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# Preserving tradition amidst modernity: the hybridity of food practices

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional socio-cultural practices surrounding food, vital for cultural preservation and continuity, are increasingly contested due to modern influences such as globalisation and economic growth. These shifts can significantly impact consumption routines and disrupt long-held traditions. While such lifestyle and food-practice shifts can threaten consumers' sense of ontological security, more attention is needed to understand how these contestations are negotiated and managed. Drawing on theories of practice, we explore how consumers negotiate contestations amid the tensions arising between tradition and modernity. This ethnographic study of 31 middle-class households in India reveals how consumers actively (re)configure material and competence-based elements of food practices to preserve traditional meanings while negotiating modern influences. This study offers theoretical insights into the hybridisation of practices, illustrating how consumers fluidly adapt to sustain cultural continuity and restore ontological security.

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## Introduction

Traditions are deeply rooted cultural practices, beliefs and customs passed down through generations, which shape everyday life (Lien et al., 2018). In India, traditions draw from Gandhian ideals and Hindu philosophy, which emphasise simplicity, spiritual devotion and the interconnectedness of life (Eckhardt & Mahi, 2012). In China, Confucian principles prioritise hierarchy, respect and social harmony (Sun et al., 2016). These enduring traditions continue to influence behaviours and values in their respective societies. Food is not just a means of sustenance; it is a key vehicle for maintaining tradition and reinforcing shared histories, rituals and social structures woven into daily life (Feldman & Wunderlich, 2023). Across cultures, food practices serve as powerful expressions of heritage, connecting individuals to their heritage through the repetition of meals prepared, shared and passed down over generations (Morton et al., 2020; P. Sarkar et al., 2015). Traditional food

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practices, such as grilling as a ritual and cultural experience in Mexico (Morton et al., 2020), following Ayurvedic dietary principles in India (P. Sarkar et al., 2015), and Kaiseki dining in Japan (i.e. a multi-course meal that adheres to strict rules regarding seasonal ingredients and presentation; Sato & Parry, 2015), illustrate how food traditions are deeply entrenched in social life. Yet, as societies modernise and global influences permeate everyday routines, these traditions are continuously reshaped to accommodate contemporary lifestyles (Epp & Price, 2018). Consequently, food practices become sites of negotiation, where consumers reconcile long-standing cultural meanings with the demands of modern life.

Given that food practices are central to traditions that shape daily routine, as reinforced by Marshall (2005) who describes food as 'extraordinary in its ordinariness, exceptional in the extent to which we treat it as mundane' (p. 69), we adopt theories of practice (hereafter practice theory) as a lens to explore how consumers negotiate their food practices at the intersection of tradition and modernity. Through this lens, food practices are not viewed in isolation but rather as a set of interconnected activities embedded in everyday life, such as shopping, purchasing, planning, cooking, storing, preparing, eating and disposing (Devaney & Davies, 2017). These practices are shaped by both historical continuity (i.e. traditions) and contemporary change (i.e. modernity), and are rich with affective, symbolic and instrumental meanings that influence food routine (Carrigan et al., 2023; Fiese, 2006; Molander & Hartmann, 2018; Oleschuk & Maniotes, 2023).

Existing studies on food traditions, customs, rituals and conventions provide noteworthy insights into how food consumption is deeply embedded in social, cultural and familial structures. Particularly, previous studies that draw on practice theory highlight how tradition is enacted, embodied and reproduced through routinised food practices and rituals. For example, Trees and Dean (2018) show how food serves as an expression of care in intergenerational relationships, which reinforces traditional family roles. Revilla and Salet (2018) demonstrate the potential of household food rituals in institutionalising shifts in meaning regarding food waste. Similarly, Carrigan et al. (2023), in a non-practice theory-based study, explore the preservation of traditions in facilitating family food sustainability. While these studies focus on the persistence of traditions through food practices, they overlook how consumers reinterpret and reconfigure food traditions when confronted with contemporary influences such as globalisation, urbanisation, digitalisation and shifting lifestyles.

Beyond explicit applications of practice theory, related literature explores how food traditions are constrained or reconfigured in contemporary life. For example, Epp and Price (2018) introduce the concept of 'thrown-togetherness', showing how feeding the family is disrupted and evolves in response to macro-social disruptions. Feldman and Wunderlich's (2023) theoretical work conceptualises cultural food distancing to explain how modernisation weakens ties to traditional food practices over time. Meanwhile, non-practice theory-based studies in consumer literature examine how modernity reshapes consumption spaces and rituals, such as the evolution of grilling traditions within Mexican families (Morton et al., 2020), the relationship between shopping malls and modernity (Eduful & Eduful, 2022), and the adoption and adaptation of global cultural rituals such as the high-school prom (Tinson & Nuttall, 2010). However, we observed a lack of explicit focus on the ways food practices can reflect both continuity and change, particularly in how tradition is maintained and adapted in response to

modernity. Responding to Hoffmann et al. (2020) and Smith Maguire et al. (2017) calls for a closer examination of the broader influences on consumer food choices, this ethnographic study of 31 middle-class households in three Indian cities (Ahmedabad, Indore and Mumbai) explores the role of traditional meanings in everyday food routines and the hybridisation of food practices amidst modern influence. This study was guided by the following research question<sup>1</sup>:

*How do consumers negotiate food practices amid contestation between tradition and modernity as these practices evolve?*

By demonstrating how consumers actively adapt material and competence-based elements to protect and sustain the traditional meanings attached to their food practices, this study offers theoretical insight into the hybridisation of food practices, which occurs at the intersection between traditional beliefs and modern lifestyles. Thus, we move beyond the modern versus tradition dichotomy by demonstrating how traditional food practices are not merely preserved or abandoned but are actively reconfigured in response to changing social and material conditions. Rather than a linear transition from tradition to modernity, hybridisation emerges as an iterative process wherein consumers integrate modern conveniences, such as pre-packaged ingredients or outsourcing food preparation, while maintaining core traditional food principles. This interplay highlights how food practices function as dynamic, meaning-laden social performances shaped by both historical continuity and contemporary adaptation. While this study is grounded in the Indian context, where food traditions are deeply intertwined with identity, religion and social hierarchy, our findings offer broader implications for understanding how consumers navigate the evolving relationship between traditions and modernity through their everyday food practices.

