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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hospitality that cares: a qualitative investigation into small foodservice businesses' social responsibility

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ABSTRACT

This study adopted Spence's (2016) theorization of small business social responsibility (SBSR) to investigate how small hospitality foodservice businesses express and implement their social responsibility through prioritization of their key stakeholders. Using an abductive research methodology, 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted with small foodservice businesses located in Sheffield, UK. The findings revealed that these businesses exhibited three distinct types of business orientation, growth, value, and social entrepreneurship, which led to different interpretations and expressions of their SBSR. Prioritization of employees was important to these small businesses as they are crucial pivots of the service experience and important in the implementation of their SBSR. This study has evolved the SBSR understanding for hospitality businesses, which enriches the corporate social responsibility (CSR) scholarship by encompassing a better understanding of how small businesses prioritize different domains of responsibility in their interpretation of SBSR, through explaining the influential role of business orientation. The findings can support new and existing small hospitality business owners in making purposeful organizational changes.

1. Introduction

Small businesses are the hospitality industry's backbone (Sharma et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2011) because they stimulate economic growth, innovation, employment opportunities and social inclusiveness (Jansson et al., 2017; Moneva-Abadía et al., 2019). Worldwide, small businesses produce substantial negative environmental impacts (Revell & Blackburn, 2007) with studies indicating that they can generate up to 70% of local pollution levels (Hillary, 2004), 60% of commercial waste (Revell, Stokes, & Chen, 2010) and around 50% of UK business greenhouse gas emissions (British Business Bank, 2021) but they are often unaware of their negative consequences (Garay & Font, 2012; Sampaio et al., 2012). As individual entities, their impact may be negligible but collectively, it becomes significant because of the sheer size of the economic activity they represent.

These small firms are now expected to demonstrate their environmental commitment via their practices and account to their stakeholders, which is usually enacted through their CSR (Berk, 2017). There is a misunderstanding that CSR only occurs for successful large organizations (Jansson et al., 2017; Yáñez-Araque et al., 2021) ignoring the contribution of small businesses (Besser, 2012; López-Pérez et al., 2017). Businesses orient themselves to implementing CSR activities to meet their

stakeholders' demands (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Moneva-Abadía et al., 2019), resulting in trade-off as satisfying the demand of all stakeholders can become challenging due to incompatibility (Magrizos et al., 2021). In responding to many stakeholders, small business owners/ managers tend to express personal responsibility to their employees and local communities (Choongo et al., 2019; Torugsa et al., 2012) whilst others focus on environmental actions (Raar, 2015). Hence, compromises on CSR actions are even stronger for small businesses as they typically focus on one aspect which is not always around generating profits (Magrizos et al., 2021).

Despite the formal lack of research on CSR in small hospitality businesses, there is evidence that many are pursuing lifestyle and family goals alongside non-financial goals (Pereira et al., 2021; Randolph et al., 2022), which leads them to implement responsible business practices with positive social and/or environmental impacts (Garay & Font, 2012). Such examples include social enterprises creating inclusive job opportunities (Castellani et al., 2020; Dickerson & Hassanien, 2018) or lifestyle entrepreneurs focusing on improving the environment in their local community (Dias et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2018). This unearths the complexity of the CSR agenda in smaller hospitality organizations which is often overlooked in the literature because of their limited size and lack of strategic frameworks (Njite et al., 2011).

Moreover, compared to larger businesses, small firms are not equally motivated by the business case for CSR (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Wickert et al., 2016) because their actions are based on the informal decisions made by the owner-manager (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Murillo & Lozano, 2006); resulting in less strategic and more ad hoc solutions. Such leadership style leads to an informal business approach to their social responsibility (Jenkins, 2006), which often goes unreported, is not included in company communication (Wickert et al., 2016) and is therefore less likely to be the object of research (Berk, 2017). This may explain why small businesses' social and green agendas are usually underexposed in the CSR (Ortiz-Avram et al., 2018; Soundararajan et al., 2017) and hospitality literature (Rhou & Singal, 2020; Wong et al., 2022). A challenge is therefore presented in operationalizing CSR and reaping the wider business benefits in society, if the small business acumen is not explained and understood. Given their substantial value to the hospitality industry, a different line of enquiry is necessary for examining how these small hospitality businesses owners/managers approach their social responsibility (SR) in meeting stakeholder needs (Soundararajan et al., 2017; Spence, 2016). To address this gap, this current research investigates how small hospitality businesses express and implement their SBSR through prioritizing different stakeholders. We achieve this by drawing on Spence's (2016) theorization of SBSR. Soundararajan et al. (2017, p. 2) defined SBSR as those 'activities of smaller organisations that result in positive social change'.

