Aggregating and Toggling:

how people use platforms to do care, consumption, and convenience

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Walk on air against your better judgement

Seamus Heaney

Abstract

This thesis examines the case of two India-based food delivery platforms, Swiggy and Zomato and their users, to answer two main research questions about how people use digital platforms to do care, consumption, and convenience. The first question is about the *aggregation* of users and activities by digital platforms individually and collectively. The second question is about people's experiences as platform users *toggling* between livelihood, consumption, and care as they buy and sell food.

Swiggy and Zomato's aggregation through promotions is analysed here using digital ethnographic methods. The first two empirical chapters analyse how food delivery platforms emerge as cultural agents in India's media and entertainment industries, not just as employers of gig workers. The first chapter focuses on how platforms use their app interfaces and push notifications. The second chapter scrutinises branding practices on platforms' official social media handles on Instagram and Twitter.

The three remaining chapters analyse how platform users toggle i.e. *switch between* livelihood activities, care, and consumption *and hold together* demands from these through in-person, qualitative, and ethnographic methods in Mumbai, India. The third chapter examines how users contend with platforms via fleeting moments of encounter between consumers and businesses' listings on Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces. The fourth and fifth chapters explore practices and infrastructures of making meals and routines that are at the edges of platforms but have a bearing on how users analyse their own platform use.

This thesis analyses food delivery platforms as cultural agents and examines their understudied user-cultures across individual, household, business, and industry levels. It challenges dominant scholarly conceptions of platformized convenience by attending to users' attachments and dissatisfactions with it. The implications of these analyses go much further beyond the specific platforms that I study, because I analyse wider processes of aggregation and toggling.

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In a world of generalised difficulty due to metabolic illness, inequality, injustice, what seems like permanent failure of governments, institutions, and our own faltering health and feelings, I am forever grateful to have met these patron saints of my madness and to have known peoples' tenacity, brilliance, and creativity.

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1. Overview

In India, food delivery platforms Swiggy and Zomato form a duopoly and host nearly 301,000 food businesses[1] and 35 million and 55 million daily active users respectively[2].

The title of this thesis pegs this inquiry at the *level of two processes of socio-technical change*, not solely on the case of Swiggy and Zomato or their millions of users. The *first process* that is examined in this thesis is that of '*aggregation'* or how digital platforms cooperate, compete, and converge with other socio-technical systems to aggregate users and various activities. The *second process* under examination is that of '*toggling'* or how platform users switch between and hold

[1] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/startups/swiggys-food-delivery-revenue-grew-56-from-april-to-sept-prosus-says/articleshow/87847157.cms?from=mdr. Accessed January 15, 2023.
[2] https://www.businessinsider.in/business/news/-food-delivery-real-estate-travel-high-fashion-apps-looking-healthy-user-metrics-in-march-2023/articleshow/99778417.cms. Accessed January 15, 2023.

together experiences in consumption, livelihood, care, and leisure across different apps on their digital devices.

Most platform scholars choose to focus deeply on a specific platform whereas I widen and broaden scholarly focus onto seemingly woolly processes of socio-technical change. How can this approach be justified? 'Platform' is a term used to refer to a range of digital intermediaries[3] like social media platforms, crowd work platforms, ride-hailing platforms, food delivery platforms, e-commerce platforms etc. However, prefixes for platforms like 'food delivery' can obscure the empirical reality of how platforms widen and broaden the list of activities that they aggregate and mediate. Let me illustrate what I mean by platforms' widening and broadening of aggregation with an example.

Both platforms Swiggy and Zomato seem to be doing *everything, everywhere, all at once*: food delivery; quick commerce deliveries of everything ranging from air conditioners, coolers, cosmetics, and household supplies; ticketing services[4]; table booking services[5]; restaurant management software[6]; among other things. In the internet culture inspired film[7] titled *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), characters including the protagonist — an Asian American woman and an owner of a laundromat — jumped universes and switched between social roles, professions, and languages. Platforms like Swiggy and Zomato jump universes as they widen and broaden their

[3] See Gillespie, Tarleton (2010) for an exposition and critique of using 'platform,' a term emic to the tech industry.
[4] https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/companies/zomato-completes-acquisition-of-paytms-entertainment-ticketing-business-12808696.html. Accessed March 2025.
[5] https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/startup/swiggy-buys-times-internets-restaurant-tech-platform-dineout-8502561.html. Accessed March 2025.
[6] https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/urbanpiper-funding-swiggy-zomato-saas-company-7874677/. Accessed March 2025.
[7] The director duo referred to as 'the Daniels', started their filmmaking career by making YouTube videos and hired many technicians on their film based on discovering them via social media. See: https://www.fastcompany.com/90738552/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-multiverse-internet. Accessed March 2025.

mediation of functions beyond food delivery. In February 2025, Zomato signaled their ever-evolving nature as an organization by changing their name to 'Eternal'[8].

The socio-technical processes analysed through the case of Swiggy and Zomato can be relevant to understand other platforms in India and abroad. Similar to my observation about Swiggy and Zomato doing everything, everywhere, all at once, journalists have noted how ride-hailing platform Ola in India[9] operates similarly. Outside India and beyond the two platforms that I study in this thesis, Google made room for itself to be more than just a search engine by naming its parent company 'Alphabet'[10]. Similarly, Facebook became 'Meta' to communicate that they had plans for themselves beyond their existence as a social media platform[11]. All three moves to rename Zomato, Google, and Facebook enabled each of these platforms to be more than the prefixes of 'food delivery,' 'search engine', or 'social media' associated with each of them.

To examine the expanse of activities aggregated listed above, scholars have identified what platforms do to our lives as workers, consumers, and businesses, at an institutional level (markets, governance, and infrastructure) and everyday level as the process of 'platformization' (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019). Despite this definition of platformization being multi-scalar (institutional and everyday), existing studies about platforms do not sufficiently capture how platforms, and by extension, their users, jump universes and move across prefixes like 'food delivery,' 'instant commerce,' and 'social media.' Scholarly focus needs to mimic both platforms'

[8] www.eternal.com/letter.pdf. Accessed March 2025.
[9] https://the-ken.com/podcasts/the-nutgraf/everything-everywhere-ola-at-once/?utm_source=weekly_email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=weekly_recap_card. Accessed March 2025.
[10] https://www.vox.com/2015/8/10/9128375/why-google-is-renaming-itself-alphabet. Accessed March 2025.
[11] https://www.newscientist.com/article/2295438-why-has-facebook-changed-its-name-to-meta-and-what-is-the-metaverse/. Accessed March 2025.

and people's movements by being rhizomatic, wide, broad, and navigational, if we are to realistically examine the relationship between platforms and people.

A moving scholarly focus also enables examining a convergence of socio-technical systems like open network systems, blockchain, artificial intelligence (AI), bitcoins etc that are often bundled with platforms in practice (De Seta, Pohjonen, and Knuutila 2024). Even though the systems listed above are distinct from platforms, Swiggy uses generative artificial intelligence (AI) in their search functions on their app[12] and Zomato offered bitcoins as a gift for in-app games. Further, the Indian state's interoperable systems (systems that exchange information) referred to as digital public infrastructures (DPIs)[13] are an integral part of this convergence of socio-technical systems described above. United Payments Interface (UPI) is one example of an open network system. UPI allows users to make and receive payments in a platform agnostic way, meaning that users can transact with each other irrespective of which payments platform they have downloaded on their devices[14]. More recently, the state has also begun to use open network systems to challenge platform dominance by setting up an e-commerce network called the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC)[15] (2021) and a cooperative taxi service (2025)[16].

[12] https://bytes.swiggy.com/swiggys-generative-ai-journey-a-peek-into-the-future-2193c7166d9a. Accessed March 2025.
[13] Scholars and civil society critique 'public' in DPI. See: https://www.internetgovernance.org/research/india-stack-public-private-roads-to-data-sovereignty/. Accessed January 2024.
[14] The UPI plug-in (2022) enabled payments on Swiggy and Zomato has meant that users can now finish transacting without having to leave Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces to complete their payments. See: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/technology/tech-news/after-zomato-swiggy-launches-upi-services-what-it-means-for-users/articleshow/111493771.cms#:~:text=What%20is%20UPI%20plugin%20and,TPAP%20license%20(previously%20required). Accessed March 2025.
[15] The Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) (2021) attempts to become the UPI of e-commerce by offering a platform agnostic experience of buying and selling online. See: https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/explained-what-is-the-open-network-for-digital-commerce/article66878581.ece. Accessed March 2025.
[16] To challenge the dominance of ride-hailing platforms Ola and Uber, in March 2025, the Union Home Minister announced a cooperative taxi company. See: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-to-launch-ola-uber-like-sahkar-taxi-service-amit-shah-announces-in-parliament/article69384921.ece. Accessed March 2025.

The aggregation of a wide and broad range of activities means that common users are afforded convenience: at the tap and/or the swipe of a finger, users can toggle across livelihood, consumption, leisure, and care activities that these socio-technical systems straddle. People use platforms in *consumption* of services, goods, experiences, content; to perform *livelihood activities* be it those of content creation, selling, renting, replying to emails at work, video conferencing; as well as *engaging in leisure and care* by swiping on dating apps to find partners, texting friends, watching web series, and attending to family members remotely. Examining how users of Swiggy and Zomato toggle means that I will analyse how activities that surround users buying and selling food have a bearing on users' experiences and interactions online. Surrounding purchasing and selling food online, users *switch between* activities like making a livelihood, consuming, finding leisure, and caring for themselves, their families, the future of their businesses, and *hold together* demands from these activities. Given this universe of actions and arrangements at hand, how do users assess the platformized convenience of buying and selling at their fingertips?

The rest of this introduction will first briefly review literature from the fragmented and multi-disciplinary field of platform studies to define platforms, platformization, and what this process has meant for users' practices of care, consumption, and convenience. Further, the research questions that guide this inquiry will be listed. After which, I will briefly note the contributions that my research seeks to make to this field and its understanding of convenience. Next, the methods used to answer these questions, the methodology, and rationale for selecting the sites and sampling of interlocutors are explained. Finally, a chapter plan will map out how the chapters answer the research questions by using various research methods.

2. Brief review of platform studies literature

'Platform' is a term used to refer to a range of digital intermediaries[17] like social media, crowd work, ride-hailing, food delivery, task completion, e-commerce and so on. As a process, 'platformization' refers to what platforms do to our lives as workers, consumers, and businesses, at an institutional (markets, governance, and infrastructures) and everyday level (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019).

Economic sociologists Caliskan, Callon, and Mackenzie (2024) see this multi-scalar process of platformization as "stacked economization". Economization is at once an empirical and analytical process of making people and things 'economic,' and marketisation is one form of it (Çalışkan and Callon 2009). In their view, platforms' novelty lies in how they stack or "amalgamate and layer diverse and pre-existing economization modes" (pg. 3) including market exchanges and non-market activities of barter, promotions, and so on (Caliskan, MacKenzie, and Callon 2024). In platforms' stacking of old and new, formal and informal markets are both involved. Media scholar Akshaya Kumar's work on the platformization of the regional Bhojpuri music industry shows how platforms like YouTube try to formalize the vernacular music industry. Kumar argues that platforms' digitization hinges on this industry's own routes of consumption and distribution through audio cassettes, DVDs, VCDs, microSD cards, and live concerts (Kumar 2019). How are these macro changes at the level of the economic-political order of industries experienced by individual users?

Users' experience and interaction have been studied through critical accounts of the power of platforms' branding efforts to create a culture of convenience (Huberman 2021; West 2022). This

[17] See Gillespie, Tarleton (2010) for an exposition and critique of using 'platform,' a term emic to the tech industry.

culture rests on virtual shopfronts, dark stores, and cloud kitchens that consumers never physically encounter (Shapiro 2022). Even though platforms have created dependencies among workers, businesses, and consumers (van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma 2021), most literature on consumers assumes that they succumb to the culture of ease and convenience. Consumers are imagined as being unconscious about the labour and ecological impact (Hill 2020). This has meant that most of the very limited literature on consumers inherits this framing of consumers being seekers of convenience and has studied their impact on workers —are consumers resisting or reinforcing precarious work (Healy, Pekarek, and Vromen 2020)? Additionally, consumers are cast as managers who rate and review services provided by platform workers on behalf of platforms that are understood to have "socially and morally elevated consumers" (Stark and Levy 2018).

Two considerations are missing from the accounts above about platforms' power to offer convenience and shape user experience and interaction. The f*irst missing consideration* is that platforms act both individually and collectively. Especially after the covid-19 lockdowns, platforms were identified as 'essential' (Neves and Steinberg 2020), through strategic partnerships with state (Steinberg, Zheng, Mukherjee 2024) and market institutions. It is important to note exceptions: recently, some scholars have begun to acknowledge what platforms do collectively by framing platformized convenience as infrastructural. Media scholars Joshua Neves and Marc Steinberg, in an edited volume titled *In/Convenience: Inhabiting the Logistical Surround* (2024), have addressed this first consideration about how platforms act both individually and collectively. They referred to this aggregation of activities and people across platforms as constituting "logistical surround." This surround has been formed by a combination of precarious work and proprietary algorithms that afford users next-day delivery, food delivery, cashless payments, and so on. It is this logistical surround that makes convenience an infrastructure of platforms.

Therefore, convenience is an affordance *and* a demand that platformization places on people and is a "condition in which we live" (pg. 8). It is not simply a demand placed by lazy and selfish consumers that harms workers and ecology (Neves and Steinberg 2024).

The *second missing consideration* in accounts about users recounted above is that user interaction and experience with platforms is composed across socio-technical systems by people's toggling. A limitation in the existing studies of platform users' experience and interactions recounted in the brief review above is that they all have a deep yet narrow focus on platform users as individuals. A depth of focus means that users' actions are analysed by compartmentalising their activities either as workers or consumers, even though we know that consumers on one app can at once be pursuing livelihood activities on another app (Caribou Digital and Qhala 2022), performing domestic responsibilities, and pursuing leisure simultaneously (Ticona 2022). Despite this acknowledgement, the width and breadth of users' movements across platforms is left outside of scholars' deep yet narrow analysis and we know less about how people navigate the logistical surround. Oft-cited information studies scholar Paul Dourish has argued that users experience interfaces compositionally, as owners of smartphones, not as users of individual apps (Dourish 2021). Informed by Dourish, this inquiry tracks the compositional nature of users' experience and interaction with Swiggy and Zomato.

In addition to analysing how users compose experiences across platforms, this thesis attends to a more fundamental but often-missed fact that 'users' includes individuals *as well as* organisations. 'User' is a curious term because in the case of food delivery platforms, it refers to consumers in households who buy food, businesses in industries that sell food, and workers who deliver food. Therefore, platform use is not only a domestic activity of consumption, content creation on social media, or a livelihood seeking activity of workers, but it includes commercial organisations like

businesses that are located within industries. As a result, ideas of competition and market making are also included along with consumption in the seemingly simple act of platform use.

The next two subsections will indicate how this thesis will address the two missing considerations from the accounts about platforms' power to offer convenience and shape user experience and interaction. Namely, *how platforms act collectively* and form a logistical surround as well as how *platform use* is an activity of individuals *and* organisations.

2.1. First contribution: how platforms aggregate users and activities

To address the first missing consideration of how platforms act individually, and collectively along with other socio-technical systems, this thesis will examine the *process* of how platforms *aggregate* users and activities. Despite a growing recognition that platforms act individually and collectively, most studies only examine what individual platforms do.

The term 'aggregation' in the title of this thesis enables addressing this limitation as it moves scholarly focus by navigating the full width and breadth of the field, not just by focusing deeply on any one platform. The case of two India-based food delivery platforms, Swiggy and Zomato, anchors this inquiry about the width and breadth of platform aggregation efforts and users' experiences with it. Less is known about what stacking diverse activities means for platforms themselves and what it means for consumers and businesses when they are gathered as users. Most scholarship on on-demand platforms like food delivery and ride-hailing remain focused on logistical aspects through platform-worker relationships (Rosenblat and Stark 2016; van Doorn 2017; Prassl 2018). Due to a deep but narrow focus on logistics platforms as sites of work, these platforms have been siloed from questions of digital culture and leisure that are the mandate of a separate literature on social media platforms. This thesis will move away from this siloed approach

by asking how platforms use promotions and branding to aggregate millions of food and hospitality businesses and consumers of food.

I will analyse aggregation in terms of how Swiggy and Zomato use promotions and branding in stacking economization and forming a logistical surround together. Promotions and branding are obviously instances of competition as they seek to draw users away from one site to another. However, by studying the making of promotions I examine *platform agnostic objects and processes of aggregation* such as pushing information through push notifications and content creation on social media by both Swiggy and Zomato. Platform agnostic things and processes are those that can move across platforms and are not specific to one platform. These objects and processes include *elements of user interaction* like buttons, push notifications, virtual shopfronts, *physical infrastructure* like dark stores and cloud kitchens and *processes* like pushing information and content creation on social media.

What is gained analytically by focusing on platform agnostic processes of promotions? There are at least three advantages: *first*, these objects and processes often outlive individual platforms. *Second*, as hinted in the overview, platform agnostic objects and processes make it difficult to affix qualifiers like 'food delivery,' 'quick commerce,' and 'social media' in front of the common noun 'platforms.' Swiggy, one of the cases under examination in this thesis, owns the grocery delivery service, 'Instamart', and the quick commerce service, 'Bolt', on the same app.[18] Zomato owns the

[18] Swiggy has kept their food delivery, quick commerce, and grocery delivery in the same app. Until January 2025 when Instamart was launched as a separate app, in addition to being present on the food delivery app. See: https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/startup/swiggy-to-launch-instamart-as-separate-app-eyes-multi-app-strategy-on-quick-commerce-boom-12906614.html. Accessed March 2025.

grocery delivery service 'Blinkit', and the quick commerce service, 'Bistro'.[19] So how can we, as scholars, analyse Swiggy and Zomato as food delivery platforms distinct from quick commerce or grocery delivery platforms when empirically, both platforms host virtual shopfronts of cloud kitchens selling cooked food as well as dark stores selling packed food, cosmetics, medicines, and so on? Simply put, Swiggy and Zomato are food delivery as well as quick commerce and grocery delivery platforms when it suits them.[20] Focusing on any one function of a platform, like food delivery, can obscure the full range of their efforts to aggregate users and activities. Therefore, my analysis of platform agnostic developments offers a wide and broad focus on how the functions of food delivery, quick commerce, and grocery delivery converge on Swiggy and Zomato.

Thirdly, platform agnostic objects and processes in aggregation enable highlighting the role of logistical platforms as cultural agents in the media and entertainment industries as well as food and hospitality industries, not only employers. The aim of referring to food delivery platforms as cultural agents has a corrective impulse. In nearly all studies of a variety of on-demand platforms, they are studied as sites of labour and work, siloed from questions of culture and leisure that are the mandate of a separate literature on social media platforms. Therefore, in combining the words 'cultural' and 'agents' the emphasis is on the term 'cultural' rather than agents. Cultural here corrects the tight analytical focus on food delivery platforms as sites of work and labour by making room to examine what other than work happens on and through these platforms. The intention is corrective and not to reinforce the binary between what constitutes as the cultural or the economic.

[19] Unlike Swiggy, Zomato have adopted the strategy of keeping their food delivery, quick commerce, and grocery delivery apps separate: https://www.livemint.com/companies/news/zomato-blinkit-launches-bistro-app-10-minute-food-delivery-compare-zepto-cafe-competition-google-play-apple-all-we-know-11734064123423.html. Accessed March 2025.

[20] The business press covers the rolling back and failures of Swiggy and Zomato's failed experiments. For instance, before Zomato's Bistro, they had tried dabbling in quick commerce via Zomato Instant between 2022 -23. See: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/startups/zomato-is-winding-up-its-10-minute-food-delivery-business/articleshow/97252284.cms?from=mdr. Accessed March 2025.

In the term cultural agents, 'agents' could have been replaced by a variety of different words like entities, firms, or organisations, as I do not necessarily wish to claim that platforms have or do not have agentiality. Furthermore, this term complements a wide, soft, and moving scholarly focus as it enables me to unify my findings about the divergent and hyperconnected nature of these platforms. This way I can offer an analysis of these platforms as sites and participants in both labour *and* culture, without privileging either. In other words, my project will highlight Swiggy and Zomato's distributed and hyperconnected character or how they do everything, everywhere, all at once. By asking how Swiggy and Zomato aggregate users and activities through promotions, my analysis can then detail the role of social media platforms, Swiggy and Zomato's in-house creative workers, managerial platform workers, data scientists, designers, and external creative agencies in the media and entertainment industries enable *Swiggy and Zomato to act as cultural agents*, not just employers and food deliverers. This allows me to join scholars who bridge these silos through their studies of work and labour on social media (Terranova 2000; Abidin 2016; Duffy 2017).

2.2. Second contribution: how users toggle

How are these macro changes at the level of the economic-political order of industries and socio-technical systems cooperation, competition, and convergence experienced by users? The *second missing consideration* in accounts about users is about the compositional nature of users' experience and interaction.

To address the second missing consideration this thesis examines how users' interactions and experiences are composed by their *toggling* across activities. Analysing how users experience and

interact with Swiggy and Zomato can make an obvious contribution about food-delivery user-cultures of buying and selling food. This fills the empirical gap from scholarship remaining focused on platform-worker relationships (Doorn 2017; Prassl 2018; Rosenblat and Stark 2016).

The case of food delivery platforms Swiggy and Zomato, rather than ride-hailing platforms like Ola or Uber for instance, is well-suited to the inquiry of the compostional nature of behaviour because in provisioning for the household, even prior to platforms, consumers of food have always composed their experiences by switching across activities — livelihood, consumption, care and leisure. Online or offline, foodwork (Sobal 2017) by individuals, households or businesses has always involved *care work* of cooking, some people's *livelihood activities* of those who might be selling food, most people's livelihood-enabled consumption of food, and *cultures* of eating, serving, and entertaining.

In addition to addressing this empirical gap about user-cultures on food delivery platforms, this thesis' approach to user-behaviour in compositional terms makes *two contributions*. *First*, it offers a way out of behaviouralist explanations which explain what people do in response to stimuli from apps or devices. A compositional view still takes behaviour seriously; however, it is not behaviouralist as it places behaviour in a wider and broader frame, not narrowly analysing behaviour as a response to stimuli. Situating behaviour widely enables asking: how do people as users (individuals and groups) *hold together and switch between activities* of livelihood, care, and leisure? How consumers and businesses buy and sell food on Swiggy and Zomato is examined as being composed of and being informed by activities of livelihood, consumption, care, and leisure outside these two platforms. Specifically, I will examine how households and businesses both

participate as users in the logistical surround by studying three phenomena: (1) encounters between buyers and sellers on platform interfaces (2) The practices and infrastructures of cooking, eating, serving that enable users to buy and sell via platforms and (3) the routines, schedules, and habits of platform use.

Second, studying the compositional nature of user-experience of buying *and* selling enables me to attend to the many scales of platform use: users are individuals *as well as* organisations. Attending to multi-scalar platform use by individuals *and* organisations in homes and businesses like this, offers at least two advantages. One, provisioning[21] as a category of experience of both households and businesses enables examining domestic questions in studies of how platforms stack economization without reproducing binaries between productive-commercial and reproductive-domestic spheres or economy-culture. It is perhaps no coincidence that Caliskan, Callon, and McKenzie (2024) borrow the term 'stack' from computer scientists who named this computational function based on stacks of dishes in kitchens.

The second advantage of studying use in domestic and commercial contexts together is that it enables bringing platform studies literature into conversation with practice-oriented consumption scholarship. This older scholarship has studied socio-technical systems of convenience such as flows of gas, electricity, (Trentmann 2016; Shove 2003), retail and advertising (Haynes et al. 2010; McFall 2004; Slater 2002). Neves and Steinberg (2024) have begun this work by mapping the evolution of platformized convenience through three movements. Beginning with time-shifting

[21] My framing of provisioning is informed by non-dualistic approaches to economy-culture from the field of cultural economy. For instance, sociologist Don Slater (2022) studied micro-economics from the perspective of advertisers or cultural intermediaries. Based on this, Slater made the case to treat economic categories of markets and products as lived realities, not only formal categories. In a similar spirit of attentiveness to use values, sociologist Alan Warde (2002) argued that consumption is largely ordinary as people shop to provide for households and not just as symbolic, leisure-seeking.

kitchen appliances and convenience foods, they take us outside the home to convenience stores' retail space optimization. Finally, we arrive in the present platformized form of convenience. Neves and Steinberg suggest that today convenience is less domestic as it is also a choice about work, like the convenience offered by gig work (Neves and Steinberg 2024).

My minor criticism of Neves and Steinberg's (2024) mapping of platformized convenience is this: even before platforms, convenience has been about composing experiences between home and work. Neves and Steinberg refer to kitchen appliances like freezers and washing machines as the "first wave of domestic conveniences" because these appliances were located in the home, yet these appliances made sense to their users because of changes in their work-lives. Sociologist Alan Warde (1997) has explained the popularity of time-shifting domestic conveniences like freezers due to changes in work-lives that resulted" in "deroutinisation" and an "informalisation of social life". To clarify the point: domestic convenience was located at home, but it made sense to people and was popular because of changes outside the household, at work. To address the effects of these changes in livelihood, domestic conveniences offered people the ability to re-order time and tasks (Warde 1999), and just save time or labour (Shove, Trentmann, and Wilk 2009).

The next subsection will build on this criticism to explain how addressing both the domestic and commercial aspects of platform use leads my research to join with *and also differ* from Neves and Steinberg's. Their important and helpful intervention reframes convenience as an affordance and demand of platformization on users. I go further to explore what it means when demands are placed not only on households but also on businesses in industries that have long served consumers.

2.3. Contributions to reframing platformized convenience

Informed by my minor criticism of Neves and Steinberg in the previous sub-section, this sub-section will detail how this thesis differs from them in *two ways*. *First*, I analyse both consumers' and businesses' experiences of platformized convenience. Both these platform users have a preexisting relationship of buying and selling convenient products and services, before platform mediation. Before the arrival of platforms, various businesses have offered formal and informal conveniences ranging from convenience foods, kitchen appliances, (Dike 2021; Mintz 1985; Warde 1997) the service of cooks (Dickey 2000; Janeja 2010), street vendors (Anjaria Shapiro 2016; Ray 2020), and home chefs (Gooptu and Chakravarty 2018; Roncaglia 2013) based on their understanding of consumers' needs. Therefore, this thesis examines how selling food via platforms is composed and informed by businesses' existing efforts to provision for themselves and the future of their industry. Similarly, this inquiry analyzes how buying behaviour is composed and informed by consumers' activities of making a livelihood and provisioning for themselves and their households. Studying how both consumers and businesses as users compose experiences of provisioning as individuals, households, and organizations, allows analyzing how people navigate across binaries of domestic-commercial, and production-consumption, and informal-formal.

The *second* way that this thesis *differs* from Neves and Steinberg's approach is this: I question whether logistical systems can really *determine* cultural forms, feelings, and experiences. In contrast, they assume that "cultural forms are themselves determined by logistical systems under platform capitalism, shifting the very place of analysis from the form of a content to the form of distributed experience" (pg 21) (Neves and Steinberg 2024).

The field of cultural economy has *two very useful approaches* to understand the relations between culture, aesthetics, feelings, and the economic organisation of society without dichotomising them. I recount these two approaches below for us as platform scholars to have a sophisticated point of departure. *First*, Sociologist Alan Warde argued that consumption is *within* the system of production and exchange in which economic practices have cultural meaning too. This was a refreshing re-framing because it questioned whether scholars can really claim, as was all the rage in the early 2000s, either a 'culturalisation of the economy' or an 'economisation of culture.' Warde made room for a useful third side to the economy-culture debate by attending to the cultural meanings of economic things (Warde 2002). Examining the cultural meaning of mass consumption goods led anthropologist Daniel Miller (1987) to identify a "progressive possibility" within consumption. Miller even frames buying groceries to provision for one's households as a 'technology of love' (Miller 2012). However, to remain open to how consumers do the work of translating objects from alienable to intimate through their consumption, Miller alerts us to two potentially reductive views of consumption. One, if consumption is reduced to the nature of the commodity and two, if it is reduced to the "process by which the commodity is obtained" (Miller 1987, page 189).

This project takes a cue from the work of Warde (2002) and Miller (1987; 1998) on the relationship between consumption and production and applies it to my examination of food delivery platforms. By applying Warde and Miller's approaches outside the cases they had chosen to study, my aim is also to offer fresh empirical material about digital technologies to bear on their approaches. to Neves and Steinberg (2024) do acknowledge the role of consumption within the economy in passing, especially when they mention that a Meituan (Chinese delivery platform) delivery worker is a consumer at another moment. This acknowledgement does not offer an account of how

delivery workers' workplace decisions might be composed based on their purchases and consumption activities. Through this thesis, I will offer an account of how platform consumers' purchases are composed in light of their livelihood activities as workers, self-employed professionals, and so on.

The *second approach from* cultural economy is to the question of how market activities like buying and using products and services become meaningful for consumers. Frank Cochoy, Joe Deville, and Liz McFall (2017) use the deceptively simple word "attachments" to argue that attachments are top-down, bottom-up, objective-subjective processes that do not simply seduce or dupe people. Following them, this thesis examines users' attachments with platforms as being top-down, bottom-up, involving material-subjective elements, not determined by either. The next few paragraphs will point to public discourse about platforms to offer reasons for critical socio-technical scholars to loosen our grip over the assumption that feelings, cultures, experiences are an automatic byproduct of what platforms do with their logistical systems.

A recurring public debate over our increasing reliance on logistical systems can serve as a coxswain. I recount this debate below to steer scholarly focus to identify people's guilt and dissatisfaction as instances of the limits of powerful logistics systems in determining cultural feelings and experiences. In the popular press and on social media, every year after Amazon Prime Day or even after a logistics worker's accident, there is a discussion about the "hidden costs" of the lure of affordable goods and convenient delivery[22]. Upon receiving news about an accident of a logistics worker, inevitably, someone, including myself, will express their guilt about ordering online. This confession about feeling guilty for seeking convenience will lead to the unfolding of

[22] See: https://www.vox.com/labor-jobs/361079/amazon-prime-day-labor-worker-injuries-union. Accessed February 2025.

a debate around what should be done with this guilt. Everyone who witnesses the confession or confesses to being guilty knows the motions of this debate. It begins with picking a side — are you going to boycott Amazon or the platform under public scrutiny at the time? This side will make the case that as users, we must do what we can and use the power of common users to show which side people are on. Boycotts have an appeal because Big Tech relies on network effects which make ordinary use a signal of acceptance by the public. This pro-boycott side is often the one to suggest that everyone should support a local business to make a dent in platforms' monopoly power.

Inevitably, this pro-boycott position attracts its own criticism and the second side of this debate. If companies are not selling only to consumers but to governments, businesses, and industries, how will consumer boycotts make a dent? This side typically reprimands the first side for suggesting an individual-solution-to-a-structural-problem by calling others' attention to how big platforms like Amazon Web Services (AWS) run under everything else. If platforms like Amazon undergird other platforms, does boycotting one mean that you will boycott everything else it has relationships with? Will you boycott using Netflix too because it runs on AWS? Even the Indian state uses AWS for DigiLocker so those who find themselves on this side suggest that guilt about being lazy is enforced, not chosen. Recognising the role of platforms in structures does not end this debate or relieve the responsibility that common users feel for seeking convenience.

Both sides in this debate seem to struggle with one thing: how to hold together our participation in experiences of convenience and our increasing reliance on exploitative systems together with our dissatisfaction. In some ways this question is a caricaturised version of the old agency-structure debate in social theory. That debate has pondered over whether people exercise agency in their actions or whether social structures are more influential over people's actions. To sidestep that

seemingly unanswerable question and its endless loop, there is more recently an emergent third side in public discourse. It often asks, "where are the robots when we need them?" This question guards the person asking it from struggling with finding a way to hold together what we should do and its limitations in leading to structural change. Its point of departure is limited agency, and it redirects convenience offered by tech to what it considers more useful avenues that reduce harm to human workers.

The participants in this public debate have not necessarily read the debates over culture-economy, attachments, or agency-structure that I cited above. However, spurred by their experiences as platform users, common people are articulating the central conundrums of these intellectual conversations. Users experience conundrums such as the limitations and necessity of individual action along with a confounding reliance. They also experience dissatisfaction from relying on platform services whether for livelihood or leisure and other such conundrums from their attachments to platforms. Let me also cite YouTuber and comedian Bo Burnham's song *Welcome to the Internet*. The chorus of the song points to how users are acutely aware of how the internet and socio-technical systems are wide and shape a wide variety of our cultural experiences, be it in romance, livelihood, or leisure. Burnham sings:

> "Could I interest you in everything?
> All of the time
> A little bit of everything
> All of the time
> Apathy's a tragedy
> And boredom is a crime."[23]

For these intellectual and empirical reasons, it does not appear that culture is straightforwardly determined by logistical form. What then is the relationship between what people do as users and

[23]Bo Burnham's song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1BneeJTDcU. Accessed March 2025.

what platforms do to aggregate users and activities? Allow me to reference popular culture a second time. This time the aim is to illustrate how my doctoral thesis approaches the relationship between platforms' aggregation and platform users' experiences and interactions being aggregated. I will move the reader's focus further away from platforms, onto a Studio Ghibli film, before bringing it back to a scholarly debate.

Kiki's Delivery Service (1989) is a coming of age film about Kiki, a young witch who leaves her home as part of her training in which she develops flying skills by delivering food. The film was made in the late 1980s in Japan by manga artist and filmmaker Hayako Miyazaki. Miyazaki adapted a children's book to address young people who were learning to find their place in the world in which livelihood practices like *tobaryu* (changing jobs) were gaining prominence. Convenience stores never feature in this fantasy film, but Miyazaki notes their presence as arrangements that enable young people to fly or be independent: "you only need a nearby convenience store to live in a world of strangers". For Miyazaki, the convenience store emblematized a conundrum that young people experienced, and he had sensed. Especially young women in Japan had found economic independence due to macro-economic developments, but their experience of city-living made them feel lonely and isolated. Kiki's flying *over* the city's lit-up skies in the film was a visual representation of this confounding experience of having found economic success, which did not automatically lead to an enjoyment of the city. Instead, young people's experience was one of distantly flying above connection and possibility (Miyazaki 2010). Hovering over a coveted experience without being able to catch hold of it is similar to the conundrum in the public debate over platformized convenience.

Both in reality and fiction, people and fictional characters' guilt, dissatisfaction, loneliness, and isolation are evidence of the fact that logistics and macro developments like it do not

straightforwardly determine culture and experience. This thesis will examine the platform-user relationship in a way that is similar to how the film moves the viewer's focus through Kiki's navigating her coming of age, macro-changes through micro-interactions, and how she holds together oppositions between autonomy-loneliness. This is another kind of coming of age story of platforms and people, in which the terms 'aggregating' and 'toggling' serve as helpful guides.

Instead of a deep and narrow focus on one or the other platform, I draw on a scholarly counterpart of the film's approach to 'focus' referred to as a 'navigational approach' in anthropology. This approach examines how people navigate macro factors like infrastructures, social systems, and so on, so both the macro and micro are on the move in this view. People are assumed to be like boats on undulating waters of ever-changing environments (Vigh 2009). A lateral scholarly gaze (Tett 2022) that moves is needed to analyse how people navigate systems that are on the move. Viewing the relationship between people and infrastructure or systems in this way enables examining how people move along lines. What people do is understood through hapticality or how people get a "feel for feeling others feeling you" (Ingold 2021). Following action along lines in an ever-evolving environment means this view does not tie a causal link between what people do and their social locations. This approach to action is different from the dominant Bourdieusian preoccupation with social location (Bourdieu 2010). Of course, people's social location such as caste, class, gender, race and so on are important in shaping action. These factors will emerge as crucial in the empirical material about what people are able to do in this thesis. However, a navigational approach means that I will emphasise people's and organisations' navigation of infrastructure and practices. I will not be able to do justice to deeply analysing the role of social identities through this particular project. The aim of emphasising practices and infrastructure is not to discredit or contest the importance of examining social identities but it is simply to first

establish the connection between practices and infrastructures that might seem disparate and disconnected.

Why is a navigational approach or examining the coming of age of the relationship between people and platforms useful? Platforms in urban India are constantly evolving who they are and what they do, as evident in Zomato's renaming itself to Eternal, Google turning into Alphabet, and Facebook into Meta. Platforms are dabbling in logistics, culture, and adopting and adapting emergent socio-technical systems such as artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, and crypto currencies. Similarly, people in households and businesses in industries are both navigating these changes as users of one platform or another. Furthermore, this thesis is an account from me, a scholar who has herself come of age as a user of platforms, critical of, but nevertheless attached to them (Cochoy, Deville, and McFall 2017). Much like those in the public debate over what platform consumption does to us, I too have been navigating an ever-evolving field of platform studies and what it means to be critical (detailed in the 'methods and methodology' section of this introduction). As a piece of scholarship, this thesis is a result of its author, coming of age as a scholar along with their scholarly field. Media anthropologists have tracked how people's navigation of media systems marked by convergence and hybridity created, popularised and accelerated the term 'polycrisis.' As a popular and academic term that refers to a set of interconnected crises, polycrisis has emerged through various champions, boosters, and critics' use of various media environments (Bräuchler and Postill Forthcoming)

Platform studies as a field is being jostled across disciplinary boundaries due to this ever-moving subject of study and diverse scholars' participation. This thesis will *address* this fragmented multidisciplinary field of platform studies *while being informed by* wider social scientific literature that has examined how before platforms too, people have interacted and experienced buying and

selling in markets that platforms now stack. In operational terms, a separate literature review chapter will review platform studies research in detail. Each of the five thesis chapters will delve into the social science literature outside platform studies. For this reason, each of the five chapters have literature review sections.

3. Research Questions (RQs)

To track the two considerations missing in the literature and make the three contributions detailed above, this thesis examines two processes of technical change in urban India that are mediated via platforms.

The first RQ examines the first process of how digital platforms — individually and collectively — aggregate users. The second RQ examines the second process of how platform users — consumers and businesses — experience and interact with being aggregated as they toggle between different apps on their digital devices to pursue activities of livelihood (email, video conferencing, etc), consumption (buying things like food), care (keeping in touch with family, friends, dating etc), and leisure (memes, watching webseries, etc). This project will explore platforms' and both types of users' navigations of these two processes by asking the following research questions:

1. How do platforms — individually and collectively —aggregate users on their interfaces?
    1.1. How do Swiggy and Zomato use the interface of their apps in promotions and platform-user relationships?
    1.2. How do Swiggy and Zomato use other platforms like social media platforms in promotions and platform-user relationships?

2. How do platform users — consumers and businesses — interact with and experience platforms' aggregation as they toggle between activities of livelihood, consumption, and care?
    2.1. How do consumers and businesses find each other on Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces?
    2.2. How do Swiggy and Zomato influence cooking and serving in commercial and household kitchens?
    2.3. How do Swiggy and Zomato influence schedules, rhythms, habits, and routines in commercial food establishments and households?

Both RQs deliberately use the vague common noun 'platforms' to ensure this inquiry address the lack of scholarship about platforms' competition *and* cooperation. The sub-questions use the proper nouns 'Swiggy' and 'Zomato' to make this inquiry manageable. Delving into the differences between competitors Swiggy and Zomato could be a compelling project, but it would have to be a separate one.

Further in this chapter, I will discuss the methods and methodology adopted to answer these questions and a chapter plan will map out how each of the five sub-questions listed above will be answered by the five chapters in this thesis.

The next section will discuss the rationale for selecting Swiggy and Zomato as cases and it will indicate how these RQs are addressed by the chapters to make the scholarly contributions detailed in the previous section.

4. Methods and methodology

I began qualitative and ethnographic research with remote methods and concluded with in-person fieldwork. Between December 2020-January 2022, I combined remote methods to examine Swiggy and Zomato's relationship building with users via promotional content on their apps (RQ 1.1) and social media (RQ 1.2). After this, I conducted in-person qualitative, ethnographic research in Mumbai with Swiggy and Zomato's users like consumers and food and hospitality businesses between March 2022-December 2022. The aim of using in-person methods was to understand users' relationships with both platforms as consumers in households and businesses in industries (RQ 2).

Swiggy, Zomato, and Mumbai were chosen as sites for fieldwork for both pragmatic and intellectual reasons: I grew up in Mumbai and was familiar with the languages, neighbourhoods, and it was the site of my pre-doctoral research. I had conducted research on a range of labours and cultures of feeding and being fed in the city. This research ranged from the women-run institution of *khanavals* (boarding houses), overshadowed in scholarship and public discourse by the *dabbawallahs* or lunch carriers, to the experiences of Swiggy and Zomato's food delivery workers. Through this project, I had the opportunity to build on my previous work and understand what platforms were doing to these food cultures. Finally, food was chosen as a case over the case of ride-hailing for instance, because even prior to platforms, it has most obviously invited a compositional activity that cuts across production-consumption and home-work.

This section will first indicate the remote methods used and explain the rationale for their selection. After this, it will reflect on the methodology before turning to the combination of in-person methods and sampling interlocutors.

4.1 Remote research methods

To understand how Swiggy and Zomato used their app interfaces to aggregate users (RQ 1.1), I combined 4 remote methods. I started with a *walk-through method*[24] that enables scholars to make evaluations of how apps guide users. Walkthroughs can be conducted auto-ethnographically or be user-led (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018). Either way, walk throughs offer an understanding of the "environment of expected use" of apps. In other words, it involves studying how platforms lay elements of user interaction such as permissions in the path of users, beginning from when users sign in (Light, Burgess, Duguay 2016). When I walked through Swiggy and Zomato's apps, it was to understand how they use their interface to build relations with users through my experience of being a consumer *and* a researcher, and my intention was not to test user experience on platforms' behalf. In this process, I noticed casual and friendly sounding push notifications (PNs). These PNs guided me even when I was outside the app, so I developed a method to study these.