## Literature review

### ***Food practices: tradition-based routines***

Consumers' food practices encompass a series of interconnected activities such as shopping, cooking, eating and storing (Warde, 2013), together forming what Arnould et al. (2004) describe as the 'lifecycle of food'. This definition recognises that food-related activities are not isolated events but rather multifaceted routines, deeply embedded with social, cultural and emotional aspects, such as caring for and providing for children and elders in the family (Neysmith & Reitsma-Street, 2005; Trees & Dean, 2018; Warde, 2016).

Food practices embody both routine and ritual (Marshall, 2005; Ratcliffe et al., 2019). Routines function as second nature, helping individuals to manage unexpected situations by providing structure and a sense of normalcy (Ilmonen, 2002). Routines in practice also contribute to practitioners' ontological security – a sense of continuity that enables them to navigate everyday demands (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017; Thomas et al., 2019). From a practice theory perspective, routines are understood as sequences of socially and materially situated actions grounded in shared understanding of how things are done (Warde, 2016). While such routines shape the rhythms of life, food practice routines are increasingly challenged by shifting social, material and temporal constraints (Oleschuk & Maniotes, 2023; Warde et al., 2007).

Food practices are deeply embedded in cultural traditions, which shape how consumers select, prepare and consume food (S. J. Bronner, 2019). Practices such as using specific spices, cooking times and techniques and meal structures serve as a means of cultural preservation and intergenerational continuity (Epp et al., 2014). Thus, food practices reflect the intricate interplay between tradition, identity and social ritual that provide meaning, structure and connection for individuals and communities. Tradition, as a force of cultural reproduction, represents everyday processes of social control and expression, often juxtaposed with modernisation (S. Bronner, 2013). Even amidst globalisation and lifestyle changes, traditional food practices can persist, adapt or re-emerge in new forms. For example, Benny (2012) highlights the pedagogies of preservation and innovation in traditional cooking, where consumers encounter novel food experiences through intermarriage, travel and workplace interactions. Lang and Caraher (2001) attribute the decline of traditional cooking in the UK to a transition in culinary skill, driven by declining skills and experience in preparing traditional dishes, and rising market offerings that provide alternate ways to assemble meals. Similarly, Gallegos et al. (2011) discuss how modernisation and globalisation have reshaped traditional family meals, from preparation and consumption to passing on food knowledge. Thus, tradition should not be seen as opposing modernity. Rather, it operates as a mutable norm that provides structure while allowing room for adaptation (Blank & Howard, 2013).

Through the lens of social practice theory, tradition is seen as a flexible norm that individuals and communities draw upon to reinforce their identity and authority (S. Bronner, 2013). Practices gain cultural significance when they are stylised and recognised as traditional, either by resembling other practices or being identified as part of a tradition (S. J. Bronner, 2019). In this study, we adopt Shove et al. (2012) conceptualisation that emphasises the connection between the triad of practice elements: the meaning associated with the practice (e.g. socially shared meanings, ideas, emotions and cultural conventions), materiality (i.e. the broad array of objects, tools, technologies and infrastructures involved) and the competence required in its performance (e.g. skills and know-how). A key issue in practice theory research is understanding how consumption patterns are reproduced and altered (Southerton & Evans, 2017; Warde, 2016). A primary assumption is that reproduction and gradual changes in consumption are intertwined (Warde, 2016), with innovations emerging from the interplay between practices as entities and performances. Practice as 'entity' keeps together the set of consumption activities through the components of material, meaning and competence, while practice as 'performance' refers to the actual performance of the doings and sayings, thus realising the entity (Røpke, 2009; Warde, 2005). Thus, practices are continuously stabilised, modified and innovated through performances (Southerton & Evans, 2017; Thomas et al., 2019).

Practice theory foregrounds the dynamics of practices and the interplay of elements, such as resources, time pressure and social commitments, that shape food practices (Dyen et al., 2018). Recent studies have emphasised the role of material (Chitakunye & Maclaran, 2014; Domaneschi, 2019; Magaudda, 2011; Maller, 2015; Truninger, 2011; Twine, 2018), socio-technical (Epp et al., 2014; Feiereisen et al., 2019) and competency-related (Thomas et al., 2019; Trees & Dean, 2018) aspects of the social structures that enable the (re)-integration of routinised practices. Further, the role of meaning in food practices is illustrated through studies where meanings pose as barriers to practice adaptation or limit the engagement and experimentation within food practices (Evans et al., 2020;

Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021; Venugopal et al., 2019), or are held through greater engagement in novel consumption practices (Canavan, 2023), or conversely, are reorganised (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017; Porter et al., 2023). Additionally, meanings of food practices are often bolstered and reimagined, illustrating the interchangeability and fluidity of meanings in practice (Shove et al., 2012). However, we know little about the varying layers and dimensions of meanings that shape traditional food practices in contemporary contexts.

## Meaning in traditional food practices

As a practice integrating element, meaning represents the cognitive, emotional and motivational aspects of engagement in a practice. While meanings play a critical role in how practice performances are reproduced or changed (Shove et al., 2012), it is also important to consider that practices render our actions meaningful. Haslanger (2018) claims that actions are not just individual dependent but are shaped by the social milieu. Social meanings, expressed through rules, norms and values, confer cultural significance on practices. Both Yadgar (2013) and Frohnen (2001) argue that tradition, as a precondition of individuality, is rooted in the substructure of practice and meaning through which we conduct ourselves. When practices are stylised and recognised as traditional, they are sustained by regular patterns of behaviours shaped by shared social meanings internalised through socialisation (Haslanger, 2018).

Food is more than sustenance; it carries generational values that elucidate our focus on food meaning. Therefore, meanings in routine food practices extend beyond the cyclical activities of procuring, eating and storing to include social, traditional and emotional aspects such as caring for those with whom 'one has relationships of responsibility' (Neysmith & Reitsma-Street, 2005, p. 383). Prior studies highlight that meanings in food practices span functional, symbolic and emotional dimensions (Haslanger, 2018; Kharuhayothin & Kerrane, 2018). Routine food practices are therefore imbued with multiple and rich social meanings not only about what is healthy, proper and virtuous but also about the structural aspects and cultural norms around following routines and traditions, performance of identities, expression of care and negotiation of tensions and anxieties (Devaney & Davies, 2017).

