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RESEARCH

Understanding Personal Food Values in Social Movements: Evidence from Slow Food Germany

Elia Carceller-Sauras[1] · **Insa Theesfeld**[1]

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Abstract
Food movements play an increasingly influential role in shaping ethical debates and food system practices. Yet, little empirical research has explored the moral frameworks that guide food movements. This study addresses that gap by introducing the Values System for Food, a new methodological instrument adapted from Schwartz's Short Value Survey. Designed to assess food-related personal values, the tool captures eight core values through 31 targeted statements. We applied this instrument in a proof-of-concept study on Slow Food Germany—a group chosen for its explicit ethical agenda of promoting food that is "good, clean, and fair." Our aim was to explore the ethical architecture of the organization by focusing on how the personal value systems of members align with the movement's core principles. Specifically, we examined the degree of value coherence among participants and the dominant ethical orientations present in the group. Notably, our analysis revealed no significant differences in the value portfolios across subgroups in the organization, challenging the common assumption that these subgroups would exhibit distinct value patterns. Challenging initial expectations of a dominant hedonistic–universalist orientation, our findings reveal a more nuanced configuration, with universalism, security, and self-direction emerging as key priorities. This suggests that food ethics within social movements is not monolithic but composed of diverse, interacting moral commitments. By tracing the ethical foundations of Slow Food Germany, this study offers both empirical insight and conceptual advancement in understanding how grassroots movements contribute to ethical transformation of food systems. It engages with debates on food sovereignty and justice in food governance, showing how ethical commitments are shaped and maintained within participatory, value-driven organizations.

Keywords Values system for food · Social movements · Sustainable food systems · Food ethics · Slow food

✉ Elia Carceller-Sauras
elia.carceller@gmail.com

Insa Theesfeld
insa.theesfeld@landw.uni-halle.de

[1] Institute of Agricultural and Nutritional Sciences, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Halle, Germany

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Introduction

Over the past decade, food and nutrition have gained increasing visibility in public debate—not only with regard to food security and public health, but also as matters deeply intertwined with ethical, environmental, and political concerns. Although calls for a sustainable transformation of food systems have proliferated, achieving such transformation remains difficult. A key impediment lies in the sector's moral complexity: food systems are shaped by multiple, often equally legitimate ethical standpoints that coexist and frequently come into conflict within public arenas (Olde & Valentinov, 2019). This plurality of moral claims helps explain why initiatives grounded in more conservative discourses tend to gain political traction more readily and are more likely to be translated into concrete policy measures(Carceller-Sauras and Theesfeld 2021). Current food crises further expose the structural weaknesses of the corporate food regime (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011), as rising production levels coexist with hunger, environmental harm, and inequality. Scholars argue that meaningful and inclusive transformation cannot be achieved through technical or institutional reforms alone (Guthman 2011; Holt-Giménez et al. 2009; Leeuwis et al. 2021; Ruben et al. 2021). Instead, it requires a fundamental reorientation of the ethical values shaping food production, distribution, and consumption (Bui et al. 2019; Elver, 2023; Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Yet the value systems guiding organized food movements remain underexplored, despite their significant role in driving normative change within complex systems like the food one (Temper et al. 2018).

Existing research shows that activist groups hold internally diverse—and often conflicting—views on policy issues, which limits their ability to act collectively (Alkon and Guthman 2017; Soliev et al. 2021). Within this context, Slow Food—a food movement grounded in sustainability, justice, and cultural preservation—constitutes a distinctive example that links gastronomic culture with ethical, ecological, and political commitments, redefining what counts as "good" food in times of global crisis. Understanding how members articulate and prioritize the values that underpin this engagement is therefore essential for situating Slow Food within broader debates on food system transformation.

In this context, we argue that Slow Food Germany offers a particularly rich case for examining how individual moral frameworks shape collective identity. Slow Food functions as a hybrid entity: internationally, it operates as a social movement with a mobilizing narrative around 'good, clean, and fair' food, while at the national level chapters such as Slow Food Germany take the form of civil society organizations with formal membership and governance structures (Slow Food International 2020). This multi-scalar configuration reflects the movement's decentralized and participatory ethos. Our study investigates how the value systems of German members align with these narratives and principles.

Meanwhile, prior research has consistently documented gender-based differences in dietary choices and consumption patterns (Dillon-Murray et al., 2023), while numerous contextual and situational factors also influence individuals' food-related decision-making (Tian et al. 2002). In light of these findings, the present study also sought to examine potential subgroup differences within the sample. To this end, we focused on five explanatory variables that prior literature has linked to variations in food attitudes and ethical reasoning: age, gender, educational attainment, the presence of children in the household, and years of SFG membership (Blair et al. 2024; Claessens et al. 2023; Ditlevsen et al. 2020; Tavenner and Crane 2018).

To conduct this investigation, we introduce a novel methodological framework: The Values System for Food. This tool adapts Schwartz's widely used Short Value Survey (Schwartz 2012) to the domain of food, redesigning its value constructs to reflect food-specific concerns. The revised survey operationalizes eight core value domains through 31 context-specific statements, allowing us to empirically explore how abstract moral ideals are translated into food-related values.

Our aim is twofold. First, we seek to contribute conceptually to the field of food ethics by deepening the understanding of how individual values align with collective ethical discourses within food movements. Second, we offer an empirical contribution through the application of our adapted instrument in a proof-of-concept study. In doing so, we provide a replicable model for investigating how personal food-related values are expressed in contexts explicitly oriented towards food system transformation.