(1) I *screenshotted and inductively coded over 1,100 push notifications* sent to me over one calendar year. Navigating platforms by toggling and swiping got me interested in how platforms expand by *pushing* information and users, not only *pulling* information through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) (Helmond 2015).

(2) *I also studied Swiggy's and Zomato's annual reports on their blogs* at this time. These reports used user data in narrativising platforms' relationships with users in a sentimental and proximate style. Swiggy's Stateatstics annual report mentioned chicken biryani was the most ordered dish in 2020[25] and I noticed how platforms actioned this knowledge about all-time favourite food items

[24] A walk through is a method used in media and app studies and involves researchers opening apps and walking through them, like a user and sometimes along with users.
[25] [2] https://blog.swiggy.com/2020/12/22/stateatstics-year5/. Accessed July 2021.

through PNs which named biryani as a dish. In addition to these, probably due to my GPS location in Mumbai, I received PNs specifically about *pav bhaji* (a buttery bread and vegetable combination popular in the state of Maharashtra). Since I collected only the notifications sent to me, based on my interaction and order history with the app, I am unable to compare how use of the app and order history might influence the number or kind of push notifications users receive. Yet the increasing number of push notifications I received as I engaged more with push notifications by screenshotting, tapping them, shows that platforms customise communication based on individual users' interaction history.

When I was studying PNs, I experienced Swiggy and Zomato attentiveness via 6 PNs from both apps every day. If I was not researching PNs, I might have turned these off. So, were other users simply turning them off? During in-person immersions in 12 consumers' homes in Mumbai, I asked my consumer-user interlocutors. Most of my interlocutors had turned them off because they found them irritating, overwhelming, and people wanted to distance themselves from getting tempted. Only a few mentioned re-sharing them on social media or with friends. Had platforms noticed people turning off push notifications? What strategies did platforms adopt to tackle this issue? To get platforms' point of view, I relied on a third method.

(3) I conducted *5 semi-structured telephonic interviews with managerial platform executives* who had experience working in roles facing restaurant partners, delivery partners, and in marketing at Swiggy, Zomato, and Dunzo. I had noticed some friends and colleagues in my social media network either worked for or knew people who had worked for such platforms. So, I posted calls on social media platforms – a story on Instagram and posts on X, formerly known as Twitter and LinkedIn – to get access to otherwise difficult to reach platform executives. I asked four sets of questions: about push notifications, labels and curated collections, social media reputation

management, and specific questions about their role and work history. From executives' answers, I learnt that platform executives had paid attention to increasing app uninstallation rates. They even explained to me how they recalibrated their strategy of reducing PNs temporarily. From these interviews, I was led to asking: what was the role of user data in building relations with users?

(4) I *examined the code* of the apps by using the App Inspect Tool to understand how user data collected via permissions and trackers was used to push information better onto users. *I examined the code* of apps by drawing from app studies scholars who suggest examining platforms' software packages (Dieter et al 2019). I examined the code via Swiggy's[26] android package kit (APK) files for apps used by worker-users, consumer-users and restaurant-users.[27] APK is a file format that holds the code for the app and is useful in the distribution of apps, like .doc is for the distribution of text. This tool allowed me to examine what permissions platforms' apps took from us to access data from our mobile devices' microphones, galleries, contacts, and so on. Trackers, as the name suggests, track any metric or interaction like clicks, time spent etc. Studying these permissions and trackers that were coded into Swiggy, showed their reliance on other tech businesses in being attentive to users, not just on their own app interfaces. Examining the code is an instance of digging away from surfaces, into depths. However, the aim is to bring attention back to the width of cooperation and competition involved in the making of the interface, rather than exposing a truth hidden beneath its surface.

[26] I was unable to retrieve Zomato's APK files using the tool. My intention using this method was to map the types, sources and businesses involved in the gathering and collection of user data which I could do sufficiently with even one of two platforms I was studying.

[27] I learnt about this tool at the Global Digital Cultures (GDC) annual conference on 'Global Perspectives on Platforms and Cultural Production,' 2022. I do not code but I used the 'APK Inspect Tool,' developed at the University of Siegen under the Media of Cooperation project. I am grateful to Krishna Rokhale for pointing me to developer forums and clarifying my doubts as I analysed Swiggy's APK files.

To examine how Swiggy and Zomato used social media platforms to build a brand (RQ 1.2), I immersed myself through (1) a digital ethnography and (2) telephonic interviews with managerial platform workers. (1) The digital ethnography began with observations of Swiggy and Zomato's use of Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube for a minimum of 6 hours every week over 2 years between November 2020 and January 2022. Digital ethnographers study digital flows *and* are led in new directions based on what they find (Markham 2017).

From observations of Swiggy and Zomato's Instagram handles, I saw that platforms' official promotions included employee engagement in the form of encouraging content creation. In addition to making content for Swiggy and Zomato's blogs, managerial workers like engineers, marketeers, and designers, were using their personal handles on social media like creators. I followed some managerial platform workers to understand if their personal branding had any implications on platforms' official branding efforts that they contributed to on behalf of platforms. Managerial platform workers' personal branding reminded me of insights I had from a previous research project on gig workers. So, I draw on my longitudinal observations to examine what different types of platform workers' content has to do with platforms' official branding. In 2019, I had queried YouTube with keywords like 'strike,' protest,' 'Mumbai,' 'Swiggy,' 'UberEats,' and 'Zomato' and found videos about workers' experiences. In the comments section, I noticed that other workers were querying social media to find community and so I subscribed to logistics workers' YouTube channels. I found content about food delivery platforms outside of India because I queried 'UberEats' which has a global presence.

Being immersed in Swiggy and Zomato's use of social media via digital ethnography, allowed me to observe a culture of users talking back. While I did not plan to study this, people's interactions and experiences (RQ 2) with social media user-cultures (Abidin 2021) had a bearing on food

delivery platforms. To understand how Swiggy and Zomato dealt with this culture of users talking back, I signed up for newsletters like The Hard Copy (THC), a weekly newsletter on branding and content started in 2020. I also followed the Instagram account for Social Samosa, a publication reporting on ad, marketing and social media. I chose THC and Social Samosa because the ad and marketing professionals in my co-working space kept up with news from both and therefore they seemed to be influential. Through these methods, I found that having a reputational crisis in their use of social media was a shared concern among many brands. This enabled me to locate Swiggy and Zomato in the flux created by social media platforms in the media and entertainment industries and the careers of ad and marketing professionals.

(2) I conducted 5 telephonic interviews with managerial platform workers between October and December 2021. I asked questions about how platforms managed building and maintaining a brand on social media, as well as managerial workers' personal use of social media meant for platforms' official promotions. Managerial platform executives explained to me how the labour of making and evaluating promotional campaigns to push information and aggregate users was divided — in-house and outsourced to external agencies. In making and evaluating promotional campaigns on social media, Swiggy and Zomato were also recipients of other businesses' services.

While platforms and their executives are blackboxed to researchers (Pasquale 2015), from previous experience of slipping into platform offices (Lalvani and Gupta 2021), I posted on LinkedIn as an ethnographic tactic (Seaver 2017). In doing so, I used the affordance offered to me, a researcher-critic *and a user* of a platform to get access. This resulted in telephonic interviews with 5 platform executives in Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore. These executives had experience of working in ad, marketing, and client facing roles, working with restaurant owners, customer satisfaction, and

delivery workers. I asked questions about their role, how they work with other departments, the work involved in push notifications, and online reputation management efforts (RQ 1).

4.2 Methodological reflections on criticality and positionality

The digital ethnographic methods described above compelled me to reflect on my own attachments with platforms while pursuing this research. I started the project as a researcher-critic who never used food delivery platforms, but I was forced to order food online when I moved to the UK to start my doctoral studies during the covid-19 pandemic. By the end of my quarantine period and digital ethnographic fieldwork, I was a researcher-critic who was a lot more doubtful about distancing herself from being a user. If platform competition and cooperation in attaching users and aggregating activities was so vast and I was a participant in it, then I had to re-think if I could suddenly distance myself when I was analysing platform activity as a critic.

Including myself, a researcher and critic of platforms, I positioned myself as a researcher-critic-user (Lalvani Forthcoming). Including researchers in the category of users means acknowledging their *attachments* both as researchers (Cochoy et al 2017; Shapiro and Anjaria 2020) *and* consumers. In *Markets and the Arts of Attachment,* Frank Cochoy, Joe Deville, and Liz McFall (2017) crack open the width in the deceptively simple term "attachments." In their account of how markets attach consumers, attachment holds together opposing pulls of top-down, objective-subjective ties; market making involves commerce's efforts of using material as well as consumers' subjective attachments to things. In other words, the making of markets is about how consumers navigate being attached to goods and services, not only what commercial entities do to attach people.

Positioning myself as a researcher-critic-user as described above, takes reflections on scholarly positionality a step further than what is currently required: declaring the scholar's social location by naming their class, caste, religion, or another form of identity. Some might rightfully ask: how is including the researcher-critic-user different from what ethnography has always enabled? Ethnographic research enables studying attachments as a method from which to draw information. Using this tool does not automatically lead to the researcher's writing and thinking to consider their own involvement and proximity. In fact, current academic norms in qualitative research dictate that the researcher-critics establish their positionality in two ways*:* scholars either distance themselves from the subjects of study or claim proximity to the subject of study, if they can claim to be insiders. Either way, the very minimum standard requires the researcher-critic to declare the latitudes and longitudes of their social location. This study does not take the first path as I do not obscure my experience and interactions of platforms in the name of scholarly distance. I have written this thesis in the active voice, I have included auto-ethnographic reflections, yet it is primarily about other users' experiences and interactions. As this study is not focused on ascribed identities, I cannot simply claim insider status based on my ascribed identity and take the second path to positionality. Instead of these two paths, I acknowledge my own attachments as a researcher-critic-user of platforms, *alongside* other users in my study. The most obvious example of being a researcher-critic-user is that of how I consciously used my LinkedIn network to reach managerial platform workers. I anticipated that by having been a student at leading colleges and universities in India and an independent researcher, I was likely to reach platform professionals, if I tried via my online network.

If we are to include ourselves as researcher-critic-users, alongside the subjects of our study, more needs to be said about researchers' attachments to academic and theoretical tools of critical

thinking. What does the academic training of researcher-critics mean for how we reside alongside the people we encounter in fieldwork? I find myself in the company of two seemingly opposing thinkers from the Western canon. Interestingly, both anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2005) and sociologist Bruno Latour (2004) wrote about the limits of dominant critical scholarly approaches to positionality. This is interesting because Sahlins has been critical of constructivist approaches of which Latour is an influential thinker. Sahlins' post-dinner address to a gathering of anthropologists, later published as a leaflet titled "*Waiting for Foucault, Still*", is worth recounting at length. The address has immense comedic value but the excerpt below is worth recounting here because of how clear Sahlins is in imploring researchers to think of where we live *within* the systems that we might be critical of (pg 76):

> "Anthropologists generally live in the most capitalistic and commodified societies in the world… They tell us that capitalism and commodification are hegemonic forces cum discourses that enslave people to particular ontologies or regimes of truth: notably those that resolve persons and objects of their existence to exchange values. But do anthropologists, living under the worst of such regimes, really experience themselves as culturally unfree?" (Sahlins 2005)

A few years after Sahlin's address, Latour (2004) raised a very similar question about how the researcher-critic is trained to suspend themselves over the people and subjects they study:

> "After arduous years of reading turgid prose, you will always be right, you will never be taken in anymore..Better equipped than Zeus himself… striking from above with the salvo of antifetishism in one hand and the solid causality of objectivity in the other." (pg 239)

Latour refers to his own intellectual tradition of critique-as-deconstruction as "critical barbarity." For him, this criticism is barbaric because he identifies how it is generally antifetishist for things the researcher-critic does not believe in like religion, popular culture etc. At the same time researcher-critics are positivist for the things that they do believe in, like the tools from sociology, economics, etc. Finally, it permits researchers to be realists about all that they cherish themselves

like criticism itself or painting (Latour 2004). The following passage summarises his alternative vision for the role and positionality of the critic:

> "The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast…but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and attention." (pg 246).

A small minority of socio-technical researchers across disciplines have views that are strikingly similar to Sahlins' and Latour's arguments about positionality and criticality discussed above. These scholars have observed how studies of digital technology tend to be pitched only in terms of surveillance, misinformation, and other 'dark' sides (Bucher 2019). In an edited volume titled *Everyday Data Cultures*, various contributors have demonstrated the unexpected ways in which people use socio-technical systems. Together, they have argued for the need for socio-technical researchers to go beyond Big Critique that mirrors Big Tech and matches rhetoric with rhetoric (Burgess et al., 2022). The scholars cited above draw inspiration from author Ursula Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction. Le Guin argues that most stories are about how heroes wield "long and hard things" like spears and so "we have not heard about the things to put things in" (pg 2) (Guin 1986). This kind of exploratory work that examines how people contain and hold things together, unencumbered by the 'impact agenda' is difficult, or near impossible, for younger scholars such as the author of this thesis to carry out, even if, early career scholars might be in the best position to do so (Doyuran, Lalvani, and Unal 2025).

My project is informed by the spirit of the researcher-critic-user adopting a realism and pragmatism that aims to assemble matters of concern (Latour 2004). A pragmatic approach enables an eclectic analysis (Shove 2023) that takes description seriously because far from lacking

analytical heft, it is description that makes room for the unpredictable and strange (McFall 2010). My project is interested in describing-analysing the contingent relations between platforms and their users as a means to identify new paths of civic action. In this effort, the researcher-critic-user's ideas can be useful interpersonally too, not only as an activity of intellectual ornamentation or social impact through policy recommendation. Let me offer an instance of what I mean by being interpersonally useful as a scholar. Through my participation in the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded Festival of Social Sciences (FoSS) as a researcher and resident of the city of Oxford, I planned two games inspired by my doctoral thesis. The aim of both games was for me as a researcher-critic-user to contribute to platform users' imaginaries (Bucher 2017) of how algorithmic systems function. One game was a playing-cards based role-play game. In it, attendees played the role of the consumer ordering food, the restaurant cooking food (actually making a pizza with a toy!) and a delivery worker delivering food. These roles were played by rearranging playing cards that had buttons and gestures on the screens of consumers, restaurant workers, and delivery workers. While playing this game, some members of the public reflected on how they were rushed and others wondered how money from the consumer was split between the delivery worker, restaurant, and platform. This way, my interpersonal intervention as a scholar aimed to invite curiosity, conversation, and empathy, not just invoke guilt or disseminate information from the researcher-critic to the public (Lalvani Forthcoming).

The contest over what it means to be a critical scholar discussed above is not new in the regional focus of my study. A special issue in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* provocatively expanded the meaning of scholarly criticality. The contributors argued for the need for critical scholarship from a region full of inequality, violence, and so on to contend with fun more seriously in a way that "diasbuses the scholar of her distance and joylessness" (Anjaria and Anjaria, 2020,

pg. 240). In other words, the issue encourages scholars to use fun or *mazaa* (the Urdu word for fun and pleasure) as an optic and methodology. Does taking fun seriously mean making light of what is unjust? Far from it. It offers a directive for the future by "finding new ways of writing about the forms of life that thrive even in times of crisis" (Anjaria and Anjaria, 2020).

Anthropologist Jonathan Anjaria Shapiro's analysis of bicyclists in that special issue calls attention to the limits of infrastructural thinking. Cycling alongside the hustle and bustle of vehicular traffic, bicycling activists in Mumbai demand smoother road surfaces, not separate cycle lanes. How is this to be understood if bicyclists and vehicles, generally antagonists in transport studies, both share the demand for smooth road surfaces? Anjaria explains this by *remaining on the surface* and shows us "how material encounters on the road's surface are part of the fun of cycling *and also* generate a potentially more equitable transportation politics that goes beyond a narrow focus on infrastructure building" (pg 268). He shows us how bicyclists enjoy the city's road surfaces and does not, in the name of rigor, assume that 'surfaces' are only facades hiding a deeper truth (Shapiro 2020a).

In this project, like Anjaria above, my analysis stays on the surface of platform interfaces. I will analyse how Swiggy and Zomato's promotional activities are made and what constitutes them, rather than simply dismissing these as cultural smokescreens distracting the critical scholar or the innocent public from the exploitation of delivery workers. This approach is well suited for this project because one of its aims is to analyse platform agnostic developments in the formation of a logistical surround (Neves and Steinberg 2024) in which Swiggy and Zomato are two cases. So, if the reader is looking for a deep and narrow account of the differences between Swiggy and Zomato, they might have to look elsewhere. Here, they can expect to find a wide account of the many processes of marketing, virtualizing of shopfronts, consumers finding restaurants, arranging

cooking, and scheduling meals alongside demands from work and existing convenience of cooks. In examining the relationship between people and platforms, taking surfaces seriously allows focusing widely in order to expand critical understanding alongside what depth offers.

A wide and moving scholarly focus puts into action what film studies scholar Debashree Mukherjee notes about the nature and potential of spectatorship. Mukherjee defines spectators as those "who watch, witness and are moved by what they see" (pg 81). She argues that mass spectatorship acts as a catalyst for mass politics. Mass spectatorship is studied through the 'recreational' actions of Mumbai's movie goers and 'political' actions of the participants in the Civil Disobedience rallies (1930-1931) in the city. Both groups intuit a "group affect…a kind of energetic pact that pulls the individual out of solipsism and into the collective" (pg 89). This group affect emerges through interactions with the screen surfaces of cinemas and the surfaces of the city's streets. Both surfaces of the screen and street "gather bodies into a shared space of distracted viewing with hawkers, film narrators and jokesters competing for attention" (pg 89) (Mukherjee 2025). In this thesis, users are examined as spectators who watch, witness and are moved by information as well as other demands on their attention. Furthermore, users' actions on screens, in the street, and at home are examined as individual actions that intuit implications for the collective.

From both phases of fieldwork, this project will analyse the wider processes of aggregation led by Swiggy and Zomato (RQ 1), and people's experience of this cumulative change in households and businesses (RQ 2). This means that user behaviour involves what people do on interfaces in light of their prior arrangements: does ordering-in make sense or should I hire a cook? Does listing my restaurant and paying platforms a commission fee make sense, or can I be found by consumers in a less expensive way? By playfully guessing, experimenting, assessing, users end up "putting food delivery platforms in their place," alongside pre-existing arrangements of cooking-related tasks

and time-use. This playful putting belongs to a mundane, pragmatic, and humble universe of actions. It resembles the gentle, course-corrective smack on the back of the head, referred to as a *tapli* in Mumbai slang. The *tapli* is delivered swiftly, most often in the city's overcrowded train as strangers ask the recipient to "watch out!" "Are you paying attention? You might die!" This action is humbly critical as it simply puts the proverbial ball in the recipient's court. When users playfully put platforms in their place by giving them a smack or a *tapli,* they do so with awareness of the limitations of their actions. Having said that, it is what begins as playful, that can and often does lead to gaming, resisting, boycotting, and delisting from platforms (Lalvani, 2026).

Furthermore, analysing surfaces enables groundedness as it highlights how the materiality of touch-screens has a bearing on people's actions as users. In the context of payments, anthropologist Bill Maurer (2005) has noted how transaction infrastructures afford ontological transformation and are not just modes of payment. In his words: "the prefix trans- denotes across, or through. Transaction derives from transigĕre, agĕre meaning to act or to drive" (pg 169).

Informed by Maurer, I think of *toggling as a surface level capacity that is ontologically transformative.* This means that toggling as an affordance created by computing enables users to move across platforms, switch between functions, and compose experiences of *being* household members, workers, and people with civic commitments, not only recipients of services. *P*rior to computing, toggle was a noun that referred to buttons on garments that *hold different ends together*. As both a noun and verb, the word toggling enables researchers studying what people do with their hands and fingers informed by their activities and movements across work and home, not simply in response to an app pushing them to tap a button and order food (Lalvani 2024). Attending to how people switch between and hold together enables scholars to studying user behaviour by attending to both the compositional width and playfulness of action afforded by touch as a mode

of interaction. Popular behaviouralist explanatory frameworks affix what people do as an automatic and predictable response to what infrastructure enables. In contrast, studying behaviour as being composed widely and playfully allows a moment's repose for us as scholars. We can peacefully gather and analyse wide data without slipping into behaviouralist explanations or worrying about seeming unfocused and uncritical.

The next subsection describes the in-person methods used to examine Swiggy and Zomato's users' experiences and interactions of buying and selling food in Mumbai.

4.3 In-person research methods

As a counterpart to platforms' cumulative effort of making a logistical surround, I examined users' navigation across many platforms' surfaces by conducting in-person fieldwork in Mumbai. Specifically, I examined what platforms meant for existing foodwork in terms of encounters between consumers and businesses (RQ 2.1), practices and infrastructures of cooking and serving (RQ 2.2), and rhythms, habits, and routines in households and businesses in Mumbai (RQ 2.3).

I examined business owners' user interactions and experiences of being found (RQ 2.1) on Swiggy and Zomato through two methods: (1) an event ethnography at two events and (2) interviews. Prior to DPhil, my interest in food delivery platforms started with my examination of what Swiggy and Zomato had done to the existing ways of running a restaurant.[28] So I have been following the tense relationship between food and hospitality industry associations and Swiggy and Zomato via the

[28]]https://medium.com/rawblog/the-offline-as-a-place-of-work-examining-food-discovery-and-delivery-by-digital-platforms-ed1efecdd841. Accessed September 2021.

news and social media and I am familiar with the factions within the industry. Due to this prior interest, I had followed the National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) on LinkedIn.

(1) I was led to my first *event ethnography* from the NRAI's LinkedIn page. There, I learnt about the first cloud kitchen convention being hosted in Mumbai when I was doing fieldwork in 2022. The lineup for the convention included famous restaurant owners, chefs, cloud kitchen owners like Rebel Foods, representatives of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the co-founder of Zomato and Swiggy's Chief Marketing Officer. As noted by platform scholars, it has been notoriously difficult to get access to platform executives. However, by going via industry, who are platforms' clients, I found a way in. I did not interview platform executives separately because I was interested in observing their relations with the industry and business owners. At this event, I also examined the pamphlets, schedule, and joined discussions between restaurant owner attendees about their experience of being aggregated on platforms.

The second event ethnography was conducted at Zomato's annual carnival 'Zomaland (2022)' held at the Jio World Garden in Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) in Mumbai. The carnival had a line-up of popular musicians, comedians, and food businesses that Zomato had curated. In previous years, it attracted over 150,000 attendees.[2][29] So I was curious about how Zomato translated its algorithmic curation of encounters between users to a physical encounter. I learnt about Zomaland from push notifications and noticed that the Zomato app had added Zomaland as a tab along with 'delivery,' dining,' and 'money' tabs at the bottom of the home screen from where I purchased

[29] https://www.businesstoday.in/entrepreneurship/story/after-a-long-hiatus-zomaland-is-back-says-zomatos-deepinder-goyal-349177-2022-10-06. Accessed September 2023.

tickets. I also noticed it being advertised in the weekly newsletter from the co-working space where I was conducting fieldwork.

(2) I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with restaurant owners, cloud kitchen owners, restaurant managers who operate restaurant management software used for daily operations of placing and processing orders online and in person, and those entering the industry through pop-ups. I gained access to several food and hospitality business owners at the cloud kitchen convention. On later dates, following the convention, I asked questions about their clientele, use of devices, social media, and questions about experience with Swiggy and Zomato in terms of commission fees, grievance redressal and so on.

To understand consumers' use and experiences of finding places to order from on Swiggy and Zomato, I draw from in-person interviews and observations with consumers that was conducted in their homes and in a co-working space. I visited 12 consumer households based on a convenience sample given the difficulty of gaining access to middle class households. I posted a call for participation as Instagram and Facebook stories[30] and excluded friends and family. Before and after the visits, I conducted observations in neighbourhoods to capture the mundane routines and encounters with food businesses. During the visit, I asked questions about people's views on platform services, their use of social media, individual and household scheduling, division of tasks around meals, and conducted a user-led walkthrough of the apps and of the kitchen. In a 9-month long immersion in a co-working space in suburban Mumbai, I attended various wellbeing workshops, learnt the food related habits, routines of my co-workers, and ate meals with some. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 co-workers and spoke about finding consumers to

[30] Stories are ephemeral posts that other users can respond to in a private messaging channel that I imagined would an easier communication, clarification and scheduling with potential informants.

10 food businesses that sold food as pop-ups in the co-working space. I used a similar discussion guide for semi-structured interviews in households and the co-working space with questions about people's views on platform services, use of social media, individual and household scheduling of meals and work routines, and division of tasks around meals.

During my research with consumers across these two sites, I learnt about the importance of the reviews and ratings sections in making a decision about ordering food or selecting a restaurant. So, I decided to conduct telephonic interviews with food bloggers and/or those who wrote reviews for Zomato. I randomly selected 5 reviewers and conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the motivations of review writers and their relationships with platforms (RQ 2.1). I asked questions about their blogging journey, how Zomato's 'spoonback' and 'connoisseur' programmes for bloggers worked, changes in reviews and ratings systems, and about the differences between Swiggy and Zomato.

I examined platform users' experiences of cooking, eating, and serving food (RQ 2.2) by combining 3 methods. (1) I conducted *ethnographic observations* about commercial kitchens' experiences using Swiggy and Zomato by attending the first cloud kitchen convention in Mumbai (2022) organised by the National Restauranteurs Association of India (NRAI). There, I met vendors of various convenience technologies: ingredient aids like premixes, software systems, and electric vehicles. Some of these vendors and their services were spotlighted as they had opportunities to make presentations in the break slots, others had stalls and offered demonstrations and pamphlets of their services. I also supplement insights from these first-hand experiences listening to CEOs and difficult to reach professionals with podcasts freely available online.

(2) I then conducted *10 semi-structured interviews* with food business owners, restaurant managers and mixologists. I asked questions about their clientele, use of devices, relationships with vendors, grievance redressal with platforms.

To get the point of view of how consumers use platforms in everyday cooking, eating, and serving, I draw from my visits to 12 consumer households and semi-structured interviews. I asked consumers questions about individual and household routines, division of labour around meals, use of devices, Swiggy, Zomato, social media and so on. How do consumers as a group organise practices of cooking and eating? I conducted an interview with Mr Shirish Deshpande, the co-founder of the Mumbai Consumers Association or Mumbai Grahak Panchayat (MGP). In the 1970s, the MGP was set up as a citizen-led grocery procurement and distribution cooperative in response to hoarding and inflation of essentials. I asked Adv. Deshpande questions about their cooperative grocery procurement and delivery system, their work with platforms, labour unions, and how they balance their membership's identities as consumers and workers. By asking about how a group of consumers collectively negotiates with a workers' union, I was interested in examining how groups compose their experiences, not only individuals.

(3) I then conducted *a content and document analysis* of the MGP's Marathi language monthly magazine for articles on food and digital platforms (2019-21). I looked for keywords "cooking," "eating," "digital platforms" as I was perusing the table of contents and read only those articles.

I learnt that the modality of payment (cash or digital) was crucial in users' experiences of buying and selling food via platforms, even though payment systems were not my research focus (RQ 2). This learning was due to my participation in the CBDC: Expanding Financial Inclusion or

Deepening the Divide? project[31] between April and May 2022. For that project, I conducted semi-structured interviews about cash and digital payments with food delivery workers, street vendors, and home chefs. I asked some of my DPhil project's participants like food and hospitality business owners an additional set of questions specifically about digital payments.

From these interviews and additional questions about payments, I got a sense that cash on delivery (CoD) created logistical hassles and risks for Swiggy and Zomato even though cash was important in their expansion. On querying platforms' blogs, I noticed that Swiggy's data scientists had published an applied computer science paper about building DyCoD, an algorithm that predicted risks associated with CoD at the Machine Learning and Knowledge Discovery in Databases conference (2023). For platform users — businesses, consumers, and delivery workers — digital payments were avenues of new forms of risk. I scrutinised the risks of digital payments for consumers through the MGP's participation in E-Commerce and the Digital Consumer, a webinar hosted by the Department of Consumers Affairs, Invest India,[32] and the IAMAI.

To understand how platform users' make routines and schedules as households and businesses with Swiggy and Zomato (RQ 2.3), I combined my in-person fieldwork across 3 sites in Mumbai (1) The *first site* was the Cloud Kitchen Convention organised by the National Restauranteurs Association of India (NRAI). I attended the convention to understand businesses' experiences of selling via Swiggy and Zomato. From there, I got access to and conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with restaurant owners, cloud kitchen owners, restaurant managers who operate restaurant management software in the everyday, and those entering the industry through pop-ups.

[31] See the report here: https://dci.mit.edu/cbdc-fi-1. Accessed January 2023.
[32] Invest India (2009), another non-profit venture set up by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). Make in India (2014) and Start-up India (2016) were launched under the banner of Invest India.

I asked specific questions about their experience with Swiggy and Zomato in terms of schedule of payments, commission fees, grievance redressal, and so on.

(2) The *second site* I immersed myself in was 12 consumer-users' homes and a co-working space in suburban Mumbai and made my own routine for nine months. This immersion across consumer's homes and places of work meant that along with others, I relied on and witnessed how hawkers near railway and metro stations, food trucks outside offices, *farsan* or snack shops set rhythms and menus of eating on weekdays, weekends, and festivals, alongside Swiggy and Zomato. Across both these sites, I conducted semi-structured interviews asking specific questions about individual and household scheduling and division of tasks around meals. Through these methods, I saw consumers balancing pressures from work. This helped me understand the use-values of convenience without having to expose some hidden meanings of consumption invisible to all others (Shapiro and Anjaria 2020).

(3) The *third site* was households at a neighbourhood level who have been attempting to slow down in Mumbai's notoriously fast life. I attended an Easter Walk organised by Go *Hallu Hallu* (slowly slowly in Marathi), a company that offers city walks and experiences of the city's rivers, informal markets, and various communities led by community members. From these experiences of moving with my interlocutors at a household and a neighbourhood level, I learnt about habit, repetition, and pace of the city's social infrastructure that enlivens, animates, and sustains people and sometimes uses platforms to this end.

5. Chapter plan

This thesis has seven chapters: a literature review chapter, followed by five empirical chapters, and finally a conclusion chapter that will summarise the argument and indicate directions for future

research. The chapter after this introduction will review the platformization literature by bringing together its three dimensions — techno-material, infrastructure-related, and social reproduction-related — that have been studied somewhat separately.

After addressing platform studies as a scholarly field in the literature review chapter, the thesis will progress onto the five chapters. Each of these chapters has a dedicated literature review section that situates the findings and analyses within debates that have occurred outside the field of platform studies.

Each of the five chapters will answer one sub-question each. Chapters 1 and 2 answer the first research question's two sub-questions about Swiggy and Zomato's promotional efforts on their apps (RQ 1.1) and their social media handles (RQ 1.2). Chapters 3, 4, and 5 answer the second research question's three sub-questions about platform users' interactions and experiences of using Swiggy and Zomato, through each of the sub-questions (RQ 2.1, 2.2, 2.1) respectively. The table below depicts this mapping of research questions, chapters, and methods:

Introduction Chapter		
Literature Review Chapter		
What platforms do to aggregate users? (RQ1)		
Chapter 1 Being pushed by push notifications: how platforms use their apps to build relationships with users	RQ 1.1	Digital ethnographic methods on Swiggy and Zomato's app interfaces.
Chapter 2	RQ 1.2	Digital ethnographic methods on Swiggy and

Being attentive to branding: how promotions are made and evaluated on social media		Zomato's official social media handles.
How do platform users interact with and experience aggregation of livelihood, consumption, and care? (RQ 2)		
Chapter 3 Making a market encounter on platforms	RQ 2.1	In-person, qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai with Swiggy and Zomato's consumer and business users.
Chapter 4 Making a meal: platformization of cooking, eating, and serving	RQ 2.2	
Chapter 5 Making routine meals with platforms	RQ 2.3	
Conclusion Chapter		

Figure 1: Table depicting how each chapter answers one sub-question and the methods used.

How do the two main research questions map onto the sub-questions about Swiggy and Zomato as cases? As explained in the methods and methodology section above, the chapters are led by platform agnostic objects and processes such as buttons, vending machines, etc from the logistical surround that I encountered during my research. These point to how things and processes travel across and are shared by socio-technical systems. Their movement sets the readers' focus on the wider frame of the logistical surround within which Swiggy and Zomato operate and are examined.

These platform agnostic objects serve as reminders that *focus* on Swiggy and Zomato is a navigational kind of focus that has *width* and not only depth.

The first two chapters draw on digital ethnographic fieldwork and examine Swiggy and Zomato as cultural agents that led me, as a researcher, to *being pushed* and *being attentive* to their aggregation efforts. By dipping into the researchers' experiences alongside other users' experiences, the chapters reflect on the limits of the researcher-critic's distance from their subject of study.

Chapter 1 is about how platform users are *being pushed* by food delivery apps' interfaces (RQ 1.1). This chapter examines how platforms' efforts to push information are cooperative and have to be mindful of coming off as pushy because users compose experiences with these apps in light of their experiences outside them too. It is led by a screenshot of virtual assistant software, Google Assistant's integration with Swiggy and Zomato. An auto-ethnographic reflection of how Swiggy and Zomato integrated with the clock app on my phone, illustrates how Swiggy and Zomato cooperated with Google to push information onto users. Based on my digital ethnographic observations as a researcher-critic-user, I discuss how push notifications from Swiggy and Zomato talked in customised, temporally sensitive, informal, friendly, and flirty ways. Talking in these ways, Swiggy and Zomato offered the convenience of ordering in by engaging with people's concerns around time, demands from work, and health. Even as yearly summaries and reports pushed users through sentimental narratives about their proximity to platforms, this did not de-emphasise the transactional aspects of use for consumers. Then I show how these apps are coded to gather user data with assistance from other tech companies to push users better through user segmentation of consumers, workers, and businesses.

Chapter 2 is about *being attentive* to Swiggy and Zomato's branding on social media platforms. Attentiveness of a researcher-critic-user enables examining how on-demand platforms use content creation on social media to aggregate users (RQ 1.2). In this chapter, I discuss how and what Swiggy and Zomato do to brand themselves on social media encourages people to talk back *via* social media which takes away control from and risks platforms' efforts to build reputations. The 'order food' button on businesses' Instagram pages leads the reader into this chapter because it shows how paths between on-demand and social media platforms are created. When this button is tapped, it leads users from Instagram to that businesses 'listing on Swiggy, Zomato and other on-demand platforms. The button also brings attention to how it was created by cooperation between platforms and the resultant transformation of retail. The chapter offers an account of how Swiggy and Zomato use their official social media handles to create friendly sounding promotional talk. In doing so they rely on external creative agencies and in-house creatives from India's mediascape. In addition to what Swiggy and Zomato post, I highlight how an unofficial promotional culture exists. This includes Swiggy and Zomato's users as well as current and former employees, who publicly talk about these platforms on social media. By detailing platform user cultures of complaint on Twitter and other genres of unofficial promotional culture, I discuss how platforms' pushy promotions risked their reputation, and it could lead to a potential loss of workers.

The remaining three chapters move focus from what platforms do, to what users do as they toggle between livelihood, consumption, and care. Each of these three chapters analyses user experience and interaction in terms of how *users make encounters with each other* on platforms, *make meals* through commercial and domestic cooking practices, as well as how they *make routines*, schedules and habits. The emphasis on making (encounters, meals, routines) is because these chapters aim

to offer a compositional account of platform use as users toggle between home-work and production-consumption.

Chapter 3 is about the *making of market encounters* between consumers and varied food and hospitality businesses listed as users on platform interfaces (RQ 2.1). This chapter identifies how consumers and businesses see and try to be seen as a fertile ground for scholarly inquiry. Grocery delivery platform, BigBasket's vending machine, at the start highlights how dark stores and cloud kitchens are platform agnostic arrangements that enable platforms to move between functions of food delivery, quick commerce, and grocery delivery and join food businesses that have long grappled with the question of how-to-be-seen by consumers. Interfaces are studied as sites of market encounter, much like street vendors' efforts to make encounters with consumers by setting up stalls around commuting infrastructures. Rather than analysing platforms' invisibilising effects, this chapter studies platforms' impact on the food and hospitality industries by explaining how the popularity of platform interfaces has manifested in terms of interfaces being crowded with listings of businesses. Platforms address this crowding through algorithmic curation which they claim acts neutrally in making encounters. This is guaranteed only if businesses follow the norms of circulation in listing themselves and if consumers follow norms in reviewing and rating those businesses. However, users — businesses, industry associations, and consumers — often challenge platforms' claims of neutrality based on their experiences from different platforms. The chapter then discusses the implications of users' circumventions on ideas and practices of competition, fair prices, and in writing a genuine review.

Chapter 4 studies how businesses and consumers in Mumbai used platforms in *making a meal* which involves cooking and its concomitant practices and infrastructures (RQ 2.2) of *serving and eating*. In this chapter, the acts of buying and selling food via Swiggy and Zomato are located in

pre-existing flows of goods between commercial and domestic spaces. At the start of the chapter, the annually published Godrej Trends Report situates platforms in an existing flow of ready-to-eat foods, sauces, snacks etc. In that context, the chapter studies what serving via Swiggy and Zomato does to practices and infrastructures of commercial cooking and what ordering in means for gendered expectations of running domestic kitchens on urban Indian women. Therefore, it analyses what ordering in via Swiggy and Zomato means for households ongoing efforts to balance demands from livelihood activities, income-expenditure, health concerns, and expressions of love and affection. These practices and infrastructures of serving and eating involve leisure, entertainment, and money which cannot be sought through maximising efficiency alone. Finally, this chapter brings attention to how Swiggy and Zomato rely on the role of platformization of money and payments systems in enabling businesses' serving and households' being served.

In chapter 5, I examine how platform users in Mumbai were *making habits and routines with platforms* (RQ 2.3) by studying existing demands on users' time. Consumers and businesses habits are examined before, after, and around using Swiggy and Zomato, across scales and sites. This approach illuminates how platform consumers' food habits and routine are imprinted by what consumers do for a livelihood and commuting, not only platforms' information push. The emergence and popularity of M-indicator, an app popular in Mumbai amongst public transport users, is analysed to bring attention to how Swiggy and Zomato's ability to make habits is contingent on how people balance multiple scales and sites. While food delivery platforms promised speeding up on consumers' behalf, consumers were cautious of what this meant for their health, the environment, and workers. As city-dwellers, some people used social media to collectivise leisure and slowing down through city-walks involving food. Business users of Swiggy and Zomato engage with the pace set for their organisations by their selling via platforms,

especially what digital payments mean for their existing credit-debit cycles. Finally, I highlight the temporal expectations in the life of a platform through the case of two dead platforms: Burrp! and Tiny Owl.

In the conclusion chapter, I summarise the significance of studying two socio-technical processes of aggregation and toggling. I discuss the significance of these processes for platform studies and for studying emergent technologies that merge AI and platforms to enable interactions like agentic payments. I also summarise my findings and analyses about platforms' aggregation and how it is experienced by consumers and businesses to indicate how these chapters have answered the two RQs and their sub-questions. Based on analysing the relationships between socio-technical systems' aggregation and people's toggling across such systems, I identify an emergent pathway of civic action: user advocacy. In India, recent user advocacy efforts seem to put into action my thesis' efforts to reframe platformized convenience.

Literature Review Chapter

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1. Introduction

This literature review chapter focuses on scholarship about platformization from platform studies, a multi-disciplinary field of study. As indicated in the Introduction chapter, this thesis addresses two limitations in this field: *firstly*, how platforms act individually *and* collectively along with other socio-technical systems to aggregate a broad and wide range of users and activities. S*econdly,* how users — individuals and organisations — toggle across activities of livelihood, consumption, caring for oneself and others, and leisure that surround buying and selling food via platforms.

Studying aggregation and toggling in the ways identified above includes approaching questions around information push, branding, marketing as well as how people make meals as households and food and hospitality businesses. These questions have been examined by social science literature that does not always overlap with platform studies scholarship that I address here. Therefore, within each of the five empirical chapters in this thesis, there are references to this social scientific literature.

2. Three dimensions of platformization

In the three sub-sections that follow, I focus on three dimensions of platformization from within the field of platform studies. These dimensions are often studied somewhat separately due to what the introduction identified as a deep but narrow focus on either what platforms do or what users do either as workers, consumers, or businesses. This thesis will complement existing knowledge by approaching the three dimensions of platformization with a wide and navigational focus.

2.1. Techno-material dimensions of platformization

In this sub-section, I review literature about how platforms use computational power and software or techno-material affordances to frame my analysis of how Swiggy and Zomato aggregate users via promotions on their apps (RQ 1.1, Chapter 1) and social media platforms (RQ 1.2, Chapter 2).

Anne Helmond's (2015) work on platformization as a techno-material process has shown how platforms decentralise functions while maintaining centralised platform power. Through the case of Facebook (FB) offering Application Programming Interface (APIs) to developers, Helmond showed how FB allowed limited access to their data and functionality so that other platforms would be built on top of FB. Dating app Tinder for instance, was built on top of FB meaning that Tinder users could sign in to Tinder using their FB profile. How did platforms recentralise power by decentralizing functions described above? Platforms were able to recentralise power by *pulling i*nformation from those who use their APIs. So, when Tinder used the FB API, it enabled FB to pull information from Tinder. Like FB, Zomato made their APIs public in 2011 so that they "get to create an eco-system of developers and apps who use our content and also help us create content for our platform." In building their API, they relied on "partners" like Makemytrip and

Mapmyindia.[33] Building a developer ecosystem also shaped future techno-material advancements, sometimes by routing investments through ex-employee networks.[34]

APIs offer *interoperability* to software or computational systems so that they can exchange information and work with other pieces of software and systems. These objects emerged at a point in the history of software at which the demand for personal computing grew and software was commercialized (Bucher 2013). Interoperable computational systems and cooperation between platforms enables software and data flows. As a result, some scholars have suggested identifying nodes in "integrated platform ecosystem, through gatekeeping, lock in, cross-subsidizing or combining crucial data flows," rather than identifying the intricacies of a single platform company. These nodes could be infrastructural services like payment systems, search engines, app stores, and so on (van Dijck, Nieborg, and Poell 2019). Being cognizant of the role of the state in making interoperable platform systems (Miller 2023; Steinberg, Mukherjee, and Punathambekar 2022) is important to foreground the minutiae of buying and selling food online.