Understanding the trajectory and evolution of (positive) meanings in food is critical for successful integration of related sustainable practices (Gollnhofer, 2017). In this study, we respond to the calls by Hoffmann et al. (2020) and Smith Maguire et al. (2017) to explore the broader influences on consumer food choices and decision making by linking them to the role of traditional meanings in routine food practices. Specifically, we draw from Shove et al. (2012) and Oleschuk and Maniotes (2023) to conceptualise meaning across three interrelated dimensions rooted in traditional beliefs and values: (1) the affective (i.e. linked to the perceptions of care, roles and responsibilities; emotional responses, taste & pleasure) (Molander & Hartmann, 2018); (2) the symbolic which recognises the cultural and social aspects of food, such as its traditions, and social status (i.e. related to socio-cultural, traditional, temporal and tacit know-how associated with practices) (Carrigan et al., 2023); and (3) the instrumental (i.e. the functional and utilitarian aspects of food encompassing bodily and mental 'doings and sayings' in food practice) (Fiese, 2006). These dimensions allow us to capture the multifaceted nature of food practice realignments and the challenges

consumers face in maintaining or adapting them, echoing Casotti's (2004) observation of tensions between pleasure, aesthetics and health in contemporary lifestyles. Drawing on our empirical data, we highlight how food practices are (re)configured through the interplay of traditional meanings, alternative materials and competencies within everyday practice performances.

Studying change in (food) consumption practices is important not only for their relevance to everyday life, but also for the insights they provide into the relationship between meaning and tradition (Ratcliffe et al., 2019). Building on existing research on how consumers strive to realign practice elements to sustain continuity (Keller & Halkier, 2014; Rokka, 2010; Šimůnková, 2019; Thomas et al., 2019), this study explores the various meanings involved in the coordination of traditional food practices, how these meanings are integrated into routinised food practice performances, and their significance in practice adaptation to contemporary lifestyles. By focusing on the mechanisms of traditional food practice 'reshaping', particularly the social processes of food practice performance, the study contributes to understanding how food practices evolve as entities to restore consumers' sense of ontological security.

## Method

### *Research context*

In emerging economies such as India, the externally induced consumer culture brought about by globalisation poses challenges to traditional values, ideologies and societal structures (Eckhardt & Mahi, 2012). India, often described as 'a land of contrasts where tradition and modernity coexist' (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 281), experiences a juxtaposition of these opposing forces, disrupting the consumption patterns and cultural norms of the new middle-class Indian consumer group. This group, comprising salaried professionals and bureaucrats who are part of the emerging economy, is significantly impacted by the paradoxical processes of globalisation and economic liberalisation (Saavala, 2010). This influence is particularly pronounced in the food context, which is often at the centre of consumer culture tensions (Eckhardt & Mahi, 2012).

Indian food culture is typified by home-cooked food, prepared by the women of the house, primarily vegetarian with herbs and spices believed to enhance energy, digestion and overall health (Ganguly, 2017). These practices are deeply rooted in Ayurveda, a traditional system of medicine native to India. In Ayurveda, regulation of diet is crucial since it classifies the human body as the product of food whilst emphasising how the body can heal by establishing connections with the elements of life and the energetic elements embedded in food (Prakash, 2020; P. Sarkar et al., 2015). Transmitted through generations as socio-cultural norms across all classes and regions of the Indian population (Sen, 2004), these entrenched food conventions consequently underlie attitudes towards food handling and consumption in India (Bruckert, 2015; Kumar et al., 2022). Thus, the concept of food 'purity' extends beyond freshness and health qualities to encompass who cooks the food, how and when it is prepared, consumed, and with whom, providing insights into the social meanings of food consumption, as well as the interpersonal relationships, emotions, statuses and transactions involved. These cultural, emotional and health-related associations foster a strong resistance to change, as many Indians

view their traditional food habits as sacred and resistant to the influences of modernisation.

## Sampling and data collection

We employed an ethnographic approach to uncover the embodied and discursive meanings of routine food practices via multiple data sources including semi-structured in-depth interviews, the researcher's observations and informal conversations during a grocery shopping trip with each participant. Fieldwork was conducted in the cities of Ahmedabad, Indore and Mumbai. Written approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited through social media advertisements, accompanied by a snowballing approach via personal referrals. In total, 31 participants were interviewed after obtaining their informed consent to participate in the study and to publish their anonymised responses. Pseudonyms were used for all participants mentioned in quotes to ensure their anonymity. The participants (30 females, one male) were aged between 29 and 55 years; married with children; well-educated; and they included both stay-at-home homemakers and those in full-time employment. Despite our best efforts in participant recruitment, we acknowledge a significant gender disparity within our sample, which should be considered when interpreting our findings. In the Indian context of food consumption, this discrepancy may largely stem from entrenched socio-cultural norms dictating traditional gender roles, wherein women are predominantly responsible for food-related activities (Das & Mishra, 2021). Additionally, there may be a prevailing perception among Indian men that research topics related to food are more pertinent to women, potentially contributing to lower participation rates among men. Furthermore, our recruitment is predominantly conducted through social media platforms where women are more active, this could inadvertently lead to an over-representation of female sample. Detailed field notes were taken during the grocery shopping trip, and these were followed up in the interview sessions. The in-depth interviews were conducted in both English and Hindi at the participants' homes. During these home visits, the researcher observed the participants as they undertook kitchen activities to prepare tea and a snack or meal to eat together.

The interview focused on the broad, everyday living that would reveal the multiplicity of processes relating to food consumption (Halkier & Jensen, 2011). We employed projective techniques (e.g. sentence completion, word association and choice ordering) to elicit food-related stories. While the in-depth interviews lasted for 60–80 minutes, the total time spent with each participant was 4–6 hours, incorporating the activities such as grocery shopping and informal conversations over tea/snacks and lunch/dinner, as well as meal preparation.

## Analysis process

The interpretation process followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2020), which entailed reading, familiarising, documenting, comparing and systematising the interview data. Codes were initially themed in accordance with practice theory elements (i.e. competence, materiality and meaning) and then further collapsed based on meanings' enduring significance and how they were rediscovered following phases of

disruption. The coders resolved discrepancies through regular code reviews, collaboratively refining interpretations to ensure consistency and accuracy. Trustworthiness was further strengthened through member checks and data triangulation using interview transcripts, observations and reflective notes. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the first author upon reasonable request.

