

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Retail or consumer responsibility?—Reflections on food waste and food prices among deal-prone consumers and market actors

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Abstract

Supermarkets have been criticized by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for pricing tactics that trigger overpurchase, which may subsequently lead to food waste. Some retailers have responded by abolishing price promotions. However, is it the macro-level of the market structure, or the micro-level of the consumer, that is to blame for food waste? With an outset in consumer responsabilization theory and through 24 in-depth qualitative interviews, we explore how consumers and institutional actors perceive the responsibility for food waste in the interface between retailers and consumers, and how this perception has evolved. We identify two responsibility narratives—one that portrays the consumer as a self-governed actor and the other as interdependent on the institutionally shaped context. We uniquely show that over time, a process of hybrid responsibility expansion has led to an extension of the consumer's responsibility into the retailer's domain of action, and vice versa. Findings highlight that responsabilization is not either on the consumers or retailers' side and can expand for both. This provides a nuance and a new contribution to the theory. For businesses, our results imply that abolishing price promotions does not align with consumer's ascription of responsibility. In turn, actions that involve collaborations of actors, including consumers, speak much more to the perception of responsibility expansion.

KEYWORDS

consumer behaviour, food waste, marketing, qualitative, stakeholder engagement, sustainability

1 | INTRODUCTION

Food waste is a global sustainability challenge. It is estimated that between a third and a quarter of all food produced globally is lost or discarded along the food supply chain (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2011, 2021; Kummu et al., 2012). There is a broad

consensus that the amount of global food waste is deeply problematic from a sustainability perspective (Alexander et al., 2017; Crippa et al., 2021; Foley et al., 2011; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2019; Xue et al., 2017). Household food waste is by far the largest contributor to the total amount of food waste in developed countries (European Commission [EC], 2010; Parfitt

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et al., 2010). The cause lies in a complex mix of individual factors, for example, personal values, knowledge and cooking skills, and their interaction with both situational and contextual factors. Situational factors are, for example, the supermarket offer and the retailer's pricing tactics, and contextual factors are, for example, the economic situation, politics and law, or technological innovations (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015; Boulet et al., 2021; do Carmo Stangherlin & De Barcellos, 2018; Principato, 2018; Quedstedt et al., 2013). Therefore, it is not easy to pinpoint where to locate responsibility for food waste incidents in the retail-consumer interaction, and whether it is the individual consumer or the market actors who have caused it. Even though the majority of food waste is accounted at the household level, a great deal of the causing factors are situated at the retail level.

This discourse of “who to blame” becomes particularly prominent in the discussion of the role of food prices for food waste, because pricing decisions might cause food waste both up- and downwards in the supply chain, as well as far into the individual household. Pricing tactics such as multi-item offers have been accused of triggering consumers to bulk-buy and over-purchase and, eventually, discard some of this food (Stuart, 2009; Waste and Resources Action Programme [WRAP], 2011). Several consumer food waste studies conclude that price promotion practices cause food waste (Delley & Brunner, 2017; Graham-Rowe et al., 2014; Ponis et al., 2017; Porpino et al., 2015). A few other studies, however, contradict this by showing that consumers who buy foods on offer exhibit less food waste (Jörissen et al., 2015; Koivupuro et al., 2012; Neff et al., 2015; Parizeau et al., 2015). Highlighting the role of pricing mechanisms, and thereby “blaming the supermarket,” stands in contrast to “blaming the consumer” (Evans, 2011, p. 429), which has otherwise been a prominent theme in the food waste discussion. These two statements on who is responsible for food waste are thus a case that reflects the broader dichotomy of whether it is the micro-level of the consumer, or the structure of the macro-level, that ought to change.

Businesses in the food sector have begun to act upon the sustainability challenge of food waste (e.g., Young et al., 2018). Retail businesses—Tesco in the UK (Evans et al., 2017) and Rema 1000 in Denmark (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2016)—have, among other initiatives, eliminated “BOGOF” (buy one get one free) offers. However, there is a need to understand how consumers perceive this action and experience the relation between pricing tactics and food waste and the responsibility for the latter. Developing collaborative actions to reduce food waste requires an in-depth understanding of the consumer vis-à-vis the institutional actors' perception of the relation between pricing and food waste and the responsibility for the problem.

This paper focuses on the interface between the supply chain and the consumer and in particular the case of supply chain pricing tactics being blamed for subsequent consumer food waste. We explore how consumers and institutional actors (retail employees, managers, ministry representatives, and NGO activists) deal with and experience responsibility for food waste as a result of food pricing tactics in the store, and how this has evolved. We ask the following research

question: *What are the perceived directions and procedures of responsabilization in the case of food waste originating in the retailer-consumer interface?*

Our contribution to the literature on responsibility in ethical consumption is twofold. First, we nuance the general discussion on whether consumer responsabilization (see, e.g., Eckhardt & Dobscha, 2019) or de-responsibilization (see, e.g., Soneryd & Ugglå, 2015) is most prominent in ethical consumption by showing that in the case at hand, either-or are at play. Second, we expand the theory of consumer responsabilization (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) by introducing the term “hybrid responsibility expansion,” which means that responsabilization takes place on both the consumers' and institutional actors' side. This paper supports managerial decision-making on sustainability, as we argue that to be efficient in their communication and actions, companies should be aware of the two narratives of responsabilization that we find as well as the responsibility expansion process. Such knowledge can direct alignment of responsible marketing tactics, which we recommend being collaborative and mutually engaging, and thus in synchrony with the overlap of retail and consumer responsibility perceptions.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RESPONSIBILITY FOR FOOD WASTE IN THE CONSUMER-RETAILER CONTEXT

2.1 | The business ethics debate on responsabilization

Consumers have been increasingly conceptualized as agents who make market choices towards green (González et al., 2012; Perera et al., 2018), ethical (Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008; Harrison et al., 2005), and sustainable consumption (Connolly & Prothero, 2003; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014), or enact consumer social responsibility (Vitell, 2015). According to Giesler and Veresiu (2014), it is not merely the increased awareness of the consequences of individual choices that encourages consumers to engage in such responsible consumption. Instead, they propose that, based on the sociology of governmentality, consumers are shaped and managed into such a role, in four distinct, but interrelated processes (*personalization, authorization, capability, transformation*) that they call consumer responsabilization. Thus, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) observe that “responsibility has shifted away from the state and corporations” (p. 841) to consumers. Gollnhofer and Kuruoglu (2018) extend the concept of responsabilization as a governmental process in a study on a refugee aid initiative by proposing that responsabilization is a process driven through lived experiences and that the responsabilization process can happen at grassroot level (so-called “grassroots responsabilization”). Here, responsabilization are based on a perception of shared responsibility and driven by individuals as a response to failed institutional structures. In another study on food waste, Gollnhofer et al. (2019) highlight a new type of consumer movement strategy, where consumers collaborate with actors in the food value chain to

prevent food waste instead of pressuring the institutions to change market governance mechanisms.

