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*Delhi ke momos mast hote hain:
Constructing the city through food*

Keywords: Delhi, momos, informality, southern theory, foodification, street food.

This article explores foodification of the city by investigating social media. The article argues towards a conceptual understanding of foodification, which combines the material, social, and cultural aspects of food and its mobilization. Using Twitter feed of 10 years (2010-2020) in Delhi (India) on *momos* (dumplings), the paper demonstrates, (i) use of popular food items to promote businesses thereby propagating foodification, (ii) citizens using food as a means to lay claims over the city, and (iii) foodification of discourses beyond food. The paper uses these three empirical discussions to build a larger understanding of knowledge hegemony in city conceptualization. It demonstrated how the city is constructed through food and the discourse, practices, and performances around it.

Delhi ke momos mast hote hain: Costruire la città attraverso il cibo

Parole chiave: Delhi, momos, informalità, *southern theory*, *foodification*, cibo di strada.

L'articolo esplora la *foodification* della città tramite un'indagine sui social media. Esso mira ad una comprensione concettuale della *foodification*, che combina gli aspetti materiali, sociali e culturali del cibo e la sua mobilitazione. Utilizzando gli interventi su Twitter lungo 10 anni (2010-2020) a Delhi (India) sui *momos* (sorta di ravioli), il documento dimostra (i) l'uso di prodotti alimentari popolari per promuovere i produttori, propagando così la *foodification*, (ii) che i cittadini utilizzano il cibo come mezzo per sottolineare l'identità cittadina e (iii) per alimentare discorsi che vanno oltre il cibo. Il documento utilizza queste tre discussioni empiriche per costruire una più ampia comprensione dei veicoli egemoni di conoscenza nella concettualizzazione della città. Si dimostra come la città è costruita attraverso il cibo e il discorso, le pratiche e le performance che lo circondano.

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1. INTRODUCTION. – People taking pictures of food is a common sight today. Many of these pictures or their descriptions become a way to express complex social relationships with and within the city. Social media is a space where these descriptions and snippets from the physical world are curated and *posted*. Social media provides an archive to analyse what a city is and how it is constructed by various actors. That is, these curation of narratives gives a very pertinent understanding of how the users conceptualize and act in the physical world. These conceptualizations of the physical world is further influenced by what is prominent in the social media space, in a mutually reinforcing order (Goodman and Jaworska, 2020; Santos and Mansey, 2022; Zirari *et al.*, 2022). This mutually reinforcing order almost eliminates the difference between social media space and the physical world, or at least how they are coproduced. My interest in this complex array of things is the formation of knowledges and how certain forms of knowledges or ways of knowing becomes hegemonic (Palat Narayanan, 2020a, 2020b, 2022b). In this light, the article explores representations and narratives of/by *momos* in Delhi, i.e., the construction of city through food (using a critical constructivist position).

Momos are steamed, fried, or baked dumplings; a popular food available both on the streets and eateries of Delhi. With a large and diverse consumer base, *momos* have become a cultural phenomenon of Delhi. *Momos* are diverse, in terms of what it is made of, where and by whom it is sold, and how it is presented. As *momos* became popular, its association with the city of Delhi also grew, and with this came the myriad conceptions in social media. *Momos* (as a food item) is part of the city and its increased consumption has indeed effected the urban space from a material point of view¹. However, this article will analyse these conceptions and argue how the concept of foodification is applicable beyond food (as an object) or the physical spaces of its consumption. That is, food being read as ‘more than food’ (Goodman, 2016).

Food as an analytical point of entry is common in geography, largely clustered under what has been termed foodscapes (MacKendrick, 2014; Sedelmeier *et al.*, 2022). This wide cluster has within itself many other variations, across disciplines, which focus on various aspects from identity (Farrer and Wang, 2021) and gender (Palat Narayanan, 2022a) to oppression (Rege, 2009) and ethnonationalism (Haniffa, 2017). In this wide array of literature, foodification focuses on the process, one that of becoming via food. Construction of the city is a dynamic and plural process, befitting the use and expansion of foodification as a concept.

