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The sounds of silence: 'Pivoting' as a rhetorical strategy of the animal farming industry to maintain the institution of meat

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Abstract
This study examines the rhetorical strategies employed in animal agriculture communication to maintain the legitimacy of meat as an institution amidst gwowing ethical concerns about animal welfare and the animal-as-food logic. By analysing the public discourses of the Spanish animal agriculture interbranch organisations, we propose a rhetorical strategy that we call *pivoting*, which consists of three rhetorical moves: *silencing, amplifying,* and *hollowing. Silencing* diverts the audience's attention from the ethical implications of animal exploitation. In contrast, the credibility and authority of farmers are rhetorically *amplified* by portraying them as benevolent stewards of cultural values, territories, and societal well-being. *Hollowing*, in turn, frames animal welfare as merely a good business practice, obscuring the debates about the moral considerations that underpin welfarism and other ethical perspectives on non-human animals. Our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of discourses in shaping the evolving values underpinning animal agriculture, revealing how the lobbying voice of the animal agriculture industry association can stifle divergent moral perspectives about animals within the sector. Additionally, they expand theoretical typologies of institutional work by providing evidence of the rhetorical strategies used to maintain the normative foundations of a societal institution. Furthermore, this study highlights the need to promote a critical understanding of meat production and its ethical implications, challenging the entrenched anthropocentric speciesism within the food system.

Keywords Animal agriculture · Institutional work · Rhetoric · Livestock industry · Meat · Speciesism

Introduction

Meat is an institution built around the animals-as-food logic.[1] Institutions are sets of organised practices and norms that are structured over time and shape the behaviour of individuals within a society (Friedland and Alford 1991; Giddens 1984; Vialles 2008; Zilber 2002). Like any institution, meat is not just a formal entity but the result of deeply ingrained patterns of social action that are continuously repeated, stabilised, and reproduced, ultimately creating a structure that guides social interactions (Giddens 1984). These practices and norms become embedded in everyday life, reinforcing their legitimacy and making meat as a stable social institution. The killing of 92.2 billion land animals annually for their flesh (FAO 2023) —or 175,000 individuals per minute— illustrates how meat and animal use are institutionalised perpetuating a framing based on anthropocentric speciesism (Lundström 2019). This framing assumes an unjustified and unfavourable consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to the human species (Faria and Paez 2014; Horta 2010).

[1] We use non-speciesist language to challenge linguistic conventions that naturalize the commodification of nonhuman animals (Dunayer 2001). Following this approach, although we specifically refer to non-human animals, we use 'animals' for the sake of brevity and clarity in reading. We also opt for terms that resist the erasure of their agency and individuality, such as 'sheeps' instead of the standard singular 'sheep' and 'calves' instead of 'veal'.

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However, institutions, while resilient, are not immutable (Lawrance and Suddaby 2006). Over the past decades, the legitimacy of the meat industry has been increasingly challenged, facing scrutiny not only due to its environmental impact (Arcari 2017; Mekonnen et al. 2012; Poore and Nemecek 2018; Steinfeld et al. 2006) and health risks (Pan et al. 2012; Van Boeckel et al. 2015), but, more profoundly, because of the ethical dimension of animal agriculture, particularly regarding intensive farming practices (De Jonge and Van Trijp 2013; Henchion et al. 2022).

Although concerns about the use, treatment, and killing of animals for food dates to antiquity (Almiron and Tafalla 2019; Wolf 2014), critiques of industrial animal agriculture have gained increasing visibility in recent years. Since Ruth Harrison's seminal work (*Animal Machines*1964) on factory farming and her depiction of farm life revolving around profit, these systems have long been criticised for their normalised violence and exploitation within socio-economic structures (Twine 2012). This systemic exploitation is embedded in what scholars in critical animal studies have described as Animal-Industrial Complex (Noske 1989; Twine 2012): "a partly opaque and multiple set of networks and relationships between the corporate (agricultural) sector, governments, and public and private science. With economic, cultural, social and affective dimensions it encompasses an extensive range of practices, technologies, images, identities and markets." (Twine 2012: 23). The Animal-Industrial Complex operates to normalise animal commodification and maintain the hegemonic status of intensive animal agriculture.

As key actors participating in this complex, many animal farmers feel increasingly criticised or even attacked, and compelled to defend their livelihoods, which they previously saw as socially accepted (Fukuda 2016; Mc Loughlin and Cassey 2022; Wernersson et al 2024). This shift is reflected in the perception of a growing number of "anti-farming people" (Fukuda 2016: 18), whose influence– through advocacy, policy changes, and shifting consumer preferences– poses a direct challenge to the legitimacy of animal agriculture and its hegemony in the food system (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Mc Loughlin et al. 2022).

In this context, extensive research has explored the moral dimensions of animal agriculture, highlighting the paradox inherent in human-animal relationships within farming: animals are simultaneously perceived as sentient individuals and economic commodities (Fukuda 2016; Meijboom 2021). One key concept in this debate is animal welfare, which has been widely examined from the perspective of farmers, with studies analyzing its connection to public perception (Buddle et al. 2021) and how different approaches to welfare are shaped by cultural processes and farmer identity (Vigors 2023). Other studies highlight the contradictions and tensions in farmers' affective relationships with the animals they breed and rear, only to be killed for profit (Fukuda 2016; McLoughlin and Cassey 2022). As Wilkie (2005) puts it, animal farmers are both "empathetic carers and economic producers of 'sentient commodities'" (p. 213). Comparable tensions have been identified among slaughterhouse workers, who must reconcile their moral uneasiness with the demands of their profession (Baran et al. 2016; Ben-Yonatan 2023; McLoughlin 2019; Pachirat 2011). To manage these moral tensions, both animal farmers and workers employ various coping mechanisms, including cognitive dissonance reduction, ritualization, and emotional detachment, allowing them to sustain their work despite the ethical conflicts it entails (Bruckner et al. 2019; Johnston et al. 2022; McLoughlin and Casey 2022; Wernersson and Boonstra 2024).

While this research offers valuable insight into the internal moral dilemmas experienced by individuals, it does not necessarily reflect the institutionalised narratives of the animal agriculture industry in its public discourse. As Bryant and Weele (2021) observe, farmers may privately express ethical concerns or even support alternative proteins, yet they often refrain from publicly voicing such perspectives for fear of being perceived as disloyal to the industry. This potential disconnect between private concerns and public narratives highlights the need to extend attention from individual subjectivities to the collective discourse produced by the animal agriculture industry, particularly through farmers associations.

Industry associations play a central role in shaping media narratives, influencing consumer perceptions, configurating the industry, and advocating before policymakers (Greenwood et al. 2002; Lawton et al. 2018; Rajwani et al. 2015). Acting as 'the voice of an industry', animal agriculture industry associations unify disparate perspectives within the sector under a single message (Rajwani et al. 2015). They function as lobbying entities, broadly understood as groups, corporations, or organisations seeking to influence policymakers in favour of their interests. Beyond direct political influence, lobbies are also powerful advocacy actors, leveraging public relations and strategic communication to shape broader public debates (Almiron 2017; Plehwe 2014).

In the context of animal-based food industry the discursive power of meat lobbies is particularly relevant because the ethical issues they face regarding human-animal relationships are heavily debated and currently unfolding on the public agenda. Therefore, they are "not (yet) fully governed by law, and about which there is not (yet) a shared moral understanding in society" (Meijboom and Stafleu 2016: 7).

Despite the power of these associations, their voice on the public debate on the moral challenges of animal agriculture remains largely underexplored. Our research addresses

this gap by examining how meat industry association discursively shapes the institution of meat (and its underlying animal-as-food logic) through their public communication efforts amid growing moral contestation. The discursive power of lobbies is inherently tied to the broader mechanisms of public relations, which serve as a key tool for persuasive and influence-driven communication, particularly in shaping public narratives around animal-based food industries (Almiron 2016).

Specifically, we aim to answer the following research question: *What are the rhetorical strategies deployed by meat industry associations in defence of the institution of meat?* To address this question, we analyze texts produced by these associations in Spain, which are named by the European Union agricultural policies as Interbranch Organisations (IBOs). The European Union recognises these organisations as representatives of the agro-food supply chain, aligning with its broader goal of strengthening farmers' collective bargaining power.[2] The relevance of the Spanish context lies in its significant role as a major livestock producer, its deep-rooted cultural tradition of animal farming, and the growing tensions surrounding meat production, as we will be further illustrating in Sect. "Animal agriculture in Spain: Interbranch organisations as official representatives of the meat sector".

To conduct our analysis, we adopt the lens of rhetorical institutional work (Green and Li 2011; Harmon et al. 2015; Hampel et al. 2017). Institutional work refers to the actions through which institutions are created, maintained, and disrupted (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). While the work to create new institutions tends to be more visible, continuous active involvement by actors and organisations to maintain institutions over time is required, not only in threatened institutions (Maguire and Hardy 2009); also the most established and powerful institutions require continuous effort by actors to remain relevant and effective (Hampel et al. 2017; Lawrance and Suddaby 2006). Specifically, the discourses developed by industry association actors are central in the work of (re)producing institutions: they provide a space for the collective representation of their members and contribute to developing narratives that reproduce and enforce collective beliefs, which in turn contributes to the resilience of institutionalised practices (Greenwood et al. 2002).

In this process of shaping and legitimizing institutional arrangements, rhetoric plays a crucial role (Brown et al. 2012; Riaz et al. 2016; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005; Vaara et al. 2016). By persuading audiences to think, feel, and act in specific ways (Higgins and Walker 2012), rhetorical strategies help reinforce dominant narratives facing external contestation. Our analysis is grounded in classical Aristotelian rhetoric, which is based on three persuasive appeals: *ethos* (moralizing), *pathos* (emotion-evoking), and *logos* (reasoning) (Aristotle 1991; Brown et al. 2012). The rhetorical texts produced by meat trade associations provide a contextual understanding of the meat institution, emphasizing the need for its preservation.