However, others interestingly suggest a process of increased “responsibilization” for corporations as well (Shamir, 2008). This process has for instance been found in relation to CSR, where brand-led social partnerships are articulated through the coordination of the responsible, voluntary work of both employees and consumers (Bookman & Martens, 2013) and in relation to cause-related marketing campaigns “producing” responsibilized consumers (Kipp & Hawkins, 2019). One study has even observed an oppositional process, namely, consumer de-responsibilization, which refers to the shift of responsibility from consumers to the state or public institutions (Pellandini-Simányi & Conte, 2020). Hence, the view of consumers as powerful agents is not without opposition. There is literature pointing to the limits of what consumers can do via their individual market choices for the social issues in question (Carrington et al., 2010). In particular, the topic of sustainability is a question of systemic, macro-institutional issues (Mick et al., 2012; Prothero et al., 2011; Shaw et al., 2018). This also plays a role in explaining why there are two paradigms in conceptualizing consumers: One paradigm perceives consumers as active agents opposing social problems, while the second paradigm portrays consumers as “managed” and (re)producing social problems because of the circumstances caused by economics and marketing (Akenji, 2014; Chatzidakis & Shaw, 2018; Newholm et al., 2014).

2.2 | The managerial question of food marketing's impact on food waste

Food marketing has been heavily criticized for increasing consumer-related food waste (Stuart, 2009; WRAP, 2007). The excessive focus on “perfect” homogenous food appearance increases the wastage of fruit and vegetables in the supply chain, because retailers do not expect that consumers will select such food (Loebnitz et al., 2015). Supermarkets offer a huge range of products in the assortment right up to the closing time of the store, but quite a share of these products may end up in the bin. At the same time, retailers' strong market power and strategic position in the supply chain allows the retail chains to dictate the relations to suppliers (Devin & Richards, 2016), for example, in the form of unfavourable take-back agreements enforced on the producers (Eriksson et al., 2017). These observations triggered the formation of counteractions by grassroot groups such as dumpster divers (Gollnhofer et al., 2019) as well as alternative business models such as surplus food supermarkets and redistribution apps (Ciulli et al., 2020).

Pricing strategies on food, such as BOGOF or 2-for-1 offers, or multi-item packages at a favourable price, are particularly in the spotlight. Research has found that consumers do not always understand the advantages or disadvantages of certain pricing mechanisms (Mitchell et al., 2003). Price promotions are said to trigger consumers into over-purchasing food products that, in some cases, end up as household food waste (Delley & Brunner, 2017;

Schmidt, 2016). The retailers Tesco and Rema 1000 have abolished BOGOF offers on these grounds (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2017). However, retailers also use pricing to reduce food waste. They sell discounted food that is close to the expiration date or suboptimal in appearance at a lower price (de Hooge et al., 2017; Neff et al., 2015), offer surplus via apps (Ciulli et al., 2020), or apply a “buy one now get the other later” price promotion (Evans et al., 2017). As such, they are offering “positive consumption” options (Shaw & Newholm, 2002) for active ethical consumers—for example, buying imperfect and unattractive products (Grewal et al., 2019) or price-reduced suboptimal food (Aschemann-Witzel, 2018), and using apps that facilitate restaurants or supermarkets to sell surplus and leftovers (Ciulli et al., 2020).

It seems puzzling at first that pricing tactics can both be a cause and a solution to food waste. However, the effect of pricing on consumers' food waste behaviour is not as direct and simple as suggested by Stuart (2009) and others. There are two reasons for this. First, consumers vary greatly in psychographic characteristics, capabilities and behaviours and thus also in how they deal with pricing and how they handle food (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2021; Hebrok & Boks, 2017; Schanes et al., 2018). Second, food goes through several stages between purchase and disposal (Block et al., 2016; Thyberg & Tonjes, 2016), and in each of these stages, the relationship between price, price behaviour and food waste might vary. Therefore, food pricing potentially has a dual role in the social issue of food waste. Amongst others, consumer price involvement is a relevant factor in the interface between the institutional level and the consumer (Tsalis, 2020). However, how both sides of the interface—the consumers and the market and supply chain actors—perceive the interrelation of food pricing and food waste is unknown, and how these actors perceive the evolvement of responsibility for the matter is also under-researched.

2.3 | Conceptual framework

In line with research on consumer food waste, we propose that there are context- (such as economic, cultural, and social) and situation-related (e.g., social norms of peers and family, the context of the purchase situation) factors as well as individual factors that have an influence on food waste (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015; Boulet et al., 2021; do Carmo Stangherlin & De Barcellos, 2018; Principato, 2018; Quedest et al., 2013). Also, major influences at the individual level can be classified as related to motivations, skills, and factors resulting from goal-conflicts (as for example between own and other family members' interests) (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015), and food takes a “journey” from planning to disposal (Block et al., 2016; Thyberg & Tonjes, 2016). Drawing from the literature on responsibilization, we distinguish between the macro-level and the micro-level, and we propose a range of stakeholders across the supply chain as well as stakeholders who have an impact on the supply chain, to play a role for the factors on and the responsibility for food waste (see Figure 1).

