frontiers | Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems

TYPE Review
PUBLISHED 19 December 2023
DOI 10.3389/fsufs.2023.1292887

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 12 September 2023
ACCEPTED 30 November 2023
PUBLISHED 19 December 2023

CITATION
Lamarque M, Tomé-Martín P and Moro-Gutiérrez L (2023) Personal and community values behind sustainable food consumption: a meta-ethnography. *Front. Sustain. Food Syst.* 7:1292887. doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2023.1292887

Personal and community values behind sustainable food consumption: a meta-ethnography

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Various aspects of sustainable food consumption have been studied within the Social Sciences in the last years. Specifically, the analysis of motivations and determinants behind alternative economic practices has gained prominence in disciplines such as Sociology, Psychology, Economics and Marketing, seeking to understand, measure and calculate consumers' decision-making processes and actions through the application of cognitive theories and qualitative predictive models. Anthropology—more specifically through the practice of ethnography—, has also made significant contributions, mostly toward the analysis and description of contemporary cooperative experiences, both in rural and urban settings. However, within this field, few studies have focused on the underlying values, as well as the symbolic, emotional/affective, and identity-based incentives that exist behind the participation in sustainable, pro-environmental, organic, and fair-trade food initiatives. This kind of perspective might help in comprehending how different people or social groups conceptualize their habits and link them to certain representations or beliefs. At the same time, it can provide information about the way in which action-related values appear in discourse and become embodied, whether they are uniform, conflicting, precede practice or emerge as a post-personal reflection of those involved. Through a review, synthesis, and analysis of qualitative literature—meta-ethnography—this paper seeks to present an overview of available academic work on the social, political, personal, material, and ethical reasons associated with partaking in alternative food networks. The findings will be analyzed and discussed in relation to a constructivist perspective, as well as debates around identity, social distinction, and gender.

KEYWORDS

human values, alternative food networks, sustainable consumption, ethnography, cultural capital, qualitative research

1 Introduction

In recent years, academic literature has shown extensive interest in the personal and collective factors that influence sustainable food consumption. Mostly examined via economic and marketing analyses, the increasing forms of conscious consumerism in urban and rural settings have raised numerous questions among researchers and

entrepreneurs, mainly about their origin, their various forms of implementation, the business potential behind them and the cost-effectiveness of engaging in such practices.

A lot has been said about the environmental, economic, and social justice contributions of these forms of production and consumption, analyzing supply chains, the structure of food distribution networks, policy frameworks and governmental actions. Within these efforts, there has been a growing area of research on the social elements of food selection and preference, to explore how settings, different forms of capital, norms, and convenience—along with other things—impact individuals' decisions toward green, local, and organic products. The Social Sciences, particularly, have dedicated several efforts to understanding the link between needs, motivations, attitudes, and sustainable behavior, exploring these through different lenses.

Theories and models from experimental sociology and social psychology, for example, have been used to measure, predict, and comprehend people's choices and consumption patterns, like the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the Norm Activation Model (Schwartz, 1977), the Attitude-Behavior-Context model (Stern, 2000) and the COM-B model for Behavior Change (Michie et al., 2011), among others. Such frameworks propose standardized connections between subjective and collective drives, beliefs, norms, opportunities, accumulated experiences, and consequences, to foresee but also to design potential changes in consumer's decision-making processes.

In the case of sustainable food research, this type of approach has become very popular in recent years, with numerous medium- and large-scale quantitative or mixed methods studies. Some examples are the work conducted in Belgium by Vermeir and Verbeke (2008), on perceived confidence and values when buying dairy products; Campbell-Arvai et al. (2014) experiment on pro-environmental food-related decisions of university students in the US, the study of Ran et al. (2022) about the informational factors that affect the capabilities, opportunities, and motivations of Swedish shoppers; or the Vietnamese enquiry of Le and Nguyen (2022) on social and individual norms explaining organic food purchase intention, among others.

Survey-based behavioral studies, however, are not without their limitations when it comes to encompassing the full complexity of the food phenomenon, as well as unfolding the cognitive-social processes that take place behind the decision-consumption cycle. Some of the criticisms that have been made in this regard mention the difficulty of correlating intention with behavior in a linear way, without considering the existence of temporal, contextual and pragmatic interferences (Sutton, 1998). Intentions may simply change, or the hypothetical categories used in the research questionnaires may not reflect what happens when an action is finally undertaken. Furthermore, predictions or measurements may simply diverge from actual performance, due to attitude-behavior gaps (Moraes et al., 2012; Testa et al., 2021). Other discussions have pointed out the low consideration of cultural factors in the models' design and application, followed by the risk of incompatibility between universalist projects and diverse populations' realities (Pasick et al., 2009).

In this context, the qualitative and sociocultural contributions of other fields such as anthropology become important in the study of sustainable food networks, giving access—through in-depth field research—to the motivational and behavioral complexities of the people involved in them (Murphy and McDonagh, 2016). The situated observation and up-close interaction of ethnographic methods, for example, can provide an additional layer of knowledge about social organizations; showing the connections—but also the distances—between *what is said* and *what is done*, or what is presented narratively in discourse (reported by participants) and the acts that may or may not be based on conscious reflection. Thus, the question would not only focus on the individual and group cognitive mechanisms that drive consumers toward organic, proximity and ecological choices but also on how these processes of election and involvement are marked by specific historical, structural, and socio-cultural components while showing the areas of conflict, contradiction and change that occur behind any human phenomenon.

Despite its significance, the anthropological production on this topic remains less visible than in other disciplines, making it necessary to explore, evaluate and bring to light those efforts that, from a narrative/observational perspective, reflect on the multiple experiences and social practices around sustainable consumption. This paper, therefore, aims to provide an overview of emerging academic work on the personal and shared values/principles/drives of alternative food networks (AFNs)[1] participants and customers, focusing particularly on primary studies conducted through a qualitative or ethnographic methodology. Other literature reviews addressing values and agroecological consumption have been published in recent years (Verain et al., 2012, 2016; Aertsens et al., 2019; Aguirre-Sánchez et al., 2021; Testa et al., 2021); however, there is still a gap on qualitative evidence.

2 Framework for understanding sustainable food consumption

2.1 Values and social practice

In recent years, sustainability studies have shown a growing interest in *values,* seeing them as core conceptual elements to be discussed and incorporated into research and intervention design (Horlings, 2015). Global initiatives, such as the one by the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2022), for example, have pointed out the need to integrate different world views and values around nature and sustainability, to inform development-related decision-making and environmental policies. However, they have also argued that potential conflicts over these values (either by categorization or by responding to different cultural or institutional interests) can hinder their use as a tool for change (Pascual et al., 2017).

