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# Off the Table: The Environmental Impact of Meat

*Exploring the Persistence of Meat Consumption  
Among Sustainability-Conscious Women*

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**Master Thesis**

by

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*“I don't want to ever stop myself from eating tacos because I'm sad that it came at the detriment of like a mom cow.”*

# Abstract

**Title:** Off the Table: The Environmental Impact of Meat. Exploring the Persistence of Meat Consumption Among Sustainability-Conscious Women

**Course:** BUS39 Degree Project in Global Marketing

**Programme:** International Marketing and Brand Management

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**Keywords:** Meat paradox, accounts, sustainable consumption, Socio-cultural norms, vocabulary of motives

**Thesis Purpose:** The thesis investigates the complexities of meat consumption among women, focusing on why women continue to consume meat despite being aware of its negative impacts. This research aims to offer a deeper understanding of the interplay between societal norms, personal values, social interactions, and reasoning processes in shaping dietary behaviors.

**Theoretical Perspective:** The study utilizes a combination of Vocabularies of Motives and Accounts Theory, which is employed to examine the rationalizations people provide for their behaviors. Additionally, the theory of Orders of Worth is used.

**Methodology / Empirical Data Collection:** The methodology involves qualitative data collection through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 women who are active in sustainability organizations but continue to consume meat.

**Findings / Conclusion:** The findings illuminate the complex interplay between societal norms, personal values, and social dynamics that influence women's meat consumption behaviors, despite their awareness of its sustainability implications. The study highlights a perceived decline in public discourse of the negative impacts of meat consumption. It further proposes a model that integrates cognitive dissonance and societal pressures, suggesting that enhancing public discourse could result in decline in meat consumption.

**Practical Implications:** The study suggests practical implications in crafting strategies that resonate more effectively with the target demographic. By understanding the underlying motivations and barriers faced by these women, interventions can be designed to encourage more sustainable dietary practices. Additionally, this research can inform public health initiatives and contribute to discussions on sustainable food systems and ethical consumerism.

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# 1 Introduction

In recent years, dietary choices have transcended personal health and preferences, emerging as crucial elements in broader discussions of sustainability, ethics, and environmental stewardship. In the context of the prevailing climate crisis, the implications of dietary decisions have gained significant attention. This thesis explores the complex dynamics of meat consumption within these broader debates, particularly focusing on the area of women's dietary choices in Western societies. Despite a growing awareness of environmental and health impacts of meat consumption, and the increasing popularity of plant-based diets, traditional meat-eating practices remain deeply entrenched. Through a sociocultural perspective, this study uncovers how women account for their seemingly contradictory behavior of continuing to eat meat despite their ethical and environmental awareness. The findings broaden the understanding of meat consumption theories, suggesting a dynamic interplay between societal norms, personal values, social dynamics and reasonings in dietary choices. These insights provide a deeper understanding of food habits and add new dimensions to the conversations about meat consumption and sustainability.

## 1.1 Background

The impact of meat consumption on health, the environment, and animal welfare has come under increasing scrutiny. According to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2023), global meat consumption has steadily risen over the past few decades, with projections indicating further growth in the coming years (OECD/FAO, 2021). However, the rise in meat consumption is accompanied by alarming consequences, including deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity loss, contributing significantly to climate change, and environmental degradation (FAO, 2023; Poore & Nemecek, 2018; Stoll-Kleemann & Schmidt, 2017). High consumption levels of meat have further been linked to adverse health outcomes, including heart disease (Feskens, Sluik & van Woudenberg, 2013) and cancer (Bouvard et al., 2015).

In response to these challenges, there has been a notable surge in interest in vegetarian and vegan diets as more people become aware of the negative impacts of meat consumption.

Research by Medical Inspiration Daily For Stronger Society (MIDSS) reveals that 72% of Generation Z vegans plan to maintain their vegan lifestyle for at least the next five years, challenging the perception of veganism as a passing trend (MIDSS, 2023). Furthermore, the evolution of brands towards plant-based food options highlights the growing demand for sustainable and ethical dietary choices. Plant-based food brands have gained significant traction, offering plant-based alternatives to traditional meat products and reshaping consumer preferences (Bloomberg Intelligence, 2021).

Consumer motivations for vegetarian eating are diverse ranging from health, environmental, and ethical motives (Hopwood et al, 2020; Chai et al., 2019; Craig, 2009). Health-conscious individuals are drawn to the perceived health benefits (North et al., 2021), supported by research showing lower risks of chronic diseases (Satiya et al., 2017). Environmental concerns drive others (North et al., 2021), as plant-based diets significantly reduce carbon footprints and support sustainable agriculture (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). Ethical considerations and animal welfare also play a significant role (North et al., 2021) as meat production causes mass breeding (Ritchie, Rosado & Roser, 2019).

Despite these advancements, meat consumption remains ingrained in societal norms, presenting a paradox for individuals. While persons may possess knowledge about the environmental and health consequences of meat consumption, they continue to eat meat. Among Generation Z meat eaters, a significant portion cited an inability to give up meat (MIDSS, 2023). The sentiment, shared by 51% of people surveyed, hints at the cultural significance of meat consumption and its enduring appeal within contemporary society. Recent research categorizes the influences of meat consumption into individual factors (like knowledge, skills, habits), socio-cultural factors (such as societal expectations and culture), and external factors (like political and economic conditions), with societal expectations highlighted as a key determinant of meat consumption habits (Stoll-Kleemann & Schmidt, 2017). From a sociocultural perspective, this phenomenon demonstrates the complex interplay between consumer choices, cultural norms, personal identities and beliefs. Moreover, alongside the rise of veganism, there has been a concurrent emergence of "vegaphobia" – a sociocultural phenomenon characterized by a distrust or aversion towards veganism (Cole & Morgan, 2011). This phenomenon, often rooted in cultural traditions and norms surrounding meat consumption, further complicates the discourse surrounding dietary choices.

Previous research in exploring the dynamics of meat consumption has predominantly centered on barriers to adopting vegetarian or vegan lifestyles, such as masculinity, right-wing ideologies, and lower levels of education (Rothgerber, 2013; Schösler et al., 2015; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Guenther et al., 2005). Furthermore, whereas many scholars compare meat consumption between genders (Kubberød et al. 2002; Fantechi, Contini & Casini, 2024; Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2021), there are comparatively few reports of deep diving into women's meat consumption. Moreover, scholars have concluded that highly educated young women with an interest in sustainability are the customer segment most likely to be vegetarian (Allés et al. 2017; Pfeiler & Egloff, 2018). However, our participants, who fit this profile yet continue to consume meat, present a unique opportunity to examine the barriers they face. Understanding their barriers can provide insights that may apply to a broader demographic. Additionally, understanding meat consumption is often from an individual and psychological perspective, oftentimes with the goal to overcome consumers' attitude behavior gap (Rothgerber, 2019; Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2021; Terlau & Hirsch 2015), which can be understood as an in-house assumption in research of consumer behavior and mainstream marketing research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011), with an over emphasis on individual preferences and emotional affection. Challenging this assumption by investigating societal norms, cultural values and group dynamics, combined with a focus on young women, we contribute with a nuanced perspective to deepen the understanding of dietary choices.

## 1.2 Aim and Objectives

This research aims to address the gap in understanding the complexities of meat consumption among women. The research question guiding this study is: Why do young women eat meat despite being aware of its negative impacts?

To gain a unique and nuanced perspective on the issue, we are investigating sustainably conscious young women, who are active in sustainability practices yet continue to consume meat despite awareness of the negatives. Through a sociocultural lens, the study seeks to explore the paradoxes inherent in meat consumption behaviors. By not only examining the experiences of the demographic of young women, often overlooked in existing research, but who are also environmentalists, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate meat consumption behaviors and its broader implications for contemporary society.



Looking ahead, we aspire for the insights gained from this study to be useful in shaping strategies to foster sustainable consumption patterns.

### 1.3 Research Purpose

With this paper, we aim to contribute to the literature on dietary behavior on the paradoxes surrounding meat consumption among young women. By delving into how they account for their meat consumption despite awareness of its negative impacts, we seek to shed light on the complexities of consumer behavior within contemporary society. Furthermore, our investigation aims to explore the influence of societal norms, personal values, social dynamics and reasonings on dietary choices, adding depth to the understanding of consumer decision-making processes from a societal perspective.

In addition to its relevance to consumer behavior research, this study also has significant implications for marketing communication strategies and public health initiatives. By understanding the motivations and behaviors of young women regarding meat consumption, marketers and policymakers can tailor their messages and campaigns to more effectively engage this demographic. This knowledge supports the development of interventions designed to shift dietary practices. Furthermore, the insights gained can enhance educational campaigns, contribute to healthier and more environmentally friendly consumption habits, and further discussions on sustainable food systems and ethical consumerism.

### 1.4 Outline of the Thesis

Firstly, a comprehensive review of existing literature is conducted, focusing on literature streams of attitude behavior gap and its critique and a societal perspective on meat consumption, as we delve into the importance of meat in contemporary society and gender dynamics. Furthermore, we examine the identity's role on meat consumption and sustainability. Subsequently, qualitative interviews are employed to examine the experiences of sustainability-conscious young women, shedding light on their attitudes and rationalizations regarding meat consumption as well as the motivations behind them.

Additionally, the research analyzes the role of social context and societal discourse in shaping meat consumption behaviors among this demographic. Finally, based on the findings, the study proposes strategies for driving change, including recommendations for educational campaigns, policy interventions, marketing communication and community-based initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable and ethical dietary choices.

## 2 Literature Review

This literature review comprehensively explores various perspectives on meat consumption, beginning with an examination of the well-documented attitude behavior gap and the critical responses it has elicited. We delve into the societal implications of meat consumption, tracing its historical significance and role in contemporary society. This exploration includes an analysis of how meat consumption intersects with gender dynamics. Additionally, we investigate the role of meat consumption in the formation of identities, emphasizing its symbolic value in society. Lastly, we review literature on sustainable consumption, examining how evolving environmental awareness influences dietary choices. Through a multidisciplinary approach, this chapter aims to illuminate the multifaceted nature of meat consumption and its broader societal implications.

### 2.1 Attitude Behavior Gap

The motivations driving individuals towards vegetarian or vegan diets are predominantly health and environmental concerns, substantiated by studies like that of Springmann et al. (2016), who quantify the health and climate benefits of plant-based diets. Conversely, motivations for meat consumption often revolve around taste, enjoyment, dietary health, and social norms (North et al., 2021). Despite this preference, the cognitive dissonance experienced by meat-eaters who are disturbed by animal suffering epitomizes the "meat paradox" (Loughnan, Haslam & Bastian, 2010; Bastian & Loughnan, 2017; Loughnan & Davies, 2019; Rothgerber, 2020). The paradox ties into the broader "ethical consumption gap," also known as the "attitude behavior gap" (Wintschnig, 2021), where a significant discrepancy exists between pro-environmental beliefs and actual behaviors (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016; Shaw, McMaster & Newholm, 2016). A clear example of this attitude behavior gap was shown by Young et al. (2010) as they concluded that 30% of consumers report that they are concerned with environmental issues, but only 5% translated it into action.

While the attitude behavior gap offers one explanation for why women continue to consume meat despite their environmental and ethical concerns, we find it overly simplistic to attribute this phenomenon solely to individual failure. Scholars such as Bray, Johns, and Kilburn

(2011) identify barriers like economic constraints, skepticism, lack of information, brand allegiance, and cynicism as impeding factors of ethical consumption. This gap is not only a matter of individual choice but is influenced by cultural and societal factors, as discussed by Grunert, Hieke and Wills (2014) regarding the understanding and use of sustainability food labels.

Food, specifically meat, consumption is deeply entrenched in cultural practices and social rituals (Douglas & Nicod, 1974; Gvion, 1990; Holm & Møhl, 2000; Twigg, 1984), making it insufficient to understand meat consumption merely through the lens of individual attitudes and behaviors. Critical marketing scholarship challenges the neoliberal assumption that consumers alone can address environmental issues, suggesting a shift towards a systemic approach that involves various stakeholders (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016; Caruana & Chatzidakis, 2013; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Coffin and Egan-Weyer (2022) introduce the concept of the “ethical consumption cap,” redirecting attention from the gap itself to broader market morality (Carrington, Zwick & Neville 2016). They argue that the gap serves to place responsibility on consumers while minimizing demands for marketers to become more ethical, emphasizing the need to focus on the underlying structures and systems that perpetuate and benefit from this gap (Coffin & Egan–Wyer, 2022).

Instead of narrowing the focus solely on the attitude behavior gap, this paper explores the complex interplay of societal, cultural, and social drivers behind meat consumption. It advocates for a comprehensive analysis of the systemic factors at play, recognizing that meat consumption cannot be fully understood or addressed through individual behavioral changes alone.

Transitioning from this discussion, we now turn to explore the historical dimensions of meat consumption, shedding light on how societal structures and cultural practices have shaped attitudes towards meat over time.

## 2.2 The Importance of Meat in Contemporary Society

The history of meat consumption in Western culture can be argued to be rooted more in cultural and ideological constructions than in mere nutritional or economic necessity (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). From the Paleolithic era onwards, meat held significance beyond sustenance, playing a central role in communal and social practices (Mithen, 1999; Cartmill,

1993). As societies progressed through the Neolithic, antiquity, medieval Europe, and the Renaissance, meat's role expanded to symbolize status, identity, and power (Marciniak, 2018; Montanari, 1999; Hoffman, 2014).

During colonial America (1607–1776), meat consumption was profoundly shaped by economic and ideological contexts. Colonists, predominantly subsistence family farmers, regarded meat as a primary source of nutrition, perceiving it to be healthier than vegetables (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). Beef, in particular, emerged as a crucial export commodity, reflecting attitudes influenced by racial and imperialist ideologies that equated the cultivation of land for meat production with “improvement” and “civilization” (Hagenstein et al., 2011 cited in Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). Meat production and consumption were so ingrained in colonial culture that alternatives were almost inconceivable (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018).