Understanding the moral underpinnings of such movements is vital not only for academic theorization but also for practice. Civil society organizations like Slow Food often serve as laboratories for ethical innovation, shaping public discourse and influencing policy through grassroots engagement (Daugbjerg and Feindt 2017; Giraldo and Rosset 2018; Petrini & Waters, 2004). Gaining insight into the values held by their members can inform internal strategies, external messaging, and alliances with other actors in the agri-food system.

This manuscript is structured as follows. In Section The Role of Values in Food Systems Transformation, we review theoretical literature connecting human values and food systems transformation. Section Developing the Values System for Food: the Proposed Concept introduces the conceptual design of the Values System for Food. In Section Proof of Concept: the Empirical and Analytical Approach, we detail the methodological framework used to test this concept. Section Results presents our empirical findings based on a survey of Slow Food Germany members. Finally, Section Conclusion discusses the broader implications of the findings and offers conclusions for both research and practice.

The Role of Values in Food Systems Transformation

Values lie at the heart of the transformation of food systems toward greater sustainability, equity, and resilience: what do individuals, communities, and societies consider important when it comes to food? While much attention in the literature has been devoted to food choices and pro-environmental practices, particularly through the lens of social psychology (Al Mamun et al. 2024; Carfora et al. 2019; Pasquariello et al. 2024; Zhang et al. 2020), fewer studies have interrogated the ethical and motivational foundations that drive those behaviors.

Values function as cognitive and emotional standards that guide human perception, judgment, behavior, and political orientation of human beings (Rathbun et al. 2016; Rokeach 1973; Stern et al. 1999). They shape not only individual choices but also cultural expectations and social norms (Grunert and Juhl 1995; Schwartz 1992; Zhang et al. 2020). The World Values Survey, for example, has shown how deeply rooted values impact broader social phenomena such as democratic governance, economic development, and gender equality (*The World Values Survey*, 2020).

Values are not static; they are socially constructed, transmitted, and embodied through institutions, communities, and personal experiences (Blair et al. 2024; Ditlevsen et al. 2020).

They are also not only beliefs but relational practices shaping how people engage with food systems (Seymour and Connelly 2023). However, how values manifest specifically in food-related contexts remains underexplored, even among so-called "converted" populations—those already engaged with food movements (Landrum and Lull 2017; Soliev et al. 2021). For this reason, these groups might be expected to express strong ethical coherence that moves beyond moral individualism toward a systemic understanding of ethical orientations (Guthman 2011; Hitlin and Vaisey 2013; Vaisey 2009) - but this assumption often lacks empirical verification. Moreover, while values are often conceptualized as stable constructs, evidence suggests they are also domain-specific and dynamic: people may express different values in contexts like work, family, or food (Lindeman and Väänänen 2000). In this sense, food-related values may form a distinctive moral repertoire. Understanding these repertoires is essential for designing culturally sensitive and normatively grounded strategies for food system change.

Holt-Giménez and Shattuck's (2011) show that value orientations structure the transformative capacities of food movements. Their typology places initiatives such as Slow Food within a progressive space where agroecology, territorialized food systems, and culturally grounded notions of quality operate as explicitly value-driven commitments. From a Polanyian perspective (Block and Polanyi 2001), these actors function as counter-movements to the social and ecological disruptions of market deregulation, mobilizing justice, sustainability, and solidarity as normative foundations. Crucially, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck argue that transformation depends on articulating coherent moral frameworks and, when aligned with radical actors, contesting the corporate food regime's legitimacy. Our analysis builds on this by examining whether shared values motivate participation, authorize political claims, and shape the scope of food system change.

Operationalizing Values in Food Research

Although personal values have been central to psychological and sociological research for decades (Greve 2022; Rokeach 1973; Schwartz 1992), their application within the context of food is still emerging. Recent studies have begun to connect personal values with consumer behavior, sustainability preferences, and attitudes toward food quality and origin (Blair et al. 2024; Blake et al. 2023; Grunert and Juhl 1995; Weinrich et al. 2014).

For example, Olsen and Tuu (2021) examined the conflict between long-term goals and short-term gratification in food decision-making. They found that values such as self-control, hedonism, or security played a conflicting role in shaping dietary decisions. Similarly, Truong et al. (2021) showed that value orientations also influence opinions on food governance and production ethics, while Thøgersen (2010) identified a correlation between openness to change and support for environmentally friendly agricultural practices.

Cultural and family values also play a role: Chiles and Fitzgerald (2018) argue that "family values" sustain meat consumption in U.S. households, revealing the interplay between ethics and identity. Other studies also point to the value of tradition as being very important to people in relation to cooking and production practices (Buddle et al. 2023). Also, in the German context, Cicia et al. (2021) discovered that self-transcendence and conservation values significantly shape attitudes towards farmers´ markets and environmentally conscious purchasing behavior. At the same time, several comprehensive value frameworks - like the Barrett Values Model (Barrett 2011), the Valued Living Questionnaire (Wilson

et al. 2010) and the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014) – offer useful insights into value dynamics. Yet, their generality limits their applicability to the food-specific context. Notable efforts have been made to apply value-based frameworks to the study of food ethics and its dynamics. For example, Te Velde et al. (2002) developed a framework that employs values to assess public perceptions of animal breeding, while Hölker et al. (2019) conducted a study on animal ethics that is particularly relevant to our research. The latter applied the Schwartz Theory of Values (Schwartz 2012) to segment German consumers, demonstrating that animal-ethical intuitions can be embedded within the general value system as domain-specific values. Their analysis identified five consumer groups with distinct animal-ethical value profiles and revealed clear links between these profiles and dietary choices, showing, for instance, that rejection of relationism (the view that humans' moral obligations toward animals depend on the kind of relationship they maintain with them) was associated with higher rates of flexitarianism and vegetarianism. Building on this approach, our study extends this line of inquiry by adapting Schwartz's Value Survey to the food domain, enabling the isolation and analysis of food-specific values.

