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# The contextual understandings of eating: A practice theoretical approach to Swedish business travellers' meals

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## ABSTRACT

Business travellers are a significant component of the hospitality industry and range from the managerial to the operational level of the firms they work for. These different positions come with different contextualised reasons for engaging in eating situations or meals when travelling. Research has begun to map out the activities related to those meals, although the sense-making and organisational aspects are still largely unexplored. Thus, this article aims to elucidate the organisation of business travellers' meal practices. The study is theoretically framed within Schatzki's social practice theory and semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine business travellers of different ages, working in different sectors, and at different levels within their firms. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. It was found that the meals were organised around, and understood through, two themes; *significant social interactions* and *meaningful material properties*, that was related to the teleoaffective, organising, structure of the practice. The interactions described in the first theme were mainly driven by how the interactions were perceived within the group the business traveller represented, as well as interactions between the group and the restaurant staff. Moreover, business travellers could find themselves in the role of acting both as a host and a guest within the same context. In the second theme, the material properties that influenced the understanding, and thus the sensemaking of the meal were focused on the physical environment, such as the interior of the restaurant, the food and drinks, as well as the economic circumstances of eating out. As illustrated through business travellers' meals, the study mainly contributes to our understanding of the contextuality of meals as contexts and how those are experienced as good meals.

## 1. Introduction

Business travellers are a significant part of the hospitality industry. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth<sup>1</sup> reported that business travellers' expenditure accounts for a substantial part of the Swedish domestic hospitality market with 52% of the occupancy rate of Swedish hotels in 2018 were rooms bought by the corporate sector. Meals while travelling for business are an important, but under-studied, part of the everyday life of the business traveller. Such meals are taken for many different reasons, e.g., lunches with potential customers, a quick bite between meetings or at a conference, dinners with colleagues after a day's work, or at a gas station in the middle of the countryside on the way to the next work destination, all depending on the situation and the specific type of traveller. Business travellers are frequently, and often narrowly, represented as being part of a highly autonomous workforce consisting of senior management and professionals (Aguilera,

2008; Gustafson, 2012). However, such a limited conceptualisation of the business traveller is not transferable to the business traveller group as a whole, since the group also includes people holding a wide variety of jobs at the operational level, e.g. technicians, specialists, or construction workers who all travel as part of their work.

Work-related travel occurs for many different reasons and, depending on the scope of travel, entails different levels of organisational involvement (Davidson and Cope, 2003). Travel related to meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) is commonly characterised by considerable organisational involvement. This kind of business travel usually involves other actors in connection with the organisational aspects of the trip, for example, travel agencies, meeting planners, or convention bureaus. MICE-related travel could be contrasted with individual business travel, which is depicted as travel with less organisational involvement and where a plethora of individual expertise is made visible (Davidson and Cope, 2003). It is within the

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scope of this individual business travel that, for example, computer networks are maintained, houses and roads are constructed, meetings between customers and suppliers take place, knowledge is disseminated, and research data are gathered. Furthermore, the different levels of organiser involvement present different opportunities, and reasons, for the traveller to engage with meals. Travel occurring within the MICE-segment often includes meals as part of a package deal – leaving the individual business traveller with little to no say in what food is going to be offered, or with whom the meal will be had. By contrast, activities with a low level of organisational involvement leave such meal-related options open to the individual business traveller.

Meal-related activities engaged in while being at a business journey destination are inherently different from the corresponding activities being performed at home (Sundqvist, 2020; Sundqvist et al., 2020a, 2020b). Engaging in, as well as organising meals in the context of a business journey, thus add to the complexity of everyday life for the business traveller; something that already requires much strategizing to balance work and family (Lassen, 2010; Saarenpää, 2018). Contrary to the glamorous public perception of the business travellers' lives, they consider their work-life as stressful and complex due to factors such as the need to manage work-space on the go (Brown and O'Hara, 2003); difficulties following diets (Lee and McCool, 2008); increased alcohol consumption (Gustafson, 2012; Rogers and Reilly, 2000); and feeling negligent toward the family because of their long working hours (Gustafson, 2014; Saarenpää, 2018).

Business travellers are known to formulate various strategies to handle the stress related to the spending of extended time away from home (Gustafson, 2012; Lassen, 2010; Saarenpää, 2018). Thus, as meals are an important part of everyday life, the management of those meals in a less-known environment, and where individuals have less control than in their own habitual space, could add to the stress they experience. The planning that is involved e.g., ambitions to minimise time spent away from home, planning meals in relation to work, and minimising the experience of stress resulting from travelling, are aspects that differentiate the business traveller from the leisure traveller. The leisure traveller, operating on a different basis, is described as someone exploring of other cultures, using meals as a means of exploration (Mak et al., 2012; Quan and Wang, 2004; Williams, 1995). Consequently, business travellers, and their meals, need to be understood with regard to the distinctive context of business travel.