A key insight emerges from our analysis: the institutional work carried out by IBOs is structured around a rhetorical strategy that deliberately shifts the focus of discourse from animals to farmers. We named this strategy *pivoting*, which operates through three interwoven rhetorical moves: *silencing, amplifying, and hollowing.* Silencing suppresses the recognition of animals as individual subjects with moral interests by framing them as a 'good product,' strategically erasing their agency and reaffirming their status as edible and disposable commodities. The amplifying move strengthens the moral authority of the animal agriculture industry by presenting a romanticised image of individual farmers as 'good producers' and stewards of society. Finally, hollowing instrumentalises the discourse of animal welfare, depicting animals as recipients of a 'good process' that ostensibly ensures their wellbeing, while ultimately legitimising their continued exploitation through an empty moral rhetoric of care.

This paper advances literature in two significant ways. First, we contribute to the field of animal studies in the domain of animal agriculture by making visible the powerful voice of meat industry associations. In doing so, we add another layer to the polyphonic academic and social debate on human-animal relationships, marked by what Francione (2004) terms "moral schizophrenia" (p.1). Specifically, we deepen the understanding of the narrative force of meat lobbies articulated around the rhetorical strategy of pivoting to defend the institution of meat amidst growing contestations. This discursive force hinders the flourishing of compassion-driven narratives that challenge the reduction of animals to mere commodities—a tension evident not only among individual farmers but also across broader social spheres.

Second, our research contributes to institutional studies by introducing *pivoting* as a new theoretical category of the institutional work to maintain institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). This strategy seeks to neutralise criticism by diverting attention from the source of normative questioning and refocusing it on the perceived positive effects of the institution. While research on the work to maintain institutions has largely focused on field and organisational dynamics, large-scale societal institutions —such as the institution of meat and its deeply rooted anthropocentric speciesist logic—, have received less attention (Hampel et al. 2017; Lawrence et al. 2013). Our study addresses this gap by enriching our understanding of the various forms

[2] https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/agri-food-supply-chain/producer-and-interbranch-organisations_en#interbranchorganisations

of work aimed at maintaining societal institutions, complementing well-established categories like enabling, policing, or mythologizing (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

In the following sections, we first provide the background of our study, covering both the rhetorical dimension of institutional work theory and the Spanish animal agriculture industry as the context for our empirical analysis. Specifically, we outline the role of IBOs as representatives of the agro-food supply chain within the European Union. We then describe our methodological approach and procedures used before presenting and discussing our findings.

Background

Rhetorical institutional work maintaining societal institutions

Institutions have been defined as "supraorganisational patterns of human activity by which individuals and organisations produce and reproduce their material subsistence and organize time and space" (Friedland and Alford 1991: 243). These patterns include material practices, but also norms, values, assumptions, and beliefs that become deeply engrained in individuals, providing legitimacy to collective cognitions, emotions and practices through socialization and regulation processes (Friedland and Alford 1991; Greenwood et al. 2002 Thornton and Ocasio 2009).

Though enduring by nature, institutions depend on ongoing efforts by institutional actors to reproduce the logics that underlie institutions and maintain them over time (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Thornton and Ocasio 2009). The institutional work carried out by actors holding strategic resources can similarly transform and disrupt institutions (Greenwood et al 2002; Lawrance and Suddaby 2006; Lawrance et al. 2009). Thus, a central argument in the field of institutional work is that individuals and organisations do not only passively comply with institutional logics and the symbolic boundaries of institutions but also seek to shape them and may manipulate interpretations of legitimacy (Symon et al. 2008). As Zilber (2002) emphasises, institutions can be understood as socially constructed through the interplay between actions, meanings, and actors: "actors are carriers of institutional meanings, [and] their interpretations can be considered as expressions of agency" (p.235).

One form of institutional work in which actors engage in such acts of interpretation to support or challenge existing institutional logics is a discursive work (Lawrance et al. 2013). Discourses produce institutions, and it is through linguistic processes that actors interact and develop common understandings of reality that become legitimate (Vaara et al. 2016) and institutionalised (Phillips et al. 2004); thus, institutions can be defined "as products of the discursive activity that influences actions" (p. 635). Rhetoric, as the art of persuasion (Aristotle 1991), is an instrumental use of discourse to prompt audiences to make judgements and engage in social action (Brown et al. 2012). As a result, rhetoric plays a crucial role in shaping institutions using language and communication strategies to influence the legitimacy, maintenance, and transformation of institutional logics and practices (Harmon et al. 2015; Green and Li 2011; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005).

Here, we focus specifically on the rhetorical institutional work seeking to maintain institutions, particularly with respect to the work designed to shape societal institutions (Hampel et al. 2017). Institutions at societal level cut across fields and times, thus potentially producing greater influence on social meanings and behaviours than institutions defined at meso and micro levels. However, according to Hampel et al. (2017) from their review of institutional work studies, the field has paid much less attention to societal institutions, commonly more complex and distal than institutions located in fields and organisations. Responding to this call, we explore the rhetorical institutional work by animal farmers actors to maintain the institution of meat. Meat carries a set of long-enduring institutionalised practices, values, beliefs and norms that makes it a societal institution. The institutional logic of animal use and speciesism that ground the institution of meat may be seen different from other well-recognised societal institutions that build contemporary Westerns societies, such as family, democracy, or capitalism (Friedland and Alford 1991), but the institution of meat provides a relevant empirical site for exploring the institutional agency of actors to defend a deeply rooted taken-for-granted logic that makes the use of animal a highly normalised practice. A logic that, at the same time, is being progressive and increasingly undermined by different moral questionings, as further explained in Sect. "Animal agriculture in Spain: Interbranch organisations as official representatives of the meat sector".

Rhetorical institutional work has been richly explored in the context of institutional change at the field and organisational levels through different perspectives of the role of rhetoric. For instance, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) studied the role of rhetoric in the legitimation of new organisational forms within an evolving industry, identifying rhetorical strategies through which actors seek to reinterpret and manipulate prevailing symbols and practice. Other authors, such as Brown et al. (2012), stress the rhetoric role of specific texts rather than actors, to show how texts for institutional change incorporates multiple, often contradictory, rational arguments and favouring specific logics through rhetorical devices. Riaz et al. (2016) place the focus on rhetorical institutional work in disrupted fields, because

public coverage of disruption illuminates the rhetoric being used within and across the field to engage in further institutional disruption and or defense; in this context, the authors ground on the concept of epistemic authority to interpret the rhetorical defense of their legitimacy by elite actors during a field-wide crisis.

We join this line of research on rhetorical work to maintain institutions by focusing on a societal-level institution that is increasingly contested by moral questioning. This challenge directly threatens both the existence of institutional field actors and their core activity, i.e. the use of animals as food as the foundation of their operations. Maguire and Hardy (2009) introduced the notion of 'defensive institutional work' to describe the "purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at countering disruptive institutional work" (p.169). This concept is particularly useful for understanding conscious and strategic responses to disruptive changes that threaten the institutional pillars sustaining established practices. Although we define the moral questioning that the institution of meat is facing as gradual rather than disruptive change, the notion of defensive institutional work is still useful to explore the rhetorical institutional work developed by IBOs and highlight the discursive struggles arising in a contestation environment.

Interestingly, defensive institutional work responds to processes of both outsider- and insider-driven deinstitutionalization (Maguire and Hardy 2009). Harmon et al. (2015) propose a model of rhetorical legitimation that sheds light on the interplay between the intrafield and interfield rhetorical strategies. Intrafield rhetoric refers to arguments that shape and reflect the legitimacy of practices within an established institutional context; social actors use this rhetoric to defend practices without questioning the broader framework in which they operate. In contrast, interfield rhetoric addresses the legitimacy of the institutional context itself, challenging or reinforcing the foundational assumptions that define it. Building on this distinction, our study is focused on intrafield rhetorics showcased by the discoursive strategies from the animal agriculture lobby to counteract critiques to the moral foundations of the institution of meat but also conflicting moral perspectives on animals within the industry.

In the next section, we delve into the context in which Spanish Interbranch Organisations (IBOs) operate to understand the pressures they receive from different societal actors, particularly those engaging in the moral questioning of animals and challenging the ethical legitimacy of the meat institution.

Animal agriculture in Spain: Interbranch organisations as official representatives of the meat sector

Spanish meat sector has a prominent role in the world and European Union (EU) markets. To name a few figures, Spanish pig production is the fourth largest in the world and the second largest in Europe (Eurostat 2021; MAPA 2022). In 2021, Spain was responsible for approximately 17% of the pigs killed in the EU, 28% of the sheeps, 13% of birds, and 23% of calves (Eurostat 2021). At the national level, the meat industry is a significant economic contributor, generating 31,727 million euros in 2021, which represents about 25% of the food sector and 2.5% of GDP (ANICE 2022; MAPA 2022). Additionally, cultural practices such as bullfighting and Iberian ham production reflect the country's deep-rooted traditions in animal-based activities (García-Gudiño et al. 2021).

The relevance of Spanish animal agriculture is also reflected in the tensions between its deeply rooted tradition in society and the evolving ethical, regulatory, and market realities, particularly shaped by EU policies, which regulate the meat sector in Spain. The EU explicitly recognises animals as 'sentient beings' (Council of Europe 1976), a principle that underpins key policies such as the 'Farm to Fork Strategy'.[3] As part of the European Green Pact (European Commission 2019), this strategy aims to create a fairer, healthier, and more environmentally friendly food system, including phasing out cages in animal husbandry by 2027 and implementing new regulations on animal transport (European Commission 2023). Advanced national legislations, such as in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, includes 'animal dignity', while other countries propose to confer them the status of 'personhood', transforming them from property to subjects of law (Adamczyk et al. 2023; Kotzmann et al. 2023). These changes are paving the way for broader political and social transformations in how animals are viewed and treated.

