STOCKHOLM SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

Bachelor Thesis in Business and Economics

HANGING BY A THREAD

A qualitative analysis of strategic decision-making within the restaurant industry in Sweden during the covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Out of the blue, the pandemic hit the, at the time, prosperous restaurant industry (RI) and imposed unprecedented challenges to encounter. The ambiguity of the environment in which decision-makers now operated in, did not comply with the old rules as it by tradition depends on a flow of visitors, long opening hours and gathering of humans, sparking an increase in sensemaking (SM). Consequently, empty facilities and an extensive loss of cash-flows shortly after the first outbreak, called for strategic decision-making (SDM). Previous research covers a variety of crises and its implications, but the rarity of a lengthy crisis with significant ascendency of the government, in constraining business practice and exercising authority over customer behavior and operations, remain scarce in management literature. Through a qualitative study, consisting of 12 in-depth interviews, this thesis aims to describe how strategic decision-making has unfolded during the pandemic, under a shifting operational context and environment. The theory of sensemaking is adopted to analyze decision-makers (DM) perceptions of context and constructions of sense in the uncertain environment. Additionally, through the theoretical lens of three SDM dimensions, the study examines the balance between intuition, rationality and political behavior of decision-makers—in response to covid-19. The research adopts an abductive design, and constructivist ontological observation perspective, contributing to the academic debate with descriptive data of how strategic decision-making and sensemaking unfolds in a shifting and ambiguous environment. Also, revealing an interplay between the strategic decision making process dimensions across time, where intuition has fluctuated considerably compared to rationality and political behavior.

Keywords: Strategic decision-making, sensemaking, COVID-19, restaurant industry, Crisis.

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Definitions

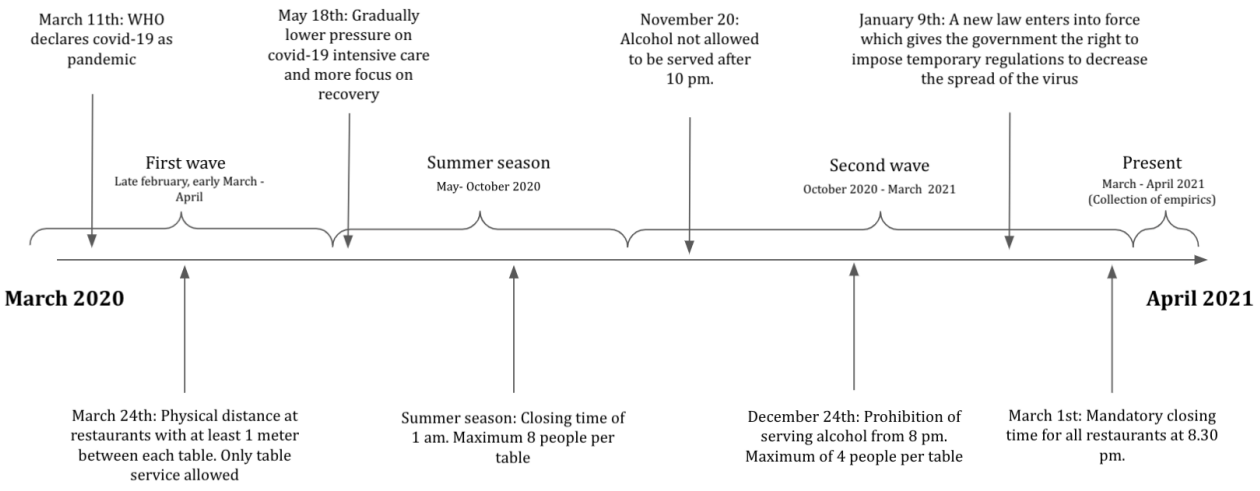
Table 1: Definitions

Concept	Definition
Crisis	When all predictive power is lost and a situation cannot be explained comprehendingly. A cosmology episode. (Weick 1993).
Decision maker	A person who makes important decisions (Oxford Dictionary), especially at a high level in an organization (Cambridge Dictionary)
Pandemic	A disease that spreads over a whole country or the whole world (Oxford Dictionary, 2020) occurring over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affecting a significant proportion of the population (Merriam-Webster)
Governmental recommendation	A recommendation, without a linkage to law or rules (SVT, 2020) often used in areas where the information may need to be changed at short notice, for example in areas where the conditions change due to factors may be new or unknown (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020).
Governmental restriction	Government decided, "restriction ordinance" which means legally binding rules. (MUCF, 2020; Sveriges Riksdag, 2021)
Business practice	A way of doing something that is the usual or expected way in a particular organization (Oxford Dictionary, 2021)
Full service	The full service restaurant segment is made up of dining locations that do not require customers to prepare or serve their own meals. Full service restaurants often feature menu selections according to a cuisine type and may be limited. The price of a typical meal at a full service restaurant may vary between moderate and very expensive. (HoustonChronicle, 2021)

Table 2: Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
SDM	Strategic decision-making
SDMP	Strategic decision-making process
SM	Sensemaking
DM	Decision-maker
HI	Hospitality industry
RI	Restaurant Industry

Table 3: Timeline, overview of the covid-19 pandemic and specific governmental regulations aimed at the restaurant industry:



Sources: Karolinska Institutet; Folkhälsomyndigheten

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Amongst the events of the turbulent 2020 is the spread of the coronavirus (covid-19), a virus classified as of March 11th, 2020 by the World Health Organization, as a pandemic (2020). A pandemic with implications spanning across all industries. The hospitality industry (HI) suffered greatly early on (Deloitte, 2020), including the restaurant industry (RI). By sudden, unprecedented and business threatening consequences, the RI was shaken to its core. Consequently, there was a 60% increase in bankruptcies in March 2020 in Sweden, compared to the year before (Dagens Industri, 2020, Göteborgs-Posten, 2020, SvD, 2021). Bankruptcies spiked during the first months of the pandemic across several sectors but stagnated considerably in the first quarter of 2021. Unfortunately, liquidation remains high within the field of hotels and restaurants (UC, 2021). The RI remains one of the five most impacted industries worldwide (S&P Global, 2021).

Throughout the pandemic the Swedish government has enforced industry-targeted recommendations, which later became restrictions by law and have caused severe consequences for restaurateurs (Krisinformation, 2020; Hotellrevyn, 2020). At the time of writing this thesis, a considerable part of the corporate world puts effort into finding equilibrium in the new normal, entering the early stages of recovery (McKinsey, 2021). Contrastingly, restaurants are still fighting for survival. The Swedish RI continues to be largely disarmed in their ability to recover (Dagens Industri, 2021) as governmental restrictions remain unadjusted (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021). Following the pandemic and its implications, decision-makers (DM) have found themselves on uncharted territory. Through the lens of management studies, it certainly becomes an interesting context to study. Primarily because a crisis of this scale and its implications is unrecorded in modern day, and thus it remains a fairly unexplored field within management studies. (Dogan Gursoy & Christina G. Chi, 2020). During the global health and economic crisis, caused by the pandemic, the ability to engage in decision-making has been of importance to address the unprecedented turn of events and tackle challenges (Tabesh, Vera, 2020). With an uncertainty of the longevity of the crisis, short-term and long-term need for resources alongside a flow of contradicting information, pressure has been put on decision-makers. Undoubtedly, the governmental restrictions deepened our urge to research the organizational implications on the RI specifically. Thus, we found exploring the strategic decision-making of DMs, in an environment where old rules no longer apply, particularly intriguing. Again, because of the limited information for decision-makers to adhere to and a semi-reliance on government allowance of business practice. The rare context and longevity of the crisis, greatly triggered our interest and demonstrated the reasoning behind why this study was conducted. Therefore, this thesis aims at examining strategic decision-making processes (SDMP) and investigate the sense made by decision-makers in the RI during this crisis. The two phenomenons, sensemaking (SM) and SDMP, are studied to form a deeper understanding of how the processes have unfolded under these extreme conditions.

1.2 Previous research and problem area

Organizational crisis and strategic decision-making (SDM) is thoroughly researched within the management field (e.g. Elbanna & Child, 2007; Dean and Sharfman, 1993; Papadakis et al., 1999, Dutton, 1986). However, there is not much research examining implications of a crisis equivalent to this pandemic (Gursoy & G. Chi, 2020). Consequently, there is a need for a crisis of this longevity and its impact on SDM to be researched. Additionally, scholarly research that specifically adheres to the RI devotes more attention to crisis management, rather than SDMPs, which further stresses the need for this field to be examined within the RI. An industry which in academic research and literature, typically falls under the HI and therefore rarely is examined separately.

