

**Food, Fetish and Public Display: A Sociological  
Analysis of the “Performativity” Involved in  
“Consumption” of Food.**

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**Abstract:** *Food is basic, natural and private. But when it comes to “eating” it essentially intertwines the notion of “performance” as eating is the “act of having food”. It involves an attention towards the performance of the act while eating. Now when this act of having food takes place in “public” the performative notion provides a space for the individual agency to translate this mundane, bodily need of having food to the act of consuming food in turn relegating it to an altogether different status. The sites of eating transform into a single site that becomes the theatre of “action”, the action is that of consumption. The social categories that previously dictated food choices, cooking and eating were largely found to be dictated by the social categories of caste, religion, culture etc. Contemporary urban settings have emphasised the performative dimension of all the activities related to food and eating. The foci of food are seen to traverse between hunger, appetite and “appetite appeal” making people wander in a state of trance to figure out the primacy between “real” and “symbolic” values attached to food. Analysing Goffman’s concept of performance as a theoretical framework together with the concept of panopticon surveillance of Foucault we have tried in this paper to develop a deeper understanding of the theme. Among 70 Hindu, educated, urban, middle and upper-middle class youth in Kolkata questionnaire as part of the quantitative study as well as qualitative method of observation was employed to figure out and analyse the contemporary situation. Participants were found to be strongly motivated by the “performative” dimension involved in food and its related activities. Tendencies of fantasising about food by performing the act of eating are popularised among people. Food has been treated as a fetish that is manifested with the symbolic association of food that goes well beyond the realm of hunger to the realm of “social appetite”.*

**Keywords:** Appetite, Consumption, Eating Out, Hedonic foods, Hunger, Performativity, Public, Meal Performance.

### ***Introduction***

As “food” and “eating” have realms of nature and culture respectively surrounding them similarly hunger and appetite have peripheries which even though coincide at junctures are not similar under any circumstances. Hunger is defined as a set of internal experiences that make a man or any other animal seek food whereas appetite involves the preferences surrounding which food is selected to satiate the hunger. Hunger is often associated with a feeling of “emptiness” surrounding the stomach or intestine (2003: 219). Thus, what is perceived is the bridging of the gap between the “biological” and “social” domains as we move from categories of “hunger” to “appetite”. Hunger is thus biological as it involves the physical emptiness characterized by stomach contraction and distention, whereas what kind of food is chosen by individuals to satiate this biological hunger is largely determined by the social and cultural orientations of the individuals.<sup>1</sup> This also stands as a barrier for demarcating humans and other animals as the latter are free from the social and cultural strainers that determine appetite. Admitting the centrality of food in the lives of people, it is mostly found to be intertwined with emotions of pleasure and guilt and also with that of culture and social structure. When it comes to food it is intertwined with social meanings and is reflective of our surrounding circumstances and people who not only determine what we eat or when we eat but also where we live, who we are and with whom we interact (Germov & Williams 2019). Thus, food assumes a social character as it not only biologically sets to fill our hunger but also is symbolically infused with identity creation and designation of our social position. It is quite apparent that people are socialized into certain food systems which might be determined by factors such as cultural tradition which includes societal subsystems including family, place of orientation etc. but when the medium of interaction becomes food itself then appetite assumes a further “social character” as food itself becomes a medium through which people socialize beyond the private ambit of their families or caste boundaries that previously delimited the “private”-“public” dilemma concerning consumption of food.

Food as a symbol occurs in a variety of forms including objects, activities, relationships, events and gestures. Food undoubtedly is an integral part of our daily and celebratory life and thereby permeates through physical, emotional and psychological levels engaging in all the senses and having

high levels of association with emotive and cognitive senses. Eating behaviour is strongly influenced by the social contexts thereby taking it quite far and extending beyond the individual act of just having food. Hedonic foods, following Cramer and Antonides (2011) are the ones that primarily serve to provide pleasures of the senses and generally include foods like ice cream, waffles, potato chips etc. Whereas, utilitarian foods include foods like bread, fruits, vegetables etc. which are centred around utilitarian values. They also suggested in their study that “spontaneity” in acquiring hedonic foods is much over the utilitarian counterparts. As suggested the ‘reward’ dimension of the hedonic food acts as a factor for engagement in such food options. The act of consumption of food itself embeds it in social status and social relationships which not only emerge but are created and recreated in public settings. Pierre Bourdieu identifies food as a weapon of “social snobbery” (1984) through which food itself becomes a tool of expression of social identity and social class.