Meat consumption figures trends reflect this evolving landscape. In Spain, consumption has followed a downward over recent decades, with certain types of meat, such as beef, declining from 350,000 tonnes in 2006 to 230,000 in 2020, experimenting a slow increase in last two years (INE 2024; MAPA 2024). At the individual level, a study commissioned by AEOC, a Spanish leading association of manufacturers and distributors, shows that 42% of Spaniards have reduced their meat consumption (Europa Press 2023). This trend is expected to continue, as European forecasts predict a decline in overall meat consumption and production by 2035 driven by health and sustainability concerns

[3] https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en

(European Commission, 2024; Font-i-Furnols and Guerrero 2022). Moreover, meat prices in the EU are expected to increase overall, reflecting rising production costs and declining supply, while global price fluctuations will also impact the market. This is particularly relevant as price remains a critical factor influencing consumer meat purchasing decisions (Díaz-Caro et al. 2019; European Commission, 2022).

The role of civil society in defending animals and influencing EU policies has also expanded in recent years (European Commission 2016, 2023). This is evident in remarkable citizens' initiatives and campaigns such as: 1) 'End the Slaughter Age'[4], which challenges the rationale for animal agriculture, advocating for subsidy removal and promoting plant-based and lab-grown meat; 2) '#EUforAnimals'[5], calling for a European Commissioner for Animal Welfare, that was backed by over 60 organizations and 310,000 citizens; and 3) 'End the Cage Age'[6], which gained 1.4 million signatures and led to the European Parliament to commit to phasing out cages by 2027. In Spain, public concern for food production is among the highest in the EU in terms of the demand of information on farm animal conditions (Eurobarometer 2023). Additionally, while official figures are lacking, studies suggest that the rise of plant-based lifestyles has accelerated in Spain since 2017, with the number of vegans, vegetarians, and flexitarians increasing from 7.8% to 11.4% of the population between 2017 and 2023 (Acevedo et al. 2023; Lantern 2023; Perea-Delgado 2023; Vegconomist 2023). This change is being largely driven by younger consumers, signalling a potential long-term shift in ethical consumption trends (Lantern 2023).

Overall, the growing social concern for animal protection in Spain, like in many other contexts, is represented by diverse positions that shape ethical debates on traditional farming practices (de Jonge and van Trijt 2013; Díaz and Horta 2020). However, two main stances dominate: 'welfare' and 'abolition' (see Díaz and Horta 2020 for details). Welfarism supports practical changes to improve animal conditions on farms (e.g., better housing, and medical care) (WOAH 2019, 2025) but is often criticised for framing animals as resources for human benefit (Francione 2004). The abolitionist perspective rejects viewing animals as commodities, condemning all forms of animal exploitation as morally unacceptable (Singer 1975; Regan 1983; Wolf 2014). This stance is influenced by the rejection of speciesism: the disadvantageous and unjustified consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to a particular species (Horta 2010: 6). In other words, while the welfare rhetoric may be seen as an intra-field strategy that seeks to maintain the meat institution, abolitionism is an inter-field strategy that aims to disrupt it (see Harmon et al. 2015 on these strategies).

In this evolving landscape, Spanish animal agriculture has been at the centre of intense political debates, exacerbated by a highly polarised public opinion (Johnston et al. 2022; World Economic Forum 2023) and conflicting political statements about animal production and welfare. A clear example is the public criticism by then Spanish Minister of Consumer Affairs, Alberto Garzón, who in early 2022 suggested that Spanish meat was of low quality and from mistreated animals (The Guardian 2021). These statements provoked widespread reactions on the institution of meat, including significant support from various government figures and even the monarchy, highlighting the strategic importance of Spanish meat in domestic and international markets.

More recently, the debate on animal farming intensified with the 'Santander Declaration against animalism' in 2023[7], where more than 20 associations of breeders and hunters united in defense of Spanish traditions against animalist and anti-speciesist movements, arguing that they "could have catastrophic consequences for Spanish society and cultural identity" (La Vanguardia 2023). Another initiative in the same direction is the campaign launched in 2024 by AEOC in collaboration with various Spanish meat interprofessional organizations and wholesalers. The campaign aims to "halt the 40% drop in consumption over 15 years and reactivate meat consumption, a 'much-vilified food" (El Periodico 2024).

As farmers navigate all these ethical demands and controversies, they also encounter contradictory market pressures related to animals. On the one hand, ethically conscious consumers demand higher welfare standards (Alonso et al. 2020; de Jonge and Van Trijp 2013; Harper and Makatouni 2002), a trend increasingly supported by food retailers, which influence market patterns and push for less cruel practices (Miranda-de la Lama et al. 2013; Schulze et al. 2019). A remarkable example is the 'European Chicken Commitment' (ECC), adopted by over 300 leading food companies to improve chicken rearing conditions, requiring significant adjustments from producers (Schulze et al. 2019). On the other hand, consumers also seek lower prices, creating competitive pressure that clashes with the increased costs of welfare practices (de Jonge and Van Trijp 2013; Petrini and Wilson 2005). Moreover, price-conscious consumers often opt for imports that may not comply with European welfare standards, exacerbating disparities in costs and prices

[4] https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/initiatives/details/2022/000003_en

[5] http://www.euforanimals.eu/en

[6] https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/initiatives/details/2018/000004/end-cage-age_en

[7] https://santanderdeclaration.com/

Table 1 Interbranch organizations representing the Spanish meat industry

Interbranch Organization		Product (as labelled by the IBO)	Industry representation (%)	
			Production branch	Manufacture/Distribution branches
ASICI	Interprofessional Association of the Iberian Pig	Iberian Pigmeat	90	90
AVIANZA	Spanish Interprofessional Association of Poultry Meat	Poultrymeat	98–100	98–100
INTERCUN	Interprofessional Organisation for the Promotion of the Rabbit Sector	Rabbitmeat	99	95
INTEROVIC	Interprofessional Association of Sheep and Goat Meat	Sheepmeat and goatmeat	86	81
INTERPALM	Interprofessional Association of Fatty Palmipeds	Duckmeat and foie gras	90	100
INTERPORC	Interprofessional Association of White-Capped Pigs	Pigmeat	90	90
PROVACUNO	Spanish Beef Interprofessional Organization	Beef and veal	85	86

Source: Ministry for Agriculture, Fish, and Food (2024). Available at https://www.mapa.gob.es/es/alimentacion/temas/integracion-asociativa/interprofesionales/directorio/

(Mitchell 2001). Lastly, traditional farming faces challenges from the rising demand for alternative proteins, such as lab-grown meat and plant-based foods (OECD 2021).

Amidst this increasingly intricate and demanding scenario, the Spanish and European animal agriculture industry operates within the broader Animal-Industrial Complex (AIC), a network of interconnected actors that sustain and normalise animal exploitation (Twine 2012). Among them, industry associations play a particularly powerful role in shaping controversies surrounding animals in the food system, as discussed in Sect. Introduction. In Spain, these associations take the form of Interbranch Organisations (IBOs)[8], officially recognised by the EU agriculture policy as representatives of agro-food sector in the interactions with national government bodies. IBOs include multiple actors from across the value chain, playing a crucial role in improving market efficiency and ensuring product quality throughout the whole process and adapting production to market needs. They also support research and innovation, promote awareness of agri-food products and they are officially described as facilitator of market openness and transparency (European Comission 2024; Gobierno de España 2013).

Industrial and professional associations have been recognised in the literature as key institutional agents playing an important regulatory role both in reinforcing dominant institutional logics and during periods of institutional change (Greenwood and Suddaby 2002). Moreover, in the case of IBOs, the legal recognition as professional associations requires at least 51% representation in each of the branches of activity that compose it. In addition, for an interprofessional agreement to be extended to the entire sector, it must have the support of at least 50% of the producers and operators and cover 75% of the affected production. In Spain there are currently 27 IBOs, 7 of which represent interests of the Spanish meat industry value chain, encompassing breeding animals, as well as manufacturing and trading different products of their bodies. As it is detailed in the next Methods section (see Table 1), they represent the vast majority of the organizations operating in the industry in Spain.

Methods

To address our goal of examining the rhetorical strategies deployed by meat industry associations in defense of the institution of meat, we carried out a rhetorical analysis of the public discourse of animal agriculture industry associations in Spain.

We selected texts from the seven mains Spanish IBOs representing the interests of organizations in the meat industry value chain, specializing in a range of animal species: pigs, hens/cocks, turkeys, quails, rabbits, sheeps, goats, ducks, geese, cows/bulls. Table 1 provides the English translation of the Spanish names of the IBOs, the types of meat as classified by the IBOs, and their sectoral presence. The high level of industry representation and coverage is related to the fact that IBO members are, in turn, associations of producers, manufacturers or traders specializing in products (animal body parts or derivatives), activities (breeding, rearing, slaughtering, processing, retailing), or geographic levels (local, national).

The database was built using a purposive sample of documents selected from an extensive review of 202 public communications issued by these organizations published between 2019 and 2023. The sampling process followed a relevance criterion, focusing on texts used for public communication by IBOs.

