"We have to keep it a secret" – The dynamics of front and backstage behaviours surrounding meat consumption in India

Abstract

Meat consumption is on the rise in India. However, most studies on meat consumption, to date, are conducted among Western audiences and there are relatively few insights into meat consumption in emerging markets, especially India which tends to be stereotyped as a vegetarian nation. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore meat-eating practices among urban Indians aged 23-45 years. The sample comprised mainly Mumbai residents and semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews was the main mode of data collection. The research used an iterative study design and an inductive analysis approach. A key finding was that while meat consumption is on the rise, there are social stigmas still associated with it. This has led to discrepancies between consumption behaviours occurring in public (frontstage behaviours) and those carried out in private (backstage behaviours). Using Goffman's theory of self-presentation, the study provides insights into various ways in which backstage meat consumption occurs in urban India. The backstage setting can comprise places outside the home, such as restaurants, and, in some instances, segregated 'safe' spaces within the home itself. Within these spaces, the study explores how consumption taboos are broken. In addition, it provides insight into various actions taken to cover up backstage meat consumption behaviours and present appropriate frontstage appearances before a vegetarian audience. This study is of significance as it contributes to the relatively sparse literature on meat consumption in India. It also uses Goffman's theory to explore the construction of different fronts in a new cultural context.

1. Introduction

Figures from The OECD highlight that India, compared to the world average, has much lower levels of meat consumption – about 3 kilograms per capita annually (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). However, recent

findings from the Indian Census indicate that only three in ten Indians self-identify as vegetarian (Census of India, 2014) and other studies similarly estimate the prevalence of vegetarianism in India to range from about 25% (Mintel Global, 2017a) to 40% (Euromonitor International, 2011). Among Indian vegetarians, approximately three-quarters are lactovegetarians (i.e., milk and dairy products are consumed but not meat or eggs) and about a quarter are lacto-ovo-vegetarians (i.e., eggs and dairy products are consumed but not meat) (Rammohan, Awofeso, & Robitaille, 2012). When it comes to meat consumption in India, chicken and fish have highest levels of consumption per capita (National Sample Survey Office, 2012). India is also reported to be one of the world's fastest growing markets in its consumption of poultry (Mintel Global, 2017b) and chicken is relatively popular due to its versatility and the fact that, unlike other meats, it is less likely to be associated with religious taboos (Devi, Balachandar, Lee, & Kim, 2014). In addition, India's consumption of other types of meats such as beef and buffalo is also on the rise (Bansal, 2016). However, specific figures on meat consumption in India are difficult to obtain as some may underreport their consumption due to cultural restrictions and taboos associated with it (Bansal, 2016). These restrictions also explain why some Indians may display different public and private behaviours in relation to meat consumption (Khara, 2015). On the whole, meat consumption in India is a relatively under-researched topic and, apart from work discussing broad social trends, there is not much literature pertaining to meat consumption in contemporary Indian society.

The present-day food hierarchy in India still places vegetarianism at the top (Chigateri, 2008). Hinduism, followed by a large majority (80%) of India's population (The Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2011), has several teachings that emphasize vegetarianism (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010). These teachings highlight that all living beings share the same life force (Chapple, 2012; Sharma, Aggarwal, & Kumar, 2014) and advocate 'ahimsa' or non-violence towards living creatures (Hamilton, 2000). Like Hinduism, some of India's other religions such as Jainism and Buddhism also believe in reincarnation and karma (Davidson, 2003). Jains believe that "the entire universe is alive" (Davidson, 2003, p. 117) and that souls transmigrate across living beings; Jainism therefore advocates a vegetarian diet (Jayanthi, 2001). Some Buddhist traditions similarly encourage non-interference with the lives of other beings (Sharma et al., 2014) and emphasize vegetarianism for

this reason (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010).

The Brahmins, who historically sat at the top of the Hindu caste hierarchy (Sinha, 2011) and have wielded significant socio-cultural influence in India over centuries, are traditionally associated with vegetarianism (Caplan, 2008). In contrast, lower castes have been associated with "polluting non-vegetarianism" (Caplan, 2008, p. 118). Given this hierarchy, it is not uncommon to find some members from the lower castes turning away from meat and adopting vegetarianism as a way to claim greater social status (Robbins, 1999; Waghmore, 2017). The slaughter of animals and meat consumption are not only associated with a lower caste status (Ahmad, 2014) but also with baseness (Caplan, 2008; Staples, 2016) and a certain impurity (Staples, 2008). This might also explain the term 'non-veg', used in everyday language in India to describe meat, as it highlights the "immorality and illegitimacy that meat carries" (Ahmad, 2014, p. 23). The term conveys the cultural sense that vegetarianism is 'normal' while meat consumption is a departure from that norm.

Today, local meat shops in India are still kept at specific distances from religious places (Alam, 2017; Dolphijn, 2006; Sharan, 2006) as the "stench, the noise and the blood needed to be consigned to other spaces" and kept hidden from the public view (Ahmad, 2014, p. 24). In addition, many non-vegetarian restaurants remove meat-based foods from their menu during Hindu religious festivals while others are required to close shop during this time (Business Standard, 2018; NDTV, 2019; Singh, 2017). In schools and workplaces, non-vegetarian and vegetarian food are kept segregated (Waghmore, 2017) and many apartment complexes do not allow residents to prepare meat in their homes in order to avoid upsetting the vegetarian neighbours (Dolphijn, 2006). The question, 'Are you vegetarian or non-vegetarian?' is still commonly asked across many Indian cities (Ahmad, 2014, p. 23).