Meals are culturally significant to individuals. At a culturally abstract level in the sense of what is edible and what is not, when to eat what, and with whom to eat where (Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas, 1972; Fischler, 1988, 2011). Meals are also distributed differently throughout the day, depending on the cultural context of the meals, that is, the patterning of meals which stipulates what food is culturally fit to eat at certain times could differ between cultures (Fjellström, 2004; Mäkelä et al., 1999). Furthermore, there is also an important nutritional aspect to the meal, regarding what is perceived as healthy to eat, and to what extent (Fjellström, 2004; Oltersdorf et al., 1999). Moreover, the notion of a meal is multifaceted and could be understood through different perspectives, e.g. as a social context in which human agents eat and drink together (Edwards and Gustafsson, 2008; Gustafsson et al., 2006; Hansen et al., 2005); a tangible product that could be traded or consumed (Ekström, 1990; Mäkelä, 2000); a phenomenon made up of socially constructed and interchangeable factors which would be experientially interpreted by participants in the context (Sundqvist and Walter, 2017); or a form of art (Koponen and Niva, 2020). Acting within the meal as a context could be understood as the performance of social meal practices. These practices are found at different levels of abstraction in social life, and the actions they produce are co-constitutive of the practice itself.

Meals, in general, are complex in the sense that they function as an intersection of social, cultural, and health features of human life. Knowing more about how certain groups make sense of their contextualised meals becomes important as a means to gain a concrete understanding of how those abstract complexities are understood by the

participants in that context. Such knowledge could, with business travellers, for example, have societal benefits such as the possibility of being able to pinpoint what motivates different choices in different contexts, what is contextually correct as a business traveller and what might make meals add to perceived stress. Such knowledge could also have managerial benefits for the hospitality industry, as it might facilitate the creation of better-value options for customers.

In this article, the notion of the meal will be used in terms of this aforementioned broad view, as we are interested in understanding the special conditions surrounding business travellers' meals. Thus, this study aims to elucidate the organisation of business travellers' meal practices.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Social practice theory has been argued as a relevant approach to the study of meals since it moves from the individual and focuses instead on the social organisation of everyday life, thus helping researchers to gain a better understanding of the particularity of certain meals (Neuman, 2019).

Currently, the notions of practice, social practice, and practice theory are widely used within the social sciences. However, this terminology is mystifying, to a degree, as there are numerous practice theories with their own intrinsic and ontologically different takes on the notion of social practices. This study is framed within social practice theory as it is conceived within the works of social theorist and philosopher Theodore Schatzki. How the notion of practice is presented within the works of Schatzki has developed over the past two decades and the content of the concept has thus changed through its elaboration (Schatzki, 1996, 2002, 2005, 2012, 2019). In this article, we use the statement of Schatzki (2019, p. 28) that "practices are open-ended, spatial-temporal sets of organized doings and sayings" as a foundation.

Open-endedness is a central quality of the concept of social practice and describes the quantitative aspect of performances, the doings and sayings, that are central to the practice. That a practice is open-ended denotes that it is never the product of a specific nor finite number of activities (Schatzki, 2012). As such, a feature of the practice is that new activities, or performances, could be incorporated and thus drive it forward through time, making the practice evolve (Schatzki, 2019). To exemplify this evolution, meal practices have developed over time as new ways of engaging with the meal have been established and new materialities have been made available. Material conditions, such as available technology, often drive this evolution as can be seen in the concept of take-out. Ordering food at the restaurant, asking for it to be packed to take away from the restaurant and eaten somewhere else, later developed to incorporate other means of contacting the restaurant such as telephoning. Furthermore, today there are specialised online platforms where the customer can place an order that is then relayed to the restaurant as well as a delivery service, removing direct restaurant communication from the performance altogether. The aforementioned activities are still available in the practice and, as such, work, as an example of how practices have evolved.

The practice being spatio-temporal or, as alternatively termed, spatially-temporally dispersed, indicates that practices unfold over time and exist in, real, physical space (Schatzki, 2019). It further relates to the driving of practices through time, that is, as new activities are added to the practice, as in the case with take-out food mentioned above, its temporal dimension extends (Schatzki, 2002). To illustrate, there are many activities that make up meal practices, such as scanning the menu, ordering, testing the wine, engaging in conversation, eating, drinking, and so on. All of these activities occur over time and do so while relating to the same practice. Moreover, they occur at specific places within the realm of physical space, often at a restaurant. The extension of a practice through time might also lead to the establishment of new practices, or practice bundles, e.g. food waste management practices for lunch left-overs (Laasko, 2017).

These aforementioned notions, or concepts, relate to qualities of the activities, actions, or doings and sayings, which make up social practices. Doings and sayings are, in a mundane sense, easily discernible as what people do and what people say. However, in theory things are seldom as mundane as they first seem. Schatzki (1996) was initially vague as to what constitutes a doing and a saying. Instead, he tended to focus on the linkages or organizations of doings and sayings into the activities that constitute a practice. Notwithstanding that focus, Schatzki (2002, p. 72) did elaborate on doings and sayings as being bodily by stating that “[b]odily doings and sayings are actions that people directly perform [...] not by way of doing something else.” Doings, in this sense, are to be understood as bodily movements that in themselves carry no meaning, such as tapping the keys of a keyboard, whisking, or jumping. Sayings, he states, are a subset of doings in the way that sayings are doings that say something about something. Sayings are however not dependent on language, even though the relationship is close. Waving, pointing, or shrugging are all means of communicating something: hence, they are sayings. Schatzki (2019, p.28) further stated that “a doing is always the doing of something” ... [and that] ... “a doing is the performing of an action” he further conceptualizes sayings as discursive doings. So, these doings and sayings are linked, or organised, into a nexus that constitutes the practice. In his various works, this organisation of actions has been Schatzki’s focus.