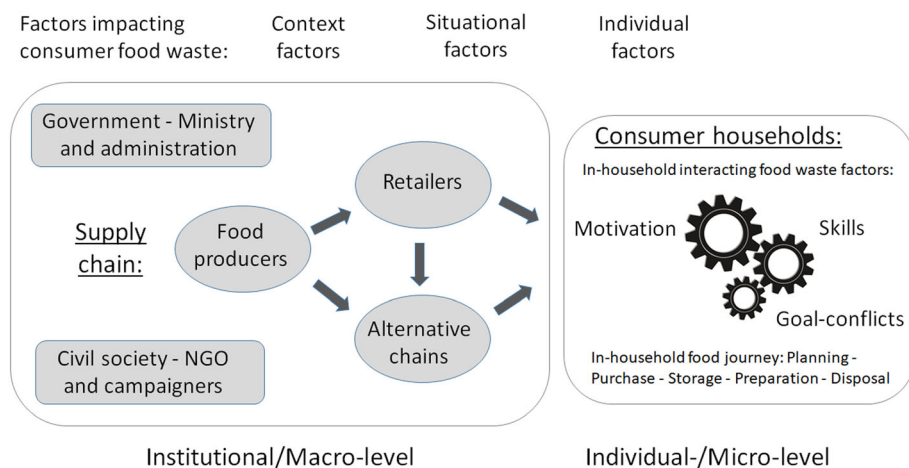


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model of factors of food waste and individuals and institutional actors

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Study context

Denmark is adequate as the study context for various reasons. In setting up the world's first think tank on food waste (CPH post online, 2019; FAO, 2019) and with Selina Juul from the NGO “Stop Wasting Food” described as an international food hero (Foodtank, 2013) and “European of the year” (Landbrugsavisen, 2020), Denmark has been presented as an international role model for food waste avoidance (Juul, 2016). In nearly all Danish supermarkets, price reductions are applied to foods that have become “suboptimal” (Kulikovskaja & Aschemann-Witzel, 2017), and some of the largest retail chains in Denmark report a considerable increase in sales of these products (Politiken, 2015). Rema 1000 previously abolished BOGOF offers in 2008, and they have received praise, achieved an improved company image, and received CSR awards for their food waste avoidance actions since (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2016). Due to this, there is a high level of awareness of the food waste issue in the Danish society. An exploration of institutions and consumer responsibility for and experience of pricing and food waste in Denmark is thus ideally placed, and it has broader relevance for how food waste and responsibility is managed elsewhere.

3.2 | Study data

The data reported here is based on qualitative interviews with households (called consumer data in the following) as well as interviews with institutional actors in the food chain including retail general and local managers, the ministry, and NGO activists and antifeed waste campaigners (called institutional data in the following).

The micro-level **consumer data** reported here consists of 10 semi-structured interviews with households in spring 2018. It is connected to a previous study from autumn 2017 in which 103 households, living in detached houses (with one waste bin per household) in a town in the Central Denmark Region, filled out a survey and had their waste

sorted and weighed at two points in time. Participants from that study were recruited to the present study based on their measure of deal-proneness as well as food waste weight (see Table 1 for an overview of the consumer sample and the appendices for an overview of the different types of data, measurements and variables of the consumer data, the interview guide, and supporting visuals).

The macro-level **institutional data** consists of 14 semistructured expert interviews conducted over a time span of 7 years (see Table 2).

3.3 | Sampling, interviews and analysis of consumer data—micro-level

The survey data was used to identify households reporting an above-average level of deal-proneness measured with three items and on a 7-point Likert scale (Krishna et al., 1991; Wakefield & Inman, 1993). From this pool of deal-prone households, we identified households that were objectively either high or low in food waste in kilograms per household—using the waste sorting data (at the first point in time, see Table 1) measured as above or below average. We then sought to recruit an equal number of deal-prone households with high versus low levels of food waste for face-to-face interviews, which is the consumer data of this study. We attempted to achieve diversity in age of respondent, household type and gender. Potential interviewees were contacted by phone. The recruitment process resulted in 15 respondents from 10 different households, as some interviews were conducted with two members present. The sample fairly reflects the Danish population of house owners (see Table 1).

The interviews followed a semistructured problem-centred interview guide (see Appendix S1). The semistructured form encouraged interviewees to share information spontaneously on the overall theme (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), while the problem-centred approach (Flick, 2009; Witzel, 2000) steered the interview towards the specific themes of interest (similar to Elgaaied-Gambier, 2016). The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min, were audio-recorded, and were conducted by the same person. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a second person in the original language, while a third person

TABLE 1 Consumer sample characteristics and food waste measures

Household number and composition	Present at interview	Age range	Occupation	Food waste level (first measure)	Food waste level (second measure)	Narrative majorly emerging
H1: Couple and child	Wife	40–49	Unemployed	Low	High	1
H2: Couple	Husband and wife	60–69	Pensioner	-	Low	1
H3: Couple and children	Wife	30–39	Unemployed	High	High	2
H4: Couple	Husband and wife	70–79	Pensioner	High	Low	1
H5: Couple	Husband and wife	60–69	Pensioner	High	High	2
H6: Couple	Husband and wife	50–59	Employed	Low	Low	1
H7: Lives alone	Man	50–59	Employed	Low	High	1
H8: Couple	Wife	70–79	Employed	High	Low	1
H9: Couple	Wife	70–79	Pensioner	Low	Low	1
H10: Couple	Husband and wife	60–69	Pensioner	Low	Low	1

Note: These interviews are conducted in 2018. Missing data in the first measure of food waste is due to a later re-analysis of the food waste data resulting in identifying that data for some households was faulty. Differences between the first and second measures of food waste are because food waste sorting at different points in time can result in very different findings (e.g., due to weekly changes in the number of persons in the household or specific occasions). The *narrative majorly emerging* indicates which narrative (see Figure 2) appeared predominant in this household.

TABLE 2 Institutional data—Characteristics of food supply chain actors interviewed and time of interview

Expert interview number	Type of organization and role	National Danish or international context	Year of interview
E1	Ministry of Food	National	2014
E2	Consumer-driven NGO, founder	National	2014
E3	Food waste campaigner	International	2015
E4	Food waste campaigner	European	2015
E5	Retailer, retail chain A, chain marketing responsible	National	2015
E6	Retailer, retail chain B, chain CSR responsible	National	2015
E7	Retailer, retail chain B, two local managers of an inner-city supermarket	National	2020
E8	Retailer, retail chain C, two local managers of a large suburb retail store	National	2020
E9	Ministry of Food & government-instated NGO	National	2021
E10	Alternative retailer 1 (alternative physical supermarkets)	National	2021
E11	Retailer, retail chain C, CSR responsible	National	2021
E12	Alternative retailer 2 (app-ordered pick-up of goods)	National	2021
E13	Consumer activist in food sharing	National	2021
E14	Consumer activist in dumpster diving	National	2021

Note: The country's food retail is divided into six large players: Dansk Supermarked, Coop Denmark, Dagrofa, Rema1000, Lidl and Aldi. The first three mentioned are the largest, and each constitute a number of chains with different names and characteristics. Representatives of three of these six retailers were interviewed in the scope of this research.

double-checked the transcripts against the audio recording. Participants were given a gift voucher worth DKK 250 (32.50 Euro) for their time and effort. Interviewees were ensured anonymity and signed a consent form.