Given the diversity in communication strategies across the associations, the corpus includes various types of publicly available materials published on their official

[8] https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/agri-food-supply-chain/producer-and-interbranch-organisations_en#interbranchorganisations

Table 2 Documents analysed

IBO	Website source	Number of documents
ASICI	http://www.iberico.com	4
AVIANZA	http://www.avianza.org	7
INTERCUN	http://www.intercun.org	5
INTEROVIC	http://www.interovic.es	12
INTERPALM	http://www.elfoiegras.es	7
INTERPORC	http://www.interporc.com	16
PROVACUNO	http://www.provacuno.es	11

websites. On the one hand, blogs, news and press releases capture specific events, and promotional campaigns, offering dynamic and time-sensitive content. On the other hand, dedicated sections of the institutional websites present more stable contents that IBOs prioritise as part of their long-term communication strategy, such as mission statements, institutional functions, animal welfare certificates, and sector overviews. To maintain a significant focus on public communication, we excluded documents with contents limited to recipe books, technical certifications, and statutes concerning the legal structure of IBOs.

The number and frequency of documents published by the associations vary, due to several factors beyond the scope of this study (e.g. different strategies, resources, and communication priorities). To manage this disparity but ensuring a diverse sample of the current industry discourse, we adapted our collection strategy according to their activity. For ASICI, INTERPALM, and PROVACUNO, all available documents on their websites were selected; for the rest of associations, document choice was guided by their relevance and comprehensiveness concerning the goal of the study. This resulted in a linguistic corpus of 62 documents (see Table 2), each with an average length of approximately 4 pages, amounting to a total of 250 pages.

Although the documents do not always explicitly identify their intended audiences, the stated missions and objectives suggest a broad target, including association members, producers, consumers, politicians, and other actors in the distribution and marketing sectors. Inferring the audience helps us understand the communicative strategies employed and how IBOs use rhetoric to appeal to these diverse groups.

We analysed the rhetorics in the data through an interpretive multi-stage process following similar works in the area such as those by Brown et al. (2012), Riaz et al. (2016) or Suddaby and Greenwood (2005). The interpretive lens does not aim at universal generalizations but at detailed evidence that allow for rich descriptions and consistent explanations of the rhetorical work developed by IBOs to maintain the institution of meat. As Gioia (2021) argues, interpretive works do not intend to apply widely the evidence gathered but to identify principles, even from a single observation, that can apply to a variety of context, in what the author call "transferability" (p.21) rather than generalizability. Searching for these "portable" principles in our research context, we developed an analytical work structured in three phases, each building on the previous one to increase depth and rigor. In the first phase, the three authors reviewed the documents initially retrieved from the search to become familiar with prevalent narratives and themes emerging from the texts.

In the second stage, two analysts conducted a focused rhetorical analysis of the final linguistic corpus. They were initially guided by the Aristotelian framework of appeals to *ethos, pathos*, and *logos* (Aristotle 1991): 1) *Ethos* refers to the credibility or moral character of the speaker, constructed not only by what is said, but also by how the speakers position themselves as expert, honest and connected with the audience, which endows them with trust and authority; 2) *Pathos* involves appealing to the audience's emotions to influence their response to the argumentation presented by the orator, allowing the speaker to connect with the audience on an emotional level, and making the message not only understood but also felt; and 3) *Logos* refers to the use of logic and reasoning in speech to convince the audience of the truth or soundness of what is presented with rational arguments and evidence (e.g. statistical data, verifiable facts, illustrative examples, refutation) to construct a coherent and convincing argument. As the strategic use of these appeals can favour one institutional logic over another, thereby reconfiguring institutional logics and legitimacy (Brown et al. 2012; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005), the authors kept on involved in a circular analytical process to develop abductively the rhetorical strategy of *pivoting* as a theoretical category. Abductive reasoning involves a circular motion of explanation-seeking grounded in which theory is grounded on data but also constructed by the researchers (Van Maanen et al. 2007).

Lastly, a triangulation stage was carried out to increase the validity of interpretation of data (Eisenhardt et al. 2016) through the participation of the third analyst in the discussion about the coherence and meaning of the results; the analysis and discussion were developed from an abductive approach, as mentioned, unfolded through a constant dialogue between analysts, database and theoretical frameworks grounding the study, until a common interpretation was reached.

As a final methodological remark, we follow the warning by Friedland and Alford (1991) about how social scientists, when assuming dominant institutional discourses in our analyses, become agents of reproducing symbolic orders and institutions. Aware of this risk and seeking to transform the institution of meat, the authors of this research have consciously brought a research positionality aligned with critical animal studies. This epistemological standpoint challenges the structural foundations of animal exploitation,

which is rooted in anthropocentric speciesism logic, the animal-industrial complex and its intersection with other forms of structural domination (Almiron and Fernández 2021; Best, 2014; Taylor and Twine 2015). In this sense, by making visible the productive effects of language on maintaining societal institutions, we also intend to respond to the call by Hampel et al. (2017) for researchers in the field of institutional work "not only to understand grand social challenges but to affect them and in so doing change the world" (p. 581).

Additionally, while we acknowledge the cultural differences between species considered edible, our focus was on examining the collective discourse constructed by IBOs rather than species-specific distinctions. This approach is based on two main considerations. First, since these organizations frequently operate collectively—coordinating activities, initiatives, and joint campaigns—it seems useful to analyze their discourse as part of a unified narrative logic that transcends individual species categories. Second, this approach aligns with our positionality, as we do not differentiate between species but rather consider animals as individual subjects, rejecting hierarchical categorizations that sustain their commodification.

Results

From the analysis of texts produced by IBOs as central actors carrying out rhetorical institutional work to preserve the institution of meat, we found that this work revolves around a rhetorical strategy that deliberately shifts the focus of discourse from animals to farmers. We named this strategy *pivoting*, which operates through three interwoven rhetorical moves: *silencing, amplifying, and hollowing.* First, a rhetoric of silence is used to circumvent the recognition of animals as sentient subjects, underpinning the reification of animals by framing them as a 'good product'. Next, the audience's attention is drawn to the animal industry, rhetorically amplifying the legitimacy of animal farmers as 'good producers'. The third rhetorical move hollows out the moral interests of animals from the notion of animal welfare, reducing it to a 'good process' within the business management arena.

Silencing animal subjectivity: 'The good product'

Silencing is a discursive strategy that plays a crucial role in sustaining the institution of meat by systematically erasing the moral subjectivity of animals, echoing previous discussions on the processes of de-animalization in intensive animal agriculture and slaughtering (Hamilton and McCabe 2016; Harfeld et al. 2016; Linne 2016). The silencing rhetorical move is central to de-animalization, by eliminating the individuality, agency and identity of animals to ensure that their suffering and sentience remain absent from public perception.

However, silencing does not stop erasing the animal: it also transforms the corpse into a neutral product, validating a version of reality where meat consumption appears naturalised, desirable, and morally unproblematic. A synecdochical relationship between animals and their flesh dominates the silencing move, reducing sentient beings to consumable, objectified bodies. As Burke (1941) describes, synecdoche replaces the whole with a part; here, the animal is replaced by its flesh, facilitating its reification as a mere commodity. Thus, the term 'animal' is rarely used, and instead, the discourse relies on sanitised terms such as 'pork', 'chicken', or 'beef', which conceal the individuality of these beings and dissociate the final product from the living creature.

Thus, silencing not only eliminates references to animals as sentient beings but also neutralises and aestheticises their bodies. Through this process, the corpse becomes invisible: the animal's body is stripped of any symbolic or visible connection to its previous life, erasing all traces that might remind consumers that meat comes from someone rather than something. Through linguistic framing, meat becomes a neutral object, devoid of veins, muscles, or any biological markers that might evoke its animality and their commonalities with human beings. This aligns with Adams' (1990) concept of absence referentiality, in which the subject disappears behind the edible product, making it easier to consume without moral conflict. Absence referentiality functions both linguistically and conceptually, ensuring that animals are removed from discussions about meat, allowing consumers to engage with it as a mere product, devoid of ethical implications.

The rhetorical strategy that the synecdoche employs appeal to logos, pathos, and ethos in a synergistic way to reinforce the process of reductionism and objectification of animals. Logos is invoked to present meat as a rational and necessary choice for human survival; pathos is activated through sensory and cultural appeals that associate meat with pleasure and social bonding; and ethos legitimises the meat industry by portraying animal agriculture as a responsible and traditional practice. Through these rhetorical appeals, meat is ultimately framed as a 'good product', defined by the intertwined meanings of health, pleasure, and tradition.

Meat is discursively framed not merely as a beneficial food but as a biological necessity, essential for human survival and well-being. In this sense, the industry's rhetoric emphasises its extensive nutritional properties provided and the vital role it plays in human health. Specifically, highlighting its high-quality proteins, vitamins, and minerals

meat is positioned as irreplaceable for human well-being ($PROVACUNO_6$).

> Beef is a healthy food with innumerable nutritional properties, since it provides proteins of high biological value, vitamins and minerals, as well as vitamins such as A, D, E, K, C and group B, especially B12, essential for the formation of red blood cells and the correct functioning of the nervous system.

This justification is further boosted through simplified, syllogistic reduction that equates animals with protein, reinforcing a perception of their bodies as nutritional inanimated resource: 'animals are meat, meat is protein, therefore, animals are protein'. This rhetorical reduction is articulated by INTERPORC when it refers to farmers as "protein producers". This rhetorical move simplifies complex nutritional discussions into powerful yet simplistic and descriptive claims, such as meat being "necessary for normal growth and bone development in children" ($INTERCUN_{13}$) or contributing to "longer life expectancy" ($INTERPORC_{12}$).