Fulfilling the research gap is vital for the hospitality literature and industry, as more research is required across industries on understanding stakeholder prioritization to provide deeper insights into how small businesses interpret their SR from the owner/manager's perspective (Schaefer, Williams, & Blundel, 2020). We contribute to the literature by specifically focusing on the owners/managers because little attention has been paid to small business entrepreneurs and CSR (Wen, Zhang, & Li, 2021) particularly in the hospitality industry. Their viewpoints are critical because they control and represent the business and directly influence the setting and implementation of CSR actions for their stakeholders (Soundararajan et al., 2017; Spence, 2016), in fulfilling their societal responsibilities.

This study is specifically valuable as it deepens the insights into the existing understanding how SBSR is implemented in the hospitality industry and is essential for effectively engaging and sharing socio-environmental issues with the wider population. Ultimately, these findings will contribute to enriching the broader CSR literature in hospitality. This research intends to fill this gap by focusing on small, independent foodservice businesses. These businesses were selected for the context of this study because they represent one of the largest sub-sector of the hospitality industry in Europe, in terms of added value through jobs creation (Gheribi & Bonadonna, 2018) and revenue growth globally (Sharma et al., 2022). Additionally, the decisions made in these small, independent foodservice businesses are heavily influenced by the owner/manager (Garay & Font, 2012; Lee-Ross & Lashley,

2010; Morrison & Thomas, 1999) and they play a critical role in contemporary macro issues such as global warming and the health crisis of obesity (DiPietro, 2017) and have been engaging with a wide range of CSR activities (Coles, Fenclova, & Dinan, 2013).

In the next section, we review the literature on SBSR and Spence's (2016) theorization. This is followed by a discussion of the abductive research approach. The findings and discussion are then presented based on semi-structured interviews with owners/managers of small businesses. The paper ends with the theoretical and practical implications of the results and directions for future research and limitations offered.

2. Literature review

2.1. Small business social responsibility (SBSR)

Researchers have highlighted the uniqueness of SBSR, which recognizes and appreciates their different logic and sensitivity in taking action on social and environmental issues (e.g. Berk, 2017; Besser, 2012; Lindeque et al., 2022; Soundararajan et al., 2017; Spence, 2016). Spence's (2016) theorization of SBSR achieved this by redrawing two established theories: Carroll (1979)'s CSR theory and the stakeholder theory (Freeman et al., 2010). Carroll's (1979) theory outlined that a business has four domains of responsibility, which were organized as a pyramid of importance. Legal responsibility was at the base of the pyramid as this was the most important and relates to compliance with various national and local regulations. This was followed by economic responsibility, which concerns the obligations to be profitable and competitive. Next was ethical responsibility, which focused on the integration of ethical sensitivity in the decision making, and lastly there was philanthropy, which was at the top of the pyramid as this was the discretionary responsibility of the business. The stakeholder theory defines whom a business should be responsible to (Freeman et al., 2010).

Spence (2016) merged and redeveloped these two theories in light of the ethics of care approach to SR (Wicks et al., 1994). The ethics of care theory was not focused on justice and principles but on meeting the needs of others for whom we take responsibility (Held, 2006). This approach better reflects the context of small businesses, where the personal involvement of the owner/manager and their moral proximity to the stakeholders was the critical element determining the relationships (Sen & Cowley, 2013), rather than the absolute power and legitimacy of these stakeholders (Mitchell, Agle, Chrisman, & Spence, 2011). This ethical approach to SBSR focused on the business maintaining the relationship with stakeholders, particularly those in close proximity (Hoivik & Melé, 2009).

This focus on personalizing the relationship with stakeholders, achieved through ethics of care, was instrumental to Spence's (2016) study. This exemplified the diverse approaches to SBSR, which is important for hospitality as it is complex industry with a myriad of stakeholders underpinned by delivering a service experience with care (DiPietro et al., 2019). The four pyramids help illustrating the different approaches four core stakeholders of small businesses (self and family, employees, business partners, local community). Looking at the domains of responsibilities, firstly, Spence replaced the generic ethical responsibility domain of Carroll's theory with ethics of care (Held, 2006). Economic responsibility, usually focused on success and achievement (Wicks et al., 1994), was changed to the concept of survival, which is closer to the reality of many small businesses in just getting by (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). Spence eliminated the legal responsibility altogether and introduced personal integrity, a new category focused on the subjective nature of the management of small firms, adhering to minimum legal standards (Spence, 2016). Philanthropy was the only domain of Carroll's theory which remained the same in Spence's theorization because of the importance of clarifying that responsibility was beyond those with whom there was closer proximity.