Foodification as a concept arose in the last couple of years (Bourlessas *et al.*, 2021; Loda *et al.*, 2020), which aids the study of food in understanding urban

¹ For more on how *momos* impact the city, refer Palat Narayanan and Véron (2018).

transformations. Foodification discussion could be read as an expansion of the socialites of food and discussion around food's embodiment (Del Casino, (2015). Foodification has been used both as a term to conceptualize increase in food consumption (Loda *et al.*, 2020) and as a driver of gentrification (Bourlessas *et al.*, 2021). As discussed above, study of food to understand sociocultural aspects is not new (Appadurai, 1988; Nandy, 2004), however, the urban centredness of some contemporary literature (Arabindoo, 2016; Bourlessas *et al.*, 2021; Davies and Brooks, 2021; Goodman, 2016; Loda *et al.*, 2020; Nyman, 2019; Palat Narayanan, 2022a) illustrates how culinary cultures, which are usually a regional or national trait, now have more and more come to be investigated from the situatedness of the city. This might be because of the ideological domination of cities (Martinez *et al.*, 2021), which is also portrayed in various social media where many of the food discourses are coproduced (Goodman and Jaworska, 2020). Thus, theoretically, we need further enquiry into urban located-ness of foodification and this article is a modest attempt to expand the concept of foodification beyond the physicality of food (and its consumption) to understand these processes. Although food (*momos* here) is central to the article, the concept of foodification is mobilized as a means to understand the use of food (both by individuals and organizations) and the socio-cultural role it plays in conceptualizing the city.

In this article, I will analyse Twitter posts. Analysing the Twitter feed is similar to participant observation (as a method), but as an observer, the researcher has a broader range of data (in terms of time period) and additional personal attributes (via user profiles). I analyse Twitter feed from 2010 to 2020, collected using the search key 'Delhi + momos'. There are around 6500 of these tweets, which I will henceforth refer to as momo-tweets. In this article, I use the term 'personal account' to refer to tweets by individuals and 'organizational account' for accounts which claim to be an organization. Organizational accounts are further subdivided into (i) food-related (e.g., restaurants, food reviewers, food blogs, food delivery systems) and (ii) non-food-related (e.g., news agencies, real estate companies, marketing agencies, airlines). In the following three sections, I will outline the results of these analyses. The first section primarily focuses on how foodification has moved beyond food (or food industry). Thereafter, I discuss the role of food in laying citizenship claims over the city, and finally how food is used to articulate social structures.

2. PROPAGATING FOODIFICATION. – Over the years, popularity and consumption of *momos* has increased in Delhi, so has the tendency to talk about *momos*. This increase also reflects in social media. There has been around a 10-fold increase in tweets which uses the term *momos* and Delhi (what I call here momo-tweets) (See Table 1). Increased consumption of *momos* and its visible presence on

the streets of Delhi (sold primarily by vendors) presents a case that expands the conceptualization of the term foodification.

Loda *et al.* (2020) has conceptualized foodification as an increase in catering activities and the conversion of other retail spaces to catering, thriving to meet the tourist demands of *authentic* cuisine. Arguing from the historical centre of Florence, their case uses foodification to express the transformation of space and consumption practices, rendering foodification as a process. Furthermore, Bourlessas *et al.* (2021) also conceptualized foodification as a process. Using the case from Turin, they argue foodification as a process by which discourses, materialities, and practices are coproduced by food. In both the cases, food-driven transformations are traced. However, with the case of *momos* I intend to highlight how these transformations, although driven by food, are not limited to the physicality of food (food item). That is, the process of foodification is propagated by a multitude of actors, some of which are not related to food *per se*. The intention is to broaden the conceptualization of foodification, one which understand food as a sociocultural construct, thus foodification being also a construct, albeit befitting the question of ‘whose construct’.

The point on whose construct becomes clearer when we reread Table 1, where we can see a steady increase in momo-tweets by both the organizational categories of food-related and non-food-related. In 2015, Delhi had its first *momo* festival, a food festival dedicated to *momos*, where one can have different types of *momos* sold by various retailers. This *momo* festival was curated by a private enterprise whose main work is as a recommendation platform for events (thus falling under ‘non-food-related organization’ as per my categorization). Table 1 shows a clear jump in momo-tweets by organizations from 2015 onwards.

2015 marks the start of a phenomenon where organizations started to tap onto the popularity of *momos* to market themselves, thanks to the *momo* festival. In this process, these organizations contribute to the foodification of the discourse on Delhi. In the tweets, we can see organizations, constantly using *momos* and Delhi as a means to promote either their products or draw attention to their social media profile(s). We can see a direct tapping into *momos* via tweets like listing favourite *momo* spots, but also indirect linking by using the word *momos* as a keyword for posts which are not related to *momos*. For example, in July 2015, a food-related organization tweeted the following, where the tweet is about desserts (which *momos* is not), yet tagging of both Delhi and *momos*:

How about a desserts break today?... #momos #shakes #sundaes #chocolate #delhi #love #foodlove [posted along with a picture of a dessert (possibly a bowl of ice cream)].