## Findings

Data from interviews and observations indicate the potent influence of cultural and traditional narratives in preserving food practices, highlighting how meanings emerge as the practice (re)configuring element. Conflicts and insecurities arise when food practices become socially contested amid shifting consumer lifestyles. With women joining the workforce, limited time increasingly hinders engagement in traditional food practices which are often time-consuming. Additionally, as tastes change with the influence of modern food products, there is a perceived lack of skill in upholding the traditional role of a carer and food provider. The subsequent themes lay the groundwork for understanding how food practices are traditionally understood and carried out by participants before delving into the mechanisms through which these practices are realigned with their socio-historical and culturally situated meanings as participants strive to reinstate ontological security amidst the forces of modernity.

## Imprints and preprints from tradition

### *The origin of profound & sacred meanings*

Social practices provide scripts that define the sets of materials, competencies and meanings that constitute a given practice (Schatzki, 1996; Shove et al., 2012). As we delve into the complexities embedded within Indian food practices, we find a dominant theme emerging that surrounds the traditional and conventional wisdom that authentic Indian food offers numerous health benefits that Western foods are devoid of. Thus, when referring to their day-to-day meals, participants allude to the superiority embedded within Indian dishes; for example, Babita claimed that, *'Indian thali [the combined serving of roti, daal, subzi, and so on] on a platter is . . . the most balanced [meal] in the whole world, because it has everything in it. If you actually notice, we have carbs, proteins, vitamins. We add curd, which is a probiotic that we were talking about . . . so I think Indian thali, a traditional or a normal [meal] is the best thing in the whole world. Nothing compares to it.'*

The word 'thali' is akin to a tray. It is a traditional system of eating, where a variety of dishes are served in small (one-cup size) bowls called katoris, arranged in a circular tray. The thali has its roots in the six tastes in Ayurveda (sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, astringent) which are viewed as being needed to balance a meal (Saldanha & Krishnaswamy, 2024). This Ayurvedic principle underscores the deep-seated belief in the traditional Indian food system, with the participant's knowledge and understanding of their routine meals serving as a 'preserving discourse' that supports the maintenance of recipes, ingredients and meal constituents within their food practices (Amilien & Hegnes, 2013, p. 3461). Additionally, such embedding of daily routines within the authentic Indian system of eating insulates participants from having to contemplate the perceived health

risks often associated with non-traditional Indian foods and ingredients, such as 'maida' [refined flour], and others more commonly associated with Westernised 'junk' foods.

In this manner, we find participants placing Indian and Western foods, as well as their associated methods of cooking, into realms of virtue and vice based on a cultural ideological framework grounded within Ayurvedic principles that commonly guide food value systems within Indian culture. Thus, Babita further describes how Ayurvedic principles act as her foundational blueprint by stating that there are commonly, *'three types of foods. One gives positive energy – that is sattvic food and tamasic food is there and there are neutral foods also'*. Ayurveda is a stream of knowledge handed down across generations since ancient Vedic times (Dhanya et al., 2019). As a form of social inheritance, it constitutes the foundational backdrop for food-related traditional beliefs and practices (Bevir, 2000). Participants' engagement in everyday food practices guided by Ayurvedic guidelines illustrates how such traditional beliefs and meanings embody continuities of connecting members of society through shared experiences as well as linking the present to the past (Blank & Howard, 2013). As Babita reinforces, within Ayurveda, food is not only responsible for safeguarding physiological well-being but also an individual's temperamental, and mental state (P. Sarkar et al., 2015).

Furthermore, authentic Indian food processing techniques such as confining cooking to only fresh and clean ingredients, maintaining hygiene and only eating food when warm are believed to eliminate nutritionally deficient factors from food under Ayurvedic guidelines (P. Sarkar et al., 2015). Thus, to ensure food remained aligned with Ayurvedic guidelines, participants such as Priya made certain that food is always cooked at home, fresh and from scratch. As she explains, *'everything is from scratch ... it's all cooked fresh. I don't eat in the evening something that is cooked in the morning; I don't touch it. Even if I have to throw it [away], I throw it [away], I don't care'*. Despite the time constraints imposed by these preparation practices, the profound significance of Ayurvedic tradition is deeply embedded within participants' practical consciousness. Therefore, the considerable time pressures associated with carrying out such practices were considered an inherent aspect of their routines, not worthy of any extra attention or questioning, as Babita nonchalantly explains, *'Mostly whatever we are cooking is Indian food, and that we prepare from scratch ... like we buy wheat, grind [it] into flour, and from that, roti is prepared on a daily basis. Everything is from scratch only'*.

Evidently, participants' 'sayings' about mealtimes follow an 'ought to be like this' pattern that portrays the normative nature of preparing food in accordance with these traditional ideological frameworks. Such frameworks have deep socio-historical roots, for example, participant Nirmal describes how their food-related practices follow those of her mother and mother-in-law and what was practised by earlier generations, *'I hardly buy anything from outside. I make most of the things at home. I have learned the same thing from my mother's place, that healthier things are made at home'*. Being socialised into these deep-seated beliefs demonstrates how traditional food practices come to form an integral aspect of the participants' habitus (Bourdieu, 2010). Consequently, participants articulate the instrumental significance of these beliefs, emphasising their need to safeguard such sacred meanings by strictly adhering to traditional recipes, and other meal components used in traditional food practices (Amilien & Hegnes, 2013). Instead of viewing normative conventions as a burden, Vaishali expresses how such principles are simply inherent elements of the customary routine in India, meant to be embraced and enjoyed,

*'Actually, we like to have it . . . we have been eating the same style of meal since we were kids. Actually, it can be said that it is our staple food. Daal, roti, subzi, salad, sometimes there is curd also . . . lunch is always proper'.* These findings indicate how dietary practices and food culture are intricately woven into the fabric of everyday routines through the intergenerational transmission of cultural beliefs regarding food (Prakash, 2020).