The health-based justification of meat consumption is strengthened by a combination of expert endorsement and appeals to scientific authority. Credibility is built through the figure of individual professionals, as in INTERCUN's reference to a sports medicine physician "Dr. Carlos Teresa Galván, from the Andalusian Center of Sports Medicine" who highlights the role of high-quality protein of rabbit meat in muscle development for physical performance of athletes. At the same time, broader scientific legitimacy is constructed by invoking 'science' as an abstract entity, often without citing specific studies. Science is personified as an indisputable source of truth, as in $AVIANZA_{17}$: "Science clearly states that, from prehistoric times until today, consuming animal proteins has favored the human brain, because from a nutritional point of view, animal proteins are the most efficient."

The appeals to logos that identify meat with health are associated with pathos to stimulate fear in consumers. The IBOs discourse fuels this negative emotion by arguing that deviating from the dietary recommendations presented by the industry —or exploring alternatives that involve eating less or no meat— threatens consumers' good health. This is particularly evident in arguments against proteins of vegetable origin and vegan diets, where a constellation of risks and dangers dominates the discourse, as this statement from $PROVACUNO_{14}$ warns: "If there is one thing that characterises vegan diets, it is the risk of a deficiency of vitamin B12 or cobalamin. This vitamin is crucial for our development and plays a very important role in the growth and proper functioning of the brain, nervous system, and blood formation."

The synecdoche that equates the animal with its flesh is further supported by the portrayal of meat as a gastronomic delight, closely linked to the joy of eating. This is conveyed across the dataset through vivid adjectives that highlight textures, flavors, and sensory richness of meat. As PROVACUNO describes, beef offers a "range of organoleptic qualities (…) from a 'pinkish' coloured meat, with more tenderness, juiciness, low fat and digestibility, from animals aged between one year and 24 months, to red and flavourful beef from cattle over two years of age" ($PROVACUNO_{11}$). The discourse surrounding cured Iberian ham takes this sensory appeal further. ASICI details how ham is experienced through each of the senses:

> Sight. Its slices are marked by a characteristic and unique characteristic and unique veining. Bright, fine white veins that contrast perfectly with the intense red of the slice.
>
> Touch. A soft and fragile texture, thanks to the shiny, infiltrated fat that expands and melts to the touch in each slice of meat.
>
> Smell. If we enjoy the aroma of cured ham, intense, pleasant and balanced, we are in front of an Iberian ham.
>
> Taste. Sweet, savoury and salty nuances come together in umami, such subtle, lingering and elusive fifth taste that stimulates our palate.

Hedonic pleasure is also framed as an exclusive luxury now democratised and accessible to all. This is particularly evident in the discourse around foie gras and Iberian ham, which highlights their historical ties to royalty and elites. As $INTERPALM_{13}$ recounts, foie gras dates to "the time of the pharaohs, where the goose was treated as sacred," but it was human ingenuity that transformed it into a delicacy for the court. Ultimately, the presence of sensory goodness reinforces the absence of the animal as a subject, converted into a mere container of qualities that provide pleasure when consumed. These hedonic claims are often incorporated as marketing slogans that invite consumers to indulge: "Let your palate do the talking" (PROVACUNO), "Awaken your Iberian sense" (ASICI), "Tasty and Sustainable" (INTEROVIC).

The pathos appeal to the pleasure of eating meat is interwoven with ethos through stories of chefs prescribing meat as essential. $AVIANZA_{28}$, for instance, highlights an event where chef Lucía Grávalos designed menus based on poultry. Such narratives blend delicacy with functionality, emphasizing gastronomic versatility. Another example

is INTERCUN$_{12}$ featuring Paco Roncero, "two Michelin stars, judge on Top Chef," and image of the free-range rabbit campaign: "Rabbit meat is tasty (…) versatile, allowing all kinds of preparations—grilled, roasted, stewed, fried… I like them all." As a chef, he values its full usability. Meat is sometimes elevated to an artistic and cultural symbol, even worthy of national heritage status: "The slicing of Iberian ham is an art perfected over time, requiring a calm approach" (ASICI$_{17}$).

The IBOs also bolster the link between meat and tradition, using the Mediterranean diet, "an Intangible Heritage of Humanity" (INTEROVIC$_{20}$) as a legitimizing framework. Rooted in the country's traditional olive-growing regions, this primarily plant-based diet has been associated with lower chronic disease rates and greater longevity, including only small to moderate amounts of poultry and red meat (Guasch-Ferré & Willet, 2021). However, meat lobbies tend to exaggerate the presence of meat in this diet. For example, INTEROVIC$_2$ presents lamb as "a main food" within the diet, while PROVACUNO$_{11}$ insists that beef is "an inseparable ingredient of the Mediterranean dietary pattern.".

The association of Mediterranean diet with meat simultaneously appeals to national pride, portraying the diet as "one of the healthiest in the world" (PROVACUNO$_{11}$), and emphasizing its long historical trajectory as well as its deep integration into local gastronomic (INTERPORC$_{10}$, AVIANZA$_{27}$). This rhetoric also draws on nostalgia and romanticism to enhance its emotional significance at a collective level by framing meat consumption as an ancient practice essential to human evolution, evoking a sense of continuity with the past (PROVACUNO$_{14}$). On a personal level, it stirs sentimental memories, as illustrated by Paco Roncero recalling his father's rabbit dish as a cherished family tradition (INTERCUN$_{12}$).

In sum, silencing shifts the discursive focus from animals to human-centered narratives, reinforcing the idea that meat exists for the consumer's benefit. This dissociation is further supported by a descriptive, simplified discourse that centers on human interests of survival, hedonism, and social bonding while blocking emotional engagement with animals. Their lives and deaths remain absent, serving to sustain their status as commodities (Wilkie 2005), obstructing interspecies justice and suppressing compassion by denying their victimhood within the food system. Through the strategic use of logos, ethical concerns are reframed as scientific and rational matters, diverting attention from moral questioning. Ultimately, by eliminating any recognition of the animal as a subject, silencing removes the potential for moral conflict, keeping consumers detached from the ethical implications of meat production. Consumption of animals is not only justified but celebrated.

Amplifying animal farmers as stewards of society: 'the good producer'

At the heart of the IBOs' discourse is the quest to legitimise the meat industry by constructing an idealised image of the entire value chain centered on one of key actor: the animal farmer. To this end, the discourse resorts to ethos as the primary rhetorical appeal, often accompanied by pathos, and leaving logos in a marginal position. The rhetorical persona of 'the good producer' relies on a triad of ethos-building arguments (see Higgins and Walker 2012): the demonstration of the farmers' expertise; the celebration of their success; and the evocation of similarity with the audience.

The discourse emphasises the expertise of animal farmers, portraying them as skilled professionals with technical knowledge who ensure the highest standards in the process of meat production. Their competence is framed as a guarantee of quality, supported by biosecurity measures and veterinary oversight, positioning the sector as an international benchmark (INTERPORC$_{18}$). This expertise is often backed by the long history of animal farming, portrayed as a bastion of wisdom passed down through generations. References to this tradition permeate the sample, using terms like "More than 3000 years (…)" (INTEROVIC5); "Millennia of continued success (…)" (INTERPORC$_{10}$) or "(…) has been with us for thousands of years" (PROVACUNO$_{14}$).

In some cases, tradition is presented as the primary source of expertise, as seen in INTERPALM's claim that foie gras production has been transmitted clandestinely since the Pharaohs, through Romans, Greeks, and Visigoths. Similarly, ASICI traces Iberian ham back to prehistoric times, emphasising its continuity through the Roman Empire and Middle Ages to the present. This invocation of time-honored practices serves not only to enhance legitimacy but also to frame tradition as a mark of excellence. ASICI validates this idea through anaphora, a rhetorical device that creates a hammering effect (Jamet and Terry 2020): "It takes years for a breed to establish itself. It takes decades for an oak tree to produce acorns. It takes centuries for a tradition to be passed on" (ASICI$_7$).

Beyond tradition, public endorsements and collaborations with politicians, scientists, and public figures serves to position animal farmers as central and indispensable actors in the broader economic and social landscape. By showcasing these high-profile collaborations, they gain legal-rational authority, emphasise traditional legitimacy rooted in its long-standing practices, and involve celebrities for charismatic legitimacy (see Weber 1978).

Politicians provide formal endorsement, framing farmers as professionals dedicated to quality and rural development. That is the case for INTEROVIC$_{10}$, when highlights the Minister of Agriculture's recognition of their role in

"providing quality food, boosting exports, and sustaining rural life," reinforcing the idea that animal farming is essential to the economy and national identity. Complementarily, scientists and technical experts add rigor by underlining the sector's commitment to innovation, sustainability, and efficiency. ASICI$_6$, for instance, promotes partnerships with universities and research centers in Spain and Portugal to improve product quality and traceability through R&D projects. This strategic association with academia enhances the industry's credibility, presenting it as science-driven and constantly evolving.

In addition, public figures such as chefs, influencers, and journalists play an informal but influential role in shaping the industry's public image, lending it an aura of status, vitality, creativity, and fun. Events like the *Salon Gourmet*, where AVIANZA participates annually, bring together professionals, media personalities, and industry representatives to celebrate the benefits of white meat, presenting it as a desirable and sophisticated product.

This multi-layered legitimisation presents the industry as both an essential economic pillar and a custodian of cultural heritage, shielding it from critique and securing its central role in national identity. This public endorsement is further bolstered by the IBOs' active participation in public-private partnerships, presented as proof of their institutional legitimacy. The VII Pork Forum, for example, is framed as a key networking event, bringing together "more than 250 people, including representatives of the Government, Autonomous Communities, US and Dutch embassies, meat sector organizations, associations, and various technological and research centers" (INTERPORC$_{24}$).