Spence (2016) argued that this different prioritization of responsibilities must be explored, as they may cause conflict for the owner/manager and acknowledged that SBSR with these stakeholders might change depending on the small business and their context industry and subgroups of

small firms, for example, those with different numbers of employees. The subsequent section explores SBSR among small foodservice businesses, with particular attention to the type of stakeholders relevant to these businesses.

2.2. SBSR in small foodservice businesses

Small businesses dominate the foodservice sector of the hospitality industry, as they represent 95% of all businesses, both in the UK and Europe (Gheribi & Bonadonna, 2018; Tasci et al., 2021). The following analysis is organized, in line with Spence's theory, by group of stakeholders: business partners, such as suppliers, customers and competitors; employees, including self and family, because hospitality is characterized by a large number of family enterprises (Gheribi & Bonadonna, 2018); and finally the local community, which includes the environment to acknowledge the debates in the literature that focus holistically on both the social and environmental aspects of food systems (Higgins-Desbiolles & Wijesinghe, 2018; Sharma et al., 2022).

Business partners (customers, suppliers, and competitors) are usually the key stakeholder for small businesses. According to Spence (2016), survival should be the basic domain of responsibility for this stakeholder group. SBSR with customers is typically expressed through offering clients healthy and ethical food options, for example, organic, vegan and vegetarian food (Sharma et al., 2014; Sporre et al., 2015). Other SBSR actions include encouraging responsible drinking or providing traceability and transparency about the ingredients utilized (Sharma et al., 2022), which are framed in terms of customers' wellbeing. The issue of food safety, a well-established CSR action in larger establishments, is less prominent among small businesses (Pereira et al., 2021). Equally, important business partners are the local suppliers, who are supported as they are crucial in offering local and ethical products to customers (Sharma et al., 2014). In relation to competitors, small foodservice businesses often focus on cooperation with other restaurants in an area to create a tourist destination (Czernek-Marszałek, 2021); such cooperative behaviour is an expression of care ethics (Wicks et al., 1994).

Employees are important stakeholders in the foodservice sector because of their role in delivering customer service. Family play a key role in the management of small business (Uhlaner et al., 2012). For the family and self, personal integrity is the most important factor which guarantees reputation (Quinn, 1997) for the long-term success of the manager and their family (Sen & Cowley, 2013). Employee-related SBSR actions have been less widely addressed in the foodservice literature (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017), arguably because of the well-known reputation of the industry for its unsocial hours and low paid, monotonous work (Royle, 2010). Problems of labour abuse in the foodservice industry are generally underreported (Poulston, 2008), with practices including bullying, rounding out the time clocks so that they always favour the management, or sexual harassment (Ram et al., 2016).

Despite not being the most powerful stakeholder, the community is crucial for the small business, because it indirectly influences critical stakeholders of the small business owner (Sen & Cowley, 2013). Supporting the local community can be about hiring local employees (Gewurtz et al., 2016) and supporting local food producers (Sharma et al., 2014), which means protecting the local environment with food sustainability actions (Sharma et al., 2022). It can further be interpreted as any activities of charitable, artistic, civic, environmental, and educational nature, which improve the quality of life in the community (Besser, 2012). When it comes to responsibility towards the environment, recycling remains the most common green action of the foodservice sector (Iaquinto, 2014; Kasim & Ismail, 2012), closely followed by the growing research in food and packaging waste management (Filimonau et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2022) and food mile reductions (Bui & Filimonau, 2021). These are the green practices consistently prioritized by patrons, guaranteeing a win–win for the organization (e.g. Kwok et al., 2016).

This literature review has provided a framework for identifying the diversity of stakeholders that are in focus in the SBSR actions, but certainly, what is lacking is an understanding of which domains

of responsibility are prioritized by these businesses. This is key to fully understanding how these small businesses express and implement their SR.

3. Methodology

This study applied a qualitative abductive research methodology because the focus was on theory development rather than theory generation (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). It sought to present an authentic and rich understanding of SBSR from these owners' perspectives (Stake, 1995). The data was collected through publicly available online documents and semi-structured interviews. A marketing database of small foodservice businesses located in Sheffield, UK, was employed to support the recruitment of participants. Sheffield was deemed a suitable location for this study, as being the fourth largest English city (Sheffield City Council, 2023) is characterized both by independent and chain restaurants (Rimmington et al., 2006), as well as for its focus on food sustainable practices driven by local government and a local partnership called ShefFood (ShefFood, 2023). Fifty-nine companies were contacted from the database because they demonstrated an interest or awareness of socio-environmental issues. This initial contact was followed up with at least two rounds of e-mails or a site visit. Eventually, 38 business owners agreed to be interviewed. For this study, small businesses were defined as those with maximum 50 employees (UK Companies Act, 2006).