On principles of interoperability, the Indian state has been working with private capital to build "digital public infrastructures" like India Stack that combines digital payments and biometric identification systems like Aadhar. Within India Stack, United Payments Interface (UPI) is the cashless layer, which the state co-owns via the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), a "non-profit venture" (Panday 2023). A variety of platforms, including Swiggy and Zomato, prefer digital transactions as they reduce the risk of leakages associated with cash (Deep et al. 2023).

[33] https://www.zomato.com/blog/launching-the-zomato-api-key-learnings. Accessed April 2023.
[34] In 2017, after Zomato acquired Runnr, a logistics company, they hired its founders as employees. These employees later quit to start-up a metabolic health company called 'Ultrahuman', with an investment from the CEO of Zomato. See: https://www.livemint.com/companies/start-ups/healthtech-wearable-startup-ultrahuman-raises-17-5-million-in-funding-11629180451304.html. Accessed May 2023.

Whereas for users, digital payments increase risk for users (Narula, Swartz, and Frizzo-Barker 2023) as there are minimal routes of redressal.

The interoperable systems detailed above are outside Swiggy, Zomato. These systems *surround* individual platforms and are important pieces of the puzzle to understand how platforms operate collectively. In my case, interoperable payments and identification systems enable food delivery platforms to creep beyond their core function. In addition to digital payments, Swiggy and Zomato hosted and later offered buy now pay later (BNPL) services themselves.[35] This raises serious questions about how food delivery platforms can offer financial services that the Central Bank has deemed risky.

Many scholar-critics have attached the term 'creep' as a suffix to analyse this kind of wide and broad movement of socio-technical systems beyond their intended use. 'Function creep' refers to how systems expand gradually and stealthily beyond their intended use (Koops 2021) whereas 'influencer creep' refers to how influencer-like practices are expected from professionals across various fields (Bishop 2023).

Interoperable systems that enable different forms of creep or an imperceptible broadening and widening of what systems do, also challenge our focus as platform scholars. How can we claim to focus narrowly on food delivery platforms, when the subject of our study is constantly exceeding our focus? Informed by the work cited above and my critique of adopting only a deep and narrow focus, I ask: how do interfaces become popular sites of buying, selling, and doing work (RQ 1.1)?

[35] https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/startup/fomo-drives-swiggy-to-evaluate-bnpl-service-customers-asked-if-they-want-to-settle-bills-by-month-end-8091441.html. Accessed March 2025.

Even as my 'focus' is on Swiggy and Zomato, I use the unqualified word 'interfaces' to observe cooperation in something as competitive as branding. Promotions and branding are obviously instances of competition between platforms, as they seek to draw users away from one site to another.

In addition to branding as competition, chapters 1 and 2 in this thesis will analyse the platform agnostic dimensions of promotions like push notifications and content creation on social media to aggregate users and activities. Together, both chapters will analyse Swiggy and Zomato as cultural agents, not just sites of livelihood for platform workers. Chapter 1 will offer a wide and navigational account of how platforms pushed information through push notifications (PNs) and other *pushy* elements in the user interaction (UI), such as buttons and suggestions. Swiggy and Zomato, using Google Assistant's API, pushed users by suggesting: "check Zomato and Swiggy for lunch recommendations." This prompt reached users even when users were not even on either Swiggy or Zomato's apps and were simply on the android clock app.[36]

Therefore, different platforms' cooperation resulted in information push seeking to aggregate users on to Swiggy and Zomato. Both these platforms had also integrated with social media and streaming platforms to host simple elements of UI that led users from those interfaces to Swiggy and Zomato's apps. Let me offer two examples of this movement of users via tapping buttons. The first such element of UI is the "order food" button offered by Instagram to restaurants' Instagram pages. In 2020, Instagram offered business users "action buttons" that would push users from Instagram to the businesses' listing on on-demand platforms in several countries like the United

[36] https://bytes.swiggy.com/ok-google-lets-order-from-swiggy-90d2bd0b9c3a. Accessed August 2023.

States, Romania, Qatar, Vietnam, and India.[37] The second example of buttons pushing information and users across platform interfaces is from Swiggy's integration with streaming service Hotstar. During the Indian Premier League (IPL), an annual cricket event that Swiggy co-sponsored, Swiggy integrated with Hotstar that was streaming the event. During a match, if a batsman hit a six, Hotstar prompted users to avail "Swiggy6" coupon code and get a 60% discount.[38] Platforms' cooperation over elements of UI that aimed to aggregate users involved the work of various managerial platform workers like engineers, developers, marketeers and so on.

In addition to using UI to push users and information described above, Chapter 2 will examine how *on-demand platforms,* like Swiggy and Zomato, *become users of social media platforms* to push information and aggregate users (RQ 1.2). Both Swiggy and Zomato relied on in-house and external creative workers and marketeers to produce and post promotional content via their official social media handles. Interdependence in branding is evident in how platforms work together — using elements of UI to push information via their apps (RQ 1.1) and by being users on their platforms (RQ 1.2) — to gain access to potential users of their services.

Analysing platform agnostic processes of promotional information push and content creation via social media through chapters 1 and 2 offers an opportunity to understand the limits to platforms' expansion. Push engages with how touch, as a mode of interaction, has had a bearing on people's abilities as users to navigate being aggregated beyond what infrastructures do. If platforms are built on the principles of interoperability and information exchange across computational systems,

[37] https://help.instagram.com/1419650861499317. Accessed September 2022.
[38] https://www.afaqs.com/interviews/what-makes-ipl-special-for-swiggy-director-marketing-umesh-krishna-fields. Accessed September 2022.

how do users navigate these evolving systems? Media scholars' histories of haptics or touch offer an account of how people have always used their hands and fingers to make sense of being pushed by information from commerce. Both gaming company Nintendo and electronics company Apple ran ad campaigns in the early 2000s to teach people about how to use touch screens. Working together, these companies used branding to create "mass haptic subjects" (Parisi 2018) who had to be taught that screens were also input devices due to techno-material advancements, not just viewing devices anymore (Plotnick 2017).

This thesis will extend the work cited above by being attentive to how users make sense of information push as consumers and businesses. It will examine how platforms enable "transacting ontologies" (Maurer 2013) or how using platform infrastructures can have a bearing on *being* consumers, business owners, and workers. Anthropologist Bill Maurer has argued that technologies of transaction afford ontological *trans*formation, not only *ex*change. *Ex* in exchange denotes going out from a stable pole to another, whereas *trans* derived from *transigere*, meaning to act or drive (Maurer 2013).

By adopting Maurer's view on transformation through transactions, I examine users' interaction and experience of *being* consumers and businesses through what they *do* or their actions on Swiggy and Zomato.[39] In other words, being consumers or businesses is examined through the practices and activities of navigating an integrated platform ecosystem and logistical surround, involving the state, and platform agnostic elements of UI that push information. In doing so, I further the

[39] Dourish (2004) makes the case for human-computer interaction scholars to view interaction through phenomenological approaches that do not separate doing and being or action and experience.

argument that user experience is compositional and involves moving across various apps (Dourish 2021), not only as a response to stimuli from Swiggy and Zomato's push.

In the next section, I ask: what do touch-based interactions such as tapping, swiping, and toggling within integrated platform ecosystems mean for buying, working, selling and being consumers, workers and businesses (RQ 2)?

2.2. Infrastructural dimensions of platformization

In this section, I review the literature on the infrastructural dimensions of platformization. Platforms become infrastructures (Plantin et al. 2018) be it in consumption infrastructures like retail (Kitchin and Doge 2011) or in livelihoods (Caribou and Qahla 2020), but little is known about users' experiences of navigating these popular infrastructures. I will address this gap in the literature by examining how consumers and business find each other on Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces (RQ 2.1, Chapter 3).

The existing literature shows us how digital platforms have come to offer essential infrastructural services to people. For instance, Google's web search which has become an infrastructure in searching the web and in people's daily lives (platformization as infrastructure). Additionally, existing infrastructures are reorganised along the logic of platforms (infrastructuralisation of platforms). Consider how Google Maps enables new platforms to use its functionality or be built on top of it (Plantin et al. 2018). Studying "actually existing platformization" has shown us how[40]

[40] During the pandemic, food delivery service Doordash, claimed to "deliver good" through partnership-driven initiatives that diverted surplus food to hunger relief organisations and worked with the New York Department of Education to deliver food to medically fragile students. Therefore, van Doorn et al suggest we study "actually existing platformization" (van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma 2021).

platforms exploit institutional deficiencies and influence existing infrastructures. This occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic when states used platform networks to distribute meals (van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma 2021).

Most critical scholarship analyses algorithmic mediation through ocular centric questions of visibility or invisibility. According to this scholarship, users' interactions are with interfaces and behind these highly visible screens lie the human effort of logistics workers and physical infrastructure that remain invisible. Land (Greene 2022), pipes, plumbing of cellular network services (Mukherjee 2019) and cloud services (Narayan 2022) are all examples of physical infrastructure platforms do not own. Furthermore, this infrastructure is assumed to remain invisible to common users. Let me clarify this point with an example of the physical infrastructure of dark stores and cloud kitchens. Communications scholar Aaron Shapiro (2022) has argued that "going dark" be it through dark stores or cloud kitchens, "threatens the publicness of urban markets as infrastructures for the provision of basic resources" (pg 170). What is the effect of a less public urban market for consumers? Shapiro reflects:

> "The effect is to soothe platform users into "a mode of unconscious consumption that dislocates buying online from the geography of fulfillment" (Hill, 2020: 522). And like commodity fetishism in Marx's analysis of capital (1976: 163–177), that dislocation nurtures a "pollution of the sensible" (Hill, 2020: 522)—a logistical fetishism—that makes it difficult for consumers to apprehend the labor involved in and environmental costs of fulfillment as the quintessential platform-commodity." (Shapiro 2022, pg 172).

Shapiro's assumption about consumers' inability to see what their consumption means is shared by most scholars who analyse buying online as an activity that can habituate consumers into easy and convenient practices of social reproduction that devalue labour. As evident in the excerpt above, consumers' physical distance and their inability to see labour makes it difficult for consumers to understand the unethical working conditions and environmental costs which creates

a “logistical fetishism” (Shapiro 2022). The ubiquity of platforms and the ease of ordering online without going to the market creates unconscious consumption since people never leave the marketplace (Hill 2020). Additionally, being a purchasing consumer online involves relatively less human interaction than even creating content on social media. This reduced interaction is imagined to have made purchasing online an asocial activity (Ramizo 2022).

I do not fully endorse the assumption about users’ unawareness in the literature cited above for two reasons. My first contention is: the argument that platforms invisibilise certain physical infrastructures or labour is more the statement of an empirical fact and might not really constitute an analytical claim. The prefixes ‘dark’ and ‘cloud’ already communicate that these spaces are made to be invisible in physical encounters between consumers and businesses. The terms already indicate that these spaces will be visible as virtual shopfronts on interfaces. My second contention in assuming that users are lulled into laziness by platformized convenience is with the framing of visibility or invisibility. This framing means that scholarship remains clustered around sight; less is known about how consumers and businesses find each other by using other senses and forms of sense making, alongside sight.

If we cannot assume that platforms “soothe platform users” into platform use how can the effect of platforms on their users use be understood? Through Chapter 3 in this thesis, I will address this question and offer an alternative. The alternative approach to the effect of platforms on users is to attend carefully to the moment of encounter and how consumers and businesses encounter each other on platforms, thereby slowing down our analysis of the effects of this encounter in favour of describing what transpires first. In these encounters, using one’s hands, fingers, and heads, along

with seeing and being seen, in interacting with interfaces will be examined. In fact, users rely on touching with their hands and fingers in order to see and be seen. Consumers tap, swipe, scroll, and toggle as they make sense of how-to-encounter virtual shopfronts; similarly, businesses tap, swipe, scroll, and toggle as they think of how-to-be-encountered by consumers.

This thesis' multi-sensorial approach to encounters argues that we, as scholars, cannot assume that "going dark" or virtualizing shopfronts automatically creates demand from consumers or supply of food from business users. Similar to the insight that attention and visibility does not automatically translate into sales (Wang 2025), studying moments of encounter in our palms can offer less totalising, more realistic, and hopeful accounts of platform-user relations. By studying how encounters occur between consumers and businesses in the palm of our hands, scholars can attend to conflict between platforms and their users. Conflict arises as both users tap, swipe, scroll, and toggle to improve their outcomes from encountering and being encountered. Users' efforts to improve their outcomes invariably lead to users contesting the terms of aggregation in ways that platforms cannot foresee and often influencing the shape platformization takes.

The second benefit of examining how-to-be-encountered: virtual shopfronts enable businesses to switch across platforms and reduce dependence on either Swiggy or Zomato. Switching or toggling across platforms is a touch-based affordance that requires hands, fingers, and heads, it is not only an ocular phenomenon. Using platforms to retail and distribute across platforms means that businesses require loquacious packaging, branding and marketing, to be seen by consumers. To address this new need of being encountered across platforms, there has been a mushrooming of business to business (B2B) services that cater to needs of businesses to go beyond big

aggregators.[41] Similar to business users' movements across platforms, platforms themselves constantly evolve their functions and offerings. For this reason, Chapter 3 is led by grocery delivery platform's vending machine that located in residential buildings, offices, and hostels and is stocked by dark stores. It is meant to be a reminder that a*s* scholars, we might 'focus' on one function of food delivery, but both platforms and their users move across interfaces.

My approach of studying the question of how-to-be-encountered detailed above, rather than assuming that visible interfaces can straightforwardly determine users' habits, furthers existing literature. This slim body of existing research is on the *actually existing use practices* of platform users like consumers and workers. It shows us the limits of assuming that virtualized shopfronts can engineer consumers' habits and dispositions. A qualitative and ethnographic study by David Bissell (2020) has shown that people's habits of ordering in took route over their life course, changing orientations to ordering food home and discomforts with it, and were not simply engineered by platforms. Even if the design of purchasing online may be asocial (Ramizo 2022), it does not automatically produce asocial consumers. Bissell's inquiry has demonstrated how several consumers have fraught relations with their smartphones for several reasons including that it made them asocial. This dissatisfaction with connectivity also extended to discomfort with using food delivery apps (Bissell 2020). For workers as platform users, gig work platforms intensify risks but platforms' "Janus-faced" permissive power of delegating control while retaining power (Vallas and Schor 2020) has aided workers in some ways.[42]

[41] https://www.outlookbusiness.com/the-big-story-1/lead-story-8/rise-of-b2b-startups-in-india-5620; https://www.bain.com/insights/the-rise-of-digital-bazaars-in-india/; https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/sme-sector/how-tech-startups-are-boosting-the-growth-of-small-e-commerce-businesses-in-india/articleshow/91703404.cms?from=mdr. Accessed March 2025.

[42] Platforms have eased migrants' entry into labour markets (van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham 2020) and facilitated their absorption into local contexts (van Doorn and Vijay 2021). This has enabled wealth accumulation (Surie and Koduganti 2016) especially in

Economic sociologist Michel Callon (2021) offers an inventive way to hold together the two opposing pulls that split platform scholars across the paragraphs above. One pull is to analyse how platforms programme user behaviour for their own benefit and habituate users. The second pull takes analysis in the exact opposite direction by bringing attention to what platforms enable often by delegating control; it is represented by the slim literature about people's actually existing use practices. To hold what works for users together with how it might enrich platforms, Callon has referred to platforms as exploratoriums. The term exploratorium comes from the interactive science museums in San Francisco created by Frank Oppenheimer in the 1960s. For Callon, platforms are spaces of exploration that "equip people with diverse tools to reassess and navigate their needs" (pg 221). Studying platforms as spaces of exploration and encounter is generative because it allows scholars to hold opposing experiences together; encounters obviously benefit platforms but also transform users. The latter is often discarded data as it does not fit a critical account of platforms (Doyuran, Lalvani, and Unal 2025).

I further Callon's framing of platforms as exploratoriums by examining the moment of encounter between consumers and businesses on Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces (RQ 2.1) in Chapter 3. That chapter will analyse the role of algorithmic curation in making an encounter between consumers and businesses' virtual shopfronts on interfaces. Virtual shopfronts are platform agnostic objects which means that they can be set up across e-commerce, social media, quick commerce platforms, not only food delivery. This offers scholars a tool to analyse how platforms

the aftermath of agrarian distress (Surie and Sharma 2019). Platforms' permissive mediation also helped workers gain skills to professionalise their services (Raval and Pal 2019), accrue socio-cultural capital through interactions with consumers (Kameswaran, Cameron, and Dillahunt 2018).

like Swiggy and Zomato are enabled to dabble in dark store-led quick commerce and compete with grocery delivery platforms. Virtual shopfronts can be set up for dark stores that hold stock for quick commerce, not only cloud kitchens that supply food for food delivery. Similarly, businesses-as-users take advantage of virtual shopfronts on interfaces as platform agnostic objects that have pluralized venues of market encounters, as they set up shopfronts across e-commerce, social media, quick commerce platforms, not only food delivery. Even outside the hospitality industry, terms of aggregation onto platforms like commission fees, paid by businesses for the service of visibility to consumers, were crucial practices in the shape that platformization took.[43]

Analysing how platforms curate encounters between users by offering objects like virtual shopfronts extends existing research about users' explorations via on-demand platforms. These studies have acknowledged how grocery delivery platforms have opened up access to affordable and healthy food in transportation scare areas or food deserts (Dillahunt, Simioni, and Xu n.d.) or how food delivery platforms' algorithmic mediation has transformed consumers' and workers' participation in the nighttime economy (Lalvani 2022). Some studies have also shown the scope for positive and supportive interactions between drivers and consumers in ride-hailing (Kameswaran, Cameron, and Dillahunt 2018). For instance, food delivery workers' chance encounters with television actors led to actors offering them support during their strikes (Raval and Lalvani 2022).

[43] Consider how the tech start-up ecosystem of neighbourhood management and neighbourhood e-commerce offered virtual shopfronts to businesses interested in scale on a pay per use, and not a commission basis. See: https://www.livemint.com/companies/start-ups/mygate-acquires-mycommunity-genie-to-strengthen-community-commerce-play-11639138594711.html. Accessed March 2024.

What is lacking in the works cited above is that platform mediated encounters in the findings are not identified as an analytically compelling development. There are two exceptions. One, when scholars have reckoned with how consumers express resistance on subjects like misleading advertising, consumerism, and when consumers act as a group in their use of new media technologies (Lekakis 2022). The second exception is more recent. Scholars have made the case for an "after-visibility" approach that examines the processes that follow the act of being seen, the process of translation and conversion of attention into sales and revenue (Wang 2025).

Chapter 3 addresses the limits in knowledge identified above by reckoning with how-to-be-encountered as an analytically compelling development for three reasons. *First*, it is useful in examining how consumers and business users shape platformization through their participation in the logistical surround that enables convenience (Neves and Steinberg 2024). *Secondly*, encounters rather than visibility or invisibility keep us as scholars open to multi-sensorial experiences led by people's hands, fingers, and heads, not only eyes. Studying how people navigate crowds on interfaces, encounter each other, and act in order to see and be seen with their eyes but also hands and fingers, will continue to be crucial to scholars interested in socio-technical systems as AI generated content crowding our screens further. In the emergent generative AI landscape, commentators refer to AI-made content on e-commerce, social media, email and so on as 'spam,' 'slop,'[44] and 'sludge'.[45] These terms communicate how users have to navigate a flood of content drowns us.[46] Therefore, the t*hird* advantage of studying algorithmically curated encounters is that

[44] https://simonwillison.net/2024/May/8/slop/. Accessed April 2025.
[45] https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.6716185. Accessed April 2025.
[46] https://www.wired.com/story/ai-generated-medium-posts-content-moderation/. Accessed April 2025.

it places platform mediation through objects like virtual shopfronts both empirically and analytically in a longer history and an emergent future of generative AI.

The literature review within Chapter 3 places platform encounters analytically in a longer history of how commerce and businesses make encounters with potential consumers. Here, lets first contend with the empirical lineage by thinking of the theatrics of street vendors that attract consumers which makes them hyper-visible in the street, even if their labour might be invisiblised in national accounts. Without programming, street vendors have anticipated demand by being embedded in people's lives through knowledge of neighbourhoods, schedules, dietary preferences, cooking skills as per region, religion, caste and so on. Hawkers develop close relationships with regulars since they ask about your taste: do you prefer sweet, medium or spicy? Organised food and hospitality businesses have used media like newspaper columns, on television, and cooking tutorials and other 'digital food culture' on social media (Lewis 2018). The rise of the celebrity chef (Rousseau 2012) and food bloggers (De Solier 2013) are examples of how sellers bring visibility to their work and themselves. In India, social media has influenced restaurants' focus on the appearance and theatricality of food like the use of nitrogen or bright food colouring (Nanjangud and Reddy 2020). What do these changing encounters with infrastructures and modalities of provisioning do to our practices of care, consumption, and convenience at home and outside?

The next section examines the implications of aggregation of both livelihood and care on households buying food and businesses selling food via platform interfaces. It asks: what does the popularity of Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces as sites of aggregation of buying, selling and logistics work such as delivery mean for how people compose activities of livelihood and care?

2.3. Social reproduction dimensions of platformization

This section reviews literature on social reproduction dimensions of platformization to understand the practices and infrastructures of domestic and commercial cooking, eating, serving (RQ 2.2, Chapter 4) and routines (RQ 2.3, Chapter 5).

Most examinations of platforms and social reproduction have *seen platforms as employers* and offered the point of view of workers. From this research that has studied platforms as employers we know how service norms get reproduced, be it through how formalised hiring practices address recipients' safety concerns (Ticona and Mateescu 2018) or by offering filters based on caste, religion etc to shortlist workers (Rathi and Tandon 2021). Even crowd work platforms, where remote workers complete micro-tasks online, reproduced gendered division of labour in workers' homes. Even though crowdwork is not about the provision of socially reproductive services like cooking, cleaning etc, it has enabled women's participation in paid work alongside unpaid domestic work (Wallis 2021). Studying exchanges between workers and consumers shows shifting cultural norms (Raval and Lalvani 2022). For instance, food delivery platforms' automation of finding a cook and delivery person has opened up this work to men and women worker-users of all religions and castes (Lalvani 2021).

The work cited above has a deep yet narrow view of platforms as employers. Due to this, most research has not reckoned with how different platforms have cumulatively altered the landscape of how people compose both livelihood and care across different platforms. There are some exceptions. In 'Left to Our Own Devices: Coping with Insecure Work in a Digital Age', communications scholar Julia Ticona (2022) reports from her study with a diverse sample of

workers whose livelihoods and care work are both impacted by and mediated through platforms. On one end in her sample are low-wage service workers for whom devices and social media platforms offer a reprieve from the demands of service work in the hospitality industry. On the other end of Ticona's sample are high-wage managerial workers whose work is mediated via devices and care work is tethered. 'Tethered care' refers to how both these kinds of workers use technologies like video calls, remote working and so on to do reproductive care work like cooking, cleaning, and maintaining relationships with friends and family, despite differences in their livelihoods (Ticona 2022).

Amongst the few scholars who have examined the cumulative effect of techno-material systems somewhat widely, the norm has been to examine the links between reproductive work and productive work. For instance, Ticona's work (2022) that has been examined how performances of reproductive work are restructured by digitalization. Similarly, political economist and feminist theorist Ursula Huws (2019) has offered a typology of six forms of household labour to further our understanding of what has happened to housework. Huws' typology includes consumption-work or the unpaid work involved in accessing goods and services from the market through grocery shopping, assembling flat pack furniture and so on (Huws 2019). At home, housewives have done the *work* of consumption "on the other side of the paycheck." This consumption-work brings them in antagonism with various forms of capital like the supermarket, landlord, the State, not just one employer (Weinbaum and Bridges 1976). Ordering food online posits consumers alongside housewives on the frontlines between the home and market (Solomon 2016) as well as makes businesses consumers of their service. Therefore, feminist scholars like Kathi Weeks (2011) have pointed to how the boundaries between 'work' and 'non-work' are blurred. Anthropologist Sareeta

Amrute (2019) has demonstrated how very different kinds of digital labourers do care. In her analysis, workers and technologies align and realign based on workers' ethical concerns and techno-affects. From fieldwork in a startup in the Indian city of Bangalore, Hemangini Gupta (2024) has analysed how startups can enable non-elite workers access to experimental forms of consumption otherwise unavailable to them. Gupta highlights what this means for young women specifically:

> "As professional employees, young women are especially suitable candidates to be enrolled in experiments to test and perfect new technologies. They contribute their care and affective attachments to growing the company and enabling its profits through both their ideas and their participation in innovation." (pg 201).

The limitation in the literature cited above is that it has examined in terms of what they *do* in terms of their effects, consequences, and implications on the family, workplace, or the start-up*,* rather than *how they are done*. So less is known about how non-work activities like leisure, fun, and care are done on their own terms. This emphasis in feminist approaches to what non-work activities do has rightly saturated and highlighted their contribution by showing the links between the household and workplace to compensate for a historical lack of visibility and valuation of care work. It is due to this visibility and saturation that we know how care work enables recreation. However, this has also meant that we have ended up painting a picture of care in which the role of work is oversaturated. It has unintentionally resulted in scholars being unable to analyse leisure and entertainment as activities and experiences in and of themselves. We, as scholars, unwittingly remain blinkered to anything other than the work that enables seeking leisure and entertainment. Cooking obviously involves care work but it also involves activities and experiences of leisure and entertainment such as eating, being served, and being entertained. These concomitant activities show us that seeking leisure, fun, and entertainment can be forms of caring for oneself and are not only passive or contrived acts of receiving services by outsourcing one's work.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine how care, leisure, and fun are done and remedy this lack of feminist interest in these categories on their own terms, not only in terms of their effects or what they do for consumers or businesses. These chapters study how Swiggy and Zomato's aggregation *tethers leisure* through practices and infrastructures of cooking at home and outside as well as through schedules and routines. Tethered leisure is examined in terms of how it is experienced individually as people use platforms to provision for households by buying food and provision for businesses by selling food. Individuals' provisioning and being a worker, consumer, member of a household, city-dweller, and citizen, all have collective implications, evident in how people act as households, consumers organisations, and food and hospitality industry associations.

Swiggy and Zomato tether leisure by linking commercial kitchens to households and join the existing flows of food between the home and market. For this reason, Chapter 4 about cooking is opened by the annually published Godrej Trends report which shows how even prior to the platform, home cooking has been mediated through the market. Home cooks purchase cooking aids like sauces or instant noodles from the food industry and ingredients. Chapter 5 examines tethered leisure by examining how platform consumers' food habits and routine are imprinted by what consumers do for a livelihood. It situates the decision to order in alongside flows from work and commuting, not only platforms' information push. The chapter also examines how businesses as users understand the impact of platforms and balance their work as individual sellers and their collective existence as industries.

Across the three sub-sections of this literature review, platforms' use has appeared in both domestic and commercial provisioning by households and businesses that compose activities of livelihood, leisure, and care. People's use stems from their movements across work, life, leisure, in different capacities, not only their positions as labour or capital. Using platforms, consumers in households and businesses in industries transforms both users and platforms. As users, people and organisations, both hold together production, consumption, and *reproduction* creating meanings, habits, businesses, collectives, interactions and levity.

Chapter 1: Being pushed by push notifications: how platforms use their apps to build relationships with users

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1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I study how Swiggy and Zomato use their app interfaces to aggregate users by pushing information through promotions and branding (RQ 1.1). This chapter contributes to scholarship on how platforms and their algorithmic systems aggregate users by offering a wide and navigational account of competition *and* cooperation between platforms in creating a logistical surround (Neves and Steinberg 2024).

When I started doctoral studies, I used the clock app on my phone to keep alarms to manage my time. When I dismissed one such alarm, my phone started speaking to me: “Good morning Simiran. Its 1014, the weather in Oxford is 9 degrees and cloudy. You have no scheduled events on your

calendar today." There was a pause, I regained my composure as I realised that it was Google talking to me. The voice continued, "Here's the latest news: from NDTV at 0938 AM today.." This led me to check my clock app. Had I set this up?

I found the Google Assistant Routine embedded in my clock. The assistant routine allows you to set up a routine through various kinds of "starters." In my case, the starter was my "action" of dismissing an alarm. I could also set other actions ranging from my voice, the sunset, sunrise, or even presence sensing as starters.[47] The screenshot below shows that Google assistant offered to tell me about the weather, events from my calendar, and I could even ask them to "check Zomato and Swiggy for lunch recommendations."

[47] Google Assistant Routine helps individuals and households "automate daily routines and tasks" using various devices like smart lights, heating and different "starters."https://support.google.com/assistant/answer/7672035?hl=en-GB&co=GENIE.Platform%3DAndroid#zippy=%2Cways-to-start-a-routine. Accessed October 2023.

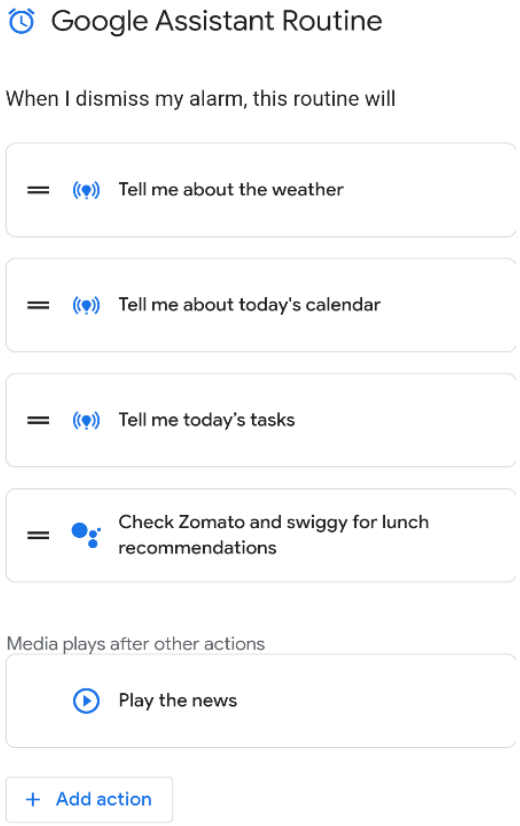


Figure 1: Screenshot of the settings page of Google Assistant Routine on the author's phone.

I had only dismissed my alarm; I did not have to be on Swiggy or Zomato's app interfaces or have the intention of buying or selling food, but I was still pushed by this prompt from the clock on my app. How did this push reach me when I was outside Swiggy and Zomato's app interfaces? Swiggy's android engineers explained in a blog the technical process they adopted in building this integration with Google Assistant to expand the reach of their app. They identified another rationale for building this integration: voice interactions were understood to be a "next billion thing" or a mode of interaction that could enable further platform expansion.[48] I referred to Google Assistant's Help section and learnt that these suggestions were offered based on my past

[48] https://bytes.swiggy.com/ok-google-lets-order-from-swiggy-90d2bd0b9c3a. Accessed August 2023.

interactions, Android app use, and use of Google products.[49] Beyond the two cases that my thesis focuses on, various other platforms like shopping platform Etsy, music streaming platform Spotify, streaming platform Netflix, news channel NDTV, and newspapers like the Times of India have all integrated their app interfaces with Google Assistant. Such integrations are platform agnostic as various platforms work both individually *and* collectively, rather than this integration being a development that is limited only to the two platforms I have chosen to focus on.

Swiggy and Zomato's integrations with something as basic as the clock app, compelled me to re-consider what information systems' interoperability meant for how I defined my position as a critical researcher. Before the doctoral programme, as a researcher studying platform work, I stayed away from ordering in – in my personal life as a consumer, and in my professional life as a researcher.[50] Yet Swiggy and Zomato's efforts to aggregate users were part of a wide effort of bridging the distance I tried to maintain by using elements of user interaction (UI), and by working with other platforms and apps on my phone, like the clock app. So being a critical researcher who refrained from ordering through the app, did not automatically sever my links with the app as a consumer and user because platforms' efforts of aggregating users like me were platform agnostic. Could distancing myself from a platform be anything more than a sincere, symbolic gesture?

Instead, studying how platforms form attachments with people (McFall, Cochoy, Deville 2017) was necessary to learn more about platforms' aggregation and their algorithmic systems. So, in

[49] https://support.google.com/assistant/answer/9346386?hl=en&sjid=2108478031135329987-EU. Accessed August 2023.
[50] So, I found my interlocutors through a keyword search ('Zomato,' 'Swiggy,' 'Mumbai') on YouTube and found delivery workers who had recorded and uploaded videos about strikes ('"India's Gig-Work Economy 'Roundtable | Platypus" n.d.). Accessed February 2020.

this chapter, I will discuss how I devised a research method from my experiences getting attached as a researcher-critic-user, alongside other users who are capable of critical thinking.

At the end of a year, as part of promotions, different platforms send users a summary of their use and these summaries have become important objects in popular culture online. For example, Spotify Wrap is a list of the songs a user listened to most over the past year. Google Maps sends users emails with visualisations of places people have been to in a calendar year. Facebook pulls out users' old posts or activities from previous years in a "memories" tab and YouTube does an annual high-level summary of viral content through Rewind. These summaries list instrumental uses – for instance, a user searched for directions to go to a restaurant or posted something on a friend's Facebook wall – but the manner in which platforms recap memories and actions performed via or on the platform, frames use as sentimental and personal, not only instrumental.

Like other platforms described above, Swiggy and Zomato too, participate in this digital culture by sharing sentimental annual reports that summarise their use. Even though these reports are not about one specific user, they include unusual anecdotes to tell sentimental stories about a proximate relationship between consumers, workers, and platforms: "There was a time when people would send carrier pigeons to their lovers. Cut to 2020, when someone asked Genie (Swiggy's on-demand task completion service) to get in touch with their spouse, because their phone was switched off."[51] Even when the reports offered quantitative data, it was offered in a light-hearted manner that enabled layering this data with fictional stories: "Between Aug and Dec (2020), one person ordered 391 units of chocolate. Looks like some lucky dentist is going to

[51] https://blog.swiggy.com/2020/12/22/stateatstics-year5/. Accessed July 2021.

vacation in the Maldives in 2021." In addition to annual reports posted on their website, in 2021, Zomato sent badges on users' apps. I learnt about this through people's tweets thanking Zomato, and my friends' Instagram stories. Zomato sent me a "writer's favourite" badge on the app because I was amongst "the people who tapped the most on notifications."



Figure 2: A screenshot of the "writer's favourite" badge that the author received from Zomato.

This style of narrativising people's platform use, informed by user data, framed the relationship between people and platforms as a proximate and friendly one. It de-emphasised the commercial aspects of our relations with platforms as users.

However, platforms' style of narrativising a commercial relationship as friendly does not necessarily de-emphasise its transactional aspects for all users. In fact, it seemed to have made some users more interested in querying their proximity: what were their habits and patterns of using platforms? Consider how consumer and software engineer Vignesh Kumar built Swiggy

Order Statistics, a chrome-extension that created high-level summaries similar to the platforms' promotional ones. In a blog post, Kumar recounted how his friend received an email from Swiggy with a high-level summary of orders placed by him. Kumar had not received this email, but he was curious to track his own spending and habits but did not know how to reach out to Swiggy. So along with some of his friends he made a tool that summarised use in an unsentimental way. It aimed to "help users get a good idea about their monthly spending on Swiggy, their eating patterns, and about how long they are waiting for their food deliveries."[52]

I used this order statistics tool during my fieldwork with consumer households in Mumbai to understand how people made sense of platforms' narratives of proximate relations with their households. How did people assess their own navigation of various platforms? All my interlocutors were very interested in seeing a quantitative summary of their use of food delivery apps because most people had not calculated this before. When faced with monthly and yearly data about their use of Swiggy, most people started explaining peak consumption periods: "we moved house in August.." or "we were newly married." Others who were living on stricter budgets had a more definite sense of how much money they were spending and did not have to explain peaks. One young woman who was tracking her expenses via Excel, told me that she knew exactly how much this proximity with food delivery apps cost her every month. She controlled the time she spent on apps by setting a timer on Swiggy and Zomato through the settings on her smartphone. The app timer disabled or greyed out the icons of these apps once she had spent 30 minutes on them. This way, her device would not let her tap the icons so that she could not waste time or money, even if she wanted to. Across the board, users did not uncritically accept platforms' attempts to create

[52] https://medium.com/@vignesh_rk_/swiggy-order-statistics-creating-a-visual-data-snapshot-from-your-food-orders-65a7f6f6f856. Accessed July 2021.

close relationships with them. In fact, by using app timers and building tools, people were investigating their dependence on and use of platforms to reflect on whether these made sense for them.

In the rest of this chapter, I first review scholarship on how platforms and their algorithmic systems aggregate users by pushing information. Then I describe my findings about how Swiggy and Zomato use their app interfaces to aggregate users by pushing information through promotions based on how users' respond. I discuss the implications of platforms relying on users and finally, I will conclude by arguing for the need to distinguish between platforms' user aggregation efforts and users' experiences of being aggregated.

1.2 Literature Review: Aggregating users through promotional pushing

In this section, I review literature to frame my examination of how Swiggy and Zomato push information via their app interfaces to aggregate users (RQ 1.1). Through this review, I identify two contributions I make to platform studies based on my examination of two analytical views on the relationship between people and information push through algorithmic systems and push notifications: (1) a dataveillance view and (2) a modular view.

These two views are not necessarily distinct, but they differ in emphasis. A modular view on user segmentation emphasises simulation, movement, and flexibility whereas a dataveillance view stresses surveillance, enclosure, and documentation in explaining the same (Zwick and Denegri Knott 2009). The modular view's dynamism can be appreciated if we consider that the word 'modular' has a similar life in the worlds of programming and database marketing. In programming, modularity refers to breaking code into smaller modules whereas in database

marketing it refers to modulation in terms of a simulation of consumers. In light of these two views, subsequent paragraphs will discuss how they enable different analyses about how users contend with being pushed by information.

(1) Dataveillance view of pushing information

A dataveillance perspective in scholarship and journalistic reporting brings attention to the ways in which companies have control over consumers by highlighting how data and digital technologies are used in surveillance. In this view, aggregation of users has been studied through how people's tastes, preferences, and habits have become a resource in the digital data economy. Be it through targeted advertising (Andrejevic 2013) or recommendations and personalisation technologies that create filter bubbles, users are only sent information that confirms their beliefs (Pariser 2012).

Push notifications (PNs) are modalities of pushing information from our devices that communicate system updates, for e.g., 'android is updated' or 'memory is full', or PNs could be more straightforwardly promotional. Either way, PNs invite us back into apps or platform interfaces to attend to messages, emails, likes, or to order food, hail a cab and so on. Due to an emphasis on how information push is used to control users, PNs have been studied as objects that engineer user attention and interaction (Markham, n.d.) through clicking, minute sensorial interactions such as glancing (Pielot and Rello 2017; Kormelink and Meijer 2018) and in terms of their implications for user experience and feelings (Sanfilippo and Lev-Aretz 2017; Pielot and Rello 2017). Artist and professor of new media, Ben Grosser, in an exhibition at Arebyte Gallery, London, examined how Silicon Valley "seduces users into a one-sided relationship" through notifications. He showed

how platforms used notifications that spoke sweetly and casually to "encourage, manipulate, and woo users into maximal platform engagement."[53] This line of thinking suggests a unidirectional relationship between platforms and users, whereby users are manipulated through tracking and nudging them into buying things that they do not need.

This view of the power of nudging and tracking to push users is reflected in literature on platforms' offer of convenience via branding. Most scholars are sceptical of convenience and define it as an ideology or a discursive idea of ease that helps companies justify exploitative labour practices. Convenience habituates consumers to ease (Huberman 2021; West 2022) and makes those who consume unconscious of the impact of their consumption (Hill 2020). Even though scholars acknowledge how platform services especially after the pandemic are becoming infrastructural (Neves and Steinberg 2020), convenience is imagined to be a discourse that tempts users by offering them easy consumption.

My analysis of PNs and their offer of convenience differs from the bulk of the literature on PNs and the understanding of convenience discussed in the paragraphs above. Most studies adopt a deep and narrow focus on how people respond to the stimuli of PNs which offers us important insights about behaviour in response to information push. How might we understand the relationship between haptic media like PNs and users then if not simply in response to information push?

53 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aa91ce1266c07fe6b490fc5/t/611e57836234936bf634f394/1629378445042/Ben+Grosser+Booklet-compressed.pdf. Accessed August 2023.

I draw inspiration for my analysis of information push from media studies scholar Rachael Plotnick's research on push buttons. In their research on early push buttons in electric circuits for doorbells and typewriters, Plotnick has shown us how the tactile experience of pushing a button created concerns about button pushers become lazy or unfeeling. In the past, button pushing was understood to make people "out of touch" for two reasons. One, it did not bear resemblance to actual touching, feeling and contact. Two, it was seen as being alienated and not similar to interaction. In fact, ads at that time reframed touch as an individualised and communicative action, not simply uniform and unfeeling, as "no two hands push alike." An ad for the Royal Typewriter Company (1914) explained how "touch control" technology enabled their typewriters was:

> "the machine with a personality—your personality! Think of a master machine with an adjustable touch—a typewriter you can "tune up" to fit your own personal touch, simply by "turning the knob" until it strikes the keynote of YOURSELF. (Royal Typewriter Company, 1914: 78; emphasis in original)" (Plotnick 2017, pg 1641).

These concerns about button pushing creating unfeeling subjects that Plotnick writes about are similar to contemporary concerns expressed in platform scholarship cited above about platformized convenience. As a result of this long-standing understanding of pushing buttons on machines as an activity that disconnects us from our capacity to reflect critically, we examine push notifications most often in terms of being tempted (Huws 2019) or distracted, or simply as actions performed only due to platforms' push.

