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Jumping on the Bandwagon of Responsibility—Or Not? Consumers' Perceived Role in the Meat Sector

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Abstract: It is evident that sustainable meat consumption and production require shared responsibility for actions and consequences by consumers and producers. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the relevant focus areas within the meat food value chain that consumers attach relevance to. Furthermore, the study provides an understanding of potential actions of consumer social responsibility (C_NSR) and reasons for not taking responsibility. The study is based on an online consumer survey (n = 1003) including standardized and open-ended questions. Data were analyzed via content analysis using a combination of inductive and deductive analyses in an iterative process. Results reveal that consumers consider animal husbandry as the core area where there is a need to take responsibility. This is followed by food safety, slaughtering, and transport, while environment and social issues related to the working conditions of employees are judged to have lower relevance. In most focus areas, the large majority of respondents attribute responsibility to one or several of the other stakeholder groups but not to consumers of meat products. Recommendations for the meat sector as well as for policymakers are derived in this paper to further encourage meat consumers to take their part of the overall responsibility.

Keywords: responsibility; meat sector; consumer social responsibility; content analysis

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1. Introduction

Expanding economic activity of humans in recent decades has had acute negative consequences, including resource scarcity and the disruption of ecological balance [1]. In order to come closer to the overall goal of sustainable development in view of these worsening climatic and social changes, a global rethink is essential [2]. The ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic [3] and the Russo-Ukrainian war demonstrate, more than ever, the urgency for sustainable changes to the food system in order to preserve already-strained resources for future generations. Food systems and, as such, changes in consumption and production, are widely recognized as a starting point towards sustainable consumption and production and are well-reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [4,5].

Responsible consumption and production plays a central role as the 12th of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) [6]. This SDG reflects the dichotomy between sustainable consumption and production patterns and the need to change our lifestyles and economic practices. Sustainable consumption and production can contribute to poverty reduction, a green economy, increased resource efficiency, reduced environmental degradation, and sustainable lifestyles, among others [7–9]. The interdependence of responsibilities between companies representing the production side and the consumer becomes evident in these accounts. While corporate social responsibility (CSR) is already seen as a prerequisite for

consumers to allow businesses to maintain their legitimacy, consumer responsibility as a matter has not yet become a focus of attention. However, consumers' role in sustainable development cannot be ignored. Especially in the saturated food market, where demand drives supply, market pull is assumed to be an important external driver of sustainable production decisions.

Thus, it is not enough to repeatedly report on consumers' statements that sustainability is, or should be, an important product attribute they consider in their purchase decisions [10–12]. With respect to farm animal welfare, polls already confirm its stated high importance to consumers [13,14]. Over the last decade, supply chain actors representing the production side have launched numerous initiatives to provide meat products with higher animal welfare standards, such as the Haltungsform labeling introduced by the Initiative Tierwohl in April 2019 in Germany [15]. The Haltungsform labeling distinguishes between four levels of animal husbandry for broilers, turkeys, and fattening pigs (one = lowest level, four = highest level) and refers only to the fattening of animals, not to transport or slaughtering. Market share of those higher animal welfare products are still low, with 3.8% and 5.4% for levels three and four, respectively, in 2021 [16]. Furthermore, animal welfare programs that pursue a complete conversion of the farm eke out a niche existence [14,17,18]. The meat market is insofar special as meat production and/or processing have received considerable media attention and raised consumer concerns about existing practices in livestock production, slaughtering, and processing due to multiple scandals over the last decades, as outlined in Kohne and Ihle [19]. These include mad cow disease, dioxins, and salmonella in chicken and eggs, and the use of rotten meat in the German catering sector, as well as inadequate labor and, particularly, animal husbandry conditions [20–24]. Although the large majority of consumers' declared commitment to sustainable values [10–12], most of them do not "walk their talk" [25]. Thus, in the actual purchase decision they do not buy the sustainable alternatives [26], nor do they reduce their meat consumption or completely abstain from eating meat [27]. In fact, meat consumption remained at a level of about 61 kg/capita since the start of the millennium until 2019. Only over the last three years has a small decline in meat consumption been reported [27]. So far, reasons have not been sufficiently explored. Possible explanations could be increased awareness of climate warming potential of meat consumption due to Fridays for Future movements, but also COVID-19 lockdowns, limiting out of home meat consumption possibilities in canteens and restaurants. In addition, though we can observe an increase in vegetarians and vegans over the period analyzed, their share is, with 7.5% and 1.4%, respectively, still low [28].

Reasons discussed for the attitude–behavior gap are manifold [29,30]. These include survey-induced biases such as the hypothetical bias and social desirability bias as well as the so-called consumer–citizen duality [31–33]. The latter refers to the double role individuals have, being consumers on the one hand and citizens in society on the other [34–36]. Other core factors are (perceived) unavailability or high costs, including transaction costs linked to buying animal-friendly products; those can be assumed to be considerably lower since the Haltungsform labeling was introduced in Germany in April 2019 and meat was labeled in almost every supermarket and discounter in Germany [17]. Additional factors include the complexity of the overall concept of animal welfare and what is and what is not improving the well-being of animals, limited time, and cognitive capacity, as well as information overload [37–41].

This study contributes to existing investigations by using the concept of consumer social responsibility (C_NSR). Consumers' responsibility has only recently been gaining importance in research [42–47]. Schlaile et al. [48] gave an overview of the different existing definitions of C_NSR. In the present study, the definition of Quazi et al. [49] is applied. They defined C_NSR as "the individual and collective commitments, actions and decisions that consumers consider as the right things to do in their interactions with producers, marketers and sellers of goods and services" [49] (p. 49). This definition is used in the present work as it broadens and deepens prior definitions, including the most quoted definition by Vitell and Muncy [50]. To implement sustainably produced animal products successfully on the market, all actors have to be willing to take partial responsibility [26,51].

The overall objective of this qualitative empirical research was to investigate, for the first time, consumers' (own) perceived responsibility, specifically in the context of sustainable meat consumption. Based on a theoretical framework and a literature review, the authors derived the following three research questions: (1) To whom or in which sustainability-related focus areas should responsibility be ascribed? (2) Who do respondents see as responsible in the different focus areas? Do they only attribute responsibility to other stakeholders or do they see their C_NSR? (3) What do respondents say about how they as consumers can take responsibility and why do they feel they cannot? The qualitative empirical analysis conducted in this study to answer the research questions focuses on the meat sector in Germany. This sector accounts for the highest share in value added at the agricultural primary and food processing stage by far. Furthermore, meat is also of dominant importance in consumers' food expenditure in Germany [52].

2. Responsibility throughout the Meat Value Chain—A Question of Attribution

Notwithstanding the almost ubiquitous use of the word "responsibility" in various disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, and philosophy), there is no all-encompassing definition of the term, though there are some elements of the construct that seem widely accepted [53]. The relational aspects are ethics, morality, and accountability [54]. Those elements are also reflected in, for instance, the definition of Auhagen [55]. According to Auhagen [55] (p. 63), " . . . responsibility includes acts of morals, of action, and of consideration of consequences of action . . . "; thus, " . . . a human acts responsibly when she or he is acting with reference to ethical and moral points of view and accepts that she or he will be accountable for the consequences of her or his acts", with the latter also including non-action.