According to Schatzki (1996) this linkage consists of understandings, rules, and teleoaffective structures. Later, he split the notion of understandings into practical understandings and general understandings (Schatzki, 2002, 2019). Practical understandings mean the knowledge of how to perform actions that are the correct ones to perform in certain situations as well as knowing the meaning behind these actions. In the context of restaurant meals, understanding that seeking eye contact with service staff indicates a wish to call them over, or putting cutlery at a specific position on the plate shows service staff that you are ready for the next course are such practical understandings. It is the same understanding that informs these actions, that also informs the service staff that they are being called over.

General understandings are, however, understandings in a more abstract sense (Schatzki, 2012), as they encompass understanding such things as beauty or value. In a restaurant setting, general understandings could relate to what is perceived as good taste. By rules, Schatzki (2019) refer to explicitly expressed instructions or directives and includes both the spoken and the written form. He is clear on the point that unformulated rules, even though they might be taken account of, are not treated as rules within the frame of his theory of practice.

Last is the teleoaffective structure which containing the end-project-task combinations of a practice, which have both a teleological and an affective dimension (Schatzki, 2012). The teleological dimension of the notion informs normative actions performed within an activity, as part of a project, to reach a certain end (Schatzki, 2012). The affective dimension, likewise, incorporate acceptable emotions as drivers for action. Normativity is described by Schatzki (2002, 2012) as what the carrier of a practice ought to do, or what is deemed as acceptable to do within the end-project-task structure of the practice. To reach the end of securing a deal with a new customer, bringing the customer to a fancy restaurant could be a project, made up of the tasks of contacting the customer, booking the restaurant, securing funds from management, and organising guest transport. The chain of activities, leading to the end, is being informed by the teleoaffective structure of business travelling practices, where the teleological dimension of the notion is more in evidence than the affective.

In short, as Lammi (2018, p. 43) states:

A practice is a specific context in which one needs practical understanding to participate in, and in which one follow rules and performs activities in line with the acceptable range of end-project-task combinations and their conjoined affectivity, while the activity itself is tinted by beliefs and values.

However, as practices are carried out in the real world, they are

dependent on the materiality of the world. Specifically, as Schatzki (2019, p. 34) puts it, “the practice plenum is the total nexus of practices and material arrangements”. He further argues that the material arrangement should be understood as the arrangement of humans, organisms, artefacts, and natural phenomena, and that none of these is mutually exclusive. Practices are not carried out separately from the arrangements. They are, rather, part of a practice-material mesh, in which practices are determinative of, and dependent on, the arrangements (Schatzki, 2005). These practice-material meshes overlap, or interlink with each other forming larger nets of bundled practice-arrangements. For example, cooking practices and serving practices carried on in the context of the restaurant kitchen and dining hall are bundled up in the aggregated practice-arrangement bundle of the restaurant practice. The restaurant could in this case be, what Schatzki (1996) calls, an activity place space: that is, a place where specific activities take place. The restaurant, in this case, would be a place to work, to eat, to meet, and so forth.

By applying the notions of understandings and teleoaffectivities of this theoretical framework to the context of business travellers’ meals, as part of a practice-material arrangement, we strive to further knowledge of how such meals are understood and made sense of by the travellers as carriers of their practices.

### 3. Method

The data for this study were part of a larger study (Sundqvist 2020) and were gathered over a two-month period in early 2018. Interviewees were recruited from a pool of respondents who had participated in a questionnaire on meal-related actions while on business trips (Sundqvist et al., 2020b). The interviewees here had expressed an interest in future participation. These were augmented by others recruited from established social networks. The target group for interviews were individuals who regularly travelled as a part of their job and had done so for consecutive years. This means they were not only people who travelled to do business in the sense of buying or selling products or services, since there was inclusion of those who travelled as part of their job e.g. academics, technicians, or educators. Furthermore, this sample also included individuals who had changed their workplace and did not travel as much as they recently used to. The criterion for inclusion was that the respondent regularly travelled for business, this regularity was not linked to any specific frequency of travel.

In-depth semi-structured interviews with nine business travellers were conducted and influenced by an existential-phenomenological approach (Thompson et al., 1989). The interviews *focused* on the interviewee’s lived experiences of the meals they had while being away on business trips to capture the sense-making of those events. All interviews were initiated by the same question: Could you, in your own words, describe in as much detail as possible, a meal you remember while travelling for work. Based on the direction the interview was taking, probes were used to keep the interview centred on the research question (Edwards and Holland, 2013; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014). Where it did not occur naturally, the interview was guided through four different themes. If the interviewee’s initial response was regarding a positive meal experience, they were asked to talk about a contrasting negative experience after the initial account was given, or vice versa. The second theme concerned meals that were eaten alone and in the company of others. This theme was approached in the same way as the first: all interviews covered positive and negative meal experience while being alone and in company with others.

Interviews were held at a location chosen by the respondent, either close to their home office or at a destination for their travel. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 min, with an average of 52 min, and were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim using the CAQ-DAS package MAXQDA 2018.

