# Ambiguous Environmental Advertising

## – How Brand Advertising And Consumers Frame Rügenwalder Mühle's Products

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# Abstract

Along with current societal developments and trends, businesses which are not originally engaged in sustainability may be inclined to reorient themselves towards more environmental practices. It is crucial for corporations to understand how to integrate sustainability into a revenue-driven business, and how to communicate this to their customers. This thesis focuses on the traditional German meat producer *Rügenwalder Mühle*, that successfully entered the meat alternative market in 2014, as an exemplary case of ambiguous environmental reorientation and in consequence advertising. Building on the academic literature on environmental advertising and strategic ambiguity, the thesis explores the brand's product framing as straddling between clear and open communication on the one hand, and ambiguous communication on the other hand.

Empirically, this thesis draws on interviews with 14 people regularly consuming the brands' products, and 62 of the brand's Facebook posts from 2020/21. Using an inductive content analysis and subsequent frame analysis, the findings show that product frames communicated by *Rügenwalder Mühle* are only partly reflected in the frames consumers use when talking about the products. The main differences are (1) how the brand conveys their new orientation by highlighting the reconciliation of tradition and innovation, which consumers primarily perceive as ambivalence; and (2) that the brand views sustainability linked to personal responsibility and agency, while consumers rather perceive the product as an agent for societal sustainable change.

*Rügenwalder Mühle* seem to employ a combined approach of strategic ambiguity and clear environmental claims in their advertising. Based on the frames identified in the analysis and the overall success of the brand in the market, this is evaluated to be a suitable strategy for businesses aspiring to reorient toward sustainability. Strategic ambiguity enables a gradual transition and thus alleviates the financial risk of abruptly changing a business orientation. While this strategy is only implicitly communicated to maintain flexibility, specific and tangible environmental product properties can be advertised to establish an environmental brand identity.

*Keywords:* environmental advertising, Rügenwalder Mühle, framing in advertising, sustainability framing, product framing, strategic ambiguity

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# 1. Introduction

The environmental impacts of the meat industry have become ever present in current times, exerting a sense of urgency for sustainable change. Meat production, particularly factory farming, accounts for a vast environmental damage through severe impacts on air, water, and soil (Djekic 2015), and 14,5 % of the global greenhouse gas emissions can be traced back to livestock supply chains (FAO 2013). Production and processing of livestock feed, storage and processing of manure, and methane gases released in the digestion process of ruminants are only a few of the many factors that contribute to increasing emissions and a massive loss of biodiversity (Chemnitz et al. 2021). In addition to environmental problems, there are further connected issues, e.g. the ethically questionable process of feeding livestock with proteins also edible for humans (Pluhar 2010).

In light of this development, the food sector is trending towards a decrease in meat demand in upcoming years. Concerns primarily related to the mentioned environmental impacts, animal treatment, and personal health have settled in consumers' awareness in recent years, which consequently caused more and more people to replace meat and dairy products with plant-based alternatives, which can be produced in a less resource-intensive manner and are therefore a sustainable alternative (Joshi & Kumar 2015). Even among the people not identifying as vegetarian or vegan, plant-based alternatives have gained significant popularity, demonstrating that they have achieved the leap from niche to mainstream product (Witte et al. 2021). It is projected that by 2025, meat consumption will have peaked in developed economies such as Europe and the US, and meat will increasingly be replaced by substitutes (Carrington 2021), laying the groundwork for the growth of a substantial new industry (Witte et al. 2021). This trend is already apparent in multiple Western markets, e.g. in the US beef market, which is currently being upstaged by new – and instantly successful – meat substitute brands such as Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat (Cardello 2019).

Turning to Europe, the situation is similar; vegetarian and vegan diets are an up-and-coming trend, and the market has and is still gaining traction. Germany stands out as the largest national market, with nearly 10% of the population following a vegetarian or vegan diet (Mordor Intelligence 2020) and a total 63% willing to

reduce their personal meat consumption (Bielinska et al. 2020). Taking a look at the younger generations in Germany, this development is expected to intensify in the future; recent research points out that there are twice as many vegetarians and vegans among the 15-29-year-olds compared to the total German population (Chemnitz et al. 2021). In many cases, the question whether or not to consume meat has become strongly political, e.g. driven by the Fridays for Future movement. Young people forgoing meat see themselves as a pioneering group of a future-oriented diet.

## 1.1. Rügenwalder Mühle

As numerous new meat alternatives are introduced to the market at high pace in response to this trend (Moreau 2020), businesses operating in the meat industry are prompted to reconsider their respective business orientations to make them viable for the future (Cardello 2019). One such business, aligning their product portfolio with these market demands, is German meat producer Rügenwalder Mühle (hereafter referred to as RM). They are a well-known family business established in 1834, that now employs 683 people and generated a turnover of 242 million Euros in 2019 (Die Deutsche Wirtschaft 2021). Originally, they exclusively produced meat (mainly sausage) until expanding their product range to vegetarian and vegan equivalents in 2014, when they also started promoting a sustainable lifestyle. While their revenue still includes sales from meat products, they effectively only advertise their meat alternatives (Laudenbach 2019), which continue to become more successful. Their portfolio currently comprises seven meat products, eight vegetarian products, and nine vegan products (Rügenwalder Mühle n.d.). Today, RM is market leader, holding approximately 40% share of the German meat alternative market (Der Spiegel 2020). Their strategy paid off: in 2020, for the first time, RM gained more revenue with their meat alternatives than with their conventional meat produce (Terpitz 2020).

RM has successfully ventured into a new market, on which they even managed to emerge as leader. Although their shift to meat alternatives is well reported in the media from a strategic and financial perspective (see Kwasniewski 2015; Kolf 2016; Liebrich 2015; Grossarth 2016), it remains unclear which product properties RM emphasize in their advertisements, and in turn how consumers view the products. What is striking here is the apparent discrepancy of products and underlying values of the company. RM was an established, traditional meat producing business known for specifically branded meat products, that people uniquely associated with RM. Today, they seemingly market their products in a way that can be argued to oppose their original business model; whilst still selling

meat products, they only highlight the benefits of their new vegetarian and vegan products to the consumer. How is this ambiguity communicated in one brand with unified underlying values? In order to explore this question from one particular angle, this study focuses on the way products are framed by RM and by consumers, respectively.

The issue became apparent to me through several RM advertisements on the social media platform Facebook. Their comment sections are characterised by a high rate of interaction of users who express quite polarised perspectives about the advertised products, partly in a vigorous and uncompromising tone. This ongoing controversy sparked my interest for this study.

*Clarification of terms*

Within the context of this thesis, I mention RM's *original* or *conventional products*, with which I am referring to their meat products that formerly constituted the entire offering and now merely play a secondary role in it. Besides that, I use the terms *meat alternatives* or *substitutes* interchangeably to refer to RM's new vegetarian and vegan product lines which comprise products that intend to imitate meat in appearance, taste, and texture. Those include egg protein- or plant-based versions of processed meat, such as sausages, burgers, steaks, nuggets, or schnitzel, but also a vegan version of raw mince which needs to be processed by the consumer.

## 1.2. Research problem

Looking at the big picture, environmental factors play a larger role in business decisions at present, and will continue to do so in the future (Bonini & Görner 2011; Holt 2020). With climate change becoming a more pressing matter on political and public agendas (e.g. the Fridays for Future movement), businesses are well advised to reflect these societal aspirations and values if they want to retain and/or gain customers (Bennett 2019). By now, sustainability is a standard expected to be an integral part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy of any business, in order to showcase their social and environmental values related to the core business, demonstrating their contribution to the well-being of society that goes beyond commercial interests of the firm (Pelsmacker et al. 2013). It is therefore crucial for the corporate world to understand exactly how to communicate their environmental considerations to consumers, otherwise it could easily be perceived as selling argument that the company does not genuinely believe in. The overall challenge is to integrate sustainability into a capitalist-orientated system that lives

off of revenue from consumption and is therefore inherently unsustainable. Naturally, this is especially challenging for businesses engaged in environmentally harmful operations, such as RM originating in the production of meat.

From a purely financial perspective, RM are successful. This however only shows an objective and quantifiable part of reality, and leaves out both the communication on part of RM and consumer perception of the products. These two perspectives will be examined within the scope of this study, in order to gain a more comprehensive overview of the RM case, and allow for a better understanding of which communicative elements might be conducive or impeding in environmental advertising of a business originally engaged in environmentally harmful practices. There are a number of brands that have been founded specifically to appeal to a sustainability-oriented target audience and thus it is rather well established how to create a corresponding brand identity; but it is more challenging for businesses that have existed for a long time to reorient their entire brand towards sustainability while managing to remain attractive to consumers.

The overall purpose of this study is to contribute to understanding the role of ambiguity in environmental advertising. To that end, I examine how RM as a conventional company – not previously involved with sustainability – frame products in order to communicate a more sustainable business orientation, which might inform practitioners or inspire business owners who are considering a similar step toward sustainability. Hereby, it is not the aim to provide concrete recommendations for application, but rather a focused analysis of this case, which then remains open to interpretation for any recipient.

## 1.3. Aim and research questions

The aim of this research is to understand how RM's current product framing is reflected in consumer perceptions, which might shed some light upon the role of environmental advertising in this particular case. The study will therefore firstly investigate the frames that are employed in RM's advertisements on Facebook, and secondly investigate those that consumers utilise when talking about the products. In a final step, those two sets of frames will be compared in order to determine how they relate to each other, indicating how consumers perceive RM's products. The findings will then be interpreted in light of environmental advertising and strategic ambiguity literature.