Given the already existing knowledge on household consumer food waste and the theoretical concepts previously found to be of relevance, we used the flexible analytical approach of thematic analysis to code and analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Authors coded

the interviews several times and made use of constant comparison to derive central codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using NVivo 11 (QSR International), the authors as three independent coders coded the same material in Danish. First, coders familiarized themselves individually with the data and conducted initial coding. Data was coded in an overlapping manner, that is, the same section of text could receive more than one code if it had more than one meaning. Second, after a joint discussion, repeated axial coding and comparison was applied

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Willig, 2013). The axial coding process involved constant comparisons, meaning that codes were refined by moving back and forth between data and codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Third, after axial coding, the three coders merged the data and jointly reflected on the data and the interpretation of underlying patterns and meanings. Codes were phrased in English and consisted of the major codes emerging from the data as well as sub-codes for some of these (see Appendix S1 for the full code guide).

3.4 | Sampling, interviews and analysis of institutional data—macro-level

Representatives of three major Danish retailers were interviewed. In addition, we interviewed representatives from the ministry of food, national and international NGO activists and campaigners as well as consumer activists that engage in food sharing or are dumpster divers, and representatives of alternative retail chains that focus on professionally redistributing food otherwise wasted. Our selection of interviewees systematically followed the conceptual model of the factors causing food waste, where both the concrete situation—determined by the retail and the alternative retail—and the broader context—determined by the governmental as well as the civil society actors—impacts the issue at hand (see Figure 1). We ensured that representatives of the alternative pathways (Gollnhofer et al., 2019) were included, given these are particularly important in the case of food waste.

The older interviews were conducted in the scope of two different research projects lead by one of the authors during 2014–2019, but analysed with regard to a question not reported elsewhere, while the interviews conducted in 2020–2021 were carried out for the purpose of this paper. Table 2 provides an overview of the institutional data (see Appendix S1 for the interview guides). The 14 interviews with institutional representatives underwent a focused thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with regard to the research question of this paper. The sampling procedure and interview guide of six of the older interviews (no. 1–6) have been reported previously (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015, 2017). For the eight interviews conducted for the sole purpose of this paper (no. 7–14), the focus was

particularly on the management and perception of food waste avoidance actions by institutional actors, as well as the ascription of responsibility of the issue, and how practices of both institutional actors and consumers have changed over time (see the interview guides in Appendix S1).

4 | FINDINGS

We present the findings in two sections: First, we focus on two **responsibility narratives** that emerged in our combined data from consumers and institutional actors, the consumer-governed and the shared contribution narrative (see Figure 2). Second, we move into the development over time, and explain that what we observe in this discourse of consumers and institutions is a **hybrid responsibility expansion**, meaning that each side perceives their responsibility to expand into what previously was the domain of action of the other (see Figure 3). When codes are referred to in figures or text, they are marked in italics.

4.1 | Two opposing narratives on consumer responsibility for food waste

In the interviews with consumers and institutional actors, two narratives on the issue of consumer responsibility for food waste emerged. The first one was a more dominant perspective in the consumer data, as it appeared across the majority of consumer interviews. The second perspective was only taken by a few of the consumer interviewees but expressed in several of the institutional actor interviews. The two narratives and their main distinctive characteristics are visualized in Figure 2, also including the codes that emerged as particularly characteristic.

In the **first narrative**, which we term “**consumer governed narrative**,” the topic of *temptation and control during shopping* was raised. Many of the interviewed household members brought up that many consumers are unaware of the fact that shopping and food management routines result in them being tempted by retailers' pricing tactics, eventually leading to wastage of food. The interviewees,

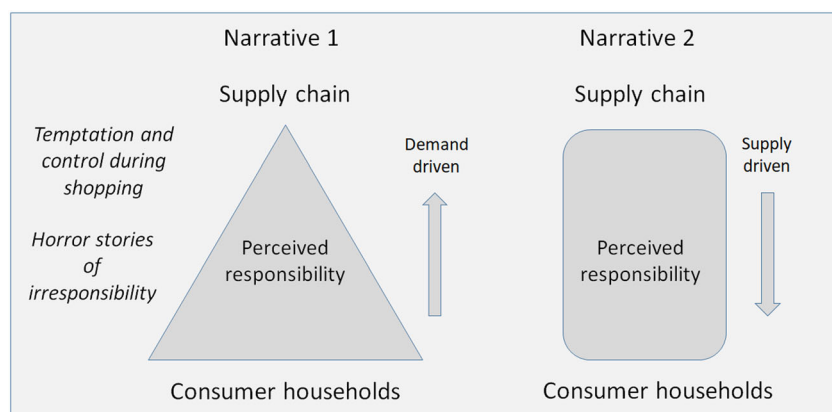


FIGURE 2 Narratives on perceived responsibility for consumer household food waste

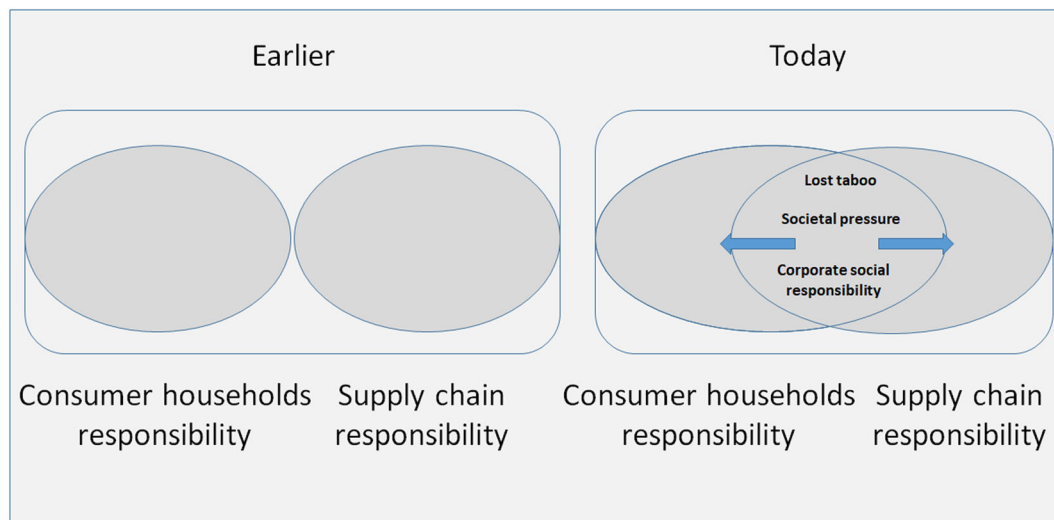


FIGURE 3 Hybrid responsibility expansion and its development over the past years

however, tended to dissociate themselves from this, oftentimes by self-ascribing a *frugal and/or thrifty identity*. Many argued that it is the consumer's responsibility to avoid food waste and enact consumer sovereignty. Even though many interviewees acknowledged and talked about the temptation of promotions, the line of argument often concluded that it is the individual consumer's responsibility to exercise moderation when shopping. This is highlighted by the interviewee in H7:

I think it is up to the consumer if s/he yields to temptation. There are many temptations in life. Nobody tells you to give in to all of them. So, I do not think you can blame the supermarkets. It is up to the individual consumer. As I said, I do not buy 10 litres of juice for 90 DKK, as I do not need it. (H7)

The quote from H7 underlines that the question of responsibility for food waste is linked to a general demand on people to assume responsibility for their life overall. This refers to and is rooted in the interviewee's pronounced frugal identity, and it also becomes apparent in his expectations towards other consumers. This pattern emerged for several interviewees, often suggesting food waste avoidance strategies to be enacted by consumers, affecting the supply chain "from below." This reflects a belief about consumers as sovereign agents, who, via the sum of their behaviours, can influence the actions of stakeholders in the supply chain.

In quite a few cases, consumer interviewees told what we termed *horror stories* of people who tended to overpurchase food. Talking about price promotions and food waste triggered stories of relatives who, according to the interviewees, horrendously overstocked their household with food and who did not exercise the care and control that the interviewee himself or herself enacted. As an example, H1 gave the following description:

Well, I have relatives whose drawers are so full that they have to stock [the food] on their kitchen counters, because they are all full. Every time I go there (...) the stuff, half of the fridge is thrown out. And it makes me sick to see all the stuff that is tossed. I think it is a crying shame. Maybe you have enough money, but I believe you should think about how you spend the money instead. (H1)

When asked about food waste responsibility directly, consumer demand was an argument that was consistently used to explain why consumers were most responsible for reducing food waste. Many interviewees argued in a similar way as the husband in H4:

If the choice of products in the store is not there, then people will not be satisfied either, you see. We are demanding and want all sort of things, but in the end, I believe it is the individual consumer who bears the responsibility. (H4)

Interestingly, in this view, supermarkets are stripped of agency, and the argumentation expresses a neoliberal approach with each stakeholder responsible for his or her own actions. The following comment from the interviewee in H9—a household showing low food waste in both measurements—about supermarkets' "Stop Food Waste" stickers initiative illustrates how he thinks supermarkets have done what they can:

Well, but in recent years they started this thing, that food waste thing, you know. Strictly speaking, what more can they do? I cannot really see that. (H9)

Further, H1 even portrays it as a kind of natural law and "obligation" that supermarkets are subjects of a market logic controlled by

competition and, thus, they must do what they do, seeking profits—a statement expressed even after talking about her environmental concerns in relation to food waste:

We are somehow on overdrive using the resources available to us, and there is simply no need to do so, I think. The supermarkets, I do not know, it is just profit, I mean, that's what they are obliged to do. (H1)

Drawing on the process of “transformation” in responsabilization theory, the quote above is also an evident example of how this consumer has adopted a moralized self-understanding in line with neoliberalism. She accepts that consumers are the autonomous and responsible actors if consumption patterns are to change in favour of the environment.

The notion of consumers being sovereign actors also emerges in the institutional data. Interestingly, such a sovereignty is expressed for the relation between ministry and consumers as well as ministry and retailers, when the representative from the ministry of food says as follows:

We have had a really good dialogue with them [retail chains], which is still ongoing, so that we continuously try to help each other instead of raising the finger at one another [...] it is difficult *not* to get into a situation of raising the finger when it comes to consumers. Again, here we collaborate with the businesses on consumer-targeted campaigns [explaining information campaigns on date labelling] and they had focus on it in their newsletter with the price promotions: “so, how can you as a consumer avoid food waste? Here we have some options” - that's also a possibility, as a business, to nudge consumers towards thinking food waste avoidance into their behaviour. (E1)

One of the international NGO activists outlines an explanation for a way to approach how to interact with consumers which is similar in respect of consumers' perception of own responsibility as described in the quote above, saying:

Consumers, people respond better to being told what to do, like reduce food waste, if they are told what the people telling them have done themselves. I lose patience with companies that invest a lot of money in telling consumers how they should reduce food waste without doing anything or communicating about what they have done themselves. (E4)

The dominant narrative of food waste governed by consumers' own actions and other actors needing to strengthen individual's behaviour is also underlined in the later interviews. It emerges that retailers perceive it as an important aspect of headquarters' CSR activities to do so, as well as an important action for the coming years:

We help the chains to communicate with the consumers - trying to influence and inspire them [the customers] to also think about food waste in their private households [...] It is all about educating consumers. (E11)

In the **second narrative**, which we termed “**shared contribution narrative**,” the few consumers who followed this line of argument ascribed more joint responsibility to the supply chain and themselves, and they reflected on the retailer playing a considerable role in “tempting” consumers and influencing how the market is shaped and organized. Interviewees elaborated on multiple actors' responsibility to conduct initiatives in supermarkets, steer the volume of products manufactured, or adapt laws and regulations. For example, the couple in H5—who had a high level of food waste in both measurements—emphasized supermarkets and producers as being responsible for food waste production and saw a dispersed cause of food waste across the whole supply chain:

Husband: “Well, I think the responsibility is here and that is because I believe there are too many. [...] Too many supermarkets. [...] I just do not understand ... because it is also harder to manage. The more there are, the more food waste there is bound to be. But I do not know.”