3.1. Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted by applying the guidelines set by Braun and Clarke (2006) using MAXQDA 2018. The process of analysis was an iterative endeavour moving between the data set, the codes, and the themes, grouping, re-coding and constructing the themes and their subthemes. Initially, the transcribed interviews were read, and re-read, to create a familiarity with the data. To establish trustworthiness, the authors then coded the first two interviews separately and had meetings discussing the coding to evaluate if the codes generated were coherent. After the initial two interviews were coded, the rest of the interviews were coded by the first author. The collaborative process was re-established in the process of thematising the data. Codes were grouped, and named, according to their resemblance or differences, and reformulated into subthemes. These subthemes were then grouped into themes: (see Table 1 for an example of the various steps of the analysis process). During the entire process, codes were checked against the data to verify the empirical rigour of the analysis.

4. Ethics

During every step of the study, measures were taken to follow the ethical guidelines established by the Swedish Research Council. All the participants were informed of the general aim of the study and were explicitly told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time they wished. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study. All data have been thoroughly anonymised to guarantee participant confidentiality. In the results, excerpts from the interviews indicate the respondent’s age, sex, and job title.

5. Results

The thematic analysis resulted in the formation of two themes (see Table 2). The themes and their related subthemes are further described and contextualised through indicative quotations where themes are presented in headings and subthemes constitute the subheadings.

5.1. The importance of social interaction

During data analysis, the importance of social interaction was identified as a major theme since it was found on multiple occasions in

**Table 1**  
Example of the coding process from data extract to theme.

Data extract	Codes	Sub-theme	Theme
And then, something I remember as very irritating was that he didn't act like what I imagine a professional restauranteur should act like, he was like a friend with the people who sat there. You could hear him through the kitchen doors like 'what the hell', just yelling, 'what the heck [NAME] did you horse win yesterday', and we were just sitting there, and he was such a character, like a fast-food joint guy.	Acting as a friend, not a professional. Engaged in everyday conversation with the guests	Interaction between the staff and the business travellers and their meal companions	The importance of social interaction

**Table 2**

Result of the thematic analysis showing major themes and their related subthemes.

Themes	The importance of social interaction	Meaningful material properties
Subthemes	Interaction between business travellers and their meal companions Interaction between the staff and the business travellers and their meal companions Performing the dual role of host and guest	Physical environment of eating The knowledge and craft of the staff as exemplified by the food and beverages The economic conditions of eating out

all the interviews. It appeared in relation to a many parts of the meal context; e.g. when sharing a meal makes the food taste better, having company functions as a motivational factor to visit a restaurant, or when being greeted by the staff sets a frame for the whole context. Within this theme, three subthemes were identified in the analysis; interaction between business travellers and their meal companions; interaction between the staff and the business travellers and their meal companions; and performing the dual role of host and guest.

**The interaction between the business travellers and their meal companions** Social interactions affected the meal experience in many ways, such as creating a more pleasant environment, motivating the traveller to go out and eat, or eating better food. Having someone to share meals with seemed important and facilitated restaurant visits. Furthermore, eating with someone appeared to produce a more pleasant atmosphere in contrast to eating alone. Eating alone caused a sense of meaninglessness in relation to the meal. One respondent felt he sometimes lacked someone to share his experience of good food with:

What was strange was that I couldn't share this, this food experience, with someone but rather was something I experienced in loneliness and, of course, it became faded when I described it later. – Purchasing Manager in his 40s.

Although not specifically asked about, feelings of loneliness were a prominent issue in the respondents’ narratives. Loneliness was a recurring pattern found throughout the analysis. Another respondent told us how she approached the meal while being alone and how this feeling affected her:

It's a feeling that creeps up and makes itself known, that there's no one there, close to you. Perhaps I eat faster and go out to run some errands. I don't engage in conversation unless I phone someone. I'm not the person who just sits down with someone I don't know and start to talk. I rather eat alone in peace and walk away. – Business Advisor in her 30s.

The importance of social interaction was not only mentioned in a general, abstract, experiential sense but was also expressed in more concrete terms - as in the experience of meals together with specific others, such as colleagues, customers, or providers. Social interaction between business travellers and their meal companions would form a context in which disengagement from work-life was experienced and performed. The meal was, furthermore, conceived as being a platform for social bonding. In that way, the context of the meal functioned less as a means to acquire food than as a means to facilitate social interaction. Within this context, participants could exchange experiences or create bonds. The meal was also seen as a context of mutual respect between individuals and between cultures, a respondent described positively-charged social interaction between peers:

Well, it is during these moments that we actually can talk about private matters and not just work. Even though some work-related issues do get mixed in, we can talk about everything during the dinners we have outside of the factories. – IT-Specialist in his 30s.

However, the personal and sometimes private social interaction between business associates was, in other cases, experienced as something unprofessional and unwanted, as in this quote when a respondent

described how he had a dilemma while trying a new type of food. The respondent had described how he was introduced to poached cod, served with salsify purée and *beurre noisette*, which was a new experience for him. The conflict between not letting go of the professional self and the personal experience had remained with him. He wanted to talk about his experience but deemed it inappropriate.

When I travel, I always try to stay, so to speak, professional. So, I do not tell so much about myself, unless it is absolutely necessary. – Purchasing Manager in his 40s.

