

Article

Responsible Entrepreneurship Through Public Eyes: A Qualitative Exploration of Moral and Sustainable Expectations

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Abstract

This exploratory study analyzes how ordinary citizens from seven European countries perceive and construct the meaning and legitimacy of responsible entrepreneurship. Drawing on a qualitative and social constructionist approach, 104 open-ended interviews were conducted, eliciting participants' narratives and metaphors about the purpose of business, the figure of the entrepreneur, and the ethical challenges of entrepreneurship. The analysis reveals that most citizens associate entrepreneurship with "growth," "prosperity," and positive societal impact, but also express skepticism regarding the authenticity of sustainability claims. Metaphors and narratives show a broad spectrum of public imaginaries: positive images ("captain," "gardener") reinforce legitimacy, while negative or ambivalent metaphors signal doubt, ethical tension, or perceived opportunism. The study demonstrates that legitimacy is shaped not only by economic or institutional factors, but by symbolic narratives and ethical expectations rooted in civic discourse. These findings underscore the need for greater public dialogue in defining responsible entrepreneurship and highlight the value of integrating citizens' voices in entrepreneurship research, policy, and practice.

Keywords: responsible entrepreneurship; sustainability; sustainable entrepreneurship; ethical entrepreneurship; qualitative approach; citizen



Academic Editors: Mário José Baptista Franco and Davide Settembre-Blundo

Received: 3 June 2025

Revised: 28 August 2025

Accepted: 29 August 2025

Published: 1 September 2025

Citation: Toledano, N.; Horie, T. Responsible Entrepreneurship Through Public Eyes: A Qualitative Exploration of Moral and Sustainable Expectations. *Sustainability* **2025**, *17*, 7874. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17177874>

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1. Introduction

It is well established that business activities addressing current societal and environmental challenges have significant impacts on citizens' lives [1–3]. While business innovation and entrepreneurship often improve daily life through new products and services, they can also lead to negative consequences for human health, society, and ecosystems [3,4]. In recent years, increasing global awareness of these impacts has resulted in heightened scrutiny of business conduct. In response, governments and international institutions have developed substantial legal frameworks, obliging or incentivizing companies to adhere to responsible business practices [5–8]. The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are two notable examples aimed at fostering more accountable and sustainable corporate behavior [6,7].

Within this evolving context, the concept of entrepreneurship itself is being redefined. Responsible entrepreneurship has emerged alongside related terms such as social, sustainable, and environmental entrepreneurship [9,10]. A common thread across these approaches is the alignment of entrepreneurial activities with the public good, ethical responsibility, and the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders—including not only employees,

customers, and suppliers, but also local communities and the broader public [9,11]. Responsible entrepreneurship, in particular, emphasizes the integration of sustainability and stakeholder inclusivity with ethical responsibility [10,12,13]. Some authors have also highlighted the need for long-term strategic planning over isolated or symbolic efforts [12–14]. This includes aligning entrepreneurial practices with environmental goals—such as reducing carbon footprints—and enhancing community well-being [15–17]. Empirical studies have further demonstrated that responsible entrepreneurship can improve internal outcomes (e.g., financial performance, stakeholder satisfaction) and contribute to broader sustainable goals (e.g., the SDGs, climate action) [10,18].

Despite this growing body of research, relatively few studies have explored how responsible entrepreneurship is perceived and morally interpreted by ordinary citizens. Apart from a limited number of quantitative studies investigating public perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability-oriented practices (e.g., [19–21]), public understanding of responsible entrepreneurship remains underexplored, particularly through qualitative or interpretative approaches. This gap in the literature is significant since legitimacy, trust, and moral expectations are not only determined by policies or academic definitions but also shaped by public imaginaries and civic discourse [19,22].

Indeed, citizens act beyond their roles as consumers or workers; they serve as key interpreters of entrepreneurial legitimacy, forming symbolic and ethical judgments regarding what constitutes acceptable or admirable entrepreneurial behavior [22,23]. Furthermore, citizens often critically assess sustainability claims, expressing skepticism when such claims are perceived as superficial or strategically motivated rather than grounded in authentic ethical commitment [24,25]. These judgments frequently emerge through metaphors and cultural narratives rather than through institutional or technical language [26], playing a crucial yet understudied role in constructing entrepreneurial legitimacy “from below” [23,27].

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of studying entrepreneurship through metaphorical analysis, underscoring how metaphors reflect deeper societal attitudes and expectations toward entrepreneurs and their social responsibilities [28–30]. However, most metaphor-based studies on entrepreneurship focus predominantly on entrepreneurial self-perceptions or managerial perspectives rather than on citizen-generated metaphors and narratives [29,30]. Consequently, an evident gap remains regarding how ordinary citizens symbolically and morally construct the notion of responsible entrepreneurship. This exploratory study addresses this gap by qualitatively examining how citizens from seven European countries perceive, construct, and articulate the notion of responsible entrepreneurship. Specifically, the central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do ordinary citizens perceive and morally construct the meaning and purpose of responsible entrepreneurship through their opinions, narratives, and metaphorical expressions? Employing a qualitative and constructivist design, this study gathered open-ended responses from 104 participants, eliciting metaphors and opinions reflective of cultural imaginaries and civic expectations. By engaging ordinary citizens as active meaning-makers, this research contributes valuable insights into the bottom-up construction of social legitimacy through symbolic coherence, narrative reasoning, and public ethical evaluation.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, including conceptual distinctions and the role of social legitimacy. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings. Section 5 offers the conclusions, and Section 6 addresses limitations and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Background

2.1. Responsible Entrepreneurship: Scope and Distinctions

Responsible entrepreneurship has gained increasing recognition within the entrepreneurship literature [15,18,31]. While it shares foundational principles with CSR—notably, the idea of assuming responsibility for business activities and practices beyond purely economic considerations [15]—responsible entrepreneurship focuses primarily on new ventures and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), rather than large corporate entities [30,32]. Initially, the concept was centered on avoiding harm to stakeholders (e.g., employees, investors) or addressing harm when it occurred [32]. However, it has since evolved to encompass broader, proactive actions that contribute to social and environmental goals, including the SDGs [9,10,15].

Scholars have highlighted overlaps between responsible entrepreneurship and related categories such as social, environmental, green, and sustainable entrepreneurship [14,33,34]. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the academic literature and public discourse, they differ in emphasis—particularly regarding the nature of their goals and the means by which they are achieved. For example, green entrepreneurship specifically emphasizes ecological objectives, such as reducing carbon emissions or minimizing waste [35], and is typically considered a subcategory of sustainable entrepreneurship, which integrates social, economic, and environmental objectives [14].

In contrast, responsible entrepreneurship is distinctive for its stronger emphasis on ethical conduct and stakeholder engagement, alongside the creation of societal and sustainable value beyond economic outcomes [9,36]. Its novelty lies in incorporating principles of ethical behavior, sustainability, and inclusivity into business strategies, prioritizing long-term impacts over short-term profits [9,10,15]. In this way, it advances a broader framework of moral and social accountability.

Empirical research shows that the adoption of responsible practices is influenced by a variety of internal and external drivers, as well as context-specific factors [18]. In developing countries, entrepreneurs' personal moral values and religious beliefs are particularly salient, especially in contexts characterized by institutional voids [32,37]. Legal regulations and stakeholder expectations also play a significant role in promoting responsible behavior aligned with long-term goals [36,38]. Furthermore, responsible entrepreneurship is increasingly regarded as a strategic mechanism for navigating uncertain environments and enhancing social legitimacy [10]. However, the pursuit of legitimacy is not without tension: it may be met with public skepticism, especially when responsible practices resemble superficial or symbolic strategies commonly associated with large corporations [24]. These tensions underscore the importance of examining the mechanisms through which responsible entrepreneurship seeks to attain public legitimacy.