The research questions each address one component of the aim. The first question revolves around exploring which particular frames were employed in RM's current

advertisements to highlight certain product properties. The second question investigates consumer perceptions of RM products, which manifest in the frames they (subconsciously) use; and the final question looks into commonalities and differences of the two sets of frames, by means of a comparative analysis. Particular focus is placed on the understanding of sustainability implied in both perspectives.

RQ1    What frames do RM employ in their recent advertisements on Facebook to highlight product properties?

RQ2    With what frames do consumers refer to RM products?

RQ3    How do the product frames identified in RM advertisements relate to those identified in consumer interviews, and what respective understanding of sustainability is implied?


## 1.4. Outline of the thesis

This section provides an overview of how the remainder of this thesis is organised, which is visualised below. Figure 1 points out the steps required to achieve the aim (Verschuren & Doorewaard 2010).

Chapter 2 entails relevant theories and literature applied in this study (framing, environmental advertising, strategic ambiguity), which are essential for informing the primary point of interest: framing of RM products. RM and RM consumers are determined as research objects to provide the required data, through Facebook advertisements and interviews. The process of generating and analysing this data is detailed in chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the results from this analysis, first describing the RM advertising frames and then the consumer frames, thus answering the first two research questions. The third research question is addressed in in chapter 5, in which the results are compared, discussed, and related back to the literature, providing a broader context and pointing out the potential implications of this study.

The process visualised below reads as follows:
a) From the study of frame theory, environmental advertising and strategic ambiguity, and preliminary research, b) framing of RM products has been derived as an analytical lens for the two research objects: RM and RM consumers. c) The results of this analysis will be described, and subsequently d) interpreted and discussed in a broader context.

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RM (3.2.)
Facebook ads

Context (1.1.
& 1.2.)

Theoretical
framework (2.1.)
Frame theory                    Framing of RM        Analysis (3.3.)    Results of          Comparison and
                                products (1.3.)                         analysis (4.1.)     interpretation of
                                                                                            results (5.)
Literature review
(2.2. & 2.3.)
Environmental
advertising;                                         Analysis (3.3.)    Results of
Strategic ambiguity                                                     analysis (4.2.)

                                RM consumers (3.2.)
                                Interviews

        (a)                             (b)                    (c)                    (d)
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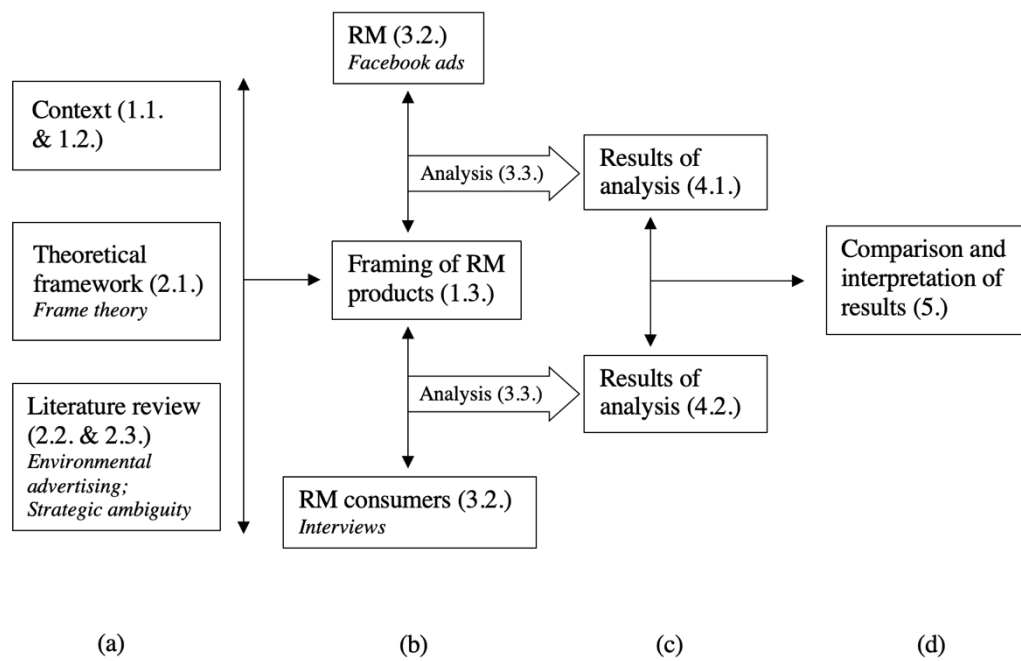
*Figure 1 Thesis structure. Inspired by Verschuren & Doorewaard (2010)*

# 2. Situating the research

After introducing the background, research problem and -questions, and structure of this thesis, the second chapter moves on to complement this contextual fundament of the study with relevant theories and literature that inform the successive analysis and can later help place the results into a relevant context.

## 2.1. Frame theory

The analytical lens for viewing the data in this study is frame theory. The field of frames finds application in various practical contexts and disciplines, such as media research, psychology, or social sciences, resulting in somewhat unclear or ambivalent understandings of the concept. However, a fundamental common conceptualisation is that framing involves exerting influence on human perception through information transfer (Entman 1993). Communication in this case is primarily understood as means for the sender to reach a specific goal with the receiver, such as educating or persuading, and thus fulfils a pragmatic function (see Pezzullo & Cox 2018).

Frames are mental structures employed by humans to perceive and categorise information. The concept is anchored within social constructivism (Fairhurst 2005), assuming that since humans cannot understand the complexity of the world surrounding them, they construct frames as a cognitive effort to categorise information and make sense of it (Scheufele 2000). With that in mind, each individual holds a different set of frames that can be activated or shaped through the use of specific language (Lakoff 2010). This act of senders creating or shaping an already existing frame within a receiver is called framing (Westin 2019; van Hulst & Yanow 2016). Although the latter is happening in any human communication, it can also be exploited in more deliberate and goal-oriented ways. That finds frequent application in public communication – political, commercial, journalistic, etc. – which sets an agenda (Scheufele 2000), by omitting or making specific message elements salient to present information in a certain light (Entman 1993).

A definition that I find suitable for the context of this study has been proposed by Entman (1993:52):

> "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."

I focus on two elements of this definition for the analysis of my data: problem definition and treatment recommendation. Expanding these concepts, van Hulst & Yanow (2016) assert that framing facilitates sense-making of a situation by firstly defining it and then insinuating a course of action that should logically follow; these two functions of frames have also been described as diagnosis and action bias (Westin 2019). Looking at how a problem or situation is defined and what remedy or solution to that is suggested within the frame allows for identifying the intention of the sender, making it an appropriate analytical tool for the purpose of this thesis.

Most papers discuss framing in the context of media research or public discourse analysis for its ability to "identify constitutive structures in a discourse" (Foust & O'Shannon Murphy 2009:153), and in turn to make the frames' impact on agency and public perception visible. Since the analysis of frames has been successful and applied to study other communication, even environmental advertising in some cases, I will review the literature in the following section by itself and in relation to frame analysis. The upcoming sections provide an overview of existing literature related to environmental advertising and strategic ambiguity in order to be able to situate this study within the context of established and relevant knowledge. That includes previously conducted research, the development of the field, as well as executed frame analyses in specific cases.

## 2.2. Environmental advertising

Growing environmental concern in society is not a new phenomenon; environmental issues already became more present in the media in the 1970s. Since advertisement fulfils both a reflective and a constitutive role in shaping culture (Banerjee et al. 1995), e.g. by responding to or taking a stand on current social issues, businesses soon seized the opportunity to incorporate sustainability as a selling point and thus the field of environmental advertising – promoting apparent environmental properties of products or services – emerged in the 1990s (Cummins et al. 2014).

Carlson et al. (1993) first researched the nature of environmental claims, and deception within those. The effect that consumers seemed to be willing to pay slightly more for a product advertised for its environmental properties was soon juxtaposed by a growing confusion and suspicion among the public about the truthfulness of environmental claims in advertisements. A corresponding investigation has found that most claims are vague and ambiguous because many of the used terms and expressions have no clear meaning, incomplete and misleading comparisons are being employed, or the link between product and environmental message is unclear (Carlson et al. 1993). Supporting this finding, another study revealed that most advertisements contain environmental aspects only in response to societal concerns, rather than being rooted in a "substantive environmental marketing strategy" (Banerjee et al. 1995:30), and therefore the advertised sustainability is not strategically anchored in business planning (Cummins et al. 2014). A mentioned example for a lacking connection between product and environmental claim is the advertisement of a major oil company showing scenic mountains and valleys, accompanied by the slogan "we care about the environment", omitting further explanation and leaving consumers unable to verify the provided information (Banerjee et al. 1995). Vague claims result in a perception of the advertiser as "manipulative, deceptive and unethical" (Leonidou et al. 2014:673). Correspondingly, there appears to be the broad assumption that marketers should provide objective, unambiguous, and factual information about the environmental properties of the product in order to adequately enable informed consumption choices (Kangun et al. 1991; Carlson et al. 1993; Easterling et al. 1996; Leonidou et al. 2011; Leonidou et al. 2014).