Organizations exploiting people’s attention using a popular object to promote themselves is a usual marketing tactic. However, my point here is the outcome of this practice. *Momos* are popular; thus organizations use them to market them-

selves. However, they cannot keep posting the same things over and over, thus necessitating the need to build newer ways of posting about *momos*. This exploration of newer ways, I argue, is constructing a specific identity of *momos* and consequently Delhi to which it is linked. A pertinent example of this comes from the official twitter handle of the Delhi Tourism (non-food-related organization), which in March 2018 posted:

Momos made with flour and stuffed with vegetables, paneer, chicken and various other delicious fillings, have become one of Delhi's favourite street food that are loved and savoured by everyone. #DelhiTourism #DelhiGovernment #streetfood

In the above tweet, the government agency is writing about *momos* addressing someone who does not know about it (explaining what *momos* is). However, within two years, this changed to a poetic linking between Delhi and *momos*. In December 2020 the same Delhi Tourism account had posted:

Momos in Delhi are a form of an emotion. Varying from steamy hot goodness to Tandoori & Afghani marinations, and almost always paired with the spiciest possible chutney. Tell us where do you love enjoying this Delhi Treat from!

Note the transformation, from 'Delhi's favourite street food' to '*momos* in Delhi are a form of emotion'. This discursive shifting between *momos* as an object to a cultural phenomenon could be seen in the tweets by other organizational and personal accounts. Contrarily, Delhi is notorious for disenfranchising street vendors (Baviskar, 2021; Schindler, 2014; te Lintelo, 2009), and *momo* makers struggle to operate in the city (Palat Narayanan and Véron, 2018). Nonetheless, we can see the official twitter handle of Delhi Tourism (part of the Delhi government), promoting *momos* as the quintessential Delhi street food and something that is deeply related to the city of Delhi.

Delhi Tourism imitated the link between *momos* and Delhi, which was constructed before the above two posts. Both food- and non-food-related organizations use *momos* for promotion and link *momos* to Delhi (similar to the Delhi Tourism's attempts above). However, they both construct the story of *momos* differently. Mostly, the food-related organizations have extensive physical presence in Delhi. However, many of the non-food-related organizations are not exclusively operating in Delhi. This difference presents an interesting case of how both these categories curate and propagate the relation between *momos* as a food item and Delhi as a city.

In Table 1, we can see how the food-related organizations follow a trend. Momo-tweets by food-related organizations increase, there is a spike in 2015 (first *momo* festival) and then a gradual increase, with a fall in 2020 (owing to Covid-19

pandemic). Contrarily, the tweets by non-food-related organization has no definitive trend, they sprout as opportunities present. For example, in August 2017, there were two key events related to momos. First, there was another *momo* festival being organized. Second, 25 people fell ill due to food poisoning, allegedly after eating *momos* (an incidence not related to the *momo* festival). We can see a spike in tweets by non-food-related organizations, which retweeted the event and the news to promote themselves. Although we can see an increase in tweets by non-food-related organizations, the number of tweets by food-related organizations remains steady during this period. To summarize, we can see the usage of *momos* in marketing non-food-related items and services, and in this process perpetuating the use of *momos* to understand Delhi. The identity of Delhi is thus being constructed using *momos* especially by organizations which are not directly related to food.

The association propagated between food and the city is interesting if we read Figure 2 & 3, which outlines the momo-tweets in percentages². Contrary to expectations, it is not the food-related organizations that are propagating the relation between the city and food. Majority of tweets by food-related organization is about promoting their business (usually via offers and posting about food items in their menu) to capitalize on the increasing home deliveries (c.f., Patgiri, 2022, for more on home-delivery of food). However, non-food-related organizations construct the identity of the city using food to propagate their products, as well as draw online traffic to their websites and social-media accounts. When we look at the ‘advertisements and promotions’, and the ‘reviews and listings’, this point becomes clearer. Over the decade, there is a decrease in advertisements and promotions by non-food-related organization and an increase in reviews of food items/eateries and creating a list of eateries (listing). These reviews and listings create (i) spots which represent *good/best* momos in Delhi, (ii) in listing these spots, they create a narrative, essentializing the need to visit these spots to know Delhi, (iii) to constantly keep listing and reviewing, they end up propagating exotic and newer ways of depicting *momos*. An example of the third point is the review about *momo* pizza (a pizza with *momo* toppings) in July 2017. Such listings create both a sensation of newness, but also evoke people to react (even if negatively) to these reviews. Reaction by people is important, because even a negative review of the items (e.g., the *momo* pizza) does not negatively affect the businesses of non-food-related organizations (e.g., a news agency). Furthermore, if these reviews feature a food-related organization, they retweet it, owing to which we see a fairly steady percentage of reviews and listings by food-related organization (although dwarfed