2.2. Responsible Entrepreneurship's Social Legitimacy and Public Accountability

As noted earlier, responsible entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as contributing to broader sustainable development goals and as a strategic pathway to building social legitimacy [18,36]. For example, firms that align their practices with climate action and proactively address environmental degradation through long-term strategies—such as renewable energy initiatives or waste reduction—are perceived as contributing positively to the public good and, consequently, receive higher levels of social legitimacy [10,18,30,39].

Social legitimacy, in this context, refers to the general perception or assumption by the public and social communities that the actions of an entrepreneur are desirable, appropriate, and aligned with a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs [31,40]. In other words, it reflects the extent to which an organization conforms to evolving societal expectations [41]. When achieved, legitimacy can help new ventures gain trust and

acceptance from key stakeholders—including local communities—while simultaneously reducing external pressures and uncertainties in the business environment [15,42].

However, this relationship is far from universal. Recent studies have demonstrated that legitimacy is shaped by multiple external factors, including environmental and market-specific contingencies such as uncertainty, rapid societal change, and evolving sustainability expectations among customers [15,43–46]. Moreover, there is growing public skepticism toward corporate social and sustainability rhetoric, particularly when ethical and environmental claims are perceived as symbolic rather than substantive [24,25,47].

These critiques reflect a broader shift in how legitimacy is understood—not as a static or binary state, but as an ongoing, dynamic, and contested social process. As such, legitimacy must be continually constructed and reconstructed through negotiation, language, and social interaction involving multiple actors [47–50]. Palazzo and Scherer (2006), for example, conceptualize corporate legitimacy as a communicative and deliberative process, emphasizing that legitimacy arises not solely from economic performance or formal compliance, but from a firm’s capacity to publicly justify its actions through inclusive, transparent, and dialogical engagement with society [48]. Similarly, one of the earliest studies on responsible entrepreneurship by Fuller and Tian (2006) emphasized that legitimacy is not merely a function of institutional alignment or CSR frameworks, but a socially mediated and moralized process, whereby entrepreneurs must build long-term trust and moral authority within their communities [30].

From this perspective, citizens and civil society are not merely passive observers but serve as both sources of legitimacy and critical evaluators of entrepreneurial conduct. Their judgments—often rooted in moral, cultural, and symbolic frameworks—may reinforce, reshape, or resist dominant sustainability narratives [24,25].

2.3. Responsible Entrepreneurship and Citizen Perspectives

Although discussions around responsible entrepreneurship and social legitimacy are gaining prominence in the academic literature, empirical studies examining how ordinary citizens perceive, legitimize, or critique entrepreneurial behavior remain scarce—with only a few notable exceptions [19,20,31,51]. Some research provides evidence that citizen perspectives can significantly influence business conduct. For instance, Adomako and Tran (2023) demonstrated that the perceived legitimacy of CSR positively affects responsible entrepreneurial behavior, and that this relationship is significantly moderated by the firm’s embeddedness within its local social environment [31]. Other studies on citizen-driven sustainability communities—such as zero-waste forums—show that these spaces act as arenas where sustainability norms are negotiated and diffused into everyday practices [52].

However, public concern for responsible business practices does not necessarily imply a clear or uniform understanding of their meaning. Studies in Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Greece, and other European countries reveal broad ethical support for sustainable and responsible entrepreneurship, but also persistent confusion about their definitions and limited public awareness of concrete examples [19,20,35]. These findings suggest that such notions are often shaped more by symbolic associations and cultural values than by technical definitions or direct experience. Furthermore, previous research on cross-national variations has shown that entrepreneurial activity and perceptions vary according to contextual factors [53–55]. Some of these differences are linked to geographic, political, regulatory, and legislative frameworks [56,57]—such as the European Green Deal or national policies promoting sustainable enterprise, for example, *Spanish Law 11/2018 on Non-Financial Reporting and Diversity* and *Austria’s updated 2021 Action Plan for Sustainable Public Procurement (naBe Action Plan)*—which are interpreted and implemented differently across governance levels (national, regional, local) [58–60].

Cultural diversity, distinct from political or economic structures, also plays a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial expectations and behaviors. Numerous studies have examined the influence of cultural factors on entrepreneurship from different perspectives, while also noting the conceptual challenges in defining culture itself [53,61]—often described as the shared patterns of thinking, values, and norms that influence how members of a society organize and interpret social behavior.

While a comprehensive legislative mapping or a detailed analysis of all cultural mechanisms affecting responsible entrepreneurship across the European countries in our sample is beyond the scope of this paper, we offer an initial exploration of how non-expert citizens from Western and Eastern European contexts construct meaning around business responsibility. This cultural lens reflects the well-documented West–East European divide, with implications for market dynamics, including public pressure for changes in labor market conditions [62]. Moreover, empirical research has shown that citizen and customer expectations influence businesses not only through market mechanisms, but also by serving as moral and cultural evaluators of business behavior [63,64]. This broader empirical landscape underscores the value of qualitative inquiry into how ordinary citizens—beyond their role as consumers—contribute to the cultural legitimization of responsible entrepreneurship through everyday interpretations and values.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Research Design: A Social Constructionist Epistemology

This study adopts a social constructionist epistemological position [65,66] grounded in two key assumptions. First, entrepreneurship is conceptualized as a social phenomenon that occurs within the social world, rather than being confined solely to the economic sphere [67–71]. Second, the social world is viewed as dynamic and continuously constructed and reconstructed through everyday interactions, as individuals engage with their contexts and co-create a shared realm of meaningful definitions [72]. By adopting a social constructionist paradigm, this research intentionally moves away from an entitative approach—one that seeks to define, measure, and categorize entrepreneurial activity within a definitive theoretical framework and clearly formulated hypotheses—and instead focuses on generating new insights and understandings about entrepreneurship as a fluid, socially constructed phenomenon. As Anderson and Starnawska (2008, p. 225) articulate, this represents a shift “from defining to exploring new ways of conceiving” [66].

In this study, these “new ways of conceiving” focus on exploring ordinary citizens’ perspectives to understand the “common” and “non-expert” views of responsible entrepreneurship and their interpretations of ethics and sustainability. Including these voices goes beyond the perspectives of functional or formal experts—whether entrepreneurial stakeholders or entrepreneurs themselves—and has been recognized as an advantage for pluralizing ongoing discussions about business, entrepreneurship, and organizations [73]. Ordinary citizens are increasingly seen as important agents demanding greater democratic accountability regarding the meaning and expectations of corporate behavior [73,74]. As such, they provide a valuable channel for capturing the richness and diversity that characterizes contemporary understandings of entrepreneurship [75–79].

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection Strategy

Key informants in this study were recruited using the convenience sampling method [80,81]. Convenience sampling involves selecting informants within the researchers’ network or proximity due to ease of access. While this strategy can introduce bias, it is appropriate when the target population is highly heterogeneous [80]—as in our case, where the aim is to capture diverse ordinary citizen perspectives—and when the research topic

is still in the early stages of scholarly investigation [81], as is the case for responsible entrepreneurship. In recent years, convenience sampling has been used by entrepreneurship scholars studying entrepreneurship from a social constructionist perspective [77,82,83]. Its advantages include reduced time requirements for researchers and the ability to capture real-time thoughts and emotions, minimizing risks of post-rationalization [84]. In this approach, researchers' informal social networks often serve as the primary means for identifying and selecting informants, which is why it is sometimes referred to as "network sampling" [84].