In sum, despite growing empirical interest, scholars still lack a robust methodological framework for capturing the structure and expression of food-related values in both general and activist populations. This paper seeks to supply and test such a framework.

Theoretical Foundation: Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values

To understand food-related value orientations systematically, we turn to Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values (Schwartz 1992, 2012). This widely validated model defines values as trans-situational goals that express what people find important in life and that guide behavior, decision-making, and social judgment.

The Schwartz model is particularly well-suited to our investigation due to its strong empirical foundation and cross-cultural validity. Tested in over 200 samples across 67 countries, it provides a universal yet flexible framework to compare value orientations across individuals and societies (Barnea and Schwartz 1998; Morselli et al. 2012; Roccas et al. 2002; Schwartz 1992, 2012).

The original model identifies ten core values, each rooted in basic human needs—biological, social, or survival-related. These domains include: benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, and tradition. To illustrate motivational proximities and tensions, these are arranged in a circular continuum: adjacent values are mutually supportive, while opposite values tend to conflict.

These ten values are grouped into four higher-order categories based on their underlying motivational goals: self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness to change, and conservation. This model enables researchers to analyze value conflicts and compatibilities, particularly in ethically sensitive fields such as food ethics (Fig. 1).

In 2017, Schwartz expanded the model to include 19 more specific values (Schwartz 2017). However, in our study we chose to retain the original 10-value model for two main reasons: First, it aligns with widely used international surveys, such as the European Social Survey (ESS), which also employs the original version (Bilsky et al. 2011). Second, reducing the number of value items helped us minimize respondent fatigue and reduce the risk of incomplete questionnaires—an important consideration for survey-based research (Menon and Muraleedharan 2020).

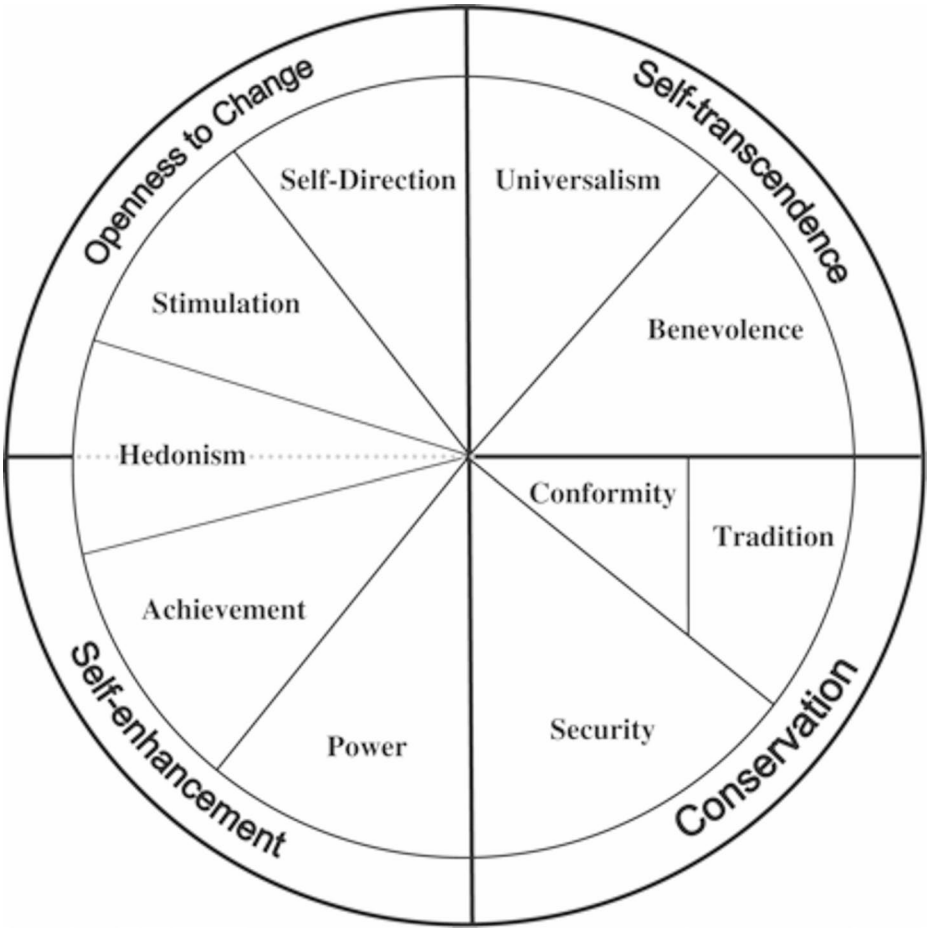

Fig. 1 Schwartz Values Circumplex (Schwartz 2012)

In the following section, we detail how we adapted this framework to the food context, forming the basis for our "Values System for Food" instrument.

Developing the Values System for Food: the Proposed Concept

While Schwartz's theory of basic human values (Schwartz 1992, 2012) has been widely applied in diverse fields—from political attitudes to gender studies and environmental behavior—it has rarely been applied for the specific domain of food and, to our knowledge, no methodological tool has fully operationalized Schwartz's value theory to the ethical dimensions of food systems in a comprehensive way.

