

Article

What Leads to Lunch—How Social Practices Impact (Non-)Sustainable Food Consumption/Eating Habits

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Abstract: The field of nutrition will face numerous challenges in coming decades; these arise from global consumption patterns and lead to a high use of resources. Actors in the catering sector face difficulties in promoting their solutions for a more sustainable situation in their field, one of them being the lack of acceptance from consumers. We must ask the question of how to influence consumer behavior and bring forth a transition towards more sustainable food consumption. This paper presents results of a qualitative assessment of eating practices. A group of ten consumers participated in problem-centered interviews and provided data on their eating-out behavior over the course of two weeks. Using the theoretical approach of practice theory, the data gathered in this study were used to form an understanding of the practice of eating out with a focus on the daily routines that influence consumer choices. The results indicate that the practice of eating out is highly dependent on external factors. Busy lifestyles, mobility routines and a perceived lack of time prompt the decision to eat out. Consumers consciously do so to save time and effort and to streamline their schedules. Mobility seems to be an important driver for eating out. Participants try to limit the ways they undertake eating out yet often stop for a meal in-between appointments spontaneously. Findings suggest that nutrition knowledge and sustainable mindsets have little influence on the eating decisions away from home: Participants show a high level of distrust towards quality claims and put their health concerns aside eating out. We can conclude that the act of eating out is strongly influenced by daily routines and those practices that precede or succeed it. Changes in work and mobility patterns are very likely to have an impact on the way consumers eat away from home.

Keywords: sustainable food consumption; sustainable consumption; public catering; consumption behavior; eating out

1. Introduction

The pace of modern life is leading people to eat out more often—at cafeterias, canteens, fast food outlets, bars and restaurants [1]. As so many foods are high in salt, saturated fat and/or sugar, eating habits do not always conform to current dietary guidelines and further do have a great ecological impact [2]. Thus, the habit of eating out has become a common everyday practice for a large part of consumers in Germany, and catering services make up a noteworthy part of the food sector. Studies suggest that about one quarter of the German working population eat out during weekdays [3] and that every German eats out more than three times every week [4]. Furthermore, the field of nutrition has been named as one of the meaningful fields of action for a sustainable future [5,6]. It is responsible for a significant share of the resource consumption of society and results in considerable material footprints [7–11]. Thus, the food sector has to transform towards more sustainable ways: Ultimately, resource consumption for this sector has to be cut by at least 30% [8]. Furthermore, we have to enable

consumers to make valid and educated choices for more sustainable food options [12,13] within their private households as well as away from home. If we are to aim for a transition towards a more sustainable food consumption, the consumption that happens away from home must be part of this development [14–16].

The study described in this article aimed to find links between everyday behavior and the decision-making processes surrounding food consumption away from home. Emphasis was placed on the influence of mobility, the company of others and the structure of work and leisure time on the eating-out decisions of consumers. Because of the exploratory approach this study followed, results are neither representative nor can they claim to be all-encompassing. The goal of this study was to gain a first idea of those aspects of the practice of eating out that are the most promising when it comes to researching options for a transition towards a more sustainable food sector (based on, e.g., [17,18]). Due to this, a thematically broad and open approach towards the topic of consumer behavior in eating-out situations was chosen for this study. The act of eating out was regarded through the lens of the theory of social practice. This theory is especially interesting as part of an explorative study focused on consumer behavior because it includes the idea that any social practice is always polymorphic. Due to being carried out by many different people who constantly change it and adapt it to their needs [19], practices are dynamic and in a constant process of development [20]. It has also been pointed out that social practices and behavioral routines are strongly impacted by cultural conventions, leading to consumption happening inconspicuously when engaging in actions that are seen as ‘conventional’ by society [21]. This theory changes the view on how behaviors change over time and thus fits in with the goal of this study: To form an idea of the intervention points where we can forward a transition towards a more sustainable food consumption [22].

The study aimed to answer the question: Which everyday routines and practices are linked to the practice of eating out and how do they influence food consumption away from home? A secondary question that was tackled by this study was: Which approach towards a change in the catering sector is the most promising when trying to promote more sustainable food consumption by consumers?

In this article we present a short overview on the public catering market in Germany and the theoretical framework of social practices as a means to research changes in consumer behavior (Section 2). We proceed to briefly present the used methodology (Section 3) and present the main findings of a research project based on problem-centered interviews with consumers, focusing mainly on the connection of mobility and everyday-routines with eating-out behavior (Section 4). The article is concluded with the discussion of the meaning that our findings have in light of the development of solutions that can influence eating-out behavior of consumers (Section 5).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. *Status Quo—The Environmental Impact of Food and Possibilities for More Sustainable Food Consumption*

Looking at material and resource use, human nutrition causes about 30% of the total global resource consumption [15]. In order to decrease resource consumption to a level that is in line with planetary boundaries, we must aim to reduce the resource use of the nutrition sector by a factor of 2 [8]. In light of such findings, the concept of a healthy and environmentally sustainable diet has increasingly raised concern. Future scenarios on global food insecurity and climate change point out renewed interest in this topic [9]. More and more studies suggest diets containing lower contents of animal-origin foods and higher contents of plant-based foods. This measure could serve to prevent chronic diseases and reduce mortality while decreasing environmental impacts at the same time [23,24]. On the other hand, Vieux et al. [25] point out that a vegetarian diet may use up high amounts of resources as some typical components of vegetarian diets, such as nuts, consume high amounts of resources. Such findings show clearly that science has to gain more insight concerning this topic in order to predict the best course of action on our way towards a more sustainable food sector.