3.1. Data collection

The data collection was conducted between May 2016 and June 2017. The online documents were firstly extracted from the websites and social media outlets of the 38 businesses that consented, after an initial email agreement, which guaranteed research integrity (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). These documents were used because it provides a deeper understanding of socially responsible business practices and helps in formulating the interview questions (Eger et al., 2019) and rapport during the interview process. Kohlbacher's (2006) stages of information collection, coding and identifying new themes used in analysing these documents. This created an abductive codebook which was used to support the coding of the interviews.

A pilot study of five firms followed this to confirm the interview structure and content. The interview format was subsequently adjusted with the reflective questions moved to the end (Cassell, 2015), before conducting the remaining interviews. Respondents were asked about the implementation of SBSR practices; the personal or instrumental motivations for SBSR and a broad reflection on the role of their business in society. Each interview lasted 60 minutes on average, was recorded, transcribed, and inputted into NVivo software. Semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate because they can tease out the complexity of how foodservice businesses incorporate socially responsible practices (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and interpret these actions according to their values, beliefs, and social context (Cassell, 2015). Similar methodological approaches to studying CSR in small businesses are common (e.g. Eger et al., 2019). Informed consent was obtained from respondents, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. A table profiling the respondents is provided in the Appendix.

3.2. Data analysis and data quality

Braun et al.'s (2018) approach for thematic data analysis was used, which was further informed by the tenets of abduction (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). During the transcription stage, observations were recorded to adhere to the abductive process (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). All interview transcriptions were compared against the original recording to guarantee accuracy with themes and subthemes specified to recognize the relationships between codes (Braun et al., 2018). A narrative was created, linking all the emerging themes, and the interim results were shared with all

respondents to guarantee that the terminology used in the final theorization is as near as possible to that used and meant by the interviewees.

4. Results

The findings, summarized in Figure 1, present three levels of information. The first is the stakeholders engaged in SBSR actions as discussed in the literature review. Secondly, the findings are presented

	SBSR ACTIONS		
	Business Orientation		
	Growth	Values	Social entrepreneurial
Stakeholder: Business partners	Key Responsibility Domain: Survival • Making a Profit • Paying suppliers on time • Duty of Care Serving Alcohol	Key Responsibility Domain: Ethics of Care • Local Food Produce through local suppliers • Collaborations with competitors • Healthy food • Clean Eating • Ethical Sourcing	Key Responsibility Domain: Survival • Affordable Food • Pay as you feel food • Supporting other businesses in own space i.e., pop up cafes
Stakeholder: Employees, family	Key Responsibility Domain: Survival • Rewarding employees • Health and Safety	Key Responsibility Domain: Ethics of Care • Kind Family Environment • Staff Volunteering Actions • Protect Staff from Bullying from Customers • Paying Living Wage	Key Responsibility Domain: Social Change • Hiring Volunteers • Employing Disabled People
Stakeholder: Community & Environment	Key Responsibility Domain: Philanthropy • Philanthropy • Recycling	Responsibility Domain: Ethics of Care • Recycling • Minimising Food Waste • Sustainable Packaging • Education in Schools • Support Community Events • Philanthropy	Responsibility Domain: Social Change • Reclaimed Food • Educational Activities for Environmental Protection • Recycling Food Waste • Own Food Production

Figure 1. SBSR actions in small foodservice businesses.

based on the three groups of businesses emerging from the data formed based on their business orientation (growth orientation, values orientation, and social entrepreneurial orientation). Thirdly, each of these business type demonstrated a clear proximity with a key stakeholder, versus others, as part of the dominant domain of responsibility prioritized and this is also highlighted.

4.1. Survival and compliance in small businesses with growth orientation

Growth-oriented businesses were those focused on expansion, having more complex operations, such as multi-outlets and a more pronounced profit orientation (Moran, 1998). In our sample, growth businesses, interpreted their SBSR as contributing to the economy by 'making a profit' (I18). These businesses focused them SBSR practices, on paying salaries, suppliers and taxes on time. These small businesses did express concern for their customers through compliance with legislation as 'there are certain laws we must adhere by regarding the well-being of the public' (I17). Growth businesses also focused on giving rewards and personal development opportunities to those key employees delivering the hospitality experience (I26). Philanthropy was found in most of these businesses and clearly motivated by seeking marketing opportunities, as expressed by I26, who stated 'for the other community actions like supporting local festivals, it is really about marketing and networking'.