The accessibility and diversity of perspectives prioritized through this sampling strategy necessarily entail a lack of statistical representativeness. As such, the results are not intended to be generalized [80,81,85,86]; rather, they provide an in-depth exploration of civic imaginaries regarding entrepreneurship and responsible entrepreneurship.

Using this sampling strategy, the study engaged 104 citizens across seven European countries. Data collection was carried out by ten trained postgraduate students enrolled in an international master's program in business administration at a European university during the first semester of 2024–2025. Each student–interviewer conducted between 8 and 12 interviews in their country of origin (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain), targeting citizens within their personal and professional networks. The only inclusion criterion was being a legal adult (18+); no prior knowledge of entrepreneurship or sustainability was required. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants, and full anonymity was guaranteed.

Descriptive information on participants' age, gender, and country of origin is provided in Table 1. While statistical representativeness was not sought—as qualitative research does not aim for generalizability in the statistical sense [80,81]—this sample illustrates the diversity of perspectives captured and allows for a grounded, context-sensitive interpretation of ordinary citizens' views.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

Attribute	Manifestation	Distribution
Gender	Male	40%
	Female	60%
Age group	18–25	47%
	26–35	16%
	36–45	6%
	46–60	18%
	60+	13%
Country	Austria	10%
	Czech Republic	10%
	Germany	10%
	Italy	21%
	Poland	12%
	Slovakia	19%
	Spain	19%

3.3. Research Instruments and Analytical Procedures

To investigate participants' perceptions of responsible entrepreneurship, we developed a standardized open-ended questionnaire comprising five questions. The main aim was to elicit citizens' generic constructions of responsible entrepreneurship by inviting their general opinions on (1) business purpose, (2) metaphorical identifications with the entrepreneur, (3) meanings attributed to ethical entrepreneurs, (4) main challenges in en-

trepreneurship, and (5) proposals for advancing entrepreneurial transformation toward sustainability.

The questions were intentionally broad and interpretive in nature, encouraging participants to respond with metaphors and short narratives or stories, and always allowing them to express themselves freely in their own words. In entrepreneurship research, the use of metaphors and informal narratives has been recognized as a valuable medium for communicating values and reflecting respondents' socially constructed understandings of reality. These methods help clarify perceptions of entrepreneurial concepts and approaches [80,82–87]. Narratives and stories, as meaning-making processes, place personal experience at the center of research and align with a constructionist view of reality, whereby individuals impose on their world a realm of meaningful definitions [72,76,86]. Metaphors, by describing one thing in terms of another, enhance the creation of meaning; they allow participants to communicate without academic or professional jargon, using culturally resonant and intuitive imagery [66,77]. As previous studies have shown, their use in entrepreneurship provides fresh insights into how various qualities of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial activities are understood [72,76,86].

The interview protocols, written in English, were translated by interviewers into participants' native languages and later back-translated into English for analysis. While the process prioritized semantic and cultural equivalence, no formal psychometric or professional validation was conducted. This limitation, typical of exploratory qualitative research—which does not require standardized measurement [81]—may have introduced some variation in interpretation across languages. Nevertheless, the structure and clarity of the questions (with all interviews following the same sequence) were discussed by the research team prior to administration to ensure linguistic accessibility and conceptual clarity across languages and contexts. Transparency, credibility, and semantic clarity were prioritized over psychometric validation, given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study.

Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 min. Once data collection was complete, responses were analyzed by the authors using inductive thematic coding [88–91]. Consistent with the exploratory and interpretive aims of the study, our primary focus was on cross-cutting narratives and metaphorical patterns, examining how diverse citizens articulated general ethical concerns and meanings through personal reflections and symbolic expressions. The objective was to explore the meanings underpinning entrepreneurship from the perspective of ordinary people—to understand what they mean when they think and talk about responsible entrepreneurship, and what they believe entrepreneurs should do in practice. To respond to emerging scholarly interest in demographic and contextual variations [53,54,60], we also conducted an exploratory comparison by age group (e.g., Generation Z) and by regional cultural grouping (Western vs. Eastern Europe). These additional comparisons, while not the main analytical lens of the study, offer complementary insights into how different social segments construct the meaning of responsible entrepreneurship. However, given the overrepresentation of Generation Z in the sample, they should be considered illustrative rather than statistically representative and interpreted with caution.

All data coding was conducted manually by the authors through iterative reading and interpretive reflection, following a thematic analysis approach inspired by prior qualitative research in entrepreneurship studies [77,88–91]. Although no specialized qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo, MAXQDA) was used, and no formal double-coding or inter-coder reliability testing was performed, a structured audit trail was maintained throughout the process, including detailed categorization tables. These materials ensured analytical transparency and supported the interpretive rigor of the study, prioritizing ethical sensitivity and contextual depth over generalizability or measurement precision.

The units of analysis varied depending on the type of response. For metaphorical expressions, individual images or descriptors (e.g., “captain,” “gardener”) were coded as the primary unit of meaning. Following the approach of Dodd et al. (2013), metaphors were categorized as positive, neutral, or negative, based on their evaluative connotation [77]. Positive metaphors conveyed admiration or constructive agency (e.g., “gardener,” “captain”); neutral metaphors were functional or ambivalent (e.g., “puzzle solver,” “builder”); and negative metaphors reflected skepticism or moral critique (e.g., “bandit,” “slave to politics”) (see Appendix A).

For narrative responses, full passages were manually segmented into thematic units using a combined inductive and deductive strategy [90,91]. Drawing from both the literature and the dataset itself, we developed nine predefined categories that capture key dimensions of responsible entrepreneurial behavior: business and management competence, care and support for others, respect and fairness, honesty and transparency, other positive (human) traits, perseverance and long-term thinking, contribution to the community, sustainability and the environment, and responsibility and accountability. Each statement was manually coded into the category that best captured its core meaning. For instance, “a person who helps others succeed” and “a person who cares for their team” were coded as *care and support for others*, while “a person who keeps their word” and “a person who acts honestly” were categorized under *honesty and transparency*. This approach enabled a grounded yet systematic categorization of participants’ open-ended responses and symbolic representations, based on their connotative orientation and moral framing.

4. Results

This section presents the key findings from open-ended interviews with 104 citizens across seven European countries. The data are grouped into two main dimensions: (1) public perceptions of the purpose of entrepreneurship and the ethical qualities attributed to entrepreneurs—including the use of metaphorical imagery (Section 4.1); and (2) perceived challenges associated with responsible business transformation in the context of sustainability, as well as opinions regarding mechanisms to address these challenges (Section 4.2).

4.1. Perceptions on Business’ Purposes and Difficulties

To determine the main purpose that ordinary citizens associate with business, participants were asked to provide a single word that captured it. The results show that traditional notions associated with “making money”—such as “profit,” “money,” and “income”—were mentioned only occasionally, particularly among citizens from Poland (3 mentions), the Czech Republic (2), and Austria (1), without indicating a marked distinction between Western and Eastern Europe. More frequently, participants offered broader conceptions of business purpose (see Figure 1).