² In 2011, there was only one tweet by food-related organization accounts. Therefore, in figure 2, which is based on percentage, there is a spike in 2011.

by advertisements and promotions). Thus, over the decade, we see a steady increase in advertisements and promotions by food-related organizations (promoting themselves) and an increase in reviews and listing by non-food-related organizations (constructing imagery of Delhi via *momos*).

The core point that I want to make in this section is that empirically, organizations not related to food are responsible for the foodification of Delhi compared to food-related organizations. In the following section, I will move to how people engage with these formations.

Table 1 - Number of momo-tweets by account types

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Organization (Food Related)	0	1	21	11	10	37	59	69	99	118	74
Organization (Non-food related)	9	3	15	22	19	73	85	201	132	50	46
Personal Account	121	236	425	400	351	376	386	565	525	669	1.363

3. CLAIMING THE CITY THROUGH FOOD. – In the previous section, we looked at how organizations *foodify* the understanding of Delhi. Let us now look at momo-tweets by personal accounts, which surpass that of organizational tweets and shed light on the way claims over the city is made using *momos*. City is a complex entity and to claim belonging to this entity is also intensely complex. In this section, I will discuss how belonging to Delhi is constructed by individuals using *momos*.

DeSoucey (2010) has used the term *gastronationalism* to investigate the use of food in creating national identities. As discussed in the introduction, the identity making processes studied at a national or regional level, gets problematized when investigated at the city level. For example, in the previous section we have seen the popularity of *momos* and its linking with the city of Delhi. However, *momo* is considered as an imported food item to Delhi, at times from outside India. Yet, *momos* have become an identity of Delhi, although its *foreignness* is neither contested nor attempted to be changed. A common phrase in momo-tweets is “Delhi ke momos mast hote hain” [Delhi momos are very good], which forms the title of this paper. *Momos* is attributed to be imported to Delhi, nonetheless, *momos* of Delhi are the best, a construction, which imagines the city as an entity with agency. Eating, as Shee (2021, p. 2) has argued, “is, in many respects, ideological, it is also deeply entangled with struggles over subjectivity”. Subjectivity here is

important because it is constructed and surpassed through food (Baviskar, 2018; Kikon, 2021) especially when the city is imagined to have an agency (although the city is not a definitive object here). Subjectivities become further schizophrenic, because it is rare for many people to link hereditary claims to a city beyond a few generations (if at all)³. Furthermore, belonging to one city exclusively is a rare occurrence, as most people are migrants⁴ to a city. Therefore, how does one become or belong to a city, i.e., how are the claims to belong to a city constructed, is the question I engage with in this section. Thus, principally enquiring, what is Delhi and who are Delhiites/Delhi-Wale (term for persons from Delhi).

Construction of Delhi and claiming the belonging to the city, passes through three cliques when investigated via momo-tweets. First, are those who claim to be not from Delhi, but slowly converting to being from Delhi. Second, those who are exploring Delhi and in this process conquering the city by finding out best and rare spots, i.e., by knowing more about the city. Third, is a more emotional connect, where one is nostalgic about facets of Delhi or claiming to know more (or something special) about Delhi (expressing possession of addition/exclusive/emotive knowledge). These three sets are neither hierarchical nor mutually exclusive, but reveals different constructions of Delhi and claiming of these different constructions.

Of all these three cliques, the first one is probably the most emblematic to the constructed relationship between *momos* and Delhi, which I have already discussed in the previous section. A person in December 2019 tweeted:

i just had momos yesterday but now i want them again... i used to hate momos a few months ago what has delhi done to me i cant even recognize my own self anymore

Here we see a typical type of momo-tweet where one is in the process of being part of Delhi (or becoming *from* Delhi). This person, clearly is not from Delhi (self-claimed), however, the craving for *momos* is attributed as an aspect that is induced by Delhi (as an entity with agency). Of course, craving for a food item has nothing to do with a city, but craving for *momos* has been identified as a trait of those who are from Delhi, i.e., to crave for *momos* is to be from Delhi. This construct of Delhi can be seen in multiple formulations, and as discussed in the previous section, organizations too promote this narrative. For example, in January 2013, a non-food-related organization tweeted:

³ Delhi is an old capital city with links to existence since at least 1000 BC. However, the contemporary city is very new, with a major growth in population happening post-independence of India (1947).