Social interactions could in some cases also bring about conflicting ideas that needed to be handled by the individual business traveller. Handling the situation could lead to acting against one's convictions to be part of the social group:

I usually want to have something light, something in the lines of salad. However, many of my colleagues want the steak. It should be steak houses, it should be French fries. This is not my kind of food, but it is the kind of food I need to tag along to eat. When we decide what to eat, I'm not the most outspoken person. There are those who are way more influential than I am. But well, I am the only one in the gang to want the fresh food. But then, afterwards, I can feel disappointed with myself for having eaten food like that, food that I actually didn't want. – Educator in her 40s.

The activity of visiting a steakhouse with her colleagues impacted her in such a negative way that she experienced disappointment with herself but the social importance of the situation was so strong that participation prevailed.

**The interaction between the staff and the business travellers with meal companions** In many cases, this was discussed as something that could make or break a meal. Staff awareness of guest needs, and the perceived capability of staff performing their craft, was explicitly mentioned as a factor of importance for the meal. A wide variety of staff behaviour was considered appropriate by the respondents, such as staying in the background, providing prompt service, being welcoming or making the guests feel 'seen'. One of the respondents reflected on how the service and treatment tended to vary by what day in the week they visited, highlighting the importance of consistently good hospitality:

When you go out in the middle of the week, I can sense that there are two different mindsets in the restaurants. When you go out during the weekend the staff will be a bit more oriented towards families and since you pay with your own money it feels like the staff is more attentive. When you go out in the middle of the week, you get the feeling that ... "Ah here is a delegation of professionals coming to eat." It was that feeling we got. However, it was sorted out over time. In this particular case though, the reason I remember it, was that the waitress was a bit nonchalant, and I think that if you think about a meal experience, everything needs to be included. It's about how you are greeted in the foyer, what you see when you enter the restaurant, how you are shown to the table. Do you feel welcomed and cared for? Do they ask you any questions about how you want to sit or if you have any special requests, when you are a group that is? There are, perhaps, a lot of things going on in my mind about what I expect to happen. – Sales Manager in his 40s

In other cases, too much attention could also irritate:

A couple of years ago this restaurant had a fine-dining concept and it felt like the staff exaggerated too much. They didn't know how to do this in a correct way so it was probably easier for them to amplify everything they did. Constant attendance, constant questions about how we were. What they really did was disrupt conversation at the table. – Business Advisor in his 40s.

In this sense, service staff could help business travellers achieve a positive meal experience by being attentive, prompt, and knowledgeable. Whereas staff considered inattentive, nonchalant, rude, or over the top, were part of their negative meal experiences. In some cases, it was important for business travellers that restaurant staff considered their

wishes. This was especially so when they brought guests of their own to restaurants to represent their business. In these cases, business travellers were acting as a host while still being a guest at the restaurant.

**Performing the dual role of being host and guest** When performing a dual role like this, business travellers not only fill the role of organiser, they are simultaneously active participants. Also, in the context of organised meetings, they do not wholly embrace the role of guest as they are not entirely receivers of hospitality. Acting as a host within this limbo brings an added complexity to the role of being a business traveller within the context of the meal e.g. the choice of a restaurant depends on who the guests are as well as on the meal's purpose. Restaurant choice might be thought of as a trivial aspect of the meal but knowledge about what is considered a good meal within the specific context is important. This was illustrated by one respondent who had a negative experience with a waitress who didn't deliver the required service:

So, finally, we found out that it was this lady, or this girl who was a bit more nonchalant, who was going to look after for our table. First, I had to fix the seating around the table and then I asked if we could have an aperitif. It was not like she asked if we wanted it, I had to get it done myself. I asked for one bottle, she insisted we had to get two. Ehm, No? We don't have to get two, because we don't want a lot, we just want a small toast before we get to dine. When we received our glasses, from just one bottle, I even complemented her but that didn't change her mood at all. I felt that I had to help with the service myself, because after all I didn't want my guests around the table to have a bad experience. In the end I actually had to ask to get her replaced, and after that everything became much better. – Sales Manager in his 40s.

This respondent had to actively step in and make changes within the dining context to get it to fit the image of a good business dinner. The role performed here is that of being a guest, expecting a certain level of hospitality, but at the same time being the host, trying to deliver a certain level of hospitality to guests. This type of 'corrective' behaviour is a consequence of how the business traveller interprets the mood of the guests, as they are also, in many cases, their customers. This meeting with customers, as guests at a restaurant, adds to the complexity of the business travellers' meals since it involves both a dual role and the possibility to lose situational control if not paying attention. This was exemplified by one respondent:

A lot of my travels are like this, I am like a hostess, or whatever you want to call it, organiser of the event. So, I am like, a customer to the restaurant, but I also want my customers to have a great evening. [...] I always, as soon as I arrive, go in to the kitchen and present myself and check that everything is in order, that we have the same information. I am a control freak when it comes to this, since I want my guests to have a good time. Like, if I got 30 guests I don't want the restaurant to have prepared for 20. I mean it has happened before. – Sales Manager in her 30s

This respondent felt it was important to engage with restaurant staff to secure the anticipated level of service for guests. This further exemplifies how the meal could be treated as a working arena even while participating in it as a guest. However, the main goal for business travellers is to cater to the business represented rather than for themselves within the eating situation. These eating situations do not exist in a material vacuum but do take place in a world full of material aspects: these contextually signify importance in the meal setting.