To address this gap, we constructed what we call the Values System for Food, an adapted framework grounded in Schwartz's value theory but reinterpreted specifically for the food context. Our starting point was the ten original values outlined by Schwartz (1992), which

we critically examined through the lens of food ethics and consumer studies (Dreezens et al. 2005; Grunert et al. 2014). From this process, we identified eight values that were both theoretically relevant and empirically adaptable to food-related scenarios and excluded two of the original ten values—conformity and achievement (see Table 1). Conformity proved difficult to operationalize meaningfully within the domain of food without significant overlap with tradition. Moreover, achievement as a value was deemed too abstract for the types of food-related scenarios we intended to measure, and its application would likely have diluted interpretive clarity. Unlike other studies that have applied Schwartz's existing value items to specialized domains, our approach rearticulates each value in language and examples explicitly connected to food behavior, ethics, and identity.

To construct our survey instrument, we began with the German version of the Short Schwartz Value Survey (Boer 2013)and systematically recontextualized each item for the food domain. This procedure resulted in a 31-item questionnaire that operationalizes the eight selected values through food-specific statements (see Table 2). The adaptation process was informed by relevant scholarly literature, as well as by pretesting and cognitive interviews ($n=6$), which ensured that the reworded statements were both context-sensitive and easily comprehensible (Willis 2005).

For instance, the original SSVS item "social power" (Lindeman and Verkasalo 2005) was adapted to "deciding which restaurant to visit," illustrating how power relations may surface in routine food decisions. These types of reinterpretations are unavoidably contextual and culturally situated, and we acknowledge the degree of subjectivity involved. Nonetheless, we made a deliberate effort to remain as faithful as possible to the original Short Schwartz Value Survey. This choice was guided by the extensive empirical validation of the SSVS and its long-standing application across a wide range of cultural, behavioral, and attitudinal research settings (Bilsky et al. 2011; Lindeman and Verkasalo 2005; Morselli et al. 2012).

Our aim was not to alter Schwartz's methodological foundations but to translate them into the domain of food ethics. By adapting items to food-specific contexts while retaining their motivational structure, we preserved the model's theoretical integrity and psycho-

Table 1 The Schwartz Values for the food domain

Benevolence	Preserving and enhancing the nutritional welfare and food environment of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact.
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensual reward of taste.
Power	The human being is dominant over nature's resources and access to them is a matter of social and economic status.
Security	The food system is stable and everyone has enough and healthy food available.
Self-direction	The opportunity to decide independently about your own diet, freely and with sufficient information.
Stimulation	Discovering new culinary techniques, the fun of trying new dishes and the challenge of cooking with new recipes.
Tradition	Respect, commitment and acceptance of customs towards diet prescribed by tradition or religion.
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection of the well-being of all people, animals and nature.

Table 2 Items transferred into specific statements to determine the values system for food

In the following we briefly describe different people. Please read each description and consider how similar or dissimilar the person is to you. How similar is the person to you? It is important for this person…		Value represented by the item
1	…to be creative in cooking and nutrition. This person enjoys being original and unique when cooking.	Self-direction
2	…to make purchasing decisions based solely on taste and quality, regardless of price.	Power
3	…that everyone in the world has the same opportunities for healthy and sufficient nutrition. This person wants food justice to prevail worldwide, even for people who are not involved or interested in the discussion.	Universalism
4	…that everyone in her/his country has sufficient and healthy food.	Security
5	…to experiment with food and to always be on the lookout for different dishes and products to try.	Stimulation
6	…to be tolerant of many different food cultures and habits.	Universalism
7	…that people do not consume excessively.	Tradition
8	…that her food tastes good and that it brings her pleasure.	Hedonism
9	…to make her own decisions about her diet.	Self-direction
10	…that the people she/he knows have enough tasty food.	Benevolence
11	…to live in a state that can guarantee all citizens sufficient and nutritious food.	Security
12	…to have a variety of new eating experiences, even if running the risk of not liking it her/himself.	Stimulation
13	…to have an influence on other people's purchasing decisions when it comes to food.	Power
14	…to be a reliable and caring host/hostess.	Benevolence
15	…that people consider the environment and animal welfare in both food production and consumption.	Universalism
16	…to preserve family or religious traditions regarding food.	Tradition
17	…to eat nutritious foods that can protect her/his health.	Security
18	…to be interested in the topic of nutrition and to take a critical look at the production of food.	Self-direction
19	…to preserve traditional values and beliefs related to food. It is important for this person that new eating habits and innovations respect the old traditions.	Tradition
20	…to take every opportunity to enjoy food. This person likes to spoil themselves.	Hedonism
21	…to offer good food to the people she cares about at every opportunity.	Benevolence
22	…that everyone involved along the value chain is treated fairly. It is important for this person to protect the vulnerable in society.	Universalism
23	…to have the feeling of discovering something new. This person likes to use ingredients from all over the world.	Stimulation
24	…to avoid all the dangers of poor nutrition.	Security
25	…not to focus on the origins of the food conflicts, but to find future-oriented solutions for the benefit of mankind.	Benevolence
26	…to plan shopping and cooking freely and independently of the opinions of others.	Self-direction
27	…to live in a geopolitical situation where the availability of food is not threatened.	Security
28	…that food tastes good to them, even if factors such as fairness and environmental awareness are not taken into account in the value chain.	Hedonism
29	…to be modest when eating. This person is content with simple dishes and fancy dishes are not important to her.	Tradition

Table 2 (continued)

In the following we briefly describe different people. Please read each description and consider how similar or dissimilar the person is to you. How similar is the person to you? It is important for this person…		Value represented by the item
30	…to decide which restaurant to go to in the evening. This person likes to take on the leadership role in the group.	Power
31	…that no living beings are harmed in the production of food. The person thinks that people should change nature as little as possible.	Universalism

metric reliability. This approach allows comparability with prior research and ensures that conceptual innovation—reframing values in relation to food—does not compromise the methodological robustness of the SSVS.Participants were asked to rate how closely they identified with each of the 31 statements using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("I am not similar to this person at all") to 6 ("I am very similar to this person"), in accordance with the coding protocols proposed by Schwartz (2007) and operationalized by Albaum (1997). Each personal value score was calculated as an index by averaging the responses to the statements designated as markers of that value, following Schwartz's original value assignment methodology (Schwartz 2006).