Over time, however, India has been witnessing a shift from vegetarianism towards diets containing greater amounts of meat (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006). Rising rates of urbanisation, increasing disposable incomes and greater exposure to new cultures and norms are key factors driving the change (Devi et al., 2014; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006). However, as highlighted previously, meat consumption is also at odds with several

age-old customs and traditions which emphasize vegetarianism, which, in turn, tends to give rise to different consumption behaviours in different public and private contexts (Khara, 2015). The discrepancy, known as frontstage and backstage behaviours, is a concept that was explored by sociologist Erving Goffman in his seminal work, *'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'* (Goffman, 2012). In this work, Goffman uses the theatre as an example to highlight how stage performers have different behaviours in different contexts. On the front stage, the performer, conscious of being observed by the public audience, will perform according to cues and audience expectations (Goffman, 2012). Backstage, in a private environment, the performer may behave differently as there is no observing audience and therefore no role-playing is necessary (Goffman, 2012). Hence, public front-stage behaviours tend to have more role-playing elements to them compared to private backstage behaviours (Eckhardt & Houston, 1998).

In the social world, the different spaces in which one enacts different behaviours can be referred to as `front regions' or `back regions', similar to the `frontstage' and `backstage' in the theatre (Goffman, 1959). Behaviours carried out in the front region might be characterized by politeness and attention paid to the rules of decorum (Goffman, 1959). In contrast, the back region can be a place for release and catharsis, and may also be a training ground for maintaining appropriate front region appearances (Goffman, 1959). In addition, appearances and impressions created in the front region might also be contradicted in the back region (Goffman, 1959).

Goffman's theory on frontstage and backstage behaviours has been applied across a wide range of contexts. Some examples include exploring different public and private behaviours that occur with regards to racism (Picca & Feagin, 2007), teasing (Sinkeviciute, 2017), behaviours that occur on social media (Persson, 2010), on the news (Thornborrow & Haarman, 2012), in court rooms (Portillo, Rudes, Viglione, & Nelson, 2013), in classrooms (Gilmore, 2014) and in hospices (Cain, 2012). However, the theory has also drawn some critique for depicting a world focused on superficial externalities (Gouldner, 1970; Habermas, 1984; Wilshire, 1982) and where the authentic self is bypassed or overlooked (Messinger, Sampson, & Towne, 1962). On the other hand, it is worth highlighting that one's sense of self is not entirely an independent entity but also composed of social constructions (Mead,

1962; Tseëlon, 1992; Zahavi, 2009). In collectivist India, for example, some may view themselves from the perspective of others and may feel bound to adhere social norms, traditions and moral obligations (Paul, Roy, & Mukhopadhyay, 2006). It is also considered shameful, by some in India, to be seen in situations that are socially inappropriate, although the shame might not apply when it comes to doing the same thing in private (Patel, 2018). Furthermore, in response to the critique about Goffman's depicting a world of "manipulators" on the frontstage (Hall, 1977, p. 547), it is also worth noting that the theory is not focused on "'the psychology of deception' but rather 'the semiotics of dramatization'" (Tseëlon, 1992, p. 124). This makes it a useful framework for the study in India given the emphasis on self-presentation which exists in collectivist cultures (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and that indirect and face-saving modes of communication are commonly used in collectivist cultures (Holtgraves, 1997). Goffman's emphasis on enactment therefore helps researchers gain deeper insight into latent meanings and symbolisms as focus is "not so much in what is said, as *in the act of saying*" (Gronbeck, 1980, p. 329).

When it comes to meat consumption, many Indians tend to consume it outside the home (Devi et al., 2014; Rukhmini, 2014; Suresh, 2016), away from the watchful eyes of the family (Khara, 2015), due to the social stigma associated with it. A recent qualitative study on urban Indian consumer attitudes towards ethical foods highlighted that "You eat it (meat-based foods) in secret, away from your family" (Khara, 2015, p. 119). These attitudes are also reflected in a recent newspaper article titled *8 types of vegetarians found in India*, where the 'restricted vegetarian' is a term given to people who are vegetarian at home, but eat meat outside (Times Food, 2018). This brings to mind Goffman's concept of the 'setting' where the performer "cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it" (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). To this point, some Indians may consider "desh (place), kaal (time) and paatra (person)" when deciding how best to respond to different situations as collectivist behaviour normally occurs in the presence of the in-group, whereas it is only in impersonal settings, such as a public place, that an individualist approach is taken (Sinha, Sinha, Verma, & Sinha, 2001, p. 143). In India, the strongest judgement may come from the family group, and public places may become spaces that are free from that judgement, where backstage behaviour can take place, alone

or with trusted friends. An example of this was highlighted in the urban Indian study on ethical foods where participants claimed - "In India there are a lot of restrictions, so if someone is doing something bad (such as eating meat) they will probably want to hide it from their home" (Khara, 2015, p. 119). Thus, we cannot simply associate frontstage behaviour with just public settings and backstage with private settings when discussing meat consumption in India. The relationship is more complex, as this paper will further elaborate.