So far, the wide range of disciplines and viewpoints involved in such conceptual interest has led to numerous outlooks and little theoretical consensus on the matter (Horcea-Milcu et al., 2019). The main differences across academic efforts lie in knowledge systems and their ways of perceiving and studying values in the first place. The

1 Here, the term *alternative food networks* (AFNs) is used in a wide sense to refer to multiple forms of organization between producers, consumers, and other actors that represent alternatives to the more industrialized, standardized method of food supply (Renting et al., 2003). Common examples of AFNs are Farmers' Markets (FMs), Producer Cooperatives (PCs), Community Gardens (CGs), Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs), Community Supported Agriculture projects (CSAs), and exchange groups, among others (Savarese et al., 2020).

ontological distinction is based mostly on the range between realist positions (i.e., there is a self-existent social world, distinguishable, persistent and external to the observer) and relativist/constructivist ones (i.e., human phenomena are constructed by social actors as part of their dynamic interactions) (Kenter et al., 2019; Rawluk et al., 2019). Each paradigm also implies certain methods to empirically research values, going from generalizable quantitative modeling/testing to qualitative context-dependent explorations, respectively.

For the purpose of this work, this section will mostly focus on some definitions and ancillary perspectives from the sociological and anthropological traditions, in an attempt to present their main contributions and reflections while emphasizing (and advocating on) the richness of their small-scale, culture-bound, situated and relational approach.

Throughout the 20th century, sociologists such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Talcott Parsons began to be interested in the ideological and material forces behind the human experience. In his exploration of collective conscience, for example, Durkheim (1960) understood morals, norms, and shared beliefs as behavioral touchstones, analyzing their role in shaping and maintaining the social structure, as well as in producing its cohesion. Weber (1968), on his part, argued that social action is oriented around four dimensions: *instrumental* (means-ends rationality), *affective* (related to emotions), *traditional* (linked to customs and habituation) and *of-values* (as detached from individual benefit and linked to binding external demands or requirements); with none of them occupying a dominant position or existing disconnected from the others. Parsons (1951, 1989), was the first to focus primarily on the notion of values, understanding them as normative concepts—moral beliefs/cultural ideas—with the capacity to justify people's actions and promote social order. According to the author, values had such an important function in the collective organization that their study would produce a unified theory of human behavior (Spates, 1983). Alongside his colleague Edward Shils, Parsons also claimed that values linked themselves to others, creating systems of limited variability through patterned and consistent behavior (Parsons and Shils, 1951). This laid the foundations for later universalist approaches such as those of Milton Rokeach (1973) and Shalom Schwartz (1994), who—seeing values as guiding life principles that order the decision-making and assessment of acts—developed their respective models to identify and classify them by their goal or motivation.

In anthropology, however, the interest in values developed less explicitly or comprehensively, as part of broader research on cultural systems and without occupying a prominent place. Authors such as Kluckhohn (1951) and Firth (1953) were some exceptions, who remained conceptually close to their sociologist colleagues by sharing the idea that the organized study of values could provide a rich frame of reference for the analysis of social behavior and its meaning. Kluckhohn included in his definition the realms of the individual and the collective, understanding values as "conceptions of the desirable" (1951, p. 395), i.e., social indications or precepts capable of influencing the decisions of people. Firth (1953), on his side, was interested in the systematic operations through which values were manifested, as well as in their role in the classification of actions and things according to cognitive and emotional criteria. Both authors, however, stressed the need for empirical research to understand the connections between social categories of this kind; always keeping in mind the particularities of each context (Barth, 1993).

As values are "abstract qualities attaching to verbal statements" (Belshaw, 1959, p. 556), it is essential to bear in mind that they are rationalizations about events and, as such, can be purposely shaped to appeal to the surrounding moral "landscape." A person can justify their actions not only in reference to their genuine motives but in terms of what they believe their interlocutor expects and approves of. Such creations also involve researchers, who observe behaviors or listen to what subjects express and describe them in their own terms. This means that, without sufficient care, it is possible to take what is said too literally or end up deductively forcing categories—of mainstream academic thought/culture, and the social sciences themselves—into human practices. In this way, uncritical and unreflective research can end up adopting normative, prescriptive and even ethnocentric tendencies, which assume that concepts and classifications around values are exclusively rational, natural, and absolute (Heinich, 2006). Such risks are not only increased in the case of the more positivist or realist traditions within the social sciences but also in the proliferation of quantitative research protocols, which lose sight—either out of pragmatism or omission—of the contextual dimension of values (Heinich, 2010).

Because of its links to qualitative fieldwork, contemporary anthropology proposes a more inductive approach, in which the research project must be immersed in the language of the society under study and understand it as an active, changing reality. Authors such as Frederick Barth (1993), point out that most efforts on values focus on operational schemes of classification and cognition, linked to *a priori* terminology. However, according to him, not every action has a cognitively clear purpose, and the application of integrative or totalizing assumptions can lead to reductionist results (Barth, 1993). The hierarchy of values and people's priorities are simply not always clear or evident. It is therefore essential to pay attention to the effects these elements produce and to the shifts, reversals and twists that lie behind the processes of thought. Ultimately, rich information also unfolds in the inconsistency, the negotiations and discrepancies between acts and ideas, as well as in the discontinuities between people, spaces, and times. This anthropological feature is fairly expressed by Marcus and Fischer (1986, p. 167) when they state that:

> For some, advocacy or assertion of values against a particular social reality *is* the primary purpose of cultural critique. However, as ethnographers for whom human variety is a principal interest and any subjects are fair game, we are acutely sensitive to the ambivalence, irony and contradictions in which values, and the opportunities for their realization, find expression in the everyday life of diverse social contexts. Thus, the statement and assertion of values are not the aim of ethnographic cultural critique; rather, the empirical exploration of the historical and cultural conditions for the articulation and implementation of different values is.

In summary, this kind of approach entails conceiving values as notions inextricably tied to experience rather than as transferable abstract entities; and not just as driving forces that direct activities but also as creations that arise from practice (Graebner, 2013). In other words, ethnographic and anthropological reflection considers values as elements that could explain and precede social action, and simultaneously as units capable of being modified and renegotiated from the action itself.