⁴ I use the term migrant to denote the notion of moving into a city. Migrant is understood here to be a self-declared label, which a person tends to wade off as they claim belonging to the city.

RT [Re-Tweet] if you are a Delhiite and love momos. #delhi

The tweet above is just an example of myriad ways in which belonging to Delhi is coproduced by both personal and organizational accounts using *momos*. The coproduction of belonging to Delhi also produces Delhi, i.e., Delhi being a city where people love *momos* (I will come back to this notion in the next section). One legitimizes as being from Delhi by performing the adoration of *momos* while at the same time the adoration of *momos* is what constructs⁵ a specific identity of Delhi. This performance of being, leads to both the identification of oneself as from Delhi and the construction of Delhi to which one belongs. This belonging is enunciated via various forms, for example in September 2020 a person tweeted:

Finally I started eating momos and learned savage gaalis [expletives] too. Now I can say proudly “Delhi se hoon behenchoo [I am from Delhi *expletives*]”. :D #delhites

Many of the tweets articulate the city of Delhi through the performance of eating, linking, or knowing *momos*. The above tweet draws a direct link between liking *momos* (and using expletives) by which one is transformed to be a Delhiite (person *from* Delhi). This construction of Delhi or belonging to Delhi, points to the larger performative aspect of cities. Cities are performed into being. Performative aspects of the city have largely been studied with specific marginalized aspects (Moatasim, 2019; Müller, 2019). However, I would like to point to its broader implication of citizenship claims and belonging in/to the city at large.

These particular understandings of Delhi are of course subjective. The subjective understanding of Delhi is further constructed by exploring and *discovering* new places or best places where one can have *momos*. The deeper one can claim to have knowledge about the city (or its attributes, e.g., *momos* for Delhi), the more authentic the claim becomes. These narratives of claim are of three types in momo-tweets. First, about the best places, e.g. top five places to have *momos* in Delhi. Second, to find exotic variation of *momos*, e.g. the *momo* pizza (discussed in the previous section), *tandoori momos* (coal baked), and finally, revisiting popular avenues to have *momos* (mostly having *momos* [again] as an everyday practice).

From the early 2010s, we can see a large percentage of momo-tweets by personal accounts, listing favourite spots and linking Delhi to *momos*. From mid-2010s, there is a steady decrease in people posting about their personal favourites (until at least 2019). This decrease is coupled with an increase in reviews and listing (see Figure 1). The reviews and listings show a pattern in claiming the city by portraying knowledge about the city. For example, a tweet from 2020 reads:

⁵ Constructs are neither singular nor stagnant. The construction of Delhi via *momos* presents one of the many constructs (although quite a dominant construct) which is in a flux.

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Today's dinners are the dim sum and thuka soup speciality of Nepal. We call it Momos in India. So momos. Momos take me back to Delhi, where bachelor years of my life...

The above tweet is about a person eating a food item. However, the framing of this everyday practice is enmeshed in showcasing the knowhow about the food item and its link to Delhi. In the early 2010s people used to post more about their personal 'favourite spots and preferences'. From 2015 onwards, contrarily, we see a steady increase in tweets which are more fashioned as a review, showcasing one's knowledge about certain food outlets. Listing of favourite spots for *momos* are personal, while reviews are written in an authoritative format illustrating claim of knowledge about *momos* and Delhi. This coincides with the increase of 'ratings and listings' tweets by the non-food-related organizations from 2015 onwards (first *momos* festival) as can be seen in Figure 3.

Amongst the listings and reviews, there is also a construction of Delhi, which is mediated by prose, knowhow, and nostalgia. The identification of *momos* with Delhi has over time become so strong that it has become metaphoric. We can see a steady increase in tweets that use *momos* to essentialize Delhi, while not talking about food at all. For example, in February 2012, two on-duty Italian marines murdered two Indian fishers (off the coast of India). The arrest of marines led to a complex diplomatic and legal situation between India and Italy, which lengthened the case. Critiquing the response of Indian government a person in March 2013 tweeted:

Italian marines won't be arrested immediately. 1st they visit Taj Mahal, have momos in Delhi, biryani in Hyd [Hyderabad] and then we will see...