The authors further present how the modern era, spanning from 1890 to the present, witnessed dramatic changes in meat production and consumption. Industrialization revolutionized meat production, integrating advanced technologies and transforming agricultural practices (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). Corporate entities gained significant influence, employing strategies such as horizontal integration and market share expansions and thereby profoundly altering the dynamics of meat production (Stull and Broadway, 2004; Ogle, 2013).

The 20th century marked a pivotal shift in meat consumption patterns. Refrigeration technology and industrialized production methods made meat more accessible and affordable, democratizing its consumption (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). Post-World War II United States experienced a surge in meat consumption, where meat became synonymous with prosperity and family values (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). The poultry industry exemplifies these changes. Industrialization and marketing strategies led to a rise in poultry consumption, promoted as a healthier alternative to red meats (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). The use of antibiotics and vitamin D in poultry feed significantly reduced production costs, making poultry more affordable for consumers (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). By the late 1970s, value-added poultry products like chicken patties further transformed consumer preferences (Horowitz, 2006). Preferences for specific cuts of beef and pork also evolved during this time, influenced by external factors and the emergence of standardized, processed cuts like bacon. The industry capitalized on this by building brand loyalty and charging more for these value-added products (Horowitz, 2006).

### **2.2.1 Carnism and Speciesism**

Transitioning from this historical exploration, it becomes imperative to delve deeper into how today's societal structures and cultural practices have profoundly influenced attitudes towards meat consumption. Central to this examination are the ideologies of carnism and speciesism, which have long been deeply ingrained in Western culture and have played pivotal roles in shaping perceptions and behaviors related to meat consumption (Joy, 2010; Ryder 1971; Singer, 1975).

Carnism, as defined by Joy (2010), is the invisible ideological system or belief that conditions individuals to consume certain animals, those conventionally categorized as "meat." This ideology is embedded within a framework of normalized violence and exploitation, creating and sustaining a psychological and cultural disconnection between the animals consumed and their reality as living, sentient beings. The disconnection enables the widespread consumption of meat, reinforcing the ideology across society (Joy, 2010).

Similarly, speciesism refers to the discrimination or prejudice against individuals based on their species membership (Ryder, 1971). In the context of meat consumption, speciesism manifests as the belief in the inherent superiority of humans over other animals, leading to the exploitation and commodification of non-human animals for human benefit (Singer, 1975). This ideology not only justifies the consumption of certain animals but also rationalizes their treatment as mere commodities, devoid of intrinsic value and deserving of exploitation.

Together, carnism and speciesism serve to normalize and perpetuate the consumption of meat from certain animals. These ideologies not only shape individual attitudes and behaviors but also inform societal norms and practices surrounding meat consumption.

### **2.2.2 Neocarnism**

In contemporary discourse surrounding dietary practices, the emergence of neocarnism introduces a wave of justifications aimed at perpetuating the consumption of animal products (Gibert & Deasaulniers, 2014; Joy, 2011). With the expansion of information accessible through the internet and heightened public awareness regarding the treatment of animals in the production process, traditional defenses of carnism, such as invisibility (Joy, 2010), are increasingly challenged (Joy, 2011). Consequently, neocarnistic arguments serve as secondary defenses, providing rationales for conscientious consumers to reconcile their carnistic habits with rising ethical concerns (Piazza et al., 2015). Central to understanding these justifications

is the “4 Ns” - a framework established by Joy (2010) and built upon by Piazza et. al. (2015, pp. 115-116) - categorizing meat consumption as “natural, normal, necessary,” and “nice”. These terms represent deep-seated societal and psychological justifications used to rationalize meat consumption. Each ‘N’ details a specific rationale: Natural (biologically predisposed), Normal (culturally endorsed), Necessary (perceived health requisites), and Nice (pleasure derived).

Building on these justifications, Joy (2011) delineates three main neocarnistic discourses designed to counter arguments pertaining to animal welfare, environmental sustainability, and human health. Firstly, the discourse of “humane” or “happy” meat posits that consuming meat from ethically raised animals can assuage concerns regarding animal welfare, thereby allowing individuals to maintain omnivorous practices while still expressing compassion towards animals (Joy, 2011). Secondly, the concept of “ecocarnism” emphasizes the virtues of locally sourced and “sustainable” meat production as a means to address environmental apprehensions associated with industrial farming practices (Joy, 2011). Additionally, Joy (2011) identifies a discourse centered on health claims, which contends that animal products are indispensable for optimal health, thus outweighing any moral objections to their consumption. Instead of prompting a paradigm shift towards veganism, neocarnistic arguments serve as a backlash against the growing traction of vegan ethics within society. They reflect both a genuine concern for animal welfare, the environment, and human health, as well as the entrenched resistance of the dominant meat-eating culture to embrace a vegan ethic and thereby perpetuate carnistic ideologies (Joy, 2011). Thus, neocarnism demonstrates the complexities inherent in navigating ethical considerations within contemporary food consumption practices.

## 2.3 Masculinity and Meat Consumption

Gossard and York (2003) and Vandermoere et al. (2019) reveal that meat consumption tends to be higher among men compared to women. Meat is deeply embedded in cultural narratives, particularly in its association with masculinity, and has been reinforced as a marker of strength and virility (Adams, 1990/2000 cited in Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018; Franklin, 1999; Rozin et al. 2012).

Gender disparity can be attributed to gender-specific norms and values. Across various cultures, meat symbolizes power and social status historically reserved for men (Cavazza et al., 2015; Modlinska et al., 2020; Rogers, 2008; Rothgerber, 2013). Rothgerber (2013) discusses how meat consumption reinforces traditional gender roles, positioning it as a masculine trait, while vegetarianism or reduced meat consumption is often viewed as feminine or emasculating. This societal framing perpetuates the notion that meat consumption is essential for embodying traditional ideals of manhood (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Additionally, Role Congruity Theory, which addresses the alignment between societal roles and group characteristics (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2023), suggests that meat consumption is often associated with masculinity. Historically, meat has been linked with attributes like power and virility (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018). As a result, individuals, particularly men, may choose meat to align with traditional gender norms and societal expectations regarding masculinity (Chiles & Fitzgerald, 2018).

## 2.4 Identity and Social Influence on Meat Consumption

This chapter examines the interplay between food consumption patterns, social identity, and socio-economic status. It explores how meat consumption varies with income levels and serves as a form of self-expression and social signaling across different cultures. Additionally, it considers how social identity theory and social representation theory elucidate the influence of social networks and group dynamics on dietary choices, highlighting the complex ways in which individuals align their eating habits with their social environments.

Food consumption patterns can be further explored through the lens of social class and capital theories. As posited by Bourdieu (1984), variations in meat consumption may serve as indicators of social class or as a demonstration of distinct tastes and preferences within different social strata. In high income countries meat consumption is stabilizing and even somewhat declining, while in emerging economies it increases with income growth and urbanization (Clonan Roberts & Holdsworth, 2016). The authors also note that beef consumption escalates with income, attributed to its higher cost relative to other meats.



In postmodernist society where identity is fluid and shaped by personal choices, the market serves as an important factor for identity construction (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). According to McCracken (1986), consumer goods have an inherent cultural meaning which is transferred to the consumers when consuming. This has laid the foundation for Belk (1988) to further argue for consumption integration into identity construction, where individuals incorporate their possessions into their sense of self (Belk, 1988). Meat consumption, therefore, serves not only as a dietary preference but also as self-expression and a marker of identity. Choosing and eating meat can serve as a way for individuals to define themselves, reflecting their values and belonging to certain social groups, where meat consumption can be understood as a linking value (Belk, 1988; Cova, 1997). This view underscores the concept that identity is socially constructed through interactions and choices within the marketplace (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; McCracken, 1986; Rokka & Ulver, 2023). Among several factors such as attitudes, sense of control and social influences, the meat-eater identity plays a role in meat consumption (Wolstenholme et al., 2021).

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) further elucidates the role of group membership in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Individuals may align themselves with certain social groups, such as communities where eating meat is encouraged, as a means of affirming their own identities and distancing themselves from perceived out-groups, such as vegans (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, social representation theory posits that individuals construct shared understandings of social phenomena through communication and interaction within their social groups (Wagner et al., 1999). In the context of meat consumption, these shared understandings can perpetuate the cultural and social significance of meat as a symbol of tradition, and community. As a result, individuals may continue to eat meat to conform to these established social representations and to maintain their social identities within these groups.

Vandermoere et al. (2019) underscore the importance of the social network in influencing meat consumption, where household vegetarians significantly lower overall meat consumption. Similarly, Barr and Chapman (2002) highlight the role of social networks, as a lack of support from friends and family may lead former vegetarians to resume meat consumption. These dynamics highlight the intricate interplay between food choices, identity formation, and social dynamics.

## 2.5 Stigma and Negative Identities

The next chapter delves into how individuals navigate and defend their meat consumption choices against environmental criticisms, and how societal stigmatization of veganism further complicates these identity constructs.

Luedicke et al. (2010) introduce the concept of "moral protagonists," individuals who defend their consumption choices against environmental criticisms, reflecting deeper values and a sense of right and wrong. This concept extends to meat consumption, where individuals may consume meat as part of their identity work despite awareness of its environmental and ethical implications. Conversely, negative representations of vegans within meat-eating communities and media may reinforce stereotypes and stigmatization (Abrams, 2010; Visconti, Maclaran & Bettany, 2023), further solidifying negative attitudes towards veganism.

Drawing upon Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, deviations from normalized consumption are perceived as abnormal, contributing to the marginalization of vegans (Goffman, 1963; Joy, 2001; Joy, 2009; Monteiro et al., 2017). Stigmatization and social exclusion thereby reinforces the dominant belief system of carnism (Gibert & Desaulniers, 2014; Joy, 2010). Stigma influences dietary choices and broader implications for social acceptance, highlighting the complex interplay between food consumption, identity, and societal norms.

Skepticism towards vegans can also be explained by the formation of negative identities (Erikson, 1968). Negative identity formation emerges when individuals delineate themselves in contrast to perceived 'others,' namely, vegans (Erikson, 1968). This skepticism may stem from the perception of vegans as deviating from traditional norms and values (Erikson, 1968). As individuals seek to assert their own identities through meat consumption, they may adopt negative attitudes towards vegans as a means of reinforcing their own identities and maintaining a sense of belonging within their social groups. Consequently, vegans may face derogation and marginalization within omnivorous social circles, perpetuating negative stereotypes and stigma (Corrin & Papadopoulos, 2017; McInnes, Carstairs, Cecil, 2023; Vandermoere et al., 2019).

## 2.6. Sustainable Consumption and Identity Conflicts

Furthermore, our literature review delves into the topic of sustainable consumption and identity. This exploration aims to enhance our understanding of the participants selected for the study, as we examine persons who are actively involved in environmental fields. Additionally, we explore the possible conflicts that can emerge within sustainably conscious individuals, who often navigate between their environmental values and the societal, economic, and cultural pressures that influence their dietary choices. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for explaining why sustainability-minded women continue to eat meat despite their pro-environmental beliefs and involvement in sustainability initiatives.

Engaging in pro-environmental behavior is essential for addressing environmental challenges. Pro-environmental behavior minimizes adverse impacts on the environment (Meyer 2016; Tian & Liu, 2022) and reflects individuals' autonomy and role in mitigating harm to the planet (Kaiser, Wölfing & Fuhrer, 1999; Kollmuss & Agyeman 2002). Exploring the dynamics of sustainable behavior necessitates examining the intersection of personal identity and environmental consciousness. Whitmarsh and O'Neill (2010) delve into this concept, emphasizing that individuals who identify themselves as environmentally conscious are more prone to engage in pro-environmental actions. The notion of "pro-environmental self-identity" serves as a significant determinant of consistent participation in environmentally friendly activities (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). Additionally, Gatersleben et al. (2012) argue that while personal values are pivotal, the translation of these values into actual behaviors often hinges on an individual's environmental self-identity. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that external influences, such as social, economic, and physical barriers, also shape environmentally friendly behaviors. Building on this understanding, a study by Randstad (2022) underscores the importance of aligning personal convictions with professional endeavors. Their findings reveal that younger generations, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, prioritize job opportunities that align with their social and environmental beliefs, emphasizing the growing significance of fostering a sustainable identity not only in personal conduct but also in professional contexts.

Conflicting identities in ethical consumption arise as consumers navigate their identity projects, which are often goal-driven yet marked by internal contradictions and ambivalence

(Arnould & Thompson, 2005). These efforts are usually unspoken and may include conflicting values and objectives, leading to the use of different coping strategies and ways to balance these conflicts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

These conflicts are further mediated by the complexities of ethical consumption, as explored by Pecoraro and Uusitalo (2014). Their study on ethical food consumption in Finnish online discussion forums highlights the plurality of ethical understandings and the insecurities consumers face in making 'right' ethical choices. Utilizing Boltanski and Thévenot's (1999, 2006) theory of orders of worth, the research reveals how consumers reconcile these tensions through various practices, demonstrating the adaptability and negotiation involved in ethical consumption decisions. This dynamic interplay of conflicting identities and ethical consumption illustrates the intricate balancing act consumers perform in aligning their personal values with their consumption practices.

Within the framework of different worlds of worth proposed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006), meat consumption can be situated within multiple registers of evaluation, each representing distinct criteria for assessing worth. In the world of industrial production, meat may be valued for its affordability and convenience. The Civic world values cultural norms associated with abundance and prosperity (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). However, within the Green world highlighting environmental advocacy (Thévenot et al., 2000), meat consumption may be scrutinized for its ecological footprint, animal welfare implications, and alignment with values of ethical consumption and planetary stewardship. This juxtaposition of competing evaluations highlights the tension between the symbolic significance of meat consumption as part of personal identity and the ethical considerations of sustainability awareness.