## 5.2. Meaningful material properties

The second theme identified during the analysis was that of material properties as mediators of meaning: through its sub-themes, this appeared frequently in the data. Three sub-themes were identified relating to the materiality of the meals; physical environment of eating, the knowledge and craft of the staff as exemplified by the food and

beverages, and the economic conditions of eating out.

**The physical environment of eating** As a major aspect of the meal, the physical environment of eating, was given importance at various levels such as, where the restaurant was located in the country or within a city, the placement of groups within the restaurant or even the placement of individuals around the table. The place was often associated with what could be expected of the meal, in terms of food quality. It was, furthermore, mentioned as something that could enhance the experience of the meal: for example, when placement within the restaurant, relative to other guests, was perceived as good. How objects were organised in the place-space were also signifiers of order. Good order signified that the staff knew what they were doing whereas, for one respondent, a lack of order signified ambiguity:

So, when we arrived it took us some time to get in touch with the staff and it was pretty unclear who it was we were supposed to talk to. There was no clear spot to walk up to, like a line, a sign, or a desk. A desk is a common thing; you can just walk up to and it is pretty explicit. I like that, I like order, and I think it is very important to think about that since it has to do with the customers. – Sales Manager in his 40s.

The interior of a restaurant could also be seen as part of the meal in the way that it connects the sense of the region with the rest of the experience. One respondent illustrates this when asked to elaborate on a meal experience in Champagne:

Oh, [it was] classic! 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century villa, or more like a pavilion, a castle pavilion. Gold on the walls of course, gold paint. Classic round, good, restaurant chairs with arm rests, large tables. Well, luxurious interior if you like. Chairs and walls in colours that matched. A very luxurious representation restaurant. [...] Very Champagne basically. – Lecturer in his 60s

Thus, the place of the meal was important to guests but equal attention was given to the food and beverages served.

Another aspect of eating environment materiality was the feeling of being comfortable. This was sometimes expressed as voluntary social isolation, as in the case where an individual did not want to leave the hotel, or even the room. Sometimes, buying food and bringing it back to the room was best for them. One respondent reasoned like this when prompted on why she ate in her hotel room:

I do believe it has to do with being cheap, like, you're not supposed to go down to the restaurant ... but well then, after all, I've been meeting with people the whole day, since I work with education. So, just being able to land and relax and don't be surrounded by all that noise. – Educator in her 40s.

The same desire to spend the evening alone was outlined by another respondent who did not feel inclined to leave the hotel at all after a day of work:

Well, usually my choice, nights like these when I'm out travelling a lot, when I'm going to grab something to eat, is that I never leave the hotel. I've been driving for a long time, and I've often worked a long day, so I usually feel like, no, I can't stand to go out somewhere, it has to be the hotel. Oh, well, but I'm tired, I've driven myself to be tired, emotionally, so I just want to have a calm and nice hour. So, I spend that time in the restaurant of the hotel before I go back to my room to sleep. It should be simple, it doesn't need to be so damn pretentious. It should be good food and a calm environment, just fine. – Sales Manager in her 30s.

For this respondent, the voluntary isolation, and simplicity was also projected to the food and not just to the environment. She was not searching for an extraordinary experience but rather wanted everything to be "just fine", or good enough.

**The knowledge and craft of the staff as exemplified by into food and beverages** While visiting restaurants, the food and beverages sought by business travellers could be seen as an expression of staff knowledge and craft. That is, when respondents spoke of food, or food and drink combinations, they referred to the skills of the staff expressed in material form. Food was mentioned as something that should be

aesthetically pleasing, an important part of their daily routine, or something fundamental to sustain a healthy lifestyle. There was also an outspoken critique of the general food offering at restaurants, such as the lack of "real food", eating out as a necessary evil, restaurant food being a bad compromise compared to a home-cooked meal, and that it was hard to eat healthy food while travelling. One respondent who had experienced a large variety of lunch and dinner offerings put it like this:

I'm usually very satisfied with lunches! Lunch is usually reminiscent of home cooked traditional food, which is what I generally aim to get. However, this type of food is very hard to come by during the evenings, which leads to you usually having to order *à la carte* and, to be honest, I'm not really interested in that. I'm so tired of French fries, but that is usually what is on the menu. – Maintenance operations manager in his 50s.

This respondent was very satisfied with getting an energy-dense and filling traditional meal: by contrast, others expressed their concerns regarding the quality of the lunch offerings:

When I'm out with customers, say a store manager or a head of department, I usually find the lunch offerings rather poor. I don't want to pay premium for something that is half-arsed. Instead, I don't take people out and usually bring a green smoothie and some boiled eggs with me. That way I know what I get and it feels better, and more economical. – Sales manager in her 30s.

This sales manager experienced a lack of quality in the lunch offerings generally, and so she developed new strategies to satisfy her needs both financially and in health terms. She was also changing the way she met with her customers as she no longer took store managers out to lunch, due to the fear of being served something "half-arsed".