For the study of food behavior and sustainable consumption, such a perspective on values can contribute to situated knowledge by

approaching the way in which different cultural groups or communities conceive their habits and associate them with certain symbolic concepts/beliefs. At the same time, it can provide information about the way in which action-related values appear in discourse and become embodied, whether they are uniform, conflicting, precede practice or emerge as a post-personal reflection of those involved (including scholars). The reflexive component of anthropological and ethnographic inquiry can also serve to deconstruct the researchers' network of premises, categories, and tacit givens, critically assessing their potential impact on the reconstruction and interpretation of social phenomena. Lastly, this approach can help delve into the political aspects of food systems and sustainability, examining through value expression the power relations, economic structures and social dynamics that impact food production, distribution, and consumption. It could also reveal how values related to sustainability intersect with broader systems of power and inequalities, and how these factors shape individual and collective choices around food.

2.2 Additional perspectives: social difference, gender, identity

One theoretical approach that can enhance our understanding of sustainable behavior is that of Pierre Bourdieu regarding social differentiation by means of consumption. For this purpose, it is relevant to explore some of his most emblematic concepts, such as *symbolic capital* and *distinction*.

According to Bourdieu (1986), the position of individuals within a social field is established by three types of capital: social, cultural, and economic. These elements, once legitimized, can be translated into symbolic capital or collective recognition. Social capital is the set of actual or potential resources/benefits that come from possessing a durable network of personal ties and contacts. Cultural capital is derived from education, socialization, and personal history, and is embodied in the form of knowledge, skills, taste, and forms of expression. It is largely related to the possibilities offered by one's social class and context, as well as to economic capital. The latter refers to easily measurable material and financial belongings or assets and could be considered a basis for the other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2001).

Distinction, on the other hand, is the notion through which Bourdieu explores the link between lifestyle, taste, and consumption as demarcating elements within society (Jenkins, 2002; Jacobsen and Hansen, 2021). According to the author, the different forms of capital allow social groups to consume things (culture, art, goods, food) in a specific manner to their class position, building reproductive discourses about what is desirable, correct and expected for that environment/hierarchical level (Bourdieu, 1984). Through distinctive symbols and ways of being/doing in society, people communicate their status and aspirations, while negotiating possible modifications and mobilities. In terms of the topic of this research, the interplay between all these elements can provide great insight into alternative food network participation, while examining the circumstances in which different motivations and values are evoked and ranked.

Another fundamental approach to analyzing sustainable consumption is one that also considers its study from a relational and gender-sensitive perspective. Undoubtedly, food and food-related practices have a strong gendered component, as these are still commonly linked to pre-established social roles and unequal distributions of labor (Federici, 2012; Gracia Arnaiz, 2014). In contemporary societies, for example, women's domestic work often involves choosing, buying, storing, preparing, and distributing food to the family, which generates an additional burden on other reproductive responsibilities held by this group (Lopez Mato et al., 2022). Such reality is intersected by conditions of class, race, and sexuality that deepen the inequalities derived from the heteropatriarchal normative order.

For that reason, the study of food systems and their forms of organization must actively examine power dynamics and embedded hierarchies within them, with a view to questioning and making visible the unfair distribution of roles and tasks, the differences in decision-making processes and the symbolic constructions around it. It should also look into how certain notions—such as sustainability—are constructed and by whom, as well as what kind of social schemes they conceive/reproduce. For this, decolonial and critical feminist approaches are relevant, as they call for a revision of hegemonic imaginaries and practices.

Finally, a third perspective can be introduced to sustainability research, to explore through discourse, action, and material/cultural preferences the link between consumption and identity creation/maintenance. Specifically, it is of interest to study the way in which social contexts influence the notion of *self* (self-categorization and identification) and the ideological, aesthetic, moral, and differentiation principles that emerge from belonging to a defined group (Stets and Burke, 2000). For the organic consumer, for example, food choices may reflect particular values and motivations (individual expression, self-improvement, self-care) or expectations, norms and roles attached to a certain lifestyle or social movement (e.g., ecologic, green), for which it is essential to exercise precise practices (Costa Pinto et al., 2016). In Giddens (1991) terms, everyday acts and the choices linked to them (food, clothes, relations, thoughts) are not only decisions about how to *act* but also about who to *be*.

3 Methodological notes

The assessment, synthesis, and analysis presented in this document correspond with Noblit and Hare (1988) framework for meta-ethnography. This reviewing approach seeks to generate new insights and understandings by integrating and comparing findings from multiple sources (Lee et al., 2015). It is a way of conducting research that allows for the development of overarching interpretations while examining the relationships and connections between identified concepts or themes in the literature.

The interpretivist underpinning of meta-ethnography involves recognizing and highlighting the subjective meanings that individuals produce about their experiences. This entails a chain of interpretations that runs from the primary research participants (who depict their own universe), through the researchers (who reread those narratives in the field), to the meta-ethnographers (who translate those findings in a new direction). Such an approach can be complemented by a constructivist view, that shares the recognition of socially constructed knowledge while highlighting the influence of cultural, historical, and social factors in shaping people's understanding of the world (Soundy and Heneghan, 2022). In the specific case of this research, our interest lies not only in the identification of values linked to sustainable food consumption but more than anything else, in the way in which these

values are identified, elaborated, and characterized by participants and researchers, seeing the interplay between these categories and other aspects of social reality.

According to Soundy and Heneghan (2022), conducting a qualitative literature review from a constructivist paradigm supports the use of a purposive search strategy, aimed at finding and selecting information-rich documents for an appropriate in-depth analysis. In this sense, a limited but carefully retrieved sample size intends to fulfil the objectives of overviewing the knowledge base, critically re-examining it and developing new concepts through creative comparison of results (Campbell et al., 2011; Harsh, 2011; Snyder, 2019).

In the case of this study, the sampling was the product of a purposeful but comprehensive search in multiple databases, such as Web of Science (Social Science Citation Index), ProQuest Central, Scopus and Google Scholar, using the keywords: *values*, *Alternative/Sustainable Food Networks*, *Alternative/Sustainable/Organic food consumption*, *qualitative research* and *ethnography*. These terms were handled in combination, by adding the Boolean operators "AND" and "OR." The selection of publications was based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) peer-reviewed academic work that explicitly explores the role of *values*—as a symbolic category—in sustainable food consumption, (b) qualitative/ethnographic work as the methodology for data collection and text production, (c) documents published in English in the last 25 years. Titles and abstracts of the initially retrieved documents were scanned for relevance by the authors of this paper, followed by a full-text examination of the preliminary set. Additional manuscripts were also included through iterative "snowballing" techniques. The final selection of articles was appraised for methodological quality and depth of analysis on values through collaborative discussion, establishing an *ad hoc* classification of the findings.