Building on this strategy, meat lobbies leverage accreditations, certificates, and awards to strengthen the *ethos* of endorsed expertise. References to officially recognised facilities and ministerial approvals are common, positioning the sector as highly regulated and credible. ASICI exemplifies this approach, emphasizing its status as an Interprofessional Agri-Food Organization with official backing since 1999. It operates its own laboratory within the National Centre for Research and Development of the Iberian Pig, a "national reference centre" accredited by ENAC. This rhetorical legitimization also serves to position the industry as a trustworthy social interlocutor, countering what it frames as disinformation campaigns. In this sense, IBOs frequently denounce external criticism as "distorted information and fake news" (INTERPORC$_{24}$) or "biased, self-serving and targeted" (AVIANZA$_{19}$). These statements, marked by frustration and concern, reflect the industry's perception that such narratives are designed to create confusion and mistrust. As PROVACUNO$_{13}$ warns, "we must open and show society what our reality is and not the distorted image that certain collectives with obvious economic interests present of us."

A second rhetorical strategy to boost the authority of animal farming is constructing a champion identity, positioning the sector as vital to the economic and social development of Spain. Hard data sustains this image, portraying the meat industry as a major economic driver. For example, AVIANZA highlights that "livestock farming contributes 16,500 million euros to Final Agricultural Production, while the turnover of the meat industry amounts to 31,727 million euros, representing 28.5% of the entire agri-food industrial sector" (AVIANZA$_{19}$). This economic role is further amplified by presenting the sector as a "net generator of opportunities for our country" (AVIANZA$_{11}$).

Such self-attributed responsibility for bolstering Spanish economy is enhanced by its role as a social cohesion agent, capable of transforming communities, particularly in rural areas, where animal farming acts as a catalyst for socio-economic development. On this respect, IBOs depict the sector as a defender of "social activities that have allowed the survival of many towns and villages" (INTEROVIC$_{10}$), a heroic force for prosperity in 'España vaciada' [a term used to described heavily depopulated rural areas in the country], where other industries have disappeared: "The pig industry continues to create jobs, wealth, and hope" (INTERPORC$_{24}$). This narrative is backed with figures such as "119,000 direct jobs and more than 2 million direct and indirect jobs" (ASICI$_7$).

The meat sector also intertwines its social contribution with environmental stewardship, emphasizing its role in sustainability. It promotes itself as advancing food security, gender equality, employment, and climate change mitigation (INTERPORC$_{24}$). Specific production systems, like transhumance, are framed as models of ecological balance: "The 'dehesa' [holm oak meadows where acorn-fed Iberian pig graze] generates life in depopulated areas, provides biodiversity, and contributes to reducing carbon footprint by being a source of CO2 absorption" (ASICI$_7$). Moreover, the discourse of IBOs portray animal farming as essential to preventing or mitigating environmental problems, such as land regeneration, circular economy, and fire prevention, naturalising the industry's claim as an environmental ally.

This heroic image extends beyond national borders, positioning Spanish meat as a key player in the international food scene. Industry's export success is frequently quantified: "The Spanish meat sector exported 9,986 million euros (…) contributing a positive trade balance of 606%" (ASICI$_7$). This economic strength is reinforced by claims of superiority over imported meat, fuelling nationalistic pride: "The stringent requirements of the European Production Model give Spain's beef sector the highest quality and food safety standards in the world" (PROVACUNO$_8$). Doubts are

cast on non-Spanish meat, emphasizing Spain's leadership in disease prevention, particularly regarding African Swine Fever and Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (INTERPORC$_{18}$, PROVACUNO$_{12}$). These arguments strengthen the idea that Spanish meat is not only essential but superior, positioning the industry as both an economic and moral authority in the global food system: "endorsing a leadership position that has led us to be present in more than 130 countries" (INTERPORC$_{20}$).

The third rhetorical device to amplify the image of the good farmer is fostering a sense of similarity with the audience, portraying farmers as integral members of a shared community. A key linguistic device to get this effect of unity and commonality is the use of inclusive pronouns and adjectives: 'our farmers', 'our culture', 'our work', 'our children', 'our countryside' or 'our gastronomy'. Hyperbolic statements further magnify the societal participation of the meat industry. AVIANZA$_{19}$, for instance, highlights the Livestock and Meat Forum as a platform to amplify the "work and voice of Spanish municipalities," framing farmers' efforts as nation-building under the slogan 'Construyendo país'" ['Building a country'].

Lobbyists seek to resonate with the public by aligning with shared cultural values and beliefs, portraying themselves as attuned to community expectations and concerns. INTERPORC$_{8}$ exemplifies this persuasive approach, asserting that consumers now seek brands that reflect their values, and that the pork sector already embodies an "authentic truth, a culture, and values the public can fall in love with." At times, the discourse also frames meat production as a response to 'shared needs', (INTEROVIC$_{11}$), a rhetoric that fosters complicity with consumers, positioning them as active participants: "Many of the opportunities generated by pig farming in rural areas would be unviable without its presence, as would the satisfaction of the population's demand for meat and meat products, since in our country the pig sector provides consumers with around 19% of all the animal protein they consume." (INTERPORC$_{16}$). Similarly, PROVACUNO$_{10}$ cultivates this sense of unity by inviting the audience to see themselves as part of the industry and vice versa when talking about consuming meat: "The food *we* eat must be safe and provide nutrients as part of a varied, balanced and sufficient diet".

The ranching identity is again shaped by credibility (ethos) and deeply imbued with emotion (pathos). Specifically, three emotions prominently shape this narrative: pride, frustration, and concern. Pride is tied to nationalism and the notion of meat as a cultural treasure and expression of Spanish identity, fostering loyalty and duty. INTERPORC$_{26}$ makes this explicit: "We are proud of our productive sector, which not only feeds Spain but feeds the world with quality products." In the same vein, ASICI$_{7}$ heightens this sentiment through hyperbolic language, portraying the Iberian pig as a an "the fruit of the culture and tradition of an entire population," and "Ambassador of Europe in the World."

In other instances, pride is constructed through ethopoeia, a rhetorical figure that attributes moral traits to enhance credibility. For example, farmers are portrayed as dedicated, ethical actors committed to society, the environment, and animal welfare. This is exemplified in INTERPORC$_{24}$'s claim: "We are 415,000 people who get up early every day to work with honesty and enthusiasm (…) we are people who love the countryside, protect nature, and do everything possible to preserve its biodiversity."

However, pride is juxtaposed with frustration and concern about external pressures that threaten the sector. The discourse reflects a pervasive sense of being "attacked" and operating in a "difficult" environment, citing misinformation, competition from imports, declining financial support, and restrictive regulations on animal welfare. Social actors, particularly animal rights activists and vegans are framed as adversaries seeking to dismantle their work. AVIANZA$_{8}$ exemplifies this rhetoric, warning about the European Chicken Commitment (ECC), an initiative "promoted by animal and vegan organisations" that, according to them, aims to "eradicate poultry meat production in intensive systems by 2026." By highlighting these threats, the industry casts itself as a victim of forces beyond its control, consolidating its defensive stance.

To counter this confrontational climate, the industry appeals to consumers' empathy, framing the purchase of animal products as a moral choice that supports animal farming. INTEROVIC$_{21}$ reinforces this message: "[b]y the simple gesture of including lamb, mutton, and kid on your shopping list, you are helping to perpetuate our traditional livestock." This rhetoric stresses collective responsibility in safeguarding the sector's future and preserving a traditional way of life. INTERPORC$_{22}$ exemplifies this strategy by simultaneously appealing to solidarity and guilt—conveying a kind of 'you take care of me, I take care of you' message. These emotions are shaped by narratives that highlight farmers' sacrifices, portraying them as dedicated individuals who bear significant burdens for society's welfare: "[a] sector that has spent decades putting maximum effort and dedication into promoting initiatives aimed at being more sustainable, improving animal welfare, supporting rural development, and creating thousands of jobs" (INTERPORC$_{22}$).

In sum, amplifying is a process of re-enchantment, a deliberate attempt to construct an idealised vision of meat production that deepens disconnection from its origin. This phenomenon has been made evident in specific contexts, such as the dairy industry, which portrays happy cows on idyllic farms while concealing their alienation (Linne 2016).

Similarly, in alternative food networks, the ideal of 'happy meat' highlights the complexities of the attraction-disassociation spectrum in human-animal connections (Bruckner et al. 2018). Here IBOs, by invoking images of rural life, generational wisdom, and social cohesion, craft an emotionally charged narrative in which farmers become moral protagonists of national identity and economic resilience. This rhetoric erases the reality of industrial animal farming —confinement, mechanisation, and large-scale facilities— and replaces it with a romanticised image of small-scale, family farming, where farmers are stewards of the land, selfless contributors to social welfare, and guardians of cultural continuity.

In doing so, the discourse not only neutralises critique but also relies on the rhetorical complicity of consumers, inviting them to participate in this idealised vision. This shifts responsibility onto the public, creating a consensus that discourages critical examination of the meat industry's ethics. By marginalizing alternative viewpoints as radical, it perpetuates the idea that questioning meat production opposes social values, deflecting moral scrutiny and entrenching the industry's status quo.

Furthermore, in shaping their positive image, rhetorical solidarity with farmers is central. IBOs emphasise farmers' care for consumers, the planet, and animals. However, this rhetoric is ultimately utilitarian, serving profit-driven interests while diverting attention from critical issues that could negatively influence public perceptions of meat. For instance, discourse glorifies economic performance while omitting favorable regulations and public subsidies, creating an illusion of self-reliance. It also overlooks precarious working conditions, environmental pollution, and hazardous labor realities within the industry (Compassion in World Farming 2024; Gerber et al. 2013; Winders et al. 2021). Additionally, the suffering of animals in meat production is systematically concealed, while advocacy voices are discredited, silencing ethical debate. This vested empathy aligns with the concept of illusory altruism (Almiron et al. 2024), which discourages compassionate views toward animals, reinforcing the industry's moral legitimacy while shielding it from scrutiny.