## 2.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter provides a thorough literature review of the complex and multifaceted issue of meat consumption. We start by exploring the attitude behavior gap that highlights discrepancies between people's stated values and their actual eating habits, along with critical perspectives that question the effectiveness of individual consumer choices in addressing broader environmental and ethical issues. The review then delves into the historical context of

meat consumption, underscoring its deep cultural and ideological roots that extend beyond mere nutritional necessity and how it evolves to symbolize status and identity through various historical periods.

We also examine how gender dynamics influence meat consumption, with meat often associated with masculinity and power in many cultures. This is complemented by an analysis of how meat consumption contributes to personal and collective identities, serving as a significant element in social and cultural expressions and interactions. Finally, the discussion on sustainable consumption highlights the growing importance of environmental consciousness in shaping dietary choices, pointing out the tension between traditional dietary practices and the drive toward sustainability.

Through this review, we weave together insights from various disciplines to provide a nuanced understanding of meat consumption which functions as a thorough background to our research. To fully grasp the phenomenon, we synthesize the literature and deepen the understanding by exploring the complex interplay of motivations behind continued meat consumption from a societal perspective.

## 3 Theoretical Framework

To delve deeper into understanding meat consumption, we want to examine the individual perspectives from a societal standpoint. By exploring narratives and experiences, we aim to gain insights into how individuals navigate the complexities of identity construction, sustainability awareness, and social norms surrounding meat consumption.

By integrating the theory of vocabularies of motives with the Accounts theory alongside the concept of orders of worth, we seek to get a deeper understanding of the diverse motivations behind young women's meat consumption, unveiling the conflicting norms and values that shape their dietary decisions and reasoning. This approach enables a nuanced analysis of how language, social context, and evaluative criteria interact to influence individuals' behaviors and attitudes towards meat consumption in contemporary society.

### 3.1 Vocabularies of Motives and Accounts Theory

Our theoretical framework is grounded in the understanding that individuals' behaviors and reasonings are deeply influenced by the social contexts in which they occur. The theory of Vocabularies of Motives (Mills, 1940) offers a deeper understanding of the multifaceted articulations behind their dietary choices within specific contexts (Mohammed & Larson, 2013). This theory posits that individuals' motives for actions are shaped by the situations they encounter. Language plays a crucial role in shaping and justifying individuals' actions within social settings. Motives act as common grounds for mediated behaviors, serving as both constraints and incentives for their actions. Different situations have their own typical vocabularies of motives, which significantly influence individuals' behavior and integrate their actions with societal norms (Mills, 1940). In the context of young women's meat consumption, the theory suggests that their dietary choices are not solely determined by internal preferences or beliefs but are influenced by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and situational factors. We follow Mills's framework, which involves identifying situations where motives are discussed, identifying common Vocabularies of Motives, exploring why certain motives are emphasized, and examining the functions these vocabularies fulfill in relation to social norms and interactions (Mills, 1940 cited in Campbell, 1991). Through this approach, we seek to understand how language uncovers social discourses playing out in the

individual accounts. Building upon our understanding of these women's meat consumption behavior, our research question delves into the intricacies of how they rationalize their dietary choices.

While eating meat remains a societal norm in mainstream culture (Joy, 2010), the tension surrounding its consumption may be intensified within environmentally conscious circles due to heightened awareness of its environmental impact. When conducting interviews for this study, participants may perceive their meat consumption behavior critically within the context of environmental awareness. Thus, we recognize the potential for participants to tailor their rationalizations to align with their pro-environmental attitudes.

In this context, the Accounts theory, as proposed by Scott and Lyman (1968) and further developed by Nichols (1990), becomes particularly relevant. Accounts theory explains that individuals engage in account-making processes to explain deviant behavior to manage their identities and present themselves favorably within social interactions (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Furthermore, the authors acknowledge the situational nature of the rationalizations, as they are adjusted for the specific social interaction. In the case of this paper, participants are situated in a context where meat consumption can be understood as deviant behavior, because we discuss environmental behavior as well as questioning their consumption.

Scott and Lyman (1968) present two types of accounts that persons use when explaining deviant behavior; Excuses and Justifications. Excuses are accounts where one admits the wrongfulness of one's action but denies full responsibility (Scott & Lyman, 1968). In contrast, Justifications accept responsibility but deny the wrongfulness of the action (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Furthermore, Nichols (1990, cited in Boyle, 2011) expands the Accounts with Admissions and Denials, where Admissions admit both the wrongful behavior as well as the responsibility, and Denials reject both the wrongful behavior and the personal responsibility. Admissions and Denials are further accompanied with Justifications and Excuses (Nichols, 1990, cited in Boyle, 2011). This acknowledgment allows us to navigate the complexities of understanding the motivations driving women's meat consumption behavior within environmentally conscious contexts.

## 3.2 Orders of Worth

The Orders of Worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006) offers insights into the diverse criteria used to evaluate the worth of meat consumption across different consumption communities. It proposes that there are multiple “orders” or systems of evaluation that people use to assess the worth of actions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). These orders of worth provide criteria for determining what is considered legitimate, valuable, or appropriate in a given context (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Their framework identifies six distinct worlds, each characterized by its own set of values and criteria for assessing worth. These worlds include (1) the market order, where value is primarily measured by price and economic exchange, (2) the industrial order where value is measured by efficiency and productivity, (3) the order of fame where value is determined by the degree of recognition and visibility, (4) the domestic order where value is assessed based on interpersonal connections and reputation, (5) the inspired order, where value is derived from expressions of talent or passion that result in unique creative outcomes and (6) the civic order, where value is evaluated based on the extent to which actions contribute to the common good or societal welfare (Lindberg, Fitchett & Martin, 2019; Bertilsson & Rennstam, 2017). A seventh category (7) was added by Thévenot, Moody and Lafaye (2000), named the green order (7) where value is measured by adherence to environmental principles.

Previous research has extensively used Boltanski and Thévenot's theory of Orders of Worth to explore consumption, such as Pecoraro and Uusitalo (2014) examining moral complexities in ethical food choices, Stamer (2018) studying social background influences on food consumption in Denmark, and Hui et al. (1995) revealing demographic influences on meat attribute ratings.

Orders of Worth theory allows us to see the complex interplay of personal, social, cultural, and ethical rationalizations that young women use to argue for their meat consumption. The theory can help to examine the various values and rationalizations participants use to navigate and account for their food choices.



## 4 Methodology

To address the research question why young women continue to consume meat despite awareness of the negatives, qualitative data collection methods were employed. Qualitative approaches are essential for gaining deep insights into participants' motivations, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding meat consumption in the context of sustainability awareness (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The thesis adopts an abductive approach, aiming to uncover insights into the reasons for environmentally conscious young women's meat consumption habits.

### 4.1 Research Design

For this research, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were employed due to their ability to facilitate personalized exploration of participants' attitudes and experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). We opted for in-depth interviews over focus groups due to their ability to foster a personalized exploration of each of the participants' attitudes. By conducting interviews individually, we created a safe environment for open dialogue, particularly crucial for discussing possibly sensitive topics like meat consumption (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) as it might have been perceived as offensive being asked about this deviant behavior within their sustainability background. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible framework that allows for open-ended exploration while ensuring key topics are covered systematically (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The interviews were conducted in quiet settings, prioritizing their comfort and reducing potential distractions that could occur in unfamiliar environments (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Additionally, face-to-face interactions were chosen to cultivate a more intimate ambiance and to capture non-verbal cues (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). However, when the physical distance was too far for a simple meetup, it was conducted online. Special attention was given to ensuring that interviewees did not feel hurried, disrupted by external influences, and had ample opportunity to articulate their thoughts and viewpoints thoroughly. Each interview was conducted individually by one of the researchers to foster a sense of intimacy

and promote open conversation. All the interviews were recorded with the participants permission, to ensure everything they said was included in the transcription.

The participant selection criteria were specifically crafted, focusing on female individuals within the Generation Z cohort, delineated as those born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). These participants also needed to be regular meat consumers. In this study, we adopt the definition of meat provided by the American Meat Science Association, which describes meat as "skeletal muscle and associated tissues derived from mammals, avian, and aquatic species" (Boler & Woerner, 2017, p. 8). We intentionally excluded pescetarians from our sample, despite them consuming fish and seafood, which fits to the definition of meat, because they might align their dietary justifications more closely with vegetarianism, as they refrain from other types of meats.

Additionally, we targeted women who are knowledgeable about the environmental impacts of meat consumption, evidenced by their engagement in sustainability fields. This dedication encompasses young women who are actively engaged in sustainability initiatives and organizations, either through volunteering efforts, on a professional basis or as students studying sustainability-related topics. In this thesis, "sustainability organizations" refers to groups that explicitly focus on both ecological and social sustainability. Accordingly, our use of the term "sustainability" encompasses environmental and social dimensions.

The participants were from varied nationalities, but all lived in European countries. By targeting individuals across these diverse contexts, we aim to capture a comprehensive spectrum of perspectives and experiences regarding meat consumption within the framework of sustainability consciousness.

Volunteers play a crucial role in driving sustainability initiatives forward, often dedicating their time, energy, and resources to advocate for environmental stewardship and promote sustainable practices within their communities. By actively engaging in sustainability initiatives as volunteers, individuals demonstrate a genuine passion for addressing environmental challenges and fostering positive change. Their voluntary involvement reflects a personal commitment to environmental values and a desire to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of sustainability goals. As such, we perceive volunteers uniquely positioned to offer valuable insights into the motivations and barriers surrounding meat consumption behaviors from a sustainability perspective.

Likewise, professionals working in sustainability roles bring specialized knowledge and a

commitment to sustainability goals. Their professional roles may require them to advocate for sustainable solutions, engage in sustainability initiatives, and drive positive change in their respective fields. As such, they are likely to be highly conscious of their own dietary choices and motivated to align them with sustainability principles, making them valuable contributors to discussions on dietary choices and environmental impact.

Additionally, students studying sustainability-related fields are immersed in the academic exploration of environmental issues, equipping them with knowledge and perspectives that are invaluable to understanding meat consumption behaviors within the context of sustainability. Their academic pursuits reflect a genuine interest in addressing environmental challenges and promoting sustainable practices. The students are informed by their coursework, research projects, and engagement with sustainability literature. Thus, this sampling group demonstrates a certain level of interest in and identification of sustainability-related topics.

By including women from diverse national backgrounds, we aimed to create a sample that reflects the complexity and richness of perspectives within sustainability consciousness. This diverse representation fostered a more nuanced exploration of meat consumption behaviors and their broader implications for sustainable living across different cultural contexts.

## 4.2 Data Collection Method

We employed a purposive sampling strategy, targeting women who meet the specified criteria. Purposive sampling allowed us to intentionally select participants who possess relevant knowledge, experiences, and perspectives aiming to answer the research question, thus maximizing the richness and depth of the data collected (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Our participant recruitment process involved various methods, including reaching out to individuals who were friends or former colleagues, as well as connecting with potential participants through the sustainability organizations' Instagram accounts and direct messaging. Additionally, we utilized LinkedIn to search for suitable candidates and sought assistance from our networks to identify eligible participants. Subsequently, we supplemented our sampling with snowball sampling techniques to expand our participant pool. Through snowball sampling, participants were encouraged to refer individuals from their networks who also met the criteria, thus enabling us to reach a broader range of potential participants who

may not have been initially identified through purposive sampling (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

In total, we interviewed 12 participants who brought diverse backgrounds and experiences related to sustainability to our study. Table 1 provides an overview of our participant sample with alias names for anonymity. Four of our participants are associated with the same organization. The intentional selection allowed us to delve deeper into group dynamics and explore how shared organizational ties may influence perceptions and behaviors related to sustainability. Transcripts of these interviews are available upon request.

*Table 1: sample size*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Type of engagement</b>
1	Anna	Swedish	22	Volunteer
2	Beatrice	Swedish	21	Volunteer
3	Charlie	Swedish	21	Volunteer
4	Denice	Swedish	21	Volunteer
5	Eva	Ivorian	22	Volunteer
6	Freja	German	24	Work
7	Gabriella	Greek	26	Student
8	Hanna	Swedish	23	Student
9	Isabella	Filipino	26	Work
10	Johanna	Central Asian	24	Volunteer
11	Kim	Dutch	27	Work
12	Lisa	South African	25	Volunteer & Student

As we continued collecting data, we made sure to reach saturation, a point where gathering more data didn't provide new insights but confirmed the existing themes. This ensured that our developing theories were solidly supported and thorough, firmly based on the collected data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021).

The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' motivations and barriers related to meat consumption, as well as their broader attitudes towards sustainability and dietary choices. The interview structure comprised several sections aimed at gaining insights into the participants' backgrounds, organizational involvements, sustainability beliefs, food consumption habits, attitudes towards meat, and influences on dietary choices.

The interview started with an introductory phase, allowing participants to share personal details, interests, and motivations for engagement in sustainability-related organizations or topics. Following this, participants were asked to describe their involvement in sustainability organizations, including their motivations and alignment with organizational values. Subsequently, discussions delved into participants' conceptualizations of sustainability and their personal approaches to integrating sustainability into daily life.

The interview then transitioned to explore the significance of food in participants' lives, including favorite foods, meals, and associated memories. Specific inquiries regarding meat consumption habits followed, covering dietary preferences, frequency of meat consumption, factors influencing meat choices, and contexts of meat consumption. Participants were also asked about the influence of friends and family who may have different dietary preferences, as well as the challenges and motivations associated with reducing or eliminating meat from their diets.