4 Findings

The literature search and the selection/evaluation criteria determined the inclusion of 14 academic articles in the final review (see Table 1). Of those studies, 10 specified the use of ethnographic methodology (participant observation, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, document review, online fieldwork or *nethnography*), while the others employed qualitative or mixed approaches such as surveys and secondary source analysis. Cases were drawn from various regions of the world, including Western, Northern and Southern Europe, North America, Australasia, and the Middle East.[2] Studied experiences and populations included producers, sellers and consumers of Farmers' Markets, organic shops, community-supported agriculture projects, food collective organizations as well as related online forums and families involved in this form of consumption.

4.1 Conceptualization and mapping of values

Throughout the documents analyzed, the notion of *values* appears to a greater or lesser extent, without presenting a very concrete definition. In most cases, this conceptual category seems to refer to shared social/cultural schemes, which—in line with sociological and anthropological perspectives—frame or even motivate human action. In this sense, values appear in the accounts of research subjects and researchers to offer significance (a rationale, a logic) to alternative food practices. Among the selected authors, only one of them elaborates on terminologies by talking about "value ideals" (Kallio, 2020, p. 1096), as variable structures of meaning that are deployed and negotiated according to context and practice. She even suggests thinking of values as verbs rather than nouns, to imply that they are not something that simply *exists* (or is possessed/given), but something that is *done* continuously through social action (performative character).

In inspecting and translating the findings into each other, we identified and organized a series of themes, as shown in Figure 1. This schematic representation corresponds to the second-degree interpretation of the examined texts, by means of which we attempted to construct a "map" of the values that—according to the reviewed authors—appear within the AFNs. Therefore, this diagram classifies the values into subsets and connects the categories to each other, pointing out their links and emphasizing the previously mentioned idea of interconnectedness and interdependence (i.e., value system). The subsequent sections and the final discussion will attempt to unpack these operational categories, deepen their meaning, and contrast them with the proposed theoretical framework.

4.1.1 Ethical/moral values

A recurring category within the analyzed alternative food networks corresponds to ethical/moral values, particularly those linked to collective responsibility and sustainability. This last concept, rather widespread and polysemic in nature, appeared in the selected ethnographies generally linked to three domains: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, and social sustainability.

Environmental or ecosystem preservation values are one of the major discursive topics shared by both users and organizers of the AFNs. On both sides of the chain, people involved express their concern for the ecological footprint of the current global food system (Feenstra, 2002; Parkins and Craig, 2009; Grasseni, 2014), and advocate the use of responsible techniques and practices that follow natural cycles, are resource-efficient and comply with indications for organic and cruelty-free production (O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015; Savarese et al., 2020). Authors like Makatouni (2002), Schösler et al. (2013), and Salam et al. (2022), even delve into the emotional/affective aspects of ecological sustainability by showing how consumers perceive organic food as a future investment—to preserve the planet for next generations and protect their children from the long-term effects of pesticides and synthetic chemicals—; and a form of identity expression—through activism or a "life philosophy" of awareness and conscious connection with the natural environment—.

2 The fact that most of the retrieved literature corresponds to places from the Global North could possibly be a result of the English-only inclusion criteria of this review, which was selected for pragmatic reasons in relation to time and resource constraints. Additionally, other thematic and conceptual priorities or social actors (e.g., *food sovereignty*, *fairtrade*, *peasant movements*, *indigenous initiatives*, and *land struggles*) could be more prominent in the literature from developing regions. Despite this, we are aware that there are plenty of academic efforts on sustainable food practices and regional food communities across the globe, and the interest in the extended use of the concept of values requires further exploration in the future.

TABLE 1 Data corpus of meta-ethnography.

No.	Author(s)	Publication year	Location	Studied practices/ population	Research methods	Values
1	Feenstra	2002	USA (California)	Community food projects	Qualitative. Case study (Open-ended interviews and document revision)	Ethical (*social and environmental justice/equality/democracy*); Personal (*health, care*)
2	Makatouni	2002	UK	Organic food buyers (parents with children)	Mixed (laddering interviews)	Personal (health); Ethical (*environmental and social sustainability*)
3	Alkon	2008	USA (San Francisco)	Farmers' market (Managers, vendors, consumers)	Ethnography (Participant observation, in-depth interviews, surveys)	Political (anti-corporate, anti-capitalism, anti-racist); Personal (*health*); Ethical (*social and environmental sustainability*)
4	Parkins and Craig	2009	International	Slow-food forum "Terra Madre" (creators), Farmers' market (consumers)	Qualitative (Interviews, online forum analysis, surveys, participant observation)	Ethical (*environmental and social sustainability, trust*); Political (anti-globalization); Personal (emotions and affects); Social (*community*)
5	Hall	2011	England	Consumption practices of families	Ethnography (Observations, interviews)	Personal (*health, care*)
6	Schösler, de Boer and Boersema	2013	Netherlands (Amsterdam, Groningen)	Organic food store clients; Slow food organization	Qualitative (in-depth interviews)	Personal (*health; emotions and affects*); Ethical (*environmental*); Material/Symbolic of Food (*purity, locally grown, authenticity*)
7	Grasseni	2014	Italy	Solidarity Purchase Groups	Ethnographic observation, survey	Personal (health); Ethical (*solidarity and environmental responsibility*)
8	O'Kane and Wijaya	2015	Australia (Canberra)	Farmers' markets (farmers)	Ethnographic (Observation, in-depth interviews, document analysis)	Ethical (*environmental and social sustainability*); Social (*community, Social Capital, Trust*); Material/ Symbolic of Food (*freshness, authenticity*)
9	Grosglik	2016	Israel	Organic food consumers	Ethnographic (Observation, in-depth interviews, document analysis)	Personal (Health); Social (Cultural Capital)
10	Gómez Mestres and Lien	2017	Spain (Catalonia) and Norway	Food producers and consumers' cooperative networks	Ethnography and secondary sources	Ethical (S*ocial sustainability, reciprocity*); Political (anti-globalization); Social (*commonality*)
11	Pétursson	2018	Iceland	Organic store (founders/ staff and consumers)	Ethnography (participant observation, in-depth interviews)	Ethical (*environmental and social sustainability*); Political; Social (*commonality, distinction, trust*); Personal (*care, emotions*); Material/ Symbolic of Food (*purity, authenticity*)
12	Kallio	2020	Finland	Food collective organizations (Founders, coordinators, members)	Ethnography (Participant observation, in-depth interviews, social media discussions)	Material/Symbolic of Food; Social (*community*)
13	Savarese, Chamberlain and Graffgna	2020	New Zealand	Community-supported agriculture projects (farmers and members)	Focused ethnography (in-depth interviews, observations)	Social (*community*); Political (*against industrialized production*); Ethical (*environmental sustainability*)
14	Salam, Mulye and Rahman	2022	International	Organic Food Forum (Facebook page of consumers)	Nethnography (review of online posts and comments)	Ethical (*environmental and social sustainability*); Political; Personal (*health*); Material/Symbolic of Food (taste)