Theories that try to explain human behavior reveal that motivation lies at the beginning of an action [56,57]. According to the integrated action model, the underlying condition of motivation is the perception of possible threats or grievances [58]. If a desired target state is not identical with the actual state, the individual is anxious to reduce the perceived dissonance with his or her own behavior [59–61]. For example, the literature on environmental concerns and green purchase shows a relationship between consumers' environmental concerns and green buying behavior [62]. According to Auhagen [55] and Neuhäuser [63], responsibility is at least a triple relationship between "who" (e.g., an individual or a group) is responsible for "what" (e.g., for the own behavior) towards "whom" (e.g., humans, animals, nature). This triple relationship is graphically presented in Figure 1.

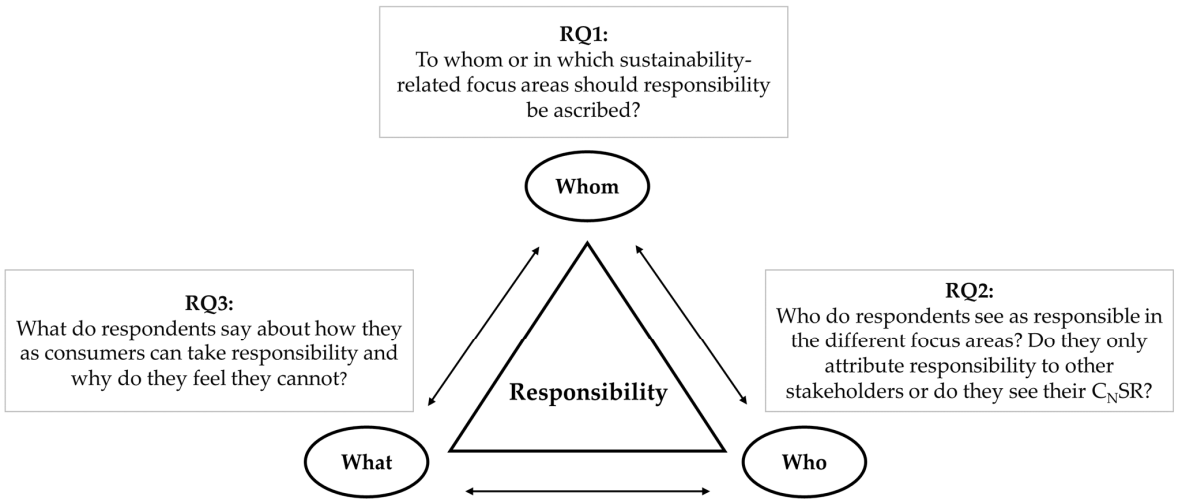

Figure 1. Responsibility: a triple relation model. Abbreviations refer to RQ = research questions and C_NSR = consumer social responsibility. Figure 1 is based on [55,63] and displays the three research questions addressed.

Questions of responsibility are only posed if somebody believes that there is a need for action or a grievance that needs to be addressed. Overall, the German meat sector has faced criticism for a long time and has a consistently poor reputation, especially compared to other major manufacturing and service industries [64–66]. Upon deeper consideration of the single stages of the food value chain of meat, it becomes clear that the slaughtering and processing industry is particularly regarded critically due to, for instance, long transport routes to slaughterhouses or a lack of, or inadequate, stunning during slaughter, as well as contract labor and wage dumping [64,67]. In addition, consumers are concerned about animal husbandry conditions [26]. In addition to these more social and animal-welfare-related concerns, the environmental impacts of livestock production such as CO_2 emissions are further points of public criticism [64,67,68]. The rotten meat scandal and the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis have raised insecurity among consumers about the safety of meat [69]. Thus, we identify four dimensions relevant for sustainable consumption and production in the meat sector (see Table 1). This is in line with the current operationalization of sustainable food consumption by the Scientific Advisory Board on Agricultural Policy, Food and Consumer Health Protection (WBAE) of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) in Germany [70]. The WBAE identified health, social welfare, environment, and animal welfare as the four central goals of sustainable nutrition.

Table 1. Points of public criticism in the meat sector and associated focus areas.

Sustainability Goal	Focus Areas	Criticism/Improvement	Source
Animal welfare	Animal husbandry	Intensive livestock farming, castration methods	[64,68]
	Transport	Long transport routes to slaughterhouses	[64,68]
	Slaughtering	Inadequate stunning during slaughter, mass killing	[64,68]
Social welfare	Employees	Wage dumping, social standards for workers (from Eastern Europe) who are mostly employed by subcontractors	[64,67]
Environmental	Environment	High CO_2 emissions, energy and water consumption	[64,67,68]
Health	Food safety	Rotten meat scandal or the BSE [1] crisis, antimicrobial resistance	[71]

Note: [1] BSE is a transmissible, neurodegenerative, fatal brain disease of cattle, that first got scientific attention in the year 1986 in the United Kingdom.

Against this background, the paper will focus on the following sustainability focus areas in the meat sector: animal husbandry, transport, slaughtering, employees, environment, and food safety. Therefore, it is important to first find out which of the six areas are most important to participants and to whom responsibility should be ascribed. Following the triad of responsibility (see Figure 1), the first research question is:

RQ1: To whom or in which sustainability-related focus areas should responsibility be ascribed?

Once the "whom" has been identified, the next question is "who" should take responsibility: me, as a consumer, or others, as stakeholders in the value chain? Developments and scandals in the meat sector demonstrate the need for its sustainable development. Adjustments in production and consumption patterns are necessary if the sustainability goals are to be achieved [70]. Not only the companies responsible for sustainable development, but also consumers, can contribute to change [1,72]). Sustainably oriented consumers can have an effective influence on a company's responsible actions and vice versa. Brinkmann [73] speaks of a "shared responsibility of business and consumers" [73] (p. 18) contributing to sustainable development with their responsible purchase behavior. Despite the fact that one's own perceived responsibility is a prerequisite for responsible behavior, this latter factor has not yet received much attention in the discussion on the attitude–behavior gap. This is somewhat surprising, as the consumer is seen as the person who eventually decides what to buy and thereby can reward or punish companies depending on their CSR activities with his or her consumption choices [74–77].

The low market shares of sustainable food products could be attributed, among other reasons, to the fact that consumers are not fully aware of or neglect their personal responsibility. Thus, it is fundamental that companies make C_NSR a part of their corporate

strategy [78] and communicate their CSR activities [79,80]. According to Devinney et al. [78] (p. 230), companies cannot "do well by doing good" without consumers "doing well and doing good". Hence, a shared responsibility by all the actors along the value chain, including consumers, can be derived. However, "acceptance and denial of responsibility go hand in hand" [53] (p. 2). The denial of responsibility is a phenomenon that can be found nearly everywhere [53]. In the case of several potentially responsible parties, a diffusion of responsibilities can rapidly occur (the so-called "bystander effect"). If everyone waits for someone else to act, nothing happens and the risk of dilemma situations according to the public good theorem exists [81,82]. People find reasons and excuses as to why they are unable to take responsibility themselves (e.g., the volunteers' dilemma [83]). It is therefore important that individuals see themselves as responsible and that their actions can contribute to change, thus recognizing their C_NSR. Thus, the relevant question is not only "who" takes responsibility, it is "who" is responsible for "what" [81]. It is necessary to identify the different actors' opportunities to take responsibility [81]. Hence, the second research question to be answered is:

RQ2: Who do respondents see as responsible in the different focus areas? Do they only attribute responsibility to other stakeholders or do they see their C_NSR?