Hollowing out animal welfare: 'the good process'

While in the synecdochic representation described above animals as subjects are silenced behind their flesh, there is one space in the discourse of IBOs where they seem to be heard: animal welfare. However, this recognition is not neutral; rather, it operates as a strategic mechanism within the rhetorical framework of meat lobbies. Welfare is framed as a 'good process', i.e., a standardised, ethically sound, and technocratically managed system that ensures the well-being of nonhuman animals. This construction positions welfare as an intrinsic and unquestionable feature of animal agriculture, where animals are portrayed as living good lives within a harmonious system of care. As $INTEROVIC_7$ asserts reproducing the Five Freedoms framework (Harrison 1964; WOAH 2019), "the commitment also guarantees that ruminants live free from fear and distress, that they are free from physical and thermal discomfort, and that they can 'express natural behaviors'".

Built around notions of empathy and responsibility (Fernández et al. 2024), this rhetoric presents farmers as voluntarily committed to the well-being of their animals. By emphasizing that this dedication is undertaken "with conviction and by their own decision" ($INTEROVIC_7$), welfare is framed as an internalised duty rather than an externally imposed requirement. This IBO even extends such narrative to the extreme by claiming that animals receive unparalleled care, even greater than in natural settings: "animals receive protection and care even greater than in nature itself". The rhetorical strategy situates farmers as the true custodians of animal welfare, portraying it as a fundamental and unquestionable principle already embedded in everyday agricultural practices: "offering special attention and care to our animals is an intrinsic part of our production model" ($INTERPORC_{16}$).

However, the notion of animal welfare itself is deeply contested. In line with Meijboom (2021), animal welfare functions as an overarching and strategically flexible concept, one that ostensibly embodies ethical concern for animals while remaining open to multiple and often contradictory interpretations. This flexibility enables discursive co-optation by industry actors; rather than integrating the moral basis of animal welfare, the discourse of the IBOs strips it of its ethical dimension, turning welfare into an empty signifier. Following Laclau (1996), an empty signifier is a discursive category that lacks a fixed meaning, allowing different political or social actors to mobilise it strategically. In the context of meat industry discourse, welfare is not a fundamental moral commitment to animals as sentient beings but a set of instrumentalised assurances designed to mitigate consumer discomfort while leaving intact the structures of animal exploitation.

This process of semantic hollowing out is particularly evident in how welfare is reconfigured as a quantifiable, standardised, and technocratic principle, aligning with the bureaucratic logic of industrial production. IBOs exploit this discursive malleability to position welfare as an already-achieved outcome. In this frame, animal welfare does not require further scrutiny or reform. It is already safeguarded within the existing system: "Fundamental pillars: Animal health; Animal safety; Sustainability and respect for the environment. The Spanish beef sector is a world leader in

animal welfare. Currently, all farms in Spain comply with European animal welfare standards" ($PROVACUNO_{10}$).

The technification of care is further reinforced through representations that depict welfare as a clinical and impersonal process, where measurement and monitoring replace ethical and affective concerns. Welfare is framed as a managerial task, overseen by professionals whose authority remains unquestioned, thereby erasing any intersubjective relationships between humans and animals. Thus, instead of recognizing animals as individuals with unique needs, the industry presents welfare as a matter of scientific oversight, control, and efficiency, reducing care to a system of standardization and measurable indicators. Welfare is no longer about relationships, emotions, or moral considerations but about maintaining a productive system. This logic is well illustrated in the following assertion:

> Animal welfare can only be guaranteed through the measurement of parameters based on scientific criteria and in turn, through their registration, so that they can be traceable over time and contribute to improving the living conditions of animals. Subjective criteria are not valid. Anticipation is based on scientific progress. Daily on-farm monitoring and study in connection with science and research allows to improve detection and monitoring techniques and to adapt measurement criteria to anticipate new situations that may affect the animals, such as climate change, for example." ($INTEROVIC_5$).

Very often, IBOs rely on established frameworks such as the abovementioned Five Freedoms to sustain this technocratic veneer, shifting the focus from the affective aspects of care to a fixed checklist. Originally formulated by Ruth Harrison (1964) and later institutionalised by the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH 2025), this model defines welfare as freedom from hunger and thirst, discomfort, pain, injury or disease, fear and distress, and the ability to express normal behaviour (WOAH 2019). While these principles suggest an ethical commitment to the treatment of animals, they are deployed in a way that detaches welfare from lived experience. "This is exemplified by the reference to the European Charter for the Production of Fat Palmipeds, which formally incorporates the Five Freedoms while embedding them into an industrial production model that ultimately prioritises efficiency ($INTERPALM_{11}$).

Under this rhetoric, welfare becomes a business asset that serves corporate interests rather than protecting animals. This logic relies on appeals to authority and professionalism (ethos) and rational justification (logos), rather than engaging with emotional persuasion (pathos), which would signal genuine concern for animal well-being. This process operates through three key mechanisms: first, the legal codification of animal welfare, which allows industry actors to present it as an objective and fully achieved regulatory standard rather than an ongoing ethical concern; second, its alignment with economic competitiveness, positioning welfare as a strategic advantage rather than a moral obligation; and third, its integration into consumer reassurance strategies, which frame welfare as a guarantee of product quality rather than as a matter of animal protection.

A central mechanism in the hollowing out of animal welfare is the equation of care with legal compliance, allowing industry actors to present it as an objective and fully achieved regulatory standard rather than an ongoing ethical concern. As $PROVACUNO_8$ asserts, "all farms in Spain now comply with European animal welfare laws. Its objective is to establish minimum standards for the protection of animals from the farm through transport to slaughter". Similarly, the sector strategically merges welfare with food safety narratives, strengthening the notion that compliance with welfare standards is ultimately about securing high-quality, risk-free products for consumers: "The strict adherence to legislation guarantees the good health of animals and, consequently, the supply of quality products". ($INTERPALM_{11}$).

By equating welfare with legal sufficiency, this framing ensures that no further ethical questions need to be raised as long as regulations and 'objective' technical criteria are met. This move consolidates corporate control over the very definition of animal welfare, aligning it with business interests rather than substantive reforms. Moreover, since legal frameworks are often shaped by industry influence, compliance becomes a circular logic: one in which the industry both sets and validates its own standards, ultimately legitimizing existing practices while preempting deeper critiques of animal treatment. This logic is advanced through self-issued certifications, such as the Decálogo Compromiso Bienestar Animal Europeo, signed by PROVACUNO and INTEROVIC, or the "Compromiso Bienestar Certificado" de INTERPORC, which allow the industry to position itself as a leader in animal welfare without external oversight.

Animal welfare is also strategically mobilised as a competitive advantage in global markets. Industry discourse explicitly links welfare compliance with economic success, promoting the idea that high welfare standards are not a matter of moral progress but a tool for strengthening international trade relations. The language of competitiveness frames *welfare* as a value-added feature that enhances the credibility of national production models and expands export opportunities. As $PROVACUNO_8$ states:

> Its objective is to establish minimum standards for the protection of animals from the farm through transport to slaughter; to contribute to the improvement

> and maintenance of the competitiveness of livestock exports, thus creating a higher quality market compatible with the European Production Model that allows opening and maintaining foreign markets for the product".

By linking welfare exclusively to trade competitiveness, the ethical dimension of animal treatment disappears, replaced by an economic rationale that prioritises compliance as a business asset rather than a moral commitment to animals themselves. This shift further distances welfare from its ethical foundation, reconfiguring it as a market-driven necessity rather than a commitment to the well-being of animals themselves.

Ultimately, animal welfare is fully absorbed into consumer-oriented discourses, where its primary function is no longer to protect animals but to legitimise the product and reassure public trust. Welfare is framed as a proxy for quality, safety, and responsible consumption, aligning with consumer expectations rather than ethical imperatives. The industry explicitly acknowledges this dynamic, positioning animal welfare as part of a broader marketing strategy to respond to consumer demands. As INTERPOC_{32} claims that "the Spanish pig sector has been applying the most demanding pig welfare regulations in the world for years, in the knowledge that the better the quality of life of our animals, the better quality we can offer our consumers".

The alignment of welfare with market needs is further institutionalised through certification schemes, which serve as external markers of credibility while remaining within industry control, as INTEROVIC_{15} highlights regarding its certificate: "in order to respond to the new needs of the market and consumers, the interprofessional sheep and goat meat trade association, INTEROVIC, has promoted the accredited certification seal 'Animal Welfare Commitment'." This framing dissolves the ethical dimension of welfare, reconfiguring it as a consumer-driven attribute of food production, where the value of animals is defined by their utility as food. INTERPORC_{16} reaffirms this: "the better the quality of life of our animals, the better quality we can offer our consumers." This logic extends throughout the entire life cycle of the animal, where its existence is erased and replaced by a sequence of production phases—as seen in PROVACUNO_{8}, which describes animals solely through the economic stages of their transformation: "exploitation, transport, and slaughter."

Beyond being redefined as a product-enhancing attribute, animal welfare is strategically merged with broader corporate discourses of sustainability and environmental responsibility: "Triple sustainability, global leadership in animal welfare, and the highest standards in food safety are in our DNA" (INTERPORC_{24}). This ambiguous framing strengthens the industry's legitimacy by presenting welfare, food security, environmental impact reduction, and traceability as interchangeable concerns, obscuring the specific interests of animals and creating a flexible moral framework that benefits the industry. This conflation is further institutionalised through industry initiatives such as the IBÉRICO ANIMAL WELFARE (IBAW) seal, which, as ASICI claims, certifies products that meet standards in animal welfare, health, biosecurity, handling, and traceability under international and EU regulations. Similarly, INTEROVIC integrates commitments to Carbon Neutral goals and sustainability within its Animal Welfare Decalog, positioning environmental responsibility as part of welfare itself.