**The economic conditions of eating out** While travelling for work, the economic conditions of eating out functioned as a kind of emancipation from everyday life for some respondents. Where the *per diem* expenses could be used together with hotel subsidies given to frequent visitors taking part in their loyalty program, something extra could be achieved:

During those days, when I was travelling a lot, I could feel that, well, I deserve this. Now I'm not going to have the usual, I'm going to have a nice entrecote at that fancy place. Or, it was pretty common that I used the voucher from the hotel and added from my *per diem*. If I wanted sole for example, it was pretty expensive, but I used the voucher and just added a bit more myself. This was common practice. Now a days, when I travel more sparsely, I tend to think even more about the quality of food. – Business advisor in his 40s.

This usage of *per diem* expenses, and economic issues in general, were topics discussed in many different contexts related to travelling alone and in the company of others. In some cases, such as representation meals, economic factors were of little concern since employers tended to cover the expenses. However, when the travellers were out dining with colleagues or dining alone, cost was mentioned as a common issue. One of the respondents outlined how he had created strategies related to the economic aspects of meals and to the food offerings available while travelling:

Well, the *per diem* expenses have gotten so low over the years that it is hard to actually break even if you want to eat something decent. Usually it lands in some quick meal somewhere, which is rather boring. When you are out travelling it would be nice to actually experience the [local food] culture. In some countries, like U.S.A. it's pretty easy to find some local shack that is pretty cheap, in Beijing however, it's really hard to find food that is affordable. It usually lands in fine dining, unless you find some suspicious small restaurant. [...] It's not easy, you have to scan your surroundings pretty well. On most of my travels I'm very careful about the breakfast that is served, because I like to plan to survive on just the breakfast until pretty late in the evening when we get back to the hotel, so I can eat dinner there as well. – IT-Specialist in his 30s

The unwillingness to risk eating something perceived as bad, from the local Chinese cuisine, made him formulate strategies on how to survive the day on just breakfast from the hotel. To get something he perceived as good would equate to visiting a fine dining restaurant, which would be too costly. Being able to eat something that not only tasty but also feels good could be considered part of the traveller’s need to be comfortable.

6. Discussion

Two major themes occurred in data relating to the understanding, and thus the organisation, of business travellers’ meals. The first major theme involved the social aspect of the meal; the second, the physical entities that influenced the performativity of business travellers in the meal context. Furthermore, three distinct social contexts were described by respondents, which were all informed by their intrinsic understandings and consequently inherent organisation. Those contexts were eating alone, eating with colleagues, and eating with customers. Schatzki (2002, 2012) stated that each practice contains an acceptable range of end-project-task combinations: however, those combinations could vary in relation to the social context. As shown in the results, the different social contexts seem to be organised around different ends and thus generate different projects and their subsequent tasks (see Table 3). The discussion will be organised around these social contexts and the identified themes will be related to each of them.

*Eating alone* at a restaurant was organised by understandings that drove the experience in both positive and negative directions. Negative associations of eating alone are found in many cultures (Fischler, 2011). Some, like Baudrillard (1989, p. 15) have even gone a step further to state that “sadder than the beggar is the man who eats alone in public.” There is a clearly expressed affective dimension, informed by the teleoaffective structure of the practice, that eating out alone is understood to produce feelings of loneliness or meaninglessness. The connection between the restaurant meal as a shared experience, including other people, was also frequently mentioned by respondents. Consequently, the restaurant meal could contextually be understood as a necessary evil when the respondent is alone, as a context of just getting fed rather than the normative restaurant context that includes social interaction.

In other situations, however, as when the atmosphere and interior design were perceived to be relaxed, eating alone could be understood as a break from work and everyday life, contrasting with the idea of prolonged feelings of negligence toward the family (cf. Gustafson, 2012; Lassen, 2010; Saarenpää, 2018). Instead, the understanding of the positive restaurant meal when eating alone was driven by utilitarian factors, as a means to get real, good, food and as a way to connect with habitual meal practices. A way of being private in public mediated by material properties.

This illustrates the conflicting ideas about business travellers’ meals, as they are in some cases understood as social contexts, or social arenas, whereas in other cases they are understood as products, such as good or real food. When the meal is understood as a social context by the lonely business traveller, it becomes invasive and infringes on the individual’s personal time, a time where relaxation is sought. When the meal is alternatively understood as a product, the barrier to enjoying the restaurant visit seems less articulated.

Furthermore, within a Swedish context, this social aspect of the

restaurant meal is understood as something you indulge yourself in, something associated with an economic cost, and as such could be understood as unmotivated when being alone: this is highlighted by a focus on the cost, as a material aspect of the practice. This understanding of the meal also clearly distinguishes the business traveller’s meals from those of the leisure traveller (cf. Mak et al., 2012; Quan and Wang, 2004). It could thus be argued that legitimate teleological ends of the business traveller’s meal practice when eating alone, is that of satisfying hunger or relaxation from work.

*Eating with colleagues* shared many of the understandings with eating alone, such as the meal being conceived as a break from work. However, the end of the context of being out with colleagues was social interaction and building camaraderie. These activities, defined by Schatzki (2002) as the normative sets of actions making up projects and tasks, are performed in relation to the meal context with colleagues being understood as facilitators of social interaction. Consequently, the action of business travellers sacrificing their own will by eating somewhere, or something, they do not enjoy in order to please the group is such normative behaviour being expressed by the respondents. In this scenario, the meal qua material is just an enabler for social interaction. When the end shifted with the context, the understanding of the material aspects shifted as well. The economic aspect that was understood as limiting in the context of eating alone was not perceived in the same way when eating together with colleagues. Instead, money was understood as a means of emancipation from daily routines, a way to support indulgence.