The sarcastic tweet is meant to say that the marines will have a touristic exploration in India, before the Indian authorities proceed with the case. This tourism in Delhi entailed eating *momos*, overshadowing any visit to the monuments of Delhi and equating it with a visit to the Taj Mahal.

Furthermore, the metaphoric use of *momos* also manifests to mock and stereotype certain areas within Delhi. South Delhi is the emerging economically richer part of Delhi and there are multiple tweets that make jokes about it. For example:

Dimsum is South Delhi Momos (March 2018)

and

South Delhi me momos chopstick se khate hain [In South Delhi *momos* are eaten using chopsticks] (June 2018)

The first tweet plays with the notion that *momos* are what one eats on the streets (or low scale eateries) while upscale restaurants market them as *dim sum*. The second tweet plays with the way *momos* are eaten. Generally as a street food, *momos* are eaten by hand, while use of chopsticks is evoked to mock the alleged snobbishness of South Delhi. This is not to say that South Delhi is snobbish, but an image of certain parts of Delhi is created to render the city legible by certain of its members.

In this section, we have seen how people lay claim and construct the city of Delhi using *momos*. In the following section, I will move to how this claiming disenfranchises certain sections of the society.

4. FOODIFICATION BEYOND FOOD. – The previous section discussed how individuals construct their claims to the city of Delhi. Claiming goes hand in hand with othering, a process of creating the *other* who do not belong to Delhi or are marginal to its imagination. As discussed above, one of the constructions of Delhi is being a city where people love *momos*. This construction has a specific semiotic manoeuvre. Here, *momos* as an object is a given (even if culturally imported from elsewhere) and loving this object discursively create the belonging to the city of Delhi. Further, the city has the agency to modify this given object ‘*momos*’: a recurring phrase in momo-tweets being ‘Delhi *momos*’ (Delhi being the identifier of *momos*). In this construct, the relation between *momos* and consumer is prominent but it relegates the relationship between the producers (those who make *momos*) and *momos*. All the variations of *momos* weather pictured as positive or negative are attributed to Delhi rather than people who make/produce them; from tweets like ‘Delhi ke *momos* mast hote hain’ [Delhi *momos* are very good] (a phrase that defines the title of this paper) to explicit linking of how Delhi has modified *momos* (rather than people who make/sell them)⁶. Taking the construction of *momos* and attributions associated with it, in this section, I will discuss a specific form of othering based on the racist profiling of people with mongoloid features.

Imageries around *momos* illustrates the contradictions within the society that makes up Delhi. As discussed previously, *momos* are well understood as an import in Delhi. This import is largely attributed to either Tibetan refugees or migrants from Nepal or North-Eastern parts of India (areas that are racially imagined to be *of* people with mongoloid features). Although Delhi is a city of migrants, the status of outsider is racially constructed for people with mongoloid features, irrespective of whether they are from Delhi, India, or elsewhere (cf. Wouters and Subba [2013] for more on racial stereotyping in India).

⁶ It has to be noted that there are some popular outlets who are known by their (brand) names. The popularity of these outlets are in having better *momos* and not in their contribution to modifying/improving *momos*.

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Momos are constructed as an identity of Delhi, where this imported item is modified locally to what is now known as *momos* in Delhi (as opposed to other known names like *dim-sum*, *dumplings*, *mantu*, etc.). In this light, people mostly refer to *momos* with a place-identity within Delhi. When listing their favourite *momos*, momo-tweets almost always refer to a place: from broad ranging ‘Delhi *momos*’ to specific places within Delhi. Tweets suggest that people like *momos* from different places and there are affiliations to specific kinds of *momos*, however, all these variations to the *momos* is attributed to Delhi and not the different cooks. For example, a popular place in the early 2010s is Yashwant Place (a South Delhi neighbourhood). People refer to the *momos* from Yashwant place as their favourite and not the specific vendor who sells it (tweets proclaim as if anyone selling in Yashwant place would be selling equally good *momos*). This disassociation between the *momo* producers and *momos*, along with the denied agency which makes them incapable of modifying/improving *momos* create two specific constructions. First, it allows the othering of *momo* producers/vendors, who could then be racially typecast, ill-treated, and discriminated, all the while keeping the sanctity of *momos* as an object that quintessentially defines Delhi intact. Second, the vending/producing then becomes a marginal occupation, even though it is the very vending which creates the Delhi identity. Both these discursive maneuvers create simultaneously the *momos* that defines Delhi and a momo-producer/seller who is outside of this imagination.