Furthermore, the tripartite concept of responsibility includes the question "what". Which options do participants see for taking responsibility in the individual focus areas? According to Devinney et al. [78], C_NSR shows up in three ways: first, in expressed activity with respect to specific causes, such as donations or the willingness to be involved in protests and boycotts; second, in expressed activity in terms of purchasing or non-purchasing behavior; and/or third, in expressed opinions in surveys or other forms of market research. At the same time, it is of particular importance to identify the causes that hinder consumers from taking responsibility.

Despite the fact that people love animals, at the same time, they also love eating meat [84]. This so-called "meat paradox" [85] may lead to emotional discomfort [86–91].

According to the cognitive dissonance theory [89], dissonance is an aversive state and drives people to action in order to reduce dissonances and to achieve consonance. As many omnivores love animals but still eat meat [84], dissonances may arise and lead to emotional discomfort. To reduce this so-called "meat paradox" [85–91], Rothgerber and Rosenfeld [92] distinguish between (1) mechanisms to prevent meat-related cognitive dissonance from occurring and (2) mechanisms to reduce such dissonance once it has occurred. According to Rothgerber and Rosenfeld [92], actively avoiding situations and information that might evoke an unpleasant emotional state belong to the category of mechanisms to prevent dissonance. The avoidance of obtaining information on husbandry practices and the underestimation of animal suffering were also identified by Graça et al. [93] as a relevant mechanism to protect oneself from dissonances.

By separating the act of eating meat from the underlying reality of its origin and production, consumers may simultaneously reduce their related psychological discomfort and absolve themselves of the guilt felt over the negative aspects of the meat industry. Mental and verbal separation of animal production and meat consumption, for example, by naming the animal cattle or pig and the food beef and pork, can reduce the emergence of dissonance in relation to meat consumption and animal welfare [92,94]. The relation between animals and meat products is even more dissolved on the level of products, e.g., ham, hamburger, bacon, or Sunday roast. Grauerholz [95] as well as Kunst and Hohle [96] pointed out that the way meat is prepared and presented in the shopping environment increases the willingness to eat and hampers the rise of dissonances

The second category that refers to the mechanism to reduce dissonance that already occurred can be further divided into (2a) indirect and (2b) direct strategies [92]. Indirect strategies are perceived behavioral change, which means convincing oneself (and others that one's own meat consumption is already at a low level, and defining oneself as a "human" meat eater by restricting meat consumption to fairly produced meat [92,97]. People with higher moral positions can be derogated in order to reduce the dissonance induced by

their moral behavior. Finally, the rejection or denial of personal responsibility [61,86] and assigning responsibility to other actors in the food system is another viable way to reduce dissonance [92,93].

According to Bastian and Loughnan [86] (p. 4), one way to obscure personal responsibility is by "changing the way how the act itself is understood". If the consumption of meat is perceived as natural, normal, necessary, and nice [98–100], the advantages of meat production and consumption are emphasized and possible alternatives for meat are denied in order to reduce ongoing dissonance [93]. Thus, viewing a behavior as natural, normal, and necessary leads to a denial of personal responsibility [86].

The denial of the animal mind, meaning that farm animals' feelings, sufferings, and thinking differs from those of human beings, is another direct strategy of reducing dissonance [92,101]. Moreover, dichotomizing animals into different categories, such as those you eat (farm animals) and those you love (pets), allows people to reduce meat-related cognitive dissonance [92].

The mechanisms described above help to suppress dissonances, but Bastian and Loughnan [86] compare these mechanisms to a veil that can become transparent again. Accordingly, they are not a perfect protection against dissonances. Thus, consumers may ignore a tangible responsibility [51,61,102] or do not want to be reminded of potential negative issues regarding the treatment of animals when they choose to consume meat [94,103,104].

In order to achieve the goal of sustainable consumption and production and contribute to sustainable development, gaining insights into the reasons underlying consumer willingness or reluctance to act is essential. For this reason, the third research question to be answered is:

RQ3: What do respondents say about how they as consumers can take responsibility and why do they feel they cannot?

3. Methodological Approach

3.1. Data Collection

A Germany-wide online survey was conducted over eight days from late 30 July to 7 August 2012. The data collection was carried out by Uzbonn, a spin-off of the Center for Evaluation and Methods at the University of Bonn. Uzbonn used the access panel provider Panelbiz GmbH. Participants were automatically cash incentivized with 2 € deposited into their bank accounts for their participation in the study. The nationwide sample was quoted by age, gender, and education.

In order to validate the questions in the survey and to make sure that participants understood, could interpret, and were capable of answering the questions, the survey was pretested with 50 participants. Based on the pretest, some adjustments in the wording were carried out. The link to the questionnaire was accessed by a total of approximately 5085 people before the field was closed. A total of 151 dropped out at different points of the questionnaire. A sum of 202 persons were rejected because they were too old or too young (<18 or >65) and about 3729 were rejected because one of the quota cells (age, gender, or education) they fell into was full. A total of n = 1003 participants completed the finalized questionnaire. A relatively large sample size of 1000 participants was necessary due to the fact that participants tend to skip open-ended question formats as mentioned by Dillman et al. [105], given the design of the questionnaire with conditional questions in sequence.

As empirical research on C_NSR is still scarce and the concept still not clearly delimited, we followed the recommendation by Züll [106] and included, besides standardized questions, a number of open-ended questions in the questionnaire to assess the construct of C_NSR. To get an understanding of those focus areas consumers considered to be relevant in taking responsibility, respondents were asked to rank the six areas—animal husbandry, transport, slaughtering, employees, environment, and food safety—from "1" (most important) to "6" (least important). In a second step, participants indicated who should take responsibility. To minimize possible respondent fatigue each participant only assessed the three areas they previously ranked the highest. Response categories for possible

responsible actors were consumers, government, independent certification bodies, farmers, slaughterhouses, the meat processing industry, and butchers. In short, respondents could attribute responsibility to themselves, or consumers in general, and other actors along the meat value chain. If respondents indicated that consumers were (also) responsible for the respective focus area, they were subsequently asked how they, as consumers, could take responsibility. This question was posed in an open-ended format. Thus, they could freely associate and submit their thoughts in a blank field. Those respondents who did not see responsibility at the level of consumers were asked in an open-ended question format why they did not identify consumers as being responsible. Again, respondents were asked to provide their thoughts in a blank field. The questionnaire can be accessed at: https://osf.io/xakf6/?view_only=7777c0a75d02484d8c59d34191e14cb6, (accessed on 29 March 2022).

3.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel 2019 and IBM SPSS Statistics 27. To identify meaningful patterns in the answers to the open-ended questions, framework analysis was used based on Ritchie and Spencer [107]. Framework analysis is suitable since it offers a flexible approach to clearly structure qualitative data in an efficient manner [108,109]. Secondly, the method allows the combination of inductive and deductive analyses in an iterative process [110,111]. Thirdly, it can be applied to a variety of data including open-ended questions [108], such as in the study of Savic et al. [112]. Framework analysis involves two main components: creating an analytical framework and applying this framework [108]. The process itself is divided into six steps [111] (see Figure 2). In the first step, at least two researchers repeatedly read the coding material and make notes to familiarize themselves with the data. In the second step, recurring and important themes are identified. The final framework of analysis is created in the third and fourth steps, indexing (3rd step) and charting the material (4th step). The subsequent steps involve the analysis (5th step) and interpretation of the data (6th step).