Eating out refers to the practice of eating in a public setting outside the confines of the private, i.e. the house. The research essentially concerned with the eating-out practices of the first kind (i.e. eating outside food in a public setting) as data has been collected at public eating-out set-ups but as the research also takes into consideration the overall food habits concerning the nutritional realm of individuals so certain aspects of the second kind of eating out (i.e. having outside food at a private setting) would automatically come under the light of analysis for generating an all-encompassing account of the practice of eating out in Kolkata.

From the perspective of Structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1970) conceived of a “culinary triangle” comprising three categories of food: cooked, raw and rotten. The transformation from raw or cooked to rotten is a natural one, while that of raw to cooked is a cultural one. So, when the notion of culture is concerned, society or collectively gets involved in it as we search for answers like why is it cooked, how is it cooked, what is cooked and when is it cooked. Strauss understood food beliefs as cosmological and treated food practices as a language based on the primary binary opposition between “nature” and “culture”. Culture, being the unique, identifying character of humans and food practices accordingly exemplify the binary opposition between the raw and the cooked, between the food and non-food. Lévi-Strauss theorized cooked food as the cultural transformation of the raw, in which nature is transformed and delimited. How this transformation is carried out as part of everyday life serves to define cultures. Food has been analysed as a language by exploring conceptual

categories for food classification along with the customs and rules for food preparation is treated by Strauss as a means of understanding universally shared structures of human cognition. The way through the binary alteration between “raw” and “cooked” food assumes a social character and is very essential in identifying how the notions of performing these activities are intervened with the factors that make the entire activity stand under constant surveillance.

Talking about surveillance reference to Jeremy Bentham’s model of panopticon as used by Michel Foucault becomes unavoidable. The fear of being watched in prison made the inmates behave in a particular order. Similarly, in contemporary society, the concept of surveillance asserts performance as such an important core that while people eat out just by the fear of “being watched” people perform the “setting” expected behaviour that becomes indicative of a person’s social status.

Erving Goffman’s ideas (1959) that people engage in face-to-face interaction in a public setting which marks the performance that is centred around impression management. The role-playing and reaction are all part of the front stage of the actor where he based on the “definition of the situation” reacts in ways expected of him. The “performance” dimension includes the activity in front of a particular audience which also includes a “setting” where the performance takes place along with the props, scenery and location. The “appearance” dimension portrays in front of the audience the social status of the performer. People use food in a public setting to not only perform certain roles in the setting where they eat out but also the ambience, and props which aid in such alongside how they are always eager to manage their impression that becomes indicative of the appearance of the person’s social status.

Joanne Finkelstein (1989) identifies the evolution of restaurants<sup>2</sup> as an institution as measured by its popularity and the breadth of economic significance. The author recognizes the sociological significance of dining out is amplified by the way it illustrates the individual’s participation in the public domain along with the kind of social relationships that are pursued and cultivated. Dining out impacts the styles of sociality and the expressions of civility which are considered the most illuminating characteristics of the social epoch (1989: 25). In modern society, foodstuffs and their manner of consumption have become symbols of social differentiation and individual preference. Dining out itself has become something more than that of immediate physical gratification to become a commodity reflective of desires. Restaurants in modern history have emerged as social institutions

