chains—such as aerospace, electronics or specific agri-food segments—and in other emerging economies would allow testing the transferability of the mechanisms identified and exploring contextual factors that may moderate their intensity.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design adopted here captures these mechanisms at a single point in time, without tracing their historical formation or possible recomposition. Longitudinal studies, ideally complemented by action research, would make it possible to observe how these configurations are constructed, reinforced or transformed, particularly in the wake of exogenous shocks (health crises, geopolitical tensions, supply chain reconfigurations) or leadership changes. Testing some of the levers proposed—creation of framed autonomy zones, broadening of metrics, formal re-legitimation mechanisms—would help assess their feasibility and their effects on perceived strategic influence and performance, while documenting organisational and political resistance.

Finally, while the study identified four identity adjustment strategies (Section 4.4.4), a more fine-grained analysis of the conditions under which each strategy is adopted—and of the circumstances that might enable transitions from resigned acceptance towards more proactive forms of engagement—would enrich the understanding of agency within structurally constrained settings. Such extensions would contribute to consolidating and refining the general scope of the analytical framework proposed here.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand why purchasing functions in automotive subsidiaries located in an emerging economy remain confined to largely operational roles despite their widely acknowledged strategic potential.

Based on 64 interviews conducted across 35 multinational suppliers in Morocco, it identifies a persistent pattern of strategic marginalisation: a structural and self-reinforcing discrepancy between the growing professionalisation of these functions and an organisational reality confined to execution.

This marginalisation rests on four interacting mechanisms—strong decision-right asymmetries, categorical delegitimation, metric invisibility of local value, and organisational reproduction processes in the form of self-reinforcing circles—that durably keep local teams in a subordinate position despite substantial investments in capability development.

Theoretically, this work makes three main contributions.

First, it reconceptualises the strategic position of purchasing from a configurational perspective: influence does not depend solely on internal capabilities, but on the interplay between structural autonomy, categorical positioning, evaluative regimes and headquarters-subsidiary power relations.

Second, it identifies four interacting mechanisms through which subordinate functional roles are reproduced over time, thereby contributing to the understanding of organisational reproduction in multinational settings.

Third, it shows that geographical location acts as a symbolic marker of competence: in the context studied, being located in an emerging economy fuels perception patterns that assign subsidiaries to low-cost execution roles, rendering their strategic contributions less visible and adding an ethical layer to the identity tension when suspicions of corruption affect the function.

Managerially, the findings call for a shift in diagnosis: difficulties in upgrading local purchasing functions stem less from individual skills deficits than from organisational systems that simultaneously constrain their room for manoeuvre, recognition and value visibility.

Reducing strategic marginalisation requires coordinated interventions: creating framed autonomy spaces, broadening performance indicators beyond cost savings alone, capitalising on and disseminating concrete cases of strategic value created locally, and securing explicit support from legitimate internal sponsors in decision-making arenas.

Purchasing value creation then appears as a co-constructed process between global and local levels, rather than an exclusive prerogative of headquarters.

The reach of the analysis extends beyond automotive purchasing in Morocco.

Other support functions and other geographies may experience similar forms of strategic marginalisation despite significant investments in professionalisation. The analytical framework developed here provides a transferable lens to diagnose such situations, identify the specific mechanisms at work, and design interventions adapted to local contexts.

As a final reflection, the key question is arguably no longer whether local purchasing functions can become strategic: the data show that they already create significant multidimensional value.

The issue is to determine the extent to which organisational architectures allow this value to be recognised, measured and amplified.

As long as subsidiaries are perceived as mere executing arms without strategic legitimacy, multinationals risk depriving themselves of essential resources for innovation, agility and resilience.

Strategic marginalisation is not an inevitable feature of headquarters-subsidiary relationships, but the product of organisational choices that can be made explicit, debated and reconfigured.

Turning this condition into a genuine pathway towards strategic influence requires accepting that value is not created solely at the centre, but emerges from the intelligent combination of global capabilities and local expertise—a reality that recent disruptions in global supply chains have made more visible and more urgent than ever.

Declarations

Author Contribution

M.A.B. conceived the study, designed the methodology, conducted the fieldwork and data collection, performed the analysis, and drafted the manuscript. A.C. contributed to the conceptual development, interpretation of the results, and critically revised the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

The data underpinning this study were generated through 64 semi-structured interviews conducted across 35 multinational automotive subsidiaries in Morocco. Several categories of research materials are made available to support transparency and replicability. The semi-structured interview guide, including the five thematic areas explored during data collection, is available as Supplementary File 1.

The complete codebook, documenting the progression from 187 first-order codes to 24 second-order themes and 4 aggregate dimensions following the Gioia methodology, is provided in Supplementary File 2.

The data collection protocol, including sampling criteria, recruitment procedures, and inter-coder reliability assessment (Cohen's kappa = 0.92), is detailed in Supplementary File 3.

An anonymised case-level data matrix summarising the analytical salience of each dimension across the 35 cases is presented in Supplementary File 4.