Awareness of environmental and ethical concerns related to meat consumption, perceptions of societal debates, and reflections on future strategies for reducing meat consumption were further discussed. The interview concluded with an opportunity for participants to share any additional insights, reflections, or final thoughts regarding their experiences with meat consumption and sustainability. During the interview we also made sure to ask follow up questions regarding particular interesting things the participants said, as well as questions to clarify if some answers were unclear. The interview guide can be found in the appendix.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

For analyzing the interview data, we employed hermeneutic and thematic analysis, methods aimed at uncovering, interpreting, and presenting recurring hermeneutic patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hermeneutic analysis facilitates the interpretation of the underlying meanings and contexts embedded within the interview

transcripts (Bleicher, 1980; Clarke, 1999). By considering the socio-cultural, historical, and personal contexts of participants, we aimed to uncover deeper layers of interpretation beyond surface-level themes. The thematic analysis facilitated the identification of shared elements and distinctions within participants' responses, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how they account for their dietary decisions (Nowell et al., 2017).

Our analysis proceeded through several stages. After transcribing using a software program and enhancing the transcripts manually, we immersed ourselves in the transcribed interviews, engaging in multiple readings to grasp the content thoroughly applying a hermeneutic approach. This preliminary step was vital for grounding our analysis in both real-life experiences and existing theoretical frameworks, a process known as "sensitization" (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Subsequently, we continued with the initial coding phase, systematically labeling the data to uncover commonalities, repetitions, and distinctions among participants' responses.

As our analysis progressed, we transitioned to a more targeted approach. This involved selecting the most analytically relevant initial codes to thoroughly categorize the data. Gradually, we refined and condensed the data, ensuring a comprehensive approach (Rennstamm & Wästerfors, 2018). During this phase, our focus shifted towards pinpointing consistent themes that emerged across the interviews. To enhance the organization and clarity of our analysis, we employed categorical reduction, prioritizing the most frequently occurring themes to ensure relevance and depth. Lastly, through illustrative reduction, we carefully selected quotes that encapsulated these themes, thereby enriching the depth and validity of our analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Themes were identified iteratively, with continuous comparison and refinement of codes and categories to ensure validity (Morgan & Nica, 2020).

## 4.4 Ethical Considerations

Prior to the study, all participants received information regarding the study's general objectives. Communication style was consciously chosen to prevent biased responses. Participants were briefed multiple times on the study's objectives and were encouraged to ask questions if any aspects were unclear. This communication occurred at various stages, including during recruitment, in the briefing email or message, and just before the starting the interview. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation in the

study, ensuring they understood the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their responses (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Measures were taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants' information through anonymizing data and give the participants pseudonyms.

Additionally, efforts were made to minimize potential harm or discomfort to participants during the interview process, and sensitivity was maintained regarding the disclosure of personal information.

To maintain confidentiality and accuracy, we obtained consent from the participants to record the interviews. Recording the interviews allowed us to capture detailed information and accurately transcribe the conversations for analysis. Although online services were utilized for transcribing the data, we took diligent steps to delete the files from the platform once the transcription process was completed. By adhering to ethical guidelines and prioritizing participant confidentiality, informed consent, and transparent reporting, we aimed to maintain the integrity of our research process and ensure the credibility of our findings (Babbie, 2016).

## 4.5 Limitations

While our research methodology aimed to provide valuable insights into the accounts of young women for continuing eating meat, several limitations constrain our findings. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the participants in our study may not fully represent the diversity within the demographic of young women. The predominance of Western cultural and socio-economic backgrounds among our participants limits the generalizability of our findings to a broader population of young women, as their perspectives and experiences may differ significantly from those excluded from our sample.

Additionally, the scope of our analysis may be constrained by the limitations of both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. While purposive sampling allowed for the intentional selection of participants with relevant knowledge and experiences, it may have inadvertently excluded individuals with alternative viewpoints or unconventional perspectives on meat consumption and sustainability. Similarly, snowball sampling, while useful for expanding the participant pool, may have introduced biases by relying on existing social networks and connections (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Moreover, while semi-structured interviews were chosen as our primary data collection method due to their ability to facilitate personalized exploration of participants' attitudes and experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), it is important to acknowledge their limitations compared to other qualitative research methods. Unlike participant observation or ethnography, which involve direct observation of participants in naturalistic settings, interviews rely on participants' verbal accounts of their experiences, which may be subject to memory biases or social desirability effects. This reliance on self-reporting introduces the potential for participants to present themselves in a favorable light or to provide responses influenced by societal norms or researcher expectations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In contrast, methods such as participant observation allow researchers to directly observe participants' behaviors and interactions, providing richer contextual insights into the investigated phenomenon. Similarly, focus groups offer the advantage of group dynamics, enabling participants to build on each other's responses and generate new insights through group interaction (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Interviews, however, provide a more intimate and personalized approach, allowing us to delve deeper into individual experiences and perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

During the data collection phase, it was crucial to recognize how our own backgrounds might impact our interactions with participants. Since both interviewers have a keen interest in sustainability, there was a potential for participants to perceive biases in the interview process. This awareness became especially important when addressing sensitive topics like eating meat consumption in the context of sustainable consumption. Participants may have been hesitant to share their true opinions and experiences if they sensed a disconnect between their perspectives and those of the interviewers. To address this, we made deliberate efforts to foster a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere during interviews, stressing the importance of open communication and ensuring participants felt at ease expressing their views.

Furthermore, as we conducted the interviews individually there might have been biases in interpretation, where cues might have been overlooked or interpreted subjectively by the interviewer. If both of us were present during all the interviews this bias could have been mitigated. To lessen potential bias in interpretation and bolster the quality, validity and reliability of the findings, we practiced reflexivity throughout the research, regularly reflecting on our own biases and striving to remain neutral while facilitating discussions with participants (Alvesson, 2003). This involved acknowledging our biases, assumptions, and



positionalities, particularly in relation to societal and cultural influences on our interpretations (Alvesson, 2003). Member checking and peer debriefing were employed to validate interpretations, reduce bias and enrich our data (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Regarding our use of thematic analysis, we recognize additional limitations, particularly concerning the subjective nature of interpretation and the difficulty in establishing specific analysis guidelines. These challenges have complicated the decision-making processes during the analysis, resulting in a possibility for skewed interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, thematic analysis might not have fully captured the nuanced complexities within the data, necessitating supplementary analytical strategies to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 4.6 Chapter Summary

This research employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore participants' attitudes and experiences regarding meat consumption and sustainability. The choice of in-depth interviews over focus groups was made to allow personalized exploration of individual attitudes in a safe environment to foster open dialogue. Interviews were conducted face-to-face to capture non-verbal cues and held in quiet settings to ensure participants' comfort and minimize distractions. Participants were selected purposely, focusing on women within Generation Z who are regular meat consumers and actively engaged in sustainability initiatives, either through academic pursuits, volunteering or professional work.

The interview protocol covered various aspects of participants' sustainability beliefs, food consumption habits, and attitudes towards meat. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data, complemented by hermeneutic analysis to interpret underlying meanings and social discourses embedded within participants' narratives. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process, including informed consent, privacy protection, and measures to minimize discomfort for participants.

The methodology contained limitations, such as sample representativeness, potential biases in data collection and analysis, and constraints associated with thematic analysis. To mitigate these limitations, reflexivity, and adherence to ethical guidelines were implemented to enhance the validity and reliability of our findings.

## 5 Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, we will explore and discuss our findings, linking them to theory. Firstly, we start with a summary of the participants' views on meat consumption and the continuing discourse around this topic. Secondly, we delve into the various accounts participants use to rationalize their meat consumption, categorizing these into four different types of accounts; Justifications, Excuses, Denials and Admissions (Nichols, 1990; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Throughout the analysis, Boltanski and Thévenot's (1999, 2006) Theory of Order of worth is applied. Following this, we present examples of cognitive dissonance exhibited by the participants.

### 5.1 Importance and Lack of Discourse

All participants actively engage in environmental sustainability, whether through volunteering, work, or academic pursuits. They exhibit a profound understanding of sustainable living and a commitment to integrating it into their lives. Most participants are aware of the environmental impact of meat consumption, and acknowledging its reduction as a significant personal contribution to sustainability. This is for instance stated by Eva, who highlights how it is evidential.

*“... It's just factual, it's evidence, it's a lot of scientific legitimate evidence that meat consumption is literally destroying our planet [...] It's very evident about how agricultural mismanagement is affecting us, it's really bad, it's really, really bad.”*

Eva claiming that it is “factual” and “evidence” showcases her strong belief in the negative environmental effects of meat consumption. Many participants additionally had been vegetarian or pescetarian before, but have gone back to consuming all kinds of meat. The participants further explain how they perceive the debate surrounding meat consumption as being not as relevant as it was before. This is for instance stated by Denice.

*“Lately I don’t think there has been such a big debate. Like, in the last years it feels like it’s more like the wetlands and other things that have been discussed more. I haven’t read much about meat like that recently. [...] It may very well be because you feel like ‘oh now we have discussed it a lot’ and [media] don’t get as many clicks on the articles any longer so then we will move on to something else. But also climate activism doesn’t feel like it circulates around meat anymore, compared to how it was a couple of years ago. Now when I’m thinking about it, that’s how it really feels, it was more back then.”*

Denice observes that conversations surrounding meat consumption have become less prominent in recent times. Instead, contemporary sustainability dialogues are increasingly centered around issues like the restoration of wetlands, as emphasized by Swedish activist demonstrations targeting peat mining and wetland restoration efforts. She speculates that this shift may be due to people feeling that the issue of meat consumption has been sufficiently discussed and that there is a general lack of interest in this topic in contemporary media. This observation is echoed by other participants, who also note a decrease in vegetarianism compared to previous years. They perceive a shift in social norms, now less centered on meat consumption.

This perception aligns with the concept of descriptive norms, which refer to behaviors that individuals believe are typical (Rimal & Real, 2003). Participants observe a decrease in vegetarian practices and concern over meat’s negative impacts, which they interpret as a shift in injunctive norms, or what is socially approved (Rimal & Real, 2003). According to research by Melnyk, Carrillat and Melnyk (2022), such changes in social norms significantly influence consumer behavior. Therefore, the participants’ perceived decline in societal interest in meat consumption can be understood to have influenced their continued meat consumption.

## 5.2 Accounts for Meat Consumption

Within this chapter, we present the rationalizations the participants use to explain their meat consumption behavior. We have categorized the findings according to the Accounts theory, into themes of Justifications, Excuses, Denials and Admissions (Nichols, 1990; Scott & Lyman, 1968). We further shed light on the complex mechanisms by which participants are

navigating their actions and decisions regarding meat consumption. Our findings reveal a striking abundance of Justifications employed by the participants to rationalize their actions. These Justifications serve as the primary mechanism through which they reconcile their behavior with societal norms, personal values, and contextual pressures. Additionally, our investigation uncovers instances of Excuses, Admissions and Denials, reflecting the spectrum of accountability present in human behavior and reasoning.

## **5.2.1 Justifications**

In this subchapter, we explored the varied Justifications provided by participants for their meat consumption behavior. These Justifications acknowledge personal responsibility while simultaneously downplaying or denying the perceived wrongfulness of their actions (Boyle, 2011; Scott & Lyman, 1968).

### **5.2.1.1 Meat is like oxygen or water**

Many of the participants perceive meat as natural and experience a form of instinct to eat it. Several participants acknowledge how proteins could be sourced from vegetarian alternatives. However, this perception is not shared by all the participants as they instead express their beliefs regarding the naturalness of meat. Some view meat as an indispensable protein source, critical for muscle building. Particularly chicken is highlighted for its ease of preparation and protein richness, using this to justify continued meat consumption. This viewpoint aligns with justifications, suggesting meat is necessary for health and fitness (Joy, 2011; Piazza et al., 2015). Some of the participants further shared an even stronger opinion depicting meat as generally essential, as illustrated by Johanna.

*'I just can't picture myself not eating meat. It's so natural. I would say for me, meat is like oxygen or water. I will never stop drinking water, and I think I will never stop eating meat. It's just so natural, so something that should be there.'*

Johanna's comparison of meat and water indicates how important meat is for her. Eva further articulates an instinctual connection to meat consumption.

*“Just primal desires, primal urges like ‘Oh I really wish I could bite into a good chicken wing’ or I want the crunchiness, I want the texture.”*

By characterizing her consumption choices as driven by “primal urges,” she is justifying her behavior by appealing to a fundamental aspect of human nature: the desire for sensory satisfaction. This Justification suggests that she views their meat consumption as a natural response to instinctual cravings, rather than as a deliberate decision influenced by external factors such as social, cultural, environmental, or situational factors, which could affect her decision-making. Johanna and Evas viewpoints showcase a broader societal narrative that positions meat as a fundamental component of human sustenance, echoing the principles of carnism - the dominant ideology that conditions individuals to perceive meat as a Natural, Necessary, Normal, and Nice (Gibert & Deasaulniers, 2014; Joy, 2010; Piazza et al., 2015). However, unlike Johanna, who disregards the negative effects of meat consumption, Eva elaborates on the negative consequences associated with meat consumption. This suggests a conflict within Eva, where her deep-seated cravings for meat appear to override her conscious recognition of its environmental and health impacts, compelling her to continue consuming meat despite her better judgment. It can further be understood as a case of doublethink, where Eva accepts both truths even though they are contrary (Orwell, 1989).

Furthermore, Eva and Johanna emphasize the cultural significance of meat throughout the interviews, noting that deep-rooted traditions made it difficult for them to stop consuming it. This narrative illustrates how food has become a symbol of cultural identity, differentiating between cultures and reinforcing social bonds and identities, as discussed in the frameworks of symbolic consumption and social value of food (Cova, 1997; McCracken, 1986; Rokka & Ulver, 2023; Murcott, 1982).