### **The social reinforcement of meanings**

Just as skills and habits are passed down intergenerationally as forms of cultural wisdom (Weinberger et al., 2017), we find socially reproduced traditional meanings embedded within Indian food practices being reinforced by the familial and social structures surrounding participants. Notably, women rarely see food as a mere commodity, isolated from broader domestic and social circumstances. Rather, they tend to view it historically as a meal shaped by the specific needs and preferences of their family. This integrated view underscores a deeply rooted cultural understanding in which Indian women constantly concern themselves with practices of cooking, eating and feeding. Most are actively engaged in food processing, meal planning, cooking and daily nourishment (Khare, 2011; Mish, 2007). It was commonly observed that female participants assumed the emotional responsibility of protecting the physical health of all family members and felt socially obligated to do so by adhering to the regimented Ayurvedic traditions inscribed in food practices. As illustrated by Kritu in her account, the expectations she places on herself are further reinforced by members of her family, *'He [husband] needs everything in place . . . daal, two subzi dishes, then some pickle and papad [poppadums] and everything he needs. So that is his proper dinner. Since once a day he eats at home, he needs to eat properly. Even my father-in-law needs a proper dinner'.* In this manner, most participants held onto ideologies that aligned with their traditional gender roles and explained with great pride the efforts they undertake to ensure their families are supplied with authentic Indian meals. Cultural values, beliefs and understanding of role responsibilities are also traditionally passed down through generations. In Indian culture, the traditional ideal of motherhood is reinforced in several ways, for instance, through the nurturing mother-goddess 'ghar ki laxmi' (or Annapurna) in Hindu religion that glorifies and deifies the self-sacrificing mother dedicated to the hearth and home (S. Sarkar, 2020). Fulfilling such moral duties, as mothers, often triggered social validation, evoking a sense of pride and fulfilment, as Nirmal explains, *'As the woman of the house, I feel very happy if I get something and cook it and I am appreciated. I feel like I have won a medal . . . and no one [else] will cook it with love like I do'.* Evidently, food practices can become 'sticky' in the sense that traditionally symbolic and affective meanings accumulate additional layers of significance as they transform into sources of social expectation and validation.

As social control is achieved and maintained by the legitimacy and authority of a social entity, we find explicit forms of social sanctioning from educational and medical institutions that are placed in high positions of trust as effective reinforcers who ensure food-oriented practices remain aligned with Ayurvedic Indian tradition (Young et al., 2021). Thus, Anita explains how Westernised foods are often demonised by local schooling institutions, and banned from entering school grounds, *'At school it is compulsory to get roti and subzi. You cannot bring anything else. Even ketchup they will not allow'.* In light of the considerable trust and

authority vested in such institutions, which govern the behaviours of not only school children but also their parents, the prospect of potential social humiliation in the event of deviating from the status-quo evokes feelings of apprehension among participants, as Nirmal explains, *'If he [her son] is not well and I give him bread-butter in the tiffin, they will immediately send you a notice. Even they prefer that you send healthy food for them'*. In discussions concerning these regulations, participants do not adopt a tone of complaint. Rather, they regard the strict and regimented guidelines set forth by their surrounding social institutions as sources of pride and affirmation, understanding such policies in the context of having their best interests at heart.

The scrutiny provided by legitimate institutions creates a flow-on effect, wherein food practices also become a subject for the social scrutiny of others. Therefore, participants fear being 'caught' breaching practice normativity by others, which would result in becoming the next social pariah. Unnati notes how polarising such deviations can be among her social community when relaying the conversations she had with her domestic help who often gossips about her other clients violating food norms. Implicitly, these discussions convey to our participants that individuals and social entities are observant, implying that adherence to traditional food practices is necessary to evade becoming the subject of humiliation or social scrutiny. Yet viewed through a more positive lens, these distinct methods of socially reinforcing practices also emphasise the coming together of households and surrounding institutions to form 'communities of practice' that enable the integration and reintegration through shared meaning and understandings.

## **Bridging worlds, bridging practice**

### ***When worlds collide***

With the emergence of global consumer culture and the rise in the cost of living, middle-class households in India have never felt the need for two incomes in order to acquire their class position (Nair & Hofman, 2022). Legislative changes have restructured the Indian society creating new roles and identities for women (Shenoy-Packer, 2014). When discussing the day-to-day maintenance of traditional food practices, it is therefore evident that managing food routines in conjunction with current and busy lifestyles brings challenges of time, skills and effort to the fore. Whilst many participants complain about the lack of time because of their busier lifestyles, for others like Manisha, further conflict arises due to a lack of cooking skills that barricade her from keeping up with her family's evolving food choices, as she says, *'My elder daughter is crazy about cooking. She tells me to try new stuff'*. Manisha uses the term 'new stuff' to talk about foods that are not part of traditional Indian cuisine but are very readily available outside the home (Kumar et al., 2022). This growing exposure to a large variety of global cuisines outside of traditional practices is a point of contention for participants as Ratan claims that, *'there is a lot of variety outside [the home]. There is a lot of stress at home to cope with home-made food. It is boring for children'*. Consequently, participants are torn between their role-related responsibilities of providing healthy 'proper' and traditional Indian food and accommodating the family and their choices. We find that their inability to prepare foods that are to the liking of the family disrupts their felt emotional obligation to fulfil

their idyllic motherhood roles, breeding a level of ontological insecurity (Shenoy-Packer, 2014).

As participants navigate the tumultuous terrain between modernistic and ingrained ways of acting, we find them engaging in dualistic approaches for coping. That is, participants hybridise their practices in alignment with the various social demands and obligations placed upon them from within and outside the home. Everyday food practices are therefore realigned via shifting practice integrating elements. As we expand on these mechanisms of practice reintegration in the following sections, we foreground how such practices are hybridised as a result of participants striving to strike a balance between maintaining culturally derived instrumental, symbolic and affective meanings whilst adapting to their new lifestyles but in a way that preserves tradition, and their sense of self and security.

### ***Me & the domestic help: outsourcing competencies***

Participants cope with increasing time constraints by hiring a domestic help or maharaj (male cook) to cook food in the 'appropriate' manner and in accordance with tradition. By delegating monotonous and time-consuming tasks to the domestic help, such as cutting, chopping and the preliminary preparation of food, this allowed participants to maintain their traditional roles as women who care, feed and safeguard the health of their families and find some semblance of harmony without compromising any further devotion of their time. Priya explains, *'Earlier, I would try and do everything, like any other woman, but finally ... I realised there is no point spending your energy [on] mundane things, which can be outsourced. As long as I know what nutrients are going [into the meal] I [can] control that'*.