Wife: “But the farmers also produce a lot, you know. They need to produce a lot. They want meat and stuff to be sold, you see.” (H5)

That the responsibility to avoid food waste rests on both the consumer and his or her surroundings is particularly voiced by the NGO representatives. The national NGO interviewee, in a similar way to the consumer quote above, mentions the different supply chains:

So, it is important, you know, that consumer food waste can be reduced by raising awareness and giving consumers the tools to reduce waste. But also, we have to look at the packaging, we have to look at the industry, because, you know, sometimes consumers buy what they can get in the shops. Because if they cannot get nice carrots, so the industry has to say, ok, we want to sell more nice carrots. (E2)

The ministry representative, reiterates this view of dispersed and shared responsibility in 2021, explaining:

it goes all around, right, all have a responsibility for it [...] there is a responsibility in all places. (E9)

One of the international NGO activists explains how consumers have quite a lot of power to begin with, and how such a process can amplify the influence that retailers have on each other, which again

points to the responsibility resting on both consumers and retailers, and also being dispersed among the supply chain:

I think it has to be the consumers who say it to the stores. To create the debate for it. I do not know ... [explains company examples, then returns to question] it's peer pressure. One retailer to another. I have always been impressed that the retailers take on the issue. Doing it on their own. You see it in the UK. Everyone is really following. (E3)

However, the other international activist also strongly underlines the power on the retailer side, thus contradicting the consumer interviewees who appeared not to think supermarkets can do more than they already do, when critically reflecting on where food cosmetic standards and consumer expectations about food appearance ultimately come from:

So, you know, these cosmetic standards are not eternal, they have not been there forever. They've been introduced with the strength of the supermarket marketing teams; kind of giving rise to the expectation that produce should simply look this way. Those marketing teams are equally capable of undoing the damage, and marketing the stuff that does not comply with those standards. (E4)

Going even further, the consumer activist in food sharing explains that consumer power is ultimately weak in the light of the systemic problem causing food waste:

Trying to put the blame on consumers in a retail that is designed to make bad decisions - it's just another attempt to keep business as usual going - like putting a band-aid on a broken arm. [later in the interview while explaining consumer activism such as food sharing] ... but I do not believe that as much as we can do as individuals - will ever fix the problem, a systemic problem. (E13)

Thus, we have shown in the above examples how the two narratives of a “consumer governed” versus a “shared contribution” emerged in both consumer interviews and in the interviews with the institutional actors. In the third part, we now turn to the temporal process that emerges from the interviews and the fact that responsibility appears to be expanding.

4.2 | Hybrid responsibility expansion

Where the first narrative reflects a process of assuming responsibility among consumers (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), the second narrative sees the responsibility dispersed among both consumers on the one hand

and the supply chain on the other. However, because the institutional interviewees talk about processes they have observed over previous years and because the institutional data spans several years, a third finding on the responsabilization over time emerges. We do not only see responsabilization among consumers (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), but also among organizations (Shamir, 2008). What is striking about this is that there is an *expansion* of perceived responsibility into the domain of actions of the other actor. Thus, we propose that the continuous societal discourse about food waste has, over time, led to an expansion of the extent to which actors assume responsibility for practices even outside of their domain of action (see Figure 3 for a visualization). We provide examples of this finding in the following.

In the quote from the earlier interview with the ministry representative, the possibility outlined is to “... nudge consumers towards thinking food waste avoidance into their behaviour” (E1), even though consumer behaviour is the consumers' domain, and despite the fact that consumers are otherwise portrayed as sovereign actors. Thus, the ministry representative, on behalf of the ministry, assumes responsibility for nudging consumers in their individual choices. The representative of the recently government-instated NGO interviewed in 2021 also expands on this as an expectation towards retailers, stating:

They [the retailers] have a responsibility to help consumers buy these goods [suboptimal food otherwise wasted]. (E9)

In a similar vein, a retail chain manager explained a radical change in marketing tactics for the sake of food waste reduction—suggesting to assume responsibility for a consumer's action even after the consumer has purchased at the store, thus outside of the traditional realm of responsibility of the retailer. The manager explains having imagined consumers' perception of the tactic as well as future consumer purchase satisfaction—thus, taking current and future responsibility for consumers' decision-making process:

And we [the marketing team] talked about that this [tactic] was contributing to us [as consumers] throwing out too many products. And that we in fact felt that we were forced to buy products we did not need. And we talked about that if we felt like that, it must be generally like that, and that many consumers felt the same [explaining internal decision-making process]. So, I defended it [the change of the tactic], and said that I believe, in the long run, it will contribute to people being even more satisfied with buying from us. (E5)

These examples show how retailers take responsibility for actions which are originally not theirs to be responsible for. However, the expansion of responsibility that we observe in the interviews goes both ways—consumers also expand their responsibility into the area of action that originally was the retailer's domain. For example, consumers interfere into what is binned or not, by demanding that such

food should be sold instead, with the purpose of saving the retailer from wasting it. In one of the interviews with store managers, the managers explain a change in consumer views and actions corresponding to this:

There is this understanding from all consumers by now, who say “well yes, we would like to buy this so it is not thrown out,” right? [referring to bananas with brown spots that were previously binned by the supermarket] They say “we know we'll use it today anyhow, and make a banana cake” - or whatever it is. (E7)

In a similar vein, the other interviewed store manager explains that this has changed how the assortment is managed in the store:

Earlier, we have maybe hidden it a bit on the shelves ... but it does not necessarily look pretty to have it there, but my impression of the customers is, that they do not see it as negative anymore – I mean, that there are products marked as reduced in price. So, people have actually an interest to come and look at it. So, it's actually just this professional perspective [as a seller], to assume it does not look pretty [...] it does, in fact, not do any harm to instead make it easily accessible for the customer. (E8)

Further into the interview, the same store manager describes an example of a practice they have taken up in the team which again shows the expansion of the supermarket's responsibility; it reflects how years of intense societal discussion have sharpened and expanded perceived responsibility across the supply chain, even into the waste bin:

It's because we know that there is nearly always someone out at our container, so when we have cold cuts that are taken out because of suspicion of listeria, then we need to put it into a box, and write, that there is listeria in it, because we fear consumers will otherwise take it and just think it's strange, we simply throw it out. But it's because we know they [the dumpster divers] are there, and we need to assume some form of responsibility for them, even if we have said goodbye to the product. (E8)

We propose that the continuous societal discourse has triggered this expansion of responsibility of consumers and retailers into each other's domains. However, what exactly is the mechanism, in particular for the institutional actors of the supply chain? Through the 2021 interviews, we identify three mechanisms that are involved as connected aspects triggering the expansion. First, the existence of food waste in the supply chain has **lost its taboo**. Two quotes from the representative of the alternative retail illustrate this:

It's become ok to say you have surplus. There is less taboo. We have come a long way. Now retailers say we cannot avoid it, but we collaborate with other actors. (E10)

When I started, the supermarkets preferred not to talk about it. Producers in particular were not willing to talk about it. Now the numbers are on the table. There is understanding that there is no one size fits it all to solve it [...] There is focus on that we need to do something. They [the retailers] are not scolded at. We know there is food waste, come out of the bush, let us do something. Now it is all open. (E12)

Second, in this process of a greater acknowledgement of the existence of food waste as a problem, there is also a mechanism of **societal pressure** and an expectation towards the actors to engage that acts as a force together with the loss of the taboo. Shortly after the statement quoted above, the second alternative retail representative proceeds to explain that:

you [talking about retailers and producers] can almost not hide anymore. You cannot cuddle up anymore. (E12).