The role of the managers has not only shifted strongly towards being quick on their feet to make decisions forward, but also expanded towards formulating an understanding of the situation (Holmberg & Petrelius Karlberg, 2021). Forming an understanding of the environment correlates with the act of SM, however, relevant empirical data of SM processes during the pandemic is scarce. Yet in the past few decades SM research has interested scholars. The phenomenon is generally defined as arriving at a plausible understanding of a shifting environment (Weick, 1988; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Ancona, 2012). SM is heightened under turbulent conditions, in an attempt to rationalize and form a plausible understanding (D. Ancona, 2012; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). The pandemic can be described as an extreme and turbulent incident with consequences sharply separating business operations and strategy in a before and after (Verbeke & Yuan, 2021). From this, a gap was identified in existing empirical research on SDMP during a crisis in the RI. Therefore, the expected contribution of this research is to provide deeper insight on the SDMP in an industry highly affected by a striking crisis.

1.3 Purpose and research question

Through the lens of the theoretical framework, our aim is to form a deeper understanding of the processes adopted by DMs during the pandemic, in order to make strategic decisions and make sense of the reconstructed business environment. This thesis examines the unfolding of processes and adopts theories of SDMP and SM to achieve this aim. The governmental restrictions and ambiguous environment has situated the RI and thus DMs in a new context. Therefore, our research question is formulated as follows:

How has the strategic decision-making process unfolded during the covid-19 pandemic?

1.4 Delimitations

To answer the research question and fulfill the purpose of this thesis, the choice was made to study DMs within the Swedish RI. The RI can be divided into multiple segments , however, our primary focus is full service restaurants, more commonly referred to as fine-dining. These restaurants are defined as more traditional with table services and generally have license to

serve alcohol (Houston Chronicle, n.d.; SCB, 2020). The motivation behind this delimitation springs from the severe consequences of the pandemic and the governmental restrictions full service restaurants have suffered from, resulting in massive losses in revenue for business operators (S&P Global, 2021).

Moreover, we delimit ourselves to examine how the decision-making process has unfolded during the pandemic and what dimensions have been prominent in these processes. We thus exclude further investigation of how internal differences in resources and capabilities potentially influence the decision-making process and strictly focus on the impact of uncertainty and consequences of the pandemic. Additionally, implementation and effectiveness of strategic decisions are not within the scope of this thesis. This consequently also delimits our research, in terms of time horizon, to place a focal point on the decision-making process pre-pandemic until april of 2021, a time where the crisis is still ongoing.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Swedish restaurant industry

In literature, the term "restaurant industry" generally refers to the market on which restaurants of all sorts operate, when in actuality RI is one of the four segments of the larger HI. The similarities between the four segments are numerous as all companies within the HI deal with customer satisfaction and focus on meeting leisurely needs rather than basic needs (Hospitalitynet, 2017). Distinctive for the RI, is the low requirement for previous knowledge and experience, which attracts young workers and makes it one of the most common gateways to the labor market in Sweden. Furthermore, the industry is characterized by high worker turnover and binding minimum wages (Skedinger, 2002). In 2018 the HI employed more than 200,000 people, corresponding to approximately 4% of total employment in Sweden (Visita, 2019). Over the past decade the RI has seen tremendous growth and businesses have been thriving (SCB, 2020). The pandemic imposed a stagnation and later a decline in this growth. The RI has been affected severely for multiple reasons. First and foremost, the government has imposed continuous regulatory measures affecting the industry (Krisinformation, 2020). The most severe restriction being a mandatory closing time of 8 pm for all restaurants serving alcohol. Considering a fifth of total sales in the industry is generated from alcohol sales (SvD Näringsliv, 2021), this had devastating consequences. Secondly, guests are reluctant to visit restaurants due to health risks and the fear of infection, naturally causing a rapid decrease in demand (Sung, Hu & King, 2021; Ju Song, Yeon, & Lee, 2021). Lastly, the RI is seen as a high-risk industry by lenders and investors (Dalbor & Andrew, 2013). Consequently some restaurant owners are private creditors to their loans. Hence, there is a risk not only for organizational, but also personal bankruptcy. Following the pandemic, more than 50% of all employees have been laid off, terminated or notified (SvT, 2021). In 2020 a 20% decrease in total revenue was recorded in the RI in Sweden which corresponds to SEK 26 billion (SCB, 2021).

2.1.1 The role of the decision maker

Previous research on the role of the decision maker (DM) within the RI is rather scarce (Israeli, 2007), alike literature on the RI in general. Research suggests the typical hierarchical structure within the RI, adopts several levels of decision-making and leadership. This structure varies

across organizations as well as the allocation of responsibilities (Nordqvist & Persson, 2010). Considering the lack of research on DMs' role within the RI in general, there is neither literature concerning that of a crisis. However, it has been found that there is an urgent need for managers that are specialists in crisis management within the RI, as the industry continues to develop (Wut, Xu & Wong, 2021). The presence of an experienced leader within the RI can be strategically significant in a crisis (Ritchie, 2004). Literature on the DMs' role during a crisis more generally, irrespective of industry, found that the role differs in stages of a crisis, depending on its nature and severity. However, in all stages of the crisis, resilience and wisdom are emphasized to achieve effectiveness and success in decision-making (Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

2.2 Crisis

There are countless ways of describing what defines a crisis and what separates it from a high impact event. Previous research describes a crisis as a situation where all predictive power is lost, and a situation cannot be explained comprehendingly. A cosmology episode. (Weick 1993). Additionally, a crisis includes critical "points of departure," or "moments of change," where our understanding of the world or it in itself shifts in important and dramatic ways (Murphy, 1996). Literature has identified five common traits of organizational crises: 1) they are ambiguous which creates a SM process, 2) they have low probability, however they threaten the survival of the organization, 3) they require fast decisions to be made due to their time constraint, 4) they disrupt the status quo of the organization, and 5) leaders gain authority which changes the leader-follower relationship (Santos, Bandeira-de- Mello, & Cunha, 2016). Furthermore, there is a distinction between crises imposed by external and internal factors, where internal factors are based on management failure while external crises are beyond organizations' control (Lerbinger, 1997). Previous research also found that when an organization goes through an external crisis, they will look for support from those who are perceived as responsible for the crisis situation, for example the government (Israeli, 2007).

2.2.1 Coronavirus crisis

Considering the mentioned definition of a crisis, the pandemic can be said to impose an external crisis where the operations and the world in itself has dramatically changed. The pandemic much like past crises challenges DMs as the environment offers inconsistencies in the making of them. Offering lack of supportive structures to make such decisions (Al-Dabbagh, 2020). The pandemic is a crisis complex in its nature, thus stipulating more demanding crisis management (Al-Dabbagh, 2020). The impact of the pandemic will be uneven in both space and time (Hall, Scott & Gössling, 2020). The magnitude of this crisis and its devastating effects on operations, employees, and customers are unrivaled compared to previous crises. Thus, implying that the RI has stepped into an unknown territory in terms of managing the crisis (Gursoy and G. Chi, 2020). However, an early study on the impact of the pandemic has proved the importance of strong pre-pandemic financial conditions to alleviate the negative effects of the crisis. The results suggest that firms of larger size and more cash are prone to tolerate the demanding period more effectively (Ju Song, Yeon & Lee, 2021).

2.2.2 Organizational crisis

Crises have disrupted the HI before. It is an industry sensitive to external crises, such as terrorism, natural disasters, economic recession, and disease outbreaks, but it also faces numerous internal challenges and crises (Mckercher & Hui, 2004). Despite this, crisis response has received insufficient attention in the HI for decades (Pforr & Hosie, 2008). Furthermore, previous research suggests that almost no knowledge is gained from crisis to crisis and most of the crisis-management practices within the industry are reactive (Mansfeld, 1999).

A study on how restaurants in Hong Kong responded to SARS, an epidemic that was a death sentence to the industry and like the current pandemic caused liquidity problems for many restaurateurs, found that the appropriate strategy to deal with disasters from the physical environment is to react quickly to minimize damage. The same study found that the best tactics to handle a crisis include all measures that could minimize costs and enhance the revenue of the restaurant (Tse, So & Sin, 2004). Another study examined the strategic response by restaurants in New York following the terrorist attack on September 11th 2001. This, like the pandemic, was an external crisis putting a complete stop to business operations. However, a crisis of a smaller magnitude compared to the covid-19 crisis, both in terms of time horizon and geographical scope. The study found that an initial quick response from DMs was consistent in all organizations. (Green, Bartholomew & Murrman, 2008).