Nevertheless we can assume that a more sustainable food choice is one with a low-protein content which may be vegetarian or vegan. A sustainable meal is produced locally and contains mainly seasonal ingredients or at the very least does not contain ingredients that were shipped by plane or imported out of season. As sustainability should never provide a solely environmental point of view, a sustainable food choice should always be a healthy one [15].

2.2. Status Quo—Out-Of-Home Catering in Germany

With a market share of about 40% of the total nutrition market in Germany, the restaurant and catering sector presents a large and largely untapped potential for the transition towards more sustainable food consumption: we may hope to see an increase in resource efficiency and measures that work towards improving the consumers' health status. This heterogeneous market is constantly growing and has, over the past decades, reached a size that makes it an important part of the German food sector. In 2013, over 232,000 restaurants, inns, canteens and other kinds of catering-facilities were registered in Germany [26], not counting hotels or other places that offer meals as a secondary part of their business. Eating-out has become an everyday practice during the past decades; only 7.12% of Germans say that they never eat out. Their number has fallen over the past three years, while the number of people who identify themselves as frequent consumers of catering offers has risen to almost ten percent (Ifd Allensbach, 2015). Next to the more traditional uses of eating away from home, such as dining out with friends or family or having lunch at a workplace-canteen, food offers have spread to almost every corner of our cities in the forms of vending-machines, quick-service restaurants and coffee shops. They have also spread into almost every sector of human activity including travel, leisure, retail, fairs, festivals and sport events. In addition, along with the growth in availability, vendors make sure to adapt their offers to trends in consumption: vegetarian or vegan meals, healthy options at fast-food places and a growing prominence of seemingly artisan offerings are part of the catering sector. Recently, street food and food trucks have surfaced as new places of meals. Quick-service offers account for at least 55% of the earnings of Germany's eating-out sector [27].

The eating-out market has made it so that in any given situation, people usually face multiple options for getting themselves fed. Looking at the example of having lunch during the workday, consumers choose from a variety of food-offers and possible vendors during their lunch breaks (compare Figure 1). This evokes the question of why they favored one choice over another and what external effects drove these choices.

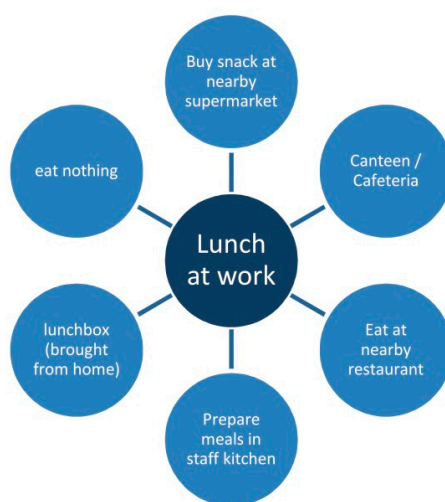


Figure 1. Eating-out options of interviewees during a lunch break, inspired by [11,28,29].

Some of the trends in the eating-out market already fit in with the goal of a more sustainable food-sector [30,31], such as the increasing availability of vegetarian or vegan meals. Very often,

however, a lack of acceptance or trust of the consumer is a difficulty food vendors face when trying to provide more sustainable options [32,33], locking their efforts into a niche of the food-sector. Thus, to enable a more sustainable way of eating out, the consumers' actions and ideals are among the first things that have to change. This can only happen if we understand when, how and why consumers decide to eat away from home and what external factors influence their decisions.

Research on eating behavior names many factors that influence the eating-out behavior of consumers, for example, the age of consumers. Younger people consume higher amounts of fast food and quick-service offers [34] while employees face a higher probability of consuming snacks during their time-consuming everyday schedules [29]. Gender [29,35] and household structure are also named as influential external factors. The more irregular a workday is, the more susceptible a consumer is to offers from the catering sector (Stieß and Hayn, 2005:71 [3]), and studies suggest that they try to save time in the field of nutrition in order to gain time for their leisure-time activities [34]. The use of quick-service offers is associated with promptness, quick satiation and convenience [36]. This directly ties in with the growing mobility in society, the rising consumption of to-go offers during busy days and the declining number of meals eaten at home [4,37]. One last aspect that comes into play here is income—while people from low-income households might consider visits to a restaurant as a pleasant extravagance, people with high incomes may not even consider eating out as anything special [36]. Especially for people with tense income situations, pricing has a large influence on their consumption of food away from home [34,38].

2.3. Social Practice Approach

The theory of social practices has recently received increased interest in consumer culture studies. Developed by [39,40], practice theory has more recently been expanded on by [41,42]. Individual practices come about simply as part of a nexus of many everyday practices and routines that influence each other [43]. Understanding which routines and practices are connected to each other is thus an important part of identifying intervention points that can be used to alter a practice. Practice theory suggests that “there is always room to do the same thing differently” [44]. Coming from this theory, we accept that an existing practice can develop further and change over time [42,45].