The first alternative retail representative expresses how he simply expects a certain level of engagement:

All [retailers] have some agreements on collaboration [to donate surplus]. I think that one should have that [such an agreement] as a retailer, at minimum, precisely because it is routinely planned to have an over-supply in the shelves in the shop. (E10)

Third, the responsibility expansion is driven by an underlying mechanism of **corporate social responsibility**. The second alternative retail representative comments that the change in retailer's extent of taking action is both driven by the focus on the issue in the media, but also due to the competitive nature of the sector that forces to align in the CSR strategies:

If one [retailer] does it, the others follow suit. (E12)

The CSR manager of one major retailer acknowledges this accordingly:

We do not hide that of course we want to tell the story – that we want to be responsible. (E10)

However, the corporate responsibility mechanism is not an aspect of competitive strategy or PR alone, but also a driver among the employees. The alternative retailer interviewee observes:

There are large differences. It is very much dependent on the owner of the store. And if there is a fiery soul on the shop, then there are also really many solutions [to avoid food waste]. (E12)

To sum up, our analysis shows that consumer responsabilization is rooted in identity and motivation and that two narratives of the self-governed consumer and a shared contribution co-exist. These have over time given room for the perception of responsibility to expand, which we term a hybrid responsibility expansion, and describe the mechanism that appear to be at play.

5 | DISCUSSION

This study of responsibility for food waste in the retailer–consumer interface uses in-depth qualitative interviews with consumers and interviews with institutional actors over a longer time-period. We offer two main contributions to literature and theory: The parallel existence of two narratives, and the new concept of a hybrid responsibility expansion—which we discuss one by one in the following.

5.1 | Different narratives are at play at the same time

We found that two narratives on responsibility emerged. These two emerged in both the consumer and institutional data. Among consumers, the more dominant narrative was the one which sees the consumer as a self-governed actor bearing the greatest share of responsibility. However, both in several consumer interviews and in the institutional data, also a narrative of a shared responsibility among the different actors was outlined: The first, “consumer governed narrative” mirrors consumer responsabilization (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). The second, “shared contribution narrative” appears to reflect a shared responsibility and shifts importance to the influence of institutional structures in the market on consumers' individual behaviour. This narrative is also reflected in the institutional data. We propose that this reflects that there is also responsabilization among businesses and organizations, as previously noted in the literature (Shamir, 2008).

Our findings contribute a nuanced view to the discussion on whether or not responsabilization or deresponsibilization is more prominent. Findings support other researchers who showed that the consumer governed narrative is not the only one (e.g., Soneryd & Uggla, 2015), and that there is great complexity in the issue (Caruana & Chatzidakis, 2014), resulting in more than one narrative. The shared contribution narrative that we find is exemplified in quotes which nicely illustrate that there are multi-levels and multi-agents (Caruana & Chatzidakis, 2014). However, we also find that there does not seem to be a sign of de-responsibilization from the consumer side (Pellandini-Simányi & Conte, 2020) even though institutions are taking greater action. On the contrary, the narrative of consumers being responsible and expected to be sovereign actors is

very prominent in the consumer interviews that we conducted. What emerges is that both consumers and organizations and businesses in the supply chain assume responsibility.

5.2 | Responsibility expands over time and overlaps into the respective other actor's domain

In reference to Pellandini-Simányi and Conte (2020) we call the concept that emerges, and which we describe and introduce, a “hybrid” responsibility expansion. It has two aspects: First, we observe an expansion of the domains of action for which the actor perceives to be responsible, and second, this emerges as a temporal process—thus a responsibility expansion over the years the respondents refer back to. The hybrid responsibility expansion explains how responsabilization can occur on both the individual consumer and on part of the supply chain, thus explaining why different narratives can be at play simultaneously. It also shows that the different actors assume responsibility for actions and waste occurrence *outside* their traditional domain of action.

We expand the theory of consumer responsabilization by introducing and explaining the concept of hybrid responsibility expansion, and we contribute to a better understanding of the mechanism as it is observed in previous literature. For example, Gollnhofer et al. (2019) deal with the food sharing consumer movements; understanding such a movement on the background of an underlying hybrid responsibility expansion makes it even more understandable why there are both consumers and institutional actors who are engaged in re-organizing the value regime. Interestingly, in contrast to Gollnhofer et al. (2019), we do not find indicators of a negative view on dumpster divers in our interviews. Also, in our interviews, institutional actors such as the retailers are portrayed as rather powerful in defining the value regime—an argument also found in other previous literature (e.g., Devin & Richards, 2016). We argue, however, that the powerful actor is more flexible and in fact expanding and re-conceptualizing responsibility over time, as shown in the concept of hybrid responsibility expansion. For this, we also provide insights on the mechanisms that drive this expansion: the lost taboo of food waste, the societal pressure, and the corporate social responsibility that companies are following. Thus, the case we analyse exemplifies how the continuous societal discussion of an issue, as in the case of Denmark and food waste, can create the drivers for change. We attribute this to the increasing and persistent focus in society on the issue of food waste, and to the collaborative actions that sector stakeholders have increasingly taken over this time.

The expansion of responsibility on the side of the retailers is an example of business responsabilization (Bookman & Martens, 2013). But as Bookman and Martens also mention, the responsabilization inside the business can as well be bottom-up, meaning, being driven by individuals (employees) and not a general strategy. As some of the quotes in our findings show, as for example the store manager clearly marking foods that the dumpster divers should not eat, the expansion of responsibility by the retailer goes in hand with a greater empathy

for the viewpoint of the other actor as well. Moreover, the alternative retailer representative interviewed underlines how it is “fiery souls” in different retail stores that drive the change.

5.3 | Limitations and future research

The empirical data were collected through qualitative interviews and hence, the sample sizes were small and the generalizability is limited. The 10 households were recruited based on waste sorting data. However, categorizing them as low or high based on one measurement (at the first point in time, see Table 1) might not be accurate, and hence, more measurements could have provided a better foundation for understanding these households' food waste behaviour. Also, we strived to have a diverse sample, but there is an overweight of middle-aged/elderly persons. Future studies should include a more diverse sample also in terms of age, to see if there are any generational differences in their approach to food waste.