playing an instrumental role in the promulgation of certain styles of public conduct. Dining out is seen as a public performance. There is a paradox involved in the practice of dining out as a source of individual pleasure. As eating is a pleasure as accepted by the physiological processes makes little sense if it is conducted in public near others. Eating is a sensory process involving the olfactory, the visual and the tactile. The presence of other individuals during this exercise is not only unnecessary but is also distracting as in the public sphere all aspects of one's physical bearing need to be governed by social courtesies and prescriptions. The table manners in public constrain eating out coupled with the constant need for controlling natural bodily functions. It is necessary to overlay alimentation with strata of cultural constraints resting upon previous interdictions. In this practice of dining out the lower order of being, i.e. bodily nourishment is intertwined with a higher order of experience, embedded in taking pleasure acts to raise the banality of eating to an abstract level involving symbolic notions. The restaurant has been depicted as a *diorama*, which heightens and intensifies perceptions and how restaurants act as a tool capable of shaping the interior mood of dinner (1989: 27). The "consumer *par excellence*" sees a merger between the material conditions like the style of cuisine, services, price and the abstractions of pleasure, entertainment and desire. The *diorama* highlights the complexion of contemporary styles in sociality as it is a space to project how personal desires are purchased and for the *gastronome* a potential way to display personal wealth.

Restaurants following Baudrillard, which emerged as a new means of consumption, are seen to be both sides of the same coin. It is "enabling" on one hand while being "constraining" on the other (2019: 223). They enable them with capacities of doing things never done before but are constraining them financially, psychologically and materially as well. The restaurants are the sites of performance that are highly spatio-temporal, they dazzle, create a spectacle, promise an enchanted environment and assure some kind of fun and "ecstasy" within the setting (2019: 231). The emergence of restaurants as "hyperspace", which through its dislocation from time and space fails to orient us to real-time conceptions of space. Furthermore, Griffin suggests that the modern restaurants coupled with ambience and décor, customer service aims to provide an increased "customer responsibility" and "shape sociality" (1997: 5)<sup>3</sup>. Dirks and Rice discussing human performance at restaurants place immense importance on the normative demands of the social and cultural contexts that also make them figure out eating out behaviour as "culture-specific" (1997: 43).

This study was conducted to explore the extent of eating-out<sup>4</sup> practices among urban youth to understand how other intervening factors are associated with food consumption. However, the importance of the performative dimensions as involved with food consumption in public settings has been analysed to assess whether such manifestations are fluid enough to permeate to the private sphere.

Respondents both male and female were randomly chosen from urban Kolkata as respondents within the age group of 18 years to 24 years. A quasi-structured questionnaire was used so that their experiences could be noted and was administered to seventy respondents. The respondents to whom the questionnaire was administered represented educated, urban, youth belonging more or less to upper-middle class income bracket. They are the ones who have been exposed to urban, global values so they having access to the economic advantages are expected to be lured to the traps of consumerism and engage in public settings of consumption. So, with such endemicity of the phenomenon it can be assessed that as the “performative” dimension involved in food and its related activities are emphasized then how they react in such social milieus.

### ***Eating Out, Experiment and Displacement Experience***

Eating out is an event and a social space of moods and atmospheres with known codes and customs (2020: 94). Restaurants are ordered spaces where disruption (however temporary) is often experienced and enjoyed along with the pleasure of consuming food. These disruptions are the major reasons which lure consumers to these spaces. It provides them with a space that disjuncts the immediate social conditions engaging them in a state of experience and emotional rejoicing coupled with a fluid state of experience that is offered within such spaces. The elaborate performance of food rituals in certain high cuisine restaurants are performed and enjoyed by people and those acts not only mark their economic capabilities by ensuring such gratifications but also is liberating enough to make them engage in global identities. The respondents’ purpose in experimenting with newer forms of cuisines and food rituals in public settings is to enable gratification through continuous oscillation between engagement and disengagement via food. Respondents enjoy such 80.47 per cent of the total population preferred outside food, while only 19.53 per cent preferred home-cooked food. 10 per cent of the respondents ate outside 0 to 3 times a week, 15.71 per cent ate out from 4 to 7 times a week, 35.71 per cent ate outside