The racist profile is not unacknowledged, a person in August 2017 tweeted:

Ignorance and racism are so widespread in Delhi that if Kim Jong Un ever visits the city, people might start demanding momos.

The above tweet refers to Kim Jong-un’s mongoloid features to joke about racist profiling in Delhi, which is again a two-fold construction. First, it is assumed that everyone with mongoloid features makes (or is capable of making) *momos*, while these are the very same *momos* whose existence is attributed to Delhi (and not those who make it). Second, people with mongoloid features are typecast as only capable of making *momos*, thus, degenerating their social standing. An example of first construction is a tweet from August 2012, where a person tweeted:

Delhi is Safe for North eastern ppl [people], Delhi ppl [people] cant leave [sic] [live] without Momos

In the above tweet, we see the generalization of Delhi *people* liking *momos*, at the same time everyone from North-East of India typecasted as *momo* makers. This typecasting leads to a direct linking between racist categorization of mongoloid features and work they are capable of doing. Some of these typecasting are very direct, using racist slurs, e.g., the post from April 2013:

Good Morning... its too hard to find “Momos” in Mumbai.. Delhi k chinkis mumbai main kab shift honge :([when will Delhi *racist slur for people with mongoloid features* shift to Mumbai]

Selling *momos* is not limited to lower economic sections, but a general categorization creates an assumption of a lower economic status for the *momo* vendors. Phrases like “tere jaise hamare yahan momos bechte hain” [“people like you sell *momos* here” in Hindi] is recurring throughout the decade. It should, however, be noted again that opening a *momo* vending business is not easy, and many involved in the sector are not able to own/operate a vending stall (Palat Narayanan, 2022b; Palat Narayanan and Véron, 2018). Furthermore, to sell *momos*, from mid 2010s, has come to be used as a derogatory profession in demeaning tweets. In February 2016, a personal tweet read:

Why is the ex-Arunachal [sic] CM [Chief Minister] worried? He can always sell momos in Delhi.

The above tweet is a political commentary, where the person is mocking the previous Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh (a state in the North-East of India). The assumption being that he can always come to Delhi and sell *momos* if his political career fails. These types of tweets typecasting that people with mongoloid features, will and can only sell momos, has increased from around 2015 onwards. The racist association is so strong that mention of *momos* comes in tweets which are not related to it, e.g., in May 2018 a person tweeted:

Nice to see a Nepali guy coming to Delhi and doing well. No Sandeep Lamichhane is not selling momos but playing for DD #DDvRCB #IPL Almost got AB first ball as well.

Sandeep Lamichhane, the current captain of the national cricket team of Nepal, in 2018 played for the Delhi team of the India Premier League. Although, cricket as a game is very popular in India, a player from Nepal could not miss the association with the sale of *momos*.

There are multiple Delhi(s) and there are multiple ways to belong to them. However, a key factor is race (cf., McDuie-Ra, 2012, 2013; Wouters and Subba, 2013) which allows one to identify/associate with Delhi. People with mongoloid features living in Delhi for decades remain an outsider (irrespective of their practices and performances), while with specific performance (e.g., with *momos*, as discussed above) certain other groups of people come to be identified as *from* Delhi. Therefore, the discussions in the previous section about the belonging, need to be read within the frame of racist profiling of bodies.

In this section, we have seen that practices and performances usually associated with laying claim to Delhi (as discussed in the previous section) is not sufficient.

The key condition remains the racial profile of those who want to claim belonging to Delhi.

5. CONCLUSION. – The way we operate in and modify the city depends on how we understand it. This understanding is constructed and is always plural, partial, and grounded. Our construction of the city depends on multiple factors and here I explored just one factor, using online discussions of *momos*. The article has outlined three key interrelated arguments, (i) how various organizations in and beyond the city construct the food-based understanding of the city, herein linking Delhi and *momos*, (ii) how this link between food and the city is used by citizens to claim belonging, thus also constructing specific notions of the city in-turn, (iii) how these specific constructions of the city and claiming of belongings exclude certain other sections of the society. Using the material, social, and cultural aspects of food, it demonstrates the foodification of the city beyond the food (item) and spaces of its immediate consumption.

In the paper, I analysed twitter feed from 2010 until 2020. It should be noted that Twitter as a social media platform is popular amongst only certain sections of the society. The limited coverage of this media withstanding, it does provide a snapshot of the discursive constructions and physical engagements with Delhi via *momos*. The construction of Delhi via *momos* demonstrate the discourses, practices, and performances of people living in it. That is, it is not merely the physical aspects that create a city, but the people living in it who conceptualize the physicality.