The most frequently mentioned word was “growth,” cited 11 times and appearing in Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Italy, and Spain, with particular prominence in the Mediterranean Western countries in our sample—with 4 mentions in Spain and 3 in Italy. The term “prosperity” followed, mentioned six times, with three of these occurrences in Germany.

Well-established terms in the entrepreneurship literature, such as “opportunity” and “innovation” (each cited five times), were also used by participants to define the main purpose of business, while words like “responsibility” and “community” appeared only sporadically in Eastern European countries, specifically in Slovakia and Poland.

When comparing responses from Generation Z participants (18–25 years old) with those from older age groups, some distinctive patterns emerged (see Figure 2). The most frequent word mentioned —“growth”— was particularly prevalent among Generation

Z, while words such as “progress” and “innovation” appeared proportionally more often among older participants. Other mentions, such as “community” and “responsibility,” were recorded only among older respondents.

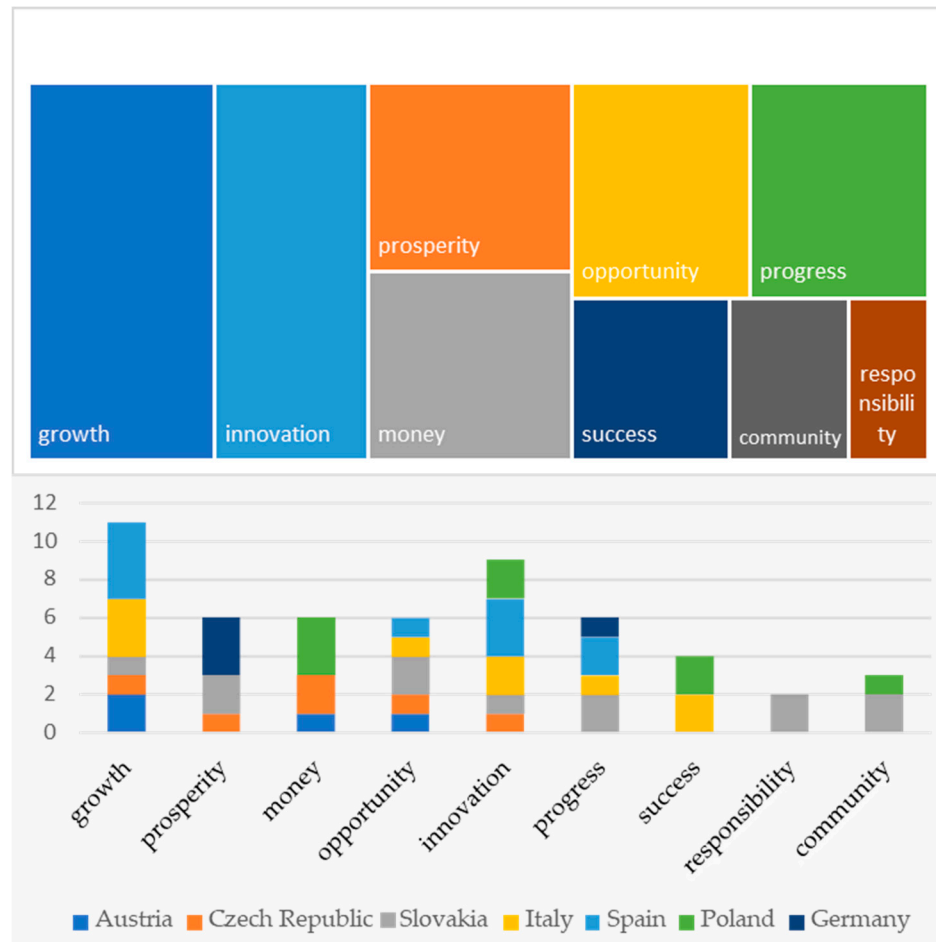


Figure 1. Participants’ perceptions on the main purpose of the business.

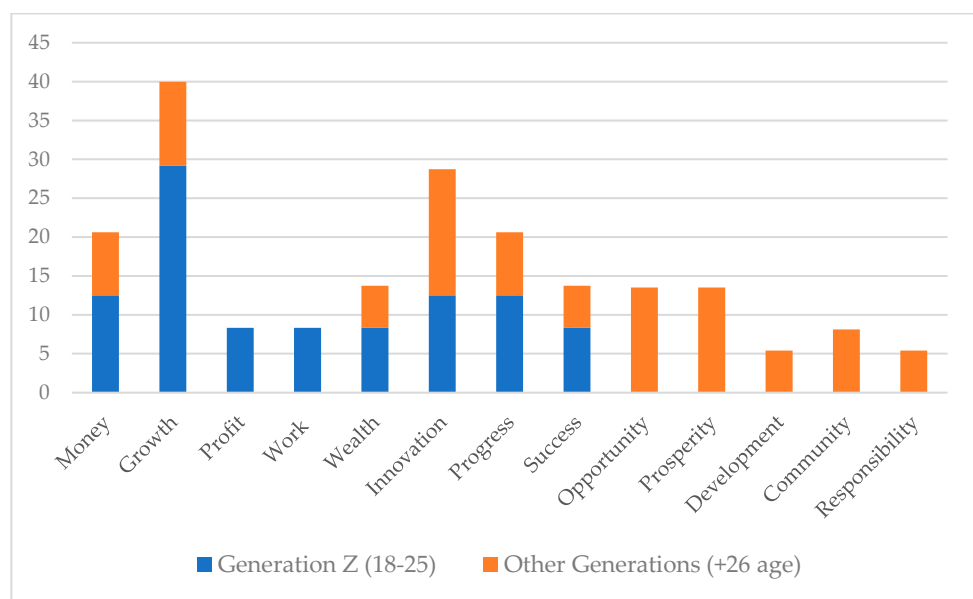


Figure 2. Top responses for participants’ perceptions of business purpose per age group.

With business purposes in mind, participants were also asked about their perceptions of the difficulties entrepreneurs face in achieving what they consider to be the primary goal of a business. The responses consistently pointed to economic pressures as the most significant difficulty across all countries in the sample. These challenges were mainly attributed to escalating operational costs (e.g., energy) and declining sales and incomes, which participants linked to reduced purchasing power among citizens.

Competition from large corporations was identified as the second most significant challenge. Many interviewees expressed concern about global retail giants and online sales—especially following the pandemic-driven shift in consumer habits—making it increasingly difficult for new small businesses to compete in a more demanding market. For these two challenges, a common pattern was observed across all the European countries in our sample. However, some variations in the importance attributed to other factors were also noted. For example, labor and workforce issues were mentioned more frequently in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Italy than in the other countries (see Figure 3).