2. Research design & methods

A key question for this qualitative research study was 'What are meat eating practices like in urban India today?' As the levels of meat consumption are relatively higher in urban India compared to the semi-urban and rural regions (Devi et al., 2014; National Sample Survey Office, 2012), the study focused on urban Indian meat-eaters. In addition, this seemingly simple question presents a challenge, given the sheer diversity of cultures within the one country. The study therefore used a social constructionist paradigm as it aimed to understand "the world of lived experience" through exploring multiple perspectives (Andrews, 2012, p. 39) and how social context can influence meaning (Thomas, Menon, Boruff, Rodriguez, & Ahmed, 2014). Within constructionist framework, language is an important conduit through which meaning is constructed (Gergen, 1994; Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). Hence, individual face to face in-depth interviews were used as the main mode of data gathering as these helped enhance understandings of different practices, cultural conventions and how, in some instances, the prevailing norms were challenged. The interviews helped provide deeper insight into meanings and context whereas, in comparison, relying on simply observations was limiting as these can be interpretive and may result in researchers drawing potentially incorrect conclusions about reasons behind certain participant behaviours (Lashley, 2018). In addition, sensitive questions – such as how certain social taboos are broken – may not always easily lend themselves to an observational setting (Kawulich, 2005). In this regard, individual in-depth interviews were also useful for exploring sensitive topics (Low, 2008) such as cultural and religious sensitivities relating to meat consumption and front-stage and backstage behaviours that may arise due to these.

Each interview was approximately 60 minutes in duration and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Reflective notes were taken during and immediately after the interviews, which helped capture ideas and insights. In addition, the notes helped with preservation of key insights that were later found to be helpful during the course of the analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Polit & Beck, 2006).

2.1 Participants

The sample comprised participants aged 23 to 45 years, given India has a relatively young population with a median age of 28 years and approximately two-thirds under the age of 35 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018), In addition, the majority of the participants were Hindu as Hinduism is followed by a large majority of India's population (80%; The Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2011). Other participants mainly came from Muslim backgrounds as they comprise the largest religious minority (13%) in India (The Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2011). The sample included an even split across the genders.

The total sample comprised thirty-three participants, twenty-five of whom were residents of Mumbai. Mumbai was selected as it is one of India's largest cities (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018), is considered the country's commercial capital (Raghavan, 2019) and is a multicultural hub (Gulliver, 2008). The interviews were held at a restaurant in downtown Mumbai and were conducted predominantly in English as it is India's subsidiary official language (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). Furthermore, the participants were comfortable conversing in English. The remaining eight participants included those interviewed as part of the pilot study in Sydney. This sample was made up of Indian citizens who were recent arrivals to Australia. The pilot study was helpful for practicing face-to-face interactions with the target groups, prior to the start of the fieldwork, and for also providing some initial insight into this topic (Schreiber, 2008). Some findings from the pilot study have been included in the main data and these only include the experiences of participants while they were living in India.

2.2 Procedure

Recruitment for the target sample used Facebook advertising and a market research agency based in Mumbai. Prior to launching the Facebook advertisement, a Facebook page was created called 'Urban India Eats'. The advertisement was subsequently launched through this page. Given the cultural sensitivities in relation to meat consumption, the advertisement did not openly target meat-eaters but instead ran with this headline - 'Are you a Foodie?' – in order to appeal to urbanites who enjoy a range of different cuisines. The Facebook profiling tool was used to target Mumbai residents aged 23-45 years who lived within 25 kilometres of Nariman Point in downtown Mumbai. Within a week of the launch, it reached almost 14,000 people and generated hundreds of expressions of interest. This reflects other findings on how social media is an effective recruitment tool in comparison to traditional methods of recruitment (Ramo, Rodriguez, Chavez, Sommer, & Prochaska, 2014), as social networking sites can help with reaching a greater percentage of eligible participants and can also open up opportunities to recruit internationally (Kapp, Peters, & Oliver, 2013).

Mumbai residents recruited via the local market research agency needed to reflect similar sample characteristics as those recruited via Facebook. Therefore, the socio-economic classification (SEC) grid, which is a segmentation tool developed by The Market Research Society of India, was used to recruit participants. The SEC grid segments urban households into twelve categories based upon two questions: levels of education - from illiteracy to a postgraduate degree - and the ownership of eleven items which range from fairly basic (e.g., electricity connection, gas stove) to relatively sophisticated (e.g., refrigerator, personal computer; The Market Research Society of India, 2011). As previous work found that education levels and disposable incomes can significantly impact one's ability to make informed and deliberate consumption choices (Khara, 2015), and given meat is a relatively expensive commodity in India (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010), the recruitment focused on affluent segments i.e., SEC A1 and some of SEC A2. Furthermore, participants were required to be fluent in English.

The sample for the pilot study, in Sydney, was obtained through placing advertisements on career websites at The University of New South Wales and The

University of Technology Sydney, through snowballing, and through a post on the Facebook group 'Indians in Sydney' asking potential participants if they were willing to be interviewed about their food choices.

The incentives, for both the pilot study and the fieldwork conducted in India, included light refreshments and a chance to participate in a lucky draw where one winner was awarded INR 10,000 (AUD $200 approximately).

2.3 Data analysis

The research used an iterative study design, which entailed cycles of simultaneous data collection, analysis, and adaptations to some questions to refine the emerging theory. Within the parameters of the research objectives, saturation of interview findings was adequately reached upon completion of the thirty-three interviews. The data collection and analysis were conducted in tandem as they helped inform and shape each other (Charmaz & Bryant, 2008). The mode of analysis used an inductive approach as each emerging theme was compared with other data, within the same interview or across different interviews, to identify similarities or differences and build upon the rolling hypotheses (Mills, 2008). This study used an inductive method of coding. The process involved attaching labels to the data to identify occurrences and meanings while also grouping similar findings and taking note of what differed (Benaquisto, 2008). New concepts and themes were constructed from the data itself (van Den Hoonard & van Den Hoonard, 2008). Coding was done using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software to help sort and keep track of different categories and corresponding sections of text, thereby making it convenient to work through large amounts of data.

2.4 Ethics

Prior to the commencement of this study, the research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Technology Sydney (ETH18-2328). During the recruitment, each participant was informed of the purpose of this study and the recruitment proceeded only once the participant was informed about and was satisfied with the requirements of the study. All participant information was treated in a non-identifiable and confidential manner.