Adding frame theory as analytical lens to the field of environmental advertising enables a researcher to view the material from a specific perspective, identify underlying implicit motives, and therefore understand what the sender of the message views as cause and remedy of certain environmental issues (see Entman 1993); the latter most likely being linked to the advertised product. Frame analysis has mainly been applied in the area of public media communication, e.g. analysing the political orientation or agenda of certain news outlets, but less so in advertising, let alone environmental advertising.

VanDyke & Tedesco (2016) recognise this gap and propose a vitalisation of research investigating environmental advertising frames in order to inform practitioners. In their study, they found that the responsibility frame – attributing responsibility for the cause or solution of a problem – is much more dominant in environmental advertising. Hereby, the focus is placed on building a relationship through communicating shared goals, in order to convey a socially responsible image (VanDyke & Tedesco 2016).

Ahern et al. (2013) augment these findings with a longitudinal study of green advertising in National Geographic Magazine over three decades with the result that commercial advertisements have "consistently focused on gain frames for current generations" (p.491).

A particular company that is rooted in environmentally harmful practices is ExxonMobil, a major US oil and gas corporation. A frame analysis has been performed on their TV campaign "Energy Solutions"; ExxonMobil attempted to shift their "multinational energy supplier" role to "environmental proponent" by stressing technological answers to issues rooted in culture of consumerism. To that end, the severity of climate change is downplayed, while the oil industry is portrayed as caretaker of the environment (Plec & Pettenger 2012). The authors argue that green marketing itself is not manipulative, but often advertisements suggest that products are "green" based on one single attribute, whilst disregarding others that constitute the big picture. In this case, ExxonMobil are not inherently sustainable and largely refuse to take progressive steps to reduce or omit the use of petroleum. Environmental claims in this case come across as untruthful and reduce credibility, which consequently results in consumers losing faith (Plec & Pettenger 2012). The authors conclude that ExxonMobils "greenwashing" advertisements discourage environmental behaviour and civic participation of consumers because they imply that the overall culture of consumption does not need to change.

ExxonMobil is only partly comparable to RM though, as the former is a major global player with much more financial resources, reach, and impact; this also involves them more directly in climate change issues, having lobbied to downplay the importance of global warming in the past (Plec & Pettenger 2012). Thus, the comparison merely focuses on how a company stemming from an unsustainable industry frames environmental properties of their product, and how consumption is understood in that context.

## 2.3. Strategic ambiguity

Contrary to the denounced vagueness in environmental advertising as described in the previous section, it has also been proposed that while false environmental claims in advertising are perceived as deceptive, vague claims do not necessarily reflect negatively onto the brand, but can even foster a positive brand attitude (Schmuck et al. 2018). Cummins et al. (2014) expand this by asserting that consumers are likely willing to give advertisers the benefit of the doubt when encountering environmental claims that they cannot verify, but are open to their

interpretation. Marketers occasionally aim for exactly this consumer reaction by employing strategic ambiguity in their communication, which is then a tactical decision.

Eisenberg (1984) describes strategic ambiguity as communication purposefully being the opposite of clear, in order to promote unified diversity; that is, to enable multiple different interpretations of the communicated message, and simultaneously creating a sense of unity. Core meanings are implied rather than stated explicitly, so that room for projection and divergent viewpoints is preserved, without excluding any perspectives. Thus, it is not the aim to drive recipients toward consensus, but to let them uphold individual, potentially contradicting interpretations whilst believing to be in agreement. Effective communication is therefore not so much understood as being open, clear, or explicit, as suggested by many environmental advertising scholars; rather than that, it is a strategic tool to address several contradicting goals, for which clear and open communication might be impeding (Eisenberg 1984).

Strategic ambiguity can be an efficient tool for CSR communication, since it manages the interests of diverse stakeholders, primarily consumers, while enabling the sender to remain flexible with their goals (Scandelius & Cohen 2016). A case study applying this concept (in a business management context) to RM asserts that in response to recognising the diverse ideologies coexisting in society, RM employ strategic ambiguity through their product offering, which represents the availability of several options rather than the need to renunciate, emphasising that people have diverging tastes that can be satisfied with different product types. RM follow the pragmatic goal to appeal to as many people as possible while alienating as few as possible, which is achieved by employing broad communication that avoids any confrontation (Schäfer 2020). Other case studies investigating the concept have shown that it is "prone to misuse" (Schäfer 2020:12), and rather associated with negatively connoted examples, such as fast food, tobacco, or alcoholic beverages. Also in these instances, strategic ambiguity is employed to exploit divergent consumer interpretations.

# 3. Research design

These insights from the previous chapter offer a suitable departure point for researching environmental advertising in the context of RM. In order to allow for a comprehensive understanding of my data gathering and analysis procedures, this chapter maps out the steps taken to fulfil the research aim. In arguing for the usefulness of the approach for this research, I also reflect on my position as researcher as well as the resulting trustworthiness of the findings and analysis within this interpretive research.

## 3.1. Research strategy

Considering the explorative nature of the research questions and aim detailed in the first chapter, a qualitative research strategy seems most feasible. Rather than quantifiable results, the type of data I aim to generate consists of themes and patterns in RM's advertisements and consumer perception. This kind of data requires the investigation of meanings made explicit in words and images (Saunders et al. 2015). The understanding implied in this approach correlates with the philosophical worldview of critical realism, which distinguishes between the external and independent reality on the one hand, and our subjective individual perception of it on the other hand. Critical realist research is consequently concerned with investigating underlying structures and meanings of observable events (Saunders et al. 2015). Framing theory corresponds with these epistemological assumptions insofar as individual meaning making of a particular object or circumstance is examined.

Concentrating on the concrete strategy, the case study appears to be the most suitable one, as it allows for an evaluation of a certain circumstance, process, or phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Bryman (2012:66) describes this strategy as "detailed and intensive analysis of a single case", which, in my research, is given through the focus on one particular brand on a specific social media platform, with specific interviewees providing insights. Characteristic for case study research is an intensive data gathering process, and the concentration on depth

rather than breath in the yielded data (Verschuren & Doorewaard 2010), which feeds into the overall research design.

Regarding the viability of particular research methods, several practical limitations are identified. The scope of this projcet is limited both financially and temporally, which narrows down the range of possibilities, such as longitudinal studies. Further, I have considered the current pandemic situation for planning field research activities; for example, it was not possible for me to travel to Germany and conduct real-life interviews or observations. Having described the overall orientation of the study in the previous section, I now outline the specific methods for data generation and data analysis.

## 3.2. Data gathering

*Advertisement analysis*

As touched upon in the previous section, there are two different research objects from which the relevant data will be generated, correlating with the first two research questions. One of them is textual (and complementary visual and audio-visual digital) material which is accessed via social media: the RM advertisements. I assume that those represent RM's general communication and self-understanding and are therefore an appropriate research object. A corresponding analysis can be classified as documentary research, a document being a "durable repository" (Saunders et al. 2015:183) which applies to social media content. The advantage of this method is that the data can be accessed easily and unobtrusively (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The challenge is to narrow down the material to a manageable amount. RM are actively conducting marketing efforts on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Pinterest, which in its entirety goes far beyond the scope of my available resources. Thus, I focused on one platform, recognising that the results of this research might be affected by that choice, as each of those platforms has a different target audience and accordingly requires a tailored approach for communication and interaction (Hollensen 2011).

With that in mind, Facebook seemed to be the most suitable platform to focus my research on, as RM have by far the most followers (or "likes"), implying likely higher reach and a more diverse usership. With 45,7% of the entire German population having an account on Facebook (NapoleonCat 2021), it is also the most used social media platform, and its user composition seems to be a more realistic reflection of society than those of other social media platforms, leading to the assumption that Facebook advertisements are the most generic since they address

the mainstream. I included 62 relevant postings (26 images, 14 animations, 20 videos, 3 interactive posts) from the period of 17.01.2020 until 20.01.2021 in my analysis, in order to narrow down the scope to a manageable size while ensuring to focus on the content that represents the most recent product positioning by RM. The data has been extracted using an online tool[1] making available the data in form of an Excel table.

*Interviews*

The second research object are RM customers. In line with the case study strategy, the participants are selected based on their potential to provide the insights required to answer the second research question (Creswell & Creswell 2018). I have decided to conduct semi-structured interviews as it is important to establish trust between the researcher and research participants in order to increase the willingness of the latter to provide truthful and authentic data (Creswell & Creswell 2018); and that can be best achieved through personal contact.

The interview participants are RM customers, thus people who are familiar with the brand and can relay their perception of it; non-probability sampling serves this purpose best, as participants are not selected randomly with this technique, but based on the researcher's subjective judgment (Saunders et al. 2015). To enhance the credibility of results, Graneheim & Lundman (2004) suggest to choose interviewees with various experiences, in order to obtain more versatile and richer data; so, I aimed to speak with RM consumers who vary in demographic factors and opinion – at least as far as visible for me – in order to depict a more comprehensive range of perspectives. To that end, the following different sampling techniques were combined:

1. I employed purposive sampling by targeting particular individuals through the comment section of RM Facebook advertisements, based on specific characteristics (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Having already skimmed through some of the comments for preliminary research, I noticed that many consumers expressed their opinions on RM's "meat made from plants" campaign, which is why I assumed that they would gladly talk about their views on it for research purposes. I chose some comments that represented an interesting point of view, and contacted the authors via personal messages, asking if they would be willing to answer a few questions. Out of the 20 messaged people, three agreed to participate in an interview; the others didn't respond.