Therefore, I apply insights from Plotnick's work cited above to challenge the dataveillance style of analysing information push through Swiggy and Zomato's apps. Plotnick's analysis has shown us that the conversation about pushing buttons began 100 years back when buttons were new. Even then, pushing buttons did not simply put people "out of touch." Informed by this, the findings will first detail how platforms use push notifications to create attachments with users. My analysis will

not assume that push notifications can create uniform tactile experiences or simply push users and consumers into indolence. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, I will attend to how common users often exercise critical thinking by moving across information systems and assess information push, rather than automatically being pushed to perform certain actions. In fact, if convenience is the *ability to shift time by reordering tasks* (Warde, Shove, and Southerton 1998) through fridges, freezers, and frozen peas (Warde 1999), it is worth analysing how surface-level capacities such as toggling enable people to reorder time and tasks.

By challenging the limitations of a dataveillance view, my *first contribution* to platform studies is by offering an account of how Swiggy and Zomato, two food delivery platforms emerge as cultural agents with links to the media and entertainment industries. This way of analysing food delivery platforms is new and significant because these platforms have largely been studied as sites of labour and livelihood.

It is worth adding a caveat about my challenge of the dataveillance view. I do not disagree that companies surveil users, gather data, segment users and target communications to influencer user action. However, it is this level of attentiveness that perversely ensures that platforms' promotions are responding to people's sentiments and needs and that they are not being experienced as pushy, insensitive, or irrelevant by recipients. In other words, disaggregation of data and a constant segmentation of users allays platforms' concerns of potentially pushing users away and dispersing consumer and business users.

(2) Modular view of information push

A difference in emphasis between modular and dataveillance approaches can be illustrated through an analysis of how tracking and predictive systems are analysed by scholars. The scholars who adopt a dataveillance view often analyse tracking and predictive systems in supermarkets for instance, as relying on surveillance, aiming at enclosure through documentation of user behaviour (Turow 2017).

Differently and not necessarily distinctly from this, scholars who adopt a modular view, stress on how these systems are used to learn about people's unconscious behaviours, irrationality, and divergent desires. Tracking involves surveillance; however, this view stresses how tracking simulates real time changes through movements and is flexible as it continuously sorts and orders people based on their actions. In this view, surveillance does not simply and automatically enclose and document action (Fourcade 2017)**.**

Another instance of this kind of analysis that does not deny surveillance but offers more than a confirmatory conclusion, is anthropologist Nick Seaver's analysis of music streaming platforms. Seaver argues that engineers offered recommendation algorithms that carefully chose music on users' behalf. In this offer, engineers claimed to relieve users of the burden of sifting through many options. Whether or not their claim is true, engineers identified people's music preferences in the context of their mood, routine, and saw preferences as always shifting. The engineers in Seaver's sample did not treat user preferences as a preexisting resource to mine which a dataveillance view would have led us to believe to be true (Seaver 2015).

This modular approach of studying the relationship between people and information is similar to an older literature on advertising that leads us to question this dominant view of information pushing or even duping people. Anthropologist William Mazzarella has shown how ad agencies in Bombay/Mumbai in the decades after independence created "interests of consumers", making the case that the Indian consumer was culturally unique. Ad professionals were aware that this was a fiction created by them, and not an easily accessible pulse of the situation (Mazzarella 2003). However, creating fiction like this one recruits ad professionals' creativity and interpretation of existing meanings and sentiments, rather than creating false needs (McFall 2004; Slater 1997; Haynes 2015).

Following the lead of the work cited above, this chapter will discuss how platforms' information push, much like most advertisements, responds to the situations that people find themselves in. Asking how platforms know and draw on existing meanings and sentiments in pushing information to aggregate users enables studying how platforms Swiggy and Zomato attend to users' interactions and experiences as being composed across apps and functionalities on their phones (Dourish 2021) *as well as people's arrangements outside devices*. I will explore how some computational systems adopt an opportunistically wide and navigational focus on users' lives. This kind of focus will be useful in understanding the width of platforms' aggregation efforts involving creative workers, media and entertainment industries, or users' compositional experiences across apps, not in isolation with Swiggy or Zomato.

Therefore, the *second contribution* made by this chapter is that it analyses the formation of a logistical surround (Neves and Steinberg 2024) through a platform agnostic process of information

push underway in platforms' promotions and branding. As cultural agents, Swiggy and Zomato rely on professionals from the media and entertainment industries in India to make promotional material. In addition to creative workers, making promotions requires gathering, analysing, and operationalising user data. Therefore, the findings here will analyse how information push involves organisational structures, professional roles, and coordination across companies and industries, not simply competition between platforms or the actions of one organisation. Furthermore, these practices of coordination across platforms, professionals, and industries in making promotions are analysed as examples of how information push that aims to aggregate users, not simply push users into performing actions.

The findings in this chapter are based on four remote methods I used to examine how Swiggy and Zomato aggregated users by using their apps (RQ 1.1). (1) I collected push notifications by engaging with the apps as a researcher-critic-user, (2) studied Swiggy and Zomato's annual reports, (3) conducted telephonic interviews with managerial platform workers, and (4) examined the code of apps.

1.3 Findings: Platforms pushing consumers via push notifications

In this section, I describe how PNs from platforms' apps and algorithmic recommendation systems offered the convenience of ordering food in ways that were (1) customised (2) temporally sensitive and (3) friendly, flirty, and informal. By casting promotional communications in these ways, PNs were presenting Swiggy and Zomato as enacting certain forms of care for users by engaging with people's daily lives. Whether or not these enactments of care are genuine is not evaluated.

1.3.1 Customised

The push notification is a means of mass communication since it is sent out to groups of users. But it also enables customising and personalising communication to users. In my sample of push notifications, they hailed me by my first name and customised communication based on my interaction history with the app and order history. When I had not shared my name with one of the two platforms I was observing, they referred to me as "foodie."

I had never ordered food from any app, so I received more notifications with discount codes like "welcome60" to encourage me to make my first order. Over the months, these welcome codes spoke to me more closely, telling me how "others in my area" had liked some restaurants and I might appreciate them too. As I was tapping, screenshotting, and engaging with push notifications over a few months, I got more welcome codes and more push notifications. In January 2021, I received 58 notifications from Zomato, which rose to 65 in June. In October, after I interacted more with the Swiggy app, I started receiving notifications from Swiggy too. As a result, I had 177 notifications from both Swiggy and Zomato in November 2021. My assumption that the platform was aware of my attention to their push notifications was confirmed when I got a badge that said "you were among the people who tapped the most on notifications" from Zomato in December 2021.

Another way in which the apps were aware of and responding to my interaction history became clear to me when I left something in my cart without purchasing it. Swiggy sent me a push notification in a few minutes: "Like Get-a-Whey? we have a lot more where that came from! Tap to explore similar restaurants *twin-dancing girls emoji*" When I checked a restaurant's menu,

but the restaurant was shut, I received this notification as soon as the restaurant opened: “Keto treats is open now. Go ahead and indulge in your favourite dishes. Order now!”

When I finally chose a restaurant and placed an order (my first order via Swiggy), I received a series of push notifications, then another set after the delivery and two emails. After I placed the order, I received the estimated time of arrival (ETA), if it was on time, when it was ready for pick up, when it had been picked up and so on. Once it arrived, I had to rate the delivery worker, rate the restaurant, and I had to indicate through a checklist which items I had enjoyed the most. While tracking the order, a floating screen accompanied me even when I left the interface of the app. When I went back to the app, I was informed that I could use Google Assistant to track my Swiggy order. The app also suggested that I could binge on Amazon Prime Video content while I waited. They offered me an opportunity to treat myself to a Kotak Bank account with a 20% discount with a Kotak debit card and so on. Since I ordered from Get-a-Whey a protein infused ice cream brand, I was being shown ads on YouTube for Noto, a vegan and keto ice cream.

Subsequently, I also received two emails from the food delivery platform. One commenting on the choice I made through my order and suggesting similar foods, and the other email sought more information through a survey about who I live with, my livelihood, and so on. The first email said: “Welcome to the Health Hub fam *flexing bicep emoji.* Further along in the email, I was congratulated for ordering healthy food from their “new destination for all things healthy.” The email asked me to“give myself “a pat on the back for ordering healthy” and suggested that I could “order something else” (a button) or explore brands with healthy menus and suggested three other brands: apsara ice cream, wow! Momo, great indian khichdi.

The second email I received said to me: “Simiran, we’re all ears” and had a link to a survey. This survey had nine multiple choices questions about my demographic information including my working status: going to office/workplace; work from home; others, who did I live with? alone; flatmates/pg; with parents - no kids; with parents no spouse; with wife/husband; with wife/husband - with kids, with wife/husband - with kids and parents, others. Did anyone amongst the people I stay have the app? Then they asked who I ordered for and whether I had used this platform or any other platform like this before and so on. They also asked me what the occasion for ordering was: craving for something specific that I could not make at home; wanted to complement home cooked meal with something; to celebrate a special occasion like birthday/anniversary; craving to eat non-veg food items; avail the offer/discount coupon; others (please specify. Then they asked me how I learned about their service and why I chose it: their app had the restaurant; delivery fee was low; they were delivering late night orders; app is easy compared to others; had better deals and discounts; faster delivery than others; was delivering from favourite far away restaurant; other. At the end of the email with the link to the survey, I was asked: “Don’t want convenience delivered to your inbox? Unsubscribe here.”

In this way, push notifications enabled Swiggy and Zomato to hail me, amongst other users by my name, respond to my location, and interaction history with the app. These communications were also attentive to rhythms shared by individuals. The next sub-section describes how offers of convenience were also topical, repetitive, and concerning shared themes such as home and work-related routines.

1.3.2 Temporally sensitive

Food delivery platforms responded to topical events, national mood, and memes through leveraging real time events to make promotional content for brands referred to as "moment marketing" by ad and marketing professionals. Some of the topical events in my sample included the Met Gala, India's Olympics win, crashing of the crypto market in India, and Zomato's IPO. Interestingly, Swiggy sent this notification to users on the day their competitor, Zomato, went public: "It's a big day for Indian start-ups *graph emoji.* We wish our friends well. Invest in something sweet to mark this special occasion? Gulab Jamun? Ladoo? Barfi? Get all your favourites delivered safely to your doorstep."

Topicality also meant that push notifications allowed platforms to engage with memes and internet cultures. Songs or sounds trending through short video content on Instagram reels and Titktok were used textually in push notifications. In this example, we see a play on the words of the popular soundtrack "West Side Killa": "West. Side. Eaterrrrrrr! It's trending online so we thought we will twist it our way. Breakfast, anyone?"

Push notifications were attuned to the national mood. During the peak of the second wave of covid in India, notifications were more sombre. Some gave hope: "another day closer to a normal world," and others were used to express platforms' social responsibility: "#FeedingIndia[54] | India needs Oxygen! We will provide free oxygen concentrators to hospitals and families in need. Help us. Tap to donate now *folded hands emoji*." At that time when people were concerned about their immunity and were on the lookout for supplements, food delivery platforms positioned what they

[54] FeedingIndia (2014) is Zomato's philanthropic initiative "working to solve hunger in India" and minimise food waste.

could provide with the #NutritiononZomato. On the app, there were listings of supplements like zinc, vitamin C, teas, protein powders, timed release melatonin, turmeric, and ashwagandha, along with the health benefits of these supplements.

Responding to repetitive rhythms, there were some notifications that repeated several times around a calendar year. I found four routines around a 'season of discounts' including festivals, mealtimes every day (breakfast, lunch, and dinner), changes in season or weather, and discounts around work. At these four times, the convenience of having food delivered would be appealing. The season of discounts included sporting events such as the Indian Premier League (IPL). Similarly, before and during festivals, notifications appealed to the foods, memories, and experiences of celebrations of Independence Day, Janmashtami, New Years, Christmas, and other festivals. Around Divali and Durga Puja, Zomato said: "We're bringing festive vibes home - click to enter the Zomato Pandal!" Tapping it led me to a sketch of someone surrounded by marigold flowers, welcoming me with folded hands and a table spread. This spread had images of aaloo jeera, sabudana khichadi, gulab jamun, lassi, shrikhand and veg biryani. On New Years eve, Swiggy gave me a gift emoji and asked me to tap to see it which led me to a discount code. In January, they reminded me of their Instamart service and that could help me with my "puja needs" during the harvest festival.

Ad and marketing communities produced these repetitive rhythms by creating templates of events. In January 2021, Social Samosa, a digital ad agency, uploaded a "social media content calendar" for all brand managers with a list of days considered important nationally and internationally. They described how they arrived at this list and how it might help in this way:

> "The days and events included in the calendar have been cherry-picked by the Social Samosa team with the experience of tracking topical and trending posts through the last couple of years. These dates are expected

> to help brands and creators add value to their content plans and garner engagement around things that matter to the people on social media."[55]

Responding to rainy weather in September, a push notification asked me: "How's the weather, Simiran? Rainy (an image of cutting chai), Sunny (an image of chai with a samosa), Cloudy (an image of chai). Similarly, several notifications engaged with different aspects of work, like the stress of Mondays, mid-week boredom, back-to-back meetings, merciless bosses, excitement for the weekend and so on. The emphasis on relaxing on the weekend repeated: "do your duty..be lazy on Sunday!" "don't get out of bed." Some notifications towards the end of the month that I could order something light since it was month end. Then at the beginning of the new month, I was reminded that now that my salary was credited, I should order what I could not at the month-end.

Several notifications also dealt with how cooking in the midst of the workweek was burdensome and led to uncertain outcomes as opposed to ordering food which ensured good food. One notification even visualised the burden of cooking as multiple levels of obstacles within the video game Super Mario. Alongside Mario, were four pillars he had to jump to get to a pillar with food. These pillars that Mario/the user must jump were labelled as "decide what to make," "get groceries," "prep ingredients," and "make a mess." The text encouraged me to "ditch the kitchen, order now." In July 2020, Zomato ran a #nocookingjuly campaign. During #nocookingjuly, push notifications presented a fictional peek into their internal operations to show the deliberation involved in extending heavy discounts to offer users freedom from cooking. This meant they fictionalised screenshots of email exchanges between the Marketing Team and CEO and screenshots of WhatsApp conversations that ensued between the marketing team, the CEO, and

[55] https://www.socialsamosa.com/2021/01/social-media-calendar-2021/. Accessed June 2021.

the finance team. This PN pushed information about the discount but also invited me to push it further on Zomato's behalf by tweeting about it: "don't forget to use #ThanksFinanceTeam." Presumably users' tweeting about PNs would increase their reach to those who might have turned PNs off or do not have the Zomato app on their smartphones.

Did platforms' framing of cooking at home being a hassle, and their offering big discounts push people into replacing home cooking with ordering? I asked this question during my fieldwork in Mumbai. All the middle-class, consumer-user homes that I visited, except one joint family, relied on cooks and were not cooking themselves anyway. For consumers in households, ordering food online is less expensive than hiring cooks and domestic workers which tends to be a longer commitment and requires more money.

In addition to expense, hiring cooks and domestic workers requires more ongoing inputs of time, and effort and preferably knowledge of cooking to be able to train and direct the cook. All households that relied on cooks complained about having to give the cook instructions on what to buy, where to buy from, how to cook, and participate in planning meals. Training generally entailed households introducing the cook to their regional styles of cooking. For instance, North Indian households would like a *bagaar* (tempering) of *jeera* (cumin seeds) rather than *rai* (mustard seeds). Or a South Indian household had to teach a Maharashtrian cook how to make *sambar* and rice.

Training and supervising a cook required someone in the household to know how to cook. Most often to first diagnose what is wrong with the cooking: did she use *rai* and we are accustomed to

using *jeera*? Did she not brown the onions enough? In the cases where members of the household did not have much cooking expertise, they just ordered food as they did not know how to correct mistakes in the cook's cooking. Even a young couple who enjoyed cooking and ran a YouTube channel about recipes, explained that they ordered the same dish that the cook failed to cook correctly. They then mixed the 'correct' gravy they ordered with the 'incorrect' gravy made by the cook so that it "tastes like it should." All those who had the convenience of a cook occasionally used platforms to defuse the friction in their relationships with their cooks. In sum, ordering online was not a substitute for the convenience offered by hired cooks and self cooking.

For consumers, ordering online is not imagined to be a long-term solution, not even by those who did order every day. In addition to being an expense, the quality of 'outside' food makes ordering every day an unsustainable habit, associated with being a college student who is yet to take responsibility for their lives. Responsible adults know how to supervise cooks even if they do not know how to cook themselves. Cooks are still outsiders cooking at home, but since the activity of cooking was taking place at home, it can be monitored. It is in this context that we can place platforms and their use of communicative practices and data from interfaces to define how they expressed care for all users.

Up to now, I have described how platforms pushed information through communicative enactments that were customized in terms of using first names, location, order history, and so on. Many PNs were also making guesses about shared conditions such as those induced by the lockdown, moods, routines amongst office going people, among other things. However, promotional communications like #nocookingjuly could not magically create demand or simply

push people into ordering food. Consumers order their time and tasks through the convenience offered by cooks and platforms did not simply substitute cooks.

1.3.3 Friendly, flirty, and informal

In this sub-section, I describe how platforms spoke in friendly, flirty, and informal ways that showed their attentiveness to the use of their platforms in ordering food, delivering food, and selling food.

Quite often push notifications did not have a nudge to make a purchase, if read hastily, PNs could be mistaken for a text message from a friend: *"Sab badhiya* (all good), Simiran?" Several notifications during peaks of covid reminded me to wear a mask, avoid going out, and to "call up your friends, recharge yourself with a nap or order a nice lunch for your family." Some PNs expressed excitement to meet "my doggo" when they come to deliver food, if I have one.

Other than trying to befriend, notifications also demonstrate how food delivery services can attend to one's existing friendships by showing friends care through food. Some notifications informed me about how I could send a birthday cake along with a personalised video. Friendliness was also voiced using songs, dialogues from films, and in speaking like a lover. At lunch time in January 2021 I received a fictional love letter from biryani that said:

> "Hey you, I have been thinking about you of- more than I have ever..The way you relish every grain of my being, how you react when I entice you with my spiciness and aroma, the way you savour me ..It's no wonder that you kee calling me back to you, and truth be told, I can't get enough of you either."

Sometimes, push notifications asked me and other users to "cast their vote" to show which foods were their favourite. Mimicking the style of a prime time television news anchor, the notification said: "Nation wants to know…what is better - Rajma Chawal or Kadhi Chawal? Tap to cast your

vote!" and at other times polls were conducted to understand which pizza toppings were my favourite.

Push notifications sometimes showed consumers how platforms cared for their delivery workers or worker-users. In June 2021, a push notification offered me messages from delivery partners. On tapping it, I read several men's and women's messages about gratitude for tips, orders during the pandemic, glasses of water on hot days and thank yous. Another message in the PN was from a woman worker who "loves making *pav-bhaji*." She thanked me for support that not only strengthens her resolve to continue working but also society.. Another worker "who is a gymnast in her free time" said she "asks for extra chutney" for all orders at snack time. On Christmas, a notification read: "There are 2 kinds of Santas! *Santa Claus emoji* One delivers only on Christmas. The other kind? Tap to read more." On tapping I was introduced to various delivery workers who committed acts of kindness, drove large distances, some who delivered large numbers of orders across multiple cities. One of them was Arnab Chakraborty, "Shatabdi[56] Santa" from Kharagpur, West Bengal. He delivered an order on a train as it stopped at the Midnapore station for a two-minute halt. The message said they saluted all the "warrior santas" who provided the essential service of delivering food through the lockdown.

This manner of showing that platforms care for their users by celebrating workers' creativity was communicated via email too. In March 2022, Zomato sent out 'delivery partner of the week' emails for a week every month to make consumer-users "meet the human behind the delivery partner." These emails to the public about worker-users revealed not only data platforms have about workers

[56] Shatabdi is the name shared by a series of high-speed, long distance trains in India.

but how platforms used this data to create a story of care, intimacy, and proximate relations with their worker-users in the eyes of the public.

From a telephonic interview with a platform executive who does delivery partner marketing, I found that Swiggy developed a different strategy for PNs sent to worker-users. Existing workers were communicated with through their app. Unlike consumers, platform executives explained that several workers have limited literacy, and in their experience, workers engage more with straightforward and informational communications. This meant that 60% of Swiggy's PNs to delivery workers were information about order status, 20% of PNs were about their incentives, and the rest were more casual. In this casual category, they found that inspirational stories of other workers or pep talk are most popular. For longer forms of communications, delivery workers receive messages on the 'message centre' in their apps. Platforms also use communicative practices to find new workers on short video platforms like Moj after TikTok was banned in India.

Beyond PNs, even the homescreens of Swiggy and Zomato's apps are customised, temporally sensitive, and attentive. I was presented different carousels of suggested places to order from depending on the time of the day and location from where I opened the consumer app. At 1030, carousels asked "snacks for breakfast?" showed me "breakfast bestseller", "delicious *idli*", "delicious *dosa*." By 11 am, I saw lunch recommendations: "Must try pizza", "lunch bestsellers", "biryani for lunch?", "sandwiches for lunch?" At dinner, there was a banner about snacks for "cric-eaters" since the cricketing event, Indian Premier League (IPL) was on. There was also a back to office festival offering 60% off when work from home was turning into a hybrid model in April

2022. When I opened the app from another location for a change, not my home, I saw recommendation of different regional cuisines.

Up to now, I have described how platforms seek to enact care in customized, temporally sensitive, friendly, flirty, and informal ways. These attentive enactments reach consumers alongside preexisting conveniences of cooks and so platforms' pushing does not straightforwardly lead to consumers ordering food. Instead, ordering in is being incorporated into existing arrangements of cooking, serving, and eating. Therefore, in the next section, I turn to studying how, in enacting care, platforms seem to be treading a tightrope – how to push information appropriately without being experienced as pushy by users?

1.4 Findings: Pushing information without being pushy

In this section, I will show how Swiggy and Zomato gather user data from mobile devices to shape the app interfaces offered to delivery workers, consumers, and business owners. I will draw on interviews with managerial platform workers to explain how platforms operationalised this data to segment users and push information carefully without being pushy.

1.4.1 Gathering user data

In this sub-section, I illustrate the scope of platforms' attentiveness to users through the executives and organisations involved in this work. I do not make claims about exactly what data is gathered or if that data is secure or not.

I analysed Swiggy's APK files (the file that contains code needed to install and run apps on Android) to understand what permissions they take to access our device's camera, microphone, and so on. I found that permissions were categorised as 'normal,' 'dangerous,' and 'other/unknown.' Could Swiggy or any app developer define these or were app stores setting these norms? I queried Android Developer Forum[57] where coders talk to each other and learnt that these definitions were set by Apple/IoS and Android Play Stores where these apps are made available to users. So, it is not only platform companies like Swiggy and Zomato, but Big Tech like Android and Apple that define what permissions platforms apps take from users and what platforms can pay attention to in our use of their apps. In gathering user data and operationalizing it, Swiggy and Zomato rely on cooperation from a variety of other platforms and tech companies.

The slotting of these permissions and gathering sensory data from smartphone sensors like rotation sensors and accelerometers has very real, experiential outcomes for users. Across app interfaces offered to workers, consumers and restaurants, platforms engineered our sensory interaction with light and sound from our devices. Swiggy's APK files showed that they had permissions for a 'wake lock that keeps the processor from sleeping or screen from dimming. They also took permission for 'modifying audio' and 'vibrate' for workers, consumers, and businesses. Prior to the DPhil, I designed an experimental audio with colleagues documenting platform workers' experience of aural stress of not being able to mute the siren when they received work from the app.[58] The APK files for delivery workers' apps showed that Swiggy had access to how their device controls 'battery optimization' (slotted as a normal) and 'activity recognition' (slotted as dangerous). Presumably these controls enable monitoring and disciplining workers' performance.

[57] https://developer.android.com/guide/topics/permissions/overview. Accessed July 2021.
[58] https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/audioscapes-of-the-platform-economy/. Accessed July 2022.

For restaurant partners, Swiggy took permission to 'schedule exact alarm' (slotted as normal). Presumably to make sure the restaurant listing on the app opens in time for consumer-users or even getting and preparing orders in time without wasting workers' time.

Big Tech companies like Twitter, Amazon, Microsoft, Adobe Systems, also had trackers on the Swiggy app. I visited the websites of some of these companies that had trackers to understand what kinds of interactions and user data they might be tracking. From this I found that Mixpanel gathered information about users' actions and users themselves. Users' actions are referred to as events or "any meaningful action a user takes" such as can include "title," "plan type" and other info like browser, profiles. Information on users is referred to as user profile and can include information about browser, browser version, city, country, email, favourite genre, initial referrer, initial referring domain, plan type, name, timezone.[59] Swiggy used Adobe systems tracker[60] that offers pathing analysis. This meant platforms can see how users navigated the app "to determine which screens and user interface (UI) elements are engaging users and which cause users to drop off." In addition to pathing, they offer "mobile engagement analysis" which offers an understanding of "how frequently consumers launch the channel, whether they make purchases from it, and more." This tracker in particular triangulated my sense that the app was tracking my interaction through touch, time spent on different listings etc when I was collecting PNs. Some trackers like New Relic, Google's AdSense measured performance of ads Swiggy showed users and others like Sentry, Xiaomi and Crashlytics measured performance of the app. Tracking

[59] https://mixpanel.com/free-plan/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=EMEA-UK-Brand-Search-EN-Exact-Desktop&utm_content=Mixpanel-Exact&utm_ad=655263090672&utm_term=mixpanel&matchtype=e&campaign_id=19984353783&ad_id=655263090672&gclid=Cj0KCQjwk96lBhDHARIsAEKO4xYNPk9ZE83uEzE_iz3gqzMpT_BsM4dIlVUqqb-Zh6HYuDyBm0JyNtMaAgeSEALw_wcB&gad=1. Accessed July 2021.

[60] https://experienceleague.adobe.com/docs/experience-manager-65/mobile/developphonegap/phonegap-intro-to-app-analytics.html?lang=en. Accessed July 2021.

extended outside the interface of Swiggy as consumers' apps had an Amazon tracker, delivery worker users' apps had YouTube, restaurant partners apps had Pinterest, Facebook, and Gmail trackers.

The next sub-section turns to how platforms operationalise this user data in managing platform-user relations.

1.4.2 Operationalising user data through segmentation

This data was made sense of by various departments in platform organisations like data analytics, marketing, client services. Various teams in these departments offered graded forms of support and engagement with users based on their data and shaped the kind of data users created.

When I was talking to marketing executives who wrote PNs, I learnt how measuring and expressing attentiveness via PNs and other communicative practices involved several departments. Data analytics, marketing and 'user lifecycle management' (ULM). The performance of PNs is measured through click through rate (CTR) whereas platforms pay attention to a 'menu funnel' in consumers' interaction with restaurants' listings. This menu funnel refers to users' journey to the menu, navigation of it, and a menu to cart percentage is calculated for the restaurant. In addition to measuring specific interactions, some platforms have a team dedicated to user lifecycle management. I asked my platform executive interlocutor for a background of the term because ULM sounded like the welfare department of a state. He explained that the ULM team plans PN strategy based on user data. If a user has not returned to the app in sometime, one common ULM strategy is to refer to their order history to ascertain their favourite restaurant. If Gulatis is the most ordered from restaurant, the team suggests to the creatives or marketing team to programme a PN for them and users generally see communications like "Gulati's misses you!"

Platform executives explained that they measured micro interactions with PNs and restaurants listings specifically, but also over time through quantifying 'turned users' or those who return as users after a long break. To widen the consumer base, the work of the ULM team which paid attention to how consumers' relationships evolve with platform services. We get a sense of this evolution from market research reports that suggest that most first time consumers begin ordering food first at dinner, then slowly start ordering lunch, and once they are frequent users, they order smaller meals like breakfast or snacks from the app. Over time, some users turn into 'power users' or the consumers who order most frequently also order smaller meals and are less price sensitive.[61] Similarly to support expanding platforms' aggregation of food businesses, Zomato had an 'emerging markets' team department dedicated to growth in new geographies, especially tier 2 and tier 3 cities.

In addition to paying attention to their own interface, platform executives mentioned how they paid attention to 'social media mentions' to measure the performance of their communications. Several users took to social media to share their feelings, views, and joke about the ways in which Swiggy and Zomato communicated. Social media mentions could also be signs of trouble and were not always positive or a validation of the success of communications. One platform executive explained to me in a telephonic interview that increasing orders meant large volumes of complaints. These were handled by the 'customer delight' team. In the next chapter, I will delve into infrastructures and practices of grievances and their redressal and the role of social media platforms.

[61] https://redseer.com/newsletters/food-tech-market-updates-june18/. Accessed September 2021.

This knowledge from interfaces is operationalised by segmenting workers, consumers, and restaurants which in turn shapes the kind of interfaces users encounter. The listings and discounts a consumer is offered via Swiggy and Zomato, depends on the consumers' interaction with restaurants and workers via the interface. From a platform executive at Zomato, I learnt that platforms gathered data about consumer-users "brand wise" or in terms of interactions with and purchases from restaurant-users. Consumer-users were segmented in three groups. LA or less affluent users are the "most discount centric," mid market or MM users are discount centric when they are trying a new restaurant but when they order from a familiar restaurant, they are not so discount centric. Finally, an upper market or a UM user "is not very discount centric" and so a someone segmented as UM will not be shown discounts and curations that users slotted as LA.

Swiggy segments worker-users into gold, silver, and bronze, on the basis of their relationship with and performance via the platform (whether they were full time, part time; the number of orders completed and other metrics), demographic factors (single earners or supporting a family). This shapes the interface and offers of work that worker-users received.

Zomato segments restaurant-users based on their popularity with consumer users. P0 restaurant users are top priority, top-grossing clients followed by P1, P2, P3 and so on. Restaurant-users are allotted account managers who troubleshoot with them, offer insights from the data about order patterns and so on. To interact with these different restaurant-users some of whom had a presence across cities, the internal organisation of platforms has a launch team for onboarding, a city team, and a regional team.

Despite user segmentation efforts, when consumers open the apps, the number of restaurant listings they are faced with is experienced as overwhelming. Consumers experience this as a drain of time and effort, which is why the young woman at the beginning of this chapter tracked her expenses, used a timer to curtail time and money spent on these app interfaces. I delve further into this experience of businesses and consumers finding each other in crowds in chapter 3 of the thesis.

Through this section, I have shown how Swiggy and Zomato's user aggregation involves their reliance on other companies in gathering data. What platforms do with that data, like segmenting users, shapes user experience and is in turn shaped by users' interactions.

1.5 Discussion: Aggregating and being aggregated

In this section, I discuss the implications of the fact that information push *relies* on users' interactions and experiences. The chapter's findings have been about Swiggy and Zomato's use of their app interfaces to aggregate users, yet how users respond to aggregation has appeared in the description of what platforms do. What platforms do to attract, attach, and aggregate users by pushing information (RQ 1.1) does not magically and automatically lead to user aggregation or use (RQ 2). Even platforms know this as they are attentive to the obvious dangers of being seen as pushy manifest in consumers turning PNs off, or uninstalling the app.

From the start of this chapter, I offered a wide and navigational account of both platforms' information push and people's interactions and experiences with information push. In the introduction, I attended to platform agnostic aspects of information push as well as how people used other functionalities on their phones such as app timers to limit the time and money they spent

on platforms. One user even built Swiggy Order Statistics to satisfy their curiosity about their dependence on platforms. More fundamentally than confirming through a deep yet narrow focus on how platforms measure people's responses to stimuli, consumer-users' responses to information push were in light of their existing convenience services and technologies of street vendors, cooks, and frozen foods that are used to help with the tasks of cooking and eating. People were aggregated onto platforms but not simply pushed by information into buying. The most common instance of people assessing information and not being pushed into purchase automatically occurred due to people's interactions with their cooks. Reliance on cooks enabled some consumers to think of platforms constant attentiveness as pushy, and not automatically useful or attractive.

In recognition of people's preexisting arrangements and limits of pushing via stimuli like PNs, food delivery platforms have aggregated preexisting market infrastructures and practices of convenience ranging from street vendors, businesses in the restaurant industry, cooks, and frozen foods. Both Swiggy and Zomato worked with the Central government's Prime Minister's Street Vendor's Atmanirbhar (PM SVANidhi) scheme (Kashyaap 2020) which aims to empower street vendors through micro-credit.[62] Bringing street vendors and encouraging cloud kitchens on platforms as sellers, enabled competitively priced (INR 80-150 or GBP 0.80-1.50) single serve meals. In 2018-19, non-metro cities' order share increased 7 times faster than metro counterparts due to a "combination of smart promos, the growing selection of restaurants and increasing comfort with food tech usage."[63] Therefore, platforms' attentiveness to users via promotional

[62] https://pmsvanidhi.mohua.gov.in/. Accessed June 2021.
[63]https://redseer.com/newsletters/food-tech-market-updates-june18/#:~:text=The%20Indian%20Online%20Food%20Delivery,in%20the%20top%206%20metros&text=The%20Indian%20Online%20Food%20Delivery,94%25%20of%20the%20overall%20market. Accessed June 2021.

information push has been accompanied by their bringing on board preexisting arrangements and has widened what people could buy and who could sell via their app interfaces.

People have always been using their hands and fingers to compose experiences across infrastructures and in making sense of the world. Just like eating food with one's hands and fingers enables tasting food even before it reaches the tongue by mashing, making morsels of, and relishing food, (Mann et al. 2011). interfaces invite us to use make sense of being consumers and workers by using hands and fingers. We go to the market – to buy or sell or work – when we open apps or even their web-versions as buyers, sellers or logistics workers who go *via platforms*.

From fieldwork with food delivery workers prior to the DPhil, I learnt how delivery workers used touch-based interactions to hold together their lives, not simply in response to food delivery pushing them into high demand areas, days, and times using heat map like visualisations (Gupta et al. 2021). How did workers use apps to hold together their lives? Many workers toggled to the consumer app and ordered lunch, while still being logged in as workers on the worker-app and wearing the platforms' t-shirt uniform. Two delivery workers I met who had benefitted from the high payouts when Zomato had first started, had saved their earnings and invested it in buying cars that they turned into cabs or had started cloud kitchens. In my DPhil research, through chapters 3, 4, 5, I will analyse how Swiggy and Zomato's consumer and business users buy and sell food there in light of their movement across other apps and preexisting convenience services used in domestic and commercial settings.

Studying how people assess and evaluate platforms' aggregation using their fingers and hands furthers scholarship that has shown how we use information overload to make sense of our lives. Unlike the past, we are not simply overwhelmed by information (Shah 2021). Terms like 'binge watching' and 'doom scrolling' used in popular parlance signal how making sense of our lives through information creates fatigue (Lupinacci 2020) and leads to understandings of disconnection as detox (Sutton 2017). Other than being an emic association, some scholars have framed users as data-eaters to illustrate how using platforms transforms users and data (Lupton 2016; Mol 2021).

1.6 Conclusion: Swiggy and Zomato as cultural agents

Through this chapter, I have described how Swiggy and Zomato emerge as cultural agents as both platforms use their apps to push information, gather, and operationalise user data to aggregate users. The term cultural agents has a corrective impulse that aims to highlight the hyperconnected nature of Swiggy and Zomato and their links to the platformizing media and entertainment industries, banking and payments, as well as food and hospitality industries.

Information push to aggregate users has been analysed in this chapter as a platform agnostic process that involves professionals, organisational structures, intra-industry relations and users' responses who create a logistical surround through promotional materials. Based on my experiences as a researcher-critic-user, I described how Swiggy and Zomato sent push notifications that were customised, temporally sensitive, friendly, flirty, and informal. Then, I discussed how their apps gather user data with assistance from other tech companies, engage managerial platform workers across various departments in segmenting users, and overall push information attentively. As discussed in the previous section, scholarship can benefit from attending to how platforms

adopt an opportunistically wide and navigational focus on users' interactions. This form of scholarly attentiveness can offer us an understanding of how people compose experiences with devices and life outside it, not only in response to platforms' information push.

Going to the market via Swiggy and Zomato's app interfaces makes their interfaces a type of real estate for platforms. Without having to meet in the same physical location, people encounter businesses on interfaces and can immediately transact with them (Lalvani 2019). Like with land, being seen as a coveted and popular location where people go to buy, sell and work is important. As platforms and other companies use user metrics like daily active users (DAU) as evidence of their popularity to build confidence among investors (Birch, Cochrane, and Ward 2021). In recognition of the prime-ness and popularity of Zomato's interface, other digital real estate like Web3, cryptocurrency company, CoinDCX, offered one bitcoin as a "mega prize" to winners of the Zomato Premier League, an in-app game during the annual cricketing Indian Premier League.

In the next chapter, I move out from Swiggy and Zomato's app interfaces to social media interfaces of Instagram and Twitter where dynamism of user cultures has been well studied. There, I will examine how Swiggy and Zomato cooperate and compete on social media, create content, and participate in the platformization of the media and entertainment industries.

Chapter 2:

Being attentive to branding: how promotions are made and evaluated on social media

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2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I described how Swiggy and Zomato attentively pushed information to users via their app interfaces (RQ 1.1). In this chapter, I will examine how Swiggy and Zomato use social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram to aggregate users (RQ 1.2). Specifically, the chapter will analyse Swiggy and Zomato's branding, information push, and their emergence

as cultural agents. Analysing food delivery platforms' activities as cultural agents diverges from the dominant approach of examining these platforms as employers of delivery workers.

What activities have platforms engaged in that have led me to analyse them as cultural agents? During the covid-19 lockdown in 2020 Swiggy, Zomato, and their counterparts across the world[64] worked with Instagram to introduce a platform agnostic 'order food' button. In the screenshot of popular restaurant *The Bombay Canteen's* Instagram page below (figure 3), we can see it. Business users must first be on Instagram and then they must choose to offer the button to bring users to their listing on food delivery apps. Only when businesses move across platforms can tapping this button direct the user from Instagram to any food delivery or on-demand service app.

This button is located on Instagram but it wireframes – literally and metaphorically – a path for consumers to various on-demand platforms. The making of this surface level interaction and path required surrounding arrangements: various combinations of professions and professionals like designers, marketers, engineers within and across platform organisations, in a wider logistical surround. In person, closure of physical retail spaces during lockdown led businesses to using Instagram account-as-arcades. Like arcades in the work of Walter Benjamin, businesses animated themselves, expressed anxiety, happiness, and used Instagram to move bodies both physically, through footfall to stores, and sentimentally, through positioning themselves as artisanal (Bassett et al. 2024). The Zomato app mimicked Instagram account arcades, especially through the "vibe check" section. Like Instagram stories, vibe check enabled businesses to upload ephemeral content like short videos to offer consumers a sense of what to expect.

[64] https://help.instagram.com/661624171320775. Accessed September 2021.

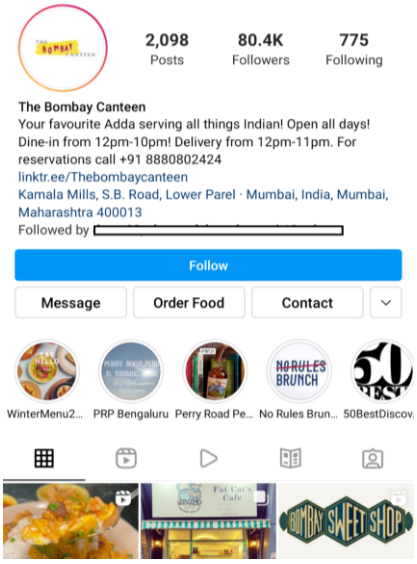


Figure 3: Author's screenshot of the Instagram page of a restaurant that shows the newly introduced 'order food' button.

People have composed experiences prior to this button wireframing paths across platforms. In provisioning meals for households, people have moved between *sites* like grocery stores, markets, workplaces, homes, and *activities* like buying, working, selling, in the *capacity* of consumers, workers, sellers and so on. In moving between sites in different capacities, buyers had joined the dots between their activities of buying and others' working conditions as evidenced by early twentieth century consumers leagues. These organisations can serve as examples of how common people have for long joined the dots between buying and selling; members of such leagues viewed the consumer as "..the clock which regulates the relationship between the employer and employee." If the clock is driven by "selfishness, self-interest, thoughtlessness and greed and avarice, thousands of our fellow beings have to live in misery". Consumer leagues also actioned this insight about their responsibility and role as consumers through practices such as the "white labeling" of ethically produced goods (Trentmann 2017).

The work cited in the paragraph above about the compositional nature of experience as well as the platform agnostic order food button both offer a similar lesson. They compel us to widen, soften, and diffuse scholarly focus on arrangements that surround the subject of our study. This chapter adopts a wide, diffuse, and soft focus on Swiggy and Zomato's use of social media. Analysing widely, diffusely, and softly means examining what these platforms do that is outside of their dominant logistical role; a wide, diffuse and soft focus enables nimble scholarship that analyses platforms' role as cultural agents when promoting their services on social media. This wide focus also examines users' reception and engagement with these promotions widely through people's compositional movements across platforms (social media; on-demand; email and so on), activities (consumption; work; leisure), and in various capacities (consumers, workers, businesses), not statically or solely from a positional point of view.

In the rest of the chapter, I first review literature on brand building on social media platforms, then describe the communications from their official social media handles that sound sweet, casual, and friendly. To widen and soften focus on arrangements surrounding the handles, I ask: how was this talk received on social media? Who made this sweet talk on behalf of Swiggy and Zomato? What did platforms' embedding themselves in popular culture in this way do to practices of branding in the media and entertainment industries? By being attentive to branding on social media, I will discuss its implications on our livelihood strategies as users and users' relationships with promotional cultures, as people who go across platforms to buy, sell and work. Finally, I will conclude by arguing that when branding is a as part of different livelihoods, we can see how creating content on social media opens a variety of risks and challenges for Swiggy and Zomato.

