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To cite this article: Merle Müller-Hansen, Kiran Addu & Markus Keck (02 May 2025): From the ‘wealthy-healthy-chubby’ nexus to ‘outside foods’: changing food consumption practices in India and Mexico, *Social & Cultural Geography*, DOI: [10.1080/14649365.2025.2498944](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2025.2498944)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2025.2498944>



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Published online: 02 May 2025.



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From the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus to 'outside foods': changing food consumption practices in India and Mexico

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we take southern metropolises of India and Mexico as examples to examine the dynamics of contemporary urban food environments and associated embodied food practices in low- and middle-income countries. In our intersectional case study analyses, we use generational difference as the main axis of inequality to structure our argument of changing food consumption patterns. As our findings illustrate, older generations tend to express their social status in terms of wealth and health by way of physical chubbiness. We provide the context for this 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus by referring to colonial experiences and persisting social inequalities. In contrast, young people increasingly consume 'outside foods' through digital platforms and adhere to the slimmer body shapes that are amplified through digital media. We interpret this as an expression of their aspiration to lead a consumer lifestyle that suggests high social status and signifies their participation in a global shift towards digitally mediated cosmopolitan food consumption. We conceive of the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus and of 'outside foods' as two contradicting teleoffective formations that lead to intergenerational friction over dietary and bodily ideals. At the same time, we understand the common element in both teleoffective formations as an evolving teleoffective regime of aspirational eating.

ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 9 January 2024
Accepted 16 March 2025

KEYWORDS

Practice theory; food environment; teleoffective formation; teleoffective regime; aspirational eating

Introduction

Economic growth has boosted the purchasing power of the urban middle class in India and Mexico, with food serving as an accessible canvas for expressing participation in aspirational consumption lifestyles. Digital platforms and food cultures are reshaping food shopping, preparation, and eating practices, increasing food diversity in cities while also promoting less healthy and less sustainable diets (Popkin et al., 2012). These shifts contribute to the 'triple burden of malnutrition' (Swinburn et al., 2019), encompassing nutrient insufficiency, underweight, and

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obesity, as well as ecological and climate-related challenges driven by industrial agriculture (i.e. large-scale monocultures) and industrially produced foods (i.e. large-scale factory processing and conservation). Despite these burdens, industrial food products are widely consumed due to their taste additives and preservatives, relative affordability in small package sizes, and their clever, increasingly digital marketing.

Urban food consumption practices of low- and middle-income countries, exemplified through India and Mexico, show how changing economic conditions, colonial legacies, and digitalization shape food environments. By food environment, we mean the interface that is mediating the individual food acquisition, preparation, and eating practices with the wider food system (see HLPE, 2017). Against this backdrop, we ask how embodied food practices relate to contemporary changes in the food environment among urban middle-class consumers in India and Mexico. We use the concept of 'teleoaffectivity' (Schatzki, 2002; Welch, 2017) to explore how emotions and cultural motives influence dietary choices and bodily practices. Generally, teleoaffective engagements mean emotions that individuals attach to social conventions for a defined end. More precisely, teleoaffectivity refers to the way individuals or groups emotionally and purposefully align their practices with culturally specific goals, values, and ideals. Teleoaffective engagements in the field of food practices reflect how the individual motives of dietary choices and bodily practices are shaped by intersecting individual desires for social status, health, tradition, or modernity and specific societal conventions over foods and their culturally coded values.

Two empirical terms guide this analysis: 'outside foods', referring to meals mainly prepared outside the home, and the colloquial conflation of 'wealthy-healthy-chubby', which reflects how the terms 'wealthy', 'healthy', and 'chubby' are often employed as synonyms in everyday discourse, despite their differing meanings. The contrasting teleoaffective formations of the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus and 'outside foods' structure the text as contradicting dynamics and constitute the two main sections of the text. In their analysis, we will be 'zooming in' (Nicolini, 2017) on the intersectional food inequalities (Motta, 2021) of class (in Mexico) and caste (in India), gender, colonial legacy, and particularly highlight generational difference and its entanglements with digitalization. When we refer to generations here, we take the market liberalization of the 1990s as point of differentiation between younger people who were mainly socialized under the influence of market liberalization and older people born in the early seventies and before and whose main socialization had thus concluded before the 1990s (see Lukose, 2009). We will then be 'zooming out' (Nicolini, 2017) to engage in a discussion of generational difference in food consumption practices to identify changes in 'larger scale social and cultural formations' (see Schatzki, 2016; Welch, 2017, p. 76). To conclude, we will revisit the article's central claim, emphasizing the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus and the rise of 'outside foods' as contrasting teleoaffective formations. We argue that both formations are part of an evolving teleoaffective regime (ibid.) driven by aspirational eating. We highlight the intertwined roles of bodily ideals and digital platforms in shaping this regime, positioning it as reflective of wider shifts in urban food environments and aspirations in low- and middle-income countries. Finally, we suggest that this evolving regime of aspirational eating significantly shapes health, social inequality, and cultural identity in the digital age.

Practice theory, teleoffective formations, and the teleoffective regime of aspirational eating

In this section, we explore practice theories related to food consumption, emphasizing the latest developments in the digital field. We elucidate this with the key concepts of ‘teleoffective formations’ and their role in the ‘teleoffective regime’ of ‘aspirational eating’ as part of evolving digital ‘food environments’ in greater detail.