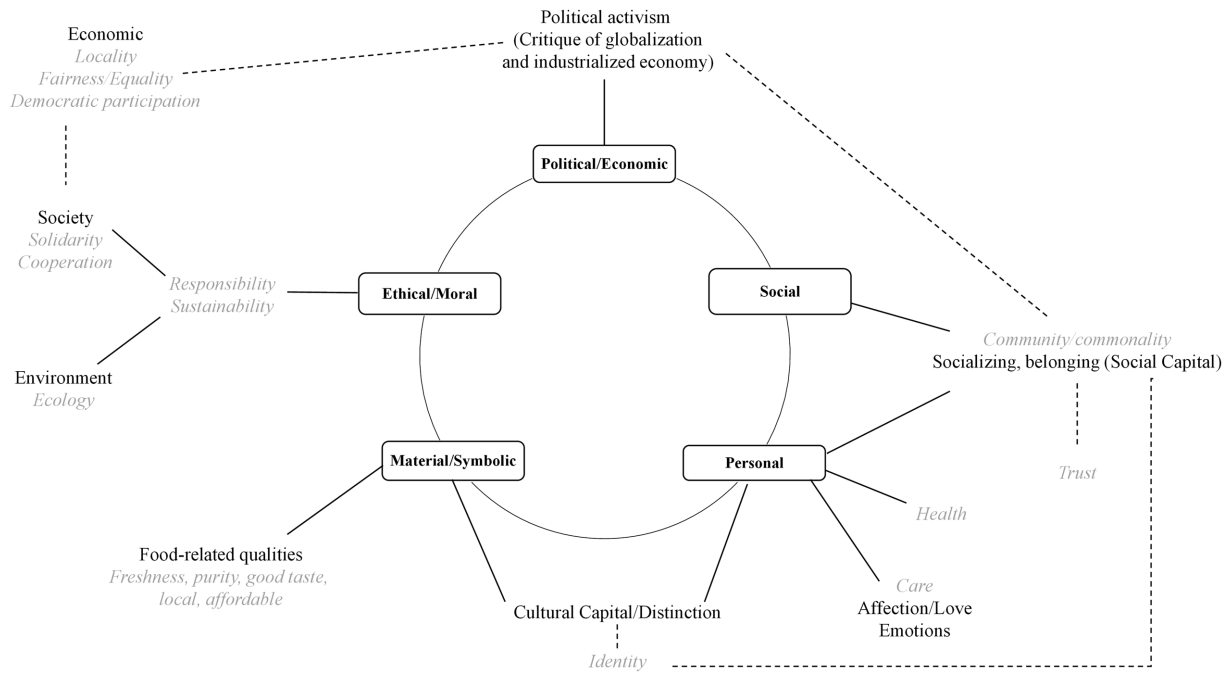

FIGURE 1
Meta-ethnography values scheme.

Meanwhile, the other two aspects of sustainability are closely linked, driven by principles of cooperation and social economy. On one side, promoters of alternative food consumption apply their environmental vision to the surrounding community context, encouraging and supporting a localized economy to favor small producers and entrepreneurs, who compete unfairly and unequally with large companies and distribution chains (Feenstra, 2002; Grasseni, 2014; Gómez Mestres and Lien, 2017). This is expressed in general narratives of *social change*, *social justice* (Alkon, 2008; Gómez Mestres and Lien, 2017), *fairness* (O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015) and *transparency* (Schösler et al., 2013); or in examples such as those of Alkon (2008), who analyses local production/consumption experiences in San Francisco as possibilities for equity and racial empowerment.

On the other hand, social motivations are also expressed in terms of building a sense of *neighborliness* and *mutuality*, through the mobilization of common efforts, by "taking care of each other," and through the principles of democracy, solidarity and redistribution, which seek to ensure that the benefits of a moral economy can also sustain community activities and organizations (Feenstra, 2002; Alkon, 2008; Grasseni, 2014; O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015; Gómez Mestres and Lien, 2017). In this sense—and based on what was postulated by Gibson-Graham (2003)—, Parkins and Craig (2009) speak of an *ethics of the local* and of daily life, which instead of simply representing an exacerbated or romanticized localism, recognizes the interconnected essence of the community and supports the need for affective and generosity ties within a specific place.

4.1.2 Political and economic drives

Linked to the previous elements, a new component appears in the retrieved scheme of values: one corresponding to the political-economic dimension of alternative food consumption. This usually encompasses criticism of the global productive system, as well as different tendencies of anti-capitalist, anti-corporatist, and anti-consumerist activism, that protest the homogenizing structures that endanger local food cultures and traditions.

Many authors identified explicit political motivations against the neoliberal system in the AFNs' organizers and participants, who condemned its constant search for monetary gain at the expense of social and environmental welfare (Alkon, 2008; Parkins and Craig, 2009; Savarese et al., 2020). Connectedly, some consumer sectors expressed their disapproval of the commercial expansion of genetically modified food, adding a health-related concern to their political stance (Grasseni, 2014; Pétursson, 2018). This translated, in certain cases, into a redefinition of alternative consumption spaces as *countercultural* places of active political participation and committed resistance against established power structures (Parkins and Craig, 2009; Gómez Mestres and Lien, 2017; Pétursson, 2018). In other cases, perhaps more moderate or without so much activist focus, the AFN partakers expressed their political intentions by claiming to carry out a morally responsible economic alternative, of a "more humane value framework" (Gómez Mestres and Lien, 2017, p. 629) and based on solidarity (Grasseni, 2014).

4.1.3 Socialization and commonality

Secondary analysis of the qualitative research identified a further set of values related to the social realm, specifically to the positive interactions that participating in AFNs can encompass. These findings highlight and elaborate on the atmosphere of conviviality and the deep social relations that emerge in unconventional spaces of food exchange. Such emphasis on socialization and on generating contexts of conscious interaction is contrasted with the anonymity and depersonalization of supermarkets, where the only purpose is the fast acquisition of goods (Pétursson, 2018). In contrast, for the surveyed

producers, organizers and consumers, the richness of the alternative experience is complemented by the "creation of community," and the consequent feeling of *belonging* to a special group of citizens and neighbors (Parkins and Craig, 2009; O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015; Pétursson, 2018). At the same time, these settings allow for the confluence of individuals from different backgrounds but similar mindsets, motivated by common interests, ideals, and values (Feenstra, 2002; Gómez Mestres and Lien, 2017; Kallio, 2020; Savarese et al., 2020).