Priya's reference to control underscores that involving a domestic help in the performance of food provisioning was not digressing from traditional prescriptions, as having help allowed her to continue engaging with meanings of providing a nutritious, home-cooked, fresh meal while handing over to the domestic help the uncreative tasks, such as cutting, chopping and cleaning. This shows the alignment of food practices with competency as a shared element in which interactions with the domestic help are meticulously crafted so that know-how and control remain square within the participant's domain. In this fashion, they are quick to establish a hierarchal dynamic with employed domestic help, delivering clear directives and closely supervising their tasks to ensure the standards match those they would maintain if it were them personally executing the domestic responsibilities, as Ruchi explains, *'[My mother-in-law and I] ensure that everything is ready before he [the cook] comes. For example, raw daal, if we have to soak it, I ensure that it was and clean it twice and then finally give it to the cook. He [might] not wash [it], so ... I make sure that two or three rounds of washing have been done by me. When we give it to him it is ensured that there are no pests or anything else ... We make it a point to keep [the] oil he will require for the day's cooking in a separate container. Otherwise, he tends to get liberal. It is not possible to watch him the whole day ... we have to keep an eye on him in terms of controlling the oil or salt'*. Evidently, through this method of quality assurance and meticulous oversight of domestic help, participants are grappling with relinquishing their deeply ingrained domestic responsibilities that are integral to their sense of role-

responsibility. However, by tightly controlling these tasks, participants maintain their sense of involvement and adherence to expected norms, without fully re-engaging with the practice and sacrificing the time required to do so. This shows how alternate competencies are engaged in reintegrating practices and further how symbolic meanings of engaging in food preparation are fluid and interchangeable with instrumental meanings.

In one-on-one discussions, participants let their guard down and spoke more freely about their level of dependency on their domestic workers. Participants understood that, if their domestic help were to become unavailable, they would be faced once again with the near-impossible task of maintaining traditional food practices under their time constraints. Rohini explains, '*We have been able to stay with a lot of traditional method[s] of cooking only because of Kishan [the cook], and I know that if he is not here, I would never be able to cook that traditionally*'. A sentiment shared by Ruchi who explains her dread on the days her cook is absent, '*All I have to do is plan the dishes to be cooked as per everyone's taste. If our cook is on leave, those days are a nightmare*'.

The dual pressures of responsibility and demands at home and work contest the performance of traditional food practices. The realignment of practices via such outsourced skills and competencies via the domestic help enables participants to retain traditional symbolic meanings in food practices. This analysis resonates with Rangwala et al. (2020), who note that by ensuring they do not delegate all the cooking-related tasks and decisions to domestic help, participants are able to achieve a hybrid practice which is both aligned with their traditional meanings and enables navigating contemporary (modern) lifestyles.

In creating such hybrid practices, we find instances where participants trespass on some traditional meanings, as Rumi explains, '*My cook comes around 9 p.m. So, roti, and sabzi are prepared the night [before]. We eat them fresh then and I pack it in the morning. I am saying the fact. I could have lied to you but I don't want to*'. Rumi's statement about not wanting to lie to the researcher about packing a lunch prepared the night before, and thus breaking traditional norm that dictates food ought to only be eaten fresh always, further underscores an interesting point of contention as to how these practices are negotiated at times (in this instance at lunch times) for women caught between the demands of work, available resources, and traditional meanings. As participants pursue the restoration of their ontological security, we observe how these practices are hybridised. Their relationships with domestic help oscillate between tight control and complete dependence, so much so that the domestic help transforms into a critical practice element, without whom the (re)integration of food practices may not be possible.

### **Renegotiating materials**

Whilst participants readily expressed clear disapproval of ready-to-eat pre-packaged and processed foods in accordance with Ayurvedic principles, paradoxically they also acknowledged the practicality of ready-to-cook types of food products in preserving authentic traditions, particularly when facing time constraints. Thus, the occasional use of pre-packaged, ready-to-cook types of products acted like a support system, mobilised in times of need when schedules left no room for provisioning food from scratch, as Vaishali further explains, '*If we make a burger at home, we buy the bun from the market, but*

*otherwise it is homemade. We know what ingredient[s] can be used for it [so] it is totally up to us'.*

Traditional ideals are enacted in more than one practice, so we find consumers compromising them in some practices (Holttinen, 2014). In these situations, we observe a trade-off occurring whereby participants are able to partially separate from their traditional beliefs, thereby compartmentalising their concerns for health and wellbeing, by using pre-packaged foods as materials that enable them to maintain the affective meanings attached to food provisioning for their families. For example, the use of ready-to-cook ingredients helped participants to meet the new demands placed on them by children who wanted to expand their palette beyond traditional Indian cuisine. Thus, when attempting to meet their children's modern food preferences, many participants bought specific ready-to-use food products such as sauces and chutneys for making Chinese or Italian dishes because they lacked the skills for preparing those foods, as Rani explains, *'I boil and mix read-made sauce. I don't have much knowledge on making pasta'*. In this sense, we find contestations between the traditional norms to prepare fresh food from scratch and those of the mothers' responsibilities which validate their sense of belonging and self by serving food that aligns or exceeds familial expectations. Here, we observe the reintegration of practice via the occasional inclusion of pre-packaged food materials that are culturally frowned upon as indicative of affective meanings being upheld.