3. Research findings

The research findings will elaborate upon the dynamics of frontstage and backstage consumption behaviours in India using Goffman's theory as the main framework. The main themes of this study include the various ways through which backstage meat consumption occurred in different settings - outside and within the home - and the integral role of the supporting accomplices as part of this practice. The secondary themes cover the instances when backstage meat consumption was discovered by the frontstage audiences and consequences that arose as a result of violating socio-cultural norms. However, we will start by first presenting an overview of the contemporary views and social stigmas towards meat-based foods and meat consumption in order to provide some context as to why different public and private behaviours arise in relation to meat consumption in India.

3.1 Religious and cultural taboos associated with meat consumption in urban India today

When it came to the topic of slaughtering animals for their meat, the Hindu concepts of ahimsa (Hamilton, 2000) and vegetarianism (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010) were highlighted by several participants:

- my mom and my grandmom...they are like, "No, no. It's very bad. You can't eat it. It's killing another living organism and eating it"...So we had the strict rule for not bringing non-veg in the house...it's religious (Female, age 28).

- We are killing animals and eating. And in our caste it's wrong. You should not eat by killing someone (Male, age 32).

Meat's association with baseness, pollution (Caplan, 2008) and immorality (Ahmad, 2014) was also reflected in this study, as one participant recalled how some people refused to attend her wedding function simply because there were meat-based dishes present:

- during our wedding we had vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods served...the girl comes home after the wedding...she actually ended up telling me "I didn't come to your wedding because the food was dirty" (Female, age 33).

In a similar vein, several meat-eating participants reported facing judgement and discrimination from the wider community:

- I mean just because I am a non-vegetarian, they think that I'm somebody who is a person to stay away from. They have particular disgust or hatred towards particular people who are non veg (Male, age 29).

- in my complex... Some of them knew that we used to bring non-veg at home and cook it...they used to frown upon and bully me (Female, age 28).

Given these views towards meat, it is not surprising that meat was not permitted to be cooked or consumed within the sanctity of one's home or during Hindu religious festivals:

- my mom...she's like, "This is my house, so not here. Do it anywhere else."...Apparently it's the sanctity, and she has her gods placed in every corner (of the home) (Female, age 23).

- we have special days also when we don't eat non-veg - basically, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays...in Ganapati, we don't eat. For eleven days, we don't eat any of the non-veg because we have to go for a puja (prayer) and a Navaratri, Vaishnu time, so we don't eat. If I go to temple in a day...so I don't eat non-veg that day (Female, age 35).

3.2 Changes in relation to meat consumption in urban India

On the other hand, despite the stigmas and taboos, meat consumption is gradually becoming more acceptable and is even being seen as a trend among India's younger generation. This is in line with other literature which highlights that India's younger consumers hold vastly different socio-cultural attitudes from their older counterparts (Shashidhar, 2011) and are more likely to embrace new cultural practices (Majumdar, 2010), particularly those from the West (Sinha, 2011):

- as far as our generation is concerned, eating non-veg food is now like a fad. So, it's like, okay you're eating non-veg, oh great, good for you (Male, age 32)

- West has propagated something, we will automatically accept it...you would always want to be called modern and forward thinking rather than being called traditional. There's almost stigma in the word traditional (Female, age 34).

Living away from home and having greater freedom to pursue one's own lifestyle choices, away from the gaze of one's family, is also encouraging new consumption practices:

- I think for urban Indians, we're hanging out away from our parents. It wasn't like earlier where people would go home and stuff like that, right? Now people are going for drinks. So it's much easier to do what you want to away from your parents' gaze. (Female, age 32).

Given the increasingly diverse array of food choices available in urban India today, traditional vegetarian food was deemed to be standard fare that was eaten at home on a regular basis. On the other hand, meat-based dishes offered a novel experience when dining out:

- veggies and everything are made most of the time at home and so it's like you try to find out something new and different (Male, age 26).

- if I'm going out and I'm spending then I'm not going to eat the same thing which I eat at home every day which is veg food. So, if I'm going out I will always pick the non-vegetarian option over the vegetarian option (Male, age 32).

In addition, vegetarian foods appear to be associated with traditional practices which appear to be gradually losing their relevance. This has consequently resulted in vegetarianism, to some extent, also losing some of its appeal in contemporary urban culture. This has been highlighted in the examples below:

- traditionally we have this 13 day thing where you eat…You know this whole 'Satvic khaana'…you're supposed to have very simple vegetarian food like boiled food…nobody really goes into the depths of this anymore or at least we don't (Female, age 40+).

- Unless I become a monk, I don't think I will give up eating all meats (Male, age 30).

These findings reflect the tension in India today between the need to adhere to cultural norms that discourage meat consumption and the desire, particularly among younger people, to seek out novel experiences such as consuming meat-based dishes. This tension between tradition and the desire to embrace change has resulted in meat-eaters needing to carefully navigate through various social contexts, which is explored further in the next section.

3.3 Backstage behaviours in relation to meat consumption in India

Having discussed some of the current perceptions towards meat consumption in India, the findings here on will highlight how different consumption behaviours in India occur in different settings and contexts and examine the roles of the various actors involved. Those who indulged in backstage meat consumption tended to come from religious and cultural backgrounds where meat consumption was discouraged. The frontstage audience commonly included the vegetarian family members and, in some instances, the neighbours who expected one to conform to the customary vegetarian norms.