Within practice theory, the act of consuming is not seen as a practice in itself but as part of practices. Consumption never occurs as an end unto itself but can be characterized through its integration into many practices [41]. This view enables us to detect factors linked with consumption and makes it less likely to overlook important influences that “lock us into trajectories and lock out sustainable alternatives” [46]. Research on the prospect of changing consumption patterns with a social-practice approach was conducted by [47,48]. Hargreaves [49] was able to show that a change in awareness will lead to a slow change in practices over the course of the coming repetitions, and collective conventions play a strong role in the dynamic of a practice and can even prevent development if a change includes going against what is expected and accepted: “Collective conventions therefore have the potential to push sustainability further than individual ‘green tinkering’” [50]. On the other hand, argues that niche-practices develop despite conventions next to ‘mainstream’-forms of social practices. When trying to promote change, one has to keep an eye out for those niche-practices because some of them may have some potential for at least partially replacing domineering practices [51]. If we manage to get an idea of the mindsets, abilities, items and venues required to partake in the practice of eating out, we gain a better understanding of the leverage points for promoting change in this practice. We can better adjust our solutions for a more sustainable catering market to the consumers' everyday life and generate higher levels of acceptance for those offers. Therefore, we will follow the research question: how are practices of eating out influenced by mindsets (meaning and competences), infrastructure (materials), and other external influences?

3. Methods

The objective of this study was to identify the interconnections of the practice of eating out with other everyday practices, a topic which is less regarded in science. Due to the necessarily given explorative character of this study, research was done through the use of a qualitative method approach. We were able to gather in-depth information on a wide variety of aspects of eating-out by conducting problem-centered interviews in the spring of 2015. Interviews were conducted with ten consumers from different backgrounds, ages and household types. We gained participants for the study through the use of a snowball system, starting with a call on the university homepage and blackboards. Each contact was asked to recommend acquaintances who might have an interest in participating in this study who then got contacted as well. This process was repeated until a sufficient number of participants was found, who as a group, met the desired broadness of sociodemographic conditions. Data were gathered over a period of one month in three stages. In both the first and third phase, we interviewed all of the ten participants, totaling 20 interviews of thirty to fifty minutes length each. The interview sessions focused on different aspects of eating out, such as the frequency of eating out, typical eating-out scenarios, level of satisfaction with own eating-out behavior or differences between foods consumed at home and foods consumed when eating out (The interview guidelines can be provided by the corresponding author upon request). Topics were chosen based on a literature review that served to identify the most influential external factors on the decision of eating out. In the second stage we conducted phone interviews over a two-week timespan between the first and the second interview. Participants were called every third day and asked about their past acts of eating out. Each act of consumption was registered in detail. These interviews were included in the research design in order to add a realistic representation of the interviewee's behavior to their self-depiction during the interviews.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through the use of qualitative content analysis [52]. The goal of this method is to extract all relevant information from the material without quantifying findings too early and by honoring important singular instances and small contexts that could easily be overlooked when using a method that relies solely on quantity as a measure for significance of information [52]. Interview transcripts were paraphrased and then transferred into a system of categories. The categories were developed inductively, ensuring that every bit of relevant information from the interviews was retained and included in the system of categories. This aspect of the processing of information was very important in regard to the small sample size employed in this study. Also, niche practices can prove to be valuable when developing solutions for sustainable consumption. Categories were developed in multiple readings of the paraphrased transcripts. Due to the amount of data, every single paraphrase was at first assigned to one of eight topic categories:

Frequency of Eating out—Choice of Vendor—Choice of Meal—Mobility and Eating out—Situations and Triggers for Eating out—Planning and Spontaneity in Eating out—Social Aspects of Eating out—Perception of Eating out as a Facilitation of Everyday Life

These categories were chosen based on the structure of the interview guideline and on the aforementioned literature review on eating-out behavior.

In a first phase, data from three participants was used to inductively create categories. Every paraphrase within a topic category was either added to an already developed category or used to create a new category. This procedure produced a transitional system of categories which was then revised. In a second phase, the data from the other seven participants were added to this system of categories, allowing for the creation of more categories if needed. After every single paraphrase was placed in a category, the system of categories was revised in a third phase to ensure that every paraphrase was assigned to the best-fitting category. Analogical categories were merged into one. The final version of our system of categories consists of the aforementioned 8 topic categories that include a total of 49 main categories and 209 subcategories (The complete system of categories will be provided by the corresponding author upon request). Main categories were formed as needed in order

to facilitate the navigation within the system of categories; they encapsulate a number of subcategories which are closely related to the topic of the main category.

As an example, the topic category ‘mobility and eating out’ encompasses the following main categories and subcategories (Table 1).

Table 1. Category “Eating-out behavior and mobility”.

Topic Category	Main Category	Subcategory
Eating-out behavior and mobility	availability of cars increases frequency of eating out	car-use facilitates food-consumption away from home proximity grows less important when having a car at command having no car at hand makes eating out less frequent
	preference for vendors in close proximity	clear preference for vendors nearby preferring close proximity out of convenience preferring close proximity for health-related reasons
	undertaking trips solely for eating out	undertaking trips solely for eating out with friends undertaking trips solely for eating at a restaurant undertaking trips solely for eating a specific meal at a specific place undertaking trips solely for eating at a high quality venue undertaking trips solely for eating out because no food is sold at the workplace never undertakes trips solely for eating out
	keeping trips as short as possible	actively keeping trips as short as possible eating away from home specifically because one is already away from home actively avoiding taking a trip to a food vendor when one has already arrived at home
	means of transportation when eating out	not using a car because planning to consume alcohol car-use carpooling bike for short routes in the summer going by foot when taking a walk or hike that includes snack/drink consumption going by foot when a venue is close by using the car when planning to eat out with friends never going by foot due to health-related reasons public transportation visiting restaurants mainly by car
	Detours undertaken for eating out	extent of detours taken taking detours because a previously known vendor is preferred to other vendors that could be reached without any detour
	Distances	distances typically travelled for eating out distances typically travelled for eating fast food distances typically travelled for eating at restaurants
	correlation between distance travelled and quality of vendor/meal	traveling further away for special meals visiting neighboring cities when eating out with friends undertaking longer trips only when going out with friends coupons lead to traveling further from home visits to restaurants justify further travels than visits to fast food vendors
	Correlation between mobility and time consumption	influence of available time on the taking of detours saving time as top priority
	Disregard for distances travelled	distance to venue has little influence on eating-out decisions
	area frequented for eating out	out-of-home setting