In the table below, we present all the statements shown to participants. Responses were recorded on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all similar") to 6 ("very similar"). To prevent potential bias, the right-hand column was concealed from view during the survey.

Proof of Concept: the Empirical and Analytical Approach

To evaluate the applicability of the Values System for Food, we conducted a proof-of-concept study with Slow Food Germany (SFG), a long-standing civil society organization promoting "good, clean, and fair" food (Schneider 2008).With over 12,000 members engaged in campaigns, education, and advocacy for ecological integrity, cultural heritage, and social justice, SFG offers an ideal setting for examining food-related ethical orientations. Its foundation integrates ethical, aesthetic, and cultural principles, uniquely framing pleasure as a legitimate component of food ethics (Petrini & Waters, 2004; Slow Food 1989) alongside the more widely shared sustainability and fairness goals (Glennie and Alkon 2018; Murray et al. 2023).

Although criticized in the early 2000s for depoliticization and market-oriented tendencies (Alkon and Guthman 2017; Guthman 2008; Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011), the movement has since undergone renewed politicization. Governance reforms and the shift to "good, clean and fair – for everyone" signal an explicit commitment to accessibility and social justice (Slow Food International 2020). In parallel, SFG has intensified engagement with institutional arenas, including EU Farm to Fork coalitions and Germany's "Wir haben es satt!" mobilizations (Petrini 2013; Slow Food International 2020; van Bommel and Spicer 2011).

This trajectory positions SFG as a pertinent case for analyzing how personal and collective values align within a progressive food movement (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011) and whether shared orientations—such as universalism—function as connective values linking reformist and transformative agendas.

Accordingly, we hypothesized that members would score highly on universalism and hedonism, reflecting the movement's ethical and gastronomic narrative. Situating our proof of concept in this politically engaged context enables us to empirically assess value configurations in real-world settings and to illuminate how civil society movements mobilize and mediate ethical commitments within food system transformation.

Survey Design

To empirically investigate the food-related values of Slow Food Germany (SFG) members, we implemented an online cross-sectional survey. This methodological approach, commonly employed to gather data at a single point in time, is well suited for capturing a snapshot of characteristics across a target population (Lavrakas 2008).

The survey consisted of two main components. The first section included the 31-item questionnaire developed from our Values System for Food, which aimed to assess how personal ethical orientations manifest in food-related values. The second section was designed to collect background information necessary for understanding the composition of the surveyed population and to enable subgroup analyses. This portion included variables such as gender, age, level of education, presence of children in the household, years of membership in Slow Food, employment status, religious affiliation, dietary habits, and political party support. While not all these variables were central to our core research objective, they served to contextualize the sample and offered auxiliary insights into the broader ethical landscape of the community.

For deeper analysis, we focused on five explanatory variables that have been associated in prior literature with variations in food attitudes and ethical reasoning: age, gender, education, presence of children in the household, and years of SFG membership (Blair et al. 2024; Claessens et al. 2023; Ditlevsen et al. 2020; Tavenner and Crane 2018). These variables were selected because they can reflect structural, experiential, or normative differences that influence how individuals prioritize specific value domains.

In particular, we paid close attention to the gender variable, given that existing literature has reported mixed findings regarding gender-based differences in values and ethical consumption within food contexts (Airey et al. 2021; Bryła 2021; Hartmann and Steinmann 2021). Some studies suggest women tend to score higher on values like universalism and benevolence, while others have found no consistent differences. Similarly, the presence of children in the household was included as a potentially significant factor, under the assumption that caregiving responsibilities and intergenerational concerns may intensify particular value expressions, such as conservation or security (Sevilla and Smith 2020).

We also examined the years of membership in SFG, hypothesizing that sustained engagement in a values-oriented organization might influence personal ethical portfolios. As research has shown, long-term affiliation with ideologically aligned social groups can lead to normative socialization and stronger internalization of group values (Clark et al. 2021). Investigating this variable offered a way to explore whether longer term organizational involvement corresponds with greater alignment in personal food ethics.

By integrating these socio-demographic variables, the survey design not only enabled an assessment of individual value orientations but also allowed us to explore how these values are socially distributed and potentially shaped by broader structural and relational factors.

Cognitive Pretest and Data Gathering

Before launching the full-scale survey and in order to test its viability and reliability, we conducted a cognitive pretest with six purposively selected participants (van Teijlingen and Hundley 2001). Pretesting is a critical phase in survey development, especially when introducing newly adapted instruments, as it helps ensure that questions are interpreted as intended and that respondents do not encounter unforeseen difficulties during completion (Drennan 2003). Given that our questionnaire involved an original adaptation of Schwartz's Short Value Survey to the domain of food, it was essential to test the conceptual clarity and linguistic accessibility of the items.

Each pretest participant completed the draft version of the survey and was then interviewed face-to-face using cognitive probing techniques (Willis 2005). These semi-structured debriefing sessions were designed to uncover ambiguities, misinterpretations, or emotional reactions to the value statements.