3 Theoretical Framework

The processes of interest for this study include strategic decision-making (SDM) and sensemaking (SM) and thus, theories concerning these processes compose our theoretical framework.

3.1 Usage of theory

The theoretical lens applied in this thesis extends to three dimensions of SDM theory and the process of navigating through SM. The theories are applied to a crisis context, where the processes commonly intensifies. The theory of SM is mainly extracted from the works of K. Weick (1988; 1995; et al. 2005), but also D. Ancona (2012). Through a process perspective of SDM we aim to understand how the strategic decision-making processes (SDMP) has unfolded, and investigate how three dimensions; (1) rationality, (2) intuition, (3) political behavior have interplayed, primarily based on the work of S. Elbanna (2006) and S. Elbanna & J. Child (2007). The study pays less attention to theory on decision effectiveness and the outcome resulting from it.

3.2 Sensemaking in Organizations

Elaborating on SM, it addresses both the concept and conditions of what is needed to make sense of a situation and the subsequent action to take (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Thus, it moves beyond the act of interpreting a situation, to cover orchestrating frameworks and

events as well. Because people play a fundamental role in the construction of the situation one attempts to understand, SM is a process of interacting with others and the environment to make sense of it (Christianson, Barton, 2020). Thus, SM applies frames of meaning to an event (S. Maitlis, M. Christianson, 2014), in an attempt to reduce uncertainty, facilitate action and reduce the presence of multiple interpretations and contrasting views. This aspect is considered equally relevant in the absence of contrasting views. Thus, SM is also of relevance when there are no interpretations nor impressions of an event (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). In an organizational context, SM questions the strictly rational and the theory suggests that "In dealing with ambiguity, interdependent people search for meaning, settle for plausibility and move on" (Weick et al., 2005).

3.2.1 Sensemaking and decision-making

The theory of SM enables leaders to better understand their environment, thus allowing leaders to perform other activities, such as decision-making, better (D. Ancona, 2012). SM is an act of questioning the strictly rational and letting cues in the environment help navigate an understanding (Weick, 1988). SM is essentially about learning, it provides an explanation of activities, ongoing and to some extent pre-decision. Enactment is a central part of SM, altering institutions and environments. The process of SM provides a balance of retrospect and prospect, in the shape of anticipation and resilience respectively (Weick et al., 2005). SM and decision-making complement each other, reflecting different perspectives of human action. (Boland, 2008). A tendency to extract certain elements which construct the sense made and decision-making acted upon the meaning assigned to these elements in SM (Connell, 1998). In the interpretative tradition, the process of sensemaking and retrospective rationality takes part in SDM. Where rationality is not concerned with choice between alternatives, but concerns enacting rational order of the world (Hendry, 2000).

3.3 Strategic decisions

Strategic decisions have been defined as "infrequent decisions made by top leaders of an organization critically affecting the health and survival" by Eisenhardt and Zbaracki (1992). Additionally, strategic decisions bear responsibility for the future outcome and survival of the organization (Harrison, 1996).

3.4 Dimensions of strategic decision-making processes

Scholars argue SDM is central, in addressing general and organizational issues. Thus, paving the way for the future of an organisation through decisions of fundamental substance (Eisenhardt, Zbaracki, 1992). DMs bear the utmost responsibility of SDM in an organization, and go through SDMP to arrive at a strategic decision. Research suggests processes of SDM extend to cover a wide range of dimensions of various presence in different contexts, (Papadakis, Lioukas & Chambers, 1998; Elbanna, 2006; Elbanna & Child, 2007) however, rationality dominated SDM for decades before intuition and political behaviour in SDM caught attention from scholars (Calabretta, Gemser, Wijnberg, 2017; Elbanna & Child, 2007). Findings of Elbanna (2006)

suggest three dominating dimensions of interplay in SDM; (1) political behaviour, (2) rational and (3) intuition.

3.4.1 Rationality

Rationality, to a large extent, revolves around viewing action or behavior through a frame of reference which justifies it as understandable and reasonable. In SDM research, the level of rationality has been broadly discussed and researched. By consequence of being regarded as central to SDM (Elbanna & Child, 2007). The concept of rationality has been constructed in various ways in research (Papadakis et al., 1998). Khatri (1994) describes strategic rationality, as a formal approach to decision-making which attends to systematic and analytical processes. Rationality is also described in research, as calculated or a concept which deploys logic in pursuing goals (Dean & Sharfman, 1993b; Schwenk, 1995). In economics, rationality adheres to maximizing utility, foremost treated as an assumption of human behavior. Contrasting rationality in organization theory constructs the concept as more relativistic in its nature (Elbanna & Child, 2007). Scholars argue a central problem with the rational model of decision-making is the assumption of available information. Nevertheless, disregarding the potential cost of obtaining information (Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1970). Alternatively, bounded rationality is introduced. Thus, implying decision-makers are bound to their capabilities eg. cognitive and political realities, however, adopt rationality within these constraints (Elbanna & Child, 2007; Snyman & Drew, 2003).

3.4.2 Intuition

Intuition is a more widely explored concept in other fields of scholarly work, such as psychology. The process of intuition in SDM is portrayed as a complex phenomenon (Elbanna, 2006). A rapid process in which managers arrive at a decision, but often unable to provide a logical or linear explanation of the process (Simon. 1987). Elbanna (2006) stresses three central dimensions continuously addressed in previous research of intuition: (1) Reliance on judgement, (2) Reliance on experience, (3) Use of gut-feeling, where knowing and sensing interplay (Elbanna, 2006). The intuitive process within the SDM litterature, stresses an incremental approach which adheres from knowledge of the situation, characterized as facts due to crystallization of knowledge from past experience (Khatri, 2000).

3.4.3 Political behavior

Political behavior is another dimension central to SDM, extensively stated by scholars (Dean & Sharfman, 1993b). SDM is influenced by people, and in its nature concerned with goals and interests of people. Contrasting to rationality where decisions are formed without bias or personal reasoning, the political behavior process perspective reflects power, conflict and interests' interaction (Elbanna, 2006). Eisenhardt (1989) states a dimension of decision-making of which presence is more noticeable in erratic and competitive settings. Political behavior, in literature, explores two views. One where scholars address politics among organizational members and units, thus the power and influence on decision-making. The other view examines both the power and influence of external parties and internal parties (eg. units and individuals). External parties extend to customers and governmental agencies (Elbanna, 2006; Dean &

Sharfman, 1993b). Nevertheless, loss of profits and opportunities can spring from political behavior stalling decision-making, as it can be time-consuming (Pfeffer, 1992).

3.5 The interplay of strategic decision-making dimensions

Eisenhardt (1989) established that managers use a combination of intuition and rationality. Managers produced a variety of alternatives then failed to examine them thoroughly or focused on only a few (Eisenhardt, 1989). Literature reveals that DMs rarely adhere to a single process dimension. There is a conjunction of the different processes in which they are adopted simultaneously and viewed as complementary or dual in SDM (Elbanna, 2006; Simon, 1987). Also, Dean and Sharfman (1993) debate SDM can be guided by both political behavior and rationality without overlooking one or the other.

3.6 Theoretical Framework

The empirical center of attention is to investigate how DMs arrive at a strategic decision. The theoretical framework combines the theory of SDMP and SM as illustrated in **Figure 2**. Extractions from theories extend to sensemaking as a pre-decisional activity (Weick et al. 2005), which intensifies in crises when uncertainty is heightened and derives a plausible understanding with cues in the environment (Weick, 1988; Christianson & Barton). The model illustrates the process of SM and SDMPs; political behaviour, rationality and intuition (2006) as simultaneous activities under which influence a strategic decision is then made. This framework will be used to examine how DMs have engaged in these activities during the pandemic.