The recent macro-level developments in food consumption, as outlined above, are linked to shifts and transformations at the micro-level of everyday food practices – namely, how people acquire, prepare, eat, store, and dispose of foods. In general, food practices are marked by ‘repetition and innovation, reproduction and change’ and are negotiated in a ‘recursive relationship between performance and practice’ (Warde, 2016, p. 7). Thus, at the individual level, alimentary practices/performances express the intimate relationship between identity and the body (see Belk, 2013; Schatzki, 2005). The repetition and variation of individual practices occurs because ‘people are positioned within a practice’ (Warde, 2016, p. 161) and perform collectively shared and acquired norms depending on their locality, corporeality, resources, experiences, competencies, and so on. In the case of India and Mexico, the alimentary lives of contemporary people are marked by a common history of colonial exploitation, continued experiences of poverty among many people paralleled with extreme wealth among few, and recent economic growth among the middle class. These structural changes constitute the ‘conditions of possibility’ that are ‘conducive towards a specific range of outcomes’ (Warde, 2016, p. 166) in terms of food practices. At the same time, cultural representations of what are presumed to be standard global food habits and ideal global lifestyles are not only amplified by the respective national markets but primarily projected through global digital media (Bissell, 2020). A now wide-spread use of food-related digital platforms allows for social comparisons and easy-access convenience (Lupton & Feldman, 2020). Consumer reception of foods therefore has a strong social element and is charged by food as signifier of social status in the present and in imagined futures (Mandich, 2019; Welch et al., 2020). This informs the repetitive food consumption practices that become individual routines and that then mark the larger-scale cultural dynamics of social change (Warde, 2016; Warde et al., 2007).

The dynamics associated with these normative consumption practices drive developments at the macro-level, best understood as ‘teleoffective formations’ (Welch, 2017, p. 61). Teleoffective formations are a specific form of consumption practice dynamic: They are configurations of multiple related practice bundles and material arrangements that constitute the formation of socially shared affective engagements. They subsume individual motives associated with different general affects (Welch, 2017). Such individual affective states include desire, disgust, happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and despite. Teleoffective formations are therefore charged by individual emotions and ‘not equivalent to collectively willed ends and projects’ (Welch, 2017, p. 82). Rather, they can be understood as the subtle emotional pre-dispositions of individuals towards collectives. In this sense, teleoffective formations are ‘conditioning [...] of the practices they govern, and subsequently [become] instantiated’ (Welch & Warde, 2017, p. 3) in discourse, in activity, and ultimately in matter. Against this background, we understand the ‘wealthy-healthy-chubby nexus’ and ‘outside foods’ in India and Mexico as distinct teleoffective

formations, associated with specific practice bundles and material arrangements that manifest in distinguishable individual affects.

Zooming further out, the subtly pre-conditioning teleoffective formations are themselves super-structured by broader ‘teleoffective regimes’ (Schatzki, 2002) – that is, widely shared values and general understandings that guide teleoffective formations within specific contexts or cultures. In India and Mexico, both teleoffective formations – ‘wealthy-healthy-chubby’ and ‘outside foods’ – centre on food and its material manifestations, each linked to distinct imaginaries of upward social mobility. We conceptualize this as aspirational eating and, therefore, regard both formations as pertinent to the same teleoffective regime of aspirational eating. The identification of teleoffective regimes enables the analysis of macro-level social driving forces and clarifies the connections between practices, teleoffective formations, and shared ‘general understandings’ (Schatzki, 2002). While Schatzki’s concept of ‘general understandings’ within teleoffective regimes remains somewhat epistemologically ambiguous, our case study of Indian and Mexican food environments – along with our conceptualization of aspirational eating – contribute to further refine and consolidate the application of teleoffective regime theory.

Altogether, the micro-level consumption practices, meso-level teleoffective formations, and macro-level teleoffective regimes provide analytical layers that illuminate the various dimensions shaping individual food environments. Food environments (see HLPE, 2017) are the interfaces that mediate enabling and restraining factors to individual food procurement, preparation, and eating within specific food systems and the broader food regime (see Friedmann & McMichael, 1989). Our understanding of food environments encompasses both the discursive/cognitive and non-discursive/material dimensions of food. These dimensions converge most noticeably in the discursive and bodily expressions of eating, as well as in the dietary effects on physical and mental health. This perspective on food environments underscores the significance of the sociocultural, physical, political, and economic contexts in which people procure, prepare, consume, and ultimately dispose of food (HLPE, 2017).

Methodology

We used an intersectional feminist research methodology (Ackerly & True, 2010) after receiving ethics clearance. Our qualitative approach combined semi-structured in-depth interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2011), mental mapping, corporeal and body geographical elements (Schurr et al., 2023; Valentine, 1999), short socioeconomic questionnaires, and ethnographic vignettes (Buch & Staller, 2011). This approach emphasized an awareness of power dynamics, particularly those related to gender, which required thoughtful engagement with participants.

We conducted a total of 53 interviews on individual food environments in Hyderabad, India ($n = 31$; in September and October 2022) and Mérida, Mexico ($n = 22$; from November 2022 to January 2023). These southern metropolises were selected for their cultural diversity within South Asian and Latin American emerging economies, as well as their high prevalence of the multiple nutrition burden (Popkin et al., 2012; Swinburn, 2019). Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, ensuring diverse representation across urban middle-class income and professional groups, neighbourhoods, adult

age groups, genders, and religions. Recruitment began broadly through the second author's contacts at the Indian National Institute of Nutrition, with subsequent refinement based on additional recommendations to meet selection criteria. This approach enabled a comprehensive investigation of changing food environments and consumption practices, allowing for data saturation regarding our research focus.

Data collection was led by the first author in both study sites, with guidance and initial participation of the third author and support from the second author in India. The authors' positionality influenced the process: one is Indian, and two are German. The outsider perspective of the German interviewers offered unique insights, though certain viewpoints may have been initially overlooked; however, discussions within the cross-cultural team ultimately ensured the validation and robustness of the interpretations. Gender identity also shaped the interviews, as participants shared more openly with interviewers they could relate to. One author identifies as queer female (often perceived as male in India), while the other two authors are hetero female and male, respectively.