This section showcases how participants justify their meat consumption through diverse orders of worth. Some participants view meat as essential for health and fitness, resonating with the Civic order due to the focus on collective well-being and public health (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). Others prioritize the convenience and protein content of meat, reflecting the Market order’s emphasis on practical benefits and consumer choice. Johanna’s equating of meat with fundamental necessities like oxygen reveals the prioritization of the Domestic order, reflecting a traditional and familial necessity of meat in the participants’ life. The focus on the sensory pleasure of meat highlights the Inspired order’s emphasis on personal satisfaction and sensory experiences. Additionally, the emphasis on protein for

muscle building can also be seen through the lens of the Industrial order, valuing efficiency and functionality (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006).

### **5.2.1.2 It's impossible to be 100% sustainable**

A recurring theme in the participants' reasoning is the acknowledgment of the challenge in achieving complete sustainability and their acceptance of imperfection in this regard. Instead the participants explain how they compensate in other areas of sustainability as well as choose to consume more sustainably. This was for instance explained by Johanna as she adopts a selective approach, seeking to compensate for her meat consumption by focusing on sustainability in other areas of her life.

*“I just realistically believe that it's impossible to be 100% sustainable. You cannot 100% eliminate food waste, you cannot stop using plastic products, you'll still do that. So I think as long as you try to be sustainable, it's okay. I'm just trying to compensate for my meat consumption by trying to buy second-hand products, or trying to eliminate food waste, or not taking public transport, you know, so it's just like a trade-off. I eat meat, but at the same time I'm trying to be sustainable as much as I can in just other things.”*

She rationalizes her meat consumption by arguing that achieving 100% sustainability is unrealistic. She acknowledges the challenges in completely eliminating food waste and plastic usage, emphasizing the difficulty of adhering to strict sustainability standards in all aspects of life. By admitting personal responsibility for her meat consumption while simultaneously attempting to mitigate its environmental impact through other sustainable actions, she justifies her dietary choices within the broader discourse of sustainable consumption efforts (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Lisa echoes the sentiment of “doing the best I can,” emphasizing her commitment to consuming meat sustainably as an alternative approach.

*“I eat duck sometimes in the UK, they have duck farming or whatever it's called. So with ducks here I feel like I can get it in a better way. And it's not like battery chickens. It's not the same intensive farming.”*

Lisa argues that consuming ducks from a farm holds a moral advantage over consuming battery chickens, suggesting a Justification for her meat consumption. This Justification aligns with the technique of neutralization, specifically the “condemnation of the condemners”, wherein she contrasts her own meat consumption with that of others, which she perceives as inferior (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 51).

Lisa aligns her behavior with societal expectations of ethical consumption by emphasizing the supposed ethical and sustainable attributes of her meat choices. This reflects the broader discourses surrounding sustainable food choices (Diaconeasa et al., 2022; Halder et al., 2020; Mapes & Ross, 2022). Furthermore, her justifications also reflect the neocarnism ideology by arguing for the acceptability of consuming meat under certain conditions (Joy, 2011).

Johanna and Lisa both exhibit their commitment to Civic and Green order, each approaching sustainable living and meat consumption in ways that balance personal preferences with societal expectations (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). Johanna, recognizing the challenges of achieving complete sustainability, rationalizes her meat consumption by actively engaging in other sustainable practices. This approach represents a conscious trade-off, enhancing her sustainability efforts to compensate for her meat consumption. Similarly, Lisa aligns her meat consumption with ethical and sustainable practices by selectively eating duck from farms perceived as more humane. This not only reflects her commitment to Civic and Green order but also involves an element of Market order (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). She evaluates and chooses options she believes hold ethical superiority in the market, thus making her choices more environmentally justifiable within societal norms.

### **5.2.1.3 I’m one consumer in a mass sea of people**

The interviews reveal varied opinions among the participants regarding the impact of their consumption choices on market dynamics. While many believe that their dietary decisions could make a difference, others, like Eva, express skepticism about the impact of their individual meat consumption on broader market trends.

*“This logic is gonna sound weird but [...] I realized that I’m one consumer in a mass sea of people. So if I’m like ‘I’m gonna stop eating meat’, there is still gonna be a supply of meat and they’re just gonna throw it out. Because there’s a lot of abundant food that’s being thrown out. They’re not gonna produce one less number, they’re*

*gonna keep producing it. So I can either neglect myself from tasty food, or I can neglect this because I want to be morally conscious. But they're still gonna be supplying, it's still going to be at ICA. So now it's like; they don't really care about if [Eva] is eating meat or not, I'm like one person."*

Eva introducing the quote by stating that it might sound "weird" indicates a self-awareness of the potential peculiarity of her logic. This acknowledgment reflects a level of introspection about her beliefs highlighting her recognition of a possible dissonance in her reasoning. Furthermore, Eva's admission of struggling to refrain from "tasty food" implies that she views abstaining from meat as a significant personal sacrifice. This perception is further underscored by her belief that reducing her meat consumption would not make a substantial difference, which she interprets as making the sacrifice seem unnecessary. Eva acknowledges her role as a consumer and admits that she could choose to stop eating meat for moral reasons. However, she argues that her individual choice to stop eating meat would not significantly impact the overall supply and demand for meat. Therefore, Eva justifies her continued meat consumption by aligning it with her perception of the broader societal context and supply chain dynamics.

Eva's reasoning can be better further understood through the lens of locus of control, which distinguishes between internal and external loci of control. Individuals with an internal locus of control believe they can influence outcomes through their actions, while those with an external locus of control feel that external forces largely dictate outcomes (Bray, Johns & Kilburn, 2011; Forte, 2004). Eva exemplifies an external locus of control by arguing that her individual choice to stop eating meat would not significantly impact the overall supply and demand for meat. She justifies her continued meat consumption by aligning it with her perception of the broader societal context and supply chain dynamics, effectively absolving herself of personal responsibility for market changes.

In an effort to gain deeper insight into Eva's reasoning, we posed a follow-up question: "Do you reason the same when involved in sustainability initiatives?", where she answers:

*"I think that I'm part of the solution. Damn I'm such a hypocrite. I'm like 'oh yeah' and like even if it's one voice, it's one voice extra."*

Despite acknowledging her position as a consumer and expressing doubts about the influence of her individual consumption habits on market dynamics, her perspective shifts when



discussing her involvement in sustainability initiatives. Eva justifies her involvement by framing herself as part of the solution, suggesting that her contribution, even if perceived as small, adds value to the cause. She furthermore acknowledges these contradictions in her reasoning by describing herself as a “hypocrite”.

Viewed through the lens of consumer responsabilization (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), Eva’s continued meat consumption does not negate her self perception as an ethically responsible consumer, given her active involvement in an sustainability organization. Her commentary on her own quotes can therefore be seen as an inner conflict, as she struggles to align her consumption with her ethically conscious identity. Eva’s rationale for her meat consumption and sustainability efforts reflects the concepts of Market order, Civic order and Green order (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). She pragmatically assesses the limited impact of her dietary choices on broader market dynamics, embodying Market order by acknowledging the economic realities of her actions. Concurrently, her commitment to sustainability initiatives resonates with the Civic order and Green order, as she aligns herself with societal values that prioritize environmental responsibility, viewing her efforts as contributing to the common good.

Similarly to the sentiments expressed by Eva regarding the insignificance of individual consumption, it appears that the participants do not think that changing their meat consumption would have a significant impact on the environment. This is for instance stated by Charlie.

*“I don't eat meat every day, and I do other things for sustainability. So if I eat meat once a week, it's not the end of the world.”*

Charlie justifies her meat consumption by arguing that her engagement in other sustainable practices compensates for the occasional consumption of meat once a week. This reasoning was furthermore shared by the other participants that were active in the same sustainability organization as Charlie. They all contend that despite their ongoing meat consumption, they have reduced their intake overall and contribute to sustainability through other means, thereby justifying their continued meat consumption.

They acknowledge their personal responsibility by acknowledging the environmental impact of meat consumption and taking steps to reduce it. However, they downplay the perceived

wrongfulness of their continued consumption by emphasizing their contributions to sustainability in other areas of life (Scott & Lyman, 1968).

The shared arguments among members of the same organization can be seen as influenced by both descriptive norms, which reflect what individuals perceive others are doing, and injunctive norms, which represent what they believe is approved by others (Rimal & Rearl, 2003). According to Belk (1988), as products are part of identity construction, shared consumption is an important aspect of group identity. The shared practice of meat consumption among the members not only serves as a linking value but also their specific approaches to reduced consumption are also significant in bringing them together (Cova, 1997). Their reduced intake of meat signalizes their altruism and pro-environmental behavior, which can be understood as manners to adhere to the values of the sustainability organization (Dietz et al., 1995). Moreover, all the girls affiliated with the same sustainability organization advocate for reducing meat intake as a means to achieve sustainability goals, indicating their confidence in the efficacy of reduced consumption as an ideal approach.

Contrasted with other participants who reflected on their own contradictions, those from the same sustainability organization expressed confidence in their assertions. This phenomenon can be understood as a case of social learning and herd behavior, whereby participants have absorbed and adopted behaviors deemed environmentally sustainable within their group. Additionally, it reflects group confirmation bias, where individuals seek out and interpret information that reinforces their belief that their efforts suffice in promoting sustainability (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Oswald & Grosjeaan, 2004; Salazar, Oerlemans & van Stroe-Biezen, 2013).

The sustainability organization members' Justification for occasional meat consumption, can be interpreted as an interplay of Civic order, Market order and Green order (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). The alignment of the Market order, the Civic and Green orders is clear, as participants conform to broader societal values that emphasize environmental responsibility. They use their commitment to sustainable practices as a justification for their meat consumption, thereby harmonizing their personal actions with the collective good (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). Simultaneously, Market order influences their reasoning, as they apply a cost-benefit analysis to their lifestyle choices, arguing that the environmental 'cost' of their occasional meat consumption is outweighed by the 'benefits' of their other

sustainable actions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). This utilitarian approach reflects a rational calculation of overall impact, suggesting a pragmatic balance between personal desires and societal expectations.

#### **5.2.1.4 Just let everyone eat what they want**

Some participants use arguments of liberty to justify their meat consumption, as they place great importance on the freedom to choose what they eat, perceive it as a treat as well as feel reluctant to adhere to labels. Whereas some participants argued that labels were good for effective communication with their surroundings, most of them dislike the idea of being labeled themselves. This highlights the necessity for self-determination in their dietary decisions (DeHaan & Ryan, 2014), allowing them to foster a sense of autonomy and ownership over her eating habits, thus enriching their overall well-being. Some participants elaborate on the negatives of placing labels on people because of the risk of social stratification and tensions associated with dietary labels. This is highlighted by Freja.

*“Well, I’m not someone who puts labels on people. [...] I just let everyone eat what they want. And I also think these labels sometimes create groups. [...] Sometimes food plays too big a role in our life. It’s also just energy that we feed ourselves in order to stay alive.[...] So yes, I sometimes find labeling a bit difficult and don’t want to assign myself to a group, but...I just kind of want to live.”*

She asserts a stance of non-judgment, advocating for individual autonomy in dietary decisions. By expressing discomfort with assigning herself to any particular dietary group, she avoids personal responsibility for adhering to dietary labels and the expectations that come with them. Furthermore, she emphasizes the potential divisiveness of dietary labels, suggesting that such categorizations can create unnecessary divisions among people. The importance of being able to eat what they want can further be understood as the participants refer to meat as a treat and an indulgence. This is for instance mentioned by Lisa.

*“So not eating [meat itself], it isn’t about that. I guess there’s a feeling of appreciation when I do. And because it’s not often, I really enjoy it. And I feel very lucky to be eating, to be able to eat that meat. And I do feel like it is giving me energy.”*

Lisa justifies her meat consumption by claiming that she perceives it as a treat, and perceived as hedonic consumption (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). This sentiment is shared by several of the participants, that they perceive their meat consumption as justified because they consume it with mindfulness and appreciation rather than mindlessly indulging. The notion of treating oneself is a widely spread discourse, where hedonic consumption oftentimes is paired with Justifications in terms of deserving it (Okada, 2005; Tezer & Sobol, 2021).

Freja's and Lisa's views on dietary labels both emphasize the importance of the Inspired order, which values individual expression and autonomy as outlined by Boltanski & Thévenot (1999, 2006). The participants articulate a strong preference for personal dietary decision-makings underscoring the significance of freedom of choice. Freja additionally expresses a strong inclination towards individuality over conforming to societal expectations. Lisa treats meat as a hedonic indulgence, which aligns with the Inspired order by valuing personal pleasure and individual satisfaction (Thorslund & Lassen, 2017). The participants prioritize personal freedom and creativity, preferring a flexible approach to identity that emphasizes personal choice above societal norms. This preference is also evident in Freja's resistance to dietary labels, reflecting her desire for simplicity and autonomy in her choices, encapsulated in her statement, "I just kind of want to live." This approach can be seen as a technique for neutralization, where personal fulfillment is used to justify deviations from societal expectations (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Additionally, by treating meat consumption as a special occasion, Lisa connects to Domestic order, which focuses on the preservation of traditions and personal connections.

### **5.2.2 Excuses**

Excuses involve admitting to wrongfulness, but with a reluctance to acknowledge personal responsibility (Boyle, 2011; Scott & Lyman, 1968). In our findings Excuses for their meat consumption are noticeably scarce, which might be expected considering the sustainability-oriented mindset of the participants. Instead, most of our findings suggest a conscious effort among the individuals to take ownership of their dietary choices. Although the findings demonstrate a high level of personal responsibility among the participants, it is notable that group dynamics, social influences and familiarity play a significant role in shaping their meat consumption.

### 5.2.2.1 You're kind of left out

The participants share a common sentiment that food serves as a vehicle for social connection, bonding, and shared experiences. Whether in familial gatherings, social events, or cultural traditions, participants value the communal aspect of food, recognizing its role in fostering relationships and strengthening social ties. The participants explain how various social aspects affected them to stop being vegetarian. Several participants express apprehension about being perceived as picky eaters, particularly in social settings where meat is a predominant food choice. This is for instance explained by Charlie.