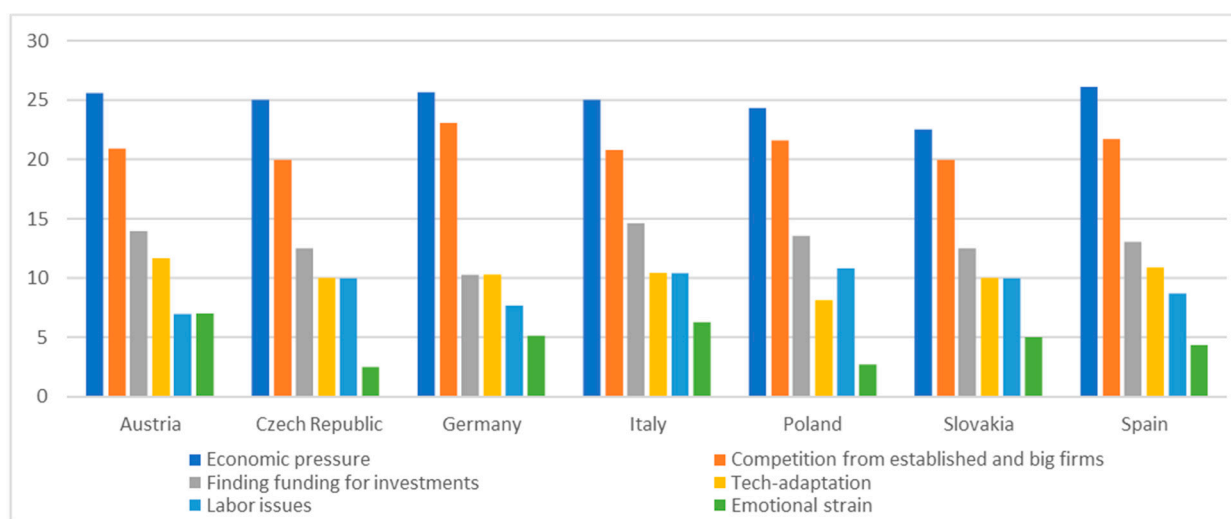


Figure 3. Participants' mentions associated with businesses' challenges for transformation.

4.2. Metaphorical Associations with Entrepreneurs and Responsible Entrepreneurs

To explore citizens' imaginaries regarding the figure of the entrepreneur, the participants were asked to complete the sentence "An entrepreneur is like. . ." with three different endings, resulting in a total of 296 valid metaphorical expressions across seven European countries (see Figure 4).

As noted earlier, following Dodd et al. (2013), all the metaphors were classified as positive, neutral, or negative according to their connotative orientation and symbolic meaning [77]. Positive perceptions of entrepreneurs clearly predominated in all age groups and countries, ranging from 59.3% in Germany to 95.4% in Italy, and from 81.3% among the younger group to 83.1% among the older participants. Neutral metaphors accounted for between 3.60% and 23.2% depending on the country, while negative metaphors were rare or absent altogether, especially in Slovakia and Spain. Slightly higher proportions of negative or neutral metaphors were observed in Austria, Germany, and the Czech Republic (see Table 2).

Regarding the nature of the metaphors, the results indicate a strong dominance of positive cultural narratives and expectations around entrepreneurship throughout Europe, with some contextual nuances. Positive images such as "captain" and "leader" were among the most frequently employed by interviewees, describing entrepreneurs as captains responsible for the journey and well-being of others, or as leaders driving social or economic

of ethics grounded in attentiveness and respect. Regarding honesty and transparency, participants consistently described ethical entrepreneurs as those who “act with integrity,” “do not deceive customers,” and “offer sincerity in their endeavors.” References to business and management competence included expressions such as “being a good leader,” “taking responsibility for mistakes,” and “making decisions with long-term impact.” This dimension highlights that ethical entrepreneurship, in the eyes of many participants, is inseparable from sound business practices and strategic responsibility.

Table 3. Participants’ descriptions of an ethical entrepreneur.

Main Category	Examples of Responses	Mentions
Honesty and transparency	Acts with integrity, does not lie; is sincere; transparent with clients	34
Special care and support for others	Leads by examples; supports people with fewer resources; gives opportunities develops others	92
Respect and fairness	Respects employees; treats others fairly; does not exploit people	13
Responsibility and accountability	Takes responsibility; keeps promises, admits mistakes; is accountable	9
Contribution to community	Benefits society; creates values for the community	14
Sustainability and environment	Cares for the planet; uses ecological materials, protects nature	10
Perseverance and long-term thinking	Thinks about the future; doesn’t seek short-term gain; builds something lasting	22
Business and management competence	Values teamwork; solves problems creatively; understands well the economy; works hard without complaining; innovates responsibly	48
Other general positive (human) traits and values	Listens; is open to other opinions; adapts to change without losing their human values	13

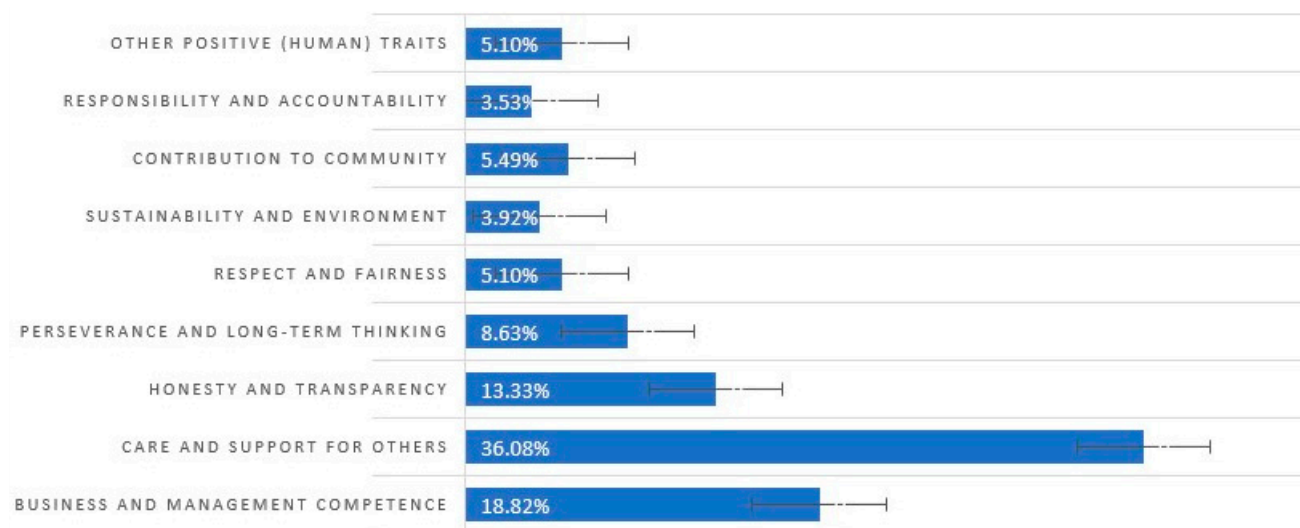


Figure 5. Percentage distribution of the main categories describing an ethical entrepreneur.

Moreover, the distribution of leading categories was broadly similar in both age groups, with slight variations in the relative importance given to *respect and fairness* and *business and management competence*. In the older group, respect and fairness (19.6%) was ranked above business and management competence (15.4%), while in the younger group the order was reversed—business and management competence (22%) came ahead of respect and fairness (17.1%). Some differences were also observed among countries: although care and support for others were valued in all countries, responses from Germany, the Czech Republic, and

Italy showed a comparatively stronger association between responsible entrepreneurship and business and management competence (see Figure 6).