The main environmental action mentioned was recycling, particularly as it was matched by a tax which created an incentive to compliance. When prompted about their personal values, these businesses mentioned that they followed industry norms relevant to the sector, which again prompted their compliance. This group of businesses did not mention ethics of care.

4.2. Ethics of care in small businesses with values orientation

The second group of businesses (particularly those among the family and lifestyle ones), which usually had smaller operations and are concentrated on quality niche products, aligned to their prioritizing of their personal life and values rather than profit maximization:

> It's not a profit business, it is partly lifestyle, it's a lifestyle choice, choosing to work every single night, it's better than before, we can dictate how to do things. (I12)

Survival, despite being mentioned, was not expressed as primary concern, as these organizations were more focused on the value of their offer with I23 stating 'it's not about the money, it's about people feeling welcome to come on a personal basis' and I30 adding that 'I want to create a place that personifies hospitality and creativity'. SBSR was expressed with caring actions, towards employees first and foremost. They were particularly concerned with employee wellbeing, who were identified as a critical stakeholder for them because of their role as brand ambassador 'our employee wants to be in an environment where they can enjoy their work and are valued for that' (I3). This is summed up by I13:

> It is important to recognise the value of people also by offering them a good work-life balance, particularly because working in hospitality is an incredibly stressful job with long hours, we offer them 4 days working week and fixed rota to key staff while employing part-time staff to cover for the remaining service times.

Caring practices mentioned here included paying staff above the minimum wage, full-time payments to employees to help them realize personal goals such as buying a house, ensuring all tips were paid out and not retained by the business, protecting staff from abusive customers, providing more clarity and advanced notice on shifts for staff on irregular contracts. Participant I30 summed this up by stating, 'to feel they then can then share our values and that becomes a natural, very natural instinctive part of what their reason is to come to work'.

Personal integrity, but also other values, such as fairness, altruism and benevolence are the foundation of this commitment: 'Well I have seen many inequalities and poor people in life, so I feel it's

my duty to help'. The ethics of care also translated in offering healthy and ethical food to customers, the support for the local community was framed similarly in terms of ethics of care:

> I think the pub can be at the heart of the community, so it's nice to be able to facilitate people meeting up, even just using our space, or using our social media presence. (I28)

Cafes and pubs offered in kind support such as free meeting space, or facilitating community activities, or championing local suppliers' products. I33 declared that 'by employing people from the city, we put money back in the local economy'. Philanthropy remains the most important community action for the more traditional restaurant family businesses, such as fundraising events at the business premises. The environmental agenda for these businesses consisted of recycling and minimizing food waste as I16 stated that 'we encourage people to order the right amount of food, I do not believe in food waste', but did not go much beyond that, with many respondents stating 'I know we could look at energy efficiency, but (…) we feel we need a more stable ground before investing in that aspect'.

4.3. Social innovation in social entrepreneurial oriented businesses

The final group includes businesses with social entrepreneurial orientation, meaning that they are aimed at creating innovative actions benefitting both society and the environment. These businesses expressed their SBSR in terms of the social change encapsulated by their vision and mission:

> The world is fighting over water and eating bugs because land is too expensive to raise cattle; that is why we are doing what we are doing here (i.e. business focused on environmental education), to do something … and perhaps on the way we are convincing other people that it is right to do it. (I4)

The social change they advocate is very different to mainstream CSR, which only creates short-term fixes:

> I never really understood if it [CSR] existed, corporates would organise a one-day volunteering day for their staff or look at Bill Gates doing charity around the world, but the actual IT companies are a big issue in California, with house pricing moving up, people are moving out. So the actual company's activities destroy the community and the environment … so I am very cynical about philanthropy. (I32)

Their responsibility lies in social change, and not just reactive responsibility, because only transformative action can benefit the economy and society and environment concurrently:

> Companies are key drivers of the economy, my own philosophy is that the word has to change very quickly, capitalism is not really working, companies need to lead the way in terms of social responsibility, in terms of how you develop people. (I11)

This means that, beyond providing affordable and healthy food, these foodservice businesses offer opportunities for socializing or employment opportunities to deprived communities, by being in deprived areas of the city where issues of social inequality are more urgent:

> We are located in a place of intersection between different communities, it's on the fringe of university, so it doesn't stop a specific demographic from coming. So it promotes diversity of people that benefit this service. (I5)

They further prioritized their employees by providing stable and full-time work, often for those who started as volunteers: 'We are not keen on zero-hour contracts, our core staff we want them to have contracts with job security' (I13). They focused on environmental sustainability alongside social justice exhibiting innovativeness also in their ability to match social and environmental outcomes. A key example is cooking with reclaimed food and using an innovative pay-as-you-feel business model

> With the pay-as-you-feel everyone can afford to be part of our mission of reducing food waste. (I15)

These businesses recognized care for the environment as their primary responsibility and framed it according to the ethics of care. The topic of survival was important for social enterprises, which mention their financial struggle in offering these services without relying on grants: 'need to be a

sustainable business as well' (I14). Finally, their personal integrity was expressed in being a change-maker towards positive social change.

5. Discussion

In this study, we examined the small hospitality businesses decision makers perspective in implementing SBSR through stakeholder prioritization. The findings identified that specific SBSR actions were framed differently, based on the orientation of the small business and the type of stakeholders as seen in Figure 1. Growth-oriented businesses interpreted their SBSR primarily in connection with the positive economic function of their business in society instigated through compliance actions, because they understood their role in society as an economic and legal one, bringing us back to early interpretations of Carroll's (2016) pyramid. A specific significance was therefore given to business partners. The economic priorities of these businesses might appear dissolute, but Lantos and McGillicuddy (2019) observe that a business self-interest is not necessarily selfish. The result highlighted that the economic survival of these business sustained other enterprises in a virtuous system, which ultimately benefited wider society (Spence & Rutherfoord, 2001). These firms were enacting economic caring where the profit was necessary for transference of SR to customers, employees and the wider public (Lantos & McGillicuddy, 2019). The literature has also identified that more established growth oriented hospitality businesses can invest in rewards as part of their employee CSR (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2018). Philanthropy is limited but usually linked to building reputation (Jenkins, 2006). There is a mention of personal integrity in the conformity to industrial norms, because even the simple compliance to health and safety regulations (Kornilaki & Font, 2019) is linked to willingness to behave responsibly (Kornilaki et al., 2019).

The values-oriented businesses framed their SBSR as ethics of care as they prioritized their values and hospitableness. This was characterized by creating a friendly or family environment (Tasci et al., 2021) particularly towards their employees' well-being, creating social value in the workplace. The caring actions shown to employees were crucial in sharing their hospitable values with staff, as these businesses were proud of the work environment they offered and hoped employees delivered the same care to customers (DiPietro et al., 2019). Staff who feel cared for by their employers, their job satisfaction is improved (Gordon & Parikh, 2020) and they are more motivated to safeguarding customers' well-being, suggesting this is part of the social role of small sustainability-oriented restaurants (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017; Yoon et al., 2020). Their passion and personal values, as well as social-identification with the locality and the community, were also the source of their sense of care (Higgins-Desbiolles & Wijesinghe, 2018). This is amplified by the synergic value of care for the environment, as often community support activities in the supply chains generated both economic and environmental benefits concurrently (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2018; Sharma et al., 2014). Conversely purely green actions are not common, confirming that the broader green agenda is lacking as a practice for many small foodservice businesses (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2018). Philanthropic responsibility here becomes a symbol of the hospitality (Lashley, 2016). Survival was not the primary concern, as these businesses were more focused on lifestyle and family reputation (Randerson, 2022).

The businesses with a social entrepreneurial orientation (Álvarez-García et al., 2022; Halberstadt et al., 2021) had a direct mission to innovatively deliver socio-environmental value that positively benefitted society. They framed their SBSR as social change (Soundararajan et al., 2017) which was proposed as an alternative to philanthropic responsibility for these businesses. Examples include tackling social issues for the more marginalized communities, particularly through creating employment opportunities for disabled people (Kalargyrou et al., 2020; Köseoglu et al., 2021) or focusing on a healthy affordable food, particularly needed in the deprived areas of the city where they choose to be located, for addressing social inequality (Dickerson & Hassanien, 2018). Framing their SBSR as social change stems from the rejection of the traditional CSR model of philanthropy, which they consider as a bolt-on activity, added afterwards to mitigate mainstream business models that create short-term fixes to social issues (Saebi et al., 2019). Ethics of care was visible

Figure 2. SBSR contextualization for small hospitality businesses.

because these businesses offered genuine welcome and inclusiveness (Cavagnaro, 2016), care and stewardship towards the environment (André & Pache, 2016). Employees are essential in embodying and supporting the transformative changes that the socially oriented businesses try to achieve as well (Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2021). The motivations founded on the value of social justice distinguish these business owners (Dickerson & Hassanien, 2018).