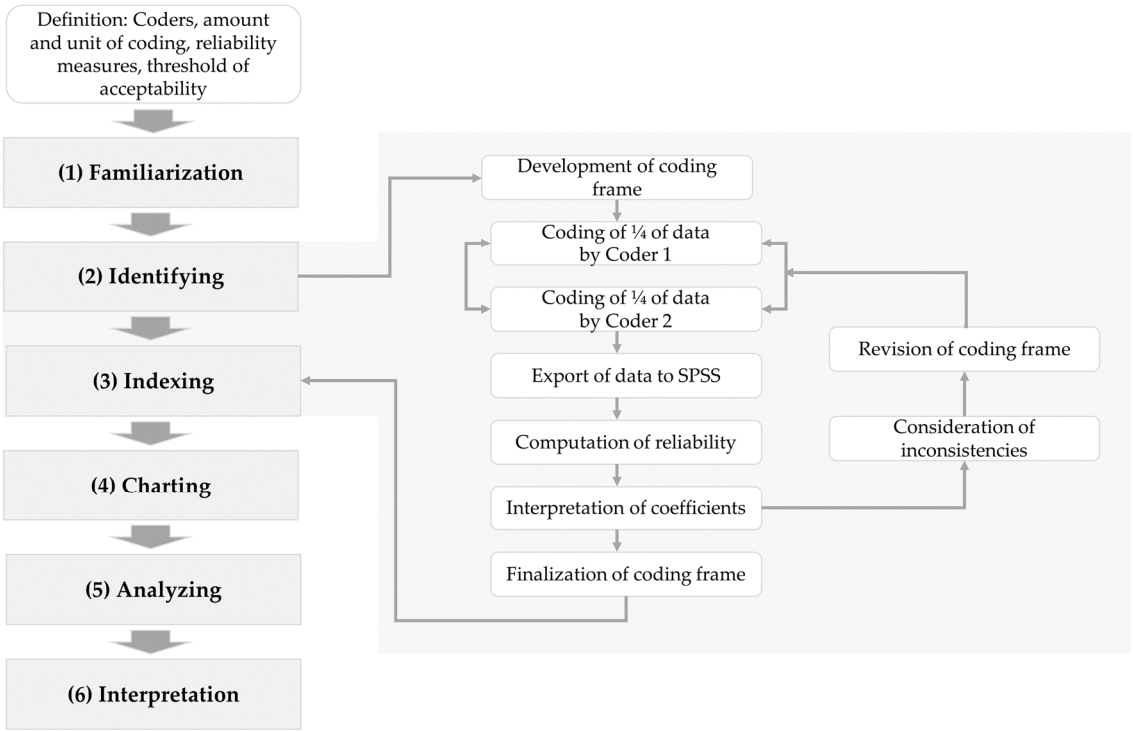

Figure 2. Analysis of data—framework assessment of intercoder reliability. Authors' own depiction based on [108,111,113].

We followed the suggested procedure for intercoder reliability assessment by O'Connor et al. [113]. Thus, to ensure the accuracy of the coding scheme, two trained coders independently coded a quarter of the data units. In order to be able to measure intercoder reliability, Krippendorff's alpha was used. Krippendorff's alpha can be used for any scale level and is not influenced by the number of expressions or missing values. Furthermore, Krippendorff's alpha allows the calculation of a 95% confidence interval [114]. According to Krippendorff [115], a minimum alpha value of 0.80 is required to be accepted. To compute intercoder reliability (ICR), the coded Excel files were exported into SPSS and analyzed using the macro file provided by Andrew F. Hayes [114]. As the a priori threshold of acceptable reliability was slightly below 0.80, the codebook was revised in accordance with the coders' and authors' judgment. The revised coding scheme was evaluated using the same procedure with a quarter of the data units. After the achieved intercoder reliability was above 0.80, the entire data set was coded by another pair of coders. Overall, nine subthemes for "options to take responsibility" and eleven subthemes for "reasons for not taking responsibility" were identified.

4. Results

4.1. Description of Sample Characteristics

A total of n = 1003 participants completed the study. A total of 50% of consumers participating in the study were men. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 65 with an average age of 41.3 years (standard deviation 13.8). A total of 26.9% lived in rural areas, 34.7% in peri-urban areas, and 38.4% in urban areas. The sample was slightly more educated and younger than the average German population [116]. This deviation is to be expected in an online survey and is typical for online users [117,118]. The socio-demographics are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographics of the sample (n = 1003).

Characteristics	% of Sample		Characteristics	% of Sample	
	German census [a]	Sample		German census [a]	Sample
Gender			Age (Ø of sample = 41.3)		
Women	51.1	50.0	18–25 years [b]	12.5	19.1
Men	48.9	50.0	26–45 years [b]	28.5	38.6
			46–65 years [b]	59.0	42.3
Income per month			Education		
Lower than 900 €	11.9	13.2	Without any graduation	3.8	0.4
900 to 1499 €	20.9	23.4	Low school education	35.6	33.1
1500 to 1999 €	15.8	13.5	Medium school education	22.1	26.2
2000 to 2599 €	15.0	17.8	University entrance degree	27.3	23.5
Greater than 2600 €	32.6	32.1	University degree	12.9	16.0
			Holding a doctorate	1.1	0.8

[a] Based on StBa [116], [b] share of the German census refers to the population age 18 to 65 years.

4.2. Relevance of the Different Areas

To answer the first research question, "To whom, or in which sustainability-related focus area, should responsibility be attributed?", participants had to rank six different focus areas—animal husbandry, transport, slaughtering, employees, environment, and food safety—where they felt it was most important that responsibility is taken. The results reveal that animal welfare is considered the most important area where responsible conduct is expected by far. Every second consumer (49.3%) ranked animal welfare as the most relevant focus area in which responsibility should be assumed, while another 23.9% and 11.8% of participants ranked animal welfare in second and third place, respectively. Food safety took second place with 552 mentions of the Top 3 ranks (61.7%), followed by slaughtering (530 mentions, 59.2%) and transport of animals (473 mentions, 52.8%). The last two focus areas, namely environment (214 mentions, 23.9%) and the working conditions of employees (155 mentions, 17.3%), were considered only by a minority of participants as one of the three most relevant areas the sector should take responsibility for (see Figure 3).

