

The Marketing of Momo in Delhi's Street Food culture: An Ethnographic Exploration

G. Vegini

Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi, India

ganethiramvegini@gmail.com

Introduction

Street food culture is a widespread phenomenon that enjoyed in numerous countries globally. Ozcelik, & Akova pointed out today, that it is assumed around 2.5 million people eat street food every day in the world (Pilato et al., 2016, p. 5). Worldwide, more people are attracted to street food. Its popularity stems from the easy availability, affordability, and deliciousness of the food. In India, a country rich in multiculturalism, street food culture is particularly vibrant. It offers people a taste of diverse cultural cuisines.

In various countries, momo that is known as a food with historical and cultural significance. Baral mentioned that historical root of momo “Momo” is translated to steamed bun in the *Shaanxi* dialect, Originating from a historically significant region as a Silk Road gateway to northwest China. Today, this province remains a popular destination for tourists. It is renowned for its irresistible juicy dumplings that vary in style from city to city, is typically filled with meat, and are a favoured snack often enjoyed with tea at local tea houses. Making and enjoying Momo is particularly trendy during the Chinese New Year festivities (Vaidya, 2020). We strongly argue that the origins of Momo are debated, tracing back to North-eastern China or introduced to Tibet in the 7th century and more delicate Momo filled with buffalo meat and local spices. Commercialisation in the 20th century further popularised Momo, establishing it as a national favourite food in Nepal (Dhakal& Joshi, 2018).

Momo is considered a cultural icon of Nepal, representing its rich culinary heritage and national identity. It is a fusion of Tibetan and Newari composition that appeals to diverse global audiences. Emerging from traditional Newari origins in the 14th century, momo has gradually developed into Nepal's quintessential dish, offering both traditional interpretations and customized variations that foster community and cultural pride (Baral 2024: 90). Therefore, its historical path clearly has roots in various countries. My general interest in street food culture, and as a Sri Lankan, the particular spread of the momo food culture in India, has sparked my research interest in the momo street food phenomenon.

Research Methods

My research area is in Chhatarpur, Delhi, India. I chose this area for my research because Chhatarpur has a high concentration of Momo shops and is very crowded in the evenings. My preliminary observations before fieldwork also indicated a significant number of Momo shops and a large number of people frequently eating Momo there. Employing an ethnographic approach proved valuable in this study. I conducted a month-long fieldwork study. For My study, a random sampling method was employed. Given the large number of momo shops in Delhi, five momo shops were selected using this technique. This approach aimed to enhance the generalizability of the study's findings. Data for this study were collected using various tools, including interviews, observations, visual documents, and secondary literature. This data was used to explore the significance of momo within Delhi's street food culture. Interviews provided insights from individuals involved in both selling and consuming momo. Specifically, I observed the areas surrounding momo stalls, consumer behaviour during momo consumption, and the activities involved in momo preparation. Visual documentation, including photographs taken at the field site, provided clear and actual records. Secondary data, such as books, journals, research articles, and online resources, also supported this study. This information provided a theoretical perspective on Indian street food culture, the historical background of momo, and other relevant details. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data in this study. This method allowed for the categorization of the collected data into various dimensions.

Results and Discussion

The Momo Marketing in the Street food Culture

The street food is a boom industry in the South Asian region today (Asif and Hussain 202: 161). Gupta, Kavita Khanna and Raj Kumar Gupta pointed out recently, that the demand for street food served around the world and especially in South Asian countries had grown (Price et al., 2016). Street food culture has been around in India since ancient times. The earliest mention of Indian street food items can be traced back to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Street vendors were known for selling various food items like roasted grains and nuts, various types of bread etc. to travellers and locals (Das, 2023). Alongside popular Indian street foods like Pani Puri, vada pav, chaat varieties, and dosa, momo also holds a significant place. Public places are important locations for street food vending.

In Chhatarpur area, Momo shops are strategically located to cater to individuals finishing work and college in the evenings, offering a convenient place to socialize with colleagues and friends over a quick bite. Notably, these stalls are often situated in high-traffic areas such as near metro and bus stations. Through my study, it's clear that the peak hours for momo stalls are between 7:00 PM and 8:30 PM. The

majority of customers at these street stalls belong to the middle class. In Delhi, the majority of momo sellers are Nepalese. In my study area of Chhatarpur, the majority of momo sellers are Nepalese, but Indians are also involved in selling momo. The working experience of individuals employed at momo shops is an important area of exploration. Through my field observations, I noted that they possess extensive experience in preparing momo, frying them, and serving customers. Notably, they were able to prepare and serve the waiting customers quickly. Furthermore, the momo vendors interviewed indicated that they greatly enjoy their work. The seller's name was Sharma, 42 years old, and he hailed from eastern Nepal. He currently resides in India with his family, and selling momo is his primary occupation. He explained that they prepare the momo ingredients at home and bring them to the stall for sale every day at 4 PM. He expressed genuine enjoyment for his work and stated that he sells momo for five hours daily. Another important case I found through an interview with one of my respondents is that mostly Nepali migrant workers face some issues in their momo selling activities. Because their native place is not India, they often experience job uncertainty.



Figure 1: The Momo vendors in Chhatarpur (Author's File 2025)

The ingredients significantly influence the taste of momo. In my study areas, veg momo preparation varied: one type included paneer and onion, while another featured cabbage leaves. Non-veg momo, in the same areas, typically contained chicken and onion. Sarah Pink (2011) essay also pointed out experience and senses related thoughts also. Sara Pink pointed out “this invites us to re-think Kress’s notion of ‘sight, hearing, smell, taste and feel’ as ‘each being attuned in a quite specific way to the natural environment, proving us with highly differentiated information.’” (2000: 184). In my momo field work, I could find various sensory experiences. While taste is crucial to the popularity of momo, customer experience has revealed a subtle difference in taste

between momo prepared by Nepalese vendors and those made by Indian vendors. A plate of veg momo costs 60 to 70 Indian Rupees and chicken momo costs 80 to 100 Indian Rupees. A plate contains 12 momo and is served with chili chutney, mint chutney, mayonnaise, tomato, and chili sauces. It was observable that the seasonal cycle plays an important role in Indian street food. However, in Delhi, it is notable that momo is consistently available across all seasons, including summer and winter. Therefore, momo marketing in Delhi's street food culture has become important.



Figure 2: Steam Chicken Momo with Chilly Chutney and Mayonnaise (Author's File 2025)

Conclusion

Indian street food culture offers a very unique perspective. This study concluded how momo, as a food, has become integrated into the tastes and daily lives of people in various countries. In my study area, the majority of momo vendors were of Nepali origin though some Indian vendors were also identified. While momo is the primary item sold in these shops, vendors are expanding their market by promoting additional items like noodles, French fries, and soda. A key finding was that momo sales were most frequent during the evening hours. Additionally, it's noteworthy that people from the general and middle classes, such as daily wage workers and students, frequently visit these momo stalls. The popularity of momo as a street food can be attributed to their affordable price, easy accessibility, and delicious taste. Undeniably, momos are very popular in Delhi's street food culture. Momo stalls are a common sight in Delhi's crowded areas, and the dish is also popular with tourists. The popularity of momo worldwide can be attributed to the movement of Nepalese people across the country. In Delhi, the marketing of momo provides a significant livelihood for many people and plays a crucial role in the income of the Nepali migrant workers.

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