3.3.1 Backstage meat consumption behaviours outside the home

The backstage is generally viewed by performers as a 'safe area' because, unlike the front stage, it is a place where deviations from the norm are tolerated and accepted (Picca & Feagin, 2007). Backstage behaviours, in many instances, also tend to be supported by other social actors who form an integral part of the backstage setting (Picca & Feagin, 2007). The 'safe area' in this study was often described to be a place outside the home, such as a restaurant, in the company of friends who were a key part of this backstage setting as deviations from the frontstage vegetarian norms were accepted and even supported:

- I have friends who do it...because when you are amongst friends, then it's no holds barred...nobody's really telling on anybody (Female, age 45).

- parents ko pata hai par unke in-laws ko nahin pata (parents know, but their in-laws don't know). My friends...if they're eating on that particular day with us, they hide (Female, age 35).

Backstage behaviours are also characterised by a casual informality as compared to front stage performances which tend to be carefully controlled (Collins, 1988). In this study, the facade of religious vegetarianism, carefully maintained frontstage, was described to give way to a voracious appetite for meat, backstage:

- in the house, they'll be so religious...but the moment they come to the restaurant...they'll try each and every spare part of that animal (Female, age 35).

- I have few friends of mine; they are Jains and they are Gujaratis. They just wait for those days of nine days (of fasting) to get over and they really jump on to the non-veg (Female, age 38)!

One participant narrated how a family, forbidden to eat meat at home during a religious month of fasting, secretly ate meat backstage, at a restaurant:

- 'Shradh'...it's supposed to be this month where you give some sort of...puja (prayer) and give respect to your ancestors...You're not supposed to eat non-veg. So there was this gentleman sitting in an oriental restaurant and he was at the next table…he and his son. Each of them had three bowls of food in front...one was prawn, one was chicken and one was something else, and that's all they ate… So, I was just really surprised because they were eating ferociously. So, later I asked the server...So then he said, "Shradh hai na? Isi liye yaahan aa kar khaate hain" (It's Shradh right? That's why they come here and eat)...So he will come here and he will have his meat fix or his prawn fix...and when they go home they will eat their daal roti...So, there's a very large population doing this (Female, age 45).

In some instances, the creation of back regions becomes necessary if the front-regions that they offer refuge from are sensitive, risky or "high-stakes environments"

(Ross, 2007, p. 316). In collectivist cultures such as India, deviation from socially sacred norms, which is perceived to impact upon the other members of one's community, can result in the individual being punished (Fershtman, Gneezy, & Hoffman, 2011). The potential punishment for eating meat, in this study, ranged from being abused by one's family, being ostracized by the neighbours, to being potentially threatened by religious right-wing groups:

- in front of parents we have to keep it a secret because once they know, they start abusing and everything (Male, age 28).

- we wouldn't openly talk about eating non-veg when somebody from the locality is around...if my mother-in-law has eaten mutton in the afternoon, she would say "No, I made some vegetable and roti, and we ate that."…we know that it's a little bit of a lie...I'd rather…not talk about it, than talk about it and get ostracized by the people (Female, age 33).

- They are totally criticizing like people should avoid eating meat...The right-wing groups, actually...The thing is, I kind of feel threatened by them (Male, age 27).

Therefore, given this rather harsh and unforgiving frontstage audience, participants tended to lie about where they ate or what they ordered when out:

- we're going to X to eat with friends, except that it just wasn't X, it was Y. It was the same place, there are heaps of restaurants. It could be the...same exact restaurant, but instead of chicken we would do beef (Female, age 34).

- I made sure that I would never mention it (meat-eating) to her (mother) so I stopped telling her about what I ate and I started telling that it was curried rice (Female, age 23).

In other instances, there were various actions that one resorted to in order to cover up the lingering evidence from what had transpired backstage:

- a friend in college would come to my house for my mom's fish curry and he would get crazy about washing his hands and his mouth to make sure that the smell wouldn't

linger when he would go back home. He would have a couple of chloro-mints (Male, age 35).

- I have a friend of mine who is a doctor and he is a Jain. He usually eats when he is in his clinic. He calls for omelette…Before going to home, he'll be all clean and fine...His mother doesn't even come to know...he's having eggs. He eats a little of chicken (Female, age 38).

When away from the observing audience and the pressures of frontstage conformity, the backstage setting can represent a sense of lightness, release and catharsis (Coates, 1999). A conversation with a young Muslim participant who ate pork, backstage without his family's knowledge, highlighted the joys of savouring the moment in private:

- I actually liked the taste of bacon, in that sauce...I'm away from them (parents), at that time don't think about it. Because if I have been thinking about what I've eaten at that time, I would rather remember the best part (Male, age 27).

Others similarly recounted how challenging prevailing frontstage norms can be enjoyable, thereby also reflecting the literature on the growing chasm between an experimental modern India and traditional India which is less tolerant of deviation from customs (Mathur, 2010, 2015; Sinha, 2011). The rebellion, as highlighted here, arose from a sense of weariness from having to constantly put up an act, frontstage:

- You have a face that you put up in India…it's a constant struggle...being rebellious, stems from you being able to do something that you know other people haven't done (Female, age 34).

3.3.2 Backstage meat consumption behaviours within the home
The other backstage setting, in this study, was the home itself. This reflects the point that any place has the potential to be spontaneously transformed into a backstage region if there is enough of a "symbolic or metaphorical disconnect" between the front and back regions (Ross, 2007, p. 315). There is also no one type of generic back region or backstage setting as different behaviours and dynamics can take place in different backstage regions which counterbalance the dynamics of the

corresponding front regions (Ross, 2007). In this study, given the restrictions on cooking and consuming meat, certain parts of the home were transformed into a back region and, in other instances, the entire home depending upon whether or not one was being observed by the frontstage audience, i.e. the vegetarian family member(s). In the example below, some family members, as backstage performers, developed a shared understanding of what was appropriate or not with regards to violating social taboos, and ate meat at home in the absence of the vegetarian parent:

- My father brings a huge ass kingfish at home...and I remember him cutting it into three cool pieces for all three of us. That's when I saw that... I was like, "Oh, this is not vegetarian. Mom's going to kill us." So he's like, "You don't have to tell" (Female, age 23).