between 8 to 11 times a week, while 30.48 per cent ate out 12 to 15 times a week and only 8.1 per cent ate out on basis of 16 to 19 times in a week. In a week if a respondent consumes an average of 21 to 28 meals, the above figure is indicative of the prevalence, extent and endemicity of the phenomenon in the current social scenario. In the current force that globalization projects, food and eating out is considered as quintessentially inter-related, inter-twined and often overlapping. As revealed in this study eating

out is the most favoured behaviour in connection with food consumption. Food is the determining factor that guides the decisions of eating out. Food, if it is viewed as a commodity, then eating out is considered as the social practice engaged in for the sake of that commodity. People eat out for a variety of reasons but the quality and the variety of food of course are major determinants in choosing the venue of eating out. This is seconded by the price, advertisements, brands, décor and ambience, service, peer pressure or others. Thus, food is part of the affective experience and experiment. The performative dimensions at the restaurants are involved in the disjunction of the mind-body experience and that becomes evident through the “displacement of the known”, an event that disrupts the habit of satiating hunger through food consumption. This disruption entails some kind of deviation from the “known” is what the people enjoy and that draws them to eat out more and more on the polar side this “rupture from mundane, habit” is capitalized upon to create newer menus, ambience, promises within spaces and never before experiences that are used to lure the consumer. As one enters the restaurant one is experiencing spatio-temporal dislocation through food whereby food acts as a mediator of that experiential dislocation of the routinized. The spatiotemporal dislocation is what ruptures the routine of having food and that expectation of the random experience has made eating out such a preferred activity in contemporary times. The performance of activity while food consumption is often dictated from above like how you have your desert, or how you have your food using chopsticks, ringing the bell after your “happy” experience or putting the flag half down to indicate you are full i.e. the entire performance of not only having food but also the entire session at the restaurant stands scripted. Thus, Goffman’s ideas are reiterated as we find respondents constantly engaged in impression management in the public setting and the appearance of a social identity to a particular audience through consumption of food appears to be of extreme importance.

### ***Eating Out and Lifestyle Consumption***

A majority of 93.34 per cent of the respondents said that they have visited global fast-food chains like McDonalds, Subway or KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken). It is an important indicator owing to the terms of “performative dimension” as these fast-food chains have a specific way of performance that is expected out of a diner and it revolves around the entire process of ordering food, paying for it, getting it to the table and thereby consuming it. The entire notion of hospitality at these sites of consumption not only stands inverted but also quite remotely juxtaposed with the Indian tradition. The majority of those who said that they liked the food of such restaurants, constituting 36.36 per cent opined that they liked it because of the global experience, while 27.27 per cent opined that they liked the global standard of the food, 19.59 per cent opined that they simply liked the food, 9.09 per cent opined that they liked it because of the feeling of having food at McDonald’s, subway or KFC, 4.19 per cent replied that they liked it because of the efficient servicing and only 3.5 per cent liked it because of the self-servicing and counter service option.

Cooking is always seen as a performance that can have an impact on the appetite. The kitchen is seen to be a “site” of performance that is reflective of the “dazzle” that it creates. The traditional kitchen in urban areas along with its age-old restrictions has diluted in the urban settings. Mostly from elaborate setups, they have turned out to be compact and utility-based owing not the demands of the urban space. The proliferation of cooking shows is seen to impact the not only outcome of food preparation but the food is thought to permeate through all the senses of taste, sight, feel and smell. The emergence of food as a fetish among contemporary cultures is visible through the discourses which are constantly created to grapple with the minds and thoughts of individuals. The rise in the number of cookeries shows on television and advertisements depicting an arousal of senses that make food reach well beyond the peripheries of hunger satiation. 41.43 per cent of the respondents opined that they watch cookery shows while 31.43 per cent opined that they don’t and 27.14 per cent replied that they wish to watch but cannot manage. The majority of the respondents who opined that they watch cookery shows constituting 74.71 per cent do not try out those recipes at home, while only 25.29 per cent opined that they try those recipes. Thus, the overall response indicates that there is a strong tendency among respondents to fantasize about food thereby taking it well beyond the homogeneous boundary of hunger satiation. The entire experience of watching cookery shows on television is also perceived to satiate the senses

of performance of the act, the use of ingredients (often global ones), the presentation of the food as well as discourse-driven languages that are used.