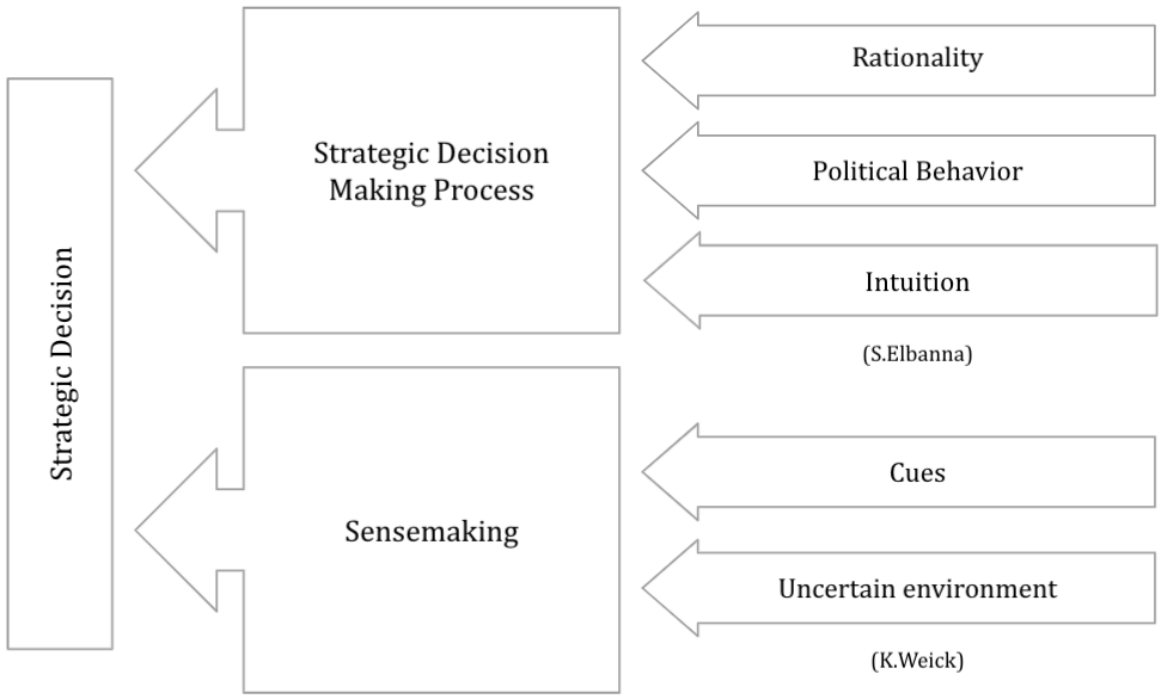


Figure 2. *Illustration of theoretical framework, edited by Ljungälv and Sjöblom.*

3.6 Theory discussion

The extractions from theory shape the theoretical framework, with emphasis on the process and dimensions of these phenomenons. However, we acknowledge that the theoretical framework adopted will paint the canvas on which the empirics are subsequently portrayed upon. As this study examines SDMP in a crisis, DMs' construction of reality is of importance to understand how processes have unfolded. Consequently, this motivates the choice of combining theories. However, as the framework combines theories of different ontological and epistemological foundations, the risk of creating a framework not applicable to the study, is increased. Through the abductive research method, the empirical data and continual literature review govern and mentor our judgement of applicability. Thus, the risk is mitigated. We recognize the possibility for the applied theory to steer our findings and empirical collection in certain directions.

4 Methodology

4.1 Choice of method

4.1.1 Abductive reasoning and qualitative research

This thesis employs an abductive research approach, a choice which stems from the nature of the research objective. Unlike deductive and inductive approaches, an abductive research can explain, develop or change the theoretical framework, before, during or after the research process (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). An abductive research allows the researcher to move back and forth between inductive and open-ended research settings to more hypothetical and deductive attempts at verifying hypotheses. This enables continuous literature review throughout the process of empiric collection, which allows for an iterative process of research offering both empirical and theoretical insights adding value to the thesis.

As this study is concerned with understanding the process of SDM in an uncertain and changing environment, people's individual experience is of importance. Thus, the decision was made to use qualitative research consisting of in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach simplifies capturing individuals' subjective world views, perception of the situation and their own experience of the crisis. These aspects are crucial to be able to answer the research question. A qualitative approach is chosen, by reason of being recognized as more relevant than the alternative quantitative approach, as it enables a richer understanding of the processes of SM and decision-making of which this thesis is concerned.

4.1.2 Constructivism and interpretivism

This thesis takes a constructivist ontological observation perspective where the social world is seen as something that people are in the process of constructing. The ambition was to understand and explain DMs' experience of the crisis and how this has affected their actions. By taking a constructionist approach it enables the authors to gain insight to decision makers' social reality in contrast to the objective reality according to (Bryman et al., 2019). Furthermore,

since the analysis will be made based on semi-structured and in-depth interviews it requires interpretations of empirical data. Thus, this study is based on an interpretivist approach, where the behaviors of the interview subjects are mediated through the authors' subjective interpretations.

4.1.3 Cross-sectional research design

Multiple interviews were conducted, to collect data from more than one case, within a short time period. The collected material was then examined to detect patterns of association. Thus, this study was made in accordance with a cross-sectional research design (Bryman, et. al, 2019).

4.2 Sample

4.2.1 Pilot interview and construction of interview guide

Prior to the formal application of the interview guide, a pilot interview was carried out to test the first draft. The pilot interview was conducted with a restaurant manager and triggered further research of theory. Ultimately, the definitive interview guide was put together through revision of the theoretical framework and further review of literature by reason of the pilot interview. See the original interview guide in **Appendix 2**. The pilot interview was conducted solely for experimental purposes and to see what adjustments needed to be made moving forward. The empirical contribution of the pilot was deemed low and irrelevant for the analysis, and thus, is not included in the empirical material.

4.2.2 Interviewed individuals

The study is based on interviews with DMs within the Swedish RI. In this study, “decision-maker” refers to individuals with the authority to control and decide on larger matters that affect the operations of organizations. These individuals include restaurant owners, CEOs and restaurant managers. The choice of interviewees stems from the aim to get a perspective on decision-making which addresses the business operations and organization as a whole. Furthermore, as established by literature, strategic decision-making is the responsibility of the top managers (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Elbanna, 2006).

In order to access a wider assortment of perspectives and gain a deeper understanding, the approach extended to interviewing a variety of individuals from organizations of different sizes in terms of capacity and revenue as well as geographical position. The aim is to provide an industry-specific, however wider in terms of the type of organization, applicable answer to the research question. With this in mind, the choice of a spread in terms of organisation size, capacity, revenue and geographical position of operation will allow us to spot potential differences and overarching similarities between the answers conducted through interviews. A total of 35 decision makers were contacted, of which 17 responded. This ultimately led to 12 interviews. Interviewees were contacted via email and LinkedIn.

4.3 Empirical process

4.3.1 The collection of empirics

As the aim is to study the SDM processes during the pandemic and get a deeper understanding of how DMs justify their decisions, the opportunity for follow-up questions were of utmost importance. Thus, the choice was made to conduct semi-structured interviews as they give room for the respondent to adjust and steer the interview in the desired direction. Moreover, it allows the interviewees to put emphasis on the matters they find particularly important which gives a deeper insight to their perception of the situation. During all interviews a pre constructed interview guide was used with a few questions covering different subjects of relevance. Only open-ended questions were included in the interviews to avoid steering the respondents in a certain direction. We also tried not to show our own opinions and personal values in matters. More sensitive questions were presented after we felt like a mutual trust had been established between ourselves and the respondent.

The length of each interview was 30-60 minutes with an average of 42 minutes. The hope was to perform as many interviews as possible in person to prevent the relationship between respondents and interviewers from being affected by having online meetings. However, considering the current poor state of the pandemic, all interviews were held online. An additional risk of conducting interviews online is that potential body language and other non-verbal expressions may be lost. These are quite important aspects when making subjective interpretations of another individual. This risk was mitigated since a majority of the interviews were conducted through video conferences which allows for important body language to be captured to a large extent.

4.3.2 Presentation of empirics & analysis process

The interviews were conducted during March and April 2021. All interviews were transcribed shortly after they were conducted, in order to be attainable for analysis as qualitative research generates a complex database. Considering the aim with this research the decision was made to use a narrative method when analyzing the data. Thus, the presentation of empirics follows a narrative pattern as well. The empirical material is presented in a chronological order to be able to follow the continuous changes in the decision-making from before, and throughout the pandemic. Furthermore, the analysis followed an iterative process, as collection and analysis processes have intersected. Thus, interviewees have portrayed their construction of reality, through the lens of their language and stories (Bryman, et al., 2019). This translates to how they understand the world that surrounds them and themselves. Moreover, a narrative analysis is compatible with the ontological observation perspective. Given our research question, the narrative analysis allows for an insight of organizational SM (Varaa et al., 2016).