In other instances, the individual kept their backstage meat consumption private and separate from other backstage meat-eaters. Hence it appears that, to some extent, these other backstage performers tended to represent a frontstage audience for the individual. This reflects the literature on how people from collectivist cultures are more likely to experience shame when seen, by others, as doing something socially inappropriate but might not feel shame when doing the same thing in private (Patel, 2018):

- this friend of mine who is eating meat in secret, her dad is also eating meat in secret. She has seen her dad eating chicken at a party…but they won't verbalize it. It's more these subtle digs at each other, like, "Hey, Dad, I'm at so and so restaurant, should I pack some tangdi kebab for you"? She'd message him on WhatsApp, and he'd be like, "No, no, no," and all of that, "I'm pure vegetarian." It's almost like they know, but they're scared to say it (Female, age 32).

In many instances, physical space tends to create a boundary or a barrier between the front and back regions (Marichal, 2013). In this study, cooking meat in the basement, below the rest of the home, or even away from one's home, were examples of how physical space was used to demarcate the front and back regions. In addition, time, an intangible barrier, was deemed equally effective in separating

the front and back regions as meat was cooked at certain times of the day when no one at home was aware of what was being cooked:

- Since I am a pastry chef, eggs are the most important thing that I need to use, so I have my own quantity (industrial) kitchen at home in the basement...I took advantage of her (mother) bones where she can't really go up and down that much (the stairs) (Female, age 23).

- either she cooks it really early in the morning when nobody knows that what she's cooking, or she gets it cooked in a church friend's house (Female, age 33).

In addition to physical barriers, space can also be created aurally as in the example of the "thick glass panels of a radio broadcasting studio, which isolates an area aurally but not visually" (Pinch, 2010, p. 418). Similarly, in this study, the chimney and exhaust at home created multi-sensory barriers in that they were not only used to mask sound but also the smell in regards to what was being cooked:

- So, I am cooking chicken...he (father-in-law) was there at home and I made Thai curry...And we had put on the chimney, as well as the exhaust, and he didn't find out (Female, age 28).

In other instances, backstage behaviours were openly brought to the frontstage as certain materials - such as meat - were presented as vegetarian foods to the unsuspecting audience:

- my brother, he brings non-veg (home)…my brother tells her (mother) that it's not non-vegetarian. It's soya chunks, so that she believes that (Female, age 28).

A key reason for establishing a backstage region and indulging in backstage behaviours was the need to maintain collective harmony and avoid conflict. This reflects the fact that people from collectivist cultures can often derive meaning from being part of the web of social relationships whereas, in contrast, the autonomous individualist is viewed as "immature and uncultivated" (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1997, p. 23):

- I could see everybody's happiness also as well. I can't see always me, me, me, me...I don't want to be...selfish (Male, age 29).

- Their (parents) idea has shaped differently, so instead of countering them, there is nothing wrong with keeping secrets. It sort of avoids confrontation (Male, age 30).

Given the complexities of keeping up appearances in the frontstage environment, several participants mentioned accomplices who assisted in the transition from the front to the backstage space by helping keep the meat consumption practices a secret.

3.4 The accomplices who assist with backstage meat consumption

Backstage meat-eaters often mentioned the presence of accomplices - usually their friends and, in some instances, their partner - who helped keep their meat consumption a secret from the rest of the family. The accomplice, as a key performer and part of the backstage setting, tended to have an in-depth understanding of the norms and conventions related to the frontstage context. They were also chosen based on interpersonal trust, i.e. "the willingness of a party (in this case, the backstage meat-eater) to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). This also reflects how information relating to appropriate front and backstage behaviours may tend to go back and forth among the performers until a consensus is reached on which behaviours are acceptable and which are not (Goffman, 1959). The accomplices helped maintain the frontstage cues in several ways which ranged from getting rid of any evidence to carefully and articulately covering up for the meat-eater when in the presence of the family:

- She (wife) helps me washing the dishes, everything...She hides chicken bones - if I'm cooking egg and chicken together, so she hides all that egg shells and all - so she's very supportive in that way (Male, age 29).

- They (reference to friend's family) used to help me in keeping it a secret. They used to sneak it (the meat dish) under the table. And if she would hear my mom, I would hide under the dining table (Female, age 30).

The backstage can also become a training ground for front stage performances as, in these private settings, actors often teach one another how to perform in front of the audience (Picca & Feagin, 2007). Similarly, in this study, accomplices reported going through an elaborate planning process in preparation for an appropriate front stage performance:

- So if it's like Bade Miya (restaurant name), then they tell that we are going to have some rules that we are going to a different place...when a phone rings and the parents ask, "Where are you?" You have to be better prepared with the answer...You have to tell a lot of lies, be very accurate with the lies (Male, age 30).

The more knowledge individuals have about the norms and conventions of a particular front region, the more likely they are to "satisfy one another backstage" (Ross, 2007, p. 315) as there is shared insight, understanding and empathy. The solidarity among backstage performers and their accomplices was also noted in this study in that there was empathy felt, by the accomplice, in relation to the stress experienced by the backstage meat-eater:

- I think oh my god...the stress he must have gone through when he entered home hoping there was no smell of fish or chicken or anything...I empathize with them and I think that is why I subconsciously made sure I didn't rat my friend out (Male, age 35).