In interview data collection practice, we employed open-ended questions of a semi-structured interview guideline to explore various dimensions of participants' food environments. Key themes included personal background, general food practices, habitual food providers, dietary patterns, reflections on changes in food infrastructure, corporeality, the impact of food digitalization, and digital tool usage compared to family and peers. We conducted all interviews face to face, primarily with individuals, though five cross-generational family interviews were included to explore generational and gender differences.

The first author transcribed and pseudonymized the interviews in the field, initiating a reiterative process of reflection upon them and supplementing the transcripts with vivid ethnographic vignettes. Some coding categories emerged during data collection, while others developed after transcription (see Mayring, 2022). MAXQDA was used to create a comprehensive catalogue of codes. For this article, only the most empirically salient categories were included: (1) reference to at least two of the keywords 'wealthy', 'healthy', and/or 'chubby' within a single argument, and (2) mentions of foods prepared and/or consumed outside the home, using the specific term 'outside'.

The wealthy-healthy-chubby nexus

This section examines the teleoffective formation of the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus in India and Mexico through an intersectional lens. It is shorter than the next, as it focuses on an older teleoffective formation, now contested by the dynamics of 'outside food'. In the following section, we will analyse these dynamics in greater detail by exploring each category of social inequalities separately. Here, we interweave colonial legacy (including race, ethnicity, and the ongoing Western-centric global structures), class and caste, generational differences, and gender to highlight the fabric of social inequalities in the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus.

The 'Wealthy-Healthy-Chubby' nexus emerged empirically in our dataset as a linguistic conflation, with many participants in India and Mexico merging these concepts or treating them as interchangeable. Such conflations often lead to semantic ambiguity, but in this case, the linguistic conflation acts as signifier of changing food practices. The wealthy-healthy-chubby discourse reflects non-material expressions of everyday practice, which

'may maintain existing understandings, or may be dissonant with them' (Welch et al., 2020, p. 451). These signifying conventions evolve, each understanding capturing a momentary 'photograph' of linguistic change that can reshape perceived realities and, in turn, transform those realities.

Our 'photographs' of 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' food practices in India and Mexico revealed striking similarities in the linguistic tools used to describe body shape. This topic often prompted participants to use polite or cautious wordings, especially when ascribing high body weight to themselves or to others. In both countries, many used the term 'wealthy' (mex. *rico*) accompanied by a gesture indicating weight, a practice also common in Germany, where a voluminous belly is referred to as *Wohlstandsbauch* or 'wealth belly'. 'Healthy' (mex. *sano*) was often used to indicate that the person in question was above average weight. It was notably frequent in paraphrasing above-average weight in children, reflecting older generations' experiences with higher rates of stunting, infant mortality, and hunger (Siegel & Stuckler, 2011), along with the lasting association of higher body weight with more resilient immune systems and higher chances of survival. Additionally, 'wealthy' and 'Healthy' were conflated with 'chubby' (mex. *gordito*), a term often associated with baby fat, particularly in the facial area. Older people, in both countries, express affection for chubby cheeks by playfully tweaking younger family members' faces; a gesture signifying their happiness about this wealth and health symbol that they perceive as desirable.

The linguistic conflation of 'wealthy', 'healthy', and 'chubby' was evident across all age groups, often creating confusion among younger participants while fuelling aspirational desires for upward mobility in older generations. This suggests a discursive nexus linking conventions over nutrition and social status among older people, materializing in embodied food practices related to above-average body weight.

Addressing the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus as a colonial legacy highlights the respective historical experiences of limited food access among colonially marginalized populations in South India and South Mexico, as well as the ongoing socio-ethnic inequalities that result in about a fifth of each population experiencing food shortage (see Otero et al., 2015; Ray & Srinivas, 2012). These shared experiences of exploitation and food scarcity shape the collective memory and continue to influence contemporary power dynamics surrounding food and body image. However, recent economic growth has enabled the urban middle classes to adopt consumerist lifestyles within a relatively short time. Aspiring to overcome the traumata of the past and attain a materially abundant life, the Indian and Mexican urban middle classes engage in consumerist practices that differ from those of earlier industrialized nations.

Nicté, a single mother of two, who reported struggling with obesity since childhood, connects the food scarcity her parents experienced in their childhood in a poor neighbourhood of Mexico City with the excess of food she came to consume in a relatively privileged neighbourhood in Mérida:

My mother told me stories that sometimes they didn't have anything to eat, and that sometimes people made two boiled stones to trick their brains. When my parents had their own children, they tried to give us what they didn't have. They thought it was a 'good' thing and not a 'bad' thing. [...] In the past, being chubby was considered a beauty status: he's chubby, he's healthy! (Interview 11 MEX, Pos. 39)

In using the phrase 'beauty status' instead of 'beauty standard', Nicté reveals the association made by older generations between class and the embodied abundance of food. Nonetheless, perceptions of what is overweight as well as the aesthetic of chubby abundance have changed from generation to generation. Interviews with Aisha and Anita, two young women from the Indian sample, brought the conflation of health with chubbiness and wealth by older generations into focus:

Aisha: [citing her family] 'Look at your face, you've become so thin!' And I was actually healthy [signalling fatty deposits]. They [the family] did not even like that.

Interviewer: So, being thin, for them, was a sign of being unhealthy?