However transient the nature of food is as it disappears once when food is consumed but that nevertheless makes the effort in its preparation and presentation less worthy. Lifestyle-induced food and its related commodities are also seen to proliferate in the private kitchen. Commodities used in cooking and serving have all assumed a fluid character owing to an emphasis on the spectacle or dazzle that it is expected to create. Convenience along with technological advancement is a leading factor that adds fuel to such change nevertheless the role of the global culture cannot be ignored. 23.33 per cent of the respondents opined that they use steel utensils while serving and eating food at home 16.19 per cent said that they use glass utensils, while the majority, that is, 53.34 per cent use both types of utensils and only 7.4 per cent use other products that includes ceramics or melamine utensils. Thus, the presentation of food has majorly freed itself from the shackles of one's cultural identity. So not only is the public display catching the fancy when consumption of food in the public sphere but such forces also find a way in the private sphere which also is seen to liberate itself from tradition's fixed attributes to attain a fluid nature.

Also coming to the context of cooking as to who cooks we find that even though under the patriarchal structures cooking was associated with women the compulsion often led to treating it as an act of monotony or drudgery. However, we find that urban household spheres have accepted cooks to supplement the compulsion involved in the act of cooking. Moreover, the chefs who were considered to professionally adorn the public kitchen have also now seen a proliferation of women. Even the entrance of women as cook show hosts also have assigned cooking to be an art or as a pleasurable activity. Chefs assign food items some kind of uniqueness that not only catches the fancy of the diner but also makes the act of having the food a kind of disjunctive experience that triggers the routine of the diner.

### ***Food, Fetish and Meal Performance***

Food, especially the entire act of consuming food has assigned food a status of fetish that not only makes certain foods or cuisine an object of desire but also an offbeat method of eating food or an unusual combination of food at some unusual hours, situations or place are all associated with food consumption. It was observed that people consume cuisines or items like

the Chinese cuisine or Biryani they like while they eat out but also the introduction of brunch menus or happy hours and theme-based restaurants. Items with unusual combinations like fried ice creams, chocolate momo, etc., all initiated a food fetish and an urge to explore and experiment. Palatability and availability appear as the prime motivators of food intake over the assumed biological category of hunger. When the performative dimension of the food is involved it not only assigns the individual the role of the “actor” largely guided by what is dictated by the structure. Thus, this interplay between individual and agency creates a plethora of dictates in terms of table manners, etiquettes, food rules etc. 92.3 per cent of the respondents reported complying with the table manners, etiquettes, and dining rules when it concerns eating out in the restaurants therefore highlighting on the performative dimension as involved with food consumption. Respondents showed eagerness to explore different cuisines and also adapted to the dining styles of those specific culture’s cuisines with ample interest and eagerness. Thus, how the body performs while food is consumed comes under the “panopticon surveillance” (Foucault) that always makes such performance essential under the fear of being observed. Not complying with such rules led to a feeling of being left behind or not being up to the standard of the respondents. Thus, the public gaze institutes a fear that such performances are seen to be compulsory at these “cathedrals of consumption”. Often the notion of “performative eating” also emerges as something that constitutes one’s identity, i.e. choice of food adheres to the social identity one wants to create and portray in the public space. Even though that is triggered by several intervening factors and however transient that identity can be it is observed to have subsequent impact.

Also, the notion of “food police”<sup>5</sup> creates a conflicting situation when the food beliefs particular to an individual into which he/she has been socialized dictate ideas about which food is good or bad or what is to be eaten but the exogenous forces create a compelling compulsion to engage in such consumption.