Based on the feedback obtained from these sessions, we revised the language of several items to enhance clarity and domain-specific relevance. These adjustments ensured that the reworded value statements were more accurately aligned with the lived food experiences and ethical intuitions of respondents. The resulting version—consisting of 31 adapted value items—was finalized and is presented in Table 2.

The final version of the survey was administered using Qualtrics, a secure and widely used online platform for developing and distributing web-based surveys. After receiving official permission from the national board of Slow Food Germany, we disseminated the survey through the organization's member newsletter ("Mitgliederrundbrief"), which reaches nearly the entire membership base. Specifically, the link to the survey, accompanied by a brief explanation of the study's objectives and importance, was distributed three times over the course of three months.

The newsletter was sent to 12,091 SFG members with active email addresses at the time. In total, 139 individuals initiated the survey. After cleaning the raw dataset for incomplete or duplicate responses, we retained 103 fully completed questionnaires for analysis. This yields an effective response rate of approximately 1.3%, and a participation rate of about 0.9%, which is consistent with online surveys common response rates (Lavidas et al. 2022). Factors such as the perceived legitimacy of the organization conducting the study (i.e., the extent to which potential participants view the institution behind the research work as credible and trustworthy), the relevance of the research topic, and the ethical soundness of the study design can significantly influence participation, but do not necessarily guarantee high response rates. Also, recent studies have demonstrated little relationship between response rates and nonresponse bias, arguing that pursuing high response rates may be costly and unnecessary (Hendra and Hill 2019; Rindfuss et al. 2015).

This study employed purposive rather than random sampling, selecting a case study that reflects a diverse portfolio of activities, core member values, and broad engagement. Although the survey was widely distributed, the respondents constitute a self-selected and likely more engaged subgroup, introducing a potential self-selection bias that limits the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, when applied with care, purposive sampling can enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of research (Campbell et al. 2020). In our case, the dataset provides a valuable exploratory window into the food-related values expressed within a highly engaged food movement, offering pre-

liminary validation of the Values System for Food instrument and insight into how ethical orientations may manifest in value-driven communities.

Non-parametric Data Analysis

To analyze the responses gathered through our 31-item Values System for Food questionnaire, we employed non-parametric statistical methods, which are particularly well-suited to the type of ordinal data generated by Likert-scale responses (Mircioiu and Atkinson 2017). Specifically, we used Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient to assess monotonic relationships between value scores and demographic variables. This method allows for detecting correlations without assuming a linear relationship or normally distributed data—an important consideration given the relatively small and non-random nature of our sample (Hauke and Kossowski 2011).

In addition, we applied the Mann–Whitney U test, a non-parametric alternative to the Student's t-test, to compare responses between subgroups (e.g., based on gender or educational attainment). The Mann–Whitney U test is designed to assess whether two independent samples come from the same population or exhibit statistically significant differences in their distributions (Kishore and Jaswal 2022). This allowed us to test, for example, whether particular value orientations were more strongly endorsed by women than men, or whether having children correlated with heightened concern for specific food-related values.

Each participant was asked to rate the importance of 31 value statements as life-guiding principles, using the aforementioned Likert scale. These 31 items were previously grouped into eight overarching personal food value categories (as outlined in Table 1). For each of the eight values, we computed mean scores by averaging the relevant item responses. These average scores represent the raw expression of each value at the individual level.

For ordinal independent variables—such as age (categorized into five groups), education (ranging from secondary school to doctoral degrees), and years of Slow Food membership (categorized into four membership-duration brackets)—we used Spearman's rank-order correlation. This method measures the strength and direction of monotonic associations between variables, without requiring the assumption of linearity or normal distribution.

For dichotomous variables, including gender (limited to male and female for the purposes of this analysis) and presence of children in the household (coded as 0 for none and 1 for at least one), we employed the Mann–Whitney U test.

All statistical analyses were conducted using the R statistical computing environment (R Core Team 2021), which enabled us to manage data efficiently and apply rigorous, replicable procedures throughout the study.

This combination of centering, correlation analysis, and group comparison allows exploration of how values are distributed within the sample and whether these values are influenced by key demographic and contextual factors. It also ensures internal validity while accommodating the exploratory nature of our pilot study.

Table 3 Values mean for the whole sample

Values	Likert scale (1–6)
Universalism	5.07
Security	5.04
Self-direction	4.94
Benevolence	4.76
Stimulation	4.43
Hedonism	4.20
Tradition	4.06
Power	3.77

Table 4 Spearman's correlations for the eight value-rates with the variables age, education and years of membership

	Age		Education		Years of membership	
	r	*p*-value*	*r*	*p*-value	*r*	*p*-value
Self-direction	0.003	0.488	0.118	0.118	0.113	0.129
Power	−0.177	**0.037**	−0.026	0.395	−0.147	0.069
Universalism	−0.048	0.317	−0.007	0.471	−0.036	0.360
Security	0.090	0.183	0.067	0.251	−0.127	0.100
Stimulation	−0.123	0.108	0.022	0.411	−0.006	0.475
Tradition	0.070	0.241	−0.072	0.234	0.054	0.295
Hedonism	−0.020	0.421	0.041	0.340	0.014	0.443
Benevolence	0.208	**0.018**	−0.030	0.381	0.162	**0.051**

Results

This section presents the findings of our empirical analysis in two stages. First, we explore the overall structure of food-related values within the sample by applying the Values System for Food. Second, we show that certain sociodemographic characteristics do not influence the structure of members´ value portfolios.