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[1] https://github.com/kevinzg/facebook-scraper

2. Second, I joined specific Facebook groups that exist to exchange ideas and/or recipes revolving around vegetarian and vegan lifestyles, and posted an interview request there; so, people were offered the opportunity to approach me on their terms if they were interested in an interview. Five interviewees were recruited like this, representing a convenience sample (Saunders et al. 2015).

3. And lastly, I employed snowball sampling by asking around in my private network for potential interviewees. That yielded six further participants of which I knew five personally. With the latter, I tried to overcome any bias on both sides by being as professional as with the others (Saunders et al. 2015).

While I recognise the limitations of each individual sampling strategy, they also complement each other and allow for a richer interviewee composition. I was able to attain 14 interviewees, who provided a wide range of opinions. They are RM customers following different diets (vegetarian, vegan, flexitarian, and omnivore) from various age groups, who eat RM's meat alternatives more or less frequently. For data protection purposes, I did not ask for the interviewees' further demographic details. After approximately 10 interviews, I began to recognise some recurring themes while only few new ones emerged, indicating a commencing data saturation (Guest et al. 2006). In their systematic analysis concerning this, Guest et al. (2006) found that saturation is reached within the first 12 interviews in non-probability sampling, making recommendations accordingly.

The 14 interviews have then been conducted via Zoom, Skype, or – if preferred by the interviewee – phone. The average length was approximately 25 minutes. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data is treated confidentially, and the interviewees are not mentioned by name in the transcript in order to ensure anonymity (Saunders et al. 2015). To remain flexible and able to respond to unexpected input, the interviews were semi-structured, allowing for the conversation to evolve more organically (Bryman 2012). The interview guide (appendix A) is subdivided into three parts with a main guiding question each for structural purposes. It includes a total 23 questions, not all of which needed to be asked in every interview, since interviewees responded to these already in relation to other questions. Rather than that, I relied on a few broad guiding questions. Not all questions were directly relevant for the research aim but have been included to make the interviewees briefly reflect on a certain topic, before delving deeper into the questions significant for the research.

## 3.3. Data analysis

*Content analysis*

To analyse and further process the data, a content analysis of both respective data sets has been conducted, loosely based on Mayring (2015). Informed by my research aim, I approached the content analysis with a specific purpose: to identify frames based on the analysed content, resulting in key categories simultaneously representing the frames. The content analysis primarily aims at classifying the manifest content into categories representing similar meanings (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). In line with the explorative nature of this study, the categories were created inductively, enabling me to approach the data openly and without any preestablished concepts in mind. The two research objects (RM advertisements and consumer interviews) have been treated as separate units in the analysis, in order to avoid any potential bias on my part. This section describes the coding procedures for both data sets combined to avoid repetition, even though they were separate in practice. Crucial differences are pointed out wherever the procedures diverge.

The coding procedure included the following steps (see Mayring 2015):

1. Determining unit of analysis
2. Paraphrasing & translating content
3. Abstraction
4. Reduction
    a. Assigning colours
    b. Developing categories

Firstly, I determined the respective unit of analysis for both data sets. For the interviews, that was each statement (individual sentences) relating to the RM products. Relevant passages in the transcripts were then marked with colour. The unit of analysis for the RM posts was each individual statement (one or more sentences) from post text, text from the post visual, or spoken text transcribed from the videos, promoting their products. Imagery and its underlying meaning was excluded from this.

Those individual statements were then paraphrased and filled into an Excel sheet (appendix B). As a result eliminating less meaningful and superfluous content, to be able to focus on the more concise information (Mayring 2015). Along with paraphrasing, I translated the content to English for further analysis. For paraphrasing the RM posts, the accompanying images were used as contextual element for understanding the text correctly, but not themselves part of the analysis. The postings were viewed at as individual meaning units, rather than in relation to

each other in a coherent storyline; in line with that, any comments underneath the postings were disregarded as well.

Then I generalised the paraphrased content to a higher abstraction level that still implies the original content (Mayring 2015). As not all statements included enough contextual information to be understood in isolation, I utilised my own background knowledge in some cases for this step.

The next step was to reduce the statements, first to codes, and then to categories. To that end, I first marked the abstract content with similar meaning in the same colour, giving each colour a code. The first codes were then reapplied to the rest of the material wherever suitable. After this, I rearranged the Excel sheet by codes in descending order, so that the content appeared directly listed per code (appendices B & C). Looking at the content in a cluster enabled me to develop suitable categories that represent the codes. I then double checked whether the initial paraphrases are still represented in the categories, or if essential meaning had gotten lost in the course of the analysis. The categories were then adjusted accordingly.

*Frame analysis*

The identified categories were then used as frames for the subsequent frame analysis. Contrary to the content analysis, the frame analysis aimed at examining the latent content. I looked into how the problems and solutions are defined within each frame, and what purpose the RM product serves in connection to that. To that end, I viewed the material holistically, taking into account underlying meanings and contexts (see Linström & Marais 2012). To render a precise result, I reviewed the original source texts (interview transcripts and RM posts), reading back the initial statements and anchoring some exemplary quotes in the analysis, which I then marked with colour. For the interpretations, I expanded the Excel table from the content analysis with one further column. I first analysed RM's frames, and then the consumer frames. Already then, I recognised some themes from the RM advertising frames that were reflected or opposed in consumer frames, but still interpreted them individually to do justice to the complex and nuanced data. Throughout the analysis, I noticed that some frames appeared more consistently than others; here, I refer to the prominence of particular thoughts, rather than a quantitative understanding or interpretation of the data.

## 3.4. Position of the researcher

The interpretative approach integral to a critical realist research study heavily relies on the researcher's subjective outlook and understanding, e.g. in the process of interpreting the frames in this study. It is essential for a researcher to reflect on their role and background, both professionally and privately (Creswell & Creswell 2018). With this in mind, I tried to be aware of my own experiences and presuppositions which shaped my pro-environmental attitude and lifestyle. On the one hand they determined my interest in this particular study in the first place, but on the other hand might also influence the conclusions I draw. Particularly my own brand attitude, culinary experiences, and general relationship to RM prior to this study are important to be aware of.

However, no research can be perfectly objective, especially in qualitative studies (Mruck & Breuer 2003). I therefore attempted to integrate reflexive subjectivity to disclose my own assumptions and conclusions in this thesis. This is also reflected in the writing style, which includes my view rather than passively describing the research process in a traditional academic manner. This way, my unique perspective can be seen as analytical lens, adding another layer of meaning to the results by enabling the reader to understand my personal experience in the research process (see Davies 2012).

## 3.5. Trustworthiness of data

Rather than referring to reliability and validity as common in quantitative studies, Graneheim & Lundman (2004) propose trustworthiness as a more adequate standard for the qualitative research tradition. Trustworthiness, in turn, comprises credibility, dependability, and transferability; I therefore considered these concepts throughout the study.

To ensure credibility of the results, I paid close attention in the process of data analysis when identifying suitable codes and categories, in order to neither exclude nor overemphasize data (Graneheim & Lundman 2004). In line with this, I only included data relevant to answer the research questions, and disregarded information that seemed superfluous in the interviews and RM posts.

Dependability can be established by relying on a well-developed research plan, in order to avoid potential instability through too many iterative changes (Graneheim & Lundman 2004). In the course of this research project, I changed the original focus from how RM as a brand is framed to how their products are framed. This gave more direction to the study and made the overall focus more tangible, while

not involving major alterations to the entire research framework. Besides this, I largely stuck to the initial plan, so that internal consistency of the research process could be maintained. Further, the limited period of time culminating in a clear deadline was conducive to goal-oriented working without getting side-tracked.

Clearly defining the focus and context of this study in as much detail as possible makes it transferable (Graneheim & Lundman 2004). I conveyed this by precisely outlining the outcomes and several variables, such as the specific brand (RM), target group, Facebook as advertising platform, and framing as means of analysis. Detailing those enables readers to apply the findings to other cases or situations, and also understanding how some circumstances might be unique to this case.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that this study has a very specific angle on the subject of investigation, limiting the outcome through several factors. That includes Facebook as a source for RM's communication as well as platform for recruiting interviewees, and my personal link to some of the interviewees. Hence, no causality can be derived from the identified relations of frames and the overall success of RM as a brand; if a link can be established between frames and RM's success, frames are but one of the many influence factors, which have not all been subject of investigation here. This could encompass marketing related factors such as pricing, or a higher exposure of advertisements in general, compared to other brands. Nonetheless, this study contributes to understanding ambiguity in environmental advertising based on the particular case of RM.

# 4. Results

This chapter collates the outcomes of the analysis described previously. To that end, sections 4.1 and 4.2 present the product frames identified in RM Facebook posts and consumer interviews. Relating back to frame theory, the problems and remedies defined by each frame are explicitly listed in Tables 1 and 2, and further elaborated in each sub-section in order to provide a comprehensive overview of how the product is framed. The outcomes are then compared in the discussion chapter, analysing and interpreting commonalities and differences of the frames from the two research objects.

## 4.1. RM's advertising frames

From the 62 analysed RM Facebook posts of the last year, I identified five major frames which are outlined in this section and summarised in Table 1. The solutions are represented by the RM products, while the problems presented in the frames are largely focused on the consumer. This is expected, since the frames are derived from advertisements which are inherently focused upon satisfying consumer needs and wants.