4. Results

4.1. Participants

Eating out is a practice prominent throughout the entire German society. People in different phases of their life consume food away from home for different reasons. Literature suggests that food consumption out of home is influenced by factors such as age, occupation, living arrangements and household forms. Consumers interviewed for this study were chosen randomly, while working towards a variety of situations regarding the participants’ age, gender, current occupation and employment status and their living arrangement, taking into account the number of household members as well as the presence of children in the household (Table 2). All participants were of adult age with the youngest participant being a student of 19 years and the oldest being a retiree of

73 years. Half of the participants were employed workers, the other half was comprised of retirees and students with either no employment or small part-time jobs. As for living arrangements of the interviewees, household size ranged from single-person households to four-person households; we interviewed couples with one or two children, single-parents and divorced parents with children visiting on weekends. In spite of the small number of participants, we were able to include a variety of living conditions. This was deemed important in order to shed light on as many interconnections between everyday-life routines and eating-out behavior as possible.

Table 2. Sample Structure.

	Gender		Age			Occupation			Living Arrangement			Employment		
	M	F	18–25	40–60	60	Student	Worker	Retiree	Single	Multi-Person	With Kids	No Kids	Yes	No
Delia		x	x				x		x		x		x	
Tim	x		x			x				x	x			x
Olaf	x			x			x			x	x		x	
Britta		x		x			x			x	x		x	
Anne		x			x			x	x			x		x
Günther	x				x			x		x		x		x
Svenja		x	x			x				x		x	x	
Robina		x	x			x				x		x		x
Jörg	x			x			x		x		x		x	
Uwe	x			x			x		x			x		x

The frequency of eating out differs greatly between participants. While Günther, a married retiree, eats out on about 120 occasions throughout the whole year (including evenings at the bar where he only consumes drinks away from home), while full-time employed Olaf eats out every morning during his work day, which adds up to over 200 meals per year eaten away from home solely through his breakfast consumption. He goes out to dinner with friends almost monthly, he eats at his friend's or family's homes frequently and likes to have dinner at a fast food place at least once a week. Part-time employed single mother Delia admits to consuming food or drinks away from home on a daily basis but she hardly ever substitutes full meals when eating on the go. The frequency of eating out occurrences among the interviewees was very varied, while those with regular daily routines and especially a partner at home consume food away from home as little as twice a week while other interviewees do it daily to varying extents.

4.2. Work and Leisure Time Routines Strongly Influence Eating-Out Behavior

This section describes findings that illustrate how consumers' days are structured by their job and how leisure-time activities lead to the consumption of food away from home. As described above, the qualitative content analysis interviews led to a system of eight main categories relating to different aspects of eating-out behavior. Out of these eight categories, the categories of work-related routines, leisure-time routines and mobility behavior were those which contained the highest quantity of information. They also describe those aspects of daily life that were most substantial in regards to affecting eating-out behavior and creating occasions for eating out in the first place. This article focuses on the findings related to those three main categories.

Work routines as well as leisure-time activities strongly influence the acts of eating out. The higher the number of different activities away from home that are scheduled on a single day and the longer time each activity takes up, the higher the chance that a consumer will get food in between those appointments. People from the workforce often feel forced to eat away from home, simply due to the length of their workdays. Among the interviewees, the packing of lunchboxes is not typical. Surprisingly, this is also the case for workers whose company offers no catering. No reasons were given for why they prefer buying food at their canteen or from a vendor away from their workplace to bringing their own food with them. Some people that bring their food will still buy additional meals on some occasions, for example, when they misjudged the amount and are still hungry or when colleagues invite them to go eat with them. Lunchbox routines also seem to be linked to the organization of the worker's workday and household. People who work long or very irregular hours

mentioned having trouble coordinating their grocery shopping and therefore often have nothing at home that they can bring with them.

Eating out during leisure-time activities seems to be surprisingly strongly linked to job routines. Long drives after work or long work hours shorten the available leisure time after work. Interviewees mentioned that they feel like they lose time by going home between multiple appointments. Eating out saves them the time they would otherwise spend on driving home and cooking a meal. If after-work appointments are scheduled back to back and require undertaking paths between each, going home to cook is perceived as 'impossible', and eating out changes from a means to win an extra hour of leisure time to the only alternative to not going hungry.

The interviews suggest that most eating out occurrences are also not undertaken as a planned means of recreation and are not perceived as an appointment that stands on its own. Instead, acts of eating-out seem to be highly subject to the daily schedule. Consumers mostly fit meals away from home into their fixed schedules and in between all other kinds of appointments instead of scheduling their days around meals. It seems that consumers consciously accept and use the possibility of eating-out as a tool for saving time and effort. The feeling of being able to facilitate the management of many appointments that follow up on each other by eating out was aptly described by Jörg:

Jörg: "By now, we have become a time-management-obsessed society—and this leads to us combining everything with eating-out [. . .]. When you are underway, you combine your appointments with it, and this is how you try to link your timeslots together."