Aisha: Yes! They want me to have chubby cheeks. They want me to put on three more kilos. (Interview 5 IN, Pos. 167–170) Anita: It's been handed down through many generations. They believe that being overweight is a sign of prosperity; that's the cultural connotation here. But [...] the perception that being overweight is unhealthy is slowly taking over and changing. (Interview 8 IN, Pos. 25)

While older generations often subscribe to the ideal that equates health with chubbiness, younger generations increasingly interpret above-average weight negatively, viewing being overweight as potentially harmful to health. Young and slimmer people often face criticism about their body shape from older people, as the interview excerpts demonstrated. Yet, exposed to global digital media, younger people are more likely to link skinniness with health. In India, the popular mobile nutrition app HealthifyMe has contributed to the reinterpretation of the 'healthy-wealthy-chubby' nexus, where 'healthifying' is reimagined and equated with weight loss. However, many heads of families, representing older generations, still adhere to the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus. This creates confusion for younger people who experience affective troubles, receiving mixed signals from the family and the media about their body shape. For health-conscious individuals like Uma, a young pharmacist, this often leads to 'strong emotions' (Interview 3 IN, Pos. 128), such as sadness and desperation, which can result in 'impulsive meals' (ibid.) or other self-punitive behaviour. Other younger interviewees also expressed fear about transgressive actions such as cheek-tweaking, and anger when the respect for older people prevents them from setting boundaries regarding their discomfort with such gestures. An interview excerpt with Isabella, a determined Mexican athlete who has faced weight fluctuations and transgressive comments from her family throughout her life, illustrates this point:

And it affected me – suddenly, if I looked thin, they'd say, 'You're too skinny, [...] haven't you looked in a mirror?'. All those comments from my aunt really affected me. [...] I tried to avoid her because I thought, 'I'm sure if I see my aunt, she's going to say things to me'. (Interview 2 MEX, Pos. 11)

Within the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus, the expected gender role for women in both Mexico and India centres on meeting each family member's needs from the kitchen –

expressing love through food and sacrificing personal preferences, careers, or individual projects in favour of a gendered, full-time caregiving role that includes the preparation of elaborate meals (see Allen & Sachs, 2007). While these handed-down gender roles may seem restrictive, it is important to note that they also carry positive connotations. In many households, food preparation is seen as an act of care and nurturing, and older women, in particular, often embrace this role with pride. By catering to the dietary preferences of all family members, they express their love and devotion. In this sense, the 'healthy-wealthy-chubby' nexus also reflects the deep sense of familial bonds and food-related heritage cherished in both Indian and Mexican cultures. Ultimately, the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' teleoaffective formation idealizes elaborate home-cooked meals prepared by women and integrates them into aspirational dietary patterns, with chubbiness emerging as an embodied symbol of wealth and health.

Outside foods

This section examines the teleoaffective formation of 'outside foods' as the more recent food consumption dynamic in India and Mexico that challenges the older 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus. It contrasts home-cooked meals with the idealization of 'outside food' and chubbiness with slimness. After introducing the concept of 'outside foods', we will apply an intersectional analysis, focusing on the most salient axes of inequality in our case studies – generational difference, class and caste, gender, and colonial legacy – which structure the following sub-sections.

We introduce the concept of 'outside foods' to better understand the expanding range of food options facilitated by digital platforms. While the term has appeared in academic discourse, it has been used loosely rather than as a defined concept. Scholars have generally described 'outside foods' in relation to food consumption settings, positioning them along a continuum of inside and outside, with consumers' homes as the main reference point (e.g. Herforth & Ahmed, 2015; Patgiri, 2022).

Rather than defining 'outside foods' by the setting in which they are consumed – whether street food on a commute, pick-up food at a friend's place, or ordered-in delivery food at the office – we define them by where they are prepared. 'outside foods' are ready-to-eat meals and snacks requiring no further preparation before consumption, made for commercial purposes outside consumers' homes. This definition prioritizes preparation settings over consumption settings, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of evolving eating practices shaped by expanding food markets and digital food platforms. Through voices from India and Mexico, this section explores how 'outside foods' reflect shifting dietary aspirations and teleoaffective social conventions.

Generational difference

Young people eagerly consume 'outside foods', associating them with cosmopolitan identities and aspirational lifestyles (see Baviskar, 2018). Rosario, a retired teacher in her early seventies, lives with her divorced son in Mérida, Mexico. She remarked, 'The children now are about buying a lot of food, buying food, going out to restaurants' (Interview 21 MEX, Pos. 43, own translation), referring to her adult children and grandchildren, and characterizing younger generations by their consumerist food practices.

A key factor driving the comfort and accessibility of ‘outside foods’ is the rise of hybrid and fully digital services, enabling food consumption across a variety of settings. Young people, more receptive to consumption-oriented marketing and engaged with global digital media, often participate in cosmopolitan consumerist practices, blending ordered-in and home-made foods in social gatherings. Their affinity with digital tools allows them to place orders through digital platforms, becoming ‘prosumers’ (Ritzer & Miles, 2019, p. 9) – consumers who simultaneously produce service value with their purchase. By adding items to digital carts and checking them out themselves, they enhance digital platform efficiency.

A generational gap exists in the values associated with ‘outside foods’. Young people often view them positively, while older people tend to interpret them negatively in both India and Mexico. When we first met 40-year-old Pandita in Hyderabad, she playfully gestured to her belly, proclaiming her love for eating. She humorously referred to herself as a perfect example of urban malnutrition. However, as the humour faded, her body language shifted: She slumped, avoided eye contact, and seemed to have reinterpreted us as being slim scientists and therefore representative of the judgemental ‘slim gaze’ or scientific ‘medical gaze’ (Guthman, 2009; Valentine, 1999). In the digital age, young people, especially those who do not have a slim body type, increasingly perceive such gazes as judgemental. This is linked to digital media’s reinforcement of body shaming and the glorification of white, slim, and able-bodied beauty standards (Lupton & Feldman, 2020). In India and Mexico, these unrealistically homogenous ideals leave young people particularly vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy and heightened self-consciousness. Such defensive body language and reactions were common during the warm-up phase of interviews, given the sensitivity of the research topic. In subsequent interviews, Pandita often resisted her struggles with weight, especially in relation to ‘outside foods’, reflecting her mother’s perspective:

Maybe my mother attributed my obesity to eating out as a family. My husband, daughter, and I ate out once a week, on the weekends. We made it a family tradition. My mother did not agree with this because they were people who never ate out. (Interview 4 IN, Pos. 54)

Older generations associate ‘outside foods’ with adverse health effects, mainly due to a perceived lack of control over the ingredients. They often express fear or disgust, suspecting poor quality ingredients and excessive use of saturated fats as taste carriers in ‘outside foods’. Carlos, a retired entrepreneur over 60, generalized that they contained ‘poor quality oil’ (Interview 22 MEX, Pos. 29), while Shanti, a homemaker in her fifties and wife of a government employee, described them as containing ‘oil that is very dangerous’ (Interview 14 IN, Pos. 88).

Homemade and outside foods are increasingly consumed together, driven by younger generations’ demand for animal protein and marketed food products. This dynamic played out when Pandita hosted a lavish South Indian lunch with vegetarian dishes. A 20-year-old niece and her boyfriend, unimpressed and disappointed by the meatless feast, were immediately handed a phone by Pandita’s husband to order complementary chicken wings with the Swiggy food delivery app, only to recuperate the young couple’s food-related happiness upon delivery of a generous serving from a global fast-food chain. Pandita affectionately referred to them as part of ‘Generation Chicken’, describing young

adult middle-class generations who crave meat – particularly chicken, the most universally accepted meat across religions.

This pattern was common in non-vegetarian households, where young family members supplemented joint family meals with meat-based ‘outside foods’. Faizan, 20, said he would ‘enhance a bit’ his diet and ‘just order’ chicken online when his mother did not cook meat (Interview IN 23, Pos. 160–195). Homemaker Meena ensured cooking a bit of animal protein, like ‘eggs on a frequent basis’ (Interview IN 9, Pos. 174), to prevent her young adult children from persuading their father into a second, meat-inclusive dinner order.

In India, digital food services have deeply integrated into daily eating practices of urban middle-class youth. In Mexico, this shift is slower and tied to physical eateries and informal vendors. Still, younger Mexicans frequently bring home or order *tacos al pastor*, cakes and other deserts – dishes rarely prepared at home – over the popular Rappi food delivery app. For them, these ‘outside foods’ are relatively accessible and representative of a comfortable consumer lifestyle, often enjoyed as early as breakfast. Over time, this trend has encouraged some older family members to become less reluctant and try more ‘outside foods’. Nonetheless, in both cultural contexts, generational divides persist: younger people associate ‘outside foods’ with cosmopolitan consumerism and elevated social status, while older generations remain sceptical, citing health concerns and the erosion of traditional home-cooked meals.

Class and caste

Our interview partners viewed food as both a lifestyle choice and a marker of class and caste status. Anita, a young entrepreneur in Hyderabad, emphasized her active social life by recommending some of the marketed, most ‘instagrammable’ cafés near her new shop. ‘Instagram is just to see the fancy pictures, [...] to see if the restaurant or café is good enough for you to actually visit’ (Interview IN 13, Pos. 61). For her, meeting friends to consume ‘outside foods’ symbolized an international lifestyle and economic independence as a professionally successful young woman. She linked specific food items, like red wine and pizza, to travel and belonging to a cosmopolitan elite. Camila, a young Mexican mother of three, emphasized the restaurants her social circle favours, reinforcing food’s role in social distinction: ‘We go out to eat Korean, Japanese sushi places. I have a friend who loves hamburgers!’ (Interview 15 MEX, Pos. 10).

High social status is often signalled through specific cuisines and dining venues that project lifestyles via pricing, design, staff, and etiquette. Alan Warde (2016) identified a ‘hierarchy of taste’ (Warde, 2016, p. 162) in British restaurants, linking it to social class. While this hierarchy of taste cannot be transferred to Indian and Mexican contexts, prioritizing certain ‘outside foods’ similarly reflects status. Warde associated this with foods and cuisines requiring sophisticated knowledge (Warde, 2016) – such as eating sushi with chopsticks – demanding resources and skills not universally available across class and caste lines.

Building on this, we interpret the hierarchisation of foods and cuisines in India and Mexico as part of the teleoaffective regime of aspirational eating that materializes in teleoaffective engagements with ‘outside foods’ consumption patterns that signify an

embodied cosmopolitan lifestyle. Globally available products and cuisines are often perceived as desirable – not only for novelty, taste, or convenience but as markers of alignment with elite consumption patterns, as portrayed through the ‘global persona’ in digital media that many young people aspire to emulate. The teleoaffective formation of ‘outside foods’ consumption intersects with digital marketing trends, shaping what is considered cool and desirable. While not limited to foreign dishes and global food brands, these often evoke strong teleoaffective attachments, encapsulating embodied cosmopolitan consumerism and the specific sets of class- and caste-dependent resources, sophisticated knowledge, and taste. As the 20-year-old daughter of homemaker Meena remarked:

[. . .] foreign fast food, we don’t find it in our home. That is considered cooler when going out to eat. (Interview 9 IN, Pos. 216)

Young entrepreneur Anita linked her current daily consumption of ‘outside foods’ to professional success, contrasting it with her childhood. Growing up, dining out on Saturdays was a much-anticipated event, symbolizing the differentiated food consumption patterns of a middle-class lifestyle and offering a chance to mingle with other middle-class families:

Saturday evenings, that were usually looked up to because we would be very excited to go outside and get some outside food. But that was pretty much it, there I was in society. (Interview 13 IN, Pos. 21)