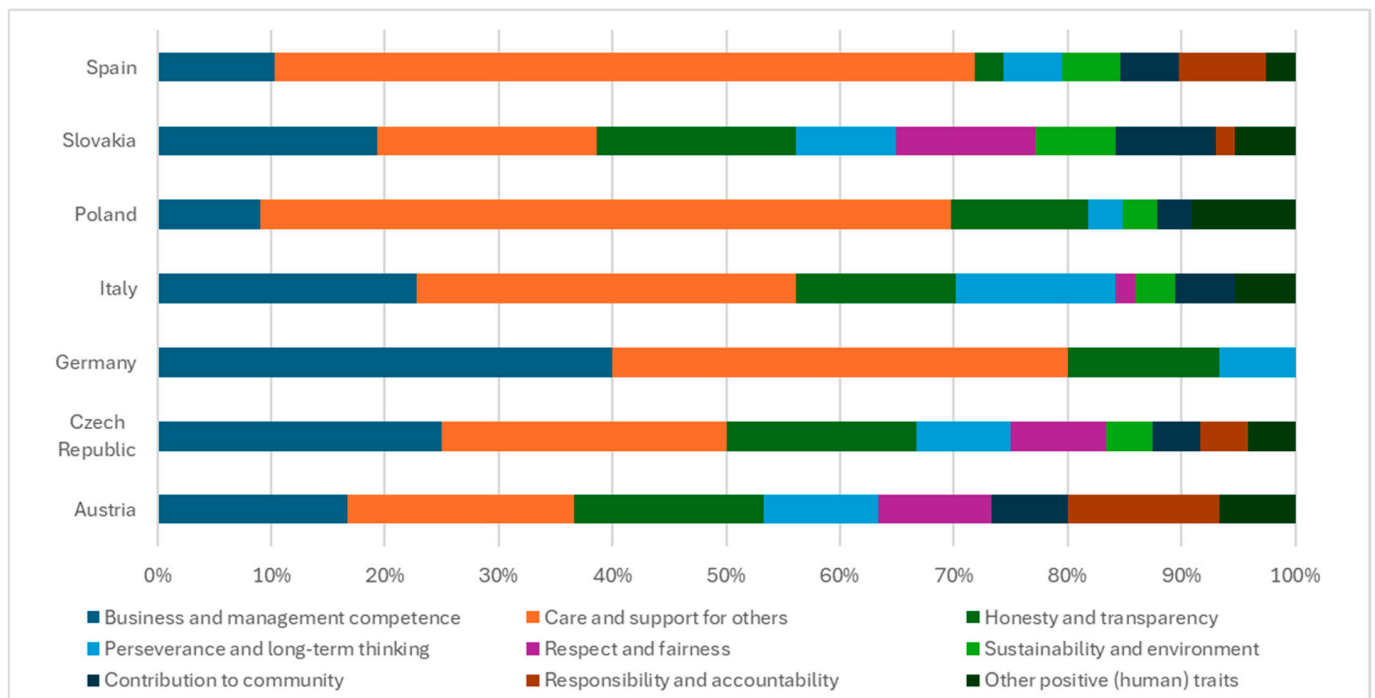


Figure 6. Percentage country distribution of the main categories describing an ethical entrepreneur.

4.3. Citizens' Role in Supporting Responsible Transformation

In addition to exploring understandings of responsible entrepreneurship, the participants were invited to reflect on their own roles as citizens in contributing to a more ethical and sustainable economy. When asked about their willingness to sacrifice personal benefits, consumption habits, or income in favor of a more ethical and sustainable economic model, the majority of respondents expressed support for such an approach, and a broad consensus emerged regarding the importance of civic responsibility and personal action.

Across all seven countries, many participants indicated a willingness to adopt lifestyle changes aligned with ethical and sustainability values. Commonly mentioned actions included purchasing fewer unnecessary goods, supporting local and eco-conscious businesses, reducing energy use, and avoiding purchases from companies perceived as irresponsible. Specifically, participants from Poland, Spain, and Italy expressed a strong commitment to personal engagement, particularly through responsible consumption and support for local or sustainable brands (see Table 4).

In Poland, all the respondents reported a willingness to make specific changes, frequently citing second-hand purchases, waste reduction, and even integrating sustainability into their own businesses or professional activities. Similarly, in Spain, the participants—particularly younger respondents such as students and early-career workers with limited financial resources—emphasized efforts to prioritize ethical consumption.

Nonetheless, despite this overall affirmative trend, responses from Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia also revealed significant economic concerns. Several participants, especially retirees in the older group and students among the younger, indicated a desire to contribute to a more responsible economy but felt unable to do so under current cost-of-living pressures, noting that price and convenience remain crucial factors in decision-making. In these contexts, the perceived burden of ethical consumption was often described

as being unfairly placed on individuals, with some participants emphasizing that real change must be driven by governments and corporations, not citizens alone.

Table 4. Examples of citizens' initiatives supporting economic and environmental transformation.

Country	Illustrative Quotes
Austria	I would buy eco-friendly products even if they are more expensive.
Czech Republic	I would support local and eco-conscious brands, even if it costs a bit more. I would donate a small part of my salary to good causes.
Germany	I would pay more as a consumer, taking into account the sustainable and environmentally friendly production of goods.
Italy	I would buy local products and products made in Italy. I would reduce comforts to support sustainable healthcare progress.
Poland	I would avoid unnecessary purchases and support local businesses more.
Slovakia	I've already cut personal spending to support social causes. I'm restructuring my business to minimize its environmental impact.
Spain	I would stop buying from big companies that don't care about the environment and I would buy local or sustainable products even if they are more expensive.

5. Discussion

The results of this exploratory study provide a general overview of how ordinary citizens understand the main purpose of business, the figure of the entrepreneur, and the notion of ethical or responsible entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the findings shed light on perceptions of how transformation toward more sustainable societies might be achieved—whether through business efforts or individual actions. Participants were invited to openly share their initial thoughts on these topics, frequently employing metaphors and everyday language rather than technical or expert terminology. In this context, as in other studies analyzing citizens' opinions [19–21], conceptual vagueness or unfamiliar expressions are considered valid, since the primary focus is to explore, from a qualitative perspective, how the public conceives of responsibility and understands the role of business within the analyzed European context.

When examining the purpose that ordinary citizens associate with business, the majority of responses aligned with recent policy and the academic literature, which emphasizes the growing responsibility of businesses toward society and the environment [6–9]. Indeed, companies are facing increased demands to integrate environmental, social, and ethical considerations into their strategic and operational models [2–4]. These developments may contribute to a redefinition of entrepreneurship, one that extends beyond its traditional association with profit maximization and wealth creation [10,11,17,22]. Notably, the most frequently mentioned one-word descriptors for business purpose—"growth" and "prosperity"—reflect social, developmental, and long-term collective aspirations that go beyond simple financial accumulation. This suggests that, for most participants, business goals are informed by a common language shaped by public discourse and policy [5,6,9]. Nevertheless, explicitly sustainable terms that portray business as a means for long-term societal or environmental development [15,17] appeared only sporadically in the replies from older respondents, who tended to integrate innovation and social orientation into their definitions of business purpose. Words such as "responsibility" and "community" indicate that, for only a subset of respondents, the main purpose of business is closely connected to the ethical fabric of society. This generational contrast suggests that younger participants may prioritize business growth as a marker of opportunity and personal advancement, whereas older respondents are more likely to embed social and environmental considerations into their understanding of business purpose.

With respect to the perceived obstacles that businesses face in achieving their purposes, our study highlights several structural challenges—including economic pressures, global competition, and political factors. These barriers often remain in tension with citizens' expectations, thereby influencing the perceived feasibility of responsible business practices and sustainable entrepreneurship [15,18,24].