The Social Capital of alternative food networks, then, becomes appreciated for its capacity to generate opportunities and projects (Feenstra, 2002), to provide spaces for knowledge exchange (O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015; Savarese et al., 2020) or long-term cooperation structures that go beyond the trading of food (Gómez Mestres and Lien, 2017). In this sense, some stakeholders refer to the importance of *trust* and *reciprocity* as core values, whether for carrying out fair economic transactions, distributing tasks, solving problems, ensuring the quality and safety of products, or even disseminating information about the health benefits of certain diets (Feenstra, 2002; O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015; Pétursson, 2018; Savarese et al., 2020).

4.1.4 Personal aspects

Despite the collective motivations and social values highlighted in the AFNs, there are several studies that also analyze underlying individualistic incentives and reflect on the personal reasons that lead people to opt for organic, local, or intermediary-free food.

The first subset within this section corresponds to the category of *health* and *wellbeing*, as a primary axis that sustains users in their practices and defines, according to Hall (2011), the corporeal nature of consumption. Following the ethnographic results, concern for health and disease prevention is one of the major determinants referred by consumers, shaping their food purchasing choices and often being put before other categories such as price, convenience, and sustainability (Makatouni, 2002; Hall, 2011; Grasseni, 2014; Grosglik, 2016; Pétursson, 2018). The weight of this value becomes so important that authors such as Makatouni (2002) and Hall (2011) analyze its adscription to the notions of *responsibility* and *moral action*: a commitment of consumers toward preserving themselves and their families from the dangers of a "bad" industrial diet (processed, impure, contaminated). In this sense, Schösler et al. (2013) suggest that food practices can even acquire religious or spiritual undertones, whether through the pursuit of a healthy, natural lifestyle or through disciplinary self-control against the temptations of mainstream consumerism. Therefore, the idea that "the body is a temple" resurfaces among different types of consumers and participants to explain their alternative food choices, reinforce a sense of duty, and justify the pre-eminence of selfish values (Salam et al., 2022).

Connected to the practices of health promotion and nutrition surveillance emerges a new subset of individual values, which are organized around the concept of *care* and the emotional responses that certain products elicit in consumers. Caring, a principle that is prominent in the domains of goodwill and social responsibility, is here expressed in people's attitudes toward themselves and family health, and in the voiced concerns—especially of parents—regarding food quality and safety for their children (Makatouni, 2002; Hall, 2011; Grosglik, 2016; Pétursson, 2018; Salam et al., 2022). Being vigilant about the origin/ingredients/production of the consumed goods displays a specific form of loving behavior and affective labor in the household (Hall, 2011; Pétursson, 2018). At the same time, the notion of *care* is employed to speak about the drive to protect/respect one's well-being and physical body by eating "clean" and green (Salam et al., 2022, p. 4877). In this sense, caring is an activity that displays both relational and personal benefits. On one hand, by taking care of others through organic food purchases, people ensure to safeguard the health and nutritional needs of those in their family. On the other hand, such caring behavior (toward the family or oneself) is accompanied by feelings of pride, self-fulfillment, and peer recognition (Pétursson, 2018).

Finally, the adoption of sustainable food practices and the pursuit of an alternative lifestyle can become elements of social distinction and self-enhancement for those who adopt them, especially in terms of possessing awareness and autonomy (Pétursson, 2018). Being an active part of local trade networks or purchasing products outside of extended supply chains implies separating from mainstream consumption in pursuit of other intangible benefits, transferring the moral values of collectivism and sustainability to all those involved. At the same time, prioritizing aspects such as health/self-care, demonstrating nutritional knowledge and expressing environmental consciousness through consumption represents a form of Cultural Capital, functional to the construction of certain contemporary cosmopolitan identities (Grosglik, 2016).

4.1.5 Material and symbolic values of food

The last subset within the map of values corresponds to the material and symbolic qualities that the participants of the alternative food networks attribute to the goods acquired there. Being able to obtain ingredients directly from farmers or with knowledge of their origin and production process (proximity, without additives or agrochemicals) is associated with notions of *naturalness*, *freshness*, *authenticity*, and *simplicity*, reinforced through sensory experiences (taste, smell, appearance), emotional responses (feeling better, with more energy) or the exercise of *trust* (in labels, in producers) (Parkins and Craig, 2009; O'Kane and Wijaya, 2015; Pétursson, 2018; Kallio, 2020).

Among all the concepts attributed to food, the notion of *purity* stands out, as examined in the ethnographies of Schösler et al. (2013), Pétursson (2018), and Kallio (2020), respectively. This idea is mainly used to characterize organic foods, which maintain an original "essence" when produced without significant alterations or interventions (chemicals, pesticides, or artificial fertilizers). Said essence is corroborated by the variety of shapes, colors, and textures of the products (e.g., vegetables), which differs from the uniform and consistent presentation of the supermarkets and regular stores. Purity, however, also poses a dual character, since—in addition to being a material value given to food—, it is an immaterial or symbolic value representing the *moral purity* of certain consumption choices (green, sustainable, healthy) and the search for a significant lifestyle, guided by modesty, sensitivity, and commitment to others (Schösler et al., 2013).

5 Discussion

Through the detailed analysis of qualitative research, we have been able to gain insight into the complexity of alternative consumption and, more specifically, into the multifaceted nature of the food

experience. Undoubtedly, food-related practices operate as a "vehicle" or mobilizing agent that enables a whole series of social and individual phenomena, which coexist and are negotiated in everyday choices regarding purchase, diet, locality, and people. Alongside the materiality of food—and its possibilities as consumable goods—we find political expressions, ideals about society, responsibilities (to the environment, the community, the family), ties and opportunities for the expression of moral values, personal drives, and identities. As Gómez Mestres and Lien (2017, p. 625) state, "food (…) is more than a commodity," for it unlocks a universe of culturally encoded (and non-necessarily nutritional) meanings (Barthes, 1994; Contreras and Gracia, 2005).

Ethical/moral discourses are a recurring element in contemporary cultural landscapes, in which increasingly high levels of political commitment are expected of consumer-citizens (Lewis and Potter, 2011). More and more frequently, we are urged to position on numerous matters through various operations ranging from participation in institutional spaces to marketplace activism (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007; Echegaray, 2015). Hence, the acts of purchase, use and disposal of goods no longer denote just our origin, class, gender, or education, but also help us express our aspirational ideals about the world we want to inhabit and the people we want to be. This relates to the concept of "regimes of living" by Collier and Lakoff (2005, p. 22), where everyday experience is transformed into a constant ethical problematization of *how to live*, and moral reasoning is used to guide decisions and actions. Cultural practices of evaluation and validation—also known as *orders of worth* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006)— therefore define the shared vocabularies for good/bad, right/wrong, and desired/rejected that will be used to organize existence. In that sense, a moral rhetoric is used to produce, reproduce, and modify determined social orders, drawing the difference between "us" and "them," and establishing roles, obligations, and attitudes (Sassatelli, 2001, 2004; Dannenberg et al., 2012).