- slip of tongue if I say something which is not good...So you have to manage your words, quite precision at times….I normally am very talkative...So basically I talk as less as possible and very to the point (Male, age 30).

On the other hand, some might bring certain front-stage cues and expectations into private backstage settings by attempting to limit certain behaviours carried out backstage (Picca & Feagin, 2007). This was also noted in this study where a backstage meat-eater was admonished by a friend who was an onlooker as part of the backstage setting:

- He said, "Beef hai sorry, I cannot offer you"...and the Punjabi guy goes "No I'm…eating." Woh dusre wallah bola...tu kaisa khaa raha hai? tujhe itne paap lagega

(The other guy said...how are you eating? you are going to face so much sin) (Female, age 42).

There were also other ways in which front stage expectations were brought backstage as some considered this type of meat consumption as a form of cheating:

- If it's just food that you're secretive about, I don't know what else you'd be secretive about. So, I'd kind of rather steer clear from a person like that (Female, age 41).

- You should be frank with your parents or in-laws. You are hiding...Why they're hiding? I think they are cheating their family also (Female, aged 35).

Backstage behaviours can often comprise informalities such as "playful aggressivity and 'kidding'" which, in many instances, tend to be absent frontstage (Goffman, 1959, p. 128). Similarly, in this conversation below, a Muslim participant, aged 28 years, recalled how he teased his Brahmin friend who ate chicken in secret. In this regard, the participant, while part of the backstage setting, tended to bring some front stage cues into the arena. The view here also reflects the broader literature which highlights how some, from minority communities in India, tend to adopt an anti-Hindu stance as a protest against the religious and caste-based discrimination in relation to meat consumption (Staples, 2008):

- Participant: Ke dekho (Like see) he's a family of a Brahmin, and he's eating a chicken.
- Moderator: OK, yeah.
- Participant: Right? I'll say...what your father will say?...What your God will say?...you will go to the hell...Better you give your chicken to me...I eat it. My God will not say anything, but your God will question it!

Despite the attempts to cover up one's backstage meat consumption, in some instances these were discovered by the frontstage audience, which lead to unpleasant consequences. This is elaborated upon in the next section.

3.5 Discovery of backstage meat consumption: causes & consequences

The discovery of the individual's backstage meat consumption behaviours by the family tended to bring about feelings of shame, disappointment and anger. This arose as the vegetarian frontstage audience became aware of the chasm between the performer's front and backstage persona and behaviours. There were several ways in which backstage meat consumption behaviours were discovered. Items discovered on credit cards and bills were rather common, as highlighted in this example below:

- My father would work for an organization. So the organization had a like a family club…where the family members could go and dine. And all you had to do is probably enter your father's name and his organization number…the purchase amount would automatically get debited off his salary...I did go out with a few friends and we dined out. So, when the amount was debited to my father, so my father did inquire about that. "This seems to be a substantial amount and what happened to it?" So, the organization club, they served him the bill...And it had fair bit of these non-vegetarian things to which he said, "That there seems to be some mistake because my family doesn't consume non-vegetarian." So, to which they cross-check...And ultimately the blame came on to me and they found it out (Male, age 35).

Some mentioned being found out through the social networks and the local grapevine:

- parents eventually get to know from the relatives, from the neighbours. It's a small world basically (Male, age 30).

- I think telling them (parents) is better than hiding because if they will be letting know by somebody else, "I saw your son or daughter-in-law eating on that particular day" (Female, age 35).

Social media was mentioned as another culprit:

- I started doing a proper non-vegetarian...and she (mother) stumbled across a picture of a roasted turkey and she's like, "Where did this come from" (Female, age 23)?

Unlike individualist cultures, where the concept of self may exist as separate from others, individuals from collectivist cultures may experience shame and guilt based upon others' actions (Wong & Tsai, 2007). This might explain why, upon discovery of meat consumption behaviours, reactions from the family tended to include shame and the feelings of betrayal:

- I told my parents one time, that I ate pork and I remember the shame that sort of flashed on their face. They were like, "You should never tell this to anybody. Never even admit this in front your...Aunties and uncles" etc. (Female, age 34).

- He (father) was shocked...it was like the biggest betrayal of his life (Male, age 35).

- mom will start crying and will give all the, "This is not good. This is not religious" (Female, age 28).

In some instances, conflicts among families also arose as, here, a participant aged 23 years, recounted how her mother discovered her backstage meat consumption which took place at a friend's home which resulted in her mother "screaming" at the accused:

- Participant: Auntie was just cutting the chicken at that time for the curry and it was cubed...she had this big knife...She (mother) immediately went to the house and she started screaming at her.
- Moderator: At the auntie's house?
- Participant: Yeah. She's like, "How could you feed my daughter non-vegetarian food?!"

4. Discussion

Some of the learnings in this study are in line with previous findings as they highlight certain negative associations with meat consumption due to religious and caste-based practices. The learnings reflect how meat tends to be kept segregated from vegetarian society in India (Ahmad, 2014; Dolphijn, 2006; Sharan, 2006) while also illustrating that consumption practices are gradually changing (Mathur, 2010, 2014) given the attitudinal differences between the youth and older generation (Majumdar, 2010; Sinha, 2011). Within the paradigm of collectivist culture, the study also details

how shame (Patel, 2018), guilt (Wong & Tsai, 2007), and punishment (Fershtman et al., 2011) may occur if an individual is seen to be deviating from socially significant norms.