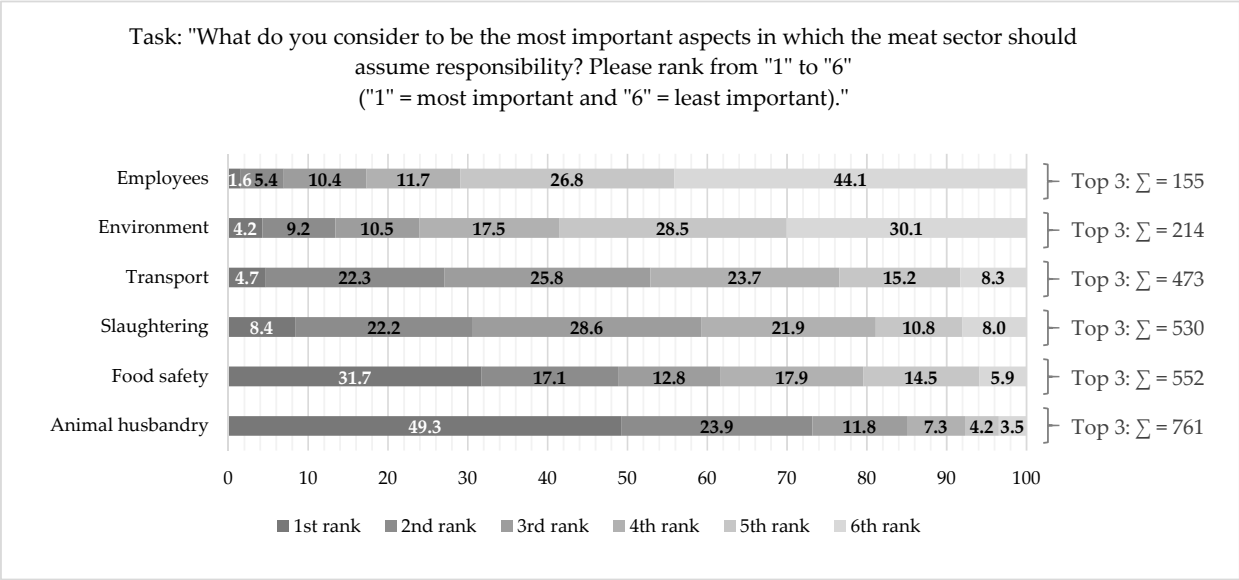

Figure 3. Relevance of different areas of responsibility in the meat supply chain. Percentages refer to n = 895; 108 participants who did not answer the question correctly were excluded from the analysis.

4.3. Consumers' Personal Responsibility and Attribution of Responsibilities to Other Stakeholders

Next, for each focus area, we assessed to whom respondents attribute responsibility. More specifically, we were interested to investigate whether respondents were considering consumers—i.e., themselves—as actors that should take responsibility for areas of responsible conduct in the meat sector or whether they attribute accountability only to other stakeholders in the meat value chain (e.g., farmers, slaughterhouses). Figure 4 gives an overview of the overall mentions and the respective percentages of respondents seeing responsibility at the level of a specific actor for the considered focus area. It becomes clear that results differ depending on the focus area under consideration. Farmers are seen as being mainly responsible for animal husbandry (73.9% of all respondents), food safety (61.1%), and the environment (52.3%). Slaughterhouses are primarily seen as the responsible actors for the focus area slaughtering (71.3%) and, to a lower degree, for transport (55.4%). The focus area regarding employees is primarily attributed to the meat processing industry. Most importantly, for all focus areas, the majority of respondents reject any responsibility attributed to consumers. However, differences between focus areas exist, with an especially small share of participants considering consumers as actors with some degree of responsibility within the focus areas food safety (22.9%), transport (21.0%), slaughtering (20.9%), and employees (16.7%). For the focus areas regarding environment and animal welfare, those shares were much higher, reaching 42.5% and 30.5%, respectively. Thus, in those domains a considerable share of participants recognized consumers' obligations.

4.4. Consumer's Own Responsibility: Why and Why Not?

To answer the third research question "What do respondents say about how they as consumers can take responsibility, and why do they feel they cannot?", only those participants attributing responsibility to consumers beforehand were asked in a subsequent question how they as a consumer could take responsibility in that specific focus area. Those who did not consider consumers to be responsible actors were asked why they as consumers could not take responsibility. The open-ended questions were analyzed based on the framework described in Section 3.

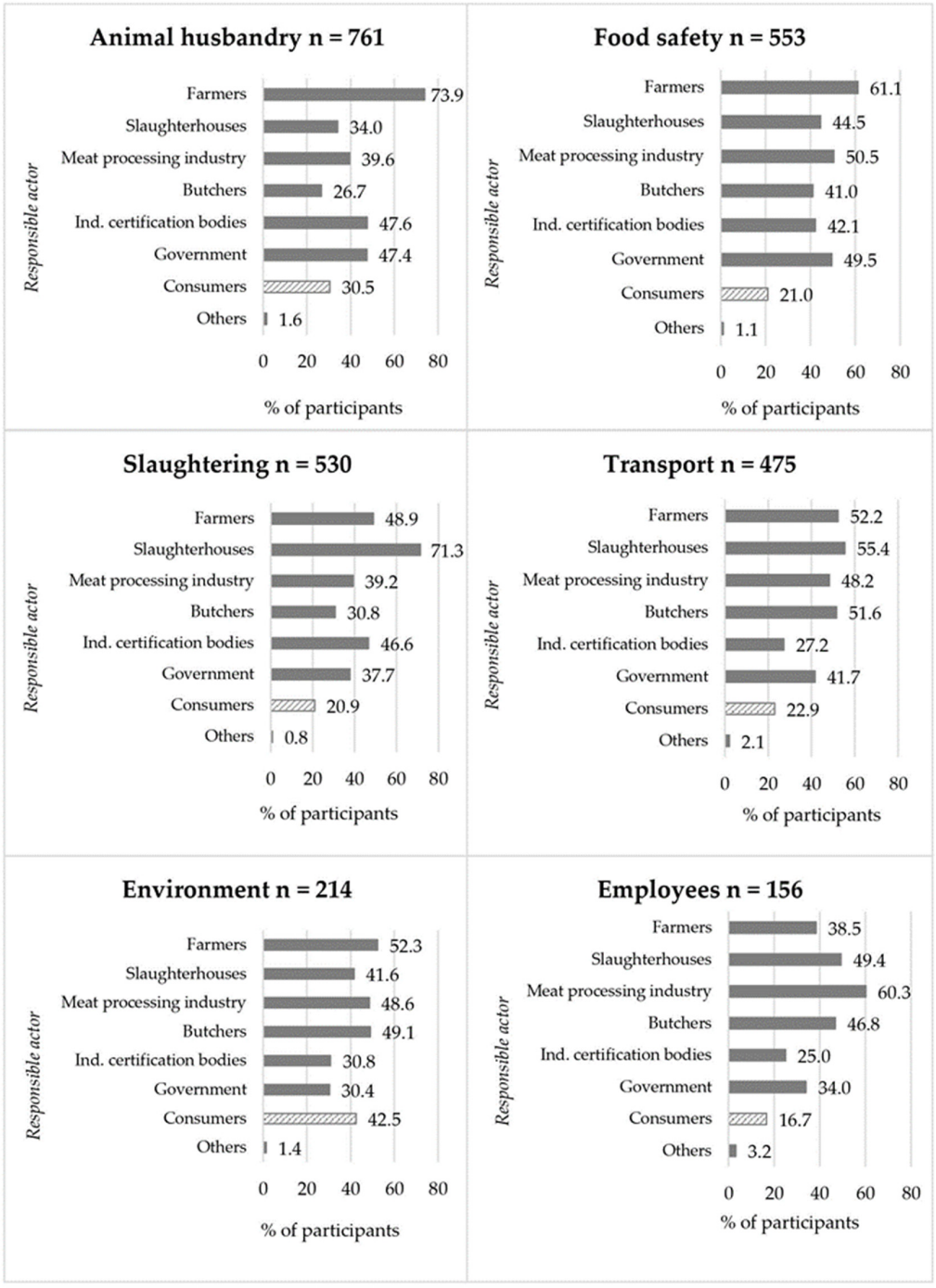

Figure 4. Attributed responsibilities in different focus areas in the meat supply chain. Multiple answers were possible.

Figure 5 shows an overview of the themes and presents some examples for the respective topics. Subsequently, the ICR was measured for the final coding using Krippendorff's alpha, with 10,000 bootstraps to obtain precise confidence intervals. The data units that had no agreement between the coders were carefully checked by the first author and finally assigned to one of the themes.

