

Urban food environments in India and Mexico

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Introduction

Food environments are the interface in which food systems meet the consumption practices of people. It is important to understand food environments especially in the urban context of emerging economies, taking into account that the metropolises of those countries with recent economic growth have a particularly high prevalence of diet-related diseases and socio-environmental degradation (GBD Ng et al. 2014, Pingali et al. 2017, Swinburn et al. 2019). The metropolises of India and Mexico are some of the most affected by the synchronous occurrence of multiple forms of malnutrition (ibid.). These include nutrient insufficiencies, obesity, and underweight, as well as associated non-communicable diseases and chronic illnesses, such as diabetes (FAO 2019). Additionally, socio-environmental degradation is occurring in food systems under the current food regime. It fosters unfair labor and trade, climate change, and biodiversity loss by way of the relative power of the food industries' profit interests over social and environmental wellbeing (Friedmann 2005).

The research question here is how individual food consumption practices in India and Mexico relate to disease-prone and unsustainable urban food environments. More precisely, I ask how food practices lead to the reproduction of such food environments on the one hand, and how these food environments help reproducing disease-prone and unsustainable food practices on the other hand. This paper identifies blind spots in the literature and proposes a food consumption practices based approach to the study of urban food environments in India and Mexico. It aims at adding to the debate from a qualitative angle by exploring the empirical "outside foods" trend and the ambiguous "healthy-wealthy-chubby" phenomenon as two contradictory dynamics of a regime that I conceive as aspirational eating. Furthermore, it explores initial findings of biographical turning points in individual food practices and proposes promising research perspectives.

Food environments

Various scholars added to our current understanding of the role of food environments in promoting sustainable and healthy diets. Sobal et al.'s (1998) systems theory approach stresses the importance of a

comprehensive understanding that takes into account the broader cultural and social context in which food choices are made. Glanz et al. (2008) build a strong concept on the notion of the environment of individual and community food consumption, which helps to understand neighbourhood food availability but lacks a broader scope. Popkin et al.'s (2012) work sets the cornerstone for debates on obesogenic environments and proposes intervention points to improve access to healthy foods and reduce the availability and promotion of unhealthy foods. Swinburn et al.'s (2013) key framework defines food environments as the collective physical, economic, policy, and socio-cultural surroundings, opportunities, and conditions that influence people's food and beverage choices, and ultimately determine their nutritional status. The authors call for a comprehensive, multi-level, and multi-disciplinary approach to improving food environments. The UN's Panel of Experts (HLPE 2017) build on that framework and foreground that it is different scalar contexts in which consumers engage with the food system to make their decisions. The latter definition is arguably the most widely used.

This brief literature review shows the development of the conceptual approach. It highlights the importance of food environments as the central interface between consumer demands and the food systems' offer. At this point of contact, contextually asymmetrical relations offer an uneven playing field for individual consumption practices. It is transversal to the intersectional axes of socio-material inequalities of class/caste, generational difference, gender, and colonial legacy. For the Indian and Mexican contexts, it seems imperative to pay closer attention to the digital, the corporeal, and the agri-food platforms' economic dimensions of food environments (see Müller-Hansen et al. 2023) to outline inequalities that constrain or enable healthy and sustainable dietary practices in cities.

Food consumption practice theory

Retrieving ideas from consumption practice analysis (Warde 2007), it is important to note that individuals and their behaviours are not solely responsible for creating healthy and sustainable food environments. Systemic and structural factors, such as power relations between consumers and the food industry

or economic policies that prioritize profit over people's and planetary well-being, significantly contribute to the development of healthy and sustainable food environments. Nonetheless, particularly the consumers of that more privileged urban population can play a crucial role in creating healthy and sustainable food environments for all. Examples include: making informed choices, being aware of the impact of their consumption practices on their corporeality and on the environment and society at large, by demanding systemic changes, and by networking and mobilizing to make their voices heard.

With this prologue to food consumption theory in mind, it is worthwhile to examine individual practices of procuring, preparing, eating, and disposing of food. Individual food practices follow certain patterns. In the terms of consumption theorists, those patterns can best be understood as sets of interconnected doings or "practice bundles", and "material arrangements" or the preconditioning stuff arraying possibilities (Schatzki 2014). Daniel Welch (2017) contributed significantly to the understanding of macro-level developments of practices. He differentiates between such socially shared affective commitments that engage with individually differentiated motives, and such more general affective engagements that represent Schatzki's (2002) "common understandings". The first macro-level dynamics are conceptualized as "teleoaffective formations" (Welch 2017: 61), meaning more or less loose conjunctures of emotional affect expressed through individually purposeful practices. The latter are conceptualized as "teleoaffective regimes" (Welch and Warde 2017: 3). Within these regimes, the purpose of practices is shared.