When discussing these adapted practices openly with the researcher, participants were quick to highlight the rarity of these occasions, as if harbouring concerns of facing social disapproval from a social other. Thus, participants framed these instances as merely a backup strategy only ever used when the pressures of work, children and other demands left little time for participation in traditional practices. For example, Preeto, a busy schoolteacher blames her hectic schedule for her pre-prepared snack foods as she states, *'If I wake up late, I store khakhra [spicy, crispy, dried, flatbread]. I purchase it. Earlier, I used to make it at home, but now with this hectic schedule, I do not find any spare time.* In a similar vein, Rani blames the demands placed on her time by saying, *'Sometimes when the kids say they want idli [fermented rice cakes] the next day and it is [too] late to prepare [them], then we purchase ready-made batter'*. These quotes illustrate that when openly questioned about their usage of pre-packaged foods, participants felt the need to defend their choices to the researcher in order to somehow convey that the use of these foods remain unaligned with their usual practices in the kitchen, as Minu further explains, *'It is a rare case when I cook pasta or [burgers, pizza, and noodles] . . . it is healthy to eat less of these'*. For others, there was a need to direct the researcher's attention towards meaningful aspects of practice that were maintained despite breaching traditional guidelines. For example, some insisted that the use of such products did not interfere with their core responsibilities, such as ensuring that children acquire optimal health from their food provisioning, as Preeto explains, *'It will not affect [the children] health-wise . . . because it is hot. Anything hot is not going to affect [them]. Anything cold will help in putting on weight'*. For others, the necessity was directed towards the notion that, at the very least, the mother continued to be involved in cooking the food and remained invested in its preparation, as Unati explains, *'It is easier, but I don't feel it is healthy for my children to eat it. As you know, if you add salt to a dish with your own hands . . . the taste is always better; it is said that the taste of your touch is transferred to the dish. These are the small things that*

*matter*'. In each case, we observe that participants fear social sanctioning in terms of social disapproval when openly discussing their use of pre-packaged and convenience food that go against traditional beliefs and norms. Consequently, we categorise the utilisation of pre-packaged food products as a negotiation strategy employed by participants to uphold symbolic meanings and reaffirm their roles as mothers and remain engaged in the food preparation. Given the significance of this aspect to their ontological security, participants find it relatively easy to rationalise these deviations both to themselves and to the researcher to keep up appearances. This illustrates how collective conventions and customs, such as the deep connection between food practices and maternal responsibility, and consequently, ontological security, play a compelling role in constructing and adjusting routines so that individuals remain secure within the shared frameworks that help define their social existence (Croft, 2012). Overall, re-negotiating food practices to cope with the clash between tradition and modernity by using the domestic worker and through the help of pre-packaged food products reveal how the different symbolic, affective and instrumental meanings shift and intersect with the materials and competencies involved in food conduct thus forming distinct and hybridised practices surrounding food.

Taken together, Figure 1 graphically depicts the aforementioned findings and outlines how modernity forces a detachment from the socio-historical and traditional meanings embedded within traditional food practices, thus spurring a profound sense of ontological insecurity. The outer boundary of Figure 1 depicts the primary negotiation strategies utilised by participants as they attempt to cope with emerging constraints by employing domestic help and using pre-packaged foods as a way of coping with the detachment of meaning tied to their traditional food practices. However, the findings suggest that additional negotiation strategies are further embedded within these emerging food practices, as participants seek to 'Control the Helper' and 'Maintain Appearances' when discussing their use of pre-packaged foods as a means of restoring their ontological security. As these mechanisms interplay and intertwine, ontological security is reinstated as participants find themselves adapting to new hybridised practices and performances. These findings highlight the dynamic and adaptive nature of food practices, setting the

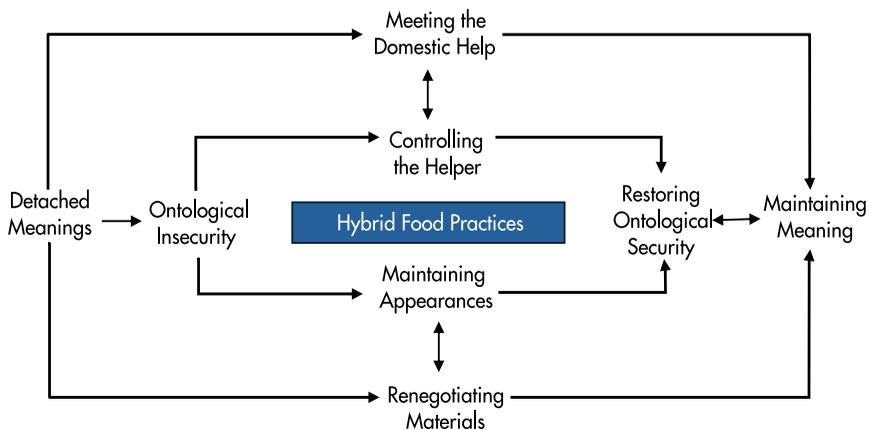


Figure 1. Graphic depiction of analysis and findings.

stage for a deeper discussion on how these new hybridised strategies not only reshape traditional meanings, but also carry broader implications for marketing strategies in evolving into the contemporary needs of the consumers.

## Discussion and implications

Through a practice-based exploration, this study contributes to the understanding of how routine food practices are negotiated, navigated and hybridised as societies modernise and global influences challenge traditional ways of engagement in food. First, our findings enrich practice-theoretical research by showing how consumers actively work to protect traditional meanings within their food practices. While previous studies have shown that meanings pose as barriers to practice adaptation (Evans et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021; Venugopal et al., 2019), and others have explored how meanings can be reorganised (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017; Porter et al., 2023), our study extends by demonstrating how practices are realigned through the preservation of various symbolic, affective and instrumental meanings. Thus, we build on existing studies that identify meanings as a practice constituting element (Epp et al., 2014; Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021; Phipps & Ozanne, 2017; Shove et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2019) by demonstrating how traditional meanings are upheld through subtle reinterpretations that orchestrate the elements of materiality and competence in carrying out food practices (Hand & Shove, 2004; Magaudda, 2011). For example, participants involve domestic help in food preparation but retain responsibility for decisions and key tasks, preserving the symbolic and affective meanings of care and duty. Similarly, the creative appropriation of food materials (such as buns and sauces) instead of preparing meals entirely from scratch enables continued engagement with traditional norms of home-cooked meals. These examples illustrate how individuals juggle alternative materials and competencies in striving to preserve traditionally embodied and shared meanings in their food practices.