The revised ethnographic documents were consistent with the existing literature on the ethical values that alternative food embodies for those involved in it (Zanoli and Naspetti, 2001; Honkanen et al., 2006; Moisander, 2007; Baumann et al., 2017). Principles such as sustainability, equity, redistribution, environmental responsibility, democratic participation, and solidarity are referred to by users and creators of AFNs to describe the underlying philosophy of their consumption practices. The moral weight of these categories is expressed in a diverse range, that goes from concern—or willingness to get involved in causes that are important—to responsibility and a feeling of duty. Whatever the intensity of the narrative, it is noteworthy the way in which ordinary people take advantage of everyday events (such as buying and selling food) to give voice to criticisms about the dominant system, the conditions of the planet, or the social fabric. This necessarily entails a self-recognition of citizens as potential agents of change, capable of organizing collective structures to enhance their efforts. It will therefore remain to explore the degree of political engagement resulting from this acknowledgement and the available possibilities, both personal and structural, for exercising such agency.

From the perspective of ethical consumption, it should be emphasized that the relation between values and action is not merely one-sided and that social research in sustainability can provide further insights into the influence of context in moral development. As Hall (2011) stated in her work, it is relevant to focus on how a person's principles guide their conduct but also on how certain practices contribute to the forging of a value scheme. Contact with others, the circulation of ideas and identification with a group, can lead to the adoption of new consumption behaviors and the deployment of new goals and values associated with that (Lazaric et al., 2020). As Arce Salazar et al. (2013) state, social learning is fully present in consumption decisions, where through interaction with different social actors, people receive information and, consequently, revise their beliefs and preferences. This reinforces the already-mentioned idea that values are inseparable from experience (Graebner, 2013) and that viewing them only as *a priori* categories, preceding any human act, can result in reductionist interpretations of social reality.

Together with collective commitment, the reviewed documents also show how the moral aspects of consumption shift to the private sphere, where people assume an ethical responsibility of caring for themselves and their family members, and exercise it through gastronomic choices. The value of health is recognized in the related literature as a fundamental determinant of alternative food practices (Goetzke et al., 2014; Rahnama, 2017; Apaolaza et al., 2018; Kushwah et al., 2019), and was identified as one of the most prominent personal motivations in the selected ethnographies. Buying quality food (healthy, nutritious, safe) for the family diet is defined as an act of care and love toward children and partners, part of the moral obligations generated within the household.

Although the family is usually taken as the minimum unit in the analysis of consumption, it is relevant to highlight the clear gendered component in the distribution of this caring effort. As several authors have pointed out, despite some advancements in social structures and equality, the burden of moral labor remains unbalanced between men and women, leaving mostly mothers and wives in charge of domestic, care-related duties (Tronto, 1989; Friedman, 1995). Activities such as food evaluation, selection, procurement, and preparation, together with family health monitoring, management, and safeguarding, are typically female-led, and associated with an idea of *natural*, *maternal* disposition (Schafer and Schafer, 1989; Pezo Silva et al., 2004; Contreras and Gracia, 2005; Esteban, 2006). This gender aspect is not always recognized in the empirical research about AFNs, contributing to an already widespread invisibilization of women's unpaid labor and masking disparities in other areas of the organizational structures.

It is also worth remarking that the issue of care and ethics-based politics presents a double face or paradox when it comes to analyzing sustainable practices. On one hand, as pointed out by several ecofeminist authors, building social and environmental behaviors around caring relationships (i.e., sensitive, tender, affectionate—what could be considered a feminized ethics of care—) could be a possible solution to the selfish materialism and environmental degradation of (a male-centered) capitalism (Mies and Shiva, 1993; Davidson and Stratford, 2006; Nightingale, 2006). On the other hand, an uncritical reproduction of a care-related morality—based on hegemonic roles—perpetuates essentialist notions of gender and nature that are functional to structures of domination and unequal social orders. What appears as *caring*, *nurturing*, and *responsible* in the eyes of these schemes is accompanied by moral demands (i.e., "good wife," "good mother," "with feminine regard") that are deployed differentially across gender identities (Cairns et al., 2013).

According to Macgregor (2006), it is therefore problematic to reduce women's ethical-political lives to caregiving, because community/environmental participation requires more than just relationships of service and collaboration. At the same time,

maintaining reductionist views that put all women (and their potential for political activity) inside a unified category, without considering intersectional dimensions of experience based on class, ethnicity, age, religion, etc. into consideration, raises additional issues (Jackson, 1993). Social research on alternative consumption must therefore delve deeper into the position of women within these networks, as well as their role in environmental citizenship. At the same time, it is necessary to assess how moral rhetorics regarding family food are constructed and maintained (Goodman et al., 2010), and how they contribute (even inadvertently) to sustaining unequal care burdens through the persuasive power of a "maternal archetype" (Stearney, 1994). Finally, sociocultural critique can also be extended to the widespread use of the term "family" as a homogeneous organization, without delving into the multiplicity of experiences that such a category encompasses in modern societies. This compels academic efforts to consider role distribution not only as a gendered aspect but also in relation to other power dynamics within domestic (and extra-domestic) structures.

In relation to social values, multiple academic studies agree on consumers' interest in cultivating social relationships from their alternative purchase practices (Kingsley and Townsend, 2006; DesRivières et al., 2017; Zhao and Wise, 2019). The attributes emerging from the reviewed qualitative papers—commonality, association, trust—reflect AFN participants' aspiration for achieving new collective ties that could convert everyday economic transactions into relational (as well as material) rewards. In increasingly disconnected or isolating urban contexts, the search for proximity and belonging to a group of like-minded peers understandably becomes an attractive reason to approach this kind of projects (Frumkin, 2002; Zoll et al., 2018). Such purposive interactions and resulting local linkages address the social and emotional needs of those involved while enhancing well-being, strengthening the community fabric, and supporting the attachment to space. Parkins and Craig (2009, p. 90) refer to this as the "affective politics of food," which constitutes new ways of apprehending the world and transforming subjects and communities.