2.2 Literature review: Aggregating users through content creation on social media

In this section, I bridge scholarship about the use of social media platforms for branding (RQ 1.2) that is scattered across four areas: (1) studies of how brands in general use social media for promotions, (2) studies of user-cultures, (3) the literature on media and entertainment industries in India, and (4) the literature on reputation of commercial entities.

(1) Studies of how brands in general use social media for promotions have shown that a variety of brands put out a coherent identity through their advertising and marketing. Yet common internet users used the brand to gain publicity for themselves (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). This is because common users of the internet do branding too (Senft 2013) by making a personal brand. In recognition of personal brands, companies tapped into influencer or creator cultures (Caliandro and Anselmi 2021) and invited visibility labour from their followers. This sometimes meant that influencers aggregate consumers by offering them a chance to win a gift if they tagged a friend for example, or influencers might instigate the use of hashtags, and create 'searchable talk' (Abidin 2016).

A range of brands use *influencers as amplification platforms* (Abidin 2016). Drawing on their research with influencers across South East Asia, and the Nordic regions, Abidin (2016) explains what they mean by influencers being amplification platforms:

> "Influencers are not merely "endorsers of things and brand ambassadors" but amplifiers of information" that act as profile-as-platform "with the ability to input a message to be disseminated like a loud hailer (Abidin, 2019f)… Alongside social media Influencers, other varieties of internet celebrity are also functioning as amplification platforms. Two further examples from my newest research are "meme factories," which are a coordinated network of creators or accounts who produce and host content that can be encoded with (sub)text and parsed into new contexts across multiple organizational structures (Abidin 2020d; Abidin & Cheong, 2019), and K-pop fandom networks on social media, who often deploy analogue and algorithmic baiting strategies through large-scale but informal coordinated action to suppress some news (e.g., idol scandals) and magnify others (e.g., idol promotions; Abidin, 2019d)" (pg 6).

This amplification by influencers is confronted by limitations from audiences. The proximity between commercial entities or brands and creators threatens both influencers' authenticity of representing a relatable point of view and brands' campaigns. So influencers use various authenticity management tactics (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard 2020) to remain not only visible but also authentic to their own experiences and relatable in the eyes of the audiences.

This chapter flips the commonly held existing understanding of *influencers as amplification platforms* (Abidin 2021) by studying *platforms as influencers.* The inversion of this framing bridges well studied social media platforms' user cultures and their relatively understudied on-demand platforms counterparts like food delivery platforms' user cultures. It is based on my findings about how Swiggy and Zomato make user-generated content via their social media profiles, just like individual content creators, and face their version of authenticity management troubles through brand reputational crises. Analysing platforms as influencers picks up on the work of communications scholar Nicholas Carah, especially their insight about the role played by brands in social and cultural practices and the development of algorithmic media infrastructures. Brands have long used culture as a symbolic resource, but mobile and social media enable brands to use culture as a platform. Using culture as a platform refers to how platforms might channel social and cultural practices such as music festivals, into streams of data, making brands important actors in the development of algorithmic media infrastructures (Carah 2017). This chapter takes Carah's analysis beyond the case of music festivals by examining food delivery platforms as brands, not only employers or tech infrastructures.

(2) *Studies of user cultures* on social media are marked by users' abilities to throw light, create consciousness, and raise new questions about seeing and being seen. This is because audiences of platforms' branding efforts are users who are accustomed to "perpetual content saturation, hyper-competitive attention economies, gamified and datafied metric cultures, and information distrust" (Abidin 2021).

Scholars have noted how users also resist promotional cultures on platforms due to their growing familiarity with branding and promotions of the self or of businesses. Studies have examined how common users bring 'critical publicity' as an alternative to brands' manipulative publicity. 'Stop Funding Hate' and 'Sleeping Giants,' are examples of how users of social media run campaigns online to pressure advertisers into pulling out of platforms that host hateful content (Lekakis 2022). Similarly, platform workers used digital native methods or interventions made online as a means of organising and bringing attention to platforms' exploitation (Vilasís-Pamos et al. 2024).

Even when not attempting to resist anything, some scholars have argued that ordinary users shape platforms' biographies by simply navigating macro processes of datafication and platformization in the everyday (Burgess et al. 2022). An example is when Twitter turned a user practice of tagging someone by using "@." In this case, Twitter turned an informal practice into a feature they offered (Burgess and Baym 2020).

My examination of Swiggy's and Zomato's use of social media to aggregate users is informed by the work about user cultures cited above. If users intentionally and unintentionally shape platforms via their use as suggested above, what kind of ongoing work do *platforms as influencers* have to undertake? Communications studies scholar Nancy Baym has framed this audience management work as relational labour or the "ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of

communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work (Baym 2018) (p.19).” This chapter applies Baym’s analysis of relational labour and their emphasis on its ongoing, interactive nature, and reliance on the creation of structures in the examining Swiggy and Zomato’s branding. This application of Baym to Swiggy and Zomato, allows me to go beyond the common refrain of “commodification of intimacy” and examine *how this intimacy was produced* between personal-professional, creative-commercial pulls and pushes. By asking who made this user generated content on behalf of platforms, this chapter situates food delivery platforms structurally, in India’s mediascape. This kind of analysis is new and inventive as food delivery platforms have largely been examined as employers of logistics labour.

(3) *The literature on the media and entertainment industries in India* (advertising, film, and television) is distinct from scholarship on on-demand platforms. The findings in this chapter link knowledge on on-demand platforms and India’s media and entertainment industries by studying Swiggy’s and Zomato’s content creation. The literature on the media and entertainment industries in India, has shown how changes in medium — print, radio, television and digital — co-evolved with who could express their creativity (Mazzarella 2003:2). These shifts in who gets to be a creative broker and how they talk on behalf of brands, was also enabled by the metrification of knowing the audience (Punathambekar 2013).

In this chapter, Swiggy’s and Zomato’s managerial workers who created content on platforms’ behalf are analysed as new cultural brokers. Similar to the talent channel between television and streaming platforms (Mehta 2019), my findings in this chapter will show how these managerial workers are enabled to move between Swiggy and Zomato and Bombay’s media and entertainment industries.

Recent literature identifies how building one's brand via posting content is a livelihood strategy across professions. This is sometimes referred to as 'influencer creep' (Bishop 2023) to signal that creating content is work that is not limited to influencers. Through my findings, I confirm this trend by showing how creativity and resultant visibility were virtues for platforms to achieve but also important for managerial platform workers. In fact, this chapter shows how Swiggy and Zomato contributed to influencer creep by encouraging their designers and engineers to use their personal social media handles to recount their experiences of building features and products for platforms.

In addition to confirming influencer creep and the role of Swiggy and Zomato's organisational cultures in this, I will reflect on the implications of managerial platform workers' personal brands on their future in their jobs. We know that some Uber driver/bloggers build their personal brands and monetise their expertise driving on YouTube (Chan 2019). Findings in this chapter will outline the implications of platform workers' monetising creativity for Swiggy's and Zomato's official promotional cultures. Managerial workers' personal brands offer them alternative sources of income outside of their jobs at platforms. As businesses need more assistance with branding to be able to sell across platforms, they seek professionals with experience of brand building online on others' behalf (RQ 2).

(4) *Literature on the reputation of commercial entities* has examined how brands' reputations can function as a type of ethical capital (Arvidsson 2010). Managing platforms' reputation via user relations has been understood as a type of platform governance that relied on interaction with users

(Shestakofsky and Kelkar 2020). However, building and maintaining a reputation as a company means dealing with different environments ranging from capital markets, labour markets, their workers, and the public at large. Capital markets fund and determine the future of the enterprise and in that world, ecological and ethical values are increasingly becoming central. Labour market reputation ensures companies are attractive to job seekers and once workers join, the internal environment and recognition culture within the organisation is of consequence. The wider public environment exerts pressure via corporate social responsibility (CSR) etc (Voswinkel 2011). Even the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s Bureau of Employers' Activities appealed to employers and businesses membership organisations (EBMOs)[65] to keep in mind their 'ethical capital' in the eyes of civil society and government.[66]

I further the literature cited above by reflecting on platforms' reputation management practices via social media. How do platforms control their brands reputation when branding relies on the audience's reception, not only creative workers? This is especially relevant on social media where user cultures are known to bring and take away attention from issues. When Zomato went public, their Red Herring Prospectus[67] identified "risk factors" to their reputation, especially through social media, as being able to harm their operations. Management literature suggests preventing public complaints and ensuring sure that resolutions are perceived as fair and advises swiftness in responding to complaints (Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp 2015; Tripp and Grégoire 2011). This chapter

[65] EBMOs are the 'other side' of trade unions in the social dialogue model. Some EBMOs in India are AIOE (affiliated with the FICCI), EFI and SCOPE. These national groups are affiliated with the International Organisation of Employers (IOE).
[66] The ILO found that EBMOs engagement with media and social media were more effective when compared to engaging with governments. In 2011, they organised an event called "The Business of Representing Business" in which they emphasised the importance of visibility and credibility as important for businesses: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---act_emp/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_603877.pdf; Another report on the importance of reputation and aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): : theyhttps://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---act_emp/documents/publication/wcms_727277.pdf. Accessed September 2021.
[67] bseindia.com/downloads/ipo/Zomato_RHP_070720212008.pdf. Accessed September 2021.

does not offer solutions by thinking on their behalf, however, it examines reputational harm due to branding. Specifically, findings here will attend to how users leverage their compositional experiences of buying, selling, and having fun online in terms of the pressure that it creates for companies (RQ 2).

This chapter examines Swiggy's and Zomato's branding on social media in terms of its content, how it is made, and received by common users based on a combination of (1) digital ethnographic methods, (2) telephonic interviews with managerial platform workers, and (2) a 9-month ethnography in a co-working space in Mumbai to understand how Swiggy and Zomato used social media platforms for promotions (RQ 1.2).

2.3 Findings: How do platforms appear as influencers on social media?

In this section, I will explicate how Swiggy and Zomato use social media like influencers or content creators. Through their official social media handles platforms listen to users, distance themselves from being commercial entities (2.4.1); collaborate with other content creators and celebrities; (2.4.2) and engage with their managerial workers by encouraging them to create content and showcase their company culture (2.4.3).

2.3.1 Building authenticity: listening, and distance from commerce

Food delivery platform companies speak in casual ways, like users when they use social media platforms. On Instagram, Zomato's bio is "meme page... occasionally posting brand posts due to business team pressure." Swiggy crowdsources their own bio and changes it regularly. Around Valentine's Day it was "*pyaar ke badle pyaar isine diya hai bas*" or "*only they have given me love in return for love*" contributed by @tulikachatterjee555 and after popular Netflix show Squid

Game, it was "You have 10 seconds to poke a perfect hole in your pani puri. If it cracks you die" contributed by another user (@shreyas4real).

Zomato Marketer Pranav Sapra explained the importance of using social media in a non-transactional way that is focussed on listening:

> "We don't look at it as a medium for driving leads or revenue. We aim to make it a place where people are comfortable talking to us without worrying about being sold to. It's a place to get feedback about us, the [brand] category, what they would like to see, etc. We try to be entertaining because that's the nature of the platform. Too many companies have a transactional approach when it comes to using social media. They say, "If we do something, will it help us get *'dhanda'*? Will it help us get orders?...We listened to people complaining about being broke every month-end. So we developed a campaign around it – we called it the Broke campaign and if you used the code BROKE, you were suddenly not as broke as you thought because your money went further on Zomato."[68]

This listening informs push notifications too, as I explained in the previous chapter about how their voice is friendly, flirty, and informal. Additionally, I noted how differently push notifications offered me food at the beginning and then the end of the month, based on their assumptions about my salary being credited or used. Further in the interview, Sapra goes on to make a case for commercial entities to adopt a no-*dhandha* (non-transactional) approach to social media.

During my observations, I noticed that brand handles invite engagement from users and listen in, but they also interact with other brand's social media posts, much like common users interact with their friends. For instance, Sugar cosmetics tweeted: "What is free but you still need to be bold to ask? #BoldAndFree?" and Swiggy replied, "Chutney." While this engagement-seeking question was meant to make the cosmetics brand appear friendlier to its customers and invite their responses, it was also used by other brands, of which Swiggy was one, to 'converse' with Sugar in public and make themselves seem friendly too.

[68] https://thehardcopy.co/zomatos-pranav-sapra-on-their-no-dhanda-approach-to-social-media/. Accessed September 2021.

2.3.2 Collaborating with other creators and celebrities

To be friendly and casual, Swiggy and Zomato also embedded themselves in popular culture through collaborations with social media entertainment and legacy media and entertainment industries.

Swiggy and Zomato leveraged creators' popularity through influencer marketing, to push particular campaigns and sometimes designed campaigns around influencers' practices. Influencer marketing was used to reach influencers' audiences through discount codes and to jump on trending memes. To celebrate their 'birthday,' and publicise a 60% discount, Swiggy collaborated with Instagram creators Meethika Dwivedi (@the_sound_blaze), a 16-year-old singer who makes popular lip-sync and comedic short videos on Instagram and Ronit Ashra who rose to popularity with recreations of popular scenes from movies and television shows. For Swiggy's birthday, he recreated a popular scene from the Hindi movie, *Three Idiots*. In Ashra's recreation, he used a cardboard box that featured Swiggy's branding and the caption informed viewers about the 60% discount.

Social media campaigns were often reflected in push notifications. In July 2021, I got push notifications with #nocookingJuly and on Instagram, Zomato promoted this campaign by collaborating with creator Prajakta Koli on Instagram.

Zomato's YouTube channel was launched by Zomato's employee Sahiba Bali who used her experience as an actor in Hindi movies to be a creator and marketeer.[69] In September 2021, on

[69] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpbDeRNEuYY&t=556s. Accessed July 2024.

Zomato's YouTube channel, Bali collaborated with Khali, a popular wrestler from Worldwide Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). The video is scripted to be Khali's cheat meal challenge and draws on Khali's large frame and reputation of being a gentle giant outside of the wrestling ring. In drawing on Khali's personal brand, the script engaged with the *ek tera ek mera* (one for you, one for me) meme popular in September 2021.[70] The meme references a comedic scene from a Hindi movie in which Akshay Kumar is seen distributing money between him and another person unequally — he stacks currency notes on his side while saying *ek mera, ek tera*. So, in Zomato's video, Khali distributes slices of pizza between his plate and Bali's saying "this one's for you, this one's for me" while stacking his plate with many more slices than he puts on Bali's plate.

Zomato also collaborated with existing YouTubers as they created an interview series, Sunday Brunch, with *Curly Tales*, a food and travel recommendation platform, akin to Buzzfeed. These videos begin with food being delivered by Zomato delivery workers, in their uniforms, carrying a Zomato bag. When the celebrity and host are back on screen, Zomato remains on the screen visually through the tape on the packed food, and in the infographics displayed when the host Kamiya Jani, plays a quiz.

Food delivery platforms offered their service and discounts to people by designing campaigns around popular user practices such as gaming streams and other live streams. Gaming streams are known to give streamers a large audience, especially amongst young boys. In June 2021, Zomato launched #zomatogamingnights in collaboration with comedian Tanmay Bhat and other influencers like Suhani Shah later. Typically, in these streams, the streamer and guests play a game

[70] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpbDeRNEuYY&t=556s. Accessed July 2024.

like geoguesser or skribble. The discount codes offered to the audience are woven into different stages in the game which keeps the audience watching and waiting.

During my digital ethnography, I found two instances of Zomato's promotional engagement with legacy media and entertainment. One was when Zomato and ride hailing service Lyft appeared in musician Tesher and Jason Derulo's popular song Jalebi baby. The song was originally released in November 2020, but the re-released music video had a product placement for Zomato and Lyft.[71] The second was when Zomato made ads with Hindi movie actors Hritik Roshan and Katrina Kaif.

2.3.3 Engaging employees via content creation

In this subsection, I show how this friendly face of platforms seems to serve the function of making platforms cool places to work at for designers, content writers, and engineers.

Separate social media handles were used for "employee engagement" and showed how companies allowed self-development and creative expression. On Instagram, Swiggy's @weareswiggy handle posted employee stories and links to blogs. Their bio introduced their page in this way: "the other side of innovative technology and unparalleled convenience are the swiggsters who actually make things happen." @Swiggydesign, a separate handle run by designers ran a series called "folks" that introduced the designers. A "typefaces" series showed off the employee designers' tastes. Other than designers' views on design, the handle allows designers to express their views about music, food and living in Bangalore through a "playlists" series. Another series was in the "pecha kucha," narrative form, that tells stories in 20 images and viewers spend 20 seconds on

[71] https://www.forbesindia.com/blog/storyboard18/inside-zomato-and-universal-music-groups-recipe-for-jalebi-baby-323691.html/. Accessed July 2022.

each image. One pecha kucha, curated by a user experience (UX) designer and "our resident foodie expert," who was also tagged, was a list of the designers' top five places to eat at in Bengaluru.

I was led to Swiggy and Zomato's blogs while conducting observations on these Instagram and Twitter handles for the design and engineering teams. *Swiggy Diaries,* their blog, was divided by various headers —'news,' life at swiggy,' 'snackables,' 'teams at swiggy,' which opens up into tech' and 'UI/UX,' both feature articles from medium blogs— Swiggy engineering and Swiggy design. Zomato's blog, *The Munchies* was similarly organised by various headers: 'technology,' 'culture,' 'feeding India' and 'community.' [72] Like Swiggy, they had a section on stories of employees often giving details about the "vibe and tribe."[73] One about the first hire in Bengaluru who worked as a Data Collection Executive who travelled around the city, and uploaded menus to Zomato. The co-founder of Zomato, Deepinder Goyal, had hired this executive via Naukri.com 10 years back.[74]

Blogs hosted employee showcases but were also fully aware of a wider public audience given the presence of a press kit, news, and visual reports about company performance. Therefore, they also hosted a variety of reports platform companies published that have interesting anecdotes, visualisations of order patterns, sentimental summaries of transactions *and* information about delivery partners more recently. In one report six months after Zomato's IPO listing, Zomato claimed to use a Delivery Partner NPS Survey. From this, they have found delivery workers were paid Rs 27,000 on a monthly basis on an average which was 15% higher than the previous year.[75]

[72] https://www.zomato.com/blog/. Accessed July 2021.
[73] https://www.zomato.com/blog/finding-vibe-and-tribe. Accessed September 2021.
[74] https://www.zomato.com/blog/10-years-and-counting. Accessed September 2021.
[75] https://www.zomato.com/blog/a-billion-smiles-delivered. Accessed September 2021.

In another blog, Zomato shared their goal of increasing women's participation in delivery work to 10% in the cities of Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Pune. To attract more women, they planned to provide self-defense training to women delivery partners, set contactless delivery as the default during the evening, add an SOS button and use #girlpower tag on those restaurants that provide separate washrooms to women delivery workers. Women delivery workers would also be able to rate the restaurants on "ease and safety."[76]

In 2022, a carousel of images posted by an 'intern' on the Zomato Instagram handle was attracting a lot of attention and likes. This carousel had a collection of puns on the names of popular foods like bay leaves. Bay leaf is *tejpatta* in Hindi but '*tez'* also means 'fast,' so Zomato posted an image of a bay leaf alongside a speeding bay leaf. Recognising the popularity of this post, the Zomato Instagram handle invited followers to help the post reach 50k likes, a common practice in the Indian Youtuber community. If the post reached 50k likes, Zomato promised to offer the author of this post, an intern, a position in their company. When the post surpassed their requested number of likes, they shared the hire letter which acknowledged the importance of "public demand" in the intern's promotion:

> "Dear Intern, On public demand, we are forced to offer you a full-time position as co-admin of our social media handles. Your daily responsibilities include: 1. Not bragging about getting 50K likes on the post 2. That's it. Your annual compensation would still be 'exposure'. P.S.: Please note that in case any of your future posts get less than 20K likes, you would be demoted to an intern again."

From my observations of Swiggy and Zomato's official handles, I found employee engagement by encouraging creator culture and managerial platform workers who were using their personal

[76] https://www.zomato.com/blog/more-inclusive-delivery-fleet. Accessed September 2021.

handles to make content. I followed those managerial workers who were creators on their own handles and made observations about their content.

In the next section, I examine how social media norms of visibility and branding influenced aspiring and existing managerial platform workers' practices of seeking livelihood and growth at work. What does Zomato and later Swiggy's setting up in-house marketing and showcasing platforms as cool places to work at in the ways described above, mean for norms and expectations of being a creative worker? How did this shape Swiggy and Zomato's brand voices?

2.4 Findings: Who creates content that makes platforms sound like influencers?

In this section, I detail how Swiggy and Zomato incubate creator culture via in-house marketing teams (2.5.1) and engage external creative agencies (2.5.2). This leads me to analyse how Swiggy and Zomato's creative work means that they too have to contend with the ongoing platformization of existing media and entertainment industries (2.5.3) and social media user-cultures of complaint that threaten to tarnish their reputation (2.5.4).

2.4.1 Content creation via in-house marketing

In 2016, Yukas Yla, a marketeer, dressed up as a delivery worker and delivered a box of donuts to forty start-ups like Postmates, Uber. These boxes read "Most resumes end up in trash. Mine - in your belly." The boxes also had a link to his LinkedIn profile that carried his resume and allowed him to track the response to his campaign. The CEO of Postmates appreciated his effort on Twitter

and Yla said companies appreciated his work since they see that it required "time, creativity and a hustler attitude."[77]

In 2022, a Bangalore based youth Aman Khandelwal, dressed up as a Zomato delivery worker and delivered his resumes in Yla's style. The conversation on Twitter ranged from being celebratory but it also involved users raising questions about the ease with which someone could impersonate a delivery worker.

In making promotions in-house, platforms became attractive destinations for those with work experience in legacy agencies like Ogilvy, smaller agencies, and first timers. From interviews with platform executives in marketing and creatives at platforms, I learnt that platforms were understood to offer better work-life balance than legacy agencies. They were seen by managerial workers as having a bigger risk-taking appetite. Their locations outside Mumbai — in Gurgaon, Bangalore, and Hyderabad — had a qualitative effect on the kind of content and language that it was being produced in.

In hiring executives for in-house creative work, those who posted content on their personal social media handles were viewed by those hiring as being trained through this experience which would be helpful to the company's brand. In an interview about influencer marketing, comedian Tanmay Bhat who rose to fame with the YouTube channel of his comedy collective All India Bakchod

[77] https://finance.yahoo.com/news/meet-job-seeker-impersonating-postmates-193700377.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAANxSxEjfJ7ypnl0qNzMeqxOG9jRmXEONldXiTzqIOf5PdCMKq0WpwlpymzoGMF0B6cTR8OSYnYkdNGVBBtiWiJBfsyY_oETaXJk0-_0PvaupxSVWXAfswssvSpiYzTf_qjOoLeFsnkKf3ur-IVcD9Mb4nd8ukwk8Ckufd6-cATTJ. Accessed September 2021.

(AIB),[78] recommended setting up in-house marketing. The interviewer and Bhat seem to suggest that having an external agency makes it more likely that the brand communication reflects the agency's distance from the brand's culture. Bhat provides the example of Zomato to underline the importance of in-house brand communications from the early days of a startup. He attributes Zomato's success and ability to effectively position the brand as a person to the longitudinal relationship between Akshar Pathak and the company (Bertelsmann India Investments 2020).

Interestingly, Pathak was one of several managerial platform workers who used their personal social media handles as creators. This personal brand enabled Pathak to leave Zomato for AIB only to leave and return in a few months.[79] Pathak is representative of how being a creator enabled managerial platform workers as a professional group to build personal relations with comedians, other popular creators, and start-up circles.

When I asked platform executives in telephonic interviews if they felt any pressure to post creator style content on their personal pages. A few executives explained to me that they chose not to do it, because they used social media to talk to people they already knew. They noted this was different for younger hires or their "genz" colleagues for whom social media "was a way of life." They had grown up there, and learnt that having a side hustle was commonplace, so they had a different approach to social media.

[78] AIB in 3-4 years of its launch was not simply a comedy collective but also had an advertising wing called *Vigyapanti*.(Anon n.d.)
[79] https://blog.zomato.com/homecoming-2-of-3-akshar-pathak. Accessed September 2021.

In the next sub-section, I show how along with in-house capabilities, Swiggy, Zomato and several other platforms outsourced bigger campaigns, as well as ongoing tasks like online reputation management (ORM) to external agencies.

2.4.2 Content creation via external agencies

At the co-working space, I noticed that external agencies counted both platforms and platforms' business-users as clients. Digital platforms' aggregation of people as businesses, consumers, and delivery workers had increased the work of building and maintaining relationships for platforms. Whereas businesses' being aggregated on platforms created more work around their condition of being aggregated on an interface —how should they brand themselves to improve their chances of being found?

These agencies were servicing different platforms as clients, be it streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime or online marketplaces like Nykaa etc. Agencies seemed to be part of a mushrooming of start-ups in the media and entertainment industries.[80] For instance, Netflix orginals and Amazon originals' credit rolls at the end often needed animation. One coworker who sat besides me worked on these credit rolls, as a short-term gig whilst setting up his own animation studio. Another co-worker used his expertise from working with a legacy ad firm and started a design company that offered behaviour solutions to Netflix and other brands. He explained to me that at legacy firms, his work centered around achieving clicks and conversions. In his own

[80] See this report by Ersnt and Young (EY) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce (FICCI): https://www.ey.com/en_in/insights/media-entertainment/reinvent-india-s-m-e-sector-is-innovating-for-the-future#:~:text=Summary-,The%20Indian%20M%26E%20sector%20continued%20its%20growth%20trajectory.,first%20half%20of%20the%20year. Accessed June 2025.

business, he was interested in shaping what our clicking and swiping behaviour meant for how we were “hardwired as people,” rather than simply gaming behaviour for clicks.

Most people at the space worked in groups, so when another young woman who worked solo, like me joined the space, we ended up getting meals together. She worked in a European digital marketing start-up so her work hours were in various European time zones. From her experience thinking on behalf of brands in the food, wellness, and beauty industries and assisting them leverage platforms, she had identified press on nails as an untapped business opportunity in India. She squeezed in short meetings with potential investors during her dinner breaks to get the idea off the ground before she returned to Europe.

Just like I understood that my coworkers’ businesses were based on their experiences of branding on others’ behalf, they saw me as being engaged in a similar business and were interested in my skills and views. How did I systematically study culture, habits, and experiences? Two young women who co-founded a marketing agency that often worked with Swiggy, were pitching to a client selling second hand vehicles and they asked for my assistance in making the pitch. What were the socio-cultural perceptions of second hand markets in India? How should they position the brand? Similarly, when the design company I worked alongside moved out to their own office, they invited me to know more about my work and offered me a space to work there. When I visited them, they showed me pitch decks to clients like Google and Netflix, on the condition of confidentiality. These decks had solutions to improve companies’ push notifications in ways that would not demand user attention in an annoying manner.

Building a brand on someone else's behalf invariably involved building one's personal brand. When I signed up to *The Hard Copy*, the first newsletter invited me to a "space for practitioners by practitioners" since there was "no place that talked about how to build a business creatively in India." In 2021, as part of the Hard Copy Pro membership, THC hosted Karthik Srinivasan, "one of LinkedIn's Power Profiles 2020," for a conversation on the importance of building a personal brand.

In the next sub-section, I place managerial platform workers' embeddedness in start-ups, the media and entertainment industries to illustrate potential pathways out of platforms.

2.4.3 Creator-as-entrepreneur and investor

In this subsection, by describing popular creators' livelihood strategies I reflect on how these might serve as benchmarks for platforms' managerial workers.

Comedian Tanmay Bhat's biography as a comedian is entangled with him being identified as a resource person for entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial insight. This is evident not only in the term content *entrepreneur* but also in him being approached for mentorship by other creators like YouTube fitness coach BeerBiceps or Ranveer Allahbadia. In an interview with Allahbadia on his popular YouTube series called "The Ranveer Show" Bhat explains how he became a content entrepreneur. After the closure of AIB on account #MeToo testimonies against the founders, Bhat moved to the city of Bangalore — that has the moniker of India's Silicon Valley — for a few months.

Bangalore is known for being a hub of entrepreneurs and techno-utopianism. So, when Bhat was invited to Bangalore by Kunal Shah, his friend and founder of fintech startup *Cred*, Bhat described feeling energised and optimistic because of the entrepreneurial spirit of the city. Bombay and Bangalore both attracted aspirational people, but Bangalore was more collaborative based on his experience of being surrounded by "crazy entrepreneurs" who "would live with their employees in the same house and they would just talk cool shit. Like literally their conversation would be like, "Did you read this article? Did you read this theory? Did you read what this philosopher said?" Bhat's vlogs in 2020 on YouTube showed that he too lived in a duplex flat with his employees — some ex-AIB, some other professionals who are his YouTube team — editors, managers etc.

Despite the promise and energy of Bangalore, digital entrepreneurship on social media or in promotional worlds is routed and rooted through Bombay's college festival (fest) culture and reality television circuit. Mumbai's college fests often have their own flagship personality contests which promise visibility to participants, a currency that is imagined to help find work. In a podcast[81], host Varun Duggirala recounts how he and his friends, when they were students in Symbiosis, Pune hosted a personality contest which Bhat participated in and won. Bhat explained how he found his way into media and entertainment work when he was spotted by a judge in Mr. and Ms. Malhar, a personality contest in St Xavier's College's annual college festival. This led to him being recommended to Ronnie Screwvala, founder of UTV Motion Pictures, one of the largest production studios in South Asia. Bhat and Duggirala met again later when they both worked in *On The Job*, a reality TV show on MTV.

[81] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5tWQiJjv-M. Accessed September 2023.

Both Duggirala and Bhat used their prior experiences of building and maintaining relations with an audience to start businesses of their own by leveraging opportunities presented by digital platforms. Their businesses offered services to other businesses interested in using platforms to find users. Varun Duggirala co-founded Glitch, a full-service agency that crafts strategies for brands. He also hosts a podcast 'Advertising is dead' to unpack the challenges and opportunities presented by digital platforms for the world of advertising. Like in the interview about influencer marketing, in this podcast too, Bhat explained how successful social media strategies were generally crafted by marketing teams that were led by those who were creators themselves.

Transferring learnings from posting on personal handles into posting from brands' official handles, was evident in the case of the platform *Dunzo.* Their official handle responded to positive tweets by making puns on users' names. It was one manager's own preference of playing with puns that shaped the brand voice on twitter which lived on even after she had quit.

This knowledge of talking to an audience based on their feedback, combined with being in "the right place at the right time," enabled Allahbadia to leverage his position as a content entrepreneur and co-found "a 360° creative digital media organisation" called Monk-Entertainment.[82] Being in the right place at the right time was not so random because Allahbadia reflected on the advantages he had as a first mover and having personal connections with other creators and understanding their desire to protect their creative liberty:

> "All our friends on YouTube, like Be You Nick, Niharika NM, Gauravi *bhai* from Flying Beast, they all noticed and said let's all work together. So we started managing even more people in an informal way. And

[82] https://monk-e.in/. Accessed September 2021.

> once there were enough people we figured, okay, now we need to make this some kind of a company… Let's keep the creative child in these guys active. All the logistical, admin, finance work, let's move it onto someone else. Let's keep that burden off to someone else. [83]

Bhat and Allahbadia are now not only creators who have their own businesses but are also angel investors. They have invested in direct-to-consumer brands (D2C), fintech platforms and other businesses offering services to the creator economy.[84] Bhat invests because it gives him the "trip" of being an entrepreneur without having a start-up.

Being within start-up circles and searching for creative autonomy through enterprise has also led comedians and other creators into the emerging crypto and web 3 spaces. Several Indian stand-up comedians' content is about being dissatisfied engineers who are in search of freedom, outside of their corporate jobs, which led them into start-ups and the media and entertainment industry. Comedians' proximity to start-ups is also understood given their engagement with reality TV show Shark Tank through memes and hosting 'sharks' on their YouTube live streams — sometimes of their own accord, other times as promotional work for the show.[85]

A newsletter reported how "the crypto industry in India has been doubling down on influencers to spread awareness." In my digital ethnography too, I saw comedians endorsing crypto companies Coin DCX and Coinbase and others joking about it. In November 2021, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced it would create its own crypto currency and refused to recognise Bitcoin. The tension was palpable in brand communications on social media and via push notifications. Swiggy's push notification, produced by creative workers resonated this tension: "OOOPS! Crypto

[83] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-g8wyflx8s. Accessed September 2021.
[84] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/startups/from-influencers-to-investors-content-creators-are-coming-of-age-in-india/articleshow/81295188.cms?from=mdr. Accessed September 2021.
[85] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9zmzSXsia8. Accessed October 2023.

took their first three letters a little too seriously. *Crying emoji* Lucky, hot chocolate can cure anything. Tap for a cuppa. *coffee cup emoji.*

In the next subsection, I describe how platforms embeddedness in popular culture often led to escalation of issues in positive and negative ways that platforms could not always anticipate.

2.5.4 Platform users tweeting to escalate complaints

Here, I describe and discuss how platform users escalate all their grievances with Swiggy and Zomato via social media platforms. Even though Swiggy and Zomato offer an in-app chat box to lodge and resolve complaints, users choose to escalate complaints publicly.

I found that several consumers 'escalate' every complaint — e.g., my cake was squashed, why did I not get extra chutney — by tagging the CEO of both the platforms. They also reported discrepancies in restaurants' menu prices, or about hygiene and quality of the food. Less often, consumers tweeted on behalf of delivery workers who had to work in the heat and rain. Once a consumer asked platforms about what working conditions they offered their delivery workers since the worker who delivered his order had informed him that a dog bit him, but he could not stop to get medicated because he would lose his incentive.

Other than consumers, restaurants and delivery workers, took to social media platforms to complain about their working conditions and make demands. During the covid lockdown, anonymous handles identifying themselves as food delivery workers became popular routes of complaint.

These practices seem to have led platform companies to create separate handles for complaints. From the Twitter bio for Zomato India, I learnt that Zomato's main handle migrated complaints to Zomato Care's bio was "official zomato support page" in 2018. Similarly, Swiggy's bio seemed to ward off angry consumers by telling them: "Welcome to our official account! For issues on your order, tweet to @swiggycares." During my digital ethnography, I noticed that not all people obediently tweet to the dedicated care handles. Companies' public responses to complaints via tweets involves them inviting the user complaining to resolve the issue in the private space of direct messages (DM).

A Swiggy executive explained to me that negative comments and complaints often came on campaign posts and activity on which "crores and crores of money were invested, celebrities were involved." So, there were two principles they abided by in responding to negative comments on very visible and expensive communications. One was to not engage with such comments from the official handle which tweeted and issued promotional communications. Doing this would muddle the campaign and only attract more trolling. Two, they set up separate handles to respond to complaints and negative comments as "a neutral third-party voice in the eye of the consumer." These dedicated handles relied on human and automated labour as there were standard operating procedures (SOPs) which could include criteria like does the complaint have an order ID. SOPs were set up based on every type of possible comment and would be used to decide if the negative comment would either receive a manual response or automated response.

Escalation could lead to positive outcomes since social media affords a public channel for interaction between people who would not otherwise interact in their daily lives. To steer

unanticipated escalations in a positive direction, I noticed that the Zomato handle often responded to Elon Musk's tweets. Sometimes influential people reach out. For instance, industrialist Anand Mahindra re-tweeted Zomato's clever Independence Day tweet. Consumers often tweeted positively about good experiences, funny anecdotes, or appreciation for humour posted by platforms' handles. A platform executive I interviewed explained to me how they replied to positive tweets by making a pun on the users' names. Users had caught on to this style and some tweeted only for the official handle to make a pun with their names. During my immersions with consumers in Mumbai too, one of my informants would screenshot clever push notifications and add his repartees on Instagram stories and tag Zomato. He was also very interested in making a change in his career and work in marketing.

Which direction user engagement would take —positive or negative— could not always be anticipated. In April 2022, I started receiving push notifications in Marathi and was curious if people were tweeting praise for Zomato. So, I searched 'Marathi,' 'push notifications,' 'Zomato' on Twitter. I found users talking about how they were amused and some found grammatical errors. At this time, I found tweets from October 2021 when #Reject_Zomato trended. I surmised from tweets and news reports that a Tamil speaking consumer demanded to speak to a customer service agent in Tamil but the agent refused. In response, Zomato issued an apology statement that explained that they terminated the agent since their actions went against their training protocols in "sensitivity." Zomato also mentioned that they were building an app in Tamil and offered their engagement with popular music composer Anirudh Ravichander to develop a brand anthem as an

instance of their sensitivity.[86] Other than the statement, they also tweeted back using #Reject_Zomato but added "Please don't…"

Negative user experiences presented a perennial threat of going viral. In March 2021, the conflict between two kinds of platform workers — a delivery worker and a young woman who was a beauty influencer and worked at an IT company became 'viral.' Hitesha Chandranee who made beauty content, claimed in Instagram posts and tweets that a Zomato delivery worker broke her nose when she complained about a late delivery. In the videos, she told her side of the story with a bleeding gash on her nose. TV interviews platformed Kamraj, the delivery workers' side of the story and he claimed that it was Hitesha who attacked him with a slipper. In a few days both had filed FIRs against each other. On social media, Kamraj received a lot of public support because he was the only breadwinner of his family and was suspended from work. Whilst Hitesha, the customer was seen as "playing the victim card."

Several people who defended Kamraj did so along with sharing their suspicion towards Hitesha, by referring to her work as an influencer who was habituated to getting food for doing nothing. Some observed that she had access to social media and could tell her side of the story while he did not, and we did not know his side of the story. Because of her access to social media and her work being online, she gained followers and benefitted in terms of her work too (which is getting attention) while he lost his job. The virality of the incident led to Bollywood actress Parineeti Chopra tweeting to Zomato:

[86] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/tech-bytes/zomato-fires-then-reinstates-employee-over-national-language-remark/articleshow/87134380.cms. Accessed January 2022.

> "PLEASE find and publicly report the truth.. If the gentleman is innocent (and I believe he is), PLEASE help us penalise the woman in question. This is inhuman, shameful and heartbreaking .. Please let me know how I can help.."

The issue, like others on social media, swung from being an issue of violence against a woman, North versus South India, to being the fault of a shallow woman who is habituated to freebies and was finally distorted by men's rights activists into the age-old accusation of women's misuse of the law. Hitesha eventually deleted all posts about this issue. Eventually, Deepinder Goyal, CEO of Zomato re-tweeted Zomato's response, bringing attention to how Kamraj had excellent ratings and had been a good worker, so he would not lose his job. This statement mentioned that Zomato would support Hitesha's medical and legal expenses. In their clarifications, Zomato shifted from their usual friendly, casual use of language to a non-partisan, measured voice. Even if genuineness was lacking, there was pressure to sound genuine.

By recounting these instances here, I want to show how using creator culture and becoming creators, gig work platforms attempted to align users' and platforms' interests. However, their visibility on social media and social media's user-led culture meant that user narratives can bring and take away attention too. So social media affordances like using Twitter as a venue of complaining publicly can lead to issues spinning out of control in unforeseen ways and give rise to the problem of reputation management.

The conflict between Hitesha and Kamraj also shows us how working on platforms as an influencer is understood to create a consumer who is accustomed to getting freebies. Despite this condescension towards freebies and not seeing creative work as work, I show how more people are drawn into creative work through opportunities for digital entrepreneurship via social media.

In the next section, I show how the draw of content creation as a livelihood strategy sediments into an unofficial promotional culture for Swiggy and Zomato. What does this mean for platforms' official promotions?

2.6 Findings: Unofficial promotional cultures

In this section, I show how content created by logistics workers and cloud kitchen owners on the subject of food delivery platforms on YouTube forms an unofficial promotional culture that both contributes to and challenges platforms' official promotions.

2.6.1 Pranks as playful exposés genre

London based YouTuber at the beginning of a video titled *I Sold Microwave Meals On Deliveroo* said "Deliveroo feeds 45,000 hungry Brits a night, while 9 million of us eat ready meals each evening,..Which gave me an idea: Would Deliveroo allow me to sell microwave meals on their app?" Josh Pieters' intent was not one of exposing the risks and regulatory loopholes, but he was interested in seeing how far he can go with his prank.

In the video, Pieters signs up on the app with relative ease. He enters his home address as a business address, gives his 'restaurant' a name, and he is ready to accept orders. Pieters anticipates requiring a health clearance but is told that he can start selling meals before it arrives.[87] This format of playful exposes became very popular with other YouTubers who tried starting their own

[87] Josh Pieters & Archie Manners, *I Sold Microwave Meals On Deliveroo*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k47u9tduwb8&feature=emb_title. Accessed July 2021.

businesses.[88] In May 2019, Josh Pieters made a video about working as an Uber driver for a day driving. However, he chose to drive around in a tank.[89]

In India, this genre of a playful expose on YouTube has not caught on. Instead of playful exposes the figure of the 'fixer' is popular. Outside of social media, the fixer in South Asia, is known to be a figure enabling navigation of complex systems like the bureaucracy and tip-toeing the line between formality and informality. The next sub-section examine show in social media content, the figure of the fixer takes up this work of inadvertently investigating the apps, like the genre of playful expose.

2.6.2 Logistics workers and the fixer genre

In 2019, when querying YouTube with keywords like 'strike,' 'protest,' 'Swiggy,' 'UberEats,' and 'Zomato,' I found videos documenting strikes or reporting dissatisfaction. Less expectedly, there were also videos about food delivery platforms were guiding viewers about how to start a business on Swiggy and Zomato, how to join as a delivery worker and so on, which I refer to as the fixer genre. I subscribed to YouTube channels which seemed to make fixer style content as well as those that documented strikes. From subscribing to these channels, I learnt that they made content not only about food delivery but also about their experiences of togging across ride hailing and other platforms.

[88] airrack, *I Sold Frozen Pizzas on Uber Eats for a Week...*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgPWagogzYA. Accessed July 2021.
[89] Josh Pieters & Archie Manners, *I WAS A LONDON UBER DRIVER FOR THE DAY *IN A TANK!**, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBFtmYH_XzU. Accessed July 2021.