The findings make it apparent that meals away from home are often bought with no prior plans to do so. They are perceived as an easy alternative and as long as they fit in well with the schedule, those foods are bought spontaneously. This is especially common among people who live alone or are in charge of the cooking in their household while people that live in a household with fixed meal times and who have somebody that cooks for them are less likely to spontaneously substitute a meal at home with a snack from a food vendor on the street.

4.3. The Impact of Mobility Routines on Eating out

Taking part in acts of eating out is impossible without preceding acts of mobility. This section explores the links between mobility behavior and acts of eating out, especially in regards to how consumers use transport in eating-out scenarios and how the interviewees' individual mobility behavior influences their consumption of food away from home.

The interviews clearly show the strong influence that mobility routines have on the practice of eating out. As was shown before, busy lifestyles and numerous appointments or long workdays strengthen the probability of eating out. The interviews suggest that those people who spend a lot of time in transit have a higher probability of eating out than people who are at home a lot.

As an example, the distance between the workplace and home seems to be quite influential. Interviewees who drive long distances on a daily basis stop at gas stations, grocery stores or fast food joints in order to get a small snack on their way home. Svenja, who has an hour-long commute, comments:

Svenja: "I do buy food after work or things like that. Like, when I leave a place by car and pass by a supermarket [. . .]. I might have to drive another 50 km to get home, and then I think: Why not get something to eat here? If I have to cook after getting home, I won't get food within two hours, even though I am already hungry at that moment."

Consumers see multiple benefits in eating on their way: They appease their hunger, arrive at home satiated and can get to their chores or other appointments right away without having to interrupt their day's work, as cooking-eating on the road facilitates fulfilling daily tasks:

Uwe: "So, when I drive back home from work and I know that I still have things to do at home and do not feel like sitting down to eat . . . Because I know that when I sit down for a

meal after work, I will start to feel tired. So that is when I tell myself: Well, you are on the road anyway and you have to stop for gas soon, so just grab a snack that will last you for two or three hours. [. . .] You will be able to get started with your chores right away.”

Here, combining mobility routines with acts of eating out ties right back in with busy schedules and the chance to streamline a day’s structure.

We observed that interviewees presented themselves as surprisingly unwilling to leave their house simply for eating out and try to drive as little as possible just for getting food. Food consumption underway often happens on the way to other appointments. Among all the eating out-occurrences admitted to by the interviewees over the course of 2 weeks, one fifth of the participants were undertaken specifically for consuming food (for example, leaving the workplace solely to get lunch or going out for dinner with friends), while 80% of the pathways associated with eating out were mainly undertaken to attend other activities not associated with eating while the food consumption was secondary and often simply included in the outing to save time or because it seemed convenient to the consumer.

This suggests that eating out behavior causes only a comparatively small number of extra acts of driving. Converting the results of our phone interviews into graphical maps that include every act of food consumption away from home over the course of two weeks illustrates this further (compare Figures 2 and 3).

Figures 2 and 3 indicate that consumers most often eat out while pursuing other activities (broken lines). They also illustrate that frequent eating-out can be promoted if consumers drive or walk the same routes on a regular basis (wide lines). Regular mobility patterns provide the consumer with knowledge about many, if not all, the food offers available on these routes. This knowledge seems to facilitate the decision for eating out or grabbing a snack on the go because it provides the consumer with more planning security.

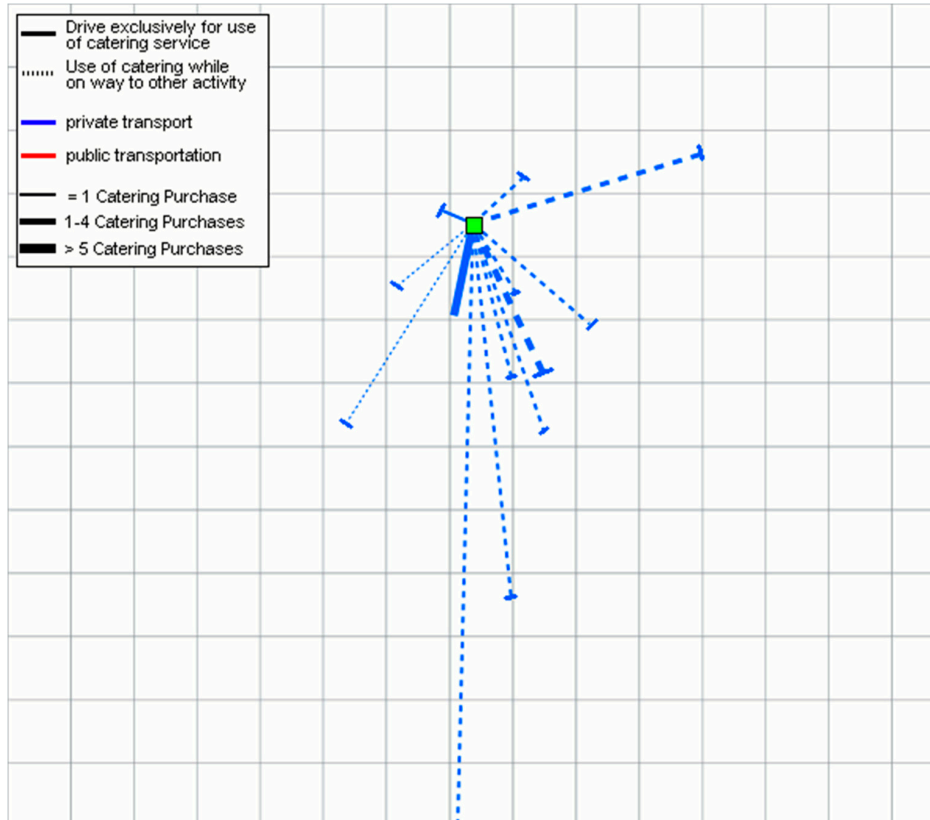


Figure 2. Map of catering service consumption of participant Olaf over the course of two weeks (based on Google Maps).

