



Inadvertent Advertising: Impact Of Social Media On Street Food Vendors In India.

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Abstract: Street vending forms a significant part of the informal economy in India. Food vending, in particular, is popular because of daily food requirements and the cultural expressiveness of food, cooking, and consumption. Street food vendors operate from public spaces such as pavements and are those who run small-scale businesses with nominal capital investments. They have limited access to spread information among people about their work through advertisements and other promotional means. Food and travel-based content are becoming increasingly popular with the growth of social media. Documentation of street food and food vendors through content creators on social media leads to an inadvertent promotion and advertisement of these businesses. The impact of social media activities on street vending businesses forms the core subject of this paper.

Index Terms – Street Food, Vending, Social Media, India.

INTRODUCTION

Street food constitutes a key element of India's rich food culture and heritage, the key actors behind this domain being street vendors and hawkers. Street vendors can be broadly understood as those undertaking business activities in goods and services from a setup that is not permanent. (NPUSV, 2006 as cited in Bhowmik & Saha, 2011) Their setups often comprise of bamboo, tarpaulin, wooden counters, and plastic chairs and they operate from footpaths, pavements, and other similar locations. (Ghatak & Chatterjee, 2018) Street vendors help meet the food requirements of residents, migrants, and tourists in the urban cities of India. (Bhowmik, 2003) Some areas of Indian cities have witnessed a growth of street food vendors due to the growing demand for food options in that area, such as in commercial hubs, near educational institutions, amusement parks, and other public spaces.

Street food vendors can be understood as small entrepreneurs and vending as a form of self-employment in the informal economy of India. Street vendors often belong to the lower socio-economic echelons of society and begin their business enterprises with nominal capital. It is interesting to notice comparative differences between street food vendors and their formal counterparts such as permanent restaurants and cafes. The latter are not only able to provide better amenities such as seating facilities, air conditioning, and a variety of food options but also have access to means and avenues to advertise their businesses which then helps in business growth. Due to the dearth of capital and resources, street vendors do not get the same opportunities, thus being unable to transcend a small scale of business. The number of street food vendors is growing in India and running parallel, digital media and its influence are spreading far and wide.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to explore street food vendors in India and the impact of social media activities on the former. A significant portion of content creation on social media is based on and around food and culinary aspects and is popular throughout the world. The exposure of street food on social media and its plausible effects on vending in India form the core aim of this paper. The methodology for this paper assumes a qualitative and interpretative approach. I have referred to written and video documentation on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and other websites containing food blogs and vlogs. It also includes insights from my ongoing doctoral work based on street food vendors in the commercial areas of Kolkata.

DISCUSSION

There are a number of challenges that street food vendors have to face. The informal sector is marked by a lack of security and provisions that safeguard worker rights and standard working conditions. Street food vendors are micro-entrepreneurs or small businesspeople whose site of vending is the marketplace which is a public space. They are not only affected by the uncertainty of the market and market forces but also the dynamics and power relations of the market as a public space. The nutritional value, hygiene, and sanitation parameters of street food have often been questioned and criticized. (Ghatak & Chatterjee, 2018) The number of regulations to control street vending has also increased. During the last two decades, law-making around street vending has witnessed growth, most of which attempt to regulate the number of street vendors and the nature of vending. The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act of 2014 (GOI,2014) presents a landmark decision in the aforementioned direction along with which there exist state directives regarding street vending. For instance, hawkers are not allowed to occupy more than one-third of the pavement in the Gariahat market area of Kolkata. (Ray, 2023).