The fixer is a figure that enables people's navigation of complex systems and structures like the bureaucracy. In the case of digital platforms and their claimed simplicity and ease of use, it might be expected that they are more straightforward systems to navigate. However, the fact that this kind of content exists and gets engagement in the comments section is indicative of the fact that there might still be a learning curve in the use of platforms, contrary to their claims.

Among fixer type videos about food delivery platforms, I discovered a channel called Digital Chef Hub - By Dheeraj Bhandari. Bhandari has started his own cloud kitchen, and I found him because he used #Swiggy #Zomato on YouTube. Bhandari did a diploma in cooking at a Delhi Government run institute, worked as a chef on ships and now refers to himself as an entrepreneur. From his channel and attending his live sessions, I learnt that he runs a WhatsApp group where he posts opportunities about jobs in the hospitality sector. He offered consultancy services to cloud kitchens and restaurants, 2-hour time slots for training chefs and sold books about culinary arts that he has written, starting at INR 250 or GBP 2.5. Bhandari's enterprising efforts through the WhatsApp group for job opportunities, his books, and consultancy services are all instances of the effort from outside platform systems that makes platforms work for people.

In live sessions on YouTube, people often asked Bhandari which degrees he recommended for a career in the hospitality industry, how much money a hotel management education required, and which cuisines there was demand for abroad. Someone even asked if beards were allowed in the kitchen. People also asked questions about him: where was he from? Which village in Uttarakhand? Where did he work? How much did he earn as a salary? When people kept asking about this, he said "*kabhi toh bada socho!" or "think big for once!*" Similarly, when someone

shared their dream was to be an executive chef, he said, "*Itne chhote sapne? sirf executive chef banana hai? Bekaar!" or "Such small dreams? You want to be only an executive chef? That's useless!*" One Zomato delivery worker attended this live and asked if he will be able to start his own cloud kitchen: "Sir, I am a Zomato delivery boy since the last 2 years, I want to start my own cloud kitchen selling *parathas,* burgers, sandwiches..sir, is this for me?"

This sub-section has detailed how platform users' enterprising efforts as fixers simplifies platform systems for other users whether they are logistics workers or hospitality workers seeking to start businesses that sell food via platforms. Contrary to platforms' claims about being simple and easy, people seem to have questions, and they seem to seek advice about navigating platforms, and this genre of content offers them some ideas. The next sub-section examines how fixing others' planning and navigation of platforms gives some workers the idea of creating content as a side hustle for themselves.

2.6.3 Logistics workers as creators genre

Gig worker generated content on social media is not always about exposing the reality of platforms' exploitation; I will detail an insight that can be counterintuitive in this sub-section. I found gig workers making influencer style videos perhaps trying to enter the talent channel opened up by the digital by making creative expression a source of livelihood.

A Kolkata based food delivery worker who I have been following on YouTube since 2019, did deliveries for Zomato and made videos about how to join, what rate cards to expect. In 2021, he renamed his channel from "Solo moto Vlogs" to "Dare to Dreams" and joined Rapido, an app-based bike taxi service. He started to make influencer-style videos like tours of the city, and a

celebration video with his subscribers when his channel got monetised. Like other career influencers, in the YouTube comments he is asked which camera he uses, and he says, "SJ Legend 6," a popular vlogging camera.

This is not an isolated case, another Gujarat based delivery workers' channel I followed, made influencer style content using high quality shooting equipment. In a vlog about how much workers can earn during festive times when consumers are offered high discounts, the worker toggled between the delivery app and his calculator app on his smartphone to show his daily earning. In the delivery app he showed that he earned Rs 967 or GBP 9.6 through orders and an additional Rs 450 or GBP 4.5 as incentive for working during the festival. In the calculator app he added both and then deducted fuel costs to arrive at his daily earnings. He said that many workers told him to spend Diwali with his family instead of working but he wanted to continue to work. He could not take a break because he still had to buy a mic and an adaptor for his newly purchased GoPro camera used by vlogger influencers on social media.[90]

From reports about social e-commerce, we know that social media is the gateway to the internet and making purchases online for rural, poor and semi-urban demographics.[91] Social e-commerce bridged the gap between consumers and businesses through re-sellers who collapsed differences between friends and influencers.[92]

[90] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beEsZmU7ZSQ. Accessed July 2021.
[91] https://www.livemint.com/industry/retail/india-to-have-228-million-social-commerce-shoppers-by-the-end-of-2022-11637918607828.html and https://www.socialsamosa.com/2022/02/data-a-look-at-bharat-consumers-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-neo-indian-consumer/. Accessed March 2022.
[92] https://the-ken.com/unofficial-sources/meesho-flipkart-and-the-social-commerce-identity-crisis/. Accessed January 2022.

I discovered a "loot" genre of videos that creates a call to action for the earn-by-shopping promise of various social e-commerce apps. I found this genre of videos through Awi Rawat blogs, a Flipkart delivery worker, from a small town in Uttar Pradesh, who I followed on YouTube. App loot videos made by Rawat and others generally have recommendations about how to cash in on these discounts as customers. Rawat has made videos for the Trell app (social e-commerce), Phable, Smytten (allows discovery by paying only for shipping) and others. The description section of these videos do not suggest that these are paid collaborations. While this genre and nomenclature seem to be a product of vernacular creativity, I noticed Flipkart started to use #lootoffer for their big billion sale. It is interesting to note that Flipkart has been interested in social e-commerce and created *Shopsy* as a competitor to popular social e-commerce platform *Meesho*.

Other than loot videos, Rawat has organised his videos into playlists like "YT helps." In another playlist on "Delivery Boy Job Helps," there is a video about the existence of a demand for delivery boys in villages. He explains that there are fewer food delivery opportunities in rural areas but plenty for e-commerce delivery since he finds an increasing demand for groceries, household goods, clothing, medicines and so on.

In another video he explains how he found out about this work[93] when he casually asked about vacancies at the Flipkart centre that he visited to pick up a chair he ordered online. After not making it through the group D exam for the Indian Railways, he used his case to encourage rural youth to consider getting a job during the Flipkart Big Billion sale since there was a large number of orders. He encouraged rural youth to consider applying too since he and his colleagues are able to achieve

[93] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olLdOWyV1e0&list=PLrT8ErYJfTSn7Ulq91CqX5njIJ4MjdEVn. Accessed January 2022.

targets even when there are floods and other obstacles. He recounts experiences about consumers being helpful since people want the convenience of items delivered to their doorstep. Sometimes consumers meet him at a pre-decided location if their areas were flooded.

Rawat, like the other workers I followed, explained in several videos how he used his salary as a delivery worker to purchase devices like bluetooth speakers and equipment like a gorilla tripod to improve his vlogs.

2.7 Discussion: Swiggy and Zomato in India's mediascape

In this section I discuss the implications of Swiggy and Zomato emerging as cultural agents who talk like influencers on social media, the creative workers who do this work on their behalf, and the unofficial promotional cultures (RQ 1.2).

We already know that branding aims at profit stabilisation *through* cultural destabilisation of meaning (Slater 2002). However, in destabilising meaning by posting on social media, Swiggy and Zomato were confronted by user interactions that social media offered users. When used by human and machine audiences, user cultures of these affordances have made audiences impactful. The audience is impactful because to even be seen by people, content competes for attention from the audience who are not only invisible masses (Abidin 2016). Swiggy and Zomato used affordances offered by social media to aggregate users who used the same affordances, in publicly talking back to and about Swiggy and Zomato, in ways that could harm their reputation.

Swiggy and Zomato programmed a private space of in-app messaging for grievance redressal faced by workers, consumers and restaurants as users. However, common users used Twitter as a public

redressal mechanism. This user practice drowned out official branding efforts as users often attached screenshots of ineffective solutions or negligence they encountered from in-app chat boxes, thereby compelling brands to create separate complaint handles. Future studies could examine how social media users worked in conjunction with each other, not just platforms in trending #BoycottZomato. Such reputational crises had imprinted platforms' organisational practices and often compelled them to drop their friendly banter and adopt a clinical, non-partisan voice.

What does unofficial content creation on platforms' behalf by managerial and logistics platform workers and these individuals' personal brands mean for platforms' profit stabilisation? On the face of it, content creation as employee engagement functions as a documentary and pedagogical kind of promotional talk. Even the unofficial content creation by logistics workers, especially the fixer genre and creator style videos, make platforms known and understandable to more people. At the same time, this UGC can inadvertently expose serious regulatory loopholes through playful pranks.

Additionally, the act of making this content sometimes opens alternate income streams for managerial and logistics platform workers and makes their skills platform agnostic. Managerial platform workers' experience of branding on platforms' behalf enabled their participation in the talent channel (Mehta 2019) between on-demand platforms' and increasingly platformized media and entertainment industries.

Platform workers found pathways outside of Swiggy and Zomato, through practices like dualapping and moonlighting. Dualapping or working across multiple platforms at the same time was a popular practice in logistics workers' content**.** In a telephonic interview, I asked a marketing platform executive why Swiggy had not collaborated with their delivery workers who were creators on social media. The executive explained that Swiggy had noticed this trend, but most logistics workers' accounts did not have too many followers, and they were often dualapping. So, collaborating with them would be promoting their competitors too. Referring to news reports, I also asked about managerial workers 'moonlighting' or working a second job, besides their primary day job with the platform. The executive explained that this was a popular practice and some of her colleagues ran businesses outside of their job after these had been "greenlighted" or given the go-ahead by Human Resources for not conflicting with Swiggy's interests.

Dualapping and moonlighting described above are individual practices, but they also hint at how Swiggy and Zomato are part of a wider platformization of media and entertainment industries. Due to platformization, more branding work was required by both businesses that crisscrossed platforms *and* platforms that aggregated such businesses as their clients. To cater to this new work there was a mushrooming of external digital agencies that offer marketing, ad, design, and animation services. Ex-engineers, comedians, beauty bloggers, and lifestyle influencers were all operationalising their interactions and experiences of building and maintaining an audience in turning entrepreneurs and investors.

Livelihood strategies of monetising creativity make interfaces popular sites of aggregation for livelihood and leisure. Furthermore, like streaming platforms' impact on who gets to be creative

and how that creativity is expressed (Mehta 2020), who can own a food business and what they can cook up is shaped by interfaces becoming popular sites. One instance is that of Get-a-Whey which is a sugar-free and keto[94] ice-cream with whey protein. It was also the first thing I ordered from Swiggy. When aggregated on Swiggy and Zomato, they sell via cloud kitchens, like other D2C food businesses. Get-a-whey get 70% of their orders from online marketplaces like Amazon, BigBasket, Swiggy, Zomato and their own website and 30% from offline retail.[95] The back of their ice-cream tub, pictured in the image below (figure 4) read: "Did you know get-a-whey was invented by engineers. Yes, you got that right! Not chefs, but engineers who love ice cream & know damn well the delight it brings."



Figure 4: Image of the back of Get-a-Whey's ice-cream tub from their Amazon India listing.

How did engineers become reliable chefs who understood what people might find tasty? In subsequent chapters, I will examine the experiences of food and hospitality businesses and industries as platform users (RQ 2).

[94] Keto is short form for ketosis, a state of metabolising fat into energy. So those "doing keto" reduce carbohydrate consumption and increase protein and fat intake.
[95] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ3XDmeScqM. Accessed September 2024.

2.8 Conclusion: Building and risking reputation through branding on social media

At the start of this chapter, the platform agnostic 'order food' button highlighted the importance of a diffuse and soft focus. This kind of focus enables us as scholars to attend to platform agnostic arrangements that surround the subjects of our study or the platforms that we choose to focus on. The findings began by establishing the subject of focus or how Swiggy and Zomato use their social media handles (RQ 1.2) and sound like influencers. After this, the chapter offered an understanding of platforms' emergence as cultural agents due to the professions and professionals who make this content on platforms' behalf.

Platforms' promotional activities aimed to aggregate users but ended up fielding at least *two types of risks* to their reputation from users and their own employees and creative workers. The *first risk* from creative workers who create promotional content on platforms' behalf has been discussed in the previous section. To recount it briefly: creating content on behalf of platforms creates livelihood pathways outside of Swiggy and Zomato for creative workers. In addition to monetising creativity via personal brands, food and hospitality businesses were enabled to sell newer varieties of food via other platforms such as e-commerce platforms.

The *second risk* that platforms' promotional content creation created was that brands were confronted by user cultures of escalating complaints via Twitter. These escalations often compelled platforms to drop their friendly and casual voice to adopt a neutral voice. Furthermore, unofficial promotional cultures about Swiggy and Zomato bring and take away attention from platforms in ways that are outside their control.

In sum, these risks implied that Swiggy and Zomato's branding on social media did not simply shepherd and push users from social media to Swiggy and Zomato. In fact, Swiggy and Zomato had trouble maintaining their brand's reputation and communicating to different audiences (Voswinkel 2011) *because* common users could spin meaning on social media. As a result, Swiggy and Zomato tried separating their communications via different venues beyond social media like their website for investors and social media for consumers and employees.

On their website, Swiggy and Zomato's public image, and socially conscious actions were *narratives* (Shiller 2019) made to investors, potential recruits, and the public at large. Zomato's website had a section dedicated to investor relations and over the year of my observations, I noticed a microsite dedicated to environmental, social and governance (ESG) initiatives. These included leave for menstruating women, making "no cutlery" the default option, calculations of their carbon footprint and waste and so on.[96] Reporting from the business press suggested that after their poor performance in the stock market, Zomato took these actions to secure ESG mutual funds. These narratives to investors were reflected in their balance sheets,[97] and were accounted for in their valuation. The balance sheet estimated the company's "goodwill" based on evaluations of brand reputation, customer base, customer service, employee relations, and proprietary technology. When Zomato went public, their Red Herring Prospectus[98] identified "risk factors" to their reputation, especially through social media, as being able to harm their operations.

[96] https://the-ken.com/story/green-push-or-greenwash-sustainable-funds-dont-buy-zomatos-esg-narrative/. Accessed September 2024.
[97] https://www.zomato.com/investor-relations/financials. Accessed January 2022.
[98] bseindia.com/downloads/ipo/Zomato_RHP_070720212008.pdf. Accessed September 2021.

In the next chapter, I shift focus onto how consumers and business, as platform users, navigate Swiggy's and Zomato's interfaces to find each other to buy and sell food respectively.

Chapter 3: Making a market encounter on platforms

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3.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I have discussed how Swiggy and Zomato's efforts to aggregate users rely on what users do. Even as platforms push information via their apps (chapter 1) and social media handles like Twitter (chapter 2), platforms were attentive to how users responded to being pushed.

In this chapter, I will build on the insight about the role of users in platforms' algorithmic curation of encounters between consumers and businesses. I ask: how do consumers and businesses find each other on Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces (RQ 2.1) on smartphone screens in the palm of our hands? Consumers hold up, scroll, tap, and swipe to transact with businesses such as restaurants and cloud kitchens listed on Swiggy and Zomato.

Encounters in our palms occur *alongside* users' encounters with grocery delivery platforms and street vendors, not as isolated experiences on our phone screens. For this reason, before burrowing

into what happens on Swiggy and Zomato's screens in our hands, it is worth moving the scholarly gaze more widely to explore in-person encounters between people and food businesses. Hawkers make encounters with consumers by being attentive to people's routines, occupation of spaces, and use of commuting infrastructures, and placing themselves in people's way and routines. In the morning on the local train, women vendors carry *dhoklas* and *samosas* because they know people are pressed for time and cannot always eat breakfast at home. Outside railway stations, metro stations, and bus stops, hawkers sell cooked snacks and vegetables which let people grab a bite after a long commute without having to detour. For those who drive back from work, hawkers with peanuts wrapped in newspaper meet them when and where traffic gets jammed. In the early evening, when children play in residential buildings, *idli* vendors blare their distinct horns as they cycle through streets. In malls and co-working spaces, pop-ups operate on a similar principle of catching people in their routine to test if their food will actually sell to consumers and find an audience.

My own encounter with a Big Basket Instant, a vending machine, illustrates this point about how people experience encounters compositionally. This means that people compose experiences of encounters with food businesses across sites, be it their phones *and* the street, or even experiences and encounters they have across apps on their phones. During fieldwork in residential buildings and a co-working space in Northern Mumbai, I encountered popular grocery delivery platform BigBasket (BB)'s 'Instant,' a 24/7 cashless vending machine, illustrated in figure 5 below. Each shelf has a QR code. So, if someone wants a drink placed on shelf two, they scan the code through the BB Instant app. Scanning the code unlocks that specific shelf's door and a sensor gauges which

item is picked up, and how many, and as the door shuts, money gets deducted from users' wallets on the app.



Figure 5: Author's watercolour illustration of the BB Instant vending machine. It has a neon green side, a lamp on top that spotlights three shelves below that each have a QR code.

BB stocks the vending machine with goods from their dark stores rather than inviting users into a supermarket, or onto an app. A senior sales executive explained to me in a telephonic interview that by placing the machine in people's homes, places of work, and educational institutes, BB gets a "captive audience" of 90,000 people. In residential buildings, hostels, and co-living spaces, BB curate encounters with 'essentials' like vegetables, fruits, and eggs — anything that an Indian household might run out of when cooking or hosting. At work, in colleges, manufacturing units, and in co-working spaces, 'impulse buys' like ice-creams, chocolates, biscuits etc are stocked. Buying from the vending machine offers quicker, less expensive purchases 24/7,[99] without on-demand delivery. Selling from it meant that brands got visibility in a less expensive and risky way than advertising on TV, Facebook etc.

[99] https://the-ken.com/tradetricks/vending-machines-may-finally-have-their-moment-in-the-indian-sun/. Accessed September 2023.

BB's curating physical encounters by taking stock outside of dark stores animates a big ongoing conundrum for platforms around how to curate encounters between their users. The fact that BB chose to make physical encounters by placing stock from dark stores literally in people's way points to the fact that virtualizing shopfronts does not guarantee encounters. This conundrum over how to be encountered on platforms matters here because like BB, Swiggy and Zomato rely on cloud kitchens and dark stores for food delivery and quick commerce deliveries of groceries, fruits and vegetables, beauty and personal care, stationery, and over the counter medicines.

This conundrum around how users encounter each other looms large in this chapter and is insufficiently analysed in critical platform scholarship. The dominant scholarly assumption is that virtualizing shopfronts automatically catapults businesses' visibility into demand and sales (Shapiro 2022). The physical counterparts of virtual shopfronts, namely dark stores and cloud kitchens, are framed through questions of invisibility: these spatial arrangements hide the labour of logistics from consumers and the public (Hill 2020). In my analysis, this framing is more the statement of an empirical fact since diminished physical visibility is hinted by the prefixes 'dark' or 'cloud.' It cannot be disputed that these spaces are out of sight in the street because consumers rarely, if ever, physically encounter these kitchens and even delivery workers struggle to locate them. However, my contention is that simply being able to be found via a screen does not automatically imply that consumers encounter these listings and order from them. In other words, businesses could be struggling to be encountered by consumers via screens and scholars have not sufficiently appreciated this possibility.

Therefore, this chapter will analyse how encounters or beholding involve seeing and the literal act of holding. Our hands and fingers hold up and navigate algorithmic curation of encounters on our phone screens while we move our bodies through physical spaces every day. A variety of businesses selling via platforms set up virtual shopfronts on platforms' interfaces – app and/or web-based. Crowding of virtual shopfronts in the form of long lists on platforms creates an ongoing conundrum for platforms and their users around how-to-be-encountered in this crowd.

In the rest of this chapter, first, I will survey the literature on platforms' interfaces as sites of gathering user data and curating the engagement between businesses and consumers. Then, I will examine how interfaces get crowded due to virtual shopfronts and what that means for businesses' and consumers' experiences of navigating crowds as platform users. I then discuss the implications of what users do to find each other for platforms' curations. Finally, I will conclude by arguing that platforms' algorithmic curation of market encounters between consumers and businesses invites user culture and curiosity.

3.2 Literature Review: Interfaces as sites of curated encounters

In this section, I review literature to bridge related conversations about platforms' curatorial work that have developed in (1) economic sociology, (2) scholarship about media flows, and (3) studies of 'user cultures' in media studies and human-computer interaction (HCI).

(1) *Economic sociology* has shown how users and their engagement through user data are assets for tech companies. Especially when raising investments, tech companies use metrics like daily active users (DAU) and monthly active users (MAU) as evidence of their value (Birch et al. 2021). These metrics of popularity amongst users like DAU and MAU communicate only what they mean

for platforms but what do these metrics mean for users? How do users interact with and experience platforms if they are part of the crowds of DAU and MAU that platforms gather on their interfaces?

Michel Callon (2021) has argued that using platforms transforms users too; it is not only beneficial for companies. Callon frames platforms as sites of exploration and shows how their use transforms how users see their own needs and choices. Rather than surveillance, Callon erects the figure of platforms operating as a "discreet MC". Unlike like masters of ceremonies (MCs) who host social events, the platform as a discreet MC leaves users occupied in their own needs and choices without exerting too much pressure, lest they do not return. In his words: "data are gathered, processed backstage by powerful calculators, and returned, carrying associations and suggestions for customers, orienting their steps, and modifying their ways of seeing (themselves)" (Callon 2021 pg 222). At the heart of the platform as discreet MC, is a kernel of the idea that platforms must pay attention to users and entertain them, similar to the hawkers and BB's vending machine's attentive responsiveness at the start of this chapter. I further Callon's framing of platforms' algorithmic systems being "discreet MCs" by examining how algorithmic systems make platform interfaces – app or web-based – sites of *curated* encounters between sellers and buyers.

Studying 'curated encounters' enables holding together platforms' MC-like effort of pushing information without being pushy and being sites of exploration for users buying and selling. The word curate comes from the Latin word, *curatus* which means care.[100] Whether it is care or not, algorithmic functioning is attentive to user experience of businesses and consumers on their interfaces. Critical scholarship about platforms using data as an asset, only views crowds in terms

[100] https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/curate_2. Accessed October 2023.

of what they mean for platforms. However, if we zoom into moments of encounter between consumers and businesses, we come across crowds and crowding as a problem. Therefore, by examining users' experiences of being part of crowds of buyers and sellers, we can study how platforms have to undertake ongoing effort to ensure their interfaces are not experienced as crowded**.**

Attaching a modality of care (as discussed in chapter 1) to encounters curated by platforms' algorithmic systems does not mean being unaware of platforms' profit motives. On the contrary, it tackles head on what Callon identifies as the contradiction that profit seeking companies face: how to attach users and extract value from them without facing public opprobrium (Callon 2021).

Acknowledging care in consumers' relationships with platforms also builds on pre-platform research by economic sociologists and anthropologists. Anthropologist Daniel Miller studied the how people shopped for groceries by following along people in between their homes and supermarket. Miller has argued that provisioning for a household by buying things is a technology of love and act of care. In this way, Miller has provocatively reframed consumption as a "negation of capitalism, not an expression of it" (Miller, 2012). Like consumption, in the case of intimacy, anthropologist Viviana Zelier's *Purchase of Intimacy* (2005) has indicated that people try and separate intimacy from economic activity. Yet, in practice, people do use economic activity like transactions to maintain intimate ties within courtship and marriage. A mirror image of Zelizer's argument can be found in the concept of 'emotional labour' developed by Arlie Hochschild (2012) in *The Managed Heart*, based on their fieldwork in the airline industry. Hochschild famously argued that service workers in airlines had to work to produce feelings and affects. Service work

involved emotional labour and it did not only involve physical effort. Through this chapter, I will apply but also extend pre-platform scholarship's inventive and non-dualistic approach to people-commerce developed by the scholars cited above. I bring my empirical material about the relations between people-commerce *and* platforms to bear on this prior work.

The non-dualistic descriptions of encounters between people-commerce-platforms in this chapter have an analytical aim that challenges a common assumption in platform studies. These details invite a moment of repose for scholarly analysis. Describing what actually happens when consumers try to find businesses on platform interfaces, invites our attention as scholars to a range of divergent outcomes and slows down any automatic conclusions about platforms' effects like their ability to "soothe users" into "unconscious consumption" (Hill 2021; Shapiro 2022). By studying Swiggy and Zomato's algorithmic curation of encounters between buyers and sellers, my findings describe and call attention to the range of public opprobrium platforms face from consumers, businesses, and their industry associations. For such public opprobrium to exist, users must be assessing Swiggy and Zomato's role as curators. I, therefore, also examine user perspectives and user cultures.

(2) *Scholarship about media flows* ranging from broadcast to algorithmic mediation has explained how media businesses engage audiences or users. Most famously, Raymond Williams explained how broadcasting was the technique of planned flows to ensure an audience (Williams 1974). Unlike broadcast, social media is at once used for mass and interpersonal communications. Recent work has shown that social media platforms fuel unsettledness, and an unpredictable flow, rather than offering routine, to maintain their centrality and popularity (Lupinacci 2021). However, other

than the fact that algorithms mediate information instantly, they do so based on an understanding of the right or opportune time to mediate information (Bucher 2020).

User cultures of on-demand platforms, like the two food delivery platforms that I study, remain highly understudied. This is because the literature is focused on one type of platform user: the logistics or delivery worker. In contrast, the literature on social media platforms is full of studies of user cultures. This paragraph and the subsequent one briefly review literature on social media user-culture to frame my inquiry about Swiggy and Zomato's user culture.

(3) *Scholarship on user cultures from media and human-computer interaction (HCI)* has shown how common users of Facebook, YouTube, TikTok have their own understanding of how algorithms work. It can be difficult to distinguish between social media and e-commerce platforms like Amazon and Alibaba as users often sell things via livestreams on social media (Wu et al. 2023).

From this literature on user culture, we know that users explore and guess how algorithmic flows function through 'folk theories,' (Rader and Gray 2015; Eslami et al. 2016; Schellewald 2022) and 'algorithmic gossip' (Bishop 2019). Users operationalise this provisional knowledge about algorithms to bring and take away visibility (Abidin 2021). Users' provisional understandings show how even though algorithms are black boxes or unknowable, users develop tacit knowledge due to their everyday use and phenomenological encounters with these otherwise unknowable systems (Bucher 2018). Algorithms are not only a topic about which users make guesses, but also

a medium of circulation of content, and are participants in users' content creation by amplifying and steering it in unpredictable directions (de Seta 2024).

Through the findings in this chapter, I address one limitation of the literature cited above. The limitation is that this research has rarely examined the user-cultures of food delivery and on-demand platforms. From the limited literature on user-cultures of on-demand platforms, we know consumers' habits and feelings about ordering food stem from their life course, budgets, and concerns about health. So habits cannot simply be determined by how platforms engineer things (Bissell 2020). I go further in this direction and examine how users learn and inform norms of algorithmic circulation as they use Swiggy and Zomato to buy and sell food.

This chapter draws on in-person and remote methods to track consumers and businesses' experiences of being aggregated in terms of finding each other on Swiggy and Zomato (RQ 2.1). Business users' experiences are examined through event ethnographies and interviews whereas consumers' experiences are examined through digital ethnographic methods and in-person observations in 12 consumers' households and a co-working space.

3.3 Findings: Crowding interfaces with virtual shopfronts

In this section, I describe how new and old businesses set up virtual shopfronts and invariably end up crowding interfaces. According to some estimates, Zomato hosts 254,000 businesses on the app.[101] So here, I analyse how crowding on interfaces shifted the grounds of competition between businesses from physical encounters to encounters by people's hands on interfaces. What does this

[101] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/startups/zomato-steps-up-restaurant-signups-as-slowdown-bites/articleshow/107606764.cms?from=mdr. Accessed September 2025.

mean for users? The first sub-section (3.4.1) describes how business users of Swiggy and Zomato make sense of platforms' claims of algorithmic neutrality. Then the second sub-section (3.4.2) describes how consumers and businesses use ratings and reviews to navigate crowds and find each other.

At the first cloud kitchen convention organised by the NRAI, a panel on "cloud kitchen marketing: how to stand out from the crowd?" served as a pedagogical resource for businesses trying to compete for visibility on interfaces. Cloud kitchens and crowded interfaces had changed how people *experienced* encountering a restaurant. Increasingly people were not encountering restaurants physically so restaurant owners' knowledge and practices of setting up an ambience or training service staff appeared irrelevant. The panel urged restaurant owners to leverage their knowledge about offering people a personalised experience as they built their online menu. Online menus should work like wait staff who 'shoulder surf' or attentively stand next to consumers in a restaurant to try and make suggestions or ask, "what would you like today sir?" Popular chef Ranveer Brar explained that clouds, similar to Web 3, did not allow seeing what one as a consumer paid for, "so how will they trust a business if they cannot see what they do?" He recommended that branding must be geared towards showing consumers about a business' operations to create and maintain trust.

This norm of visibility on interfaces was further entrenched because cloud kitchens eliminated the need to rent physical real estate in prime locations in cities. Being able to save money on renting prime real estate reduced the capital expenses and barriers for entry to starting food businesses. Cloud kitchen start-ups get most of their orders from Swiggy and Zomato even though they have

their own apps. This means that the prime real estate of Swiggy and Zomato's app interface or their popularity as places of buying and selling food compels kitchens to pay "Swiggy Zomato tax." On their interfaces, a virtual shopfront selling a masala dosa (INR 80 or GBP 0.80) competes with a domino's medium pizza (INR99 or GBP 1). From news reporting, we know that this undercutting is understood by investors in food and beverage businesses to be unviable in the long run. Undercutting by reducing prices might aid start-ups to ride the "J curve" or an initial dip in returns followed by a steep rise in returns. However, pursuing volumes by reducing prices rakes up advertising and branding costs, which might mean start-ups never get to the steep increase in returns.[102] Market research shows how single serve meals led to a falling average order value (AoV) which was compensated by high volume of orders. AoVs even improved during the covid-19 pandemic, (Christopher and Tobin 2021), yet they hurt businesses' profitability.

Given the costs incurred by businesses attempting to be encountered by consumers platform interfaces, it's worthwhile to ask: what norms of ad and marketing do platforms' curation create amongst businesses? How does crowding of virtual shopfronts on Swiggy and Zomato influence the demographics of the restaurant industry and intra-industry relations? At the cloud kitchen convention, across panels, various members of the restaurant industry viewed platforms and cloud kitchens as creating a culture of cheap food through discounting and lower AoVs that hurt profitability and sustainability of businesses. Those in the organised restaurant business used the term "high mortality" to refer to the short life of cloud kitchens and new food businesses due to a lack of profit. This was attributed to food delivery platforms' arbitrary commission fees which cloud kitchens were forced to pay since they depended on the apps for orders; food businesses'

[102] https://the-ken.com/story/cloud-kitchen-mirage/. Accessed July 2022.

reliance on platforms hurt their margins and led to a negative cash flow or kitchens spending more than they could earn and eventually shutting down in a few months of starting up. These norms of expenditure on marketing predictably influence visibility because that is the aim of marketing. However, as indicated by the insights from news and my attendance of industry events, these norms and promotional cultures influence profit margins of hospitality businesses, and the future of industries.

The above mentioned uncertainties put branding pressures on businesses or pressures on how to make restaurants discoverable on platforms. Users finding businesses' listings was partly a matter of algorithmic ranking of search results but photos, keywords in menus, and other aspects of branding also become important. This emerged as a new pressure for all restaurants because of the nature of finding listings on crowded interfaces. To be able to be found by consumers on the interface, food businesses had to consider keywords. At the cloud kitchen convention, Raymond Andrews, owner of popular cloud kitchen Biryani by the kilo, explained that businesses should keep a small menu with simple names that consumers actually type when they search, like "chicken biryani."

Due to the need to be found by consumers in a crowd of listings, the promise of knowing consumers through user data appealed to the retail industry[103] as well as food and hospitality businesses. [104] However, being a business 'user' of Swiggy and Zomato did not automatically offer

[103] The Indian retailers association carried an article about the benefits of smart vending machines because they offer access to consumer data like never before and changed practices for consumers (like self-checkout) and vendors (inventory, safety etc). See: https://www.indianretailer.com/article/technology/digital-trends/why-this-is-the-perfect-time-for-vending-to-bloom-in-india.a7907. Accessed September 2023.

[104] The food industry includes packaged food, beverage and so on, and is wider than the hospitality industry which owns and runs restaurants.

food businesses consumer data. In 2019, the National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI), a national body that represents quick service restaurants (QSRs), higher end restaurants, had taken Swiggy and Zomato to the Competition Commission of India (CCI) on grounds of uncompetitive business practices. They listed practices like platforms charging food businesses arbitrary commission fees and masking consumer data.[105] Between 2015 to 2020, The #orderdirect movement led by the organised restaurant industry encouraged consumers to order directly from restaurants and was spearheaded by a tech business called Hashtag Loyalty.[106]

After the Covid-19 induced lockdowns, several restaurant owners reconsidered this position on cloud kitchens, as eating out was impossible. In this context, I observed a difference in opinion about Swiggy and Zomato within the organised restaurant industry that I discuss in the next sub-section. Despite this difference, there was consensus within the NRAI on differentiating cloud kitchens from unruly, unhygienic hawkers as the association has long advocated against hawking. The director of the FSSAI opened the convention and goaded businesses to distinguish themselves from hawkers by getting licenses rather than only registering with the state. Getting a license is a requirement for medium to large businesses with a larger turnover (above GBP 9,88,461.00 or INR 12 crores), it requires businesses to prove that they comply with various laws whereas smaller businesses can register with a district-level food safety officer and are required to only pay a fixed annual fee. This way, platforms joined the food and hospitality industries in their existing advocacy efforts of defining certain business activities as legitimate and formal or less legitimate and informal.

[105] At this time, retailers were waging similar battles against e-commerce companies. For details about the restaurant industry's complaint against platforms, see: https://www.medianama.com/2019/08/223-nrai-flags-deep-discounting-in-letter-to-food-aggregators/ ; http://164.100.58.95/sites/default/files/39-of-2019.pdf ; https://www.cci.gov.in/images/antitrustorder/en/1620211652180990.pdf. Accessed July 2022.
[106] https://hashtagloyalty.com/ Accessed September 2022.

Up to now, we have seen how Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces get crowded with business users and their virtual shopfronts. To be found in a crowd on a five-inch smartphone screen by consumers, businesses compete with each other. A change in the site of being found by consumers — from physical to virtual shopfronts — meant that businesses' norms of spending changed too. Businesses as platform users complained about having less control over determining their expenses due to the rising costs of marketing, platforms' arbitrary commission fees, and having to offer consumers discounts. How do Swiggy and Zomato address these concerns amongst their business users?

3.3.1 Curating encounters on crowded interfaces

In this sub-section, I first detail how platforms present their interfaces as algorithmically determined neutral sites from where any businesses user can scale their enterprise. This is platforms' response to the criticism that they face from their business users. Then I discuss how business owners selling food reflect critically on platforms' promise of algorithmic curation making their interfaces neutral sites.

At the cloud kitchen convention, the marketing head of Swiggy, Bajpai suggested that Swiggy was the neutral site from where successful brand building would enable any new business to scale and succeed. He offered an example of Swiggy's "brand works" initiative through which the platform guides restaurant owners about which segments to target, pricing suggestions, imagery and description in menus etc. He explained that based on user segmentation, platforms guided restaurants to offer discounts *only* to less affluent, discount-centric users. This targeting enabled

saving cash since they did not need to offer mid and upper market users discounts for them to make purchases.

Despite the promise of neutrality on platforms due to data informed user segmentation in curating encounters with consumers, being visible first or higher up in search results or on the home screen of the apps, was still considered important by businesses. Between two panels at the cloud kitchen convention, Neha Vaziraney made a presentation on behalf of PepsiCo and explained how 50% consumers took decisions about where to order from and what to order on Zomato and Swiggy, in the top three scrolls. How did restaurants' listings reach the top three scrolls in search results on Swiggy and Zomato? The answer to this question will make clear how Pepsi made a market for their product amongst consumers and businesses. Vaziraney explained how Pepsi learnt from Swiggy and Zomato that 60% of people do not order beverages with food, and 70% of restaurants do not have beverages on their menu. To make a market for their products amongst consumers *and* businesses, Pepsi set up prompts on restaurant menu listings such that the app would suggest consumers could "add drink with this order." Additionally, after covid, platforms set up a "pepsi restaurant front" which enabled users to place combo orders. To promote the television series 'Money Heist,' one combo paired a high calorie fried chicken from KFC with zero calorie pepsi that could be ordered in one click or tap.

So algorithmic ordering of shopfronts and prompts on menus were open to the influence of the wider food industry via fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies and were not automatically neutral. Pepsi have a portfolio of snack brands like Kurkure, Lays, Doritos and Quaker's that make additions to food delivery orders online. Seeing an opportunity to widen their

market, Pepsi led the brokering of peace between restaurant owners' associations and platforms. A pamphlet handed to attendees of the Cloud Kitchen Convention in Mumbai read: "Pepsi & NRAI welcome you to the Cloud Kitchen Convention today. This event is a tribute to the solidarity of the Cloud Kitchen sector of Food Service & a great reminder that together we can achieve so much."

Small restaurant owners at the convention questioned the neutrality promised by platforms by expressing their disbelief in being able to appear as top search results. As a result, audience questions were around how platforms' ranking systems showcased some listings at the cost of others. Bajpai responded to questions about partiality by claiming platforms cared for all restaurants *and* profit. He stressed algorithmic impartiality and profit orientation because it enabled targeted discounting. During the lunch break at the convention, owners of small kitchens told me how this was a gathering of "big dads," and smaller players kept in touch via WhatsApp groups where they openly discussed commission rates. This way they knew they were being charged higher than average rates and would keep the delivery platforms in check.

This sense of suspicion amongst smaller restaurant owners may not be unfounded because we know from chapter one of this thesis about how platforms segmented restaurants into a typology based on their revenues. In my collection of push notifications (PNs) too, I found PNs for specific restaurants, for other businesses like restaurants and celebrity chefs and banner ads when waiting for/tracking an order. I noticed PNs about quick service restaurants like McDonalds, KFC, and Kailash Parbat. In September 2022, I saw a push notification about second generation celebrity

chef Zorawar Kalra: "*Zorawar Kalra has got moves *disco dancer emoji* One of India's fave restauranteurs is on Jhalak Dikhla Ja *clapping emoji* - tune in and we'll get the food.*"

Outside their interface too, Zomato pulled crowds of consumers or buyers through their annual carnival Zomaland. They curated a line-up of popular musicians, comedians, and offered rented stalls to food and hospitality businesses. A platform executive explained to me that this curation at Zomaland was based on their top grossing clients like alcohol brands, ice-cream brands, cloud kitchens, and restaurants. Curated food businesses vied for consumers through games and free samples. I stopped by a low-carb ice-cream stall and won a free tub of ice-cream because I aimed some balls into buckets. Other than food and hospitality brands, dating app Tinder and payments app Simpl also made themselves visible in the crowd through décor elements. Tinder had mounted neon signs of their very popular right swipe, and left swipe buttons on their app and people took photos with those in the background. Together with the décor, and games, the curation of the experience aimed at encouraging attendees to post about their experience on social media. Zomato installed a 360-degree camera for attendees to create content with. and these images could be airdropped onto their phones. I also got interviewed by young interns from a YouTube channel who decided to attend the carnival because they thought they could get content.[107] So these physical crowds then crowded social media platforms with their content from Zomaland.

By attending the NRAI convention, I surmised that businesses that were not 'brands' consider it unlikely for their shopfronts to be seen in the crowd. Not being a brand is a label that refers to businesses that were not franchisees, were not run by celebrity chefs, and did not have a proximate

[107] https://www.instagram.com/reel/ClWVJzAroS0/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=. Accessed November 2022.

relationship with FMCG companies and platforms. Such businesses that were not a brand seem to be overrepresented in the AHAR Indian Hotel & Restaurant Association. 40% of AHAR's membership was South Indian upper caste owned 'Udupi' restaurant owners,[108] many of whom are smaller business owners and continue to fight aggregators Swiggy and Zomato. Compared to the NRAI, AHAR had a less accommodating view of cloud kitchens and platforms more broadly. As is evident in news reporting, AHAR argued that platforms took advantage of regulatory loopholes, operated without proper licenses, and proliferated informal work akin to hawkers which was disorderly and unhygienic.[109] Audience questions at the convention by those who introduced themselves as small business owners echoed this position.

Despite a rift between NRAI and AHAR and business owners' awareness of their differential bargaining power with platforms, there was shared acknowledgement that delivery and takeaways were here to stay. According to the India Food Service Report published by NRAI in 2019, "India's food service market is worth a mammoth Rs 4,20,000 crore ($57.6 billion)..out of which aggregators have carved out Rs 26,000 crore ($3.56 billion) for themselves. That's just around 17% of the organised food service business in India."[110]

Given the NRAIs scoping of business opportunity in the emerging world of cloud kitchens, I read the NRAI's organising of the cloud kitchen convention as an attempt to do two things. First, the NRAI seemed to challenge Swiggy and Zomato's dominance but second to secure their position and the future of the restaurant industry. The opening keynote delivered by Kallol Banerjee, co-

[108] http://ahar.experiencesense.com/about-ahar. Accessed October 2022.
[109] https://www.medianama.com/2022/03/223-summary-ahar-food-delivery-petition/. Accessed October 2022.
[110] https://web.archive.org/web/20220815121842/https://nrai.org/nrai-india-food-services-report-ifsr-2019-launched-by-shri-amitabh-kant-in-new-delhi/. Accessed August 2022.

founder of Rebel Foods, one of the largest cloud kitchens, appealed to food business owners to stop fighting for prime real estate in the city for the future of the restaurant industry. He suggested that the reason India does not have an answer to McDonalds is because restaurants fight over land and physical presence rather than competing as businesses.

Even though the convention signalled a truce was being worked out between the industry and platforms, it was not fully resolved for two reasons. One, the contest between industry and platforms over commission fees, user data and discounting is still unresolved. Two, this truce was led by popular restaurateurs, and celebrity chefs who saw an opportunity for themselves in the new world of cloud kitchens. This meant new businesses without a brand or connections were aware of the unviability of doing business only via platforms.