*“Before, when I was a vegetarian, if you were going away to some family dinner or so I felt demanding [Because] You have to make sure that there is a vegetarian alternative. That was probably also a contributing factor to why I started eating meat again; To be able to join more and eat the same thing as the others. Or maybe to not be the one who needs to write to some person before and just; ‘just so you know so I am vegetarian’.”*

This suggests that Charlie prioritizes avoiding attention on her dietary choices and seeks to maintain social harmony. Additionally, since this social aspect had played a role in her decision to stop being vegetarian, it implies that maintaining comfortable group dynamics is more important to her than adhering to her vegetarian principles. This emphasis on not causing discomfort in social settings is a sentiment also echoed by other participants.

Participants further reveal the significant influence of family members, partners, and social circles on their meat consumption habits. Freja shares a specific experience highlighting the emotional impact of feeling excluded when she was vegetarian.

*“I didn't [eat meat] for two years and I got something else [to eat]. So I was the only one who had different food than everyone else. And it was somehow very difficult for me because I didn't feel integrated. And I couldn't have a say in what the food tasted like, because I didn't eat it. And then you're kind of left out a bit.”*

Freja felt disconnected from the communal aspect of the meal and experienced a sense of exclusion. Both Freja and Charlie explain how they reverted from being vegetarian to

consuming meat again. They account for this behavior by explaining the inconvenience and social pressure they experienced as a vegetarian, particularly when attending family dinners or gatherings. They felt demanding and burdensome having to ensure there was a vegetarian alternative available, which contributed to their decision to start eating meat again.

The participants' experiences of being excluded when not sharing food with family and friends, stressing that food is an important marker for societies and reinforcing group and identity (Lupton, 1994). The importance of the social aspect for the participants' food choices can be understood from a sociological perspective, where food holds a significant social value and where sharing meals further can be understood as rituals (Murcott, 1982; Marshall 2006). From this perspective the food can be understood as linking value between the consumers and an important aspect in forming one's identity (Cova, 1997). From an identity standpoint, food acts as an extension of oneself, and the decision to consume meat or not becomes a matter of one's identity project (Belk, 1988 Rokka & Ulver, 2023). Thus, the choice between meat consumption is not merely about sustenance but also about group belonging and self-definition, as a shared consumption is important for group identity (Belk, 1988).

The participants' accounts of being influenced by the values of their families and friends regarding meat consumption align with the findings of Barr and Chapman (2002), underscoring the significant role that family and social circles play in shaping dietary choices. The impact of one's family's opinions can also be viewed as a consequence of upbringing and social learning, wherein individuals undergo a process of socialization and learn from their environment which foods are considered good and bad (Lupton, 1994; Bandura & Walters, 1977). However, by framing their decision as the social influence made them stop being vegetarians, they admit to the deviance from their previous dietary choice but deny full personal responsibility for it, shifting the blame onto external factors such as social expectations and discomfort.

The emphasis on maintaining social harmony and conforming to societal norms reflects adherence to the Civic order, which values actions that contribute to the common good or public interest (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). The participants' prioritization of social acceptance and avoidance of discomfort in meat consumption further aligns with the Domestic order, which emphasizes familiarity, comfort, and the fulfillment of personal needs and desires (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). By choosing to eat meat in social settings to avoid

feeling excluded or burdensome, participants are valuing actions that contribute to their domestic well-being and social integration.

It is also noteworthy that the participants do not feel excluded by their vegetarian or vegan peers and family members when they consume meat. They report that their vegetarian and vegan friends are tolerant, allowing them to choose their diet freely. This acceptance contrasts sharply with the discomfort they experienced while adhering to vegetarian diets themselves. This situation underscores the influence of carnistic ideology (Joy, 2010) and highlights the stigma associated with plant-based diets (Goffman, 1963).

### **5.2.3 Denials**

Denials are a form of account where one does not agree with the wrongfulness of deviant behavior, nor accept the responsibility (Boyle, 2011; Scott & Lyman, 1968). As the participants are highly environmentally cautious and for most parts acknowledge the wrongfulness, Denials are not very prominent in our findings.

#### **5.2.3.1 Not big meat eaters. Just chicken**

Despite discussing the drawbacks of meat consumption and making efforts to reduce their intake, many participants primarily apply this to meats other than chicken. They often distinguish between chicken and other meats, leading to a Denial and reluctance to acknowledge the ethical implications and responsibility to abstain from consuming chicken. For instance, Freja clearly favors chicken over beef, highlighting this preference.

*“I like the texture, but also the flavour. Chicken tastes very different from beef. What I don't like at all when it's raw meat or half raw, when it's so bloody. That totally horrifies me. I find the taste of blood itself quite disgusting.”*

Her aversion to beef, particularly when raw or bloody, contrasts sharply with her fondness for chicken, indicating a clear separation in her mind between these two types of meat. Isabella's perspective reinforces this distinction. Despite her general dislike for most meats, she favors chicken, a preference she attributed to her family's eating habits.

*“My parents were also not big meat eaters. Just chicken most of the time.”*

By emphasizing her family's limited meat consumption but regular intake of chicken, Isabella also suggests she sees chicken as distinct from other meats. This categorization, mirrored by Freja, indicates a broader trend among the participants to view chicken as a separate entity within the spectrum of meat choices. Despite their environmental consciousness, they do not view chicken in the same light as other meats. This suggests that participants may not fully consider the ethical implications or responsibilities associated with consuming chicken. This observation highlights the interplay between Boltanski and Thévenot's (1999, 2006) orders of worth, with the Civic and Green order playing a pivotal role, as evidenced by their general reduction in meat consumption due to environmental and ethical concerns. However, the influence of Domestic order is particularly prominent, as seen in Isabella's reflection on her family's preference for chicken, which underscores how familial habits significantly influence individual food choices.

## **5.2.4 Admissions**

Additional examples from the interviews reveal participants acknowledging the wrongfulness of their behavior and accepting responsibility for it (Boyle, 2011; Nichols, 1990).

### **5.2.4.1 Sheer laziness**

Many participants explain that they experienced difficulties in preparing vegetarian alternatives. The participants shared their unfamiliarity with tofu and lack of knowledge about how to incorporate them into their meals. This was for instance mentioned by Hanna as she describes that it is convenient for her to cook meat, and further reflects upon her actions.

*"...When I cook meat [at home], I would say it's just sheer laziness. Great that I eat so much sausage, but it's just... It's very easy, it's quick. I know it's tasty. Just some things I think are just out of sheer... That I can't be bothered. Or I go to 7-Eleven and eat a hotdog. A French hotdog. So, yeah, I think it's laziness. [...] It sounds crazy but I'll have to stand by my choices I think. But it's a selfish act. And then I just try to make myself feel a bit better by saying I only eat Swedish meat that hasn't traveled as far with better animal husbandry and there's no antibiotics... but it's also like bullshit and I know it."*



The lack of knowledge and convenience can be understood as excuses for continued meat consumption. Hanna's dismissal of her own reasons for choosing Swedish meat as "bullshit" suggests that she recognizes these as mere excuses rather than solid arguments. This indicates an Admission, which is paired with Justifications or Excuses (Scott & Lyman, 1968). She does not try to offer Justifications that would frame her actions in a positive light; instead, she candidly states that convenience and taste drive her choices, even though she is aware that this might not be viewed favorably. By using Admissions she reflects an acceptance of personal flaws or shortcomings.

Hanna describes how preparing sausage at home or purchasing it while being out is convenient, as it is "quick" and "tasty", a sentiment of convenience shared by several other participants. The importance of convenience is an example of how the consumers value the Market order with its focus on efficiency and cost-effectiveness and the Domestic order's emphasis on personal comfort and satisfaction through familiar foods (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Hanna's remark, "great that I eat so much sausage," reflects an ironic self-awareness regarding her meat consumption habits. Despite her understanding of the negative impacts of eating meat, this statement illustrates an internal conflict where convenience overrides her ethical concerns.

This conflict can be interpreted as a clash between the Market and Domestic orders of worth and the Green order. Hanna's statement can be understood as an Admission, as she both acknowledges the wrongfulness of her behavior and accepts responsibility for it. She describes her actions as "laziness" and "selfish". By using these terms, she indicates that she knows her behavior is negative or not ideal.

### 5.3 Cognitive Dissonance

All the participants are engaged with environmental sustainability through academic pursuits, volunteering, or their professional work; they encounter inner conflicts when accounting for their meat consumption habits. In order to mediate these inner conflicts, some of them explained methods they used to overcome their consciousness. Participants articulate how they do not typically conceptualize the meat they consume as originating from an animal, but

rather view it as a product intended for consumption. This detachment was exemplified in Eva's account.

*"I'm detached from it like a being [...] I feel like if I saw more like the faces of the chickens would probably consume it less, I know I would. But it's so ... you're so detached from it as a thing that once lived. You're just like "I'm not eating an animal, I'm just eating chicken breast".*

She candidly expresses that when she eats meat, she does not consciously associate it with the act of consuming an animal. This is an example of Marx' concept commodity fetishism, where consumers disassociate the product intended for consumption from the labor that has produced it (Jones & Bradshaw, 2023). This avoidance of associating meat with animal suffering further aligns with Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1957), indicating that such mental separation helps consumers manage the discomfort of conflicting beliefs (Rothgerber, 2014). Additionally, dissociation is facilitated by changing the language used to describe meat, as Adams (1990) noted; referring to meat by product names like "bacon" instead of the animal source "pig," as discussed by Rothgerber (2014). Eva further elaborates on her preference for this dissociation, explaining that it enables her to enjoy eating meat without the accompanying moral conflict.

*"I know that's so messed up but like I like a little bit of a distance not to feel like I'm eating a baby cow you know. I don't want to ever stop myself from eating tacos because I'm sad that it came at the detriment of like a mom cow."*

This showcases a tension between her carnism-rooted rationalization of meat consumption as being Natural, Normal, Necessary and Nice (Gibert & Deasaulniers, 2014; Joy, 2010; Piazza et al., 2015), and her ethical consciousness. It further portrays the extent of commodity fetishism (Jones & Bradshaw, 2023), as Eva portrays the mom cow as the "villain", hindering her to consume meat instead of thinking of the actual suffering of the animals.

Johanna also resonates with the idea of deliberately steering clear of negative information about meat consumption. She shared that her sister's choice to become vegan was driven by a compassion for animals, a path Johanna consciously chooses not to follow.

*“I just try to not watch those documentaries because I know they might influence me. I would feel guilty for eating meat because I just know it would be very hard for me to transition and become vegan. So I just try to not talk to her [my sister] about that, and don't watch those documentaries.”*

Johanna's strategy of avoidance, wherein she deliberately refrains from watching documentaries that highlight the ethical concerns associated with meat consumption, reveals her desire to preserve her current dietary habits and avoid feelings of guilt or ethical dilemmas. This tactic aligns with the concept of "denial of animal pain" and "denial of animal mind," (Rothgerber, 2014, p. 33) which posits that individuals often dissociate meat from its origins as animals to facilitate consumption without moral conflict. By actively avoiding information that may challenge her existing beliefs and behaviors, Johanna effectively shields herself from confronting the ethical implications of her dietary choices (Dibbets et al., 2021). Eva further elaborates on this point, explaining that even though she mentally dissociates meat from being animals, she still thinks it is morally right to eat animals.

*“I'm still human and I still think that it's fine if we prioritize humans over animals. because we have this bias that we don't want humans suffering but animals, they're meant for our consumption. So I'm putting human life over animal life.”*

In this quote she elaborates on her Admission, and rationalizes it with arguments of speciesism where she argues that animals have less moral status. This can be understood as a neutralization, where she practices “Denial of the victim”, where she argues that the victim deserves it because of minor value (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 51).

## 5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of women's continued meat consumption behaviors in relation to sustainability awareness, utilizing theoretical frameworks of Vocabularies of Motives, Accounts theory, and Orders of Worth. It illustrates how individuals reconcile their dietary choices with broader cultural narratives and personal beliefs through complex psychological mechanisms. Participants acknowledge the

sustainability benefits of reducing meat consumption but often find themselves reverting from vegetarian or pescetarian diets back to eating meat. They also note a decline in public attention and social discourse on the topic.

The analysis explores various types of accounts participants use to explain their behavior, including Justifications, Excuses, Denials, and Admissions, each reflecting different psychological and social dynamics. The various accounts align with different evaluative criteria, illustrating the nuanced ways in which individuals prioritize societal values over environmental concerns. Justifications for meat consumption often include beliefs in its naturalness and health benefits, while Excuses typically cite external pressures like social conformity or convenience as reasons. Denials are observed where individuals downplay the ethical issues associated with meat consumption, particularly with seemingly less controversial meats like chicken, influenced by societal and familial norms.

Admissions reveal moments where individuals openly acknowledge the inconsistencies of their actions with their values, demonstrating a higher level of self-awareness and introspection. This section highlights the personal responsibility some feel towards their dietary choices despite existing conflicts.

The chapter also examines the role of cognitive dissonance in how individuals manage the psychological discomfort arising from their conflicting beliefs and desires. Strategies such as dissociation and selective exposure to information help them navigate these internal conflicts and the moral dilemmas associated with meat consumption.

Overall, the findings underscore the intricate interplay of societal norms, personal values, social dynamics and reasoning processes, showing how they influence individual attitudes towards meat consumption and reflect the conflicting values embedded within different societal orders of worth with the strong tendency to downplay environmental concerns.

## 6 Discussion

The study offers a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted influences shaping women's dietary choices in the context of sustainability awareness, delving into the intricate interplay of societal norms, personal values, social dynamics, reasonings, and discourses in dietary decision-making. By exploring the varying accounts employed by the participants coupled with cognitive dissonance, we gain valuable insights into the complexities of human behavior in the context of dietary choices, offering a nuanced perspective on the motivations and reasoning behind meat consumption. By drawing from different societal discourses, individuals navigate the complexities of dietary decision-making, reflecting the influence of broader cultural narratives on personal choices.