4.4 Method discussion and criticism

To ensure and increase the trustworthiness of the study a critical examination of the four criterion of trustworthiness, in accordance with Bryman, et al. (2019), was made.

4.4.1 Credibility

Following our choice to study the RI which is a subsector of the HI, there was not a lot of scholarly grounded previous literature to base this study on. Most previous literature studies the hospitality or the tourism industry where several sub sectors are included. Consequently, this means literature available on the RI specifically is not as extensive as more well-researched fields and, thus, it has a larger risk of containing faults. Furthermore, there is even less literature on the Swedish RI which further compromises the possibility of finding scrutinized literature. Therefore, the majority of the literature used has been on the HI or international restaurant industries which could somewhat decrease the credibility of our study.

4.4.2 Transferability

Additional criticism can be directed towards the transferability of the study since the environment and conditions of it seldom are constant in a qualitative study. This especially applies to our study where the aim is to research how the ongoing pandemic has affected decision-making. Furthermore, with respect to Covid-19 still having a tight grip on the world as well as the RI in Sweden, it will not allow one to draw a solid conclusion about the long-term effect of the decisions made. Another limitation in regards to transferability is the uniqueness of the covid-19 crisis, it is unlikely that a similar crisis will affect the industry going forward. Following our choice to study the RI specifically can also be argued to create a limitation in transferability considering it is a unique industry in terms of opening hours, labor force, product offering, etc., and thus, it may not be transferable to other industries. However, since we have collected data from widely differentiating organizations in terms of size, structure, and strategy, the transferability within the RI is deemed high.

4.4.3 Dependability

To ensure the dependability of our research process we have adopted an auditing approach and kept record of all stages of the study (Bryman et al., 2019). Throughout this process we have had meetings with our supervisor and supervision group where we have received valuable feedback regarding our study which further increases the dependability of the study.

4.4.4 Confirmability

As stated by Bryman et al. (2019), complete objectivity is impossible in business research.
The methodological approach can be criticized for lacking in rigourness since the qualitative study design and the choice of epistemology leaves the findings for interpretation which inevitably creates a risk for subjectiveness when analyzing data. Also, the subjectivity in respondents' answers can be questioned. We have taken precautionary measures to mitigate this risk of subjectiveness and, thus, increase the confirmability of the study. Firstly, we were both present during all interviews. Secondly, an interview guide with open-ended questions was used throughout the data collection to avoid influencing participants' answers. Lastly, every interview was recorded and transcribed which ensures correct quotation.

4.5 Ethical approach and implications

In this study we have taken a number of ethical precautions to ensure its authenticity. These measures mainly concern the collection, presentation and analysis of empirics and most importantly the integrity of the participants in our study. When reaching out to potential interviewees we informed them of their anonymity and that their participation is voluntary, meaning they can at any time withdraw their consent without further questions. This decision was made to increase trust and the likelihood of honest and open answers.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed and the quotes used were recited as close to their wording as possible. Verbal and written consent to record was given from all participants. However, all twelve interviews were held in swedish which required a translation to english being made. The cultural differences in language will most probably cause differences from the original meaning when empirics are translated. Thus, it was important to be flexible when translating to not lose the original meaning of the answers.

5 Empirics

5.1 Pre-pandemic state

To form an understanding of pre-pandemic decision-making and SM, interviewees were asked about their perception of the state of the industry and to describe their organization prior to the outbreak. Daniel, owner of group C, says: "*The RI is very unorganized".* He further explains: "*Before the pandemic, the industry was becoming increasingly profitable. There was a ton of money within the industry".* Nils, CEO of restaurant group K, emphasises the prosperous pre-pandemic state: *"It is an extremely exciting industry that has developed enormously lately, and having someone like me in this position is a sign of that {referring to his background within accounting and finance}. That would never have happened 20 years ago. It is an important industry for the future."* Nils further describes: "*Within our group, the manager holds responsibility for one or two divisions*". He continues: *"They bear overall responsibility for EBITDA. The financial results beyond EBITDA, is the responsibility of the CFO and CEO".* Similarly, Aram, owner of restaurant group B, states: *"Managers are pretty much free to make decisions when it comes to their business unit, but it always becomes a financial matter in the end"*. Deniz, owner of restaurant I, shares the ambition of letting the employees take the lead: *"We decided from the very start that we would have a flat organizational structure. For the past five years, we have worked towards making ourselves less needed in the daily operations".* Patrik, owner of restaurant group A says: *"Our industry is special, it is not very loyal. Historically it has been more important who you work with than who you work for,*

5.2 The first wave

In march the coronavirus spread and respondents witnessed major implications on their operations. They were requested to describe their initial response and actions. Tina, owner of restaurant H, says: *"The place was empty".* Aram says: *"On monday the 16th of march we noticed*

that our sales had dropped about 80% over the weekend", and: "*We estimated that we would make it two months, if it would continue in the same way.*" Noah, owner of restaurant E, confirms the previous statement: *"It was like the plug went out on the 16th of March. The wind knocked us out, or the entire industry really."* Cajsa, manager of establishment D, says: "*We made fast decisions, because there was no time to plan ahead, so it was a lot of hands on decisions."* Emil, owner of group G, says: *"We quickly made calculations and realized that we would lose about 2-2.5 mSEK per month which we knew we could handle for a certain period of time, so we decided to continue as before.".* Deniz says: *"We were very early and started acting fast with everything, we were our banks first covid related meeting. We were early with takeaway, and adapting, and with tightening our expenses."* Nils says: *"Oh my, how many decisions we made. First we had to understand what this pandemic meant and try to speculate what consequences it would have, because no one knew. And it was hard to keep a long time horizon in our decisions."* He continues: *"Right away our focus shifted towards our cash and cash equivalents and we let go of the results a bit. The decisions we made and continue to make are taken to improve the company's cash. So the time horizon is very short and all purchases have to go via the CEO."* Sofia, manager of restaurant group C, says: *"We acted quickly".* She continues: "*since layoffs are more expensive than terminations we made the decisions to let people go."*

5.3 Summer season

DMs witnessed increased demand as the summer approached, thus participants were asked to narrate their perception of and actions during the summer. Aram says: *"Then the summer season came and the revenue increased and we learned that 'okay this is what we have to work with' (...), so we saw a terrific summer I must say (...). We even got the opportunity to take over a place here in Uppsala for a bargain, so we did."* Cajsa says: *"We had a great summer"* and continues *"all of a sudden we had to rehire personnel".* Sofia says: "*Before the pandemic I had about 70 employees and after the first wave they were down to 20 people. But then, when business took off again in May I had to rehire about 30 people."* Deniz describes the summer: *"When summer arrived, the situation approached a normality at the end of the day, even if the behavior was very different."* Nils states the shock of the first wave contrasting to summer as: *"our demand sunk by 70% overnight, it was a phase of chock, where we were instantly forced to act. Then spring and summer came along where we saw an increase, still holding low levels but increasing. This increased our positivity, hope for this to be over and that we would make it.*" Tina says: *"Then the sun came and summer approached and as soon as guests had the option of being seated outdoors, people seemed not to care about corona anymore."* .

5.4 The second wave

When the second wave arrived the restrictions increased both in number and strictness. All interviewees testify about the severe implications the second wave had on the industry.