Regarding citizens' imaginaries of the entrepreneur, and consistent with prior research [77,82,85,87], the use of metaphors was intended to elicit how respondents conceptualize entrepreneurs, thus providing deeper insight into cultural and symbolic understandings. The responses suggest a broad conception of entrepreneurship embedded within the collective imagination, offering a rich perspective for understanding public perceptions beyond technical definitions. Predominantly positive metaphors such as “captain,” “gardener,” “lighthouse,” and “bridge-builder” portray the entrepreneur not as an authoritarian or controlling figure, but rather as one who guides, cares, and assumes responsibility, embedded within collective dynamics and a long-term vision. These positive metaphors are consistent with the literature on entrepreneurial legitimacy and symbolic representation [18,31,43], which demonstrates that public judgments of entrepreneurship are often shaped by intuitive, culturally embedded imagery.

Cross-national variations were also evident in the proportion of positive metaphors used to describe entrepreneurs. These patterns may partly reflect the interplay between national and cultural orientation and institutional frameworks [53,54,61]. As noted in previous research, Western and Eastern European contexts differ in how public discourse and policy frame the role of business in society, with Southern European countries (e.g., Spain, Italy) often embedding entrepreneurship within relational and community-based narratives, while Central and Eastern European contexts (e.g., Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia) tend to emphasize competence, efficiency, and rule compliance [56,62,77]. Economic indicators such as GDP per capita and Total Early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) also provide contextual cues: in our sample, countries with higher TEA rates (e.g., Austria, Spain) or stronger recent growth (e.g., Spain, Poland) showed a comparatively higher share of positive metaphors, whereas contexts with lower TEA or slower growth tended to produce more neutral or cautious imagery (see Figure 7). These patterns may also reflect the influential of national and EU-level policy frameworks—such as the Spanish Law 11/28 on Non-Financial Reporting and Diversity and Austria's 2021 naBe Action Plan—which may inform public expectations of entrepreneurship and shape the legitimacy attributed to business practices within each context [53,59,60].

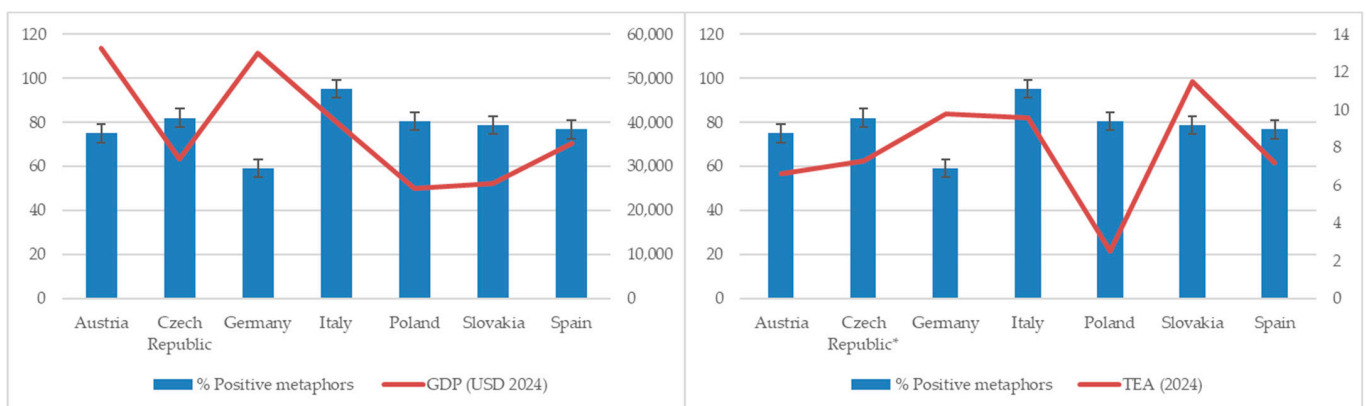


Figure 7. Economic indicators (GDP per capita and TEA rates, 2024) and share of positive metaphors per country. * TEA rate for the Czech Republic refers to the latest available data (2013).

The presence of neutral metaphors reflects a certain ambivalence toward entrepreneurial activity, illustrating both its potential benefits and its distinctiveness compared to other forms of work. References to creativity and hard work, for example, highlight qualities that set entrepreneurship apart. Negative metaphors were rare and typically associated either with the entrepreneur's vulnerability (e.g., "slave to politics") or perceived unethical behavior (e.g., "bandit"). Respondents employing these metaphors expressed concerns about opportunism and superficiality, echoing existing scholarly critiques of sustainability rhetoric [24].

The responses to the question "A good (ethical) entrepreneur is someone who..." further reinforce the symbolic framework identified above. In addition to business and managerial competence—including technical skills and efficiency—participants frequently cited attributes such as care for others, respect, and fairness. These traits reflect a public code of virtue that entrepreneurs are expected to embody, consistent with the notion of community-based legitimacy found in other studies [30,33]. This perspective aligns closely with the responsible entrepreneurship literature, emphasizing stakeholder inclusivity, ethical conduct, and sustainability [32,36]. Similar patterns have been observed in recent research on youth perceptions and public understandings of green business [20,21].

Finally, while participants expressed moral alignment with responsible entrepreneurship and an interest in contributing to social change, their responses also revealed a tension between aspirational values and practical constraints. This tension between moral ideals and real-world limitations is characteristic of the contested and dynamic nature of legitimacy construction [25,49,50]. Participants voiced concerns about inconsistencies between high-minded sustainable or moral purposes and the practices that can realistically be implemented by entrepreneurs and citizens themselves, echoing broader critiques of symbolic corporate social responsibility [24].

6. Conclusions

Over the past two decades, it has become increasingly well-established that traditional business models—once focused primarily on short-term economic value—must be reconsidered, as the integration of sustainable goals now requires businesses to embed sustainability practices across all activities and functions [2,3,10]. Entrepreneurs committed to responsible practices are recognized as contributors to the long-term well-being of communities, rather than merely addressing immediate needs, and are thus proactively aligned with the SDGs, which aim to create a more sustainable world by 2030 [9,10,14]. Furthermore, the growing environmental awareness among citizens is a significant indicator that changes in how business is perceived are underway, and these shifts appear to be irreversible [11,18–20].

This article presents the findings of an exploratory qualitative study designed to capture public perspectives on the transformation of businesses towards more ethical and environmentally sustainable practices. In particular, the study focuses on the views of a sample of European citizens regarding their understanding of entrepreneurship and responsible entrepreneurship.

By adopting a qualitative and constructivist approach, this exploratory study broadens the interpretative lens on responsible entrepreneurship. It explores how ordinary citizens—non-experts, rather than entrepreneurs or key stakeholders—intuitively and symbolically construct the social legitimacy of responsible entrepreneurship through metaphors and situated moral judgments. This reinforces the constructivist perspective that the legitimacy of responsible entrepreneurs is, at least in part, a relational and culturally constructed process, shaped not only by objective knowledge or formal institutions but also by narratives, ethical framing, and social resonance. In this way, our study adds to the understand-

ing of responsible entrepreneurship by highlighting the importance of these cultural and ethical dimensions.

Furthermore, the study reveals that public imaginaries of entrepreneurship vary across European contexts, with cross-national differences that appear to reflect the interplay between cultural orientations, legislative frameworks, and economic conditions such as GDP per capita and TEA. These findings suggest that responsible entrepreneurship is interpreted through lenses shaped not only by individual experience but also by broader institutional and cultural environments.