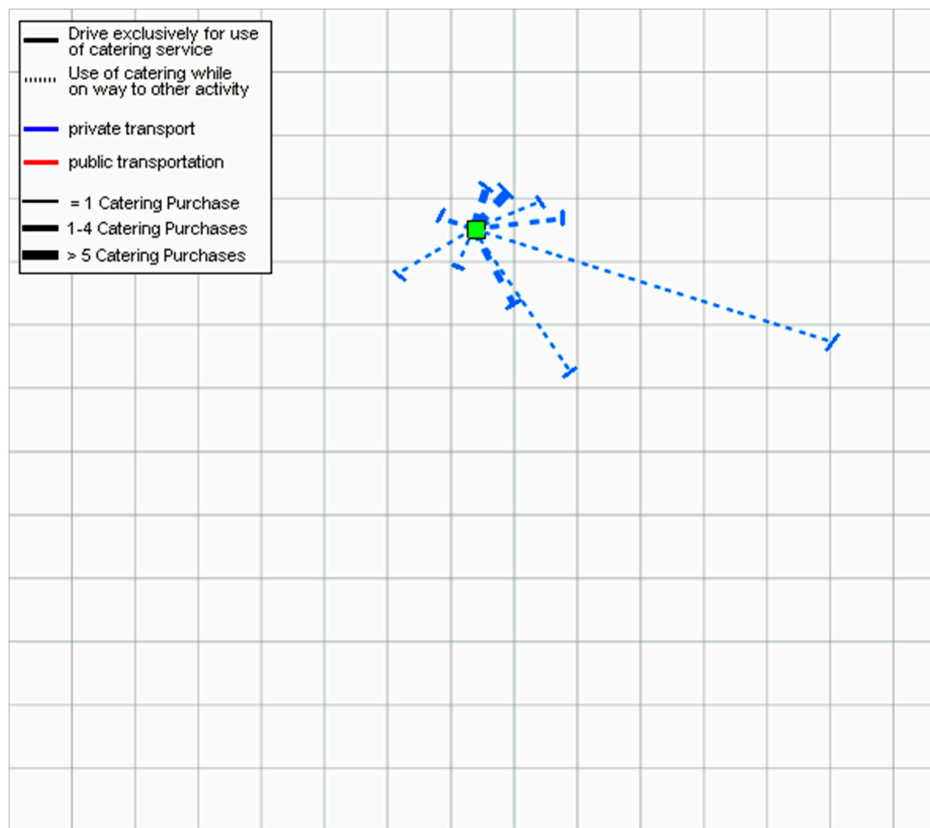


Figure 3. Map of catering service consumption of participant Delia over the course of two weeks (based on Google Maps).

Interview results further suggest that the smaller the detour consumers have to accept for eating out while driving from point A to point B, the more likely they become to actually stop for food. While hardly any of the interviewees are willing to accept a detour of more than 10 min even when really hungry, pulling over to a parking lot and grabbing a snack at a gas station at the side of the road is acceptable to almost any of them. The amount of available free time has seemingly little influence on the acceptable scale of a detour. Consumers judge the acceptability of stopping for food by the amount of effort it will take them and by external factors such as the availability of parking in close proximity and the estimated time it will take for the food to be ready to take out.

Most participants did not combine acts of eating out with the use of public transportation. This is likely a coincidence linked to the small number of participants. Still, it can be argued that going places by car simplifies eating out: While the use of private transport enables the consumer to stop or detour wherever they like, a passenger of public transportation is bound to a fixed time schedule and the food offers available at those stops or stations they use.

Interviewees signaled a great willingness to carpool when going out with friends. When asked for an explanation on why they like to carpool in such situations, environmental or economical motives were given surprisingly rarely. Most interviewees explain that they appreciate carpooling because the drive is already part of the social occasion and that having only one driver allows more people in the group to consume alcohol.

Still, findings suggest that consumers try to limit their journeys for eating out by carpooling and by avoiding large detours or extra journeys. From a standpoint of wanting to limit resource consumption, consumers follow patterns that can be judged positively, even if they happen for non-environmental reasons.

4.4. Sustainable Mindsets and Nutrition Knowledge Rarely Impact Eating-Out Decisions

During the interviews, participants often touched upon their values and views towards nutrition. Since social practices are highly influenced by mindsets and knowledge of their carrier, this information holds value for the question of how to change the practice of eating out. When asked about their health concerns in choosing a food, interviewees admitted that they care much less for their health when they eat out than they do when they prepare a meal at home or go grocery shopping. For example, those who care for home-cooked meals and clean eating will allow themselves to eat foods they would normally consider to be junk food.