5.4.1 When it rains it pours

Nils describes: *"You could probably say our decision-making has been more drastic and rigorous in round two than in phase one.".* He states: "*Harder decisions were made in phase two than one.".* Daniel explains: *"Everything went downhill, the industry died completely. We gave up, because it*

was impossible to adapt. We cancelled everything and once again started saving…". Aram says: *"Since November and the new restrictions it has been pitch black, we have lost 70-80% of revenue in all our locations. We don't even know if it is worth serving food if we have to close at 8pm."* Tina says: *"For me, the second wave was a lot worse. It was very unpredictable and the timing of it was very unfortunate.".* Göran, CEO of restaurant G states: "*Just like that, half of our revenue evaporated"*. He continues: *"All of a sudden all attention was aimed towards the RI. The government managed to create some sort of public opinion where visiting restaurants became shameful."* For Deniz it was important not to lose their core values along the way: *"We decided to pull the emergency break and close our operations. I cannot rethink my business and change the concept completely, because it will make us irrelevant since our gastronomic value today is extremely high and we have a great reputation in our city."* Aram says: *"You started thinking about things you had never thought about previously(...)" "Every little helps, and things add up in the end."* He continues: *"A lot of small decisions have become a lot bigger, since the means were so much more scarce."* Daniel further states: *"We tried finding alternatives, like day parties and getting guests to arrive earlier by offering fun events earlier in the day."* Emil says: *"Then we approached rock bottom, once again in november. We had to make lay-offs and by Christmas eve the decision to close restaurants at 8 pm came."* He continues: *"We went from approximately 230 sitting guests on a saturday to 57 guests in full capacity. We realized it was not a sustainable business"*

5.4.2 You are on your own

Johan, manager of restaurant J, says: *"With the pandemic spreading, our minister of social affairs says that restaurants are the villains."* Daniel says: *"You get the urge to become political, because you get mad at the current government that basically is sacrificing us in an unfair way."* He continues: *"I think one should know that you won't get any help when there is a crisis. We will be extremely careful in the future to make sure we do not end up in such a vulnerable situation again"* Aram says: *"The problem is, since October, there has been radio silence from the government. They decide on different laws without knowing anything about the industry. I can understand that they have more important stuff to care about, they are saving lives in a way, but I mean, the economy is a very important pillar in our society and therefore one could argue that the dialog with entrepreneurs in this country could have been better."* Göran says: *"It was almost like a war-feeling when all these press conferences came and new restrictions hailed every day. We had to try to interpret them because they never had anything to back up their statements and decisions. Everything was very unclear."* Similarly, Tina says: "*They announced changes of restrictions a few days in advance and without warning, it was impossible to predict."* Patrik says: *"When the second wave came, you were just like 'c'mon is this for real?! What are we supposed to do now? We have done everything!'".*

5.5 Adapting to the new normal

Under strict governmental restrictions restaurateurs have fought for survival. Without there being any indication for eased restrictions, DMs try to adapt to the new normal. Daniel looks back on the past year: *"During this period there has been an extreme focus on survival, you have*

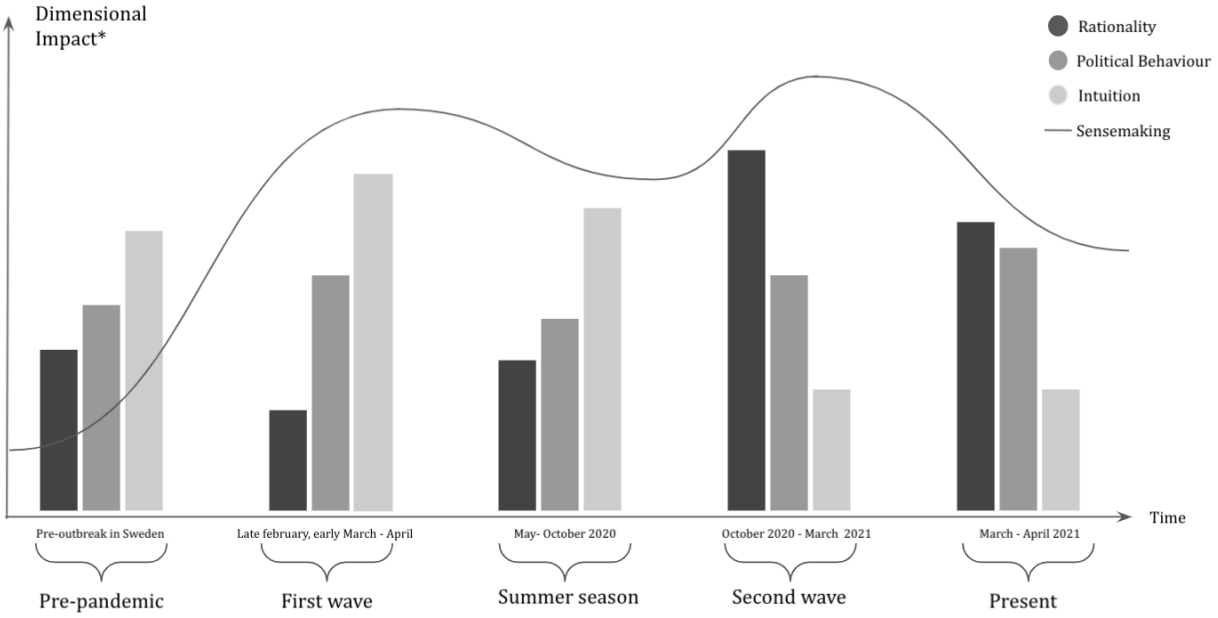
not been able to think about anything else. There has been a focus on liquid assets, more than anything else. Because if the organization no longer exists, there are no jobs to take into consideration." Aram says: *"I consider myself to have one job today which is to ensure this company's survival. If I step on any toes, make a supplier disappointed or lay off the wrong employee, it does not intrigue me (...). You have to be selfish.*"

Nils highlights taking action even with limited access to information: *"Making decisions on the basis of what we have available to us here and now, where you have had to combine considerably little information with a lot of gut-feeling. There are so many parameters, which have been very unsure, our mantra during this period has remained to affect what we can affect*". Emil states: *"Some have tried to save themselves from the crisis, whereas we have held our standpoint of keeping our product intact, as we think it is the right thing to do in the long-term"* Patrik expresses the lack of a plan and preparations for critical situations: "*Looking back at my university studies, it seems simple. Without a doubt, one should have a crisis management plan, meetings on a regular basis, investing time to discuss the present and future etc. However, when one has been in the business for 15 years without experiencing a need for those activities, it is much like going back to the drawing board.".*

Cajsa says: *"It's easy to be wise after the event, but at that time we were panicking and then you make fast decisions."* Deniz says: *"A key takeaway from this time is that it is not one for all, but every man for themselves. In the future we will make sure to not be in a situation where we are dependent on the government."* Nils says: *"With all the information in hand, with a pandemic of this length I believe most business leaders would testify that they should have done more".* He further states: *"Had we de facto known how long this pandemic would last we would have made more uncomfortable decisions in the beginning. I believe we have become more prone to making decisions than before and the fear of doing something wrong has been reduced."* He continues: *"We have learnt to be more attentive to the market from an outside-in perspective instead of inside-out."* Patrik says: *"We have learnt how to become more efficient and effective in a way we were not before the pandemic."* Nils describes the ambivalence between developing the organization while being restrained by the pandemic: *"With one hand you are pulling the emergency brakes while at the same time you are stepping on the gas pedal".*

6 Analysis

In this section we will analyze the empirical material to ultimately reach an answer to the research question. An analysis of the SDM within the RI testify about the importance of the three SDMP dimensions, in combination with the constantly ongoing but fluctuating SM throughout the pandemic. However, the three dimensions are more or less prominent during the multiple stages of the pandemic. Therefore, the analysis is structured in a chronological order to emphasize what dimensions have played a central role in the SDMP throughout the pandemic. The analysis is summarized in **Figure 3.**



*There is no numeric measure for dimensional impact. The purpose is to give an overview of how the dimensions of SDM have influenced the decision making processes in the different stages of the pandemic. .

Figure 3. *Overview of analysis*

6.1 Pre-pandemic

The pre-pandemic economic prosperity of the RI (SCB, 2020), created a propensity to decentralize decision-making authority. Additionally, extensive experience of DMs within the industry has resulted in crystallized knowledge (Khatri, 2000) thus, increased reliance on judgement and experience. Therefore, intuition can be determined to most significantly influence the process of SDM pre-pandemic. The empirical data present DMs' strive towards a flat organizational structure, with more responsibility and decision-making authority delegated to employees. Hence, this puts emphasis on an optimistic level of confidence in future prosperity of the business. Findings suggest that before the pandemic there was little to no hedging for difficult times, but rather a willingness to seek and invest in new business opportunities. This tendency was expressed by DMs running organizations varying in size. Also, the high turnover expressed, indicates political behavior.

6.2 First wave

The empirical data confirms an organizational shock with empty restaurants, a scarcity of information and initial governmental recommendations. A focal point on financials, tightening budgets, and reducing expenses is evident. The restaurant DMs acknowledge increased uncertainty and in an attempt to make the world more orderly, sensemaking increased (Weick, et al., 2005). The empirical data shows how speed was interpreted as principal, due to numerous cancellations and empty facilities.