Even though the 14 interviews with actors in the food supply chain were conducted with different persons, conducting them over a course of 7 years enhances the validity of our findings. Since the interview persons are representing food supply chain actors, we argue that we are able to detect trends and developments in the food supply chain regarding food waste through these interviews. The study is one example of how food supply chain actors view the responsabilization process of food waste in a certain geographical location such as Denmark. The interviewees were mainly Danish with only two being from outside Denmark. Hence, future research should look more into cultural differences in this responsabilization process by conducting cross-cultural studies in selected countries—for instance in countries identified as performing well (such as Denmark), average and poor in terms of sustainability (SDSN, 2019). Such a cross-cultural comparison might contribute with an even better understanding of the responsabilization process.

We suggest that future research maps initiatives related to food waste among all actors in the food supply chain to document and explain how the hybrid responsabilization process unfolds. Some activities might not be transparent or clearly communicated, and hence, we suggest triangulating a range of different methods (such as observations, netnography, interviews and focus groups) to obtain a thorough understanding of how companies' CSR-programmes, government policies and NGO activism as well as consumer initiatives and behaviour impact the perception of responsibility. Future research should also focus on generalizability of our findings through, for instance, surveys identifying different factors impacting the perception of food waste responsibility by actors in the food value chain. Comparing answers from different actors (such as consumers, retailers, governmental institutions, NGOs)—and possibly in different national contexts—could be beneficial for understanding more about how the hybrid responsibility expansion takes place and which potential drivers and barriers there are in this process. Other sustainable behaviours taking place in the interaction between retailers and consumers such as buying products with lower environmental impact

(organic, in season, local, etc.) could also be studied to advance the understanding of the hybrid responsibility expansion even better.

5.4 | Implications

This study looked at perceived responsibility for food waste and the directions, procedures and developments over time for the case of household food waste originating from the retailer–consumer interface. It looked at the issue both from a micro-level—the consumer—and the macro-level of the institutions making up the supply chain and market environment. We find that responsibility is expressed in a “consumer governed” as well as a “shared contribution” narrative. These narratives differ in the extent to which responsibility is located at the individual consumer or is shared with the organizations. In addition, we find that actors on both sides show a “responsibility expansion,” meaning that they appear to have expanded their perceived responsibility into the domain of action of the other actor over time. The case that we looked at was pricing of food and how pricing tactics and changes to these can increase or reduce food waste.

As an implication, we argue that based on our findings, it appears that abolishing certain price promotions on behalf of consumers does not correspond with consumers' own perception of responsibility, where consumers subscribe to a narrative of consumer sovereignty and individual responsibility (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). The majority of consumers do not ascribe responsibility to the retailer but rather to the consumers, dealing with the pricing tactics in a responsible way. These consumers expect sovereign consumers to withstand temptations and be frugal. As such, the actions of abolishing price promotions might even be perceived negatively as they take away consumers' power—or as only being adequate for the “other” consumers who they recall in the “horror stories” of over-purchases.

However, other consumers—in particular those struggling to avoid food waste—see a more shared contribution to the problem of food waste. In addition, the responsibility expansion over time that emerges from consumer and institutional data shows how there is not only a shared responsibility perception among some but also an overlap of the perceived responsibility, given they expand into domains of action against food waste. For retailers this responsibility expansion implies that their managerial decisions should be in synchrony and respond to that perception among their customers, their employees and the stakeholders in the sector. For example, their communication and the tools they provide to consumers should both stress the responsibility of consumers' individual choices for their own food waste avoidance, but also what consumers can do to help the retailer avoid food waste. As such, their managerial decision making in fact reflects the complex and interdependent nature of sustainability issues (Shaw et al., 2018). Research shows that retailer's communication on food waste can indeed trigger consumers to avoid waste (Young et al., 2018). The responsibility expansion also implies that actions against food waste should at best be collaborative (Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Somlai, 2022), because this is also how consumers and employees perceive the responsibility. An example are retailers

offering food reduced in price via apps, that consumers can order and pick up at the end of the day. Digital platforms (Hellemans et al., 2022) easily allow consumers and employees to act upon their perceived responsibility.

Environmental and sustainability issues, such as food waste, require supply chain collaboration (Akhtar et al., 2018; Lamming & Hampson, 1996). We propose that this also extends to the collaboration with consumers: our results indicate that consumers are motivated to have their identities as conscious and active agents verified and that a self-perception as “easily tempted” and “irresponsible” rarely matches their identity standard. Considering the scale of the sustainability challenge (Goworek et al., 2018) and opportunities for collaborative community actions (Shaw et al., 2018) such as digital interactions (Akhtar et al., 2018) and the sharing economy, there are many potential collaborative actions to build on in the area of food waste avoidance and in the interplay between businesses and consumers—as well as policy makers.

Our findings call for a greater acknowledgement of consumer's own perception of their responsibility and active role in the interface between business and consumers. The trend of “dumpster divers” criticizing and raising awareness of food binned by supermarkets shows that some consumers even enforce such a collaboration between consumers and retailers. Interestingly, the local supermarket manager who we interviewed in the study, exemplified how he actually responded to this bottom-up call for collaboration on the local level, by responding to dumpster diver actions. We suggest that managerial decision makers should generally design their CSR tactics on food waste in a manner that reflects consumers perception of responsibility and the expanded responsibility of both their employees and of consumers. In addition, we suggest that policy makers create room for this collaboration between consumers and retailers in their regulations for the benefit of reducing food waste, and make it easier for business and consumers alike to redefine waste as a resource (Perey et al., 2018).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the perceived directions, procedures, and developments over time of responsabilization in the case of food waste originating in the retailer–consumer interface. We conclude that, first, two narratives can be observed, both a more dominant “consumer governed narrative” in line with consumer responsabilization and a “shared contribution narrative.” Second, we conclude that over time a process of “hybrid responsibility expansion” is observed, meaning that responsabilization of both consumers and retailers has expanded over time and their perceived responsibility is moving into each other's domain of action and therefore overlaps. This study contributes to theory by providing a nuance to the dichotomy of agency versus structure, which has been requested in ethical consumption literature (Carrington et al., 2020; Pekkanen, 2020). Most importantly, this study expands theory by introducing, describing, and showing the mechanisms of the process of “hybrid responsibility expansion” in

which different actors perceive to assume more responsibility, also in an area that was previously the domain of another actor. We suggest that the findings call for more collaborative actions between consumers and the institutional actors defining the supply chain, as we highlight in the case of pricing-related food waste emerging in consumer-retailer food waste.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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