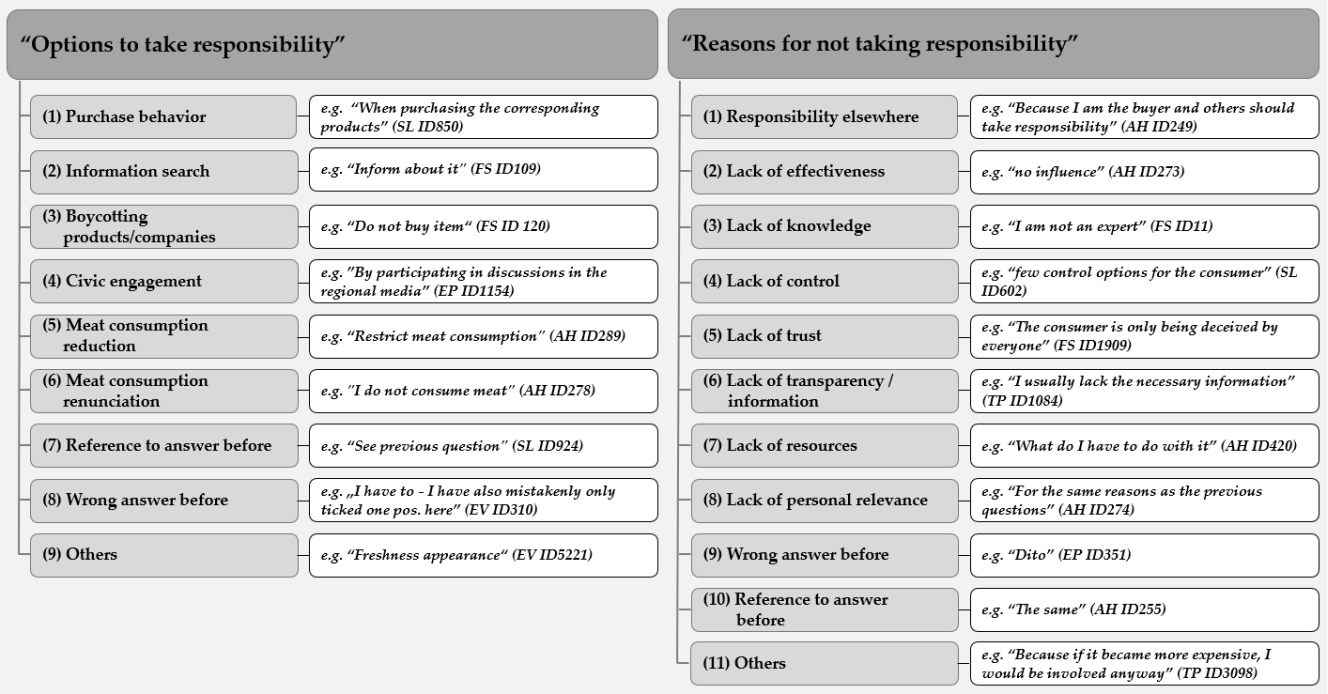

Figure 5. Identified themes and examples regarding consumers' responsibility. The information in brackets refers to the respective focus area from which the quotation originates and the ID refers to the keyed identification number of the person in the questionnaire who wrote the respective statement. The abbreviations are: ID = identification number; AH = animal husbandry; SL = slaughtering; TP = transport; EP = employees; EV = environment; FS = food safety.

Table 3 shows that, for all focus areas, intercoder reliability can be assessed as good with a 95% probability (alpha > 0.8).

Table 3. Results of intercoder reliability—Krippendorff's alpha.

Coding: Options to Take Responsibility				
Focus area	**Alpha**	**LL95%CI**	**UL95%CI**	**Units/Pairs**
Animal husbandry	0.899	0.849	0.943	257.000
Food safety	0.933	0.883	0.973	130.000
Slaughtering	0.980	0.964	0.993	119.000
Transport	0.905	0.823	0.970	124.000
Environment	0.967	0.921	0.997	105.000
Employees	0.987	0.967	1.000	26.000
Coding: Reasons for Not Taking Responsibility				
Focus area	**Alpha**	**LL95%CI**	**UL95%CI**	**Units/Pairs**
Animal husbandry	0.927	0.903	0.949	563.000
Food safety	0.864	0.825	0.900	468.000
Slaughtering	0.934	0.905	0.960	437.000
Transport	0.927	0.900	0.953	394.000
Environment	0.927	0.856	0.973	123.000
Employees	0.964	0.935	0.987	133.000

Scale = ordinal; observations = 2 (Coder 1 & Coder 2).

4.4.1. Options to Take Responsibility

The options identified by participants to take consumer responsibility in the different processes of the meat value chain are categorized as presented in Table 4. The results of the categorization show that 79.1% of the respondents were able to imagine possibilities to account for consumer responsibility adapted to the six different focus areas presented, while 20.9% of the participants did not answer or used wildcards.

Table 4. Options to take responsibility (categorized).

Category \ Focus Area	Animal Husbandry (n = 232) [1]	Food Safety (n = 161) [1]	Slaughtering (n = 111) [1]	Transport (n = 109) [1]	Environment (n = 91) [1]	Employees (n = 26) [1]	Σ
No answer	28 (12.1%)	38 (32.8%)	27 (24.3%)	17 (15.6%)	24 (26.4%)	9 (34.6%)	143 (20.9%)
Answers	204 (87.9%)	78 (67.2%)	84 (75.7%)	92 (84.4%)	67 (73.6%)	17 (65.4%)	542 (79.1%)
Purchase behavior	92 (45.1%)	38 (48.7%)	30 (35.7%)	36 (39.1%)	35 (52.2%)	7 (41.2%)	238 (38.5%)
Information Search	31 (15.2%)	23 (29.5%)	21 (25.0%)	11 (12.0%)	5 (7.5%)	3 (17.6%)	94 (15.2%)
Boycotting products/companies	40 (19.6%)	16 (20.5%)	13 (15.5%)	14 (15.2%)	8 (11.9%)	0 (0.0%)	91 (14.7%)
Civic engagement	18 (8.8%)	9 (11.5%)	13 (15.5%)	7 (7.6%)	5 (7.5%)	2 (11.8%)	54 (8.7%)
Meat consumption reduction	10 (4.9%)	3 (3.8%)	5 (6.0%)	9 (9.8%)	1 2 (17.9%)	0 (0.0%)	39 (6.3%)
Meat consumption renunciation	6 (2.9%)	1 (1.3%)	6 (7.1%)	5 (5.4%)	2 (3.0%)	0 (0.0%)	20 (3.2%)
Reference to answer before	7 (3.4%)	2 (2.6%)	6 (7.1%)	9 (9.8%)	2 (3.0%)	0 (0.0%)	26 (4.2%)
Wrong answer before	1 (3.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.3%)
Others	7 (3.4%)	5 (6.4%)	5 (6.0%)	11 (12.0%)	11 (16.4%)	6 (31.6%)	45 (7.3%)
Σ	212 (33.3%)	97 (15.7%)	99 (16.0%)	102 (16.5%)	81 (13.1%)	27 (4.4%)	618 (100%)

[1] Percentages in parentheses refer to participants who answered the question.

The focus area in which the most participants gave an answer was animal husbandry (87.9% of participants), followed by transport (84.4% of participants), slaughtering (75.7% of participants), environment (73.6% participants), food safety (67.2% of participants), and employees (65.4% of participants).