A notable revelation is the discrepancy between the rising popularity of veganism in mainstream culture (Parker, 2018 cited in Banis, 2018) and the experiences of the study's participants who have either reverted or have always stuck to meat consumption despite their sustainability awareness. While all participants are actively engaged in environmental sustainability, they exhibit varied attitudes towards meat consumption, reflecting the interplay between personal beliefs and social norms, influenced by the conflicting values embedded within different orders of worth. Additionally, participants perceive a decline in societal discourse on this topic, which also diminishes their attention to it.

The chapter proceeds with the discussion on the societal influences impacting the participants, the internal conflicts they exhibit, our contributions to existing theories and a comprehensive framework summarizing our key findings as well as implications.

### 6.1 Societal Impact shaping Meat Consumption

A deeper examination of social dynamics reveals the profound impact of societal structures, norms, group dynamics and discourses on individuals' attitudes towards meat consumption. Participants draw from societal discourses that emphasize the importance of being good guests, coupled with beliefs that achieving complete sustainability is impossible and notions of liberalism. Moreover, the participants are situated in a Western society strongly influenced

by the prevailing carnism ideology, shaping their dietary behaviors and possibly overshadowing concerns about sustainability and ethical considerations.

A notable outcome of the study is the prominence of the Civic order as a key factor shaping participants' dietary choices, followed by considerations of Domestic, Industrial, Market, and Green orders. Although the Green order is acknowledged, its emphasis seems inevitable due to the environmental context of the interview questions. The other orders emerge naturally through the participants' reasoning, underscoring their significance in influencing dietary behaviors.

The importance of the Civic order reflects the participants' prioritization of societal considerations over other factors when making food-related decisions (Evans, 2011). It suggests that the participants value societal expectations and norms, such as being good guests, over ethical considerations. This finding resonates with previous studies, particularly with the notion that societal pressures and social conventions play a pivotal role in shaping dietary behaviors (Evans, 2011; Wang, Worsley & Cunningham., 2008). Furthermore, it underscores the finding of Piazza et al. that meat is Normal (2015), and highlights its importance on consumer behavior. This includes the reinforcement of dietary norms and traditions within familial and social contexts, as well as the influence of cultural narratives, media representations, and peer influences. It thereby further strengthens the normalization of meat consumption, with individuals perceiving it as a socially acceptable and unquestioned dietary choice.

Additionally the participants couple the Civic order with Market order. The participants do not only do a cost-benefit analysis and prefer meat for its convenience, they also evaluate and choose options they believe hold ethical superiority in the market. This shows the importance of the Civic order, and how the participants use the Market order to navigate their choices. Given the importance of the Civic order of worth to the participants, they are particularly attuned to what is perceived as the public welfare (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006). The sensitivity extends to sustainability discourses, which significantly influence their consumption choices and highlight the profound impact of societal factors on individual behaviors.

In the context of our study, the participants view meat consumption as a social norm and note a perceived decline in discussions about its negative impacts during recent years. This suggests a perceived shift in social discourse, with meat consumption no longer occupying the

forefront of mainstream societal debates. Coupled with their commitment to the Civic order, the lack of ongoing discussions about the negative impacts of meat production and consumption, individuals may be less motivated to reconsider their dietary habits or explore alternative options. This underscores previous research on social norms' effect on consumption (Evans, 2011; Melnyk, Carrillat, & Melnyk, 2022; Wang et al., 2008).

The evolving social attitudes towards meat consumption may also reflect broader shifts in cultural narratives and priorities, stressing the dynamic nature of societal influences on dietary behaviors. Furthermore, given the participants' focus on the Civic order, their consumption patterns are likely to evolve in response to changes in what is currently debated within this order, suggesting that further shifts in public discourse could potentially lead to additional corresponding changes in their dietary choices.

The participants' perception that discourse on meat consumption has diminished may also be attributed to information overload, as discussed by Longo Shankar and Nuttall (2019). The authors note that environmentalists are often bombarded with extensive information about what constitutes sustainable consumption, potentially leading to decision-making dilemmas or paralysis. Oversaturation of information could divert attention from discussions about meat consumption as other sustainability issues occupy more mental space. When the discourse on meat fades into the background, it may seem negligible, subsequently influencing perceived norms. Thus, information overload can act as a "cap" (Coffin & Egan-Weyer, 2022), limiting individuals' capacity to make ethical decisions, directly impacting their dietary behaviors. This underscores the importance of perceived societal discourse for the participants' decision making which stands in contrast to the participants' green identity. Consequently, the lack of prominent discourse may hinder awareness-raising efforts and limit the dissemination of information about the environmental, ethical, and health consequences of meat consumption.

Another perspective on the issue is the phenomenon of societal regression, potentially contributing to the persistence or resurgence of meat consumption (Cohen, 2024). Societal regression reflects shifts in cultural trends and socio-political dynamics that may contribute to a backward movement in public discourse regarding veganism and sustainability in relation to dietary choices. In such contexts, individuals may experience increased pressure to conform to traditional dietary norms, inhibiting their ability to make sustainable food choices. The phenomenon of societal regression underscores the ongoing struggles in fostering environmental consciousness within society. As public discourse on veganism and sustainability seemingly regresses, efforts to promote alternative dietary practices and

advocate for more sustainable food systems become increasingly difficult. This regression highlights the urgent need for continued advocacy and education efforts aimed at challenging societal attitudes towards meat consumption and promoting the adoption of more environmentally friendly dietary habits.

The study reveals internal conflicts among the participants, who, despite holding strong green values and identities shaped by their engagement in sustainability through academic pursuits, voluntary work, or profession, appear to struggle in aligning their dietary choices with their environmental beliefs, raising questions about the sufficiency of personal values in driving behavior change. As shown by previous research (Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014), the findings reveal significant inner conflicts among participants as they navigate their consumption habits while trying to maintain their sustainability beliefs. These conflicts suggest a tension in their green identities, which are challenged as they account for behaviors that do not align with environmentally friendly practices. The influence of societal norms, cultural expectations, and social contexts appears to exert a stronger force on the consumption patterns than the individual's commitment to a green identity.

To manage the misalignment, participants appear to employ cognitive dissonance strategies as coping mechanisms (Rothgerber, 2014). These strategies allow them to overlook or rationalize their consumption of animal products, thus shielding themselves from the discomfort associated with acknowledging their actions that contradict their environmental values. The coping mechanism underscores the complex interplay between personal values and societal influences in shaping behavior.

## 6.2 Contributions

This research significantly contributes to four streams within literature: Identity and consumption in consumer culture, the power dynamics of carnism in contemporary society, gender dynamics through an exploration of young women's rationalization processes, and the expansion of understanding meat consumption rationalization.

Firstly, by examining environmentally conscious women who continue to consume meat, our study enhances the understanding of consumer identity as it intersects with ethical consumption practices. This reveals how individuals navigate and reconcile their personal beliefs with their actions, highlighting the complexities and contradictions within consumer



identities.

Secondly, we delved deeper into how carnism, the ideology that supports the use and consumption of animal products (Joy, 2010), is maintained and justified within society. Our findings shed light on its pervasive influence and the subtle ways it shapes dietary choices, illustrating how social norms and cultural narratives perpetuate meat consumption even among those who are environmentally aware.

Thirdly, our focus on women enriches research on gender dynamics by providing nuanced insights into how they negotiate their ethical dilemmas and personal identities in the context of meat consumption. This contribution highlights the challenges women face in balancing societal expectations, personal values, and ethical considerations, offering a deeper understanding of gender-specific consumption behaviors.

The fourth, and perhaps the most significant contribution of this research is the proposal to expand meat rationalization theory which will be discussed in the following sub-chapter. These contributions not only add another layer to the field of consumer culture theory but also highlight the complex interplay between individual beliefs and broader societal norms.

### **6.2.1 Expanding Dimensions of Meat Consumption: The 5th N**

Based on our findings, which emphasize the multifaceted rationalizations for meat consumption influenced by social dynamics and societal structures, we propose extending the existing 4Ns of meat rationalization theory - depicting meat consumption as Natural, Normal, Necessary, and Nice (Joy, 2010; Piazza et al., 2015) - to include a fifth dimension, "Negligible." We understand Negligible as something "so small or unimportant or of so little consequence as to warrant little or no attention" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This addition reflects the current perception that discourse around meat consumption is often overlooked or minimized in societal discussions. Negligible broadens the framework of Piazza et al. (2015) to emphasize the significance of the societal and cultural contexts that influence individuals' dietary choices, highlighting how these environments shape their decisions. Negligible suggests that the impact or importance of certain debates or considerations regarding meat eating is seen as minor or insignificant so that they are perceived as disregarded. This is additionally stressed, as the participants perceived it to be discussed more a few years ago compared to now, simultaneously as several have reverted from vegetarianism accordingly. By introducing Negligible as a fifth rationalization, the theory would underscore the complex interplay of individual, societal, and cultural factors that contribute to the perpetuation of

meat consumption. This addition highlights the importance of considering the broader socio-cultural context and prevalent societal discourses in understanding individuals' attitudes and behaviors towards dietary choices and thereby complicates the discussion on attitude behavior gap.

### **6.2.2 Our Proposed Framework**

To conclude this chapter, we have synthesized our findings into a framework that illustrates the dynamic interplay between societal norms, green identities, the use of accounts, our contribution with the 5th N, and cognitive dissonance (see Figure 1). The framework starts with participants being influenced by the carnistic ideology (Joy, 2010) and societal norms that depict meat consumption as Natural, Normal, Necessary, and Nice (Piazza et al., 2015). Our proposed 5th N, the perceived negligible discourse, fuels the other 4Ns, making their impact on the consumer more prominent. Additionally, our 5th N can also be interpreted as a justification, but as we want to highlight its role in fueling the other 4Ns we position it as a separate entity. Alongside this, participants' green identities are represented as a smaller square, reflecting our findings that these identities are less influential than the societal structures of the 4Ns. The interaction between the 4Ns and the weaker green identities creates internal conflicts, which are managed through various accounts used by participants to rationalize their meat consumption.

Participants further employ cognitive dissonance to reconcile these internal conflicts and continue consuming meat, despite recognizing its negatives. Crucial to maintaining cognitive dissonance is the fact that the discourse on the negative aspects of meat consumption is deemed negligible. This negligible discussion allows consumers' cognitive dissonance to remain unchallenged, as the lack of prominent discourse fails to confront or stimulate reconsideration of their consumption habits. This ultimately supports the continued consumption of meat among the participants. However, by diminishing the 5th N and elevating the discourse from negligible to a prominent issue, we propose that the influence of carnistic ideology and the 4Ns, as well as the ease of employing cognitive dissonance, will decrease.

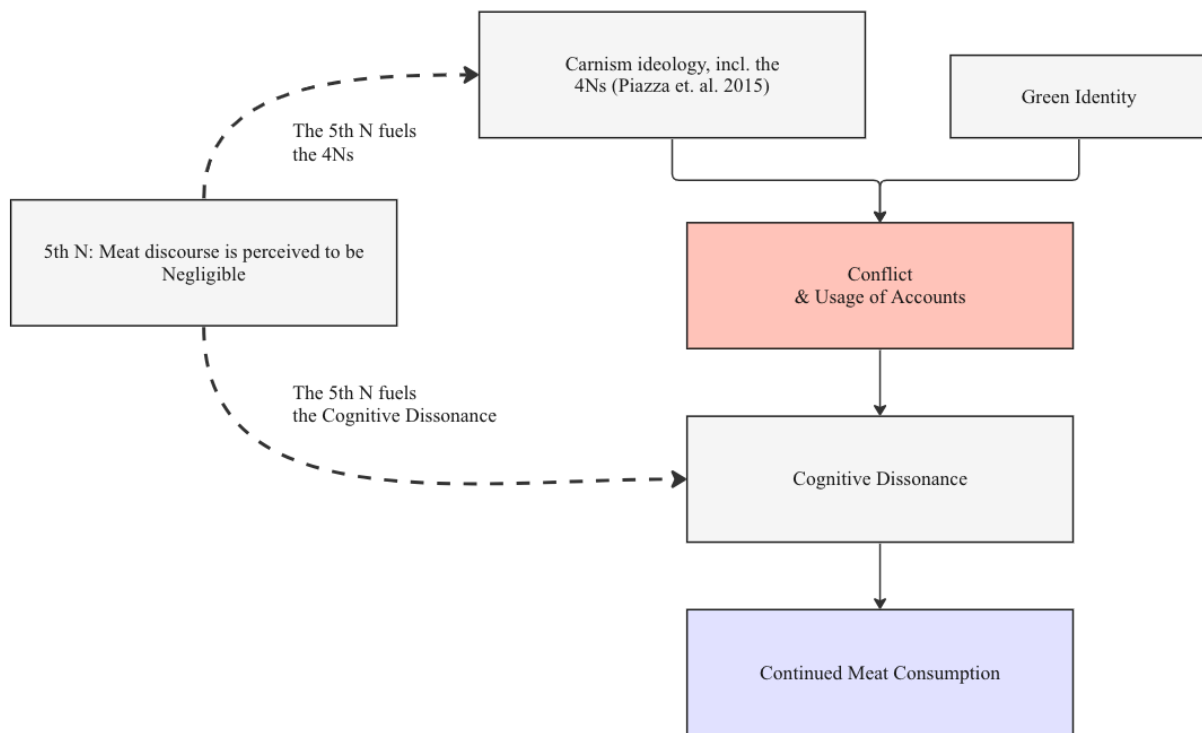


Figure 1: Framework illustrating the prevailing meat consumption

### 6.3 Practical Implications

Our findings reveal significant practical implications for promoting more sustainable dietary behaviors and crafting effective communication approaches. Rather than closing the individual attitude behavior gap, we suggest interventions that address the issue on a societal level, with a focus on revitalizing public discourse.