Processes of social differentiation and demarcation also arise from alternative food practices, community-building actions, and specific consumption groups. These aspects do not represent a major component within the overall value map but have been recognized in some of the ethnographic examples, and other scholarship, as relevant personal factors behind AFNs and organic food purchases (Costa et al., 2011; Johnston and Szabo, 2011; Elliott, 2013). This is generally noticeable in the narrative constructions about collective membership ("us" vs. "others"), and participants' self-perceptions as being different from mainstream culture (by caring for the environment, advocating for social justice or being conscious about the food given to children). Qualities attributed to the performed activities (sustainability, responsibility, commitment, solidarity, embeddedness) are therefore transferred to the people involved in them, as bearers of distinctive attributes with respect to other segments of the population.

In the case of local or organic food, for example, symbolic power is not only derived from the acquired goods but also from what is required to obtain them, involving a combination of cultural capital (knowledge, awareness), economic capital (as these products are generally more expensive than others) and social capital (links of participation and access). The time factor devoted to these projects, the degree of political involvement and the organization that this requires also contribute to strengthening the distinction value attainable in these cases. This can eventually lead to what authors such as Grosglik (2016, p. 735) call new expressions of "cultural cosmopolitanism," which correspond to fashionable tendencies that re-fetishize alternative goods to turn them into "ethical" or "local" merchandize. For others, the inclination toward sustainable consumption does not necessarily reflect a premeditated desire for status and display, but rather represents an expected response within certain social trajectories, specific to collective and individual histories (Elliott, 2013). In any of these scenarios, it is important to continue investigating the combination of personal/shared and conscious/unconscious motivations, to analyze their origin, their situated character, and the relationship that "green" consumption has with the social structure or the *habitus* of participants.

The topic of self-perception and group affiliation also raises the question about the processes of identity construction linked to consumption and the range of values involved between the individual and social dimensions of self. These aspects are constantly reinforced and negotiated through ideas, activities, discourses, and elections, which affirm to us and to others who we are (Giddens, 1991). Of course, the weight of material behavior on identity is not totalizing, since the shaping of it does not only respond to conscious decisions but to an interplay between contextual aspects, learning, structural possibilities, conventions, and routines (Warde, 1994; Wilska, 2002). However, it is of interest to see how alternative food practices and associated lifestyles are taken by people as expressions of themselves, and to what extent they attach identity meanings to their dietary choices. At the same time, it is essential to inquire into the circumstances that lead individuals to channel their identity needs into consumer culture, and to seek certain personal qualities—freedom, empowerment, contact with nature, social connection, responsibility—through commodities and participation (Soron, 2010). Social research should therefore continue to explore the interplay between distinction, green consumption, and identity, to strengthen the body of empirical knowledge on this topic and to discuss important questions about the conflict between collectively driven initiatives and the individualizing forces of the market (which, even in relation to sustainability still appeal to persons, not assemblies).

A final dimension that is worth highlighting within the data analysis relates to the inclusion of emotions/affects in the value system of the AFNs. Whether as a driving force to take care of others or as an emotional response derived from goods and the community, *sentimental value* appeared recurrently in several of the qualitative studies, showing a key component for participation and identification in sustainable initiatives. According to authors such as Murdoch and Miele (2004), Parkins and Craig (2009), Hall (2011), and Pétursson (2018), among others, participants load alternative food practices with affective-sentimental components, ranging from reminiscences of other times, sensory experiences, pleasure, love, joy, or appreciation for a "slow" temporality opposed to modern demands. This prompts us to pay more attention to a generally ignored element in the study of consumption motivations, that emerges as valuable in empirical, field-based research. Brosch and Steg (2021), even state that the question of sustainable commitment can lie in the emotional reactions elicited by certain experiences, as people look to repeat those situations or behaviors, they find positive or pleasing. Concurrently, emotions hold the capacity to form collectives, to connect individuals with others through the sharing of bodily and psychological

impressions (Ahmed, 2004). In this sense, we propose future explorations of this aspect in the framework of what Anderson and Smith (2001) or Davidson et al. (2016) call "emotional geographies," as points of intersection between embodied experiences of people and environments. This accounts for the articulation of the sensible realm with the pragmatic, situated one, to unveil the interactional aspect of "being," "feeling," and place (Davidson and Milligan, 2004). Additionally, it would be valuable to delve deeper into the junction between these affective landscapes and the previously mentioned ethical "regimes of living," to thoroughly inspect both the positive and negative outcomes of contact and dissociation between sentiment, morality, action and intention.

6 Final remarks

From what could be construed from the reviewed literature, value-based engagement in alternative food initiatives is a complex phenomenon that is far from being monocausal. Although ethical, political, social, personal, and material values have been operationally distinguished in the exploration of people's incentives, the evidence suggests that each of these categories exists in close correlation with the others and that both creators and participants of AFNs balance diverse, and even seemingly conflicting, principles (e.g., social vs. Altruistic motives).

The small number of ethnographic texts found during the process of data retrieval shows the need for further qualitative research on values behind sustainable consumption and AFNs, to access new levels of understanding of their socio-cultural and symbolic aspects. For example, additional enquiry is needed in relation to moral rhetorics, gender imbalances, social distinction, and emotions within these practices. In terms of geographical scope and breadth, it is also indispensable to direct our academic attention to the AFN initiatives and motivation-based experiences of other regions of the world apart from developed affluent ones. This calls for supplementary reflection on the differential values and value-construction processes of Eastern and Western societies, including the prescriptive/standardizing categories that emerge from the nuclear centers of knowledge production.

Overall, fieldwork-based and in-depth approaches such as ethnography can provide useful insights in relation to these topics while strengthening the contribution of disciplines such as anthropology and critical social sciences in food and sustainability studies. Moreover, this experiential and context-dependent focus can help avoid the risks of purely top-down and normative approaches in the development of interventions, informing prospective organizational initiatives, innovation programs, and policies from a culturally sensitive and reflective viewpoint. Other institutional areas that could benefit from qualitatively produced knowledge are those related to education, environment and public health, by providing them with useful information on communities' divergent priorities, conflicting meanings and internal power struggles that could be hampering planning and development efforts.

Author contributions

LM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. T-MP: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. M-GL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This publication is framed within the research grant "Sustainable food networks as chains of values for agroecological and food transition. Implications for territorial public policies" (PID2020-112980GB-C21 and PID2020-112980GB-C22; 2021-2025), funded by the Spanish Scientific, Technical and Innovation Research Plan: MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033. For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license to any author accepted manuscript version arising from this submission.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The handling editor CY declared a shared research group [Sustainable food networks as chains of values for agro-ecological and food transitions. Implications for public territorial policies] with the authors at the time of review.

Publisher's note

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