The theme of purchase behavior was, with 38.5% of all answers, the most frequently coded theme in all six focus areas (see Table 4). The following shares refer to those participants who indicated that they can take responsibility for the different focus areas. Depending on the focus area considered, between 35.7% (slaughtering) and 52.2% (animal husbandry) stated that they could take responsibility through their own purchasing behavior. Hence, a shared idea on how to signal and take consumer responsibility is present. The challenge lies in transforming this into behavior. The alternative to purchase is to not purchase. Here, respondents consequently identified the boycotting of products or companies theme as a possible course of action. By not buying specific food items ("do not buy item"; FS ID534) or by not buying from specific companies ("do not buy anything from dubious farms"; AH ID967), 11.9% (for environment) to 20.5% (for food safety) of the participants mentioned that they could assume responsibility. Ideas belonging to boycotting of products or companies were not mentioned for the focus area employees.

Active information search was another identified theme, e.g., "by looking closely, information" (FS ID291). Civic engagement was the most often-mentioned theme in the focus area of slaughtering. A total of 15.5% of participants indicated that they could take

responsibility through "projects, demonstrations" (SL ID252) or "support of independent associations, campaigns for correct slaughtering" (SL ID971).

Furthermore, two coded themes focused on meat consumption reduction and meat consumption renunciation. Meat consumption reduction was most frequently coded in the area of environment and transport with 17.9% and 9.8% of participants, respectively. Thus, according to participants, options to take responsibility include the meat consumption reduction (EV ID764) or the meat consumption renunciation (EV ID910). The remaining three themes coded were wrong answers before, reference to answer before, and others.

4.4.2. Reasons for Not Taking Responsibility

Those respondents who did not explicitly mention that the consumer should take responsibility for the respective focus area were requested to provide reasons for their appraisal. The results of the content analysis show that between 27.2% (for employees) and 38.2% (for environment) of the participants did not answer the open-ended question or used wildcards instead (see Table 5). The focus area in which the highest number of participants gave an answer was transport (71.0% of participants), followed by food safety (70.9% of participants), animal husbandry (69.9% of participants), slaughtering (66.3% of participants), employees (62.8% of participants), and environment (61.8% participants).

Table 5. Reasons for not taking responsibility (categorized).

Focus Area / Category	Animal Husbandry (n = 529) [1]	Food Safety (n = 436) [1]	Slaughtering (n = 419) [1]	Transport (n = 364) [1]	Environment (n = 123) [1]	Employees (n = 129) [1]	Σ
No answer$_{(12)}$ [1]	159 (30.1%)	134 (30.7%)	141 (33.7%)	102 (28.0%)	47 (38.2%)	48 (27.2%)	631 (31.6%)
Answers	370 (69.9%)	302 (70.9%)	278 (66.3%)	262 (72.0%)	76 (61.8%)	78 (62.8%)	1369 (68.5%)
Responsibility elsewhere	87 (23.5%)	97 (32.1%)	71 (25.5%)	64 (24.4%)	18 (22.5%)	23 (28.4%)	360 (24.0%)
Lack of effectiveness	119 (31.2%)	67 (22.2%)	57 (20.5%)	60 (22.9%)	21 (26.3%)	31 (32.1%)	350 (23.3%)
Lack of knowledge	38 (10.3%)	50 (16.6%)	38 (13.7%)	41 (15.6%)	8 (10.0%)	9 (11.1%)	184 (12.3%)
Lack of control	37 (10.0%)	46 (15.2%)	35 (12.6%)	32 (11.8%)	3 (3.8%)	3 (3.7%)	156 (10.4%)
Lack of transparency/information	30 (8.1%)	25 (8.3%)	29 (10.4%)	20 (7.6%)	4 (5.0%)	3 (3.7%)	111 (7.4%)
Lack of resources	24 (6.5%)	16 (5.3%)	12 (4.3%)	15 (9.3%)	3 (3.8%)	5 (6.2%)	75 (5.0%)
Lack of personal relevance	8 (2.2%)	3 (1.0%)	14 (5.0%)	6 (2.3%)	3 (3.8%)	4 (4.9%)	38 (2.5%)
Lack of trust	9 (2.4%)	7 (2.3%)	3 (1.1%)	3 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (1.5%)
Reference to answer before	18 (4.9%)	15 (5.0%)	13 (4.7%)	11 (4.2%)	3 (3.8%)	3 (3.7%)	63 (4.2%)
Wrong answer before	13 (3.5%)	6 (2.0%)	4 (1.4%)	12 (4.6%)	9 (11.3%)	0 (0.0%)	44 (2.9%)
Others	31 (8.4%)	16 (5.3%)	15 (5.4%)	19 (7.3%)	8 (10.0%)	9 (11.1%)	98 (6.5%)
Σ	414 (27.6%)	348 (23.2%)	291 (19.4%)	283 (18.9%)	80 (5.3%)	85 (5.7%)	1501 (100%)

[1] Percentages in parentheses refer to participants who answered the question.

Based on the data presented in Table 5, responsibility elsewhere and lack of effectiveness were the most frequently coded themes or reasons for not taking responsibility. Between 23.5% (for animal husbandry) and 32.1% (for food safety) of participants argued that the responsibility lies with another actor or another authority. For example, with respect to animal husbandry, participants wrote, "that's the task of the producer" (AH ID320) or, "the responsibility lies with the farmer" (AH ID704). Regarding the areas of

animal husbandry and employees, around one third of the answers belong to the theme of a lack of effectiveness; respondents feel unable to exert "any influence" (AH ID272; EP ID809). Another often-mentioned reason for being unable to take responsibility was a lack of knowledge. For example, with respect to food safety, 16.6% of respondents commented, "I do not have the necessary knowledge to judge that" (FS ID766). The same holds for transport: "Too little is known about animal transport" (TP ID350). Another often coded theme was the lack of control. This reason for not taking responsibility appeared to be more relevant to food safety (15.2%), followed by slaughtering (12.6%), transport (11.8%), and animal husbandry (10.0%), in comparison to employees (6.2%) and environment (3.9%). An example of a statement made by a consumer is, "I as a consumer cannot check food safety" (FS ID1486) or, "Because as a consumer it is difficult to ensure the quality of the products" (FS ID258). Other reasons for not taking responsibility were perceived as a lack of transparency or information and a lack of resources. Between 3.7% (employees) and 10.4% (food safety) of participants mentioned that they "lack transparency" (EP ID363) or wrote comments, such as, "I have no information" (EP ID551). The lack of resources was most often coded in transport with 9.3%. Furthermore, participants refrain from taking responsibility as they perceive a lack of personal relevance or a lack of trust. The theme of a lack of personal relevance was most often mentioned for slaughtering (5.0% of participants) and for employees (4.9% of participants). This theme includes all units where participants state, for example, that they have nothing to do with the topic because they do not come into contact with it ("Because I have never come into contact with it in my life; SL666). The lack of trust theme was only mentioned by 1.1% for slaughtering and transport, up to 2.4% for animal husbandry. Finally, the respondents made statements that are categorized into wrong answer before, reference to answer before, and others.