Based on the empirics, there was an eminent perception of a need for speed and a drastic increase in decision frequency. Evidently the financial state is omni-present regardless of context, however considerable emphasis, diverging from regular practice, was placed on financials resulting in an initial wave of layoffs and terminations. Additionally, centralization of decision-making increases, shifting away from pre-pandemic ambitions. Political behavior increased as DMs looked after self-interests and survival. Also, intuition continued to significantly guide decisions during the first wave, like pre-pandemic.

6.3 Summer season

The initial panic from the first wave weared off, the infection-curve flattened, cashflows increased as visitors returned. A majority of the interviewees had to rehire personnel and expressed optimism about the future across the industry. They express the perception that the crisis had already reached its culmination. This perception in turn triggered a focus on political behavior where decision makers yet again became more concerned with self-interests, other than liquidity or infections, and the desire to have a successful business long term. DMs also acknowledged that premature and irrational decisions were made in the first wave. SM evidently interplays with the dimensions of SDM at this point. Sense is made of a more prosperous future and restaurants move away from hedging for further crisis. DMs shift towards more rationality and political behavior in SDM as their perspective expands to a more long-term view, but still intuition dominates SDMP.

6.4 The second wave

Stricter government regulations completely immobilized the ability to make independent decisions. They tried to understand how to sufficiently respond to the situation. However, it is clear that organizations within the RI struggled with forming plausible understanding due to information scarcity and ambiguity. Press conferences presented new information and regulations, continuously affecting the process of SM. Empirics state that they found themselves in a no man's land without any indication of what the verdict would be. In accordance with literature, looking for support from the government, as they were perceived as responsible (Israeli, 2007).

This led to an emergence of differences in DMs' SDM process during this phase. While some tried to find manners to maximize their operations under the restricted opportunities, others saw a complete shutdown of their business as the only alternative. Ultimately, all DMs tried to make decisions that would minimize the financial damage. This resulted in decisions based mainly on rationality, but also political behavior. Consequently, SDMP relied less on intuition as the knowledge gained from years of previous experience had not served them well in earlier phases of the pandemic.

6.5 Adapting to the new normal

Reflections of DMs, portray the crisis as a conflicting experience. Pulling the emergency brakes of the physical service in restaurants while stepping on the gas pedal in innovation and exploration of developing new businesses to reach recurring cash-flows. Interviewees express their perception of the future in retrospective terms, looking back to make sense of past decisions and presented cues, to bring this knowledge into future SDM processes. Reflections state a shared perception that decisions were hastened and irrational. They homogeneously view strategic decisions serving a long-term perspective and consequently go through a more rational and systematic process to reap the benefits of decisions long-term and ensure future financial stability. Reflections of the past year play a role in the decisions DMs see themselves make moving forward. The experience of this crisis, sparked a considerable interest in restructuring the business operations towards regular meetings. Also, a propensity to rely more on systematic analysis for guidance in decisions moving forward.

6.6 Summary of analysis

After an analysis of the empirical material it becomes evident that there have been clear shifts in which SDMP have dominated DMs' decisions throughout the pandemic, as illustrated in **Figure 3**. Empirics reveal an interplay with the surrounding and altered environment. The scarcity of information regarding both the present and the future entailed initial reactive responses to the changing environment and a SDMP more reliant on judgement and past experiences than rationality. Rationality, political behavior and intuition interplay. Reliance on experience is prominent pre-pandemic, as empirics state there was never a need for a crisis-plan. The initial shock triggered a state of panic within the industry which stressed DMs to choose a path forward and prompted speed to mitigate the risk of losing too much liquidity and going out of business.

As summer arrived and cues from the environment such as increase in guests and cash-flows, formed an optimistic view of the future. DMs still operated largely on intuition, relying on past judgements as information remained scarce. However, this optimism did not persist, because walls came tumbling down again in the midst of the fall when the second wave hit. As they struggled to make sense of the situation, a more proactive and rational approach was adopted in SDM-processes. Strategically analyzing financial impact and business consequences, for alternatives and guidance. The empirical data entails patterns of DMs hedging for future challenges. The political behavior seemingly increased, and DMs acted in the interest of the business with little regard to personnel. They dared not to trust their intuition this time as uncertainty once again increased and restrictions “hailed”. In the phase of adapting, interviewees expressed a reluctance to look upon the near future with optimism. However, the restrictions remain unchanged and SM decreases. They aim to make more considerate strategic decisions as they retrospectively reflect on acting too fast and/or irrational.

7 Conclusion and discussion

7.1 Answer to the research question

With this research we aim to understand how decision-makers operating within an industry highly and severely affected by the covid-19 pandemic have made decisions. Empirical data collected from decision makers within the RI has been analyzed with the purpose to answer the research question:

How has the strategic decision making process unfolded during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Based on our analysis, the SDM moves from a pre-pandemic equilibrium characterized by intuition, towards an exacerbation of intuition reliance while falling short on the other two SDMP dimensions, in the first wave. The dimension then falls back to pre-pandemic equilibrium during the summer season, as sense is made of approaching normality. The second wave illustrates a drastic shift in SDMP, characterized by a more long-term proactive approach with a single focus on survival. Arriving at the present-phase, DMs show reluctance to adopt intuition in their SDM. They are guided by a systematic rational process and political behavior, as survival remains the highest priority for organizations. Political behavior remains fairly unchanged during the crisis, as DMs continuously aim to satisfy self-interest with little attention to respective consequences.

To conclude, the decision-making processes during the pandemic have been characterized by initial fast decision based on intuition, to in a later stage become more well-thought-out, grounded in rationality and political behavior.

7.1.1 Discussion and practical implication

Through our qualitative study we arrive at the understanding that the SDMP has changed amidst the pandemic. Contrasting to what literature suggests about the inability to learn from crises (Mansfeld, 1999), there is a pattern showing a propensity towards more rationality in decision makers' SDMP moving forward. Moreover, the dominance of rationality and political behavior which the magnitude of the crisis resulted in, reveal that DMs look to achieve long-term objectives and aim to approach proactivity rather than reactivity. It can be argued that the knowledge from the first and second wave remains in memory and to some extent is covered by "reliance of experience" under the intuition domain. However, propensity seems to have shifted towards more strategic rationality, hence a more systematic and logical approach (Khatri, 1994) with attention to throughout goals (Schwenk, 1995). Based on the analysis in the previous section, the conclusion arrives at the understanding that DMs' sensemaking process is intensified during the pandemic and the rise of environmental changes, in order to construct a perception of the environment to unlock the ability to act in it (Weick, 1995; D. Ancona, 2012). This study sheds light on the RI, which had enjoyed economic prosperity (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2019) leading up to the crisis. Pre-pandemic the industry largely lacked organizational structure and the decision-making apparatus employed no regularity of meetings nor clearly stated long-term vision or goals. From our qualitative research method it is evident

DMs have converged their practice to replicate a more structured approach of SDM, and more emphasis on long-term objectives.

7.1.2 Contribution

The expected contribution of this research is to provide deeper insight to the SDMP in a generally neglected industry, highly affected by a striking crisis. Plotting the SDMP and SM in a rare crisis context, opens up for further research to investigate the effectiveness of DMs adapted approaches. Strategic decisions are generally rare, but the pandemic stipulated conditions where numerous strategic decisions had to be made over a short time span. The conducted study, although from a small scale perspective, further explores this rare context and adds to already existing literature by combining the two phenomenons and qualitative empirical research.

7.2 Limitations

A few limitations with this study are addressed in this section. First and foremost, there is a risk that interviewees have biased negative attitudes towards the government as many regulations specifically adhere to their industry. Thus, there is a risk of this bias affecting the accuracy and honesty of their answers as they blame the government for deprived freedom to operate and justify inaction. Additional risk of negative biases can be exaggerated due to the pre-pandemic prosperity within the industry, which created substantial contrast. Nevertheless, positive biases towards DMs' own choice of actions and towards the industry has also been identified as a potential risk. In addition, the interviewees can choose to withhold information, consciously or unconsciously sharing stories or experiences justifying decisions to rationalize prior decisions.

Another potential limitation with this study is the choice of delimitation to the RI in Sweden and the full service segment specifically. This also increases the risk of variability of external and internal factors' influence on decision-making and thus, the pandemic can have varying impact on different organizations.