### ***Conclusion***

The presence of food cues everywhere surrounding us in the social milieu has considerable impacts not only on food intake but also eating behaviour. The interplay of various factors makes food intake a multidimensional and multilayered phenomenon which travels far beyond the traditional and

ritualistic dimensions that can be attached to food. Hunger is well superseded as food intake is being largely determined as a continuum is constantly constructed between “Appetite”, “Social Appetite” and “Appetite Appeal”. Food has well been extended and infused with conditions beyond biological hunger. Food through its performative dimension is seen to modify it as a means to attain socially desirable ends over it being an end in itself. Participants were found to be strongly motivated by the “performative” dimension involved in food and its related activities. Tendencies to fantasize food by performing the act of eating are popularized across people. Food has been treated as a fetish that is manifested with the symbolic association of food. The foci of food is seen to traverse between hunger, appetite and “appetite appeal” making people wander in a state of trance to figure out the primacy between “real” and “symbolic” values attached to food. The hedonic value as attached has gained momentum in the contemporary social condition that highlights that food is consumed often *singularly* based on its gustatory rewarding qualities. The reward of a particular food or the entire setting in which food is to be consumed has become a major determinant of food consumption which travels and rests solely on the “pleasure dimension” over and above its “utilitarian dimension”. The dilution of hedonic food categories and utilitarian food categories is quite remarkable as people strongly engrossed in “the act of consumption” have diluted the food categories that were somewhat active in creating categorizations of food. Engagements into sub-optimal food choices are the resultant outcome especially in urban settings owing to the abundance of options both for immediate consumption as well as “shelf-ed” consumption. The “rewards” of consumption do not necessarily restrict itself to material rewards but the “act of consumption” in itself is considered as a rewarding experience. Media through its various channels is seen to create images as compulsory discourses which makes consumption appear as a sort of compulsion. Not only “food contexts” galore with options and enticements of consumption but also “non-food contexts” lure consumers to an act of immediacy that necessitates such consumptions at the immediacy. Thus, the proliferation of “food” consumption in so-called “non-food contexts” is also witnessed. Engagement with food consumption either directly or passively through the consumption of symbols and rewards is massive in the contemporary “fluid” social order. However, each act of consumption of a food item across hedonic or utilitarian categories is mostly transient as consumption of each food item not only gratifies the act of consumption but is more like achieving a target (as set by fluid discourses) at the same time it necessitated another item of consumption. Thus, it traps the contemporary youth in a never-

ending cycle of endless gratification and consumption. Coming to the “satiation” dimension as connected to food it is observed that the satiation of the “sensory” is all-pervasive and “uniqueness” as a criterion is all-encompassing when consumption of food is concerned. The lure of the satiation of the sensory transgresses food from its sole “hunger-satiation” domain to the “experience-satiation” perspective as people consume not only food but the imageries, the ambience, the experience, the uniqueness, the other cues that lure the “individual” to engage in these acts of consumption, however transient it might be. Thus, a unilinear path between hunger and its satiation through food consumption is not only multilayered and complex but it is also embedded in various societal and cultural forces. It is needless to say the contemporary social milieu has placed the consumer amidst a chaos of “consumption cues” often dislocating the mind-body equilibrium of need-based utilitarian food consumption. The top-down model of consumption approaches the individual and the settings create a context of performance infused with food consumption that is wrapped in the mould of pseudo-liberation that such consumption entails thereby acting as a “fetish”.

### *Notes*

1. Hunger has been differentiated from appetite in the sense that hunger is physiological which prompts an individual to eat while appetite is the psychological determinant that plays an instrumental role in determining what is to be eaten to satiate the biological hunger. In the contemporary social scenario boundaries categorizing hunger, appetite and the social appetite have become blurred.
2. Restaurants refer typically to set-ups where individuals or groups of people sit to have food typically cooked and served on that particular premise.
3. Griffin also points out that restaurants are considered as important spaces that play an instrumental role in initiating conversations and developing engagements among diners.
4. Eating out is referred to as eating food in public settings mostly like restaurants, eateries etc. It is used to denote having food outside the peripheries of the home (private setting).
5. “Food police” refers to one’s inner voice that dictates what is to be eaten. The discourses surrounding food prompt the individual to

consume stuff often facing a conflict between what is to be eaten and what is being eaten.

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