Online food delivery has reshaped these class and caste-specific dining spaces. Samar, a non-binary student living in an upper-caste Hindu dorm, observed that their male dorm neighbours’ frequent food delivery practices reflected not only caste and class privilege but also entrenched gender norms:

And the reason it’s going digital is because it’s much more accessible. For them, it’s more satisfying to gratify their ego online rather than going to a place outside or having to call someone. They want their food right now, on demand. (Interview 18 IN, Pos. 80)

Many young middle- and upper-caste men, accustomed to being served elaborate meals by family members or staff at fixed times, use digital food delivery services to replicate these hierarchies when away from home. In India, ordering food online maintains caste- and gender-specific comfort – receiving a meal without asking or waiting in public. As Samar noted, being denied this privilege could anger upper-caste men, as it challenges their assumed status. This reflects not only the strong connection between caste/class signifiers and aspirations in food consumption patterns but also their intersection with gender, which we explore further in the upcoming section.

Gender

Gender plays a key role in food preparation in both Mexican and Indian households, with women typically assigned most of the tasks, especially in conservative families. Many older men never enter the kitchen, contributing only through grocery shopping. In Mexico, young men who are interested in cooking often face prejudices about their sexual orientation. In India, some younger middle-class men, particularly those who are

supposed to study away from home, are taught to cook. Women, often the primary caregivers for family nutrition, prioritize the food preferences of all family members, particularly male relatives, often neglecting their own. Carla, a Mexican participant who enjoys cooking, shared: 'I come from a macho family, for example, we are educated that women have to serve men' (Interview 2 MEX, Pos. 5/2).

Many interviewees described the ideal woman and mother as one who stands out through sacrifice for her family. In India, the notion of female sacrifice is embodied by the omnipresent figure of the *Attayya*, the mother-in-law. Once a woman marries, she typically moves in with her husband's joint family, taking on most household chores and following the mother-in-law's guidance. Many married women recounted changes to their body and diet as they adjusted to these new customs and hierarchies, often perceived as harsh. The sacrifice of young women, suppressing their dietary preferences to uphold family traditions and meet the *Attayya's* expectations, marks a pivotal moment of female sacrifice. For more conservative women, this represents a line of succession: a time when they eventually retire from this role and gain power and agency by handing down food practices and sacrifice to the next generation. While adjusting to the mother-in-law's customs can be difficult, some women see it as an opportunity to acquire skills they can later pass on to their own families.

Sushila, a conservative Brahmin woman, shared that her *Attayya* prohibited her from entering the kitchen during menstruation due to religious beliefs deeming this phase of the menstrual cycle impure. She followed these gendered caste rules when her mother-in-law was present but adapted them within the nuclear family. The same family consumed 'outside foods' every weekend, usually ordered-in pizza or take-away foods, which her husband Raghav would pick up. He proudly discussed Sushila's dietary changes after marriage, portraying himself as open-minded for allowing 'outside foods' to ease her cooking responsibilities – an approach contrasting with the stricter rules her father had enforced before marriage (Interview 1 IN, Pos. 416). This example illustrates how inherited gender and caste roles are evolving through the aspirational incorporation of 'outside foods' into daily consumption practices, even within relatively conservative households of younger generations.

Nonetheless, 'outside foods' remain deeply embedded in gendered norms. In both India and Mexico, portion sizes, particularly the share of protein-rich foods, are often dictated by gender expectation. Carla, who grew up with several brothers, described experiencing what can be understood as a gendered gaze of surveillance during social eating, when her family monitored her portion size ever since childhood. She actively resists this monitoring nowadays and resumes:

He [referring to her brothers] can eat two, three, four, five plates of food and I am only entitled to one plate because I am a woman [laughs]. But yes, it's still like that today [...] a man is told nothing. (Interview 1 MEX, Pos. 88)

Carla added this reflection to her food environment map, writing and stating, 'As a woman, I'm judged if I eat more' (ibid.). The food environment maps of women in Mexico were generally more creative and detailed compared to their male counterparts or the Indian sample. These maps often required over half an hour for elaboration and featured symbols like hearts, houses, delivery personnel, or slogans, reflecting the female Mexican sub-sample's strong emotional connection to food and their confidence and

happiness in displaying this. In contrast, Indian women's food environment maps were often simpler and smaller, indicating more limited agency and narrower food-related activity spaces, as men often indicate what they wish to consume and handle much of the grocery shopping.

These examples highlight gendered aspects of the teleoffective formation of 'outside foods' in India and Mexico, shifting older 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' dynamics among young generation. This loosening of ties between women, the kitchen, sacrifice, and publicly monitored portion sizes contrasts with older norms. In the United States of America, Cairns and Johnston (2015) have studied the relationship between food and femininity, emphasizing its role in understanding personal identities, body projects, and household dynamics.

In India and Mexico, the decline of homebound 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' ideals – where women are expected to cook – through the adoption of 'outside food' consumption practices – where food preparation can be externalized – marks a notable shift. Digital food delivery services further facilitate the outsourcing of meal preparation, yet women often remain responsible for facilitating food orders, setting the table, and cleaning up. While this shift reduces some domestic burdens, it is not disruptive, leaving traditional gender roles largely untouched.

Beyond gender, 'outside foods' dynamics also play a role in reshaping colonial legacies. As teleoffective attachments evolve, contemporary food consumption patterns continue to transform, carrying both liberating and restrictive implications for individuals, households, and society.

Colonial legacy

This section explores the teleoffective formation of 'outside foods' and their entanglements with colonial legacies, beginning with the work of a prominent Indian social media figure. Rujuta Diwekar, one of the subcontinent's most influential nutritionists, has a considerable celebrity clientele and nearly two million Instagram followers.