In this blurry discourse, biodiversity protection emerges as a key concept, functioning as another managerial principle of species differentiation within the meat market. While certain breeds—particularly native livestock—are framed as essential for sustainability, others remain invisible or reduced to dispensable resources. As INTEROVIC_{17} highlights, "transhumance is valued for maintaining indigenous breeds like the Merino and contributing to biodiversity and high-quality food production". These narratives illustrate how sustainability and welfare claims are mobilised to project an image of ethical responsibility while maintaining a speciesist and productivist framework.

In sum, the discourse of IBOs avoids addressing ethical implications of animal (ab)use while claiming to comply with welfare standards imposed by law, scientific progress, good professionalism, and market demands. This 'concerned detachment' which reduces animals into 'sentient commodities' (Wilkie 2005) can be seen as a form of humane-washing that misleads consumers about animal care. When repeated overtime, such discourse can create an illusory truth effect (Fazio et al. 2015). As a result, consumers are led to feel they are participating in a production and consumption model based on ethical values, while the meat industry reflects the same standardised corporate system and intensive production that it claims to oppose (Linne 2016).

Discussion and conclusion

In a context where meat consumption and meat production are increasingly contested, animal agriculture faces increasing moral scrutiny, with growing public perception that "farmers are engaged in morally dubious interspecies work" (Wilkie 2005: 293). Amidst this turbulent environment, different actors are voicing their positions about the beliefs, norms and behaviours that discoursively build meat as an institution (Phillips et al. 2004). Our research has focused on the discourse of meat lobbies to understand how the rhetorical work of this powerful actor to defend the institution

of meat contributes to shape the debate through their public communication efforts.

Our rhetorical analysis of public communications from the Interbranch Organisations that represent the interests of the meat industry in Spain, reveals a defensive institutional work articulated through a rhetorical strategy of pivoting to safeguard the legitimacy of the institution of meat. Pivoting consists of three intertwined rhetorical moves that serve to divert attention from the recognition of animals' moral interests by silencing animal subjectivity, amplifying animal farmers' stewardship, and hollowing out the notion of animal welfare. This rhetoric shapes animals' silhouette, visible as an object, but invisible as a subject, echoing the notion of animals as the absent referents (Adams 2010) that pervades animal-human relations in society.

These findings contribute to the field of animal agriculture by providing evidence for the existence of multiple moral stances on using animals for food. While individual farmers may express diverse ethical concerns on caring animals raised for slaughter (Bryant and Weel 2021; McLoughlin and Cassey 2022), their perspectives contrast with the monolithic narrative promoted by industry associations representing the meat sector. More than just a divergence of views, meat lobby rhetoric strategically erases the moral uneasiness that permeate the entire value chain regarding breeding animals to be killed. By muting these tensions rather than addressing them, the public discourse (Nibert 2002) of the meat industry silences and obscures the moral conflicts that exist within the sector, preventing meaningful debate and hindering progress toward more compassionate food systems. Ultimately, from a critical animal studies standpoint (Best 2009), we argue that pivoting strategy reinforces anthropocentric speciesism that sustains the Animal-Industrial Complex by re-moralising the instituion of meat, and limits alternative pathways toward interspecies justice (Adams 2010; DeMello 2012; Francione 2004; Lündstrom 2019).

In addition to contributing to the field of animal agriculture and the moral values underlying the sector, our findings advance institutional work theory in two ways. First, by developing a distinct form of institutional maintenance work: pivoting. This rhetorical strategy adds to the well-stablished typology created by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) about the work developed by institutional actors to preserve the normative foundations of an institution, i.e., mythologizing and valourizing/demonizing. While these categories involve single works to institutional pillars, pivoting unpacks a composite type of work that uses diverse rhetorical appeals to manage audience focus on evolving values that undermine the institution's legitimacy: 1) diverting attention from controversial normative foundations (silencing); 2) directing attention towards the authority of institutional actors working to preserve the normative foundations (amplifying); and 3) distracting attention by conflating the values in question with others that the audience may favour (hollowing).

Our findings also provide evidence of defensive institutional work (Maguire and Hardy 2009) through intrafield rhetorical strategies (Harmon et al. 2015). We showcase how field institutional actors (i.e., the animal agriculture industry lobbies) face a progressive erosion of the core institutional logics (i.e., anthropocentric speciesism) that underpins the institution of meat. While this growing questioning of the foundations of the institution is dominated by diverse societal actors outside the field (Díaz and Horta 2020; Wolf 2014), farmers have also expressed individual concerns for animals as sentient subjects. Amidst these growing and diversely visible moral demands on the meat industry, our rhetorical analysis of the discourse of meat lobbies explains a form of defensive institutional work based on pivoting to avoid confronting questions of moral legitimacy driven by actors from inside and outside the field.

Given our CAS approach, which emphasises bridging research with activism to challenge all forms of oppression and commodification (Best 2009), two practical implications derived from our research are particularly relevant to its core purpose: the role of public conversation and the role of social movements regarding the future of the institution of meat. First, the increasing moral sensitivity towards animals in society demands a more open and sincere public debate about the moral dimensions of human-animal relations in animal agriculture. As McLoughlin and Cassey (2022) note, the politics of transparency in meat production should facilitate honest public discussion of these dilemmas rather than obscure them through sanitised and strategically crafted narratives. However, the powerful voice of the meat industry lobbies moves in a different direction when working to defend the institution. The rhetorical strategy of pivoting deliberately works to avoid the debate and sideline the multiplicity of other voices, including those inside the industry experiencing moral conflicts of making animals into food. Our findings highlight that the institution of meat is not just an economic sector, but a contested ideological space, where the rhetorical force of meat lobbies to defend its moral legitimacy based on a social and economic necessity illustrates the intersection of capitalism, ideology, and speciesism (Almiron and Fernández 2021; Pachirat 2011; Twine 2012). These dynamics not only serve to stabilise, reframe, or defend the meat industry but also to deflect criticism and maintain discursive hegemony.

At the heart of this intersection lies a democratic deficit: while lobbying is often framed as a legitimate mechanism for representing sectoral interests, in practice, it reflects profound asymmetries in access to power. This imbalance

undermines the democratic ideal of pluralistic deliberation as IBOs extend their reach beyond economic advocacy to construct a dominant discourse that shapes public understanding and marginalises alternative viewpoints. Fostering greater transparency and broadening participation in this moral debate could contribute to a more informed and ethically engaged public, opening pathways for more ethical food systems. Given that consumers rarely have direct access to farmers (Meijboom and Stafleu 2016; Wille et al. 2018) and instead rely on industry narratives that marginalise dissenting views about animals (Almiron et al. 2024), fostering greater transparency and broadening participation in this moral debate could help create a more informed public, paving the way for systemic change toward more compassionate human-animal relationships in food systems.

Our research also provides strategic insights for social movements advocating moral interests of animals. Meat lobbies' claim to represent a unified industry voice is a rhetorical construct that conceals internal tensions and moral conflicts. As Meijboom and Stafleu (2016) note, farmers are beginning to acknowledge these moral dimensions, yet their voices remain largely absent from public discussions, overshadowed by industry narratives that prioritise economic stability over ethical reflection. Recognising these moral tensions creates opportunities for animal advocacy interventions by fostering internal delegitimisation within the industry. Thus, rather than focusing on the moral persuasion of industry lobbies, animal advocacy movements could shift their attention to those actors in the food system who have direct contact with animals and the moral dilemmas this entails. Engaging with farmers as moral agents, rather than mere economic actors, could open dialogue and counter industry efforts to mechanise and further distance farmers from the reality of animal life and death. In this sense, rather than strengthening an adversarial dynamic, animal advocacy could instead work to nurture the compassion already present in those closest to animals, using these moral fissures as a site for transformation towards a more just and compassionate society.

Despite our contributions, no study goes without limitations. Firstly, the varying volumes of publications from different IBOs may have influenced the distribution of the corpus analyzed, potentially overrepresenting some associations. While the homogeneous nature of IBOs reflects monolithic rhetoric, the cultural differences between species open opportunities for future comparative studies that could provide a more nuanced understanding of discourse across different IBOs. Additionally, our cross-sectional method limits our ability to track the evolution of pivoting strategies over time; future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to examine these dynamics. Finally, our focus on textual discourse leaves room for future studies to explore how visual and auditory elements shape public perceptions, offering valuable insights into the multimodal dimensions of industry rhetoric.

Future research could also examine how industry discourse on meat influences public policy and consumer perceptions over time. Alternative theoretical frameworks, such as Justification Theory (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) or Framing and Social Movements Theory (Benford and Snow 2000), could further elucidate the industry's persuasive strategies and their broader implications across management, social movements, and cultural studies.

Beyond the meat industry, the pivoting strategy proposed in this study offers an institutional lens to examine how other lobbies and industries strategically respond to societal moral challenges, such as gender discrimination, immigration, and work-life balance. Institutions under ethical scrutiny deploy rhetorical strategies to sustain their legitimacy amid social change. Understanding how industries craft discourse to neutralise moral contestation is not merely an academic exercise: it reveals the mechanisms that uphold systemic exploitation.

The meat industry is no exception. Yet, just as language can obscure and justify harm, it also holds the power to challenge entrenched institutions and envision more just and compassionate futures. By understanding these rhetorical strategies, we contribute to broader efforts to disrupt the normalization of violence and open pathways for ethical transformations in our relationship with nonhuman animals.

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