Delia: "I am a person that eats mostly healthy and consumes very few convenience products. But away from home, you will eat what is available quickly. [. . .] So, things I consume are Doner Kebap, French Fries, Currywurst, and you would consider none of that a good meal. French Fries and Coke is anything but healthy. And premade coffee-to-go drinks with added sugar and milk, pre-packaged Latte Macchiatos, are not healthy either. Simply put: Away from home, I eat completely unhealthily."

While Delia explains this with quick and easy accessibility, interviewees also buy unhealthy food due to spontaneous appetites after seeing a certain offer or due to peer pressure. Also, many male participants admit that they overeat when eating out and often have a bad conscience after their meals because they feel like they indulged or chose their food carelessly.

Even consumers who describe themselves as highly aware of their spending admit to spending little thought on prices when eating out.

Another field that is interesting with regard to sustainable food consumption is the interviewees' view on quality seals for regional or organic production. Findings suggest that such promises of quality have very little impact on the decision about what food item they will choose. They judge sustainable offers generally positive, while they see regional production and animal welfare as slightly more appealing than organic quality. Yet surprisingly, many participants met our questions with clear expressions of mistrust:

Uwe: "I have always considered the German food legislation to be a good one and think that if you eat something here, you will be on the safe side. But food scandals seem to teach us better time after time. But no, organic food offers have never meant much to me. With organic foods I never know . . . Now, if I got organic foods from a farmer and I would personally know where it came from, I might get it and even pay a higher price for that. But when I see organic offers at supermarkets or canteens I cannot help but wonder whether that is not simple profiteering."

Interviewees often felt strongly about their inability to verify the claims made by quality seals and hinted at feelings that could best be described as a lack of transparency in the food sector:

Interviewer: "Would an animal welfare claim on a product impact your choice?"

Jörg: "I would have to be admitted into the kitchen and able to check the stamp on the pig I was going to eat if I were to believe those. So: No, it would not impact my choice because I cannot verify it".

While external factors such as the relationship status of a consumer and especially the household form they live in can certainly be counted as influential factors for eating out, the presence of company in everyday situations has surprisingly little influence on the decision for or against eating out.

Cultural Conventions (as described by Jack (2013) [50]) seem to apply little to the consumption patterns in the catering sector. Eating-out seems to be fully accepted in almost every aspect of everyday life, and our interview results suggest that consumers do not feel strongly about including acceptability

or “convention” into their choice of whether or not and where to eat out. It can be assumed that a change in this acceptability could prove to be very influential on eating-out behavior. There was one example where interviewees did name cultural conventions as a powerful influence: It seems that a low acceptance exists for sitting down in a restaurant on your own, so consumers prefer grabbing something to eat on the go for fear of being judged. Uwe described a situation in which this convention influences his behavior directly:

Uwe: “I would simply take my fries and meatball, walk back to the car and eat in the car instead of sitting down inside the French fry stall [on my own]. [. . .] Then again, if you go there with another person things are totally different: If you go out for fries with your friend or your partner, then it is only natural to sit down and eat at one of the tables.”

This quote shows clearly that conventions do not prevent consumers from eating out, but that they shift the choices consumers make. Cultural conventions have the power to influence the way food is consumed away from home.

5. Conclusions and Outlook

This study focused on uncovering those routines and factors of everyday life that influence a consumer’s choice of whether, where and how to eat out. It addressed the research question of how everyday life-routines influence food consumption away from home. The goal of this study was to identify those aspects of social practices that influence eating-out behavior the strongest and are thus the most promising when it comes to changing diets towards more sustainable consumption patterns and in turn making the food sector more sustainable.

Results were gathered through problem-centered interviews with randomly chosen consumers of different ages, employment status and household structures. The qualitative findings of the study described in this paper suggest that the practice of eating-out is strongly intertwined with daily routines. In keeping with the goal of identifying the most promising leverage points for changing eating-out behavior through the lens of a social practice approach, aspects such as personal mobility patterns, work and leisure-time activities and a general tendency towards a more fragmented structure of everyday life were identified as highly influential on the practice of eating out, while the social environment has a surprisingly small significance. Especially when work or leisure-time activities are combined with high demands towards personal mobility, consumers seem to become more likely to make use of food offers away from home.

The study’s objective was to identify where the practice of eating out interconnects with other everyday practices, a topic that has received little attention in science up until now. We may point out that any change in the fields of mobility, work and leisure-time activities will influence the practice of eating away from home. These fields contain many practices that are strongly linked to the practice of eating out: Findings suggest that consumers tend to subordinate their food consumption to other aspects of their daily life and usually opt to adapt their eating to the rest of their daily schedule instead of doing it the other way around. The idea to save time is the most leading motive to guide those decisions. A find is the fact that many consumers refrain from undertaking detours or driving extra ways solely for getting food. Instead, they try to combine pathways as much as possible. This does not automatically guarantee that consumers make sustainable food choices: Consumers may be as likely to opt for a non-sustainable food choice as they might be to choosing a healthy, unprocessed snack (for example, regional fruit), but the practice of combining pathways leads to savings on the (environmental) costs of mobility, which in some instances may altogether be preferable to saving on the ecological footprint of a meal [8]. Especially if we consider the possibility of consumers that do not care at all about the ways they undertake and may ultimately end up making an environmentally unsound choice after having travelled an additional detour just to go to their favorite food vendor, ultimately taking two non-sustainable actions at once.

Due to the polymorphic character of social practices and the wide field of options that is “eating out”, it is difficult to name individual practices which might be most influential. Clearly, it is impossible to find one single solution to change the consumption of food in the catering sector. Linking back to the study's objective, we can conclude that individual solutions for different target groups and situations need to be developed.