In *Women & the Weight Loss Tamasha* (*tamasha* loosely translates to curse), she delves into the pitfalls of disciplining the female body to conform to societal ideals, drawing extensively from her professional experience. She dedicates a chapter to 'The thin, fair, tall and convent-educated phenomenon' (Diwekar, 2014, p. 70), examining the embodied postcolonial and globalized ideals of weight, skin colour, height, education, and age via the example of arranged marriage. Diwekar highlights how her clients aspire to these societal ideals while also experiencing substantial pressure to conform to colonially inherited beauty norms – particularly those amplified by Western media, such as thinness and fair skin – in order to maximize their social mobility by securing marriage into a family of high social status. These embodied codes of desirability in arranged marriages have specific nuances in the Indian context, further discussed in Bhagawandas (2023) auto-ethnography on discriminatory experiences in social media.

In Mexico, the colonial legacy of *Mestizaje* – a project in which Spanish colonizers married into Indigenous ruling elites to consolidate power – continues to shape societal imaginaries of class status through the racial and ethnic ideal of '*mejorar la raza*' (improving the race), which centres on whitening family lineages. This discourse has been, and continues to be, cultivated among the countries' long-standing elites as a means of

distinguishing class status through skin colour (see Bordo, 2003). This aligns with Julie Guthman's (2011) argument that body weight and food choices, along with their societal perceptions, are shaped more by capitalist structures, patriarchy, and racialized class dynamics than by health concerns.

Similar themes emerged in our interviews, where women, in particular, shared experiences of past or present family pressure exercised over their bodies with the aim of helping them find a husband, even when they were still girls and this was a far-distant prospect. Interview partners in both contexts emphasized that the best life prospects for women, as illustrated by Diwekar's aforementioned phenomenon, involved a delicate balance: being thin, but not without curves; having fair skin, but only in comparison to most men; being tall, but not taller than most men; being highly educated (in India, with a Protestant influence, and in Mexico with a strong Catholic influence); yet remaining softly spoken, young, and willing to sacrifice a career for family.

Numerous interviewees from the Mexican and the Indian samples shared how persistent, unsolicited comments about their bodies – often delivered as inappropriate jokes – left them feeling deeply self-conscious, including emotions such as embarrassment, anxiety, and shyness. Athlete Isabella, for example, recalled her aunt repeatedly telling her 'you look like a sow' (Interview 2 MEX Pos. 11/3). At least five interview partners under the age of 30, linked such remarks to prolonged depression. Neelima, a 27-year-old healthcare worker was acutely aware of this cycle:

I get mocked, but I can't help. That's like a vicious cycle that you get trapped in. I mean, first, you have body image issues, you're sad, and because you are sad, you want to do something that makes you feel better, which is mostly the obsessive eating. (Interview 19 IN, Pos. 15–17)

Pandita, a relatively fair-skinned woman, faced ridicule for marrying a darker-skinned man, with family members insisting in racist ways that she could have done better than a 'dark man like that' (Interview 4 IN, Pos. 50). Her father would tell her to stop eating at age 12, and:

[...] he would put his hand on our [including her sisters] head and say: stop growing! I can't find a husband for you. He did that to our children also. He said: Don't go to school! We can't find you a husband. (Interview 4 IN, Pos. 50)

Young men, such as the Mexican sound engineer Miguel, also expressed feeling 'there is constant pressure' (Interview 16 MEX, Pos. 24) not only regarding their physical appearance, but, more significantly, in achieving academic success and securing a high salary. This pressure often extended beyond personal aspirations, as many felt responsible for sustaining a consumption-driven lifestyle – not just for themselves but often for entire intergenerational households. Retired Indian high-school principal Upadhyaya illustrated this shift by comparing herself and her husband to their two young professional sons. She highlighted how the standard for a happy and fulfilling life has risen, now increasingly measured by the ability to participate in specific consumption practices, such as the regular consumption of 'outside foods':

[...] the younger generation is so aspirational, [...] for them, being wealthy is very important. Having money to spend, [...] having a good lifestyle. [...] Aspirational goals for us were very

different; we got a government job. [...] We didn't aspire for more than that. (Interview 17 IN, Pos. 174)

When comparing Mexican and the Indian food cultures to global perceptions, many people associate Mexican cuisine with summer relaxation and the Indian cuisine with health benefits. Certain food-centred traditions, such as Ayurveda, have been commodified and exported as lifestyle consumption practices. Locally, however, these traditions are increasingly fading into the background. Several interview partners highlighted this shift, linking it to the overwriting of local practices with international influences. Pandita pointed to the rise of pharmaceutical products replacing healthy cooking, and Nicté to the commercialization of *comida casera*, where 'outside food' is sold as if it were a home-cooked meal:

My culture, my tradition, always used food as medicine until Western medicine came. I don't think my grandmother ever took a tablet from over the counter. It has always been the kitchen; the kitchen is the pharmacy. (Interview 4 IN, Pos. 11)

And if I don't have time to cook at home, then I try to find a 'cocina economica' that sells 'comida casera'. (Interview 11 MEX, Pos. 9)

The notion of 'outside foods' in Mexico is further complicated by the paradoxical framing of certain meals as both outside and homemade food. *Comida casera* (homemade food) refers to relatively affordable dishes resembling what people would cook at home, typically sold in small vending establishments, often considered family restaurants.

Cocinas economicas, economic kitchens, and similar eateries selling *comida casera* represent modern consumption trends, given the fact that they are recognized by the '3Bs' rule: *bueno, bonito y barato* (good food, beautiful venue, and cheap prices). This tripartite standard mirrors globalized expectations of 'outside foods', prioritizing taste, visual appeal both of the food and the vending place according to a globally converging marketing language, and competitive pricing.