So, to reiterate, this sub-section above has detailed a life of Swiggy and Zomato's algorithmic curation on crowded interfaces, before and after covid-19. Platforms promise to be neutral spaces where algorithmic curation enables any business user to scale their enterprise and stand out in the crowd. However, ever since Swiggy and Zomato started their operations, industry associations viewed their aggregation as uncompetitive and non-neutral which they resisted via boycotts. However, the covid-19 lockdowns compelled many businesses to reckon with online ordering and boycotts were no longer considered effective. Business users like the FMCG giant Pepsi, alongside their quick service restaurant allies like KFC, bargained with platforms and struck a deal to improve their visibility on interfaces. Events like Zomaland demonstrated how platforms could mobilise large crowds of consumer users in-person as well as a line-up of comedians, musicians, and other popular public figures. These acts of gathering crowds on and off platform interfaces

meant that food and hospitality businesses did not directly boycott platforms because it seemed that they had been established as popular sites. In coping with changes post lockdowns, some in industry associations like the NRAI were bargaining with Swiggy and Zomato, not fighting against them. However, bargaining with platforms was a privilege that others – non-franchisee, local business owners represented by AHAR – claimed to not have.

3.3.2 Role of reviews and ratings on crowded interfaces

In this sub-section, I start by noting how consumers and food businesses rely on reviews and ratings to navigate crowded interfaces in everyday use. I then go on to discuss how this user culture was incubated by Zomato and currently enables platforms to improve their algorithmic curation to enhance the encounter between sellers and buyers.

From in-person research with consumers, I found that reviews and ratings were used by consumer-users to decide which restaurants to order from, especially in a crowd. Consumers' experience with the interface met with an existing suspicion with 'outside' food. When food was cooked outside the household, how could we be sure it was cooked carefully? What ingredients were used? How were they stored? Who cooked? My informants explained that they check restaurant listings with these questions in mind. In addition to food, they check photos and reviews from other consumers on Google and/Zomato before ordering. Most people use Zomato specifically because Zomato has been a site of lengthy and detailed reviews.

How did Zomato become the go-to place for reviews and ratings in the first place? From interviews with food bloggers, I learnt about the role Zomato played as an incubator for the first wave of food bloggers in urban India. Zomato ran a 'spoon back' programme that linked bloggers' personal

blogs to their Zomato profiles. They divided bloggers into 'levels' which users reached by reviewing and earning points. Zomato offered extra points for uploading photos and identified users as 'area experts.' Zomato reviewers I spoke to, recounted being invited to in person events, and receiving goodie bags. To leverage good reviews from such super users, restaurant and industry users, worked with public relations (PR) agencies to get the right reviews and visibility. These rewards led to suspicion and disdain for young bloggers with no expertise from various quarters: consumers, other bloggers, and some restaurant owners.

In my telephonic interviews with food bloggers, many bloggers recounted how the rise of Instagram as a site compelled them outside of textual blogs. This shift to an audio-visual heavy medium influenced reviews, ratings, and notions of a 'genuine' blogger. One blogger recounted that PR firms representing restaurants demanded Zomato reviews *and* Instagram posts. From 2015, their blog posts became less relevant and so many early bloggers who were text-based content creators were disillusioned by this emphasis on visuals and quantification through follower counts, likes, and so on.

Platforms improve their algorithmic curation based on user generated content of reviews and ratings on their platform. Zomato learnt from users querying their interface to curate 'collections' of restaurants on the home screen of the app. Collections were launched via an update in 2014 after Zomato got rid of the 'trending places' list. This led to users emailing them asking why they got rid of it and these questions prompted Zomato to dig into their data about popular search queries. From this, they learnt that people look for specific *types* of places: "for example, you might be wondering where to take your significant other for a romantic dinner, or where you can find a

microbrewery to beat the heat." So instead of having to structure your query, you could use "themes and occasions" in collections to decide where to eat.[111] From an interview with a Zomato executive who was in the regional key accounts team and manages food business users' experience, I learnt that these curated collections were "a property" for Zomato that food businesses paid up to appear on.

From a survey on reviews, Zomato learnt that people did not write reviews because most people did not think they were the *kind of people who reviewed a place.* They also found that people did not read enough reviews because they were too prosaic and not crisp. Therefore, in recognition of an evolved demand, they changed the supply of reviews.[112] The screenshot below (figure 6) shows how the style of reviewing has been changing from a prosaic, text heavy one to a rating based one. Users can give 'stars', select tags of what they liked at a place (pasta; courteous staff; parma ham salad), and what they did not like (garlic bread; no privacy; slow service).

[111] https://www.zomato.com/blog/presenting-collections-a-new-way-to-feed-your. Accessed May 2022.
[112] https://www.zomato.com/blog/reviews-2-0. Accessed May 2022.

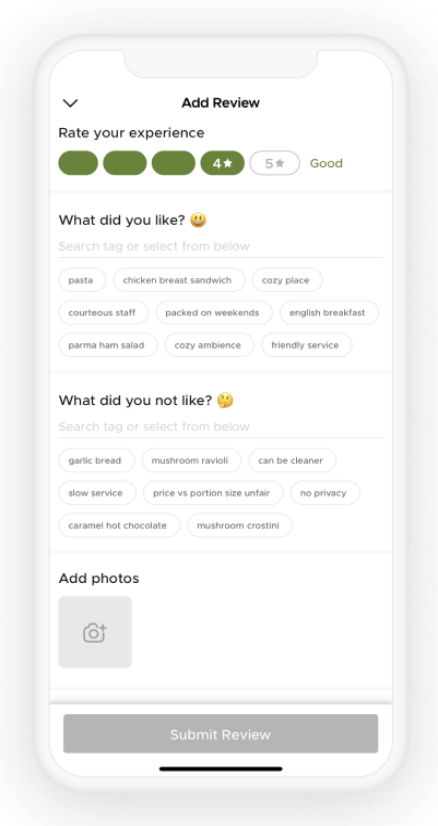


Figure 6: Screenshot from Zomato's engineering blog of the new reviews section that offers options to pick from that users can tap to select, but no fields to write a review in one's own words.

This new review structure helps Zomato improve their querying function, whether or not true it is true that some people found lengthy reviews burdensome to read. As detailed in their engineering blogs, ratings and tags meant that spelling mistakes made when writing long reviews could be avoided.[113] In 2020, Zomato separated dining and ordering in reviews and began labelling certain reviews as suspicious.

This sub-section has brought attention to the role of reviews and ratings sections in users' navigation of crowded interfaces. It has discussed the contribution of consumers through the work

[113] https://www.zomato.com/blog/architecture-behind-tags. Accessed May 2022.

of reviewing and rating food businesses as well as how Zomato have incubated a specific creator culture of food bloggers in India. This user generated content is used by food delivery platforms to improve their algorithmic curation of encounters, and it is these user cultures that contribute to the popularity and reliability of Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces as sites of buying and selling food.

3.4 Findings: Users' circumventions of platform norms

In the previous sections, I discussed how both consumers and business users developed their own understandings of the platforms' algorithmic curation in the process of their engagement with and negotiation of crowded interfaces.

The next three sub-sections will delve into the reflective and almost investigative spirit amongst users towards how platforms curate encounters between buyers and sellers. Each subsection will describe three ways in which users (industry associations, businesses, and consumers) circumvent Swiggy and Zomato's practices or norms of curating encounters or users finding each other. These findings take the literature on food delivery platforms past its focus on delivery workers and demonstrate how user circumventions are often humble actions to query the dominance and practices of platforms. Circumventions do not necessarily involve delisting from or boycotting platform services.

3.4.1 Consumer analytics

In this sub-section, I discuss how three areas of contest between food businesses and platforms – (1) commission fees, (2) discounting, and (3) consumer data – converge in consumer analytics, done by all businesses. I situate this contest in light of how the food and hospitality industry via

the NRAI attempted to secure independence from Swiggy's and Zomato's control over how food business make decisions.

The popularity of Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces meant that businesses' ways of finding consumers, knowing them, and catering to their preferences and habits is through platforms. The schedule of the cloud kitchen convention showed an interest in technological solutions for restaurant management for the future of the industry. These tech solutions enable businesses to reduce their dependence on Swiggy and Zomato and offer businesses more control than Swiggy and Zomato: fixed commission fees, sharing consumer data, and not forcing discounts. The first panel took up the most controversial question of profitability and suggested that independent analytics was one means to achieve independence from platforms. Subsequently, throughout the day, between panels, there were scheduled presentations by SaaS (software as a service) companies and others that enabled restaurants to be independent of aggregators.

SaaS companies' presentations and stalls at the convention communicated their promise of offering businesses consumer data by digitizing existing operations within restaurants. Point of sale (PoS) software like PetPooja offers billing, reporting, online order management, inventory management solutions, and devices like the waiter calling device. This enables customers to press different buttons for water, the bill, and saves time and effort. Similarly, Airmenu was co-founded by Luvin Paryani, a restaurant owner in Pune. They charge a flat subscription fee for aiding restaurants to digitise their menus, create micro-sites for them, and integrate restaurant's ordering protocol with delivery apps like Dunzo's API.[114] They also offer QR code-based menus on

[114] https://lifestyle.livemint.com/smart-living/innovation/how-food-tech-in-india-evolved-beyond-swiggy-and-zomato-111638516310480.html. Accessed March 2022.

restaurant tables, like the one in the photo below. These QR codes digitise ordering solutions and ensure that restaurants gather user data on terms that are more acceptable to them and care for the future of the business.



Figure 7: Author's photograph of the QR code menu offered by Airmenus at a restaurant in suburban Mumbai.

Thrive Now is a direct ordering platform and a second iteration of the NRAI's #orderdirect movement. After the pandemic, Hashtag Loyalty turned into 'Thrive Now' with investment from Jubilant Foods, owner of Domino's among others.[115] Unlike aggregators Swiggy and Zomato, Thrive empowers brands to "regain control of your restaurant business" by going direct to consumers." They also have a tie up with WhatsApp Commerce and offer digital menus, integration with delivery fleet, loyalty programmes, marketing automation, and Facebook ads. Thrive aims to offer user data and offered services to encourage businesses to operationalise insights from user data.[116]

[115] To understand the sentiment of Domino's investment in Thrive (https://about.thrivenow.in/company), it is important to note that even within global the food industry, Domino's is lauded as being the only big food business that does not depend on Swiggy and Zomato. See: https://the-ken.com/story/how-dominos-defied-the-might-of-zomato-and-swiggy/. Accessed June 2022.
[116] https://web.archive.org/web/20220707104142/https://about.thrivenow.in/post/how-to-use-thrives-restaurant-analytics-to-make-important-business-decisions. Accessed July 2022.

At the convention, I surmised how several tech interventions used APIs of other platforms like WhatsApp and Dunzo to circumvent Swiggy and Zomato's imposition of commission fees. Payment platforms like DotPe and chatbots offered by WhatsApp Commerce/WhatsApp for business also serve as a means outside of food delivery platforms' dominance. DotPe offers a WhatsApp business integration that enables restaurants direct contact with customers for a one-time fee of Rs 10,000 and monthly fee of Rs 500. In this way, the NRAI encourages tech innovation from restaurant owners and others within the food and hospitality industry. This tech innovation ranged from digitizing menus, payment gateways but what it shares in common is that it offers businesses user data, charged a fixed commission fee, resulting in business being free to decide how they wanted to offer discounts.

Additionally, individual business owners confessed off the record that they resorted to hiking prices on the menus they uploaded on their Swiggy and Zomato listings. During my digital ethnography, I noticed that some consumers reported differences in prices on in-person and online menus to Swiggy and Zomato. So, I asked a Zomato executive about the company's approach to responding to such discrepancies in a telephonic interview. The executive explained that these complaints from consumers were part of an ongoing tussle between businesses and platforms. The tussle existed because restaurants neutralise the expense of paying platforms a commission fee by shifting the cost onto consumer-users by hiking prices on online menus. Consumer-users do not miss this and often point it out to platforms. In the executive's view, such attempts to shift the cost of commission fees were not fair since restaurants "are not paying rent to be on the application." When I suggested that the commission fees were a type of rent, she explained that Zomato was providing a service of visibility for which it charged those fees. Other than this, Zomato cared for

the future of the industry because they charged only a minimal onboarding fee which they dropped during the pandemic to support restaurants.

Securing an independent means of consumer analytics was one way in which businesses and their associations attempt to reduce dependence on platforms and exercise control over decisions such as pricing and discounting. Circumventions did not mean that restaurants simply delisted themselves from big food delivery platforms. At the same time as delisting was impossible, old and new food and hospitality businesses were aware that relying completely on Swiggy and Zomato made running businesses unviable. So, to circumvent the costs, uncertainties, and perception of unfairness involved in algorithmic curation, what other forms of curation did businesses rely on?

3.4.2 Branded objects

In this section, I detail three ways in which food and hospitality businesses use branding and branded objects in order to be found by consumers on Swiggy and Zomato's crowded interfaces and to invite consumers to new sites. Then, I recount a case in which a consumer analyse a business' circumvention and how this compels platforms to budge from their position of neutral silence.

First, many new businesses organise pop-ups to circumvent platforms' mediation. At the co-working space where I did fieldwork, I first noticed that business owners were renting space to put up a stall. Popping up like this, enabled businesses to gather analytics; at an early stage, businesses could be informed by feedback from their target group of consumers and incorporate it into their offerings. From quick interviews with owners of food pop-ups, I learnt about how new businesses

were concerned about their dependence on Swiggy and Zomato. Even before listing their businesses, they were calculating; were they to operate via a cloud kitchen, it would be an expensive experiment. They used popping-up to see if there's an appetite for their food and build direct links to consumers. Others who had cloud kitchens and were paying commission fees still popped up to try and build direct relations with consumers and reduce dependence on Swiggy and Zomato. Those who were already in business knew the Swiggy and Zomato apps were crowded. So, some restaurants circulated through platform branded interfaces but also invited consumers into circumventing those dominant circulations by setting up physical pop ups as a work around.

A second form of circumvention using branded objects occurs when food is delivered. Deliveries leave a trail of branded objects that get delivered with food. During in-person visits in households and businesses, I saw how these objects like paper bags and tape were re-used by consumers and restaurants. Consumers also store oregano and chili flakes, chutneys, thinly cut onions, cutlery and branded paper and cloth bags, vessels, and tapes that delivered food comes in. The bag, like the one in figure 8 below, is typically inside a first layer of packing, it sometimes has the branding of restaurants and food businesses. The bag in the photograph below has an order direct QR code that invites consumers off the crowded food delivery apps.



Figure 8: Author's photograph of a paper bag in a consumers' kitchen from a Zomato order. It has a QR code and says "Scan to Order Directly With Us."

A third way businesses use branded objects to circumvent platforms' norms of encounters is by making multiple listings on Swiggy and Zomato. Multiple listings improve their chances of being found in the crowd. Ironically, businesses contributed to the crowd in their attempt to tilt algorithmic curation in their favour which influenced what consumers encountered. During my digital ethnography, I learnt about a Bangalore based user who found 189 listings on Swiggy for one cloud kitchen operating from one location in Bangalore. In the screenshot of the names of listings below, the strategy of using words associated with regional cuisines like 'Guntur Chili's,' 'Hyderabad Kitchen's,' 'Hyderabad Haveli Biryani,' or 'CHINESE BAR's', 'CHINESE SIZZLER,' 'Chinese Village,' 'Jing Fung Chinese' is evident.

Biryani Darbar	Biryani Xpress	Bismillah Biryani	Bollywood Spice	Bukhara Kitchens
CATERING SERVICE	CHINA TOWN	CHINESE BAR'S	CHINESE CHING'S	CHINESE CHUNGA
CHINESE HANGOUT	CHINESE ORGANIC	CHINESE SIZZLER	CHINESE VILLAGE	COMBO KINGS
COMBO KITCHEN	CURRY EXPRESS	CURRY POINT'S	Chettinad House	China Town
Chinese Chings	Chinese Street	Chinese Village	Curry Points	DAL KHICHDI
DELHI WALI PARATHA	DESI PARATHA	DUM PUKHT BIRYANI	Desi Dhaba	Dum Pukht Biryani
EAT FRESH	EGG STREET	EMPIAR'S RESTAURANT	Empiar's Restaurant	FIRANGI CHINESE
FIRE WOODS BIRYANI	FOODIES CORNER	GARDEN FRESH	GHAR KA PARATHA	GOLDEN GRILL RESTAURANT
GREEN BAWARCHI BIRYANI	GUNTUR CHILI'S	Gilly's Kitchens	Guntur Chili	HOSKOTE MUTTON POINT
HOTEL TAJ MAHAL	HYDERABADI KITCHEN'S	HYDERABADI KITCHENS	HYDERABADI PALACE	Hyderabadi Charminar Biryani
Hyderabadi Family Pack Biryani	Hyderabadi Haveli Biryani	INDIAN GRILL	INDO ASIAN KITCHENS	INDO CHINA
INFOSYS CAFE	Indian Grill	JING FUNG CHINESE	JITU BHAI BIRYANI & KABAB CENTER	Jaipur Jalpan
Jing Fung Chinese	KABAB & CURRY HOUSE	KABAB ZONE	KASHMIRI BIRYANI	KEBAB AUR SHABAB
KEBAB CAPITAL	KEBAB MAGIC'S	KGN RESTAURANT	KRITONGHA RESTAURANT	Kabab Aur Shabab
Kabab n curry house	Kerala Spice	Khan Sahab	Khybar Kashmir	LACKNOW DARBAR
LAL QILA RESTAURANT	LUCKNOW DARBAR	Late Knight Hunger	Leon Kebab	MALABAR KITCHENS
MALABAR KITCHENS	MANI'S ROYAL BIRYANI	MASTER CHEF'S	MASTER CHEFS	MEAL BOX
MEGNA RESTAURANT	MEHFIL E-BIRYANI	MMQ Biryani & Kebab Center	MOMO CAFE	MOMO RESTAURANTS
MOMO STREET	MOMO TOWN	MOMO'S FACTORY	MOMO'S POINT	MUGAL BIRYANI HOUSE
MUGAL DARBAR	MUTTON JUNCTION	Madras Cafe	Mani's Royal Biryani	Mughal Biryani House
Mutton Mast Kalandar	NH-7 HIGH WAY RESTAURANTS	NIMANTRAN RESTAURANT	Nizam's Biryani	ODISHA SWADISTH
Odisha Food Corner	Odisha Spice	PANJABI ANGEETHI	PARADISE BIRYANI HOUSE	PARADISE HOUSE

Figure 9: A screenshot as an excerpt of the 189 listings made for one cloud kitchen. Posted by the user on their blog: https://peabee.substack.com/p/17-one-kitchen-hundreds-of-internet

The user who uncovered this circumventory practice of duplicating listings invariably created pressure for Zomato to respond, investigate, and depart from their preferred position of neutral silence. The consumer did not have an intention to expose a malpractice; they were only trying to "find and avoid restaurant brands that I do not like on Swiggy and Zomato." In doing so, they found the same FSSAI license number being used across multiple listings. So, they wrote a script and investigated Zomato's database of restaurants from Kaggle, a community of data science enthusiasts. Kaggle shows this investigative spirit is not limited to one enthusiast, since I found a range of datasets about Swiggy and Zomato.[117] By crowding Swiggy with so many listings, this kitchen might fool a user into ordering from there if the real restaurant is shut at the time or is outside the users' serviceable area.[118] Restaurant-users' circumvention of the food delivery platforms' circulation for increased visibility seems to be a global phenomenon. In North America, chicken wings are a popular delivery food and cloud kitchen owners there used similar ways to gain more visibility. [119]

This user checked the FSSAI website to understand whether it was permitted for several brands to run from one location. Even though there was no mention of the number of brands that can operate from one location, the user reflected critically on this by saying:

> "Whether it is legal or not, it doesn't feel right. How can two dingy and drab kitchens run 200 different brands on Swiggy and Zomato? I am dumbfounded by how easy it is to do this. I mean, this guy put in zero effort in naming his restaurant brands – many of them are the same names with different letter cases…Shouldn't there be stricter checks around how restaurants get on boarded on these platforms? What's stopping other cloud kitchens to use the same strategy to spam these food delivery apps?"

[117] Like this like a sentiment analysis of Twitter complaints: https://www.kaggle.com/code/cpluzshrijayan/sentimental-analysis-of-swiggy-tweets. Accessed October 2023.
[118] https://peabee.substack.com/p/17-one-kitchen-hundreds-of-internet. Accessed October 2022.
[119] https://www.theverge.com/c/2021/6/1/22456930/chicken-wings-delivery-virtual-brands. Accessed September 2022.

In response to being "called out" by a consumer-user, Zomato responded via a blog post which offered a solution to the consumer and pacified their business users by consulting with the NRAI.[120] Authored by the co-founder of Zomato, the blog carried a graph that showed that customer ratings fell when the number of brands per kitchen increased on an average. Given this bad experience for customers, Zomato planned to conduct an in-person examination of kitchens that ran more than ten brands from one kitchen. The co-founder also thanked the user @prstb for bringing this to Zomato's attention via Twitter. The screenshot below shows a new design on the Zomato interface that would clearly list multiple brands associated with one kitchen because "the Indian customer is seeking more information about the origin of their food."

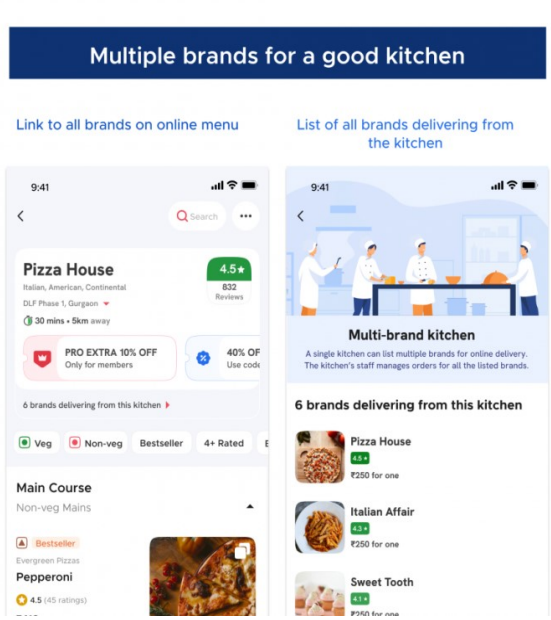


Figure 10: Screenshot of a mock up of the new design of the Zomato app that identifies a clod kitchen as a 'multi brand' kitchen and enumerates all brands delivering from one kitchen.

The kitchen with 189 listings is an example of how food businesses' listings on Swiggy and Zomato are based on seller-users' constant effort to understand how to improve their chances of

[120] https://www.zomato.com/blog/multiple-brand-from-the-same-kitchen. Accessed October 2022.

being found by consumer-users. This example also shows that consumers learnt to question the neutrality of algorithmic curation and ranking. Algorithmic recommendation and ordering of search results of businesses were understood to be open to being purchased and were not automatically neutral. Why did McDonalds and Burger King appear as the first results as I searched for 'burger'? This shows users' provisional understandings of how platforms curations work and what content they privilege.

Food businesses with the advantage of a pre-existing brand also pushed back on platforms creating branding expenses since it affected their bottom lines too. 3 out of the 5 panel discussions in the convention were about profitability, budgets, and marketing. Across these panels, big restaurant owners with preexisting brands tried to influence norms around discounting and marketing. In "Cloud kitchen marketing: How to stand out from the crowd?" panelists prescribed earmarking only 3% of a budget to marketing to run a healthy business. In this context, they jokingly cornered the platform's representative about lowering commission fees since they were upto 70% of marketing budgets.

Businesses' use of branding and branded objects to circumvent Swiggy and Zomato ranged from meeting consumers through pop-ups, using packaging material, making multiple listings, all while being mindful of budgets. These circumventions show that Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces were prime sites and that businesses were not trying to compete with their brand directly but making platforms work in ways that would benefit their own business.

3.4.3 The ‘genuine’ reviewer

In this sub-section, by describing how both platform users –consumers and businesses– struggle to ascertain who is a ‘genuine’ reviewer, I highlight how platforms’ ownership and engineering of reviews and ratings does not straightforwardly benefit platforms. This user generated content creates ongoing trouble for platforms’ defining their algorithmic curation between consumers and businesses as neutral.

Even though both consumers and businesses rely on reviews as signals, both users are suspicious of reviews because they are not neutral due to what reviewers gain –money or a free meal. While checking listings to assess if they want to order food from a particular business or not, users learn that they cannot trust Swiggy and Zomato’s interface completely. This learning for some was informed by their experience with other e-commerce platforms where they noticed how different platforms sold the same product for different prices. To secure a good experience on Swiggy and Zomato, consumer-users often apply experiences from other e-commerce platforms or consumers put themselves in the shoes of and thought like businesses, restaurants, and platforms. This meant some consumers checked prices on both Swiggy and Zomato and even cross-checked these against the restaurant menu on the website, in person, or on Google.

In November 2022, when I was wrapping up fieldwork in Mumbai, Disha Sanghvi, tweeted that Zomato deleted her review of a restaurant in Bangalore. In her review she had mentioned that she and her friend got food poisoning from the restaurant’s food.[121] In addressing a conflict between their consumer and business users, Zomato’s auto-generated response was that they were not the

[121] https://twitter.com/DishaRSanghvi/status/1586641077087260672. Accessed October 2022.

appropriate platform to report health code violations. From a restaurant-owner's Zomato dashboard (figure 11 below), the drop-down box for reporting reviews has "the review mentions health code violations" as an option.

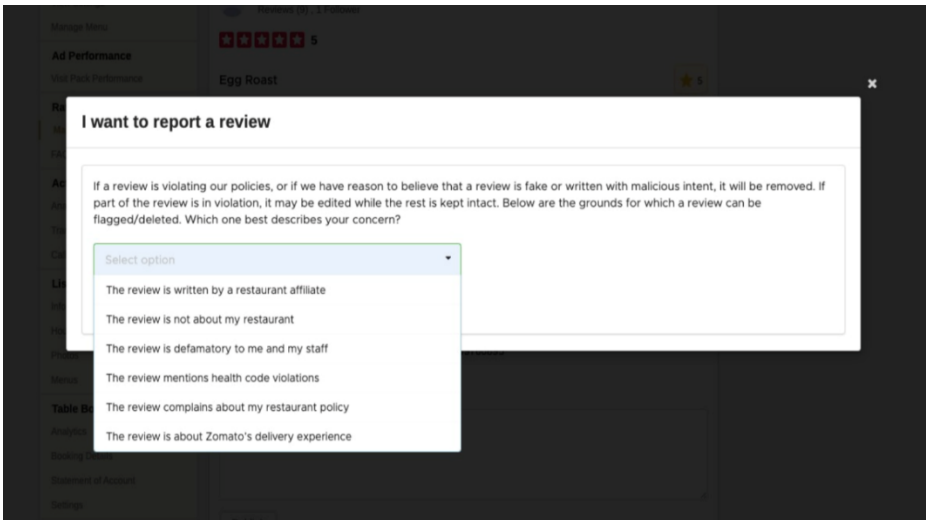


Figure 11: Screenshot from Trade Tricks, a tech-business newsletter [122] of the drop down list offered by Zomato when a user is reporting a restaurant review.

When this feature that kept Zomato outside of common grievances between consumers and businesses became public through this case, it invited a divided response. On Twitter, I observed how on one hand there were angry consumers asking where else they could go. On the other, some restaurateurs opined that the genuineness of reviews –both positive and negative– was questionable. Prior to this incident too, news reports have shown how the hospitality industry was attempting to standardize reviews. They approached the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) to regulate bloggers and suggested that some bad reviews were defamatory.[123] Due to this

[122] https://the-ken.com/tradetricks/when-zomato-and-restaurants-were-on-the-same-side-briefly/?utm_source=ro_hdr&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=trade_tricksv. Accessed November 2022.
[123] https://punemirror.indiatimes.com/pune/civic/food-bloggers-can-now-be-sued-for-bad-reviews/articleshow/71469559.cms. Accessed September 2021.

case, there was pressure on Zomato, as a two-sided market, to maintain neutrality without favouring the word of the consumer or the restaurant owner. Interestingly, a day later, the CEO thanked Sanghvi for her attentiveness, said the company had rectified a loophole in their policy and reinstated her review.[124]

Given the popularity of reviews and ratings and resultant complaints from consumers and sellers, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs published a draft code[125] to regulate reviews via e-commerce and digital platforms in 2022. It reflected my findings about suspicion around paid and/malicious reviews as well as non-social media platforms' engagement in creator culture. It listed 6 problems – 4 of those were around doubtfulness of the veracity of reviews (false negative/positive reviews, selection of reviews by platforms/sellers); 1 about reputation management firms, a new type of organization, and 1 about the change in the role of the consumer as critic. The code also acknowledged and addressed the engagement of reputation management firms that they addressed as "review administrators." To minimise "bias and fraudulent reviews" the code disallowed a "purchase of reviews." It also laid rules to guide the rewarded reviews such that the reward should not be contingent on the content of the review, and that a rewarded review should carry a 'mark' that clearly signals this arrangement.

The recommendations to ensure quality, accuracy, and reliability created a push back about these being too burdensome for tech companies.[126] Platforms' concern over reviews was perhaps the

[124] https://the-ken.com/tradetricks/when-zomato-and-restaurants-were-on-the-same-side-briefly/?utm_source=ro_hdr&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=trade_tricks. Accessed November 2022.
[125] I am grateful to Adv Shirish Deshpande, co-founder of the Mumbai Grahak Panchayat (Consumers Organisation) to bring this code to my attention. Adv Deshpande was invited to the drafting of this code in addition to representatives from other consumer organisations. The code can be read here: https://www.medianama.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/19000_2022.pdf. Accessed November 2023.
[126] https://www.medianama.com/2022/12/223-summary-bis-standard-online-reviews-e-commerce/. December 2022.

reason why my interviews with platform executives got tense when I asked questions about reviews. One executive explained that those who worked on reviews were the only people privy to any information about how reviews worked since it was a sensitive subject. Even blogs also mention how the ratings system is protected by non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) so none of their developers can talk about it.[127]

Through my interviews, I picked up on a dissatisfaction even amongst the bloggers and review writers that platforms had incubated. Especially amongst those who had a text-heavy style and had not diversified onto Instagram. Furthermore, Zomato's turn away from text-heavy reviews to labels and tags only further discouraged their blog-style content creation. These bloggers explained that due to this metrification culture in food blogging, restaurants were after bloggers with large number of followers who tended to be less genuine. Goodwill rather than number of followers, was considered useful in identifying a genuine blogger in their view.

Labels and tag reviews as ways of learning about a restaurant can create misleading images of businesses in the minds of consumers. During my visits to food businesses' premises for interviews as well as a consumer, I observed how the "work friendly" tag meant that consumers would go to establishments and 'linger' for hours, ordering minimum amounts of food or beverage. In addition to remote workers, college students worked from coffee shops to beat the competition of getting a seat in libraries. In response, some cafes had blocked off the power sockets around tables and others had tinkered with their menus to increase the average order value by offering beverage and snack combinations.

[127] https://www.zomato.com/blog/new-ratings. Accessed May 2022.

This sub-section has offered an exposition of the uncertainty created by user circumvention. By building and animating the elusive figure of the 'genuine' reviewer, I have identified how the difficulty of ascertaining whether or not a review was genuine enwrapped platform users and the Ministry of Consumers Affairs. Occasionally, being unable to ascertain reliability created a common ground between consumers and businesses against platforms. The next section discusses this further.

3.5 Discussion: Implications of user circumventions of how-to-be-encountered

In this section, I will discuss the implications of platform users' circumventions of how-to-be-encountered for platforms' algorithmic curation of encounters. Circumventions negotiated with platforms as evident in the conflict over genuine reviews and reviewers. This means that users did not simply engage in activities intuitively associated with resistance like boycotts or delisting.

Circumventions are a type of public opprobrium. Even when not attempting to challenge platforms, circumventions as a type of opprobrium compel platforms to ensure that the crowds continue to stay on their interfaces. Gathering user-led circumventions makes room to think of these not only as regulatory problems, but as unintended, unexpected aspects of platforms' plans that show limits to their power. User-led circumventions are reminiscent of Callon's argument about how platforms' programming of encounters offers users opportunities to reprogramme their actions based on their experiences. As a result, quite counterintuitively, programming causes unexpected outcomes (Callon 2021). Algorithmic systems also participate by steering user generated content in unpredictable directions (de Seta 2024). In addition to influencing how platforms' algorithmic

curation of encounters works, users' circumventions show limits to platform power by pointing to new avenues of negotiation.

To fully appreciate users' negotiation and its potential, it is worth reflecting on the fact that a 'platform user' is an individual consumer or a business and a collective entity like a household or industry. Being attentive to the collective aspects of being a user shows how platforms change systems of retail and distribution involved in making the encounter between individual consumers and businesses. Off platforms, consumers are suspicious of businesses but when aggregated on platforms, both consumers and businesses are users. Considering the range of who a user is, and what they can do, shows how platform users can share common grounds against platforms.

Reviews and ratings are often occasions when businesses and consumers share common grounds against platforms. Reviews and ratings have been understood as an "occasion for eliciting and enacting relations of accountability," not simply a collision of accounts that the moderator adjudicates on (Ziewitz 2017). The elusive figure of a "genuine reviewer" in this chapter was useful in following "relations of accountability" involving the food and hospitality industry, consumers, food bloggers, and even the state through the ASCI and FSSAI. Zomato had to change their policy and allow reviews to include health and safety violations and they had to intervene and conduct examinations of cloud kitchens. Tragically understudied civil society organisations like consumers' organisations have intervened in people's encounters with the market. Consumers' organsiations across the world have carried reviews of products and services in their magazines (Aldridge 1997; Mallard 2007). These reviews may not compare in popularity to platforms'

reviews and ratings sections, yet in India, these organisations were invited by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs to draft a code on reviews.

At the business-user end, despite being split, industry associations agreed that Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces were prime sites of finding and being found by consumers, so they did not simply boycott or delist anymore. Instead, they attempted to be independent from algorithmic curations, which meant having to create their own stream of consumer data. Using these streams of data, businesses would be attentive to how, when, from where, and who encountered them and made a purchase, based on which they would offer appropriate discounts. In gathering data and operationalizing it, businesses worked with other platforms like WhatsApp for business, DotPe, etc and invested in building technology businesses that offered services on a flat fee or commission rate.

Similar tensions between food businesses, industry, and platforms were observable even outside Mumbai, my field site. I saw similar tensions as I was writing up my thesis in Oxford and during my conference travels across cities like London, Los Angeles, Sunnyvale, New York, and Philadelphia. In these places, restaurant businesses attempted to reduce dependence on big food delivery platforms by using their own window panes. In this pane in the photograph below (figure 12), a restaurant in Oxford is encouraging ordering from Foodstuff, a smaller platform "with a conscience," while also being available on Deliveroo, a bigger food delivery platform. Another photo below (figure 13) shows a trend of cafes blocking charging points to push back against being used as workplaces. This did not stop people or consumer-users from working out of these cafes as some people carried power banks and others limited their hours of work.



Figure 12: Author's photograph of a restaurant window pane in Oxford with a poster for Deliveroo and Foodstuff, a local counterpart.



Figure 13: Author's photograph of a blocked off power outlet in a coffee shop in downtown Los Angeles.

3.6 Conclusion: Curating user encounters on crowded screens, inviting circumventions

In the introduction to this chapter, I invoked BigBasket (BB)'s instant vending machine and the city's street vendors to note how encounters are made by attentively placing businesses in the way

of consumers' daily lives. The chapter then detailed a conundrum created by virtualizing shopfronts in encounters between people and businesses: crowds and crowding. The analysis of encounters on platform interfaces in this chapter is informed by this conundrum of interfaces becoming sites where platform users (both consumers and businesses) have to navigate crowds of virtual shopfronts on their screens to encounter each other. Consumers hands, fingers, and sight had to navigate and analyze crowds of listings of virtual shopfronts on screens in the palms of their hands.

Therefore, by examining how users find each other (RQ 2.1) this chapter has called attention to crowds and crowding as important and understudied user experiences occurring in the palms of our hands. Studying moments of encounter between food businesses and consumers points to a precarious path between virtualizing shopfronts and food businesses achieving scale or high order volumes. This argument runs contrary to the common assumption in critical platform scholarship that virtualizing shopfronts catapults demand into sales for businesses (Shapiro 2022). Studying *how* users encounter one another can offer less totalising, more realistic, and hopeful accounts of platform-user relations. This approach of delving into moments of how users encounter one another by using their, hands and fingers furthers recent 'after-visibility' scholarship that examines if visibility and attention translate into sales (Wang 2025).

To navigate this crowd, platforms offer their algorithmic curation based on user data, reviews, and ratings as neutral aids. Users do not simply accept platforms' claims of being neutral. Instead, buyers and sellers both tinker with and investigated algorithmic curations to tilt experience in their interests, much like what we know of social media users' circumvention of algorithmic norms of

visibility (Abidin 2021). Consumers and businesses in my sample too undertook an effort to navigate this arrangement of crowds by critically reflecting on ranking, ordering of search results, and businesses' reviews and ratings.

This chapter has also offered an understanding of the user cultures of buying and selling on food delivery platforms. Such an examination is consequential because on-demand platforms have largely been examined only as sites of delivery work. Specifically, the chapter has grappled with how even surface level capacities such as tapping, scrolling, and toggling enable users to compose experiences as well as operationalize their learnings from moving across platforms, devices, and arrangements outside. Even though scholars focus on one or two platforms, users move across platforms. In this chapter, users' scrolling long lists of search results across different platforms informed users' guessing and doubting Swiggy and Zomato. Developing provisional understandings of algorithmic curation compositionally led one cloud kitchen to try and improve their position in search rankings by making 189 listings. This practice became public only because of a dissatisfied consumer's investigation about why they kept getting food that they disliked no matter which listing they ordered from. Beyond this case, most commonly consumers asked: how could reviews and ratings be trusted if platforms allowed restaurants to remove reviews that highlight health and safety issues? If restaurants paid for reviews, how would users know?

Therefore, this chapter has analysed how users' efforts to find each other and their navigation of Swiggy and Zomato's algorithmic curation of encounters invites user-led circumventions. As discussed in the previous section, platform users' circumventions show us what is at stake in algorithmic curation of encounters. Encounters are fleeting moments, but these have a bearing on

business bottom lines, competition between businesses over being seen by consumers, culinary cultures of reviewing, rating, advertising standards, and so on.

In the next chapter I will examine what being able to find each other on interfaces means for restaurants' and households' infrastructures and practices of cooking and eating.

Chapter 4: Making a meal: platformization of cooking, eating, and serving

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4.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the moments that follow what the previous chapter, chapter 3, analysed as an encounter between consumers and business. It examines what platformization means for the making of a meal through practices of cooking, eating, and serving in commercial kitchens as well as domestic kitchens (RQ 2.2). How do commercial kitchens organise practices of cooking to serve consumers once they have been found on platforms' crowded interfaces? What does consumers' ordering in mean for practices of cooking, eating, and serving in domestic kitchens?

Other than Swiggy and Zomato, commercial kitchens utilise media and entertainment channels to reach out to and serve consumers. One example of a media channel that links businesses and consumers is the Godrej Trends report, an annual report (2017) pictured below (figure 14). As the name suggests, the report outlines trends in food and hospitality based on conversations with members of the "food circles" like restaurateurs, food bloggers, and sommeliers. It is published by Vikhroli Cucina, a "platform" that multinational conglomerate Godrej set up that hosts all their fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) products. This intra-industry platform demonstrates that the food and hospitality industries work with the media and entertainment industries as chefs, marketeers, and food bloggers to "engage, network and collaborate."[128] In the wider neighbourhood of Vikhroli in Mumbai, Godrej also hosts the Godrej Culture Lab, a venue for performances and talks. Interestingly, the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), an industry body that represents Swiggy, Zomato, and other multinationals and start-ups across ad, entertainment, gaming, and payments, have an office in the same building too.



Figure 14: Screenshot of the cover page of the Godrej Trends Report 2022.

[128] https://www.vikhrolicucina.com/people/vikhroli-cucina. Accessed October 2024.

The Godrej Trends Report can serve as a useful reminder of how platforms are *surrounded* by practices and infrastructures that link people and commerce; platforms are not simply sites of aggregation that link people and commerce. The report's tracking of trends highlights the expanse of business opportunities in home cooking as well as inter-industry relations that support the simple activity of domestic cooking. Home cooked food often involves purchases of pre-cut vegetables (2019), do-it-yourself (DIY) meal kits and recipes, kitchen tools, vessels, ingredients, or interior design. The report also reveals how food and hospitality businesses recognise that the "modern Indian cooks may not have the time or the inclination to cook from scratch regularly." So they sell fresh batters, dips, sauces, spreads, ready to cook curry bases, pre-cut vegetables, and fruits (2019). Other than offering convenience in cooking, businesses also sell healthy packaged snacks like *makhanas* (lotus seed), granola, or millet-based options, solutions for specific diets like keto or vegan (2020).

This chapter analyses how these surrounding arrangements, practices, and infrastructures of cooking, eating, and serving have a bearing on users' experience of Swiggy, Zomato, and platforms more widely. Practices and infrastructures that exist outside Swiggy and Zomato that might seem to have nothing to do with these platforms might enable consumers and businesses' use of platforms. Therefore, these arrangements compel expanding scholarly analysis of platformization to soften our focus outwards, to the rims of the platforms we study. Doing so in this chapter enables tracing how platforms join media and entertainment channels in linking businesses and households. Therefore, platformization involves people's preexisting and simultaneously existing arrangements of care, leisure, and payments for purchases through various channels; not only platforms' actions or what they do.