*Table 1: RM advertisement frames including problem and solution*

| Frame | Problem | Solution |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Quality | Lack of trust and familiarity with product type | Normalising ingredients and validating products |
| 2. Consumer involvement | Lack of relationship between consumer and product | Involving and interacting with consumers |
| 3. Sustainability and responsibility | Lack of engagement for sustainability and recognition of own responsibility | RM's proactive measures convey feeling of responsibility |
| 4. Inspiration for cooking | Uncertainty how to prepare products | Establishing routines through relatable situations |

| 5. Reconciliation of tradition and innovation | Inconsistent product types: tradition and innovation are incompatible | New substitute products unifying tradition and innovation |
|---|---|---|

## 1. Quality

The first frame visible in RM Facebook posts highlights the quality of their products. In doing so, it picks up on potential consumer uncertainties about the ingredients of meat alternatives. The underlying concern appears to be that they are not obtained from a natural resource that directly links to the final product; animal products yield various meat and dairy products, and vegetables might even end up on the plate in their natural state – the link is clear to the consumer, and they can at least to a certain extent comprehend the steps of the production chain that preceded them eating a product. This link however is missing for meat alternatives, which are based on egg protein or plants, yet imitate meat. It is harder to grasp how these ingredients compose a product that resembles meat in shape, texture, and taste, which can cause distrust in the quality.

RM try to overcome this issue by familiarising the consumer with the used ingredients and production process, by means of images and videos of harvesting their own soy fields, as well as explicitly mentioning soy, wheat, and peas as valuable resources for protein. This is also reflected in one of their campaign slogans "the new appetite for meat made from plants", in which the ingredients are being normalised.

Further, they integrate external opinions and endorsements into their advertisements, including several awards they have won for their products, as well as known media figures and influencers expressing their preference of RM products over those of other brands. That affirms the quality of products in two different ways: firstly, the product has been awarded a prize by neutral authorities which overlook the entire market, and whose expert assessment can therefore be trusted. Such seeming objectivity increases credibility and trustworthiness for the consumer, especially through formulations like "now also officially number one" (post 2). And secondly, the use of celebrity messengers links positive feelings and associations to the products. If employed in a certain context like a cooking show that takes place "live on the GZSZ [German soap opera] Instagram channel" (post 3), they function as role models and projection screen for consumers, who then can identify with them.

What is highlighted through this frame is overall trustworthiness for the product type in general, and within the market segment, superiority over other brands quality-wise.


## 2. Consumer involvement

Unlike meat products, meat alternatives are less well established in the market, and therefore specific product type demands are not as well known in this segment. Indifference and unresponsiveness to consumer needs regarding the products lead to an incongruous representation of consumer wishes in the product segment. Along with that comes a lack of relationship between product and consumers, furthering a process of estrangement between them.

RM address this by employing their products to facilitate conversations and engagement with their consumers to make them more invested in the products. This is achieved by giving them the opportunity to actively participate in the decision-making process for the products to be launched next, conveyed through phrases like "your input is needed" (post 21), "you have decided" (post 23), or "which plant-based alternative do you wish for?" (post 28). This impression is further enhanced through several polls and questions that are posed; RM's format "question of the month" deals with particular themes, such as transparency, or product innovations, in which an RM spokesperson discusses the respective issues. People are then invited to interact with that in the comment section on Facebook. Additionally, RM regularly organise discussion panels to which anyone can apply as audience, dealing with critical questions about the brand's operations, e.g. their ongoing involvement in meat production, or to what extent sustainability is implemented (considering the plastic packaging). This demonstrates RM's willingness to deal with questions that might be uncomfortable for them, increasing their trustworthiness. The panel is among others composed of RM spokespersons, experts for the respective topics, and social media influencers. Although the discussions touch upon rather loosely connected topic areas and underlying values the brand attempts to communicate, such as sustainability in daily life, they still revolve around the products as central element of consumer involvement. RM want to position themselves as open-minded and alert to societal developments and concerns, an aspiration which is anchored in their products.

Through actively seeking the conversation and dialogue with consumers, RM want to ensure that their voices are heard and represented in the products. Thus, the latter function as touchpoints and means to interact with the consumers in an attempt to build a two-way relationship and ultimately increase consumer engagement with the brand.

### 3. *Sustainability & responsibility*

Considering sustainability and recognising the own responsibility to contribute to it – be it as individual or organisation, in a private or representative capacity – is becoming increasingly important. In line with that, the problem in this frame is defined as lack of both engagement for sustainability and the feeling of responsibility to adjust behaviour accordingly.

Through explicitly mentioning their own efforts to become more sustainable, RM are taking a clearly supportive position to sustainability, which is occasionally paired with future orientation, e.g. by referring to their products as step toward "nutrition of the future". Other sustainability themes manifested in the postings are seasonality ("the ideal companion for seasonal veggies" (post 13)) and regionality, through promoting their locally sourced crops. An obvious aspect of sustainability that underlies RM's entire communication is the apparent shift of their production capacities from meat to plant-based products and thus reducing $CO_2$ emissions by directly processing the crops instead of taking the inefficient detour of feeding it to animals first. Contrasting these two ways of processing crops also implicitly criticises meat producers, and along with that, raises a sense of responsibility.

This notion of responsibility is amplified through RM's proactive efforts to develop innovative alternatives to large-scale mass production that is common in the food industry, toward more manageable and regional approaches such as their pilot project to grow their own soy in Northern Germany. So, the product comes into play as catalyst for tackling systemic flaws of the global and environmentally harmful food industry. Likewise, RM also admit to shortcomings of their own products, particularly the plastic packaging which is not in line with their otherwise apparently sustainable orientation, with which they again take responsibility for own actions.

The products are not only a means for RM to communicate their own sustainability efforts, but also they transfer the feeling of responsibility to the consumer, e.g. by asking "what is your contribution to environmental protection?" (post 10). Purchasing the products is then offered as a solution for people to act on it, enabling them to contribute to sustainability through consumption and thus giving them agency to claim responsibility for their own actions.

*4. Inspiration for cooking*

Meat alternatives are a relatively new product category, compared to their real counterparts. But this novelty is accompanied by uncertainty about how to process or what to cook with them, which in turn might represent a barrier for people to venture a purchase, let alone a switchover to meat alternatives. Even though their main purpose is to imitate meat, whose preparation people are familiar with, these new products in the consumers' perception might comprise different properties and thus need to be processed accordingly when preparing a meal. Another aspect connected to that on a more abstract level is the perceived break with routines and lifestyle behaviours that rely on meat as commonplace meal component.

A solution offered by RM is inspirational content aimed at stimulating consumers' creativity and fantasy for cooking. Recipe suggestions in the form of clear step-by-step video instructions, or just images showing a meal prepared with the respective product are employed to achieve this. Accordingly, the product here is displayed as a driver for discovering and exploring new flavours and dishes, which is made explicit through appeals like "just try something new and enjoy!" (post 53).

At the same time, it is highlighted how seamlessly these meals merge into a weekly routine, for example through the "meatless Monday" recipe videos, in which easily replicable dishes are introduced. Those constant posts aim at promoting a smooth integration of the products into a consistent routine and this way, the products simultaneously stand for established patterns. These two rather different modes of using the product underline its versatility, and therefore present it as an indispensable item for any cooking routine.

Another recognisable element enhancing that impression is relatability, conveyed through anchors to everyday life, such as "perfect recipe for a rough autumn day at home" (post 56), "for a perfect start into the week" (post 57), or "dinner after work" (post 63). Many people can identify with these very common situations, which significantly reduces the uncertainty barrier and places the products in a more personal and tangible context for them.

*5. Reconciliation of tradition & innovation*

The last and most prominent frame addresses the discrepancy that one might find in RM products, which is the contrast of meat and vegetarian/ vegan products. The problem in this frame is presented as viewing those two product types as incompatible or inconsistent and thus, on a more abstract level, contrasting past, or status quo, with future. Directly linked to this, RM refute the notion that one has to

completely abandon the customs and habits of the past to move on to a better future; in other words, a sustainable future is only possible at the cost of tradition.

This contrast is taken up through the frame, but instead of pointing out the contradictions, the focus is put on the harmonic interplay of both orientations. These are reconciled with each other by demonstrating how the innovative meat alternatives can help navigate toward a more sustainable nutrition, while still celebrating traditions as usual. That includes seasons and occasions which are celebrated in (parts of) German culture, such as Christmas and Easter, but also asparagus-, barbecue-, or carnival season, which are all directly referred to in the RM posts. Tradition and innovation are connected by RM illustrating how to recreate hearty classic dishes, which in some cases are rooted in cultural celebrations. Examples of this are images of mashed potatoes with Schnitzel ("time for a classic" (post 44)), and German Christmas dishes such as meatballs in caper sauce or potato salad with sausages, prepared with the respective meatless equivalents.

Along with this, plenty of dishes are featured in the posts that do not necessarily originate from German culture but are an integral part of contemporary globalised eating culture nonetheless; these include burgers, hotdogs, Asian inspired meatballs, etc., representing pleasure-oriented "meaty" treats, which can now easily be replaced with meat alternatives. One post even alludes to the superiority of meat alternatives compared to meat by posing the rhetorical question "did we just invent the perfect hotdog?" (post 37), insinuating that the meat alternatives are not merely a substitute for meat, but can even reinvent a known dish.