Businesses exist to provide stakeholder value but prioritizing SR for these groups can be complex (Ferrell et al., 2010). Our sample illustrate that such prioritization varies according to the business orientation. Moreover, these small businesses are cultivating and maintaining relationships with their key stakeholders through their SR actions which embodies their caring responsibilities. Stakeholder prioritization does not mean that a certain domain of responsibility disappears, but simply that these small businesses dedicated less efforts to the less prioritized (Burton & Goldsby, 2009). For example, value-oriented businesses still need to survive, but they concentrated on their interpretation of SBSR, which was the creation of a family environment, where care is part of the culture that engages employees and the community (Tomasella & Ali, 2019). Whilst each business type prioritized different domains of responsibility, a common denominator amongst them was ensuring their staff benefitted, because employee engagement was fundamental to support their delivery of SBSR actions (DiPietro et al., 2019). The pivotal role of employees is seen in the fact that even actions aimed at other stakeholders, for example creating a safe customer environment, are based on prioritizing the protection of employees first, because employees need to embrace the cultural change needed to achieve SBSR, regardless of its form (more reactive as seen in growth-oriented businesses, more proactive as seen in values-oriented businesses, or transformational as seen in businesses with socio-environmental orientation).

Based on these findings, Spence's (2016) SBSR contextualization for the hospitality industry is presented in Figure 2 which clearly summarizes how the business orientation influences the prioritization of domains of responsibility. It adds insight to previous literature which demonstrated how CSR orientation influenced the spheres of responsibility (Burton & Goldsby, 2009), by giving a more nuanced understanding of why different interpretations of SBSR, due to a mixture of personal and business motivations, can lead to different SBSR practices.

6. Conclusions

Researchers have stated that there is a need to develop specific knowledge related to small businesses and CSR across various sectors (Soundararajan et al., 2017; Spence, 2016). This is one of the first studies, according to the researchers' knowledge, to explicate Spence's (2016) theorization of SBSR, leading to a deeper understanding of SBSR for small hospitality firms with different orientations, rather than focusing on a subset such as businesses with family goals (Fonseca & Carnicelli, 2021) or lifestyle goals (Wang et al., 2018). Moreover, it examined SBSR holistically,

considering how small foodservice businesses construct their SBSR through a broad spectrum of practices in relation to various stakeholders.

The first theoretical contribution emphasizes the significance of business orientation in influencing the way small businesses express their social responsibility priorities and highlighted that this should be considered in parallel with the stakeholder approach. Goal orientation, in terms of balance between commercial, personal, and socio-environmental goals, is critical to how these small businesses leverage several aspects of their social responsibility, and this cannot be ignored. Our findings here affirm that lifestyle businesses and social enterprises have a broader understanding of their social responsibility and a more purposeful role they can serve in society (Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2021). In particular, the diagrammatical conceptualization (see Figure 2) identifies the importance of different elements based on the business orientation may be of analytical value to researchers wanting to develop further knowledge on the critical importance of SBSR. Therefore this research add value by establishing the significance of the business-orientation dependence of CSR research.

Secondly, the focus on employees was important to all the small businesses in the sample, which is contrary to what happens in small businesses in general, where business partners (Lepoutre & Heene, 2006) or one element (Magrizos et al., 2021) are usually prioritized. SBSR actions towards employees are essential for creating excellent service and a hospitable environment (Lashley, 2016). This has very important implications for SBSR in hospitality studies because of the importance of improving employee engagement with proactive SBSR actions, with organization ethics remaining a crucial topic of interest because of its contribution to job satisfaction (Kwon, 2019). This contribution to knowledge demonstrated how sectorial differences can influence the prioritizing of a specific stakeholder in small businesses (Spence, 2016).

Thirdly, we contribute to directing the nascent literature on SBSR in the hospitality industry towards a thorough understanding of SBSR in practice by considering the social and environmental aspects of SBSR concurrently (Cantele & Cassia, 2020). We evidenced that smaller foodservice businesses do not implement many green actions beyond food waste and recycling (Sharma et al., 2022). Rather, the focus on employees is important for the hospitality industry which is impacted by low pay and lack of employee retention. This may clarify why such a people industry does not focus as much on the broader sustainability agenda (Bui & Filimonau, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2021). SBSR with an employee focus can support the studies on social sustainability, as the sustainable hospitality literature is currently too biased towards green research (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017). The holistic and qualitative micro-level approach to SBSR calls authors to more nuanced approaches to understand real motivations and barriers to implementation of certain socio-environmental practices versus others, for example by including values of the business owner and business orientation (which are linked). Such a holistic approach can be helpful also for broader studies of CSR in hospitality and tourism, too often focused on environmental responsibility and with weak links to ethical aspects of the industry (Kwon, 2019; Wong et al., 2022), giving a call to action to understanding the pivotal role of employees in determining the success of CSR engagement broadly (Kaur et al., 2022).