The raw interview transcripts are not publicly available due to confidentiality commitments made to participating organisations and individual respondents at the time of data collection. These materials contain sensitive information relating to internal organisational dynamics, headquarters–subsidiary

relationships, and managerial assessments, which could allow identification of specific firms and individuals within Morocco's concentrated automotive sector. Full interview transcripts are available for confidential review by editors and referees upon request. This restriction is consistent with the ethical framework of the study, under which informed consent was obtained on the basis of guaranteed anonymisation and non-disclosure. However, an anonymised and de-identified version of selected data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to appropriate data use agreements.

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Ethical Approval (unredacted)

According to the applicable research ethics requirements of the Laboratory of Systems, Control, and Decision (LSCD), New Science School of Engineering (ENSI), Tangier, Morocco, formal ethical approval was not required for this non-interventional study involving professional participants. The research was based on semi-structured interviews with managers and professionals in the automotive industry, involved no clinical intervention, no sensitive personal data, and no vulnerable participants. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the relevant institutional and professional ethical standards for voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymisation.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants prior to their participation in the interviews. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, the anonymised treatment of their responses and their right to withdraw at any stage. All interview data were anonymised prior to analysis, and no identifying information regarding individual respondents or their organisations appears in the manuscript.

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Figures

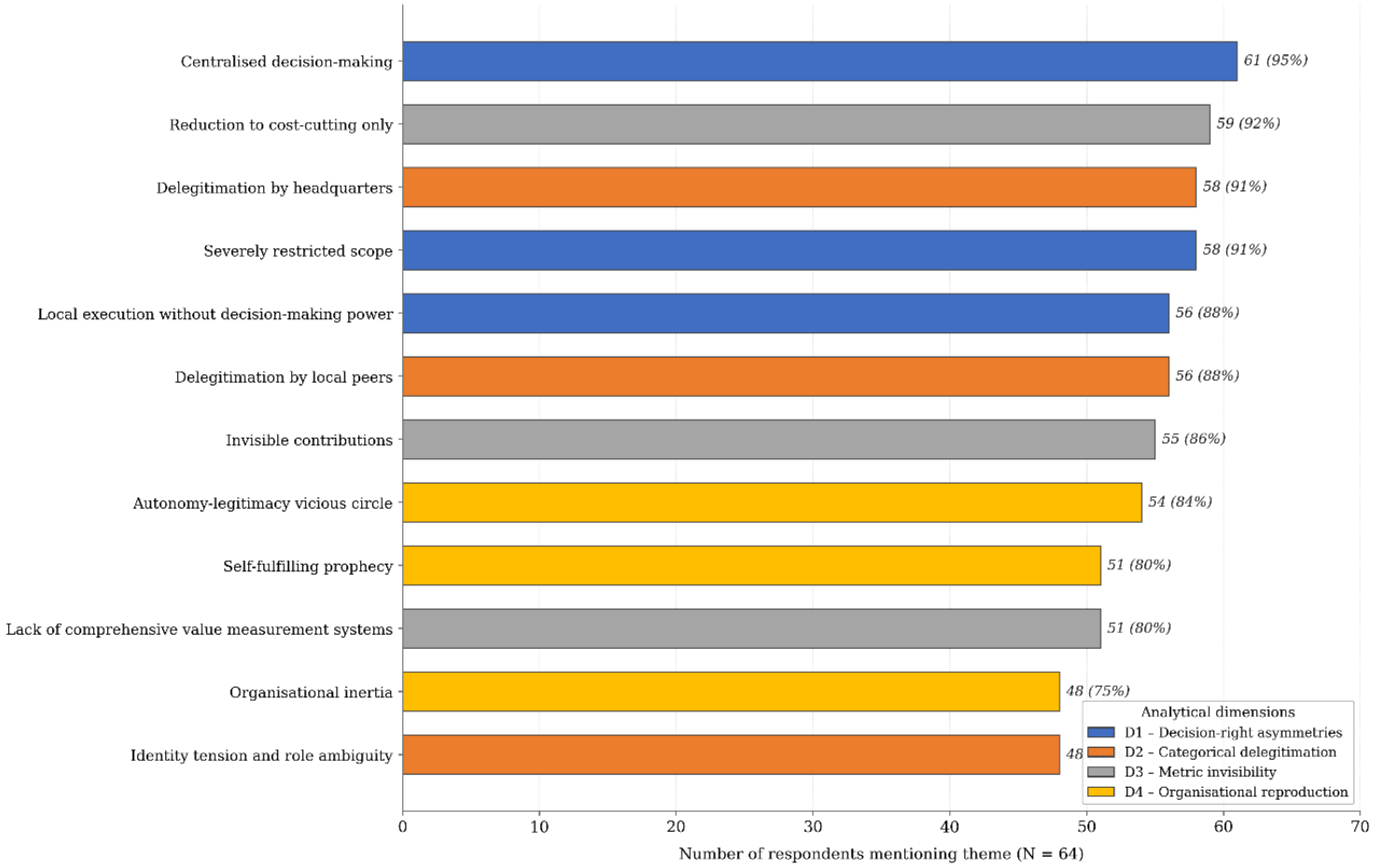


Figure 1

Frequency distribution of the most salient second-order themes across the interview corpus

Source : Authors' analysis of interview data

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- SupplementaryFile1InterviewGuide.docx
- SupplementaryFile2Codebook.docx
- SupplementaryFile3DataCollectionProtocol.docx
- SupplementaryFile4CaseMatrix.docx