Next to these featured dishes, some posts are also dedicated to explicitly highlighting the versatility of the meat alternatives, e.g. in conveying that the vegan mince "can be processed just like conventional mince" (post 47), and in doing so further support the premise that the status quo can continue with the new products.

The key point of the frame appears to be that there is no necessity for anyone to radically change their lifestyle and to forgo the eating experience of meat within its known and familiar context, (thus contrasting the *inspiration for cooking* frame, that rather presents meat alternatives as products in their own right); if anything, innovation in this instance has the potential to enrichingly complement tradition and related values, making it possible to change eating habits without actually changing them and thus effortlessly contribute to sustainability.

## 4.2. Consumer frames

In this section, I move on to present six frames derived from the 14 conducted consumer interviews. RM as sender of communication unanimously represent a particular view, whereas each consumer holds a different unique perspective. Since RM employ strategic ambiguity in their communication and thus diverging consumer interpretations are their exact intention, internal inconsistencies are unavoidable in the analysis. Nonetheless, I was able to identify some overarching frames which are presented here, summarised in Table 2 below. The RM products represent the solution in all of the frames, while the corresponding problems are generic, consumer-centred, or related to the market or brand.

*Table 2: Consumer frames including problem and solution*

| Frame | Problem | Solution |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Quality | Lack of high quality and trustworthy meat alternatives | Consistency and familiarity with RM: superiority over other brands |
| 2. Taste experience | Lack of meat alternatives with authentic taste | Pleasant and versatile taste experience |
| 3. Motivation for vegan/ vegetarian lifestyle | Forgoing meat as dietary restriction | High variety and availability of meat alternatives |
| 4. Tradition | Forgoing traditional meat-based dishes | Continuation of tradition with substitutes |
| 5. Societal sustainable change | Market structure enforces unsustainable consumption | Change of market offering by RM enables sustainable consumption |
| 6. Strategic market calculation | RM looking for a way to gain revenue | Strategic entry into meat alternative market |

### 1. Quality

The first frame through which the RM products were described comprises several properties highlighting quality. First, the package design has been mentioned by the interviewees. Through its bright colours and attractive design it appeals to people in the supermarket: "The packaging is green, suggesting health, good for the climate, good for you. Very appealing." (Interviewee 7). Other interviewees get a familial and personal impression from the packaging, making them feel involved and "part of the family" (Interviewee 6), and increasing trust in product quality.

Second, the product itself is connected to high quality, visible in the healthiness of ingredients and expertise regarding flavouring and composition of products. This is ascribed to RM's experience with real meat products, enabling them to transfer crucial properties to their alternative products. Connected to that, people know RM as producer of high-quality meat, with a long and successful history. This consistency and familiarity with the original meat products reflects onto the meatless ones as well, seemingly giving them a head-start in terms of trust, which manifests in the statement by interviewee 3: "I buy RM products because I know the brand, I know it's good.".

And third, self-indulgence is another factor playing into the perceived quality; RM products are viewed as luxury items, or a "nice little extra" (Interviewee 7) that one would buy to treat oneself. For some interviewees that applies occasionally, whereas others constantly have RM products stocked in their fridge.

What these particular features have in common is that they are perceived in contrast to competing products, implying superiority of RM. The product in this frame therefore comes across as provider of a high quality experience, from packaging to actual product.

## 2. *Taste experience*

A pertinent frame that was consistently used by all interviewees is their positive taste experience with RM products. It was highlighted that RM products are tasty, in some instances even the tastiest on the market. "Tasty" in this case refers to resembling meat in flavour and texture as much as possible. If it was not for RM products, there would be a lack of meat alternatives which taste "deceptively real" (interviewee 4) and therefore offer a proper alternative to meat.

RM products respond to this demand by providing a pleasant taste experience in multiple variations; what especially sticks out and has been mentioned by several interviewees are the meatless cold cut products, for which, according to them, there is no comparable alternative on the market. Further, the taste experience is described through a fast food analogy; while being aware of the highly processed nature of meat substitutes, the momentary hedonic motivation outweighs the perceived unhealthiness of ingredients. This contradicts the previous *quality* frame.

Interviewees described first testing one RM product, liking it, and then successively trying out the entire range of products. The taste experience is therefore connected to an entirely new segment to explore for consumers, linked to the excitement and enthusiasm of discovering something new.

*3. Motivation for vegetarian/ vegan lifestyle*

Another aspect that came up in the interviews was the role of RM products for a change of lifestyle behaviour. The prospect of having to forgo meat products and therefore restrict themselves constitutes a barrier for people, making them less inclined to try out a meatless diet. The RM products come into play here as catalyst for re-orienting dietary habits by opening up new opportunities for consumers; along with RM changing their product portfolio, people could change their diets while sticking to RM, thus changing together with the brand. Positive surprise and amazement are sentiments interviewees have expressed regarding RM meat alternatives: "I bought it for that reason: you are vegetarian but you can eat cordon bleu – amazing!" (interviewee 11).

Next to that, some interviewees exclusively view RM products in the context of meatless diets, disregarding or even being unaware of their original meat products, which is because only the meatless products are relevant to them. Brand awareness in these cases is primarily due to this new product segment, addressing an entirely new target group that otherwise wouldn't have been reached by RM.

RM products thus represent a solution by offering a vast range of meat substitutes to choose from, which are also exceedingly available in German supermarkets. Thus, the aforementioned barrier is alleviated. The product functions highlighted in this frame are firstly that of an "entry aid" into a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, inducing a switchover; and secondly, a motivation and facilitation for those already having adopted a meatless diet.

*4. Tradition*

RM products have been connected to traditional contexts by the interviewees frequently. One example is: "We eat it in stews, with red cabbage and potatoes – to make up for that last missing component in classic dishes" (interviewee 4). Here, the interviewee describes the application context of RM meat alternatives, making apparent that their pivotal function is to recreate classic dishes. Another interviewee said that they eat it with traditional sides, "for the proper feeling" (interviewee 3). These statements clarify the understanding of meat as prerequisite component for certain dishes, elucidating the indispensability. Thus, the main problem emphasized in this frame is not being able anymore to eat traditional and classic dishes that rely on meat as main component of a meal, and therefore having to break with valued traditions at the expense of a meatless diet.

Furthermore, several interviewees recall particular RM meat products they used to eat in their childhood, in familial and home-bound contexts, or they have other fond memories of. So, on a more abstract level, people also connect RM products to the traditional values that the brand always stood for.

From the consumer's perspective, RM products allow for a continuation of traditions that have been established prior to meatless diets. The meat substituting character is therefore highlighted in this case.


5. *Societal sustainable change*

Beyond their own product experience, the interviewees also found that the product is conducive to a more profound societal change. In the consumers' view, the current market structure is built in such a way that people are steered toward unsustainable consumption behaviour, thus depriving the consumer of their agency to make sustainable consumption choices. Primary reason for that in this case is the lack of reasonable alternatives to meat products.

With their products, RM aim to tackle this issue; the crucial factor to them being a proper alternative to meat is the high degree of availability, as well as variety which covers a range of consumer needs. RM is hereby perceived as major player in the market, who can utilise their powerful position to become a forerunner for other brands to follow. Connected to that, people hope to make a real difference by deliberately utilising their consumption behaviour as expression of their demand for more sustainability.

This sustainability they see manifested in RM products through the fact that producing meat alternatives instead of meat products is more environmentally and animal friendly; cutting the meat production amounts to a reduced environmental impact. Though aware of the ongoing meat production by RM, interviewees emphasised the positive impacts, rather than seeing those two product lines as a contradiction: "their message is credible through their products, and that they take their capacity to make products that in the end are better than any meat product." (Interviewee 2).

The product is perceived as change agent, leading the way toward a more sustainable market; both in providing the opportunity for more sustainable consumption behaviour, and in opening up a market niche to the mainstream, making sustainability a more integral part of the food industry. Thus, through "normalising" meat alternatives, more people who hadn't considered if before might be inspired to try it out, "and then as a consequence, vegetarian and vegan

might one day not be such a crazy, wacky thing that you need to justify yourself for; it becomes more acceptable to the broad mass", as interviewee 14 put it.


### 6. *Strategic market calculation*

At the same time, interviewees view the motivation behind offering the meat alternative product segment as purely rational and revenue-driven, with sustainable intent being only a secondary driver. It is assumed that initially RM were looking for a way to expand their business for economic gains, and in this context saw a market gap in the seemingly arbitrary trend of veganism/ vegetarianism, or, in a broader context, sustainability. As a reaction to that, they then strategically entered the market with their substitute products in order to serve that upcoming demand. Interviewees 4 and 8 referred to that move as "jumping on the bandwagon", indicating an opportunistic exploitation of favourable market conditions that were already given, but which RM did not actively contribute to.

However, there are big differences in how the interviewees evaluate this decision; on the one hand it is accepted that any business inherently strives to generate revenue and expand its operations. Starting to produce meat alternatives was a profit-promising, therefore natural step. Further, it is perceived as smart of RM to use their capacities for something that on the long term has a higher chance to be successful, rather than clinging to an industry that in light of climate change is subject of growing criticism.