Methods

In order to capture the nuanced individual motives relevant to the theoretical understanding, a fine-tuned methodological approach is indispensable. In this study, in-depth interviewing and participatory mental mapping were employed to retrieve data in the metropolis of Hyderabad in India and Mérida in Mexico. The two data sets allow for a more precise distinction of culturally specific aspects, respectively of South Asian and Latin American food environments. All 53 interviews were held in person between September 2022 and January 2023. Most of them took place in the interviewee's homes, they were recorded with fully informed consent, and they were transcribed in parallel to the interviewing process to allow for an iterative reflection on questions. For the coding with the MAXQDA software, some categories were deductively built, but the most salient ones emerged inductively during the research. The study participants were recruited via snowball sampling, and selected based on various criteria, including belonging to the urban middle class,

covering a range of adult age groups and genders, including individuals from different middle income groups, professions, castes, religions, and neighbourhoods. In the end, the Indian sample $n=31$ was a bit larger, since the author was less familiar with the context in comparison with the Mexican study site, where data saturation was reached at $n=22$.

“Outside foods” and “healthy-wealthy-chubby”

The study reveals that intersectional socio-material inequalities of class/caste, generational difference, and gender, as well as colonial legacy, determine individual urban food environments in India and Mexico significantly. In the Indian context, aspirational expressions like "outside foods" and the synonymously used terms "wealthy-healthy-chubby" let on the cultural and historical ambivalences. There are the shifting normative patterns when it comes to the body images conveyed through digital media as opposed to those of older generations in families. Moreover, some turning points for shifts in food consumption practices and corporeality were identified. They include individual turning points like taking up a sedentary occupation, marriage, performing parenthood, and increased screen time. They include also general turning points like the increased availability of digital food services, and the Covid-related restrictions and their repercussions.

Outside foods refers to comestibles that are prepared and sold outside of the home, often in restaurants, street food stalls, and fast-food chains. I intend to establish outside foods as a term that contributes to geographical perspectives on food. Outside foods take the food vending setting as point of reference, rather than the increasingly diversifying modes of food distribution and settings of food consumption. As an empirical term commonly used in India and Mexico, "outside foods" reflects not only the space where the food is prepared but also the social and cultural meanings associated with it. Particularly for young generations, consuming "outside foods" is often associated with upward social mobility and modernity, as well as the desire to distance oneself from traditional home-cooked meals that may be seen as less sophisticated. That last aspect of sophistication when it comes to other cuisines can be linked to the countries' colonial legacy. In Indian society, the British constructed their empire across India on the notion of cultural superiority that also inferiorized Indian food culture. This tale of hierarchies of cuisines made its way to contemporary conceptions of modernity, as established by the former colonizers. Young people seek to explore the pre-conceived modern foreign foods. Also in Mexico, the convenience and colonially-infused imaginaries of allegedly uniform rather than diverse modern processed and ready-made foods is overriding the cultural heritage of the community culture cuisine. It

shows through an omnipresent availability of sodas, alcohol, and energy-dense but nutrient low snacks at the lowest prices. Their consumption has a ritualized character, for example during the morning snack time between breakfast and lunch that used to be dominantly corn and fruit based. In connection, this trend towards consuming certain "outside foods" from certain popular venues has been linked to negative health outcomes because of those foods' high share in saturated fats, salt, and simple sugars. This holds true particularly for lower-income and geo-socially marginalized populations who may not have access to healthy and affordable outside food options. Nonetheless, all sorts of outside foods are promoted through digital media and have become very popular due to their convenience, relatively low prices, and digitally translated lifestyle aspirations. Especially in India, online delivery services have had significant growth (Patgiri, 2022) and now form part of many middle-class household's everyday food practices. At first, apps like "Swiggy" and "Zomato" provided services solely for delivering prepared meals, such as chicken, which is often ordered by young Indians from the lovingly dubbed "Generation Chicken" to supplement their vegetarian family meals. During Covid lockdown and because of the fear of restaurants and service personnel as potential virus carriers (ibid.), the delivery apps included grocery delivery in their portfolio. This was well received by the urban consumers since they were already used to placing orders for example at neighbourhood corner stores. The availability of such services and the changing job market with more work opportunities for women and relatively less time for food have set the premise to recur to outside foods. From a gender perspective, outside foods can be interpreted as a tool of liberating some women from the handed-down food duties. Currently, much of the urban middle class Indians' food procurement has shifted to ordering in "outside foods" and groceries digitally or by phone call – a significant post-Covid repercussion on the food practices.

The "wealthy-healthy-chubby" nexus was identified by their usage in India and Mexico as synonyms, and gives way to complex cultural and historical ambivalences, such as the shifting normative patterns when it comes to young generation's body images, conveyed through digital media, as opposed to those of older generations. Until recently, a larger body size was associated with wealth and social status as it suggested that one had access to an abundance of food and resources. However, with the younger generations, there has been a shift towards valuing thinness as the ideal body type, that is often achieved through dieting and exercise. This shift is influenced by various factors, including the rising influence of global markets and media that promote such body ideals. Moreover, the shift towards ideal-typical thinness has contributed to the rise of diet culture and

a burgeoning market for material and digital dieting products. Particularly problematic is that it promotes a weight stigma that is disjunct from implications of real obesity. This weight stigma, disguised in (lay) medicalization, associates larger body sizes with personal failure and moral inferiority.