From a practical perspective, this research underscores the importance of entrepreneurs listening to ordinary citizens not only as consumers or economic actors but as carriers of ethical expectations and as co-constructors of business legitimacy. Accordingly, the findings highlight the need for a more dialogical approach in both entrepreneurship research and practice—one in which the voices of the public are fully integrated into the ongoing definition and assessment of what constitutes responsible business today. Based on our study, we suggest that entrepreneurs and policymakers should pay closer attention to citizens' ethical expectations and symbolic judgments. Efforts to foster responsible entrepreneurship will benefit from greater public dialogue and engagement, particularly in addressing skepticism and aligning business practices with shared social values.

7. Limitations and Future Research Lines

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings and conclusions. Firstly, the research was exploratory and qualitative in nature, aiming to gather in-depth insights rather than to produce generalizable statistical data. The study relied exclusively on a single source of data—narrative and metaphorical responses from participants—collected through a common protocol. No triangulation with additional methods or sources was conducted, which may affect the robustness of the findings as understood in quantitative research. While we acknowledge this as a limitation, it is also consistent with the study's interpretive aim, which sought to understand symbolic constructions of responsible entrepreneurship from the perspective of ordinary citizens, rather than to validate specific constructs or theories [77,84].

From a methodological perspective, it may be argued that the sample was not randomly selected but rather was purposively recruited among ordinary citizens. This may introduce certain biases, and as a result, the responses may not be representative of the broader population; thus, the findings should not be generalized. Such an approach inherently involves challenges related to specificity and potential one-dimensionality, which may not align with the expectations of broadly conceived quantitative entrepreneurship research. Indeed, the use of convenience and network sampling carries the risk of overrepresenting certain groups, as was the case with Generation Z participants in our study. However, beyond this limitation inherent in the chosen sampling method, and as some scholars have noted [84–87], entrepreneurship research is characterized by such breadth that it necessitates multidisciplinary and multi-method approaches. In future research, triangulation of data sources could be considered, for example, combining citizen interviews with focus groups, document analysis, or media representations of entrepreneurship [43,73]. Nonetheless, we believe that our study contributes to a better understanding of how ordinary citizens perceive the ethical and sustainable roles of entrepreneurship. Furthermore, by engaging participants in metaphorical reflection and open-ended reasoning, the research uncovers culturally embedded meanings unlikely to emerge in standardized surveys, thereby complementing perspectives that typically prioritize entrepreneurs or institutional actors.

Another limitation concerns the analytical depth regarding participant diversity. Although demographic data were collected, the analysis did not include a systematic and

in-depth comparison of responses by gender or age group beyond the distinction of Generation Z from others. This constitutes a limitation, particularly in light of recent calls for greater attention to diversity in entrepreneurship research. Future research could build on these insights by examining how cultural, legislative, and economic contexts intersect with gender and generational perspectives, to explore whether younger and older citizens, as well as men or women, within the same cultural setting differ in the attributes they associate with entrepreneurship.

A further limitation relates to the thematic analysis itself—with data coding conducted manually by the authors—and the subjective interpretation employed in this study. Although grounded in established qualitative research guidelines [43], the analysis is inevitably influenced by the researchers' own contextual understanding. Nevertheless, as qualitative researchers, our role is to interpret participants' constructions, and reflexivity regarding our own position is both necessary and relevant, since no research is entirely free from the influence of the researcher's perspective (e.g., in the prioritization of hypotheses).

Finally, while this study acknowledges that different legislative frameworks can influence public appreciation of responsible entrepreneurship [56–58], it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of such measures across all countries in the sample—a task that would require an extensive comparative review beyond the scope of this paper. Future research could incorporate a systematic mapping of national and regional policies, including the examination of specific legislative frameworks, to assess their potential influence on entrepreneurship and public perceptions, following previous works in this area [55–57]. Such an approach could offer a more complete understanding of how institutional environments shape the legitimacy of responsible entrepreneurship, and we encourage further studies to advance in this line of inquiry.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the present study offers valuable contributions by providing a nuanced account of ordinary citizens' understandings of responsible entrepreneurship. It also lays the groundwork for future research with larger and more representative samples, including quantitative validation of emerging themes related to citizen expectations and commitments regarding the SDGs and a more responsible economy. Moreover, as noted earlier, future research could address these limitations by incorporating systematic analyses of gender and age differences, as well as broadening the research to explore the influence of macro-level and historical factors, thereby providing deeper insights into European diversity and public imaginaries of entrepreneurship. For instance, future studies could examine the symbolic and narrative differences observed across countries through systematically theorized cross-cultural frameworks that transcend the historical West–East division often noted in European entrepreneurship studies [21,53,54,62,77,82], potentially using a mixed-methods approach that integrates narrative and statistical perspectives. In doing so, further research could advance a more culturally grounded understanding of how responsible entrepreneurship is perceived, imagined, and morally evaluated by citizens across diverse contexts—an understanding that is increasingly relevant in shaping more legitimate and responsible entrepreneurial futures.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization N.T.; methodology, formal analysis, T.H. and N.T.; writing—original draft preparation, N.T.; writing—review and editing, T.H. and N.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no direct external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study as it was conducted as part of a university course on business administration at the University of Huelva (Spain). The study involved no intervention, no collection of sensitive data, and posed no risk to participants and all participants gave verbal and voluntary consent.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study, whose opinions were only considered anonymously.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: We thank the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions during the review process of this paper. We are also grateful to those who assisted with the interviews for their work. The first author gratefully acknowledges the Department of Economics at Sophia University (Tokyo, Japan) for the invitation to its Visiting Researchers and Faculty Program from overseas during July–August 2023, which enabled a research stay and fostered a new collaboration network with researchers and faculty members at Sophia University.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Illustrative Categorization of Metaphors About the Figure of the Entrepreneur by Country and Valance

Country	Valance	Example of Metaphor	Interpretation Summary
Austria	Positive	A captain guiding a small ship	Responsible leadership, guidance; the entrepreneur steers and protects the venture and its people.
Austria	Neutral	A puzzle solver	Analytical ability; resolving complex issues without strong positive or negative moral connotation.
Austria	Negative	A person balancing on a rope	Risk, precariousness; highlights instability and vulnerability in entrepreneurial activity.
Czech R.	Positive	A sculptor, shaping ideas	Creativity and transformation; brings abstract ideas into tangible forms.
Czech R.	Neutral	A chameleon	Adaptability; changing roles and behaviors depending on the environment, without clear moral connotation.
Czech R.	Negative	A gambler, betting everything	Risk, recklessness; decision-making marked by chance and imprudence.
Germany	Positive	As oil in economic engine	Essential, facilitator of progress; makes the system work.
Germany	Neutral	A person on his/her own	Independence, self-reliance; no clear positive or negative evaluation.
Germany	Negative	A gambler	High risk, imprudence, reliance on luck.
Italy	Positive	A sailor, always ready for the storm	Resilience, adaptability, preparedness for challenges.
Italy	Negative	A tightrope walker, always in precarious balance	Instability, risk, constant danger of falling, precarious balance.
Poland	Positive	A chef creating a new recipe	Creativity, combination of resources, value creation.
Poland	Neutral	A striker on a football team	Goal-oriented, competitive, focus on results.
Poland	Negative	A bandit	Opportunism, law-breaking, unethical.
Slovakia	Positive	A teacher inspiring other	Guiding, educating, positive influence.
Slovakia	Neutral	A gamer solving puzzles	Analytical skills, problem-solving, perseverance.
Spain	Positive	A programmer debugging society	Problem-solving, innovation, societal impact.
Spain	Neutral	A Scout preparing for challenges	Preparation, anticipation, readiness.

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