Other interviewees emphasised the dichotomy that this represents in their perception; interviewee 13 referred to it like this: "I'm not sure if they do that because they are such good people, or if they recognised a market gap", making clear that those two options are mutually exclusive. This notion is also fuelled by some inconsistencies, most importantly RM's ongoing production of meat which is still "quietly happening on the side" (interviewee 10); but also the plastic packaging of the products, which is described as unnecessary and excessive. Ultimately, this amounts to a  perceived lack of sincerity: "they play against ethical values though, by doing both and still supporting factory farming" (interviewee 4). A clear ambivalence is noticeable in consumer views, even explicitly mentioned by some interviewees who could not solve this perceived quandary for themselves.

Hence, the product in this frame is viewed as means to access a new market with the underlying motivation to gain revenue, which, depending on individual perception, is either contradicting or coexisting with RM's sustainable intent.

# 5.  Discussion

The final chapter discusses some potential implications and interpretations of the previously described results and identifies connecting points for further research. It concludes with outlining the key takeaways from this study.

To answer the third research question, in this section I compare both sets of frames described above. For a structured overview, they are presented in Table 3 below.

*Table 3: Overview of both sets of frames*

| RM advertising frames | Consumer frames |
| --- | --- |
| Quality | Quality |
| Consumer involvement | Taste experience |
| Sustainability & responsibility | Motivation for vegan/ vegetarian lifestyle |
| Inspiration for cooking | Tradition |
| Reconciliation of tradition & innovation | Societal sustainable change |
| | Strategic market calculation |

Looking at the frames of both respective sources, some correlations and divergences can be recognised. Most obviously, product quality is highlighted by both, and it appears that product functions the consumers value revolve around providing a pleasant and high-quality taste experience, and facilitating a meatless lifestyle, without being required to radically change consumption behaviour.

RM's sustainability and responsibility frame matches the finding of VanDyke & Tedesco (2016) that responsibility is a predominant frame in an environmental advertising context. The aim to enhance a socially responsible image is visible in RM's aspiration to proactively contribute to creating sustainable market conditions. Further, RM involve consumers in the products in an effort to strengthen their bond to them, which is done by postulating shared goals (see VanDyke & Tedesco 2016).

A striking difference is that consumers do not necessarily view tradition in connection to innovation. They do link RM products to tradition, but properties that are rather connected to innovation, such as motivation for a new lifestyle and sustainable change are expressed through separate frames, indicating that these product properties are viewed as dissociated from each other. In addition to that, consumers also emphasize the economic factor as major motivation for RM, which logically is not communicated by the brand.

The interplay of tradition and innovation plays an essential role in the specific case of RM. Though tradition is reflected in consumer perspectives, RM communicate the reconciliation of tradition *and* innovation. This apparent contradiction requires a relatively high tolerance for ambiguity from consumers, which would enable them to perceive equivocal information without interpreting them unilaterally negatively. But as humans tend to classify received information in clear frames, this contradiction might have a polarising effect, expressed through these two frames:

1. *Societal sustainable change:* People embrace this change, as it is in line with environmental concerns that they also voiced in the interviews. In this perspective, RM fulfils a social responsibility by bringing about a profound change of the existing unsustainable market structures.

2. *Strategic market calculation:* The products, being framed as meat substitutes but also innovations in their own right, embody contrasting premises which, in turn, appeal to conservative as well as progressive ideals. Like this, RM address an entirely new target group, consisting of environmentally conscious people, and/ or those who simply want to forgo meat. Consequently, this appears like a manoeuvre to gain profit, which causes people to question the sincerity of underlying sustainable intent, and as a result credibility and trustworthiness of the brand. So, in extreme terms, a meat-lover and a vegan are served by the same brand now, which is likely to lead to some conflict as dietary decisions are often rooted in underlying values and ideals.

Comparing this case with the analysis of ExxonMobil's advertising frames, it appears that RM have handled the communication better in terms of the connection that the environmental claims have to the product, in that they proactively demonstrate involvement with sustainability topics and also rather transparently communicate about ways in which they could improve. Their environmental advertising is therefore rooted in a coherent marketing strategy. Rather than radically attempting to change their entire identity, they integrate their original

values into this new orientation, which makes them appear credible (see Plec & Pettenger 2012).

A commonality of both cases lies within the implication that consumption of their respective products is the solution to environmental problems (see Plec & Pettenger 2012); the fact that consumption culture per se is a major root of environmental problems as well is conveniently left out. This connects to RM's understanding of personal responsibility for sustainable behaviour; the responsibility frame raises the question whether it could also provoke an opposite reaction of the consumers. The latter perceive RM products as drivers for societal sustainable change, with little emphasis on individual sustainable behaviour beyond consumption of the products. On a personal level, the consumers rather accentuate the facilitation of a meatless diet, taste experience, quality, and maintaining traditions as paramount product properties. Thus, the RM product functions as item to make consumers feel good about themselves in terms of sustainable behaviour, but it seems to be a superficial negotiation of a good conscience. It is not designed to offer consumers the chance to really engage in more thorough considerations what they could change for more sustainability on an individual level. In that way, the RM products merely treat a symptom rather than the cause.

Next to these profound and maybe even idealistic value manifestations anchored in the products, it must be considered that taste experience and quality were of major importance for the interviewees. Even the ones not so much in favour of RM's double-track business approach still buy their products because they find them tasty. Since all of my interviewees were consumers, this result is not surprising at all; however, it demonstrates that even among consumers there is a wide range of values and attitudes toward the brand, indicating that that might not be the most prominent reason for buying or not buying the products. Taste experience should therefore not be underestimated as factor influencing buying motivation.

Building up on that, in general the interviewees accentuated personal gains of the RM products rather than societal responsibility, as promoted by RM. Though they do mention the societal sustainable change that can be brought about with the products, the implied responsibility is outsourced to the product instead of taken up personally. That also defines the understanding of sustainability held by RM and the consumers, respectively; both see it as societal challenge that needs to be attended to. RM strive to provide agency to the consumer to make changes within the range of their own capacity, which is reflected in the *sustainability & responsibility* and *consumer involvement* frames, which both are supposed to stimulate the consumer to engage with the product and connected sustainability topics. The consumers on the other hand, as evident through the *societal sustainable*

*change* frame, perceive sustainability as responsibility of market players such as RM, suggesting that in their perspective the structure of the market outweighs the agency of the individual to induce sustainable change. In line with Ahern et al. (2013), RM also convey personal gain, which is to be expected when selling any product; yet, they attempt to intertwine that with a social responsibility, which is not reflected in that way in consumer perception.

Environmental advertising literature extensively has made the point that vagueness and ambiguity in environmental claims result in a negative perception of the brand an should therefore be replaced by clear and accurate information (see Leonidou et al. 2014; Kangun et al. 1991). It appears that "vague" has almost been established as synonymous to "misleading" in much of the literature, and is therefore negatively connoted. RM are ambiguous in that they do not fully commit to either product type (meat or meat alternatives) which is a strategic decision, likely to exploit a larger market potential. This is reflected in their product frames: they emphasise tradition and familiar habits, yet also innovation and inspiration for something new. Thus, ambiguity is likely employed deliberately in order to benefit from different interpretations by the consumers (see Eisenberg 1984). This appears mirrored in the interviewees' expressions of their own individual perceptions of RM, which were quite divergent, yet predominantly positive.

On the other hand however, RM are very explicit in highlighting specific environmental properties of their meatless product line, such as the environmentally sourced ingredients communicated through the *sustainability & responsibility* frame, while at the same time not advertising any meat products at all. So, one could conclude that in their communication regarding sustainability, RM are clear and open and undoubtedly follow an environmental orientation, while their underlying business relies on strategic ambiguity. As highlighted in the *consumer involvement* frame, they do occasionally refer to this double-track approach in their advertising as well, conveying sincerity and transparency and thus counteracting an interpretation of their motives as being of manipulative or deceptive nature. It therefore seems like RM employ a combined approach of strategic ambiguity and clear environmental claims in their advertising, leading to the assumption that these do not necessarily contradict each other. This becomes clear in the (admittedly rare) instances when the brand acknowledges their ongoing meat production, but embed it in a context of financial considerations and a more long-term sustainability orientation that focuses on the "bigger picture".

Unlike the studies cited in the literature review, this study does not yield findings that are statistically relevant, so no inferences can be made about the effectiveness in the market of RM's environmental advertising strategy. But looking at their

success in recent years, it appears that the combination of strategic ambiguity and their environmental advertising also does not undermine it.

Taking a broader perspective, this combined approach of clear environmental communication and strategic ambiguity seems suitable for businesses aspiring to reorient toward sustainability, as I would argue that in the majority of cases an immediate transition is financially unfeasible. Changing the brand identity is a venture that involves a considerable risk and therefore needs to be planned and carried out carefully. With that in mind, an interim ambiguous business approach appears to be a suitable measure to bridge the transitional period until a strategy fully committed to sustainability is economical. And in this period, the new brand identity can already be established through environmental advertising. RM seem to follow this strategy, having approached the new product segment cautiously by gradually shifting the focus from meat to meat alternatives from 2014 up until now.

The changing market conditions are challenging for a range of businesses, which are suddenly expected to not only display, but also enact their environmental concern. Considering that they are dependent on revenue, sustainable change has to be implemented at a reasonable and proportionate pace. In line with this, instead of being associated with deception and manipulation (see Schäfer 2020), ambiguity in environmental advertising could be viewed as driver and opportunity for a long-term sustainable development. My study showed that in the case of RM, strategic ambiguity combined with advertising clear environmental product properties is employed to cover a wide range of diverging consumer needs, pointing to the underlying motive to attract as many consumers as possible.