Both in India and in Mexico, these different body images and norms create negotiations between different generations, resulting in a complex relationship between food, culture, and health that reflects the changing social and cultural landscape. It shows notably in the digital, the corporeal, and the agri-food platforms' economic dimensions. In families, especially the younger generation is experiencing these ambivalences as conflicting, with older family members pressuring them to uphold their chubbiness standards, while the media at their reach promote obesogenic foods at the same time as they promote body images celebrating thinness. In response to that ambiguity, an energy balance fitness narrative settled in among the middle class. Fueled by the food industry, it promotes an overall increase in consumed and burnt calories, and disregards nutritional value balances as well as many physical and most mental responses to food. Even when following that consumerist narrative through, maintaining the required levels of physical activity is unattainable for a large proportion of the urban middle class. Besides the time and monetary constraints for sports, many Indian and Mexican cities do not count with enough walkable green space, possibilities for active transportation, or even the clean air to make that narrative operable (see Rigolon et al. 2018; Wolch et al. 2014).

In addition, biographical narratives of study participants named turning points when it comes to alterations in their dietary health, dietary sustainability, and diet-related changes in their body shape. They mentioned individual turning points like marriage and performing parenthood, taking up a sedentary occupation, or increased screen time, and general turning points like the augmented availability of digital food services, Covid-related restrictions, and the post-Covid new normal with new food practices. Given that many of these turning points aligned across the interview narratives, it is reasonable to conclude that there are both individual and shared socio-environmental events that provoke change in our food consumption practices.

Teleoaffective consumption practices in Indian and Mexican urban food environments

This study focuses on Indian and Mexican southern metropolises, where the urban middle classes represent growing segments of the populations with increasing purchasing power. They are willing to spend more money on outside foods, to aspire to certain lifestyles, and attain certain body images that

entail different health and sustainability results within the generationally ambiguous outside food and wealthy-healthy-chubby dynamics.

From a consumption practices' perspective, these dynamics can be interpreted as teleoaffective formations. The younger generations that subscribe to the outside food dynamics have a variety of motives to engage with that consumption practice. These range from the class/caste distinction through outside food consumption while maintaining embodied thinness ideals, over reinventing the gendered division of food tasks, to the upholding of colonially infused hierarchies of cuisines and globally commercialized food products. The older generations that conflate wealth with chubbiness and health possess another set of motives. They show their class/caste distinction by embodying the large abundance at their reach. I interpret this as a consumerist reconciliation with the belittling and the manifold scarcities, including in the food realm, of the colonial times. This has repercussions in socio-cultural, economic, and racial-ethnic inequalities that last until present day. Coming to a last but not least motive, the women in the families take up the handed-down gendered role of food preparation. There are many nuances to that role, in which women may take great pride and show their love and care through food, but may also put up with sacrificing their own culinary preferences and oftentimes also their profession, career, and financial freedom.

The two teleoaffective formations "outside foods" and "wealthy-healthy-chubby" thus inglobe a variety of motives that create generationally conflicting possibilities and enactments of food-related social distinction. According to this, notions of health are changing within the urban food environments of India and Mexico, from chubbiness ideals among the older generations to thinness ideals among the younger generations, who are highly perceptible to global trade and media. The sustainability aspect seems rather absent in the wealthy-healthy-chubby dynamic, since it is marked by the logics of abundance. It seems to gain concern in outside food dynamics, particularly among the wealthiest and among the youngest generations.

I conceive that both teleoaffective formations and their myriad motives have a common denominator: aspirational eating. This teleoaffective regime helps reproducing disease-prone and unsustainable food environments by overriding bodily and environmental warning signals through powerful food marketization and the thrive for convenience that is partially conditioned by the job market. Aspirational eating conveys that belonging to the modern world, the urban middle class in particular, requires adapting the dynamics of "outside food" or "wealthy-healthy-chubby" consumption lifestyles.

Research pathways

Indian and Mexican urban food environments' central dimensions reach beyond established frameworks. These frameworks require revision and expansion to meet the need for adequate qualitative scrutiny as well as standardized factorial measures.

The identified motives of "outside food" and "wealthy-healthy-chubby" consumption practice dynamics would profit from an in-depth historical analysis to examine their possible newness or how they are possibly embedded in larger cycles.

Finally, individual and shared turning points in food consumption practices are an intriguing research pathway to pursue with a mixed methods approach. This could indicate the most fruitful moments for interventions to build healthier and sustainable urban food environments, supported by the corresponding food consumption practices.

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