Second, inspired by the works of Keller and Halkier (2014), Rokka (2010) and Šimůnková (2019), our findings contribute theoretical insights into the hybridisation of food practices, which occurs when contemporary lifestyles contest traditions. As consumers simultaneously integrate traditional meanings with modern materials and conveniences, hybrid practices emerge that shed light on the evolving relationship between tradition and modernity. This process of hybridisation is crucial as the continuity of practice hinges on the perceived success or failure of new actions undertaken (Gouveia & Ayrosa, 2020; Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). By uncovering the mechanisms of food practice hybridisations, this study extends the work of Moisio et al. (2004), who suggest that failure to maintain food traditions because of busy lifestyles and the demands of contemporary lifestyles often results in feelings of mild guilt. For our participants, the integration of alternative materials and competencies into their food practice represents ontological security as it supports the continuation of routines while upholding traditional guidelines around food practice. While routinisation of practices is central to ontological security (Thomas et al., 2019), our research reveals that hybridisation of food practices, though it may involve a deviation from traditional norms, can still help restore ontological security. The various modes of practice performances using alternative materials and competencies reflect an ontological need to hold on to the practice, or at least some semblance of it, that retains the core traditional meanings associated with food practices. Such practice hybridisations

empowered participants to maintain their traditional role-related values around cooking meals tailored to their family's preferences, thereby providing them with a sense of validation. This shows how practice realignments in specific ways empower individuals to manage challenged routines driven in response to shifting in socio-cultural dynamics, particularly among new middle-class consumers in India.

To this end, this study contributes to practice-based scholarship by showing how consumers negotiate tradition and modernity in their everyday food practices, offering insights into how these seemingly opposing forces can be reconciled within the context of culturally evolving consumer societies. Rather than treating tradition as static, our findings support a view of tradition as a dynamic, living entity, actively reshaped through the interplay of meaning, materiality and competence in practice. Through rich empirical insights into everyday food routines, we illuminate how consumers maintain continuity with traditional beliefs and values while also adapting to changing socio-cultural conditions. The identified themes of 'Origin of Profound and Sacred Meanings' and 'The Social Reinforcement of Meanings' illustrate the participants' 'sayings' about embodied traditional beliefs, values and Ayurvedic guidelines in food practices. Further, the themes of 'When Worlds Collide, "Me & the Domestic Helper"' and "Renegotiating Materials", illustrate the "doings" inscribed in participants' food practices. In the former themes, we see how food practice as an 'entity' continues to exist in its traditional form, while the latter themes are reflective of the hybridised food practice 'performances' that enable participants to preserve traditional meanings. In doing so, this study advances our understanding of how traditional practices persist and evolve through embodied performances in contemporary contexts.

Our findings also offer actionable insights for marketers and policymakers. As consumers find ways to navigate engagement with traditional food practices while meeting the demands of modern life, implications emerge for both marketplace dynamics and marketing strategy at the market and marketing levels (Canavan, 2023). The Indian food market has seen the growing influx of Western, European and East Asian cuisines, such as Chinese noodles and Italian pasta and pizza, which have become increasingly popular, especially among younger generations. The finding that traditional food guidelines for preparing food at home continue to hold meaning has important implications for the food industry, especially in expanding the market for ready-to-cook food products that enable hybridisation of practices and mitigate challenges of consumption. Further, our findings reveal an implied relationship between the use of convenience food and feelings of guilt, a diminished sense of maternal responsibility, and social judgement or neglect, all of which warrant further investigation.

Furthermore, the findings also reveal that the protection of traditional food practices is both an individual effort and one supported by broader social systems and institutions. The involvement of schools in reinforcing these core meanings indicates that institutional and policy-level investments are being made to preserve traditional cultural and societal values. Understanding the role of meaning in food practices is therefore critical to understand how some traditions are conserved (S. Bronner, 2013) and to ensure the ongoing integration and continuity of these practices (Gollnhofer, 2017).

Traditional foods routinely prepared in households when also available as processed packaged ready-to-eat meals are also not materials of choice. We highlight this important issue for food manufacturers and marketers who need to emphasise the traditional

attractiveness of the food, taste and the health benefits that can be associated with convenience (Hoffman et al., 2020; Smith Maguire et al., 2017). Equipped with this insight, brands can be positioned to confer socially validated solutions that align with the dual aspirations of modernity and tradition (Roy, 2018). Products and services that are capable of addressing the nuances of consumer preferences and cultural values have been identified as marketing opportunities (Champniss et al., 2015).

## Conclusions

Through an in-depth exploration of the mechanisms of food practice adaptation, this study illuminates the dynamic processes embedded within food practice hybridisation while revealing how consumers actively reconfigure traditions, integrating alternative elements to preserve affective, symbolic and instrumental meanings in the face of modern influence. This interplay reflects a fundamental human drive to maintain ontological security amidst modern lifestyle changes. This nuanced understanding of cultural negotiation offers crucial insights into the evolving landscape of everyday food practices. Our study provides strategic guidance for marketing professionals, highlighting the importance of understanding the endurance of traditions and the resulting hybridisation which emerges as a result of consumers' attempt to negotiate this complex interplay. Everyday food practices in Indian middle-class households is fast evolving. Thus, we suggest that future studies move beyond the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity and instead explore how consumers strive for an optimal balance between these opposing forces – a concept we further examine in the subsequent section.

## Limitations and future research

Although this research contributes to the understanding of routine food practices in the context of changing contemporary lifestyles, it has several limitations. Notably, the gender disparity in our sample may limit the interpretation of our findings. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the findings require further investigation in a quantitative manner to be generalisable. Factors such as demographic variables, shopping frequency and quantity may be incorporated in a quantitative study to understand the impact they might have on consumers' food and coping practices. Such studies can further develop more comprehensive consumer profiles built on the types of food consumption practices.

Future scholarship could shed light on the factors and forces contributing to the marketisation of routinised consumer practices (Howes et al., 2024). For example, future research could also explore the intergenerational transmission of food practices and meanings within families to gain insight into the dynamics of cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of societal changes. Scholars could conduct a longitudinal study to examine how exposure to modern food environments (e.g. social media influences) influences their appreciation of traditional food practices and how cultural meanings are reinforced or renegotiated over time. These research topics would deepen our understanding of consumer resilience in food practices but also inform strategies for preserving cultural heritage in an increasingly globalised world. Furthermore, future research may adopt a similar methodological framework to examine the diverse hybridisation strategies that emerge in various geographical contexts that uphold deep-rooted cultural traditions,

such as Japan's integration of convenience foods with Washoku cuisine or Italy's adaptation of fast food alongside its rich culinary heritage. Such investigations would enhance our understanding of the ways consumers navigate and preserve tradition across cultural contexts in the face of modernising influences.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Ethical statement

Ethical approval for the involvement of human subjects in this study was granted by Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTC), Approval number:17/329.

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