*Eating with customers*, however, is differentiated from the other social contexts. While the understandings and affectivities relating to eating alone or with colleagues were expressed as organising factors of actions concerning the well-being of the individual business traveller, other understandings were expressed for meals taken with customers.

While at a restaurant with customers, business travellers understood their role as that of a host, needing to manage the material arrangement to facilitate a good meal for their guests. Actions organised by these understandings tended towards maintaining control over the meal context. There was an underlying understanding of what a good business meal was, and how it should be performed, as in how the setting or material-arrangement should be, and how the social interaction should be performed. That is, an acceptable end of the practice could be to construct a stronger relationship, closing a deal, or to showcase a product.

*Strengths and limitations* The strength of this study lies in its variety of business travellers in terms of age, gender, and occupation, as this helps to create an overview of the organisation of meal practices. Drawing on respondent experiences through interviews allowed analysis of how certain aspects of the practice are understood. However, since interviews of this kind are not conducted *in situ* there is a possibility that certain important aspects of the practice are missed out on. The methodology is furthermore directed towards the question of how rather than why, as it is not meant to challenge the respondent’s perception of specific phenomena. This has its merits in a practice theoretical context but could also be limiting in the sense that probing why certain actions were carried out, and others were not, is of less relevance within this theoretical approach.

7. Conclusion

The results indicate that there is a problem maintaining a static interpretation of what constitutes a good meal. The meal could instead be understood, dynamically, as a progression of activities relating to some contextual end.

Three contextual framings were found in the business traveller’s meal practice, where the meal was always the project of the end-project-task combination. The first was that while being alone, the end seemed to be of a utilitarian sort, getting fed or relaxing from work. The meaning of the material aspect, governing action in this context, was highly

**Table 3**  
Contextually appropriate ends in different social contexts of business travellers’ meals.

Social context of the meal	Teleological ends
Eating alone	Still hunger, Relaxation
Eating with colleagues	Building camaraderie, Relaxation
Eating with customers	Strengthen relations, Closing deals, Showcasing products

related to being able to isolate from the public, facilitating a habitual atmosphere, and also included the economical aspect. The second was while being in the company of colleagues, the end was more in line with the facilitation of social bonding but also demarked a border between private life and work life. Tasks related to this combination were those of making social interaction as frictionless as possible e.g. acting against personal conviction, being restrictive in talking about personal matters. Furthermore, economic aspects were not as important when eating with colleagues as they were when eating alone, suggesting that eating out with other people comes with general understandings of the cost being associated with it. The third context was that of eating out with customers, which was also the most complex context. This complexity lies in the multiplicity of ends identified. Where the end could at times be to close a deal or showcase a product at other times, it could be related to customer care or maintaining a business relationship. Activities related to the context of eating out with customers included: organising the physical environment to promote good discussions between participants, taking control of the staff to make sure everything went off smoothly, and adapting to the circumstances in order to please the customers.

Furthermore, the study brings new knowledge on the complexity of business travellers' meals as contextually rooted. That is, the organisation of business travellers' meals needs to be contextually understood, meaning that the activities of each context are organised by their teleoaffectivities and understandings. This need for a contextual approach becomes evident with the conflicting understandings that business travellers have of their meals. The experiences expressed show that it is important not just to have the knowledge and craft skills to produce food, perceived as having good qualities of taste and aesthetics, it is also important to know what to serve, to whom and when. That is, certain food has certain contextual fitness (Soler and Plazas, 2012). Staff that possesses such knowledge function as facilitators of good meals, as have been previously suggested (e.g. Scander et al., 2018). Respondent concerns when they adopt the role of being host and guest at the same time might be founded in the restaurant's primary target group leisure rather than business consumers. That is, participating in meals outside of the scope of MICE travelling, meals with a lower involvement of employer-level organisers, is putting the business traveller in the organiser's role. A role that seems to be adapted *ad hoc* and taking the shape of a host rather than that of an organiser *per se*. Realising that business to consumer and business to business relationships within the restaurant context requires different approaches could help the hospitality industry to facilitate good meal experiences for an expanded target group.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Joachim Sundqvist:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Visualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Carita Bengs:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

The study elucidates meal consumption practices of business travellers through the lens of social practice theory and argues for a contextual approach to the production of meals. This need for a contextual approach becomes evident with the conflicting understandings that business travellers have of their meals. The experiences expressed show that it is important not just to have the knowledge and craft skills to produce food, perceived as having good qualities of taste and aesthetics, it is also important to know what to serve, to whom and when. Respondent concerns when they adopt the role of being host and guest at the same time might be founded in the restaurant's primary target group leisure rather than business consumers. That is, participating in meals outside of the scope of MICE travelling, meals with a

lower involvement of employer-level organisers, is putting the business traveller in the organiser's role. A role that seems to be adapted *ad hoc* and taking the shape of a host rather than that of an organiser *per se*.

Realising that business to consumer and business to business relationships within the restaurant context requires different approaches could help the hospitality industry to facilitate good meal experiences for an expanded target group.

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