The frameworks emerging from this research (Figures 1 and 2) can be of value to existing and potential small hospitality business owners contemplating purposeful changes in their organizations by using them to identify stakeholders and practices more effectively. These reflections are vital as businesses are shifting from a narrow to a broader understanding of CSR (Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2021) and moving towards creating positive social change rather than philanthropy. Policy-makers may benefit from this study by acknowledging the peculiarities, potentialities, and constraints of small foodservice businesses in implementing their policies relating to sustainability and CSR. For example, they should avoid the CSR terminology in being more mindful of the realities of small businesses. Industry associations should use these insights to inform their CSR trainings to small business owners, particularly the need for prioritizing ethics of care in relationships with

employees. As an example, they could guarantee firm rejection of abusive behaviour from clients towards employees. Finally, for industry associations, it is important that they highlight in their trainings to business owners the need for by prioritizing ethics of care in relationships with employees, rather than just focusing on training and rewards. As an example, they can show more concern and firm rejection of abusive behaviour from clients.

6.1. Limitations and future research

Whilst this research contributes significantly to the SBSR literature in hospitality; certain limitations should be noted. The nature of the qualitative research, required for studying such an under-theorized topic in the scholarship, added potential limitations to the generalizability of the findings. One is related to the type of data collection method, and the other is related to the sampling. As the results are based only on a sample of small businesses in Sheffield, the sample is not representative, although it is fair to assume that similar themes would be found in other contexts. Moreover, ethical research can be affected by issues linked to respondents' tendency to provide answers based on the social desirability bias (Besser, 2012) and the positionality of the researcher. We sought to minimize this with rigorous research ethics triangulation of the findings through online documents and researcher empathy, however, it must still be acknowledged as a limitation.

Our results have highlighted the commitment of small food service businesses to their employees, and future research can use the ethics of care perspective to delve deeper into understanding the way in which business owners can frame their SBSR benefitting employee, for ultimately creating value to the wider society.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix: Interview sample

Interviewee number	Age	Gender Male = M Female = F	Level of education	Years in business	Number of employees (Full Time equivalent)	Business Orientation Social Entrepreneurial Orientation = SEO Values' Orientation = VO Growth Orientation = GO
1	44	F	Secondary	4	4	SEO
2	40	M	Catering	4	11	VO
3	47	M	University	6	42	VO
4	39	F	Secondary	3	1	SEO
5	53	M	University	1	0	SEO
6	28	F	Secondary	10	45	VO
7	42	F	University	1	2	VO
8	30	F	University	24	13	VO
9	53	M	Secondary	35	8	VO
10	39	M	University	1	6	VO

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Interviewee number	Age	Gender Male = M Female = F	Level of education	Years in business	Number of employees (Full Time equivalent)	Business Orientation Social Entrepreneurial Orientation = SEO Values' Orientation = VO Growth Orientation = GO
11	53	M	University	10	15	SEO
12	31	M	Secondary	3	11	VO
13	52	M	Secondary	16	30	VO
14	41	M	Secondary	37	15	SEO
15	30	F	University	1	1	SEO
16	50	M	University	18	7	VO
17	45	M	Secondary	6	9	GO
18	48	M	University	3	12	GO
19	45	M	University	1	1	VO
20	51	M	Secondary	15	18	VO
21	25	M	University	1	5	GO
22	35	M	Secondary	3	8	SEO
23	52	F	University	2	39	VO
24	48	F	University	16	12	VO
25	53	M	Primary	25	6	VO
26	37	F	University	3	33	GO
27	39	M	University	28	20	VO
28	38	M	University	7	12	VO
29	39	F	University	6	6	VO
30	53	M	University	8	15	VO
31	32	M	Secondary	3	13	GO
32	67	M	University	35	5	SEO
33	46	M	University	11	11	VO
34	48	F	University	4	4	VO
35	36	M	University	12	1	SEO
36	24	F	University	1	1	VO
37	44	F	University	12	1	SEO
38	45	F	University	7	26	GO