The Value System of Food in Slow Food Germany

Descriptive analysis of the sample indicates a relatively consistent pattern of food-related value preferences. The highest-ranking values among participants were universalism, security, and self-direction, suggesting a strong emphasis on global concern, stability, and personal autonomy in relation to food. These findings align with the normative mission of Slow Food, which promotes sustainability, fairness, and cultural appreciation in food practices. The values of benevolence, hedonism, and stimulation followed in the middle range, while tradition and power were ranked lowest, indicating a lesser role for hierarchical authority or adherence to conventional food norms within this community (Table 3 and 4).

These results reflect a shared food-related value portfolio that prioritizes ethics of care and sustainability over status-based or conservative motivations. Interestingly, while Slow Food rhetorically promotes the notion of "good" food as pleasurable and joyful, hedonism did not emerge as a strong dominant value, suggesting that enjoyment may be interpreted through other ethical frames, such as cultural identity or ecological responsibility.

Social-Demographic Structure of the Population

The sample was predominantly female (70.9%), highly educated (77.5% with a bachelor's degree or higher), and largely middle-aged, with 40% aged between 45 and 65. Regarding employment, 62.1% were employed either full- or part-time, while nearly 25% were retired. On religious identity, 64.7% identified as non-religious, and politically, 68.6% reported voting for the Green Party, suggesting a strong affiliation with progressive, sustainability-oriented values.

Regarding food habits, 61.8% of participants reported an omnivorous diet, 17.7% identified as vegetarian, and fewer than 1% as vegan. Even though animal ethics is not explicitly foregrounded in Slow Food's public discourse, it is implicitly embedded in the movement's emphasis on gastronomic heritage, biodiversity, and traditional breeds. This holistic view of food systems accommodates diverse dietary practices and intentionally refrains from proposing prescriptive models. In doing so, it aligns with the commitment to producing and consuming food that is "good, clean, and fair," irrespective of how people choose to eat. In our sample, dietary styles did not correspond to meaningful variation in value orientations, and subgroup comparisons should therefore be interpreted cautiously: omnivorous, vegetarian, and vegan respondents exhibited highly similar value profiles, indicating that dietary practice is not a central axis of internal value differentiation within Slow Food Germany.

Although official demographic data on the surveyed population—namely, the members of Slow Food Germany—were not publicly available to verify the representativeness of the sample, in conversation with the current President of Slow Food Germany and long-serving board member, he confirmed that, the insights presented are closely aligned with broader patterns observed across the Slow Food Germany community (Ebner, 2025).

Spearman Correlation to Test Possible Tendencies in the Groups

We conducted Spearman correlation tests to explore associations between ordinal independent variables (age, education level, and years of SFG membership) and the eight food value domains. Three statistically significant correlations emerged:

- A negative correlation between age and the value of power, indicating that older participants were less likely to prioritize control or influence in food-related decisions.
- A positive correlation between age and benevolence, suggesting that older respondents were more likely to value kindness, care, and interpersonal responsibility in their food ethics.
- A positive correlation between years of SFG membership and benevolence, implying that longer engagement with the Slow Food organization may reinforce altruistic food-related values.

Group-Specific Differences in Values Statements Related to Food: Gender and Children in the Household

To explore whether food values differ by gender or presence of children in the household, we conducted Mann–Whitney U tests, comparing the distribution of value scores between the respective subgroups.

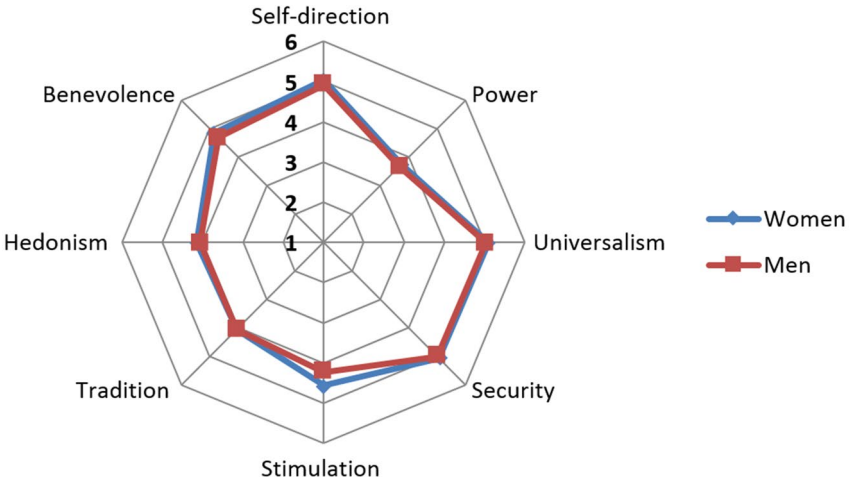

Fig. 2 Value Portfolio of the SFG Community by Gender[1]

[1] Values are ranked from 1 to 6 in which 1 shows the lowest importance given to that value and 6 the maximal importance

Table 5 The value system of food of the SFG community by gender

	Mean values by gender		Mann-Whitney U test
	Men	Women	*p*-value
Self-direction	4.92	5.04	0.186
Power	3.66	3.74	0.648
Universalism	5.03	5.09	0.499
Security	5.00	5.06	0.649
Stimulation	4.22	4.56	0.134
Tradition	4.05	4.06	0.646
Hedonism	4.06	4.14	0.615
Benevolence	4.69	4.83	0.248

An initial inspection of the data, stratified by gender, revealed a high degree of similarity in average value rankings between women and men. This pattern was confirmed by the Mann–Whitney U test results. None of the eight food value domains showed statistically significant differences between genders, indicating that in this sample, men and women expressed largely comparable ethical orientations towards food (see Fig. 2).