5. Discussion

As reflected by the 12th SDG, both stakeholder groups—consumers and producers—are responsible for ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. However, within the meat sector, sustainable products remain a niche market in Germany. While many reasons for this apparent discordance have been discussed in the literature, e.g., a lack of availability of sustainable meat products, one aspect has only recently gained attention: consumers might not feel and acknowledge that they also hold responsibility [42–47]. This study aimed to gain insights into the questions, "Do consumers feel responsible for relevant sustainability issues within the meat value chain? And if so, do they take actions? And if not, why do they neglect to take responsibility?" Thus, the overall objective of this study was to investigate the consumer's (own) perceived responsibility. This work contributes to the literature as it is the first to specifically analyze C_NSR in the context of sustainable or responsible meat consumption and production. As meat consumption maintained a level of about 61 kg/capita since the start of the millennium and only somewhat declined over the last three years—likely COVID-19-induced to a great extent—insights derived from our sample are highly relevant, despite being from 2012.

With respect to the first research question ("whom"), the results reveal that the focus areas of animal husbandry, transport, and slaughtering, and thus those areas related to the animal becoming products that are purchased and consumed, are considered to be core areas where there is a need to take responsibility. The areas of environment, food safety, and especially employee welfare are considered to have lower relevance.

Investigating consumers' perception of "who" (second research question) should take responsibility in the different focus areas shows that accountability for animal husbandry, for instance, is mainly ascribed to farmers, and slaughtering to slaughterhouses; thus, accountability is ascribed to those actors directly involved in the respective focus area. The majority of consumers do not consider themselves to be relevant actors, though differences exist between the six focus areas, with very low levels of perceived C_NSR in the area of employee welfare and considerably higher levels in the area of the environment. Overall, however, responsibility is primarily delegated to other actors in the meat sector. These

findings are in line with the literature [119–123]. They give some indication that the respondents are largely unaware of or ignore their C_NSR [49].

Summarizing the findings with respect to the third research question, "what" consumers can do to take responsibility, participants identified their purchase decision and active information search as relevant points of action. This is straightforward if one can agree on the general assumption of a market-oriented economy in which consumers' buying decisions influence what is produced and offered at the market. Thus, especially for people willing to take responsibility, information at the point-of-sale (POS) and on the product is important.

One seemingly easy way to take personal responsibility is via the reduction or renunciation of meat consumption. This would not change the current state of, for example, animal welfare conditions, but would reduce the size of the problem. However, the results show that, in most focus areas, this option is rarely considered by consumers, which suggests that a behavioral change is unlikely. Thus, we can confirm the findings of Bratanova et al. [84]: despite the fact that people love animals, at the same time, they also love eating meat.

A large majority of participants did not see any personal obligation, and delegated responsibilities to others. When asked to provide reasons for neglecting responsibility, about 30% of respondents did not answer the open-ended question or used wildcards instead. This share is much larger than those who saw room for C_NSR and, regarding the open-ended question, were requested to name options how consumers can take responsibility. This indicates that a considerable share of those denying responsibility do not want to be confronted with the topic at all, not even by providing reasons for their position.

Those who answered the questions referred to responsibilities elsewhere as well as perceived lack of effectiveness, knowledge, information, and resources as reasons for not attributing responsibility to consumers. Focusing on lack of effectiveness—as this reason was of high relevance in the responses—one possible explanation could be that sustainable meat production has a positive public reputation. The nonpayer non-excludability principal results in a free rider problem leading to market failure [124]. Thus, consumers may feel that they will make little impact on the overall sustainability of the meat value chain with their purchase decisions, leading to the perceived lack of effectiveness. According to Auhagen [55], the individual's judgment of his or her self-efficacy is relevant for the assumption of responsibility by the individual. Another consequence related to the latter is that it leads to a diffusion of responsibility. This sociopsychological phenomenon occurs if responsibility is not clearly assigned to a specific individual or group [59]. Moreover, the awareness to take responsibility decreases as group size increases. A third possible explanation stemming from the salutogenetic approach [125] is that people do not comprehend the issue in its broadness, do not see how they can manage to tackle single aspects of it, and do not believe it is meaningful to invest time into thinking about it. The reasons mentioned by respondents for not taking actions, perceived lack of knowledge and information, point to the credence character of sustainable production and processing and to the problem of information asymmetry. Consumers need information regarding credence attributes, such as animal welfare, to be able to consider those attributes in their purchase decision. This information has to be provided by credible third parties [126].

Additionally, the results show that participants feel a lack of transparency, control, and trust, with the latter, surprisingly, having the fewest mentions by far. This is interesting as a multitude of studies indicate the particular relevance of trust as a prerequisite for consumers' purchasing decisions [127–129]. However, our results reveal that consumers delegate responsibility to other actors in the meat value chain without necessarily having trust in these actors. Recognizing the latter might force them to acknowledge their personal responsibility.

There are three major limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, the present study, did not consider all actors along the value chain, as our focus was on consumers. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to include retailers as actors, as they have a strong stand in the chain [130]. Given that retailers voluntarily commit themselves to

higher animal welfare standards within the framework of the Initiative Tierwohl, future studies should embrace them. Second, since there had been hardly any empirical consumer studies on C_NSR at the time of the survey we used open-ended questions in line with the explorative nature of our study. However, open-ended questions are subject to criticism. The study by Züll and Scholz [131], for example, conclude that specific personality traits, socialization, education, and political orientation might affect the response behavior. Thus, there might be a bias that limits the generalizability of the data. Therefore, we encourage future studies to use the recently validated scales of C_NSR, such as the scale conceptualized and developed by Quazi et al. [49]. Third, we obtained our sample population via an online access panel using quota sampling. Thus, not all participants got the same chance to be part of the study, which might have led to a sampling error. Therefore, we would recommend that future studies use probability sampling methods [132].

In summary, companies, as well as the consumer, have to take responsibility for promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns. We can confirm that there is a tendency on the side of the consumer to delegate or shift responsibility to "others" [119,120,122] without taking responsibility oneself [133]. Our findings also suggest that the call for more consumer responsibility may elicit, in many cases, a limited response, as consumers have "good" reasons for nonaction that help them fend off any feelings of personal obligation.

6. Conclusions

Our study contributes to the literature by investigating consumers' perception of the areas relevant in taking responsibility in the meat sector and who should take responsibility. Furthermore, we assess reasons why the majority of consumers reject responsibility and how those who attribute responsibility to consumers take action to support more responsible conduct in the sector. Our results show that consumers perceive animal husbandry, transport, and slaughtering as the focus areas in which responsible conduct is most needed. The majority of consumers did not consider themselves to be relevant actors that should take responsibility but delegate responsibility to other actors in the meat sector. The main reasons for neglecting responsibility were a perceived lack of effectiveness, knowledge, information, and resources for taking appropriate measures. Those willing to take responsibility identified their purchase decision and active information search as most relevant points to take action.

We see the largest potential to increase the market share of sustainable meat products if the focus is on animal husbandry; this area was of particular relevance to respondents and every third participant saw the consumer as a responsible actor in this action field. Thus, market differentiation via different standards and labels instore or via a voluntary commitment to only sell fresh meat products with higher animal welfare standards (using level three and four of the Haltungsform labeling by 2030) by value chain actors—as recently announced by a German discounter—might see increasing success. Campaigns addressing self-efficacy beliefs could further help to increase the impact of those measures. Our results, however, also clearly show that other focus areas, particularly employees' concerns, though of relevance from a sustainability point of view, are so far barely considered as relevant by consumers. For those focus areas, more public attention needs to be generated, e.g., information should be provided on the working conditions of employees in slaughterhouses to increase consumers' awareness in the medium term. Alongside these measures, higher minimum legal working standards need to be implemented to secure more sustainable production in the short term, as has recently occurred in Germany. Future research is required that tests if the identified reasons are potential determinants of C_NSR.

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