In addition to confirming some of the current literature, the findings make several new contributions. For one, most studies on meat consumption, to date, are conducted among Western audiences and there is relatively little information on meat consumption in emerging markets, especially India, which is stereotyped as a predominantly vegetarian nation. Therefore, in addition to contributing to the relatively under researched topic of meat consumption in India, the findings reveal some reasons why meat consumption tends to be underreported in surveys (Bansal, 2016) by highlighting the shame and stigma associated with this taboo practice, and how people navigate through these spaces while secretly breaking social norms. The study also builds upon learnings from a previous study, which states how different settings can encourage individualistic and collectivistic behaviours in Indian society (Sinha et al., 2001) by detailing how Indians pursue their individualistic desires in impersonal public settings.

The other main contribution is that this study applies Goffman's theory to a new cultural context. Goffman's '*Presentation of Self'* has been previously criticised for not focusing enough on uncovering cultural divergences given that "much of what he has to say applies to all cultures" (Giddens, 2009, p. 290). To this point, while many of Goffman's overarching concepts have been used in similar ways in previous studies, it seems that cultural divergences may emerge when delving into specific details, aspects and nuances of behaviours within specific contexts. For example, within the constraints of the joint family arrangement in India, the study highlights the various ways in which physical space is used as a mode of demarcation between front and backstage settings and behaviours. In this regard, the study uses Goffman's theory to provide insight into how space is created, within this unique context, through erecting intangible barriers – such as cooking meat at home at different times of the day - or through multisensory barriers to prevent backstage meat consumption from being detected by the rest of the family within the home.

In addition, the study highlights various backstage characterisations, roles, moods, language and behaviours, the peculiarities of which might differ in different contexts. For one, some backstage personas in this study has helped challenge certain perceived stereotypes. For example, the caste-revering vegetarian Brahmin (Caplan, 2008; Dolphijn, 2006; Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010; Staples, 2016) presented rather differently in this study given that, backstage, the Brahmin individual was described to have a rather voracious appetite for meat. Similarly, there was the Muslim participant who claimed to enjoy consuming pork, without the knowledge of his family. In addition, although women in India tend to be associated with vegetarianism (Caplan, 2008; Donner, 2008; Gochhwal, 2015; Kumar, 2015; Ranjan, 2001; Staples, 2016), the findings revealed that some women have a penchant for meat and also indulge in backstage meat consumption. Furthermore, by highlighting how accomplices go to great lengths to support the backstage meat-eater, the study confirms the allocentric nature of relationships in collectivist cultures which differ from individualist cultures (Verkuyten & Masson, 1996). Finally, uniqueness can also be found in how diversions from socially sacred norms are deemed to reflect badly upon not just the individual, as the backstage performer, but also upon their in-group (Wong & Tsai, 2007) who, in many instances, are also the front-stage audience. In this regard, the study, while applying some of Goffman's overarching concepts, highlights some of the peculiarities that are unique to this context as it also helps extend our understanding of consumption practices within India.

In terms of limitations, as backstage meat consumption is a socially sensitive topic, there is a possibility that some participants in this study may have expressed certain views and experiences through projection– i.e., attributing one's own perceptions and behaviours to other people (Keegan, 2008). Others may not have disclosed the full extent of their backstage meat consumption practices due to the need for social desirability in collectivistic societies (Johnson & de Vijver, 2003). The 'courtesy bias' which exists in many Asian cultures, may encourage the participant to provide socially desirable information with a view towards maintaining a positive relationship with their interviewer (Jones, 1983). Hence, as future studies continue to explore how taboos such as meat consumption are broken in the face of long-standing traditions, researchers could utilise a range of methods in addition to individual in-depth interviews. One could be the use of projective techniques in order to make it

easier for participants to access thoughts and emotions that are otherwise difficult to publicly express (Keegan, 2008). Furthermore, some aspects of backstage behaviours may also need to be further explored through observations which might help provide deeper insight into the activities, rituals, meanings and relationships that occur during a practice (McKechnie, 2008). The triangulation of data sources will also be important in order to obtain diverse viewpoints (Olson, 2004) and validate and corroborate the data gathered (Patton, 2002) given the socially sensitive nature of this topic.

In conclusion, given there is a growing body of research that advocates a shift to plant-based diets for health and sustainability-related reasons (Hertwich et al., 2010; Willett et al., 2019), it is important for future research to examine how to best encourage sustainable consumption in both the developed world, where meat consumption is currently high, and in the developing world, where meat consumption is on the rise. In the case of India, insight into what drives backstage meat consumption can help to identify strategies for reducing meat consumption. As the findings highlight, meat is not only eaten for its sensory appeal but also because of its sociocultural associations with exciting modern lifestyles. Plant-based foods, in comparison, are perceived as relatively uninteresting, which raises the question of how to make plant-based foods more appealing. Given that urban India today is a hybrid of traditional values and a desire for the "good' life" (Mathur, 2014, p. 10), perhaps plant-based foods could be reintroduced as something which encapsulates a blend of modern novelty and traditional familiarity, with a view towards making such foods "cool" again (Rau, 2019, para. 1). Greater emphasis on the marketing of plant-based meats could potentially be one way moving forward given the popularity of these foods in other countries (Doherty & Brown, 2019; Saiidi, 2019; Soon, 2019). As there is relatively greater pressure in collectivist cultures to follow in-group norms (Paul et al., 2006; Triandis, 2004), people are also more likely to adhere to marketing norms adopted by the in-group (Yoo & Donthu, 2002). Therefore, making plant-based foods socially trendy and relevant again might be especially effective in a collectivist culture like India given the strong influence of reference groups (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). This may help not only to reduce the chasm between front & backstage consumption practices and alleviate the tensions involved in backstage meat consumption, but also to encourage more sustainable dietary practices.

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