Momos (beyond merely an edible item) plays an important role in the construction of Delhi. Delhi is, like any construct, subjective. What is Delhi and who are *Delhiwale/Delhiites* (persons from/of Delhi), is a constructed notion which keeps changing. Food is an important element of this construction and its mobilization. *Momos*, although understood as an imported culinary item, comes to define a certain imagination of being from Delhi. This imagination is performed and practiced on a daily basis by both consuming the physical *momos* as well as engaging with the idea of *momos*. Furthermore, these imageries of belonging exclude people based on racist notions (e.g., people with Mongoloid features), even though these excluded bodies partake in physical and narrative aspects of *momos*. This paper is a modest attempt to highlight how the food and its prominence (foodification) has impacts beyond both the food (item) and the spaces of its immediate consumption. It allows us to read the nuances of how the city is socio-culturally constructed both by individuals and organizations. This reading presses us to critically reformulate the classic question of Lewis Mumford (what is a city?) to a processual one of : how is the notion of ‘what is a city’ constructed (and by whom)?

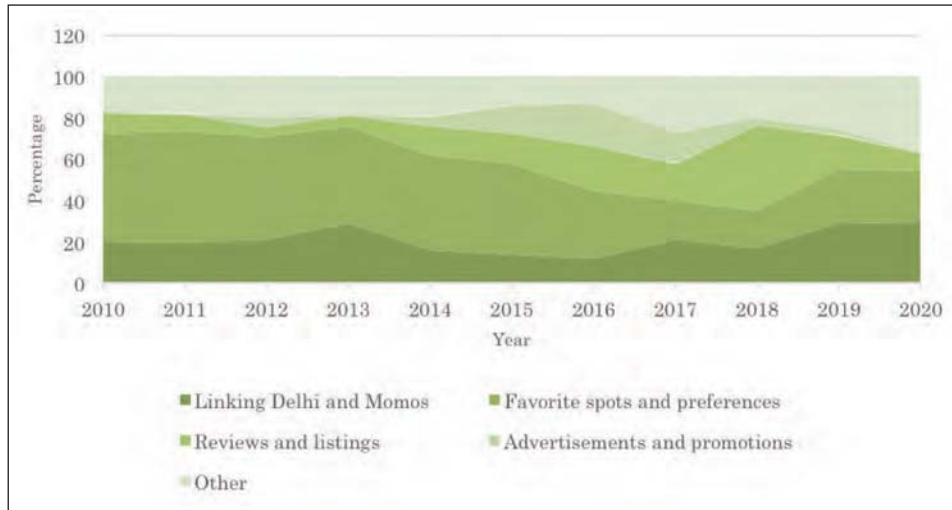


Fig. 1 - Contents of posts by personal accounts

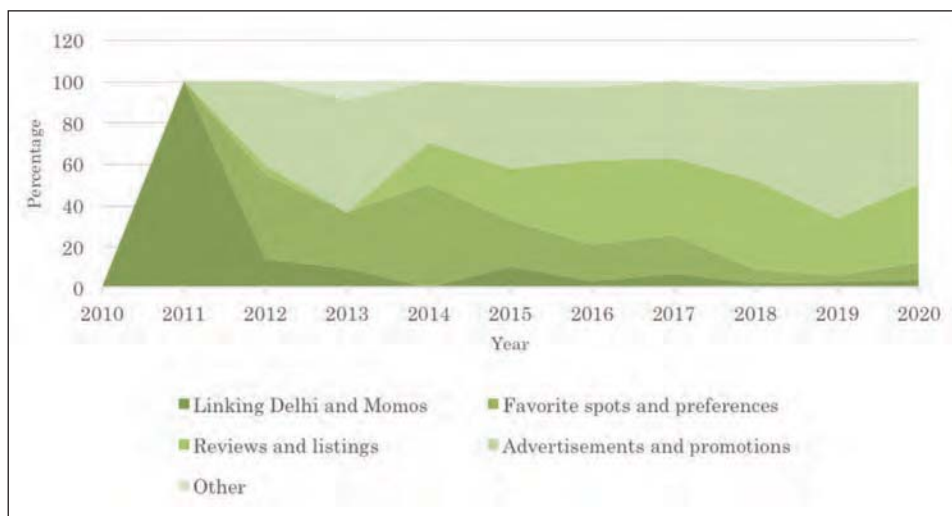


Fig. 2 - Contents of posts by food related organizational accounts



Fig. 3 - Contents of posts by non-food related organizational accounts

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