Drawing from our findings, there is a perceived decline in public discourse regarding the negative impacts of meat consumption. This has several implications for efforts aimed at promoting sustainable dietary behaviors. Addressing this decline in public discourse requires concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, media, and advocacy groups. Strategies could include revitalizing public campaigns and educational initiatives focused on raising awareness about the impacts of meat consumption, fostering conversations about sustainable food choices, and challenging prevailing norms surrounding meat-eating. Innovative communication and outreach approaches, including targeted campaigns and community engagement initiatives, are essential. By reigniting public

discourse on this issue, it may be possible to reinvigorate efforts to promote more sustainable dietary behaviors and contribute to positive societal change in regard to food consumption. In here, policy implications also play a crucial role in providing systemic solutions, such as facilitating inclusive and constructive public discourse through funding public forums, community dialogues, and citizen deliberation processes. Encouraging participation from diverse stakeholders, can help generate innovative solutions, build consensus, and amplify voices that may otherwise be marginalized in discussions about dietary choices and sustainability.

Furthermore, we suggest implications that adhere to the Orders of Worth prioritized in the various accounts for meat consumption. By acknowledging the influence of Civic order and other Orders of Worth on individuals' dietary choices, policy makers, advocates, and marketers can craft messages that align with the specific values of these orders. Whether highlighting health benefits, ethical considerations, or the culinary diversity of plant-based diets, these communication efforts should be inclusive and relevant across the various orders of worth. Such tailored communication has the potential to encourage more sustainable dietary behaviors by framing messages to resonate with the virtues associated with each respective order.

Additionally, the significance of the Civic order highlights the crucial role of societal discourse on consumption. This influence extends beyond meat to other sustainable practices like second-hand shopping and reusable packaging. Just as the discourse on meat consumption is perceived to be negligible, the focus on second-hand shopping and reusable packaging may also wane if the conversations around it decrease. This highlights how perceived societal discourse directly influences consumer behaviors across different sectors, emphasizing the need to maintain active and engaged discourse to foster sustainable behaviors.

Our findings further reveal that Justifications are the primary method for rationalizing the deviant behavior among sustainability conscious young women. Consequently, we recommend communication to be directed towards addressing and overcoming these Justifications. Since Justifications acknowledge the responsibility for one's actions but not their wrongfulness (Scott & Lyman, 1968), communications should emphasize the negative consequences of consuming meat. By focusing on the adverse impacts, these approaches can encourage consumers to critically reassess their choices and the Justifications they use to

sustain such behaviors.

Such communications could take the form of sustainability education to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to navigate complex sustainability challenges and make informed dietary decisions. In addition, investing in educational campaigns and programs that raise awareness about the environmental, ethical, and health implications of meat consumption can foster a cultural shift towards more sustainable dietary behaviors. Additionally, policy interventions, financial support or grants for initiatives promoting plant-based diets, such as subsidies for plant-based food producers and incentives for restaurants and institutions to offer more plant-based options, can significantly enhance accessibility, affordability, and appeal of plant-based foods to consumers. Implementing these measures can help broaden food options and promote the acceptance of plant-based diets in mainstream society, thus aiding the shift towards more sustainable food systems and reducing dependence on animal-based products.

The proposed interventions would result in an upswing in the debate regarding meat consumption and affect societal discourse. By making the discussion of meat consumption a prominent societal issue, these measures can, according to our proposed framework, first of all minimize the influence of the 4Ns in consumers decision making, and further challenge the use of cognitive dissonance. By making the discussion of meat consumption once again a hot topic, it would make it more difficult to rationalize, ultimately driving a shift towards more sustainable consumption patterns and contributing to positive societal change.

## 6.4 Chapter Summary

The findings provided a basis for a discussion on several key aspects: The societal influences on dietary behavior, the internal conflict experienced by participants who continue to consume meat, and our theoretical contribution to the meat rationalization theories (Joy, 2010; Piazza et al., 2015). We expanded the 4 Ns framework used to rationalize meat consumption by introducing a fifth N: “Negligible”, which reflects the current perceived diminished discourse around meat consumption. Finally, we developed an overarching model that summarizes the various processes and factors influencing continued meat consumption. This model highlights the tension between participants’ green identities and societal pressures, and

integrates the role of cognitive dissonance alongside our newly proposed fifth N; Negligible, as critical elements sustaining meat consumption habits.

Our research emphasizes the importance of societal-level strategies in promoting sustainable dietary behaviors. By aligning communication with various Orders of Worth and addressing justifications for meat consumption, stakeholders can foster more sustainable eating habits. The study highlights the critical role of societal discourse, suggesting that revitalizing conversations about the impacts of meat consumption through public campaigns and educational initiatives is essential. Moreover, targeting justifications and supporting policies for plant-based diets could shift public norms and enhance the adoption of sustainable dietary practices.

Overall, by reigniting societal discourse, addressing the rationalizations that underpin current dietary behaviors and investing in sustainability education, there is a promising opportunity to influence broader societal change and foster decline in meat consumption.

# 7 Conclusion

## 7.1 Research Recap

In this paper, we wanted to understand why women eat meat, despite being aware of its negative impacts. To understand the complexities we conducted qualitative interviews with sustainably conscious women who are engaged in environmental fields, to investigate why they continue to consume meat. We applied a hermeneutic analytical approach.

The findings revealed that they perceive the meat debate not being a hot topic any longer, different types of rationalizations for their consumptions which are categorized into different accounts, as well as the cognitive dissonance they use when consuming.

In the discussion we examined the societal impact on meat consumption, as well as the perceived lack of discourse on meat consumption, which we label as a 5th N: Negligible. We argue that by increasing the discourse on meat consumption the impact of the 4Ns of meat being natural, normal, necessary and nice (Piazza et al., 2015) on the consumers will be minimized. A larger discourse could further decrease cognitive dissonance among consumers, ultimately leading to reduced meat consumption.

## 7.2 Research Aims

The primary aim of this study was to explore the complex interplay of societal norms, personal values, social dynamics and reasonings, personal values in shaping young womens' dietary choices, particularly regarding meat consumption. By examining women who are engaged in environmental fields yet continue to consume meat, we investigated the motivations and rationalizations for meat consumption from a unique perspective, providing a nuanced approach to understanding the phenomena. By employing an interdisciplinary approach drawing from theories of Vocabularies of motives, Accounts theory, and Orders of Worth, we sought to unravel the motivations and reasoning behind women's meat consumption behavior.

### 7.3 Research Objectives

To achieve our research aim, we established several objectives. Firstly, we aimed to examine how societal norms and discourses shape attitudes towards meat consumption, illuminating the broader societal context in which dietary decisions are made. Secondly, we sought to explore the internal conflicts and cognitive dissonance experienced by individuals with sustainability awareness, particularly regarding the misalignment between their environmental beliefs and meat consumption habits. Lastly, we aimed to investigate the influence of different orders of worth on individuals' prioritization in food-related decision-making, thus shedding light on the complex interplay between societal values and individual values in shaping dietary choices. We have contributed to a deeper understanding of the nuances surrounding meat consumption behaviors and their broader implications for contemporary society.

### 7.4 Delimitations

While our study offers a unique perspective by focusing on environmentally conscious young women who continue to consume meat, it also presents certain limitations. Primarily, our findings may not be generalizable to all women, especially those who are not engaged in environmental fields. Additionally, our study does not account for women active in sustainability fields who have chosen to abstain from meat consumption. This omission means we have not explored potential differences in motivations or justifications between those who continue to consume meat and those who choose not to. Moreover, all the participants belong to the so-called Generation Z, a demographic category that is highly debated and whose association may influence perspectives and behaviors in ways not fully explored in our research. Neither does the study investigate how participants react to different communications strategies, meaning that our results are hypothetical rather than practical.

Furthermore, as students with a background in Business Administration and Marketing, our perspectives are inherently influenced by the prevailing assumptions within these disciplines. According to Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), this includes ingrained paradigms, ideologies, and field-specific assumptions, which could color our interpretation and approach. For



instance, our analysis might lean towards certain market-driven ideologies or assumptions about consumer behavior that do not necessarily align with environmental paradigms or interdisciplinary approaches. Moreover, our socio-cultural standpoint stands in contrast to economic models and rational decision-making, which means that factors like price sensitivity or utility maximization are not examined.

## 7.5 Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the motivations and Justifications behind women's meat consumption behavior, there are several avenues for future research to further advance understanding in this area and inform targeted interventions aimed at promoting sustainable dietary practices.

Exploring differences in attitudes towards meat consumption and sustainability practices across various consumer segments could be highly informative. Comparing women actively engaged in sustainability fields to those who are not, as well as examining meat-consuming women within these groups, can highlight contrasts in behaviors and beliefs. To gain a deeper understanding of how the association with Generation Z influences meat consumption choices, future research should focus on exploring the specific characteristics and values of this demographic. This approach would help elucidate the unique role that generational identity plays in shaping dietary behaviors. Additionally, analyzing generational differences and cultural variations among women could reveal how societal shifts affect dietary preferences and environmental awareness over time. This comparative approach could offer valuable insights into the diverse factors influencing sustainable consumption among women. Furthermore, longitudinal studies offer a promising approach to track changes in dietary habits over time and evaluate the long-term effectiveness of interventions aimed at promoting sustainable diets. By following participants over extended periods, researchers can observe how attitudes, behaviors, and societal norms evolve in response to environmental initiatives and educational campaigns, providing valuable insights for designing targeted interventions. Moreover, there is a need to examine the effectiveness of various communication strategies for promoting plant-based meat alternatives among women with sustainability awareness. Quantitative approaches could be employed to assess the impact of different messaging techniques on consumer attitudes and purchasing behaviors aiming to inform marketing

efforts and facilitate the transition towards more plant-based diets.

Finally, an economical perspective on the issue could add to the discussion, where utility maximization and price sensitivity can be examined to enlarge the understanding.

## 7.6 Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted influences shaping individuals' dietary choices within the context of sustainability awareness. By recognizing the complex interplay of societal norms, personal values, social dynamics and reasonings in shaping young womens' dietary choices, we can develop more effective strategies for promoting sustainable dietary behaviors and fostering a transition towards more environmentally conscious consumption patterns.

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# Appendix A

## Interview Guide

### Intro

- Could you start by telling me a little about yourself? (e.g., age, life situation, studies, hobbies, or interests)
- How do you spend time with friends and family?

### Questions about Organization

- Can you describe the organization / studies that you are active in?
- What motivated you to be active in the organization? / to study the program?
- Can you tell me about the values of the organization?
- Do you share these values?
- Are you active in other organizations? What are the differences?

### Questions about the individual and Sustainability

- In your own words, what does sustainability mean to you?
- What is your approach to sustainability issues? How do you implement sustainability in your daily life? What do you do in a sustainable way?

### Questions about Food Consumption

- Tell me about the role of food and dietary choices in your daily life.
- Could you share some of your favorite foods or meals, and what makes them special to you?
- Do you have any favorite memories connected to food? If so, please share them.

### Questions about meat

- Could you describe your typical dietary habits and preferences?
- What types of meat do you eat?
- What do you like about eating meat?
- How often and meat do you eat?
- Are there specific factors that influence your choice of meat products? (e.g., types of foods, animal preferences, production, origin?)
- Are there instances when you do not eat meat?

### Friends and family influence on meat consumption

- What do you think of dietary labels or lifestyle choices (such as vegetarianism, flexitarianism, veganism or omnivorism)?

- How was your meat consumption when you grew up?
- Do you have friends or family who don't consume meat?
- How do your friends and family who don't consume meat influence your dietary choices?

### **Motivations and Challenges in Meat Consumption**

- What are the biggest challenges you face when considering reducing or eliminating meat from your diet?
- What do you think of meat substitutes?

### **Awareness of Environmental and Ethical Concerns**

- What are your thoughts on the debates surrounding meat consumption in society today?
- How do you think meat consumption fits into the broader picture of sustainability?
- How do you reason when still consuming meat?

### **Social Influences and Future Considerations**

- What strategies or interventions do you think could help you and others like you to reduce meat consumption?

### **Closing**

- Is there anything else you would like to add or share about your experiences with meat consumption and sustainability?
- Do you have any final thoughts or reflections?

# Appendix B

## Consent to participate in a Master Thesis at the Department of Business Administration at Lund University

By participating in this Interview, I understand that:

- My participation in this study is voluntary.
- I can withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question without consequences and without giving a reason.
- Only the researcher will have access to the raw interview material.
- I am free to withdraw from the study at any time after the interview, but not after the thesis has been approved to be published.
- I can contact the researcher at any time to seek clarification or additional information.

	Yes	No
I agree to the identification of my role and the organization I am currently working for, or have previously worked for, to be disclosed in the study.		
I agree to quotes from my interview being cited in the final thesis and potential future publications.		
I give permission for the interview to be audio-recorded and transcribed.		

We do not share your personal data with third parties.

Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, Sweden, with organisation number 202100-3211 is the controller. You can find Lund University's privacy policy at [www.lu.se/integritet](http://www.lu.se/integritet)

You have the right to receive information about the personal data we process about you. You also have the right to have inaccurate personal data about you corrected. If you have a complaint about our processing of your personal data, you can contact our Data Protection Officer at [dataskyddsbud@lu.se](mailto:dataskyddsbud@lu.se). You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority (the Data Protection Authority, IMY) if you believe that we are processing your personal data incorrectly.

I agree to participate in this Interview:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Location, Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature, name clarification

# Appendix C

## **AI statement**

In the writing of this thesis, AI tools were employed to assist with spelling and grammar corrections, as well as to generate ideas for headlines and titles and to find sources. AI was not utilized for analyzing the material or interpreting the research data.