Table 5 summarizes the test statistics for each food-related value, reinforcing the absence of significant variation. These results are notable given the ongoing scholarly debate around gender differences in ethical consumption, and they suggest that within the Slow Food context, shared organizational identity may play a stronger role than gender in shaping values.

Second, we run the same test for the two groups in the sample standing for Slow Food members with and without children in the household (data not shown). Again, the Mann–Whitney U test results indicated no statistically significant differences across any of the eight values. While prior research suggests that caregiving and family roles can influence

ethical concerns—especially related to health and sustainability (Airey et al. 2021; Sevilla and Smith 2020) —our findings suggest that these influences do not result in systematically divergent food-related value sets in this context.

Conclusion

This study introduced a novel conceptual and methodological instrument —the Values System for Food—designed to adapt and apply Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values (Schwartz 2012) specifically to the domain of food. Through this adaptation, we sought to understand how core ethical orientations are expressed among members of a food movement explicitly engaged with sustainable food system transformation: Slow Food Germany (SFG).

By redesigning the Short Schwartz Value Survey (Lindeman and Verkasalo 2005) to encompass food-related value ethical constructs, and empirically testing it within a value-driven organization, we offer a proof of concept for this approach. The results indicate that the method is operationally sound: the questionnaire was clearly understood by respondents, completion rates were sufficient to allow analysis, and the resulting data were consistent and internally coherent. The food-related value portfolios expressed were not only interpretable but also exhibited limited variation across demographic subgroups, suggesting a shared ethical framework among our population.

Our findings point to a dominant food-related value triad: universalism, security, and self-direction. These values align closely with Slow Food's mission of promoting food that is "good, clean, and fair." However, our results also reveal some surprising nuances. Contrary to expectations rooted in the Slow Food slogan, the value of hedonism—associated with pleasure and the sensual enjoyment of taste—rated only moderately. This suggests that for SFG members, the idea of "good food" may be more strongly grounded in ethical and ecological reasoning than in sensory gratification.

Conversely, the relatively high importance of security was unanticipated but intelligible when interpreted through the lens of food safety and environmental protection. In the German cultural context, where "clean" food is often associated with safety and trust, security becomes an ethical as well as material concern. This finding supports a broader interpretation of what "clean" food signifies within the movement, connecting food system transformation to both environmental sustainability and personal well-being.

The value of self-direction, also highly rated, likely reflects a broader ethos of food sovereignty—the capacity to choose, prepare, and produce food in ways that align with personal and collective identities. This finding resonates with global discourses on participatory food democracy, where consumer autonomy is framed as essential to resisting industrial food regimes.

Further insights arise from the subgroup analyses. Spearman correlations revealed that older respondents and those with longer memberships in SFG were more likely to prioritize benevolence, while de-emphasizing power. This is consistent with Schwartz's circumplex model, which posits benevolence and power as opposing values. It also aligns with the notion that ethical engagement evolves over time within social movements, and that sustained membership may reinforce altruistic orientations.

Crucially, no statistically significant differences were found in food-related value ratings between men and women, nor between respondents with or without children in the household. This result, while potentially counterintuitive given prior literature linking these variables to ethical consumption, suggests that the food-specific instrument that we present - the Values System for Food – allows for a more fundamental analysis. It also reveals that, within the SFG context, shared organizational values override individual sociodemographic variance. The movement's strong identity and normative framework likely serve to align personal values across diverse members.

Taken together, but keeping in mind the limited sample share, these findings suggest that Slow Food Germany can be characterized as an ethically cohesive community, unified around a common vision for food. This has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it supports the argument that civil society movements can foster value convergence through shared narratives, practices, and goals. Practically, it suggests that organizations engaged in food system transformation may benefit from diagnosing and aligning with the ethical food-related profiles of their members. Such alignment could enhance member engagement, improve the legitimacy of organizational goals, and increase the effectiveness of behavior-change initiatives.

The Values System for Food instrument contributes a scalable, adaptable tool for conducting such ethical diagnostics. While our study was exploratory and based on a non-representative sample, the coherence of results suggests that the approach is promising for further development. Future research should replicate the survey across larger, more diverse populations, beyond Slow Food, to test the generalizability and robustness of the method. Comparative studies could also explore whether similar value constellations emerge in movements with different ideological foundations (e.g., food justice, animal rights, agroecology).

Ultimately, if food system transformation is to succeed not only in technical and economic terms but also in ethical and cultural terms, understanding the food-related value structures that underlie food movements will be essential. This study takes a first step in that direction, offering a conceptual lens and empirical method for mapping the ethical terrain of food from within.

A further step for advancing this line of research will be to connect the value constellations identified here with concrete food-system practices. While the present study focused on mapping internal value orientations within Slow Food Germany, future work should examine how these values are negotiated and enacted in real-world initiatives—such as food cooperatives, school meal programs, or grassroots sustainability projects. Incorporating such case-based evidence would not only illuminate the ethical complexity underlying everyday food practices but also clarify how individual and collective values contribute to broader processes of food system transformation.

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Author Contributions ECS and IT contributed to the conceptualization of the research and design of the study. ECS conducted statistical analyses and wrote the initial draft of the paper. ECS and IT edited and revised this into the current version of the manuscript. All authors have approved the final article before submission.

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Data Availability Data will be made available on request.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg on May 22, 2024. The approval was granted based on the documents submitted by the researchers, in accordance with the committee's application procedure, and is filed under reference number 2405ECW.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were fully informed about the objectives and procedures of the research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their answers, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.The authors declare no competing interests.

Clinical Trial Registration Clinical trial registration: not applicable.

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