The study asks the research question of which approach may be the most promising in changing consumers decisions towards more sustainable choices. Evans [53] remarked that tackling consumption patterns with a sociological approach is promising in regards to a more subtle understanding of a practice and a higher chance to create better solutions for these problems. Our findings suggest that due to the high level of interlacing between the practice of eating out and many other everyday practices, we should be able to influence the way in which consumers perceive and use food offers away from home from the outside as much as from the inside: It seems likely that not only intrinsic motivators play a role in how people choose to eat out, but that external factors are major drivers for how the act of eating out comes about and how consumers design their meals away from home. Players in the sector can do more than only optimize food offers and their value-added chains, as Oosterveer [54] suggests. For instance, the perception of meals eaten out of home is an influential factor: Consumers exhibit a discrepancy between what they think (quickservice-use is not part of what they perceive as their usual healthy or sustainable eating routine) and what they do (quickservice-use makes up a substantial part of their eating out-routines). Indeed, perhaps they do not consider eating out as part of their eating routine at all, but as a rare incident. Hence, our focus should be on advancing sustainability for those offers that are geared towards quick and easy consumption underway, because despite their considerable proportion in out-of-home food consumption, consumers hardly perceive their use of on-the-go offers and quickservice as part of their everyday-diet.

The results of our study suggest that further education of the consumer on sustainable consumption or even a change in attitude towards sustainable food consumption may not be as impactful as some scientists hope (e.g., [55]). Studies show that sustainable food choices can lead to resource-efficient consumption [15,56] and that public catering, especially in schools, can be an effective place for sustainability education and may help to promote more sustainable food choices in the future [57]. But our research contains results that indicate that knowledge and convictions have little value in many eating-out decisions: even those interviewees who actively try to make sustainable consumption choices claim that they often feel pressed to choose foods they usually dislike in eating out-scenarios. We can assume that eating-out is an act that often comes with trade-offs and that consumers willingly put aside their convictions about food consumption for the sake of convenience. Findings also suggest that eating-out is regarded as an exceptional occasion, even in very mundane contexts. It seems that even consumers who spend a lot of thought on minimizing the impact of their consumption decisions are ready to put their standards aside more easily when eating out. This is likely the case because they see eating-out as an exception and an irregular, rare occurrence—even if they eat out multiple times a week, they still view this as something out of the ordinary and disconnected from their daily routines, which is why they are unwilling to apply the same standards to their decisions that they apply when choosing what to eat or cook at home and find it easier to excuse deviations from their standards. As long as these effects stay strong, the impact of education-based bottom-up approaches is limited. This would in turn suggest that top-down approaches have better chances of success, guiding consumers towards healthier or less environmentally impactful meal choices, for example, through changes in availability that limit less-sustainable choices in the first place or through pricing that favors sustainable choices. If consumers subordinate the action of consuming food away from home to their other appointments, availability becomes a very important factor: A consumer who feels they have neither the time nor the energy to go out of their way to get foodstuffs that match their standards will pick the thing that is closest to that but at the same time easily available. The more widespread sustainable options become in the eating-out sector, the higher the probability of those being chosen. Unfortunately, the findings also suggest that this will not always work. Even if consumers look for

the most beneficial way of eating away from home, they will not completely disregard all of their preferences. Pricing and the kind of food offered seemingly still matter, and findings suggest that those can keep consumers from making the more sustainable choice. Other studies back this up by naming pricing as one of the factors that prevent organic food offers from getting fully established in public catering market [33,58,59]. A mere change in offers alone will not be able to change food consumption away from home. Also, niche practices can prove to be valuable when developing solutions for sustainable consumption [60].

The interviewees' comments on quality seals suggest that if they have the choice between an organic offer and a comparable offer of conventional quality, the latter would be chosen. It also suggests that quality seals often spawn reflection on a food choice. While none of the interviewee disagree with the ideals behind organic and regional production or the idea of promoting animal-welfare, a strong mistrust and a feeling of lacking verifiability exist towards quality seals. These feelings paired with the added expense that comes with the purchase of organic foods are why many interviewees distance themselves from those choices. It could be argued that the prominent promotion of quality seals has an adverse effect, because it makes them reflect and compare organic and conventional offers more. A more low-profile approach might turn out to be less off-putting, simply because it spawns less reflection and thus leads to less doubts. If we want to counter these adverse effects, we need to communicate the benefits of sustainable foods more clearly. While the personal benefit of convenience is directly experienced by a consumer, the argument of "doing the right thing" or "saving the planet" is neither as clear nor does it feel directly beneficial to the individual, making it a less impactful factor in the decision for a meal.

This study provides many aspects that could inspire future research. Since the assumptions presented in this article are based on interviews with a group of only ten people, the results would have to be either confirmed or refuted through further research. Whether or not consumers really avoid undertaking extra pathways for eating out and whether this is actually positive from a resource-conservation standpoint are questions we have to answer. While it appears that the act of eating-out is often chosen spontaneously or planned into a day because other daily routines call for mobility and changing places, we could ask whether this constant availability of food does not also prompt consumers to move about and be more mobile: people might be prompted to participate in certain activities that require them to go somewhere because they know that they can grab something to eat on the way. If this were the case, the catering sector would not only facilitate our busy lifestyles but might even serve to increase mobility and thus further the consumption of resources through personal mobility. Also, the question of whether or not the prominent placement and advertisement of quality seals has negative side effects that could impede sales should be looked into.

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