Further limitations of this study are connected to the scarce literature available on the RI. Restaurants are often depicted in literature as part of the HI or jointly with the leisure and tourist segments of activities. With respect to this, there is even less that adheres to the Swedish fine-dining RI in previous research and literature. The limitation of relevant information to extract from literature translates into a constraint of directly applicable theories and research. However, our collection of literature and theory mainly adhere to general research and non-industry specific frameworks given the restriction of accessible industry-specific information. Nevertheless, this has allowed for less cognitive bias in terms of influences from readings prior to and in the midst of collecting empirics and executing the research. Ultimately, since at the time of this study, the pandemic has not yet passed and SDM from this report show a dynamic pattern, the process of reaching strategic decisions can fluctuate and come to change further.

7.3 Suggestions for further research

Given that the RI in Sweden is a rather unexplored field of research, as is the context of the covid-19 pandemic, there are several suggestions for further research. Following our study on how the SDMP has unfolded during the pandemic it would be interesting to, post-pandemic, study what decisions were made and consequently which strategic decisions turned out to be most successful in the end. Another interesting topic to research would be to examine whether the decision-making process has permanently changed to a more rational organizational decision-making process or if it will return to a more intuitive process once the turmoil is over. Lastly, in our study we have aimed to form a better overarching understanding of how the process of making decisions has unfolded and the dimensions that have influenced it and pervaded in the participating organizations, disregarding the differences in their company structure, financial state, size et.c. Therefore, further research investigating what impact the differences in organizational size and structure have had on the SDMP and the strategic decisions made during the pandemic, could greatly contribute to the academic debate.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Email template

Hej XX,

Vi är två studenter på Handelshögskolan i Stockholm som för närvarande är i processen av att skriva vår kandidatuppsats i management- och ledarskapsstudier. Vår ambition är att studera hur beslutsfattande och ledarskap i den hårt drabbade restaurangbranschen har påverkats av coronapandemin. Vi vill bjuda in er koncern och eventuella beslutsfattande nyckelpersoner i era verksamheter till att medverka i vår studie, och undrar därav om ni vill ställa upp med deltagande under informella intervjuer om 45-60 minuter? Deltagande i intervjuer är i uppsatsen helt anonymt och syftet med intervjuerna är att kunna se eventuella samband och dra generella slutsater inom ramen för ledarskap i en pågående krisdrabbad bransch som förhoppningsvis vidare kan ge ledande insikter för organisationer i frågan om hur man ska hantera krisen framöver, men även kommande kriser. Ert deltagande kommer vara av stor vikt för att genomföra studien och vi skulle vara väldigt tacksamma för din medverkan!

Vänliga hälsningar,
Maja Sjöblom och Louise Ljungälv

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Om intervjuobjektet**:**

1. Berätta gärna kortfattat om dig själv och dina erfarenheter hittills?
    a. Vad är din position i företaget idag och hur länge har du suttit på den positionen?
    b. Hur kom du in i branschen och hur länge du jobbat inom restaurang samt nuvarande företag?
    c. Vilka uppgifter innefattar din roll idag? Vilket mandat har du för att fatta beslut?

Om organisationen:

1. Beskriv koncernens/restaurangens koncept och vad det ni erbjuder kunderna som besöker er?
2. Beskriv gärna er företagskultur, hur tar den form i den dagliga verksamheten?
3. Hur många anställda är ni för närvarande? Har detta förändrats under året?
4. Hur ser demografin av anställda ut?
5. Hur ser organisationsstrukturen ut?
    a. Vilka inom organisationen har mandat till att fatta beslut?
    b. Hur ser fördelningen av beslutsfattandes ut, finns det olika nivåer och vilka områden berör deras mandat?
    c. Fattas beslut vanligtvis i grupp eller ofta av enskilda personer?
        i. Om olika, när och varför?
    d. Har restaurangchefer eller övriga anställda viss frihet under de beslut som fattas av högre instanser tex. ägare och i koncernen?

Om intervjuobjekten beslutsfattande:

1. Vilka områden berör din roll främst? I förhållande till verksamheten, personal etc?
    a. Personal
    b. Verksamheten
        i. Inköp
        ii. Servering
        iii. Öppettider
2. Beskriv processen som du går igenom när du tar beslut?
3. Hur upplever du att ni manövrerat krisen som verksamhet?

Beslut och sensemaking som hänförs till tidsperioden från Covid-19 första utbrott till nuvarande:

1. Vad tog ni för beslut efter de första rekommendationerna från regeringen kom i början av mars?
    a. Vad baserades the beslutet på?
        i. Improvisation
        ii. Intuition
        iii. Förståelse, rationalisering
2. Hur har ni arbetat med Covid-19 situationen löpande och osäkerheten framåt?
    a. Hur har informationsflöde och uppföljning till personalen sett ut?
    b. Har ni satt ett tidsspann på era beslut? Tex. varje vecka eller varje månad?
    c. Hur har ni jobbat med förväntningarna på hur länge beskeden från regeringen håller/förnyas?

Krishantering inom organisation:

1. Har du erfarenhet av tidigare organisatoriska kriser
2. Hur skiljer sig tidigare erfarenheter från Covid-19?
    a. Har de påverkat ditt sätt att hantera och fatta beslut?
    b. Ser du några likheter till Covid-19?
3. Vad har du värdesatt i beslutsprocessen, vad har varit ledande för att fatta de beslut som ni gjort under denna period?
    a. Vilka verktyg eller information har varit mest värdefull för att driva igenom ett beslut?
    b. Är det några beslut eller handlingsplan som du är mer nöjd över än andra?
4. Fattades beslut på samma premisser innan corona?
    a. Om det ändrats, på vilket sätt och varför?

Media och Etik:

1. Upplever du att externa faktorer som media har format ditt sätt att fatta beslut?
    a. Upplever du att det varit viktigt att fatta rätt beslut av mediala och publicitets-relaterade skäl?
2. Upplever du att er verksamhet bär ett etisk ansvar för smittspridningen?

Anställda:

1. Vad har du fått för mottagande av anställda, vid olika tillfällen?
2. Råder det konsensus om hur man ska göra eller är det många motstridiga viljor som har kommit fram under krisen?
3. Hur har ni jobbat för att möjliggöra de ändringar som ni behövt göra?

    a. Med omställning, nya restriktioner, med kommunikation osv?
    b. Intern kommunikation, extern kommunikation
4. Hur gör du för att få de anställda att vilja jobba mot samma mål som du?

Sensemaking, perceptions and experiences:

1. Vilket har varit det tuffaste beslutet du behövt tagit under den här tiden?
2. Upplever du att kulturen på företaget har förändrats?
    a. I sådana fall hur? och har du gjort något för att förhindra/ändra på det?
3. Upplever du att din roll har förändrats?
4. Skulle du gjort något annorlunda?
5. Har du lärt dig något?
    a. Är det något som du tar med dig från Covid-19 året än så länge?
6. Hur ser du på framtiden?

Appendix 3: Ethical considerations communicated to participants

Etiska aspekter

- Deltagande i denna studie är frivilligt
- I kandidatuppsatsen anonymiseras ditt namn och företagsnamn
- Det du berättar kommer inte användas i något annat syfte än till denna studie.
- Underlaget kommer inte vara tillgängligt för någon annan är oss författare, handledare och examinator. Allt sparat material raderas vid studiens slutförande.
- Du har rätt att dra tillbaka ditt medgivande när som helst och utan vidare förklaring
- För att möjliggöra transkribering av intervjun och på ett strukturerat sätt analysera intervjun spelar vi in intervjun - har vi ditt godkännande att göra det?

Appendix 4: Interview information

Pseudonym	**Code Company**	**Date**	**Interview time**	**Place**
Patrik	Firm A	29 mars, 2021	42:52	Digital
Aram	Firm B	30 mars, 2021	43:10	Digital
Daniel	Firm C	30 mars, 2021	1:00:30	Digital
Cajsa	Firm D	6 april, 2021	43:11	Digital
Noah	Firm E	6 april, 2021	30:08	Digital

Sofia	Firm C	8 april, 2021	36:08	Digital
Göran	Firm G	8 april, 2021	48:42	Digital
Tina	Firm H	9 april, 2021	44:15	Digital
Deniz	Firm I	9 april, 2021	41:42	Digital
Johan	Firm J	9 april, 2021	39:58	Digital
Nils	Firm K	11 april, 2021	41:34	Digital
Emil	Firm G	21 april, 2021	51:43	Digital