## 5.1. Further research

Relating back to the limitations that have been touched upon earlier (section 3.4.), this study has merely been set out to provide a rough initial overview of some frames present in environmental advertising of this specific case and thus can serve as foundation for further research.

The methodological design of this study primarily depends on Facebook for both recruiting interviewees and extracting and examining RM's communication. Facebook only provides a limited perspective though, so further research could provide insights into how RM's products are framed on other social media platforms or communication channels (e.g. TV), and how participants outside of Facebook view the matter. Besides that, only current RM consumers have participated in interviews for this study, resulting in a rather positive perception;

perspectives of non-consumers, former consumers, or even boycotters of the brand would be valuable supplements to my results as well.

Also interesting for further investigation is the addition of an ethical layer of analysis: to what extent is RM's use of strategic ambiguity in environmental advertising ethical, when they do not openly promote their meat products? The question here would be where to draw the line between ambiguity and deception through the omission of information needed to make an informed consumption choice.

## 5.2. Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to explore ambiguous environmental advertising in the specific case of Rügenwalder Mühle, in order to exemplify how product properties can be strategically linked to a new orientation of a company. This has been done by investigating how RM's product framing resonates with that of their consumers, and specifically how the reorientation manifests in various and potentially conflicting frames.

The inductive content analysis of RM Facebook posts as well as consumer interviews yielded five and six different frames, respectively, which give an initial overview of present themes in the understanding of the respective parties. The RM advertising frames include *quality, consumer involvement, sustainability & responsibility, inspiration for cooking,* and *reconciliation of tradition & innovation*; the consumer frames include *quality, taste experience, motivation for vegetarian/ vegan diet, tradition, societal sustainable change,* and *strategic market calculation.*

The findings indicate that the RM advertising frames are partly reflected in the consumer frames, such as product quality, tradition, and sustainability, but the way these are perceived differs. While RM convey the reconciliation of tradition and innovation to unify their contrasting orientations, consumers perceive tradition as separate from innovative product properties, and rather notice the inconsistency that RM embodies.

The understanding of sustainability diverges insofar as RM highlight personal responsibility and agency to act sustainably for individuals but also themselves as organisation, whereas consumers rather view sustainability as the responsibility of structural entities. The RM product thus does not really incentivise consumers to consider and question their own actions and behaviours concerning sustainability more thoroughly.

Primary motivations of consumers for buying RM products are connected to a pleasant experience regarding taste and quality, and the products enabling them to continue familiar behaviour patterns and traditions in their diets. Altogether, the product is viewed through a gain frame by consumers, while at the same time an ambivalent feeling about the brand is manifested in it.

RM are employing a combined approach of being clear in their environmental advertising in order to establish a new brand identity, and being ambiguous in their underlying strategy in order to eliminate the financial risk. Implementing a reorientation gradually appears to be a suitable long-term strategy for businesses to eventually become more sustainable, even if that may imply a relatively high degree of ambiguity. RM's head of marketing sums that up in a nutshell: "We are heading there, but prudently" (Rügenwalder Mühle 2020).

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# Appendix

**Appendix A**

Interview guide (with guiding questions in *italics*)

Introduction of myself; formalities: duration of the interview, consent for recording, confidentiality and anonymity

Part 1: Meat substitutes

1. *Can you tell me something about your relationship to meat alternatives?*
2. How did they become part of your diet and what role do they play in it?
3. Are you vegan, vegetarian, flexitarian, meat eater, other?
4. Can you explain to me why you chose this type of diet? Can you explain the reasoning behind it?
5. How often do you eat meat / meat substitutes?
6. Why do you eat meat substitutes?
7. What do you pay attention to when buying them? Which attributes / factors are important to you in meat / meat substitute products?
8. What are your favourite brands?

Part 2: Rügenwalder Mühle

9. *Can you tell me something about your personal relationship to RM? How did their products become part of your diet and what role do they play in your life?*
10. When you think of RM, what's the first thing that comes to mind?
11. What do you immediately associate with the products?
12. Can you (roughly) remember the first time you tried a product from RM?
13. Which RM products do you prefer?
14. Why do you buy RM products now? How often?
15. What do you think and feel when you stand in front of an aisle with RM products whilst deciding what to buy?
16. What does a typical meal with an RM product look like for you?
17. Would you recommend RM to a friend?

Part 3: Sustainability

18. What is (environmental) sustainability (to you)?/ How would you describe it?
19. How can sustainability play a role in groceries that you buy in the supermarket? (How can food be made more sustainable?)
20. *To what extent do you think RM has made sustainability a priority? / How do you see sustainability implemented/ reflected in RM products?*
21. Is there anything that you think RM could improve in terms of sustainability?
22. Which 3 words would you use to describe Rügenwalder Mühle?

## Appendix B
Coding sheet template Interviews

| Interview | Nr. | Paraphrase/ Condensed meaning unit | Abstraction/Code | Category |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | I buy a few products from RM every now and then | Occasional consumption | |
| 1 | 2 | I grew up with RM as meat company, still know old advertisements with big mill | Association with original/ traditional meat buisness orientation | |
| 1 | 3 | I am aware they also make meat products | Awareness of ongoing meat production | |
| 1 | 4 | But now there is much more advertising of meat substitute products | Current advertisements focused on substitutes | |
| 1 | 5 | I think it's good, but is also a vicious circle | good, but also vicious circle | |
| 1 | 6 | The products taste good, I buy them occasionally | Liking taste, occasional consumption | |

*Sheet 1: paraphrased content, arranged by interview statements*

| Interview | Nr. | Paraphrase/ Condensed meaning unit | Abstraction/Code | Category | Categories |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | 33 | I connect their products with luxury and treating oneself with something fancy, even though they are ready made products | luxury, treat oneself | C1 | C1 quality |
| 7 | 117 | in general I think of their products as a "nice to have", not a regular thing on my grocery list | treat | C1 | |
| 7 | 120 | It's a nice little extra, I rather buy it on discount | luxury product, something special | C1 | |
| 5 | 78 | RM products are more expensive than real meat counterparts, so price cannot play a role in the choice | expensive products | C1 | |
| 4 | 65 | I'm just wondering if the ingredients are so healthy- with all the chemistry used to create that artificial meat-like taste and texture | uncertainty about healthiness of ingredients | C1 | |
| 4 | 66 | The question is if it's that healthy- real chicken nugget's aren't either | doubting healthiness, as products imitate fast food | C1 | |
| 6 | 97 | you rightaway think there's good quality behind it and the animals are being treated well | perceived good quality and animal treatment | C1 | |

*Sheet 2: codes arranged by colour-coded category*

## Appendix C
Coding sheet template RM posts

| Post text | Paraphrase/ condensed meaning unit | Abstraction/ code | Category |
|---|---|---|---|
| Heute teilen wir eine Infografik mit euch, die unseren Fortschritt in Sachen vegane Ernährung zeigt. 💪 In den letzten Jahren hat sich bei uns nämlich einiges getan. 💪 Welches vegane Produkt von uns würde euch in 2021 so richtig glücklich machen? 💬 | Today we share an inphofraphic with you that showing our progess in terms of vegan nutrition. Quite a bit has changed in recent years. Which vegan product would make you happy in 2021? | in recent years we have made a lot of progress with vegan products | |
| We 💚 Veganuary 2021! Deshalb zeigen wir euch jede Woche ein Lieblingsrezept von verschiedenen Influencerinnen. 😍 Angeliquelini hat gefüllte Paprikaschoten mit unserem Veganen Mühlen Hack gezaubert. Schaut doch mal bei ihr vorbei! 🙌 | Each week, we will show you an influencer's favourite recipe. Angeliquini has cooked up filled bell peppers with our vegan minced meat. | weekly influencer's favourite recipe: filled bell pepper | |
| Aus veggie wird vegan! 🌱 Ihr habt euch zwei eurer liebsten vegetarischen Produkte als vegane Variante gewünscht und letztes Jahr war es endlich soweit. 😍 Seid ihr Team #MühlenCordonBleus oder Team #MühlenSalami? | Veggie becomes vegan! You wished for 2 veggie products as a vegan version, and last year that has finally happened. Are you team cordon bleu or team salami? | You wished for 2 products to be made vegan, last year that happened | |
| Happy Veganuary2021! 🌱 Unser Januar steht ganz im Zeichen der veganen Ernährung: Wir versorgen euch mit Fakten, Produktinfos und leckeren Rezepten 🙌 Wer ist dabei? 🙌 | We will support you throughout veganuary; save our planet, it's the only one with vegan RM mince. | | |

*Sheet 1: paraphrased & translated post text, arranged by date*

| Paraphrase/ condensed meaning unit | Abstraction/ code | Category | | Categories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Peta has awarded our vegan grill sausages with "best meat alternative" award! Thanks for the second time in a row | won Peta "best meat alternative" award | C1 | | C1 Quality |
| the best meatless meatballs are those from RM, quote from a famous German podcast | RM vegan meatballs are the best, podcast says | C1 | | |
| Awarded best meat-like burger by eco test | Awarded best meat-like burger by eco test | C1 | | |
| Now also officially no 1: our 3 alternatives to meat! The @news.lebesnmittelpraxis has awarded our trio product of the year. We say thanks for the great award | Won product of the year award for three products | C1 | | |

*Sheet 2: codes arranged by colour-coded category*