The consumption of street food has experienced a decrease during and after the pandemic. Most individuals and families refrained from consuming food cooked outside the household. Street food consumption significantly decreased because of their association with a greater risk of infection. The site of street food consumption is a public space that involves people gathering in groups to purchase food. Face-to-face interactions involved in the market, close contact characterizing these interactions, and the overall crowded nature of marketplaces led many people to avoid visiting markets during the pandemic. In addition, most food vendors do not have the means to facilitate door-to-door delivery, which was a technique a number of restaurants, cafes, and eating joints adopted in order to deal with the pandemic. Covid-19 caused a lockdown for three months which affected all sections of society, including street vendors. Their livelihood experienced a sudden halt, wherein they were not able to leave their house or go to their respective vending locations for three months. Street vendors often belong to the lower socio-economic strata of society which made it difficult for them to survive in the absence of daily work. A few of them have land back in their hometown, which they cultivated which served as their contingency plan. Some used up all the savings that they had made over the years. Reopening the stalls was not an easy task and most street food vendors admit that they are still not making the same profit as they were before the pandemic. The degree of traffic movement has decreased. The pandemic has also witnessed the opening of new food stalls by individuals who lost their jobs and sources of income and have thus, taken to street vending.

India is characterized by a number of cuisines and a wide variety of cooking and eating habits. Social media documents these myriad cuisines and presents them to people, informing, educating, and encouraging people regarding cooking, eating, and commensality practices that are different from their own. Food vloggers and bloggers not only cover popular street foods in metropolitan cities but also in smaller towns. Different festivals also have their own special foods, which is a significant cultural aspect.

With the popularity of social media, the number of content creators on social media is also increasing. Content spanning across different arenas of life such as travel, food, education, sports, entertainment, and catering to varying groups of audiences can be observed. Since food is a part of our daily lives and an integral constituent of our culture, much of the food-based content on social media is gaining immense popularity. There are content creators who focus specifically on food and are known as food bloggers and vloggers. Content creation based on food is often paired with travel since the exploration of different places consists of trying food cuisines prevalent in that region. Food and travel-based content is very popular on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and other websites. Documentation may be in the form of videos, commonly known as vlogs while its written form is known as blogs. Content creation often assumes

innovative ways such as food challenges such as 'Eating Street Food in Rs 1000 for 24 Hours' (Cravings&calories vlogs, 2022) , reviews of street food, or simply as recreational means.

Although the creators of such content usually have their own personal interests in mind, their content inadvertently leads to the promotion and publicity of street foods in a particular area. This is significant because street food vendors seldom have the resources to promote their businesses and lack access to means of advertising. Documentation by social media influencers informs a large number of people about street foods, their location, items that are sold, the prices at which they are sold along reviews about the food. This leads people to flock to the street vendors, with some street foods and vendors becoming viral sensations overnight. Such content also serves as a guide for both residents and tourists who are keen to explore the city life and culture. Blogs with subjects similar to '10 Best Street Foods in Mumbai That You Must Try At Least Once'. (Tulabandula, 2023) or '20 Delicious Street Food in Kolkata that makes it a Food Lover's Paradise (Middha, 2017). All year round, India witnesses a variety of festivals observed by its various communities. Each of these occasions comes with its unique array of dishes which a number of content creators cover, such as vlogs titled '...Iftar Snacks, Burmese Food' (Sinful Foodie, 2023) and 'Diwali Food and Market Tour in Amritsar'(Amritsar Walking Tours, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Street food plays a significant role in the urban economy of India. It transcends the conception of street food as primarily snack-based food to be consumed while on the go. Street food in India provides daily meals to a large section of the population, including nutritious breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In Kolkata, pice¹ hotels are common in many old parts of the city which serve meals incorporating rice, lentils, vegetable and meat-based curries at very low prices. They cater to the large numbers who migrate to the city in search of jobs, many of whom are daily commuters from their place of residence. These food businesses also serve many belonging to the working class, including blue-collar workers. These stalls thus, started functioning almost immediately after the lockdown was lifted and people began traveling to their workplaces. Despite incurring heavy losses, street food vendors have begun recovering their businesses one step at a time, a direction in which social media is playing the role of an informal advertising medium.

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¹ Pice hotels refer to small-scale eating joints that came up in Kolkata during the 1930s. They owe their name to the fact that the meals were all priced at one pice or six anna. They continue to serve daily meals to the urban populace at affordable prices.

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