Similarly, corner shops have capitalized on the aspiration to consume standardized global products, successfully selling international bottled drinks and packaged snacks. In several interviews (13, 16, 17 MEX), these marketed snack items were described as integral to people's identities. The 43-years-old cook Javier not only had personal favourites (Coca-Cola and Pinguinos) but also knows his friends' preferences, procuring to bring them as small gifts (Interview 13 MEX) – an act that reinforces social bonds through shared consumption.

Overall, colonial legacies and Western-centric globalization have profoundly shaped body ideals and teleoaffective engagements with 'outside foods' consumption in Mexico and India. These dynamics reflect aspirations towards postcolonial white beauty standards, further intensified by late globalization's emphasis on slimness – often accompanied by self-consciousness and dissatisfaction when these ideals remain out of reach. The most prominent teleoaffective engagement with 'outside foods' is the preference for marketed, industrial, and foreign foods, which evoke positive emotions and serve as markers of coolness and cosmopolitan class identity among younger generations. Finally, colonial legacies continue to shape teleoaffective engagements with 'outside foods' in ways that visibly transform cultural practices. This is evident in how the ability to maintain 'outside foods' consumption standards can impact (arranged) marriage prospects, how over-the-counter pharmaceutical medicine replaces traditional food-as-

medicine practices, and how the meaning of home-cooked meals is being redefined by *comida casera* – an ‘outside food’ that evokes a homely feel despite being prepared outside the home.

Changing consumer practices: from ‘wealthy-healthy-chubby’ to ‘outside foods’ in the teleoaffective regime of aspirational eating

Our analysis of the teleoaffective formations of ‘outside foods’ and the ‘wealthy-healthy-chubby’ nexus reveals generational contradictions (see Table 1). The associated practice bundles and material arrangements differ significantly between younger and older generations, reflecting shifts in food consumption patterns and societal norms, further intensified by digital media and food services.

Current changes in consumption practices in the context of urban food environments in India and Mexico, as examples of non-Western low- and middle-income countries, can be understood through the dialectic between ‘outside foods’ and the ‘wealthy-healthy-chubby’ nexus. The latter is a nexus in which older generations of the rising urban middle class equate wealth with being chubby and healthy. It is a result of the belief that having a ‘healthy’ appearance with a ‘chubby’ or larger-than-average body shape is a sign of a ‘wealthy’ high social status, which is informed by the collective memory of food scarcity and recent economic growth. Individuals in this age group therefore have greater aspirations for displaying a large body size than those in other age groups. The gendered role of women as caretakers who show love and sacrifice through their effort in the kitchen reinforces the affective aspirational engagement with chubbiness among older generations.

In younger generations, however, the significations of this nexus are less well supported. Individuals in this age group are more likely to be aware of globalized media images of slim body shapes and to be influenced by these images. They are therefore predisposed to experience a double standard in health and beauty: one shaped by the beliefs of older family members and another influenced by globalized media and marketing, which often informs their personal ideals. Cosmopolitan lifestyles are projected

Table 1. Summary of the teleoaffective formations of ‘outside foods’ and the ‘wealthy-healthy-chubby’ nexus. Own elaboration.

	Wealthy-Healthy-Chubby	Outside Foods
generational difference	older generations idealise chubby bodies and women’s home-cooking as status symbols, reinforced by the discourse of using wealth, health and chubbiness as synonyms	younger generations idealise the consumption of “outside foods” and slim bodies as status symbols
class or caste	new urban middle class, i.e. people who have experienced recent economic growth	people with high digital affinity; exposure to cosmopolitan persona and global marketing languages of foods
gender	women take care of each family member’s needs from the kitchen and show love through sacrifice and serving food	women use “outside foods” as tools for escaping or reinterpreting expected gender roles of serving food; while some men participate, others use them to uphold expectations of being served
colonial legacy	experiences of food scarcity; persisting intersectional food inequalities	“outside foods” reconfigure aspirational consumption practices and affect marriage prospects, replace food-as-medicine, and redefine home-cooked meals.

through globalized media channels, encouraging a diversity of individual teleoffective motives to reproduce these lifestyles by way of consuming 'outside foods'. For younger women, 'outside foods' can serve as tools of liberation, helping them break away from traditional gendered food tasks and explore their own tastes. Younger men may engage with 'outside foods' either to subtly reinterpret gender roles around food preparation or to uphold inherited expectations of being served on demand. However, this shift comes with significant consequences, as the teleoffective formation of 'outside foods' consumption often affects marriage prospects, replaces food-as-medicine, and redefines home-cooked meals.

'Outside foods' and the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus are contradictory yet interconnected teleoffective formations, both operating within the same overarching teleoffective regime that channels desire into aspirational eating. These engagements transcend discursive/cognitive boundaries and extend into non-discursive/material engagements with food, manifesting in deeply embodied emotions such as happiness, self-consciousness, sadness, and even anger and frustration. At their core, both formations reflect a basic desire: the desire to be part of a social group and to be loved and accepted therein, whether through consuming 'outside foods' or embodying the food practices of the 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus. Ultimately, the shift from this older 'wealthy-healthy-chubby' nexus to the newer 'outside foods' teleoffective formation reveals the powerful influence of a teleoffective regime of aspirational eating, deeply intertwined with shaping and reconfiguring social inequalities.

Disclosure statement

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

Funding

The project is approved and supervised by the German Federal Agency for Agriculture and Food. Funding (indicator 2820FENV05) is provided as part of the instrument for research cooperation on world nutrition.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, MMH, upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval

This study has received ethics approval by the Institutional Ethical Committee at the National Institute of Nutrition India (ICMR-NITM/I HEC I2022-I AN I 004).

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