In the rest of the chapter, I first review the literature on cooking, eating outside the home, and digital food cultures. After this, I introduce my findings about the practices and infrastructures of cooking in various commercial kitchens, household kitchens, and at a neighbourhood level through the work of a cooperative consumer organisation in Mumbai that collectivised grocery procurement and distribution beginning in the 1970s. I will also analyse how serving food involves arrangements of leisure, entertainment, and payments, in addition to labour. Finally, I will discuss the implications of the platformization of cooking and serving food across commercial and domestic settings and then offer a conclusion.

4.2 Literature review: mediatory work between the home and market on platforms

In this section, I review literature about cooking, eating, and serving domestically and commercially by first engaging with (1) anthropological conceptualisations of cooking as mediatory work. Then I turn to (2) *empirical studies from South Asia* about the convivial and commensal practices of eating out and the work of cooks at home. Finally, I bridge this knowledge with recent conversations in media and culture studies referred to as (3) 'digital food cultures' (Lupton and Feldman 2020).

(1) In a*nthropological conceptualisations of cooking,* food is full of socio-cultural meaning and has communicative value (Stoller 1989). As a medium of contact, food prescribed relations and roles at home, and raised opportunities to define who are insiders-outsiders to the household (Appadurai 1981). As a result, cooking has been viewed as mediatory work shaped by caste, gender, class, and religion. Consider how brahmins' ritual position as "men of sacrifice" or

officiants of ceremonies, means that they mediated between humans and the cosmological. Brahmins literally "cook for the world" because they are hired as cooks. However, their role as officiants of religious ceremonies means that they also "cook up the world" through their role as mediators between the cosmological and the real (Janeja 2010).

Cooking is mediatory work between the home and the market as it tinkers with what goes in/out of the home. Conventionally, women or housewives stand as a filter between the home and the market (Solomon 2016) as they perform the work of cooking. Due to this, cooking has been framed as countering the individualising and commercialising effect of money on households (Parry and Bloch 1989). Cooking transforms money earned through interactions with commerce into something that sustains the household (Carsten 1989) through budgeting of purchases from grocery stores (Weinbaum and Bridges 1976) and women's unpaid cooking at home.

In contemporary times, cooking as mediatory work between the home and the market is also done using digital technologies. Communications scholar Julia Ticona has argued that digital technologies tether carework as people use video calls, remote working, and so on to make time for cooking, cleaning, and maintaining relationships with friends and family, despite differences in their livelihoods (Ticona 2022). The findings in this chapter will further the understanding of what digital technologies mean for the mediatory work of cooking commercially and domestically.

My analysis in this chapter of platform users' practices and infrastructures of cooking expands the conception of care to include descriptions of how it is done. This expands the gaze of most feminist literature that remains focused on what care does or what it produces (Weinbaum and Bridges 1976; Weeks 2011; Amrute 2019; Ticona 2022; Gupta 2024) Care obviously involves the *work* of cooking — commercially and domestically — however, the concomitant acts of eating, serving,

and entertaining also involve leisure and enjoyment. By studying how Swiggy and Zomato tether leisure, recreation, and entertainment, not just care*work* for their users by linking businesses and households and mediating between them, this chapter pushes the boundaries of what we identify as care to include leisure, recreation, and entertainment, in addition to work. It also makes minor contributions to empirical research detailed below.

(2) *Empirical studies from South Asia* that examines food delivery platforms is scant. From that very limited research, we know that ordering in is a form of eating out as the activity of cooking occurs outside the household division of labour. Households that were accustomed to controlling the hire of domestic workers experienced ordering in as a loss of control. This led some consumers to complain about Zomato refusing to reallocate a Hindu worker instead of a Muslim worker (Lalvani 2021). We also know that apps are defining 'local' based on geographical proximity (Srinivas 2021) and are popular amongst middle class Indian youth (Patgiri 2022).

The scholarship on food delivery platforms cited above is already in engagement with studies of eating out that have examined the marketisation of cooking through the hire of cooks and domestic workers. This older literature has shown how caste, religion, and regional identities of cooks are important in the hiring of cooks at home and in some commercial establishments like South-Indian brahmin owned *udupi* restaurants (Toft Madsen and Gardella 2012). Households find it difficult to ascertain the veracity of their cooks' self-declarations of caste (Janeja 2010) and exert minute control over their actions (Dickey 2000; Janeja 2010).

The least scholarly attention has been paid to the practices and infrastructures of commercial cooking in the food and hospitality industries on its own terms in the literature on eating out. Barring some exceptions (Solomon 2016; Toft Madsen and Gardella 2012), more is known about

food businesses' informal counterparts like hawkers and cooks. When these restaurant and café spaces have been studied, it has been in terms of how they are places where young people are exposed to different lifestyles through friendships in places of work like BPOs and leisure like cybercafes (Nisbett 2007), cafes (Platz 2012), and as new spaces of consumption like fast food chains (dolphijn 2006). These studies have chosen to examine what interactions in these spaces mean for gender, class, caste norms of who cooks and who eats with whom (Caplan 2008) or regional and national identities (Baviskar 2018; Staples 2017; Nandy 2004). Many of these authoritative analyses are less descriptive of the actual practices and infrastructures of commercial cooking. Other studies are conducted in university dining halls (Gundemeda 2020:202), workplaces, (Kuroda 2018), in the commute between home and work (Anjaria Shapiro 2016; Kuroda 2018). Some scholars have even chosen to delve into city-specific venues like Indian Coffee House (Bhattacharya 2018) or Mumbai's Irani Cafes (Raghavan, Asia, Singh 2015).

The limitation in most studies listed above is that they offer only minimal descriptions of cooking, eating, and serving practices and infrastructures. These descriptions of cooking are offered largely to support the arguments being made about ascribed identities. Through my findings in this chapter, I examine commercial cooking on its own terms and what food delivery platforms have meant for it.

The descriptions of commercial cooking here have an analytical aim. The aim is to extend the ambit of the literature about eating out in India. This research has been clustered around informal food work of hawkers and home cooks. I will extend its ambit by asking: how have cloud kitchens changed the organisation of work practices in restaurants? What does serving consumers via platforms like Swiggy and Zomato do to practices of commercial cooking and infrastructures of restaurants? From outside South Asia we know casual and fast-food establishments like quick

service restaurants (QSRs) informalized norms of cooking and serving (Kauffman 2010; Warde 1997; Ocejo 2017). This definition of informality is significant because in South Asia informality has only been examined in terms of the casualization of labour in restaurants.[129] Even commercial cooking in the region has been examined only in terms of what it means for households and families and not on its own terms.

Another understudied subject in the literature about eating out are industrialised convenience foods like instant noodles and ready to eat foods[130]. Convenience foods like instant noodles linked home cooking to commerce, prior to ordering food online. Therefore, this chapter examines ordering in, as an alternative alongside the hire of cooks, going out, and cooking with convenience foods.

Studies of convenience foods have examined their role largely in domestic kitchens (Solomon 2016). This is most obvious in the case of popular instant noodles 'Maggi' that were declared "unsafe and hazardous" for consumption by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). Additionally, a minister suggested that instant noodles had made women "lazy mothers" who did not cook nutritious food for their children (Adbi, Faizi, and Chatterjee 2017). Elsewhere in the world too, ads for convenience foods like those for mashed potatoes or frozen pastry communicated the dilemma of balancing purchasing with care, almost saying: "you can do it, and indeed you would do it, if only you had the time - how could you not given what it means." (pg 132, Warde 1997). Purchasing lower priced convenience foods like Maggi allow people across

[129] Restaurant workers are an understudied in India, except the attention received by social work scholars (Limaye 1940), anthropologists studying upper-caste south Indian owned *Udupi* chains (Iversen and Raghavendra 2006; Madsen and Gardella 2012), and more recently when I studied what food delivery platforms did to restaurants' delivery fleet (Lalvani 2021).
[130] It is interesting to note that MTR, one of the popular ready to eat brands, is owned by Udupi restaurant Mavalli Tiffin Room (MTR) (Toft Madsen and Gardella 2012).

social cleavages to consume similarly and for this reason, it has been suggested that Maggi "transcends cultural enclosures" (Baviskar 2018).

The findings in this chapter offer insight into how convenience foods aid cooking in commercial kitchens, not only domestic kitchens. Additionally, I contribute to the research cited above through my findings about how people use food delivery platforms in their ongoing effort to balance maximising time, effort, and communicating care and affection to their loved ones and caring for themselves.

In this chapter, the act of ordering food via platforms is analysed by considering how it is informed by the acts of working. Rather than analysing buying an isolated act of consumption that is enabled by platforms' programming, I examine how people's experiences with commerce in provisioning for households are *composed across* livelihood and consumption activities. One instance of how people compose their experiences is the case of a consumers' association called the Mumbai Grahak Panchayat (MGP). The MGP was set up in the late 1970s in Mumbai and enabled their members to balance income-expenditure in their households by making better purchases. In addition to their collective purchasing system or *vaatap* based on their curation of what they shortlist as healthy and necessary, they ran a monthly magazine, in-person, and online events. The magazine's articles mediated between experts like doctors, food scientists, the state, guidelines and laws concerning consumers, and their members.

(3) Scholarship on *digital food cultures* from media, communication, and culture studies rarely studies food delivery platforms as they are predominantly focused on social media platforms, calorie tracking, and other food related apps. Additionally, these studies rarely examine India,[131]

[131] When India is a site, it's largely from the point of view of the diaspora (Hegde 2013).

Nanjangud and Reddy (2020) are exceptions in their paper on what visual cultures online mean for how food is served in restaurants and cafes.

I address these gaps in studies of digital food cultures by studying the cultures of food delivery platforms in India, an understudied site. More importantly than simply offering empirical material from an understudied site, I analyse how food delivery platforms are also sites of culture, not just labour. Food delivery platforms will be examined as sites of culture because commercial platform users like cafes, restaurants, and bars have been sites of entertainment. In suggesting that restaurants and commercial venues of serving food be examined as sites of entertainment, I build off digital food studies research that has acknowledged food's association with entertainment. This research has examined the role of food in leisure (Kobez 2020; Lewis 2018), its potential for amusement (Deborah Lupton 2018; Ray 2020; Rousseau 2012), celebrity chefs (Rowe et al. 2020), TV shows, and YouTube channels (Lupton and Feldman 2020). This chapter's analysis of food delivery platforms' links with the media and entertainment industries aims to widens the grounds of their analysis in platform studies literature.

I also extend this analysis about food's association with entertainment to homes: does ordering in overhaul gendered expectations of serving and cooking food on urban Indian women? The findings in this chapter about the use of digital technologies in serving food bridge silos between two sets of literature: first, the scholarship on cooking food as sensorial, communicative (Stoller 1989) media (Appadurai 1981) described at the start of this section. Secondly, newer scholarship reviewed above on what digital media does to food practices and representations referred to as 'digital food cultures' (Lupton and Feldman 2020).

Finally, I identify payments in food delivery as important moments that link domestic and commercial users. In this chapter, money and payments are analysed as enabling serving and being served by restaurants and delivery workers. Analysing payments as moments of connection between users indicates how Swiggy and Zomato rely on a platformization of money and payment systems.

The findings in this chapter examine how cooking and serving in domestic and commercial kitchens are influenced by using Swiggy and Zomato (RQ 2.2). They are based on a combination of three methods: (1) ethnographic observations, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) content and document analysis of a consumers' organisation.

4.3 Findings: Cooking in commercial kitchens

This section details the width of practices and infrastructures of businesses that sell food via Swiggy and Zomato. It begins by discussing how commercial kitchens use convenience technologies ranging from ingredients to software even before listing themselves on Swiggy and Zomato (4.4.1). Then, an ancestry of cloud kitchens is drawn by placing them alongside quick service restaurants (QSRs) and delving further into the use of hardware and software in commercial cooking (4.4.2). Finally, I highlight how industry bodies try to mediate competition created by Swiggy and Zomato by suggesting new norms of raising investment to their membership (4.4.3).

4.3.1 Convenience technologies in cooking and serving

This sub-section offers a view of how commercial kitchens use convenience technologies to organise cooking and serving. These details help ground the examination of what selling via Swiggy and Zomato means for businesses' cooking practices and infrastructures.

Sushant*, a trained chef who has worked in restaurants in London, Singapore, and Mumbai and currently owns cloud kitchens in Mumbai, explained to me that cooking is a business at the end of the day. Surely, creative expression is a very important and enjoyable dimension of it, but cooking requires a lot more than just creativity. Due to this, every hospitality school includes training in maintaining portion sizes, inventory checks, and profit and loss (PNL) management. It is the norm in commercial cooking to set a standard operating procedure to ensure speed and consistency. It also involves trimming the staff, Sushant explained:

> "A new cloud kitchen will have max to max 4 staff. One would be a head chef or a section chef. One could be an assistant, let's call him a commie chef. Third one would be, um, we used to call it a 'turn on' chef. Let's say somebody who turns over, if you are off, I would be coming in. The fourth guy would be the hot wash, we call him *mori*[132] *wallah.* A cloud kitchen would work with these 4. The set up would be bare minimum: there would be a 3-burner gas range, if it is Chinese, there would be a wok ring, if it is Continental, there would be Continental ranges, a couple of side tables, a couple of prep tables, MS (mild steel) racks, deep freezer, and a refrigerator… If they are into bakery, they'll probably put in an oven or a salamander. The business hours are between 12-3 and 1800-1 AM or so and they rotate this staff between these shifts."

Maximising staff, space, time, and equipment is with an eye on PNL. A part of this focus on profit in cooking also means using pre-prepared spices, marinades, base gravies, some of which I saw being sold by *Food Service India* to the hospitality, restaurant, and catering businesses (HoReCa) attendees at the cloud kitchen convention. These "solutions" offering "flexibility for chef's creativity," also included glazes, choco lava cake mixes, pizza sprinklers, and so on.

Cooking and serving in restaurants and commercial kitchens involves work before and after it, like procurement, inventory, cleaning in a scullery, and serving. Similarly, serving food includes tasks like inventory management, online order management, and billing. A popular billing and point of sale (PoS) software Pet Pooja[133] offers an all in one solution to manage these tasks. Pet Pooja

[132] *Mori* in Hindi and Marathi means a sink, drain, or a narrow channel for waste water.
[133] In Hindi, *pet* means stomach and *pooja* means the act of worshipping. *Pet pooja* is a commonly used term for eating.

claims to process 25% of online order volume via Swiggy and Zomato in 140 cities across India, the UAE, and South Africa. They offer integrations with food delivery and payment platforms too like Zomato, Swiggy, Tally, Amazon Food, WhatsApp, Thrive, Razorpay, Dukaan, Paytm, Dotpe and so on. Different types of food establishments —QSRs. cafes, fine dining, bakeries, cloud kitchen— use Pet Pooja. At the convention, Pet Pooja announced the forthcoming launch of *Kharcha*[134] which uses machine learning (ML) to convert photos of invoices into data entry.

For ensuring a smooth flow in serving, PetPooja offer "smart innovative products" like Waiter Calling System and Analytics. The waiter calling system is a black circular device: "small and stylish…that glows with different colours and notifies customer requests directly on Petpooja PoS, Captain App and Android TV." This saves the waiter's time and energy since it enables customers to press different buttons for water, the bill and the waiter. Overall, it reduces the need for anyone to call out to the waiter. They sell all of these at Rs 25 (GBP 2.5) a day or Rs 10000 (GBP 100) per month, " less than the cost of your daily *chai!*"

A mixologist and manager explained to me that their daily workflow is divided in three major departments: kitchen, floor or food and beverage (FnB), and the bar. Even though the establishment opens at noon, all three departments clock in at 9AM to prepare for opening. Preparing involves the kitchen doing *mis en place* or gathering ingredients, half-boiling chicken, the FnB team check the cooler, music, apps, devices, lights, and the mixologist checking the inventory.

[134] In Hindi, *kharcha* means expense.

Restaurants are highly reliant on various restaurant management software and being connected to the internet, given the amount of coordination involved. The mixologist shared an anecdote of a busy Saturday night when the WiFi connection dropped only for a few minutes which led to complete chaos. Being disconnected from the internet led to a breakdown in communication between the departments. Orders placed by consumers did not get sent to the kitchen and did not get fed into the billing system. This meant consumers at tables were waiting for an order that no one was cooking. Additionally, the staff had to manage billing manually, calculating goods and services tax (GST), value added tax (VAT) and so on.

In addition to serving consumers on site, food establishments also integrate flows of orders for delivery. Unlike aggregators Swiggy and Zomato, the industry-backed platform, Thrive empowers brands to "go direct to consumers". Their pamphlet promised "empowering restaurants to succeed online" and "regain control of your restaurant business." At their stall and in their presentation at the cloud kitchen convention, they demonstrated how their WhatsApp Commerce integration worked and thanked Jubilant foods, owner of Dominoes in India for their support.

The details in this subsection help appreciate how commercial cooking by Swiggy and Zomato's business users relies on various practices and processes that occur before and after the actual cooking. These practices that surround cooking be it planning menus intelligently, portion sizes, inventory management, pricing, and so on maintain business fundamentals. For this reason, knowing how commercial kitchens have relied on various convenience technologies geared to achieve and maintain profitability is crucial to understanding their experience of selling via platforms.

4.3.2 Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) ancestry of cloud kitchens: use of hardware and software in cooking and serving

This sub-section attends to Quick Service Restaurants (QSRs) as models of running a food business to understand the operation of cloud kitchens today. This choice is informed by the fact that most successful cloud kitchens, like Rebel Foods, had started as QSRs. Prior to cloud kitchens, QSRs have emphasised quick, standardised assembly by personnel who use mechanical aids and need to cook only minimally.

At the cloud kitchen convention, the CEO of Rebel Foods, Kallol Banerjee compared the restaurant industry's disruption by third party logistics to the global value chains (GVC) that produce products for brands like Nike. This comparison was made to advocate for breaking commercial cooking work into small components and getting that work done by those who know it the best.

Cloud kitchens can be a 'full stack model' where the business has their own kitchens, staff and delivery fleet or they can be 'plug and play' or Kitchen as a Service (KaaS) models that offer businesses physical infrastructure needed for cloud kitchens like cooking gas, drainage pipes, ventilation and so on. Either way, cloud kitchens are often split. It is common to have one centralised kitchen making gravies or biryani masala and a separate commissary kitchen which is focussed only on assembly.

In early 2022, Zomato invested in a company called Mukunda Foods which sells infrastructure to food businesses. Like Rebel Foods, this company too, started as a QSR that now sells hardware and software solutions like 'Eco Fryers' and 'Wok-Es' to restaurants, QSRs, and cloud kitchens. These hardware solutions mechanise repetitive movements like tossing and stirring, frees up time, space and demands even lesser skill from cooks. In addition to investing in convenient cooking technologies, between 2017-18, Swiggy and Zomato tried and failed when they launched their own brand of cloud kitchens. Both platforms invested in and then by 2020, exited from investing in cloud kitchens. Their 'failure' in owning cloud kitchens coincides with their attempt at brokering peace with restaurant owners' associations that have flagged platforms' ownership of cloud kitchens as a conflict of interest.

In a podcast, the CEO and founder of Mukunda Foods explained that their automated solutions were better at cooking than chefs. Their machines were positioned as 'intelligent' because they operated from data and offered actionable insights to enable scale. As a bonus, they took less space than a person, reduced costs, and increased speed. A chef knew that tomatoes were sweeter in winter and sourer in summer, so they would "change the other parameters — temperature, quantity, salt, sugar to ensure standardised taste." The machine could sense "the features of the tomato.." with sensors and offered a flagging mechanism "this dish should not be served" and named the operator who "messed with it." It needed only 10 sq. ft of space as opposed to 30-40 sq ft a person needs and could produce a greater number of portions — a chef makes five portions in one hour versus thirty portions made by a machine. It incorporated personalisation requests more smoothly as business owners could simply select "increase spice" in their app if consumers' reviews demanded it. Due to the trail of data left by using software, KaaS providers function like a market

research firm. They often sell advisory services helping restaurants identify areas to locate their operations, drawing on data from MapMyIndia about rentals, restaurants, socio-economic and income profiles of consumers.

Increasing insights from data create pressure to do more of what is known to work and flatten out creativity and experimentation in terms of menu and cooking skills. Given that data about what people order, the fact that people's searches are generally led by generic terms all cumulatively mean everyone makes chicken wings. Even annual reports published by platforms in India reveal how chicken biryani was the most ordered dish in 2020, followed by masala dosa, paneer butter masala, chicken fried rice, and mutton biryani. Market research confirmed this as the most popular cuisines to be delivered in 2020 were North Indian food (27%), Chinese food (19%), South Indian (8%), American food (7%), Pizza (7%), Bakery and Dessert (6%), and Street Food (6%). Biryani is understood to be a popular choice because it carries well and proves to be value for money since it is a whole meal in one dish.

At the cloud kitchen convention, in a panel on "role of technology in cloud kitchen efficiency," the CEO of Mukunda Foods assured the audience that "people were not going anywhere." It is cooks who feed the machine with the recipe and retrain it via audits. The sentiment that "with automation, you don't need a chef, you need an operator" was shared by most speakers. Efficiency at the level of cooking means that the process should be "dumb", should not require judgement, or "using one's head." Instead, operators should use "an engineer or scientists' mind." Similar to a coffee machine replacing a barista, the operator chef would audit the machine to see if the recipe is being followed and retrain it when required. Other speakers drew parallels between computer

science and food through comparing how the adage “garbage in, garbage out” made sense in the case of food businesses too, since the quality of ingredients would impact the product. Another panellist, Zoravar Kalra pushed back against simply engineered cooking by suggesting that the “human touch” or chefs who use their hands and heads were crucial. Especially now when everything is online, he suggested that restaurants were the “only offline hope for humanity.”

This subsection has examined the reliance of commercial cooking on hardware and software that surrounds their use of Swiggy and Zomato. In order to sell food via platforms, food businesses rely on mechanisation and automation in commercial cooking and serving that began with QSRs. This application of hardware and software prior to platforms was modelled on global value chains, and it enables cloud kitchens today. These forms of automation and mechanisation optimise and maximise time, space, and labour yet optimisation and maximisation are not the only important considerations. Cooking and serving benefit from having a “human touch” and restaurant staff using their hands and heads or their ability to discern and deploy their judgement and knowledge are all important in serving consumers.

By analysing convenience technologies outside Swiggy and Zomato, this subsection has shown how a wider re-modelling by convenience technologies began both prior to and outside platform mediation. Food and hospitality businesses seem to be able to cater to online orders via Swiggy and Zomato because they rely on these other technologies outside the platforms I study. These workflow management technologies, cooking technologies, serving and billing software all allow businesses to maintain different workflows in everyday operations across a variety of skills and departments as described above.

4.3.3 Burning cash, distasteful scale, and VC funding

This sub-section delves into how the changes in commercial cooking described in the previous section were financed or funded by a trifecta: burning cash or spending more than earning, chasing "distasteful" scale, and VC funding. How food businesses seek revenue for scaling up and raise money have a bearing on the role of technology in their operations and on their relationship with aggregators like Swiggy and Zomato.

Through the cloud kitchen convention, the NRAI was attempting to shape the norms of starting-up and running food businesses at an industry level. This included the relationship with investors. A panel on a "roadmap to raise money and scale the business" offered insight on how businesses should raise money. The panellists included angel investors, investors from VC firms like Lighthouse funds, IvyCut Ventures, Anicut Capital, and food business owners of WOW! Momo and Rebel Foods as speakers. The panel offered an understanding of the stages or tiers of investment, such as 'series A' where the companies earn Rs 30-40 lakhs (GBP 3,000,00 - 4,000,00) per month. The panel laid out which funds and firms food business owners should approach. Other than start-ups, existing restaurants with a brand, find cloud kitchens a good way to expand by sharing costs with other brands, yet they too need "a sizeable amount of venture capital."[135]

Investors from these VC firms explained that they took up to one year to make an investment in any food business. In this period, investors reported looking out for team dynamics, how the business handles challenges, as part of the "first institutional check." At this stage typically, investors asked themselves "where can we add value?" After that, growth stage investors appear

[135] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/rise-of-cloud-kitchen-concept-in-india/article34787157.ece. Accessed July 2022.

on the scene when a business' revenue crosses Rs 50 crore (GBP 50,000,000). These investors are likely to be looking for a consistent product, operations, and metrics about the business' vision and so on.

The above shows the push and pull between investors and owners. Throughout the convention, it appeared that VC investors as a professional group were a dominant force in the lives of food business owners. For instance, all the attendees referred to angel investor Hari Balasubramaniam as "sir." The "meet your speaker" bio in the day's agenda, described him as an "active angel investor" who has "led deals for investors and portfolio companies in the QSR and food tech space and continues to expand his portfolio in this space."

In a panel on "winning strategies and possible pitfalls," second generation restaurant owner Zoravar Kalra, son of Jaspal Inder Singh Kalra, or Jiggs Kalra, shared his experience of starting-up Louis Burger, a popular cloud kitchen. He said that he had a coworking kitchen model since a "start-up mentality" was required to run these kitchens. Yet, the overall discussion amongst cloud kitchen owners suggested to new and old entrepreneurs, "don't buy revenue but build habit" amongst consumers. Here, the phrase 'buying revenue' refers to the practice of offering low prices or discounts most often fuelled by investors' money rather than 'earning revenue' through improving the quality of the product. Doing business in this way was framed as offering "distasteful" scale by the speakers: "burnt food and burnt money both don't taste good." The speakers suggested that businesses' spending investors' money blindly or burning money to lure consumers through discounts and offers was not a healthy or sustainable business practice for the

industry as a whole. They seemed to suggest that these wasteful business practices would drive a downward turn in prices and adversely impact the bottom line of other businesses too.

Finding an investor who understands this approach to growth is perceived to be crucial. In another panel, Bansi Kotecha, founder of KaaS company, Kytchens drew from his experience working with UberEats. He explained why he was selective when raising capital, and picked "patient capital" from Anicut Capital, a firm that had invested in other F&B businesses and had the experience of waiting for returns. Kotecha started-up in 2020 when UberEats was acquired by Zomato and was aware of the aggregator-restaurant business tension. So, he positioned Kytchens as an F&B business, not a tech company. This positioning addressed any concerns about being a competitor to food businesses and he did not have to burn cash like a tech company by offering steep discounts, for instance.

This sub-section has analysed how restaurateurs becoming users of Swiggy and Zomato is coupled with their access to new avenues of raising money and scaling businesses by using technology. In response to this trifecta of burning cash, chasing distasteful scale, and having access to VC funding, the NRAI as an industry association, attempts to mediate competition. The NRAI does so by steering norms of doing business in ways that it identifies as being more sustainable and tasteful than spending investors' money to offer lower prices. At the convention, speakers doubled down on the message that the norms of scaling food and hospitality businesses were different and required business owners to be tasteful.

To explain this norm, it was argued in one case that mothers and cloud kitchens both used similar principles of optimising time, space, and a budget. Lebanese food business, *Marrakesh*'s owner, Guarav Gite said cloud kitchens operated like anyone's mum did at home. During lunch, I learnt that many people took this home-based parallel quite literally and several home-chefs ran cloud kitchens from their own homes, and less expensive flats rented in Slum Rehabilitation Association (SRA) constructions. Both these types of businesses dodged paying high rent and commercial prices for electricity, water, and gas by being located in "domestic" properties.

In sum, this sub-section has analysed how the NRAI attempts to steer norms of how food and hospitality businesses raise and use investors money to sell food via platforms and in person. The next section moves to the domestic kitchens of Swiggy and Zomato's consumers.

4.4 Findings: Cooking and eating in household kitchens

This section begins by discussing how cooking and eating at is focused on minimising harm to compensate for the harm perceived to be caused by ordering food from Swiggy and Zomato (4.5.1). Then the next subsection (4.5.2) details how consumers' decisions to order in involve contending with their arrangements of maximising time, effort, and money, like their commercial counterparts. In addition to maximising resources, home cooking and eating involves expressions of love and care. Finally, household members draw from their activities as workers in acts of consumption such as ordering food or buying groceries to cook at home (4.5.3).

4.4.1 Cooking as harm minimisation

Cooking and eating at home are substitutes to ordering food via Swiggy and Zomato. However, like ordering in, it still requires households to buy things like vegetables, meat, or vessels, or accompanying snacks. Therefore, this sub-section explains how in eating at home, people took several measures to minimise harm associated with eating out, even when not ordering cooked food via Swiggy and Zomato.

I noticed several households had adopted clay and cast-iron utensils during kitchen walkthroughs in my in-person fieldwork in Mumbai. These purchases are spurred by paying more attention to food and health after covid, based on learning from social media and farmers' markets. One household explained that they adopted clay after they learnt about its benefits from following a Vedic lifestyle channel on Instagram called "sattvic movement." Another household of a finance worker and teacher were subscribers to the same channel and grew curious about the role of metal in food. The finance worker noticed most that cooking utensils were made of aluminium. From reading online, he learnt that the British colonialists used aluminium in vessels for Indian freedom fighters "to poison their gut" and weaken the freedom movement's future. Today, most pots and pans that claim to be made of granite or safe metals are actually made of aluminium. While this may not be true, the finance worker identified outsiders to the nation during colonialism, and the family in current times, both as uncaring and suspect.

Farmers' markets are also seen as places to buy fresh, "organic" vegetables from and also sample new types of food be it vegan or Satvik. One such ingredient were millets and other ingredients that required soaking. A young lawyer who lived with her parents and her sister explained to me

the difficulty of setting a menu that suited everyone's palate, gut, and health. She explained how coordinating harm minimisation efforts across often divergent health conditions among different household members was a big challenge. She explained:

> "Nobody can be in the kitchen in the morning...We're definitely not going to cook breakfast. So we've come up with one smoothie, so that's not too difficult with *sattu*[136], and all of that. But again, just to give you like a broader perspective, we're trying to come up with a system for breakfast because I want to gain some weight. So I want to have a heavy breakfast, but it's been the most difficult thing so far to incorporate in our regimen..So that's a very relevant question for our household because with my dad it was particularly oil and he had a heart attack when I was in my ninth standard and my sister was in the 10th standard. So that is the time when children really need to have fat, and we didn't really end up having that. So, then I got PCOD which was again kind of diagnosed maybe I think 4 years back and it was related to the absence of fat in my diet. So, then I started incorporating fat and I gave up on any kind of gluten and any kind of dairy."

Minimising harm when cooking for a group meant having to take into account others' needs and preferences, not only maximising individual choices. In the quote above from the young lawyer, her father had to reduce cholesterol, and she had to gain weight. So, she needed to eat chicken and meat to ensure she was gaining muscle, not just fat, whereas her father had to cut down on his meat intake. At the farmers' market, the young lawyer's family arrived at a truce. There they found out that millets had relatively higher protein and low fat. She showed me how they had made bread out of soaked millets and lentils pictured below (figure 15).

[136] *Sattu* (Hindi) is roasted gram flour. It is used like flour to make breads like *rotis* or added to water in the summer season and increasingly as a home-made alternative to protein powders in India.



Figure 15: Author's photograph of a millet bread in the kitchen of an interlocutor.

Ingredients like millets have a nutritional profile that is considered beneficial, and their cooking requires soaking that is understood to further minimise harm. Soaking cycles make digestion easier as it starts off digestion on your behalf even before food enters your body. In this case, it also helped the family plan their meals without having to cook or instruct the cook to make separate dishes. Supervising cooks is understood to be important because they cooked in a standardised way which would not suit the variegated needs of different households. In this case, the mother ensured that she added a *tadka* (tempered) the *dal* (lentil soup) because noticed the cook was using too much oil. It was at that moment in the cooking process that her intervention was required to ensure the *dal* is still suitable for her husband who had to reduce his cholesterol levels.

Some households minimise harm by sourcing ingredients from places they view as reliable. Several families receive ingredients like *jowar* (sorghum), beaten rice, jaggery*, ghee (*clarified

butter), various kinds of flour and dry snacks like *khakras*[137] and *theplas*[138] from villages and small towns they had extended family in. Families with connections to their native homes would avoid buying ingredients and snacks from local grocery or *kirana* stores because they were more certain of the quality of the deliveries they received from their hometowns.

This sub-section has tracked how households attempt to minimise harm when cooking food purchased from the market, to compensate for the harm caused by ordering food from Swiggy and Zomato. Harm is minimised through coordinating with others' needs and preferences when cooking is collective, reflecting on purchasing, preparation by soaking, supervising cooks, and it also includes sourcing ingredients from people's hometowns. People's perception of harm is not without reason. The heath and hygiene standards of dark stores and cloud kitchens have been a subject of massive public scandals with reports about consumers falling ill, dying from eating stale food,[139] and finding mould on food.[140]

4.4.2 Programmable cooking and communicative ordering of food

This sub-section describes how the decision to order food via Swiggy and Zomato involves a struggle between *maximising* time, effort and *communicating* love and affection. Home cooking is laborious, time consuming, and requires some skills and knowledge. To minimise these demands of home cooking, a Bangalore based start-up called Nymble launched Julia, a food robot that can

[137] A *khakra* is generally a wheat-flour based crisp cracker that is shaped like a *roti* or a flatbread.
[138] A *thepla* is a wheat-flour based *roti* or flatbread with fresh fenugreek leaves and spices like turmeric and red chilli powder.
[139] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/technology/tech-news/zomato-delists-restaurant-bans-owner-as-10-year-old-girl-dies-after-eating-cake-ordered-online-for-her-birthday/articleshow/109113233.cms. Accessed November 2025.
[140] https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/maharashtra-fda-suspends-zepto-s-food-license-over-non-compliance-and-poor-hygiene-13083010.html. Accessed November 2025.

cook Indian food. Their YouTube channel hosts a video demonstration of Julia cooking paneer masala for an enraptured in person audience.[141]

I asked people I met as consumers what they thought of Julia and the programming of cooking via a robot. It elicited excitement, raised concerns about becoming lazy, and led to some people explaining that they might still cook for special occasions or to relax. Most households I met had cooks, so they also wondered if they would have to train this machine again like they trained their cook. One avid cook did not think a robot was very promising because he thought but Indian food was programmable anyway. He said:

> "Entire Indian food lineup is similar. There is no difference in the food chain at all. What do you have to do? You have to just make one base of tomato, onion, ginger, garlic. You put *paneer* in it, you put *mutter* [peas], its mutter paneer! You put dry vegetables, mix veg! In the same thing you put *chana* it will be *chole* and you put *rajma* it will be *rajma*. Am I wrong? So you don't have to think about it. ..You remove tomato, add curd or cashew, it becomes white gravy. Sprinkle *thoda sa [a little bit of]* sugar..."

Swiggy and Zomato recognise that ordering food is also a question of communicating love and affection, not simply about saving time or effort. This recognition is evident in Swiggy's popular curations section on their app. It has a "Gift for an Occasion" or "Swiggy Moments" offering with top brands such as Merwans, Starbucks, and Sweetish House Mafia. The occasions could be birthdays for which they offered cakes, cupcakes and pastries, or anniversaries for which there were hampers, baklava, and chocolates. There is a section to express care for self and others by ordering soups, *khichdi*, juices, or pampering during periods by ordering ice cream, shakes, cold coffee. For more specific communication in relationships, such as to say sorry, users could order

[141] https://www.eatwithnymble.com/. Accessed July 2022.

cookies, cupcakes, and muffins. If users want to say "I miss you," they can do so with brownies, waffles, and pancakes.

In recognition of the fact that deciding what to order often occurs in conversation with others, not only individually, Zomato launched their "Share the dish" feature in 2021. This feature allows users to share a particular dish from their app with friends and family via WhatsApp, Instagram, and email.

Irrespective of whether my interlocutors are aware or unaware of these functions on the app, they still use food delivery to wish friends for their birthdays or in other moments of celebration or sadness. Some of my interlocutors told me how they used food delivery apps to order something for their friends who live in other cities to maintain their relationship from afar. Other than celebrations, food delivery apps also offer a service in the moments of fatigue, sadness and to engage with different feeling states: "Oh you got a new job! I'll order something for you…Oh, you had a bad day, I'll order some cookies."

Few young couples and parents and children explained how they knew their partner, child or parent had a specific medical condition. This meant that they had dietary restrictions such as having to avoid sweet food or oily food. So, they would monitor their parents' or partners' use of Swiggy and Zomato to ensure they are taking care of their health. At other times, they would order on their behalf to offer them a break from the discipline of restrictions.

This sub-section has demonstrated how cooking and eating at home is about balancing instrumental aspects of this care work with its affective and communicative aspects. In this ongoing effort, Swiggy and Zomato are often a part of consumers' effort to communicate affection and care to their loved ones by maximising time, effort, and bridging geographical distance. Therefore, programming cooking, either through a robot, training a cook, or learning to make one's own cooking a reproducible format,diate did not preclude the communicative aspects of food. People used Swiggy and Zomato on behalf of others and not only for themselves.

4.4.3 Working to buy food and cook

This sub-section analyses how individual households' consumption practices of buying via Swiggy and Zomato are informed by wider influences from their neighbourhood, the city, and their activities as workers. Specifically, it brings attention to the role of consumer organisation MGP in mediating between households and the market.

The MGP have for long occupied the space of recommendation that several food bloggers or those in farmers' markets now occupy. The MGP use their magazine to report from webinars and host discussions about various dimensions of cooking and eating that socially engaged, civic minded or "conscious consumers" should pay attention to. These dimensions range from the material of vessels, how to read food labels, the chemical processes involved in digestion, the importance of measuring, and are most often led by scientists and physicians.

In an essay on "The ideal vessels for cooking," contributor Ranjana Mantri reports from a webinar organised by the Dadar-Mahim-Bandra unit. Dr Mansi Rajdhakshya addressed the meeting of 373 attendee members and explained how different materials react with heat, over time, and with the

food stored in them. For instance, glass gets sterilised with the application of heat, anodised pots have a mix of aluminium and magnesium, so they are safe to use so long as they do not peel off. Dr Rajdhakshya explained how materials like aluminium were convenient because it heats up easily and does not break, yet it can be harmful if ingested. Clay and cast iron are less convenient because they are brittle, take longer to heat but are less dangerous.

In an essay on "Food and health: understanding and misunderstanding," Supriya Barve reports from a webinar organised by the Pune unit. This webinar was led by a food scientist and consultant Pramod Deodhar who offered information on common questions such as: how is the expiry date of products determined? Are chocolates kept in fridges with a white film edible? What is the difference between refined and filtered oils? He explained that the Food Standards and Safety Association of India (FSSAI) has permitted the use of palm oil in processed foods to a certain extent since it is not harmful in limited quantities. He also addressed stevia, a sugar replacement, which he explained was natural but should be used appropriately. Deodhar also contributes to a column called *Anna-satya* or *food truths.*

In "Satisfaction from cooking" contributor Anjali Potdar reports from a Facebook live with Dr Smita Lele, Professor of food engineering at the Institute of Chemical Technology, Mumbai. Dr Lele compared the human body to a "chemical factory" to remind attendees of the physiological cues of hunger. As well as think about how cooking can be made to aid digestion.

In a column titled "*Kalji gheta na*?" "You're taking care, right?" physician and Professor of medicine, Dr Rajendra Agarkar reminded readers the importance of measurements – BMI, pulse rate, waist-to-hip ratio etc — even though these might have not been considered important by

elders in families. Dr Agarkar opens the essay by recalling a conversation with a friend who he is concerned about even though the friend says they are "healthy and fit," Dr Agarkar insists that even doctors think absence of illness is good health. Whereas like the WHO definition of health he laid emphasis on wellbeing – physical, social, and mental. The column brings the readers' attention to salt and its ability to be addictive (May 2021) and sugar (April 2021). In the article on sugar, he cites *Fat Chance,* by Doctor Robert Lustig and other research to summarise the debates and their agreement on the fact that the consumption of sugar can lead to blood pressure, fatty liver, obesity and other ailments.

Mediatory work done by the MGP have involved the state and consumers' rights. In an essay titled "Maze of advertising," Bhagyarekha Joshi reported from a webinar led by Dr Archana Sabnis, a representative of the MGP to the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). Dr Sabnis lodged a complaint against an ad for Crompton bulbs that claims to kill 85% germs and part of this ongoing work was reflected in a column called *Ad Watch.*

The magazine carried news about new developments from the state like when the FSSAI issued labels to recognise vegan foods (October 2021) or a consumer activists training programme held at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, Delhi, sponsored by the Department of Consumer Affairs (September 2019). As well as specific demands made by the organisation like when Adv Shirish Deshpande was invited to a Consumers International panel on "Clicks and Mortar." There he argued about the need for a Global Dispute Resolution mechanism to make the most of online transactions and purchases that offered convenience (June 2021).

In my interview with Adv Deshpande, I asked him if in advocating for people's rights as consumers, there were any conflicts created with people's rights as workers. People as consumers often demand lower prices and as workers demand higher wages. How does a consumers' organisation balance the demand for lower prices without adverse effects on wages? He said:

> "We always deal with unions, they are all friends — auto union leaders, taxi union leaders. I always tell them you see your members may be a taxi driver or a driver for 8 hours or maybe 12 hours. But for 24 hours, they and their family members are consumers...they used to say, strike for every demand... Then you used to see the *bandh [*strike*]* and I used to object to that. I said don't hold the society for ransom, don't inconvenience the passengers and this is where there is conflict…"

He then talked about how after the 1990s, especially after liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation people suffered as consumers *and* workers, so: "it came to us to take care of the consumer and the interest of the workers."

This sub-section has examined how buying food outside of Swiggy and Zomato has invited consumers to compose their experiences from being individuals, households, neighbourhoods, workers, citizens and so on, not just as individual consumers. Delving into the mediatory work of the MGP between the home and market helps analyse how cooking and eating can have a civic orientation. Many contributors to the discussions hosted by the MGP were scientists, physicians, and lawyers who use their training to debunk myths, share developments in their fields, and offer updates on their advocacy as a collective. This indicates that in using Swiggy and Zomato to buy food, consumers could possibly also be thinking as households, residents of neighbourhoods, and collectives with varying convictions, not only as individuals.

The MGP might not have organised action around Swiggy and Zomato specifically. However, the organisation and its work on advertising standards and dispute resolution mechanisms for online purchases might be useful examples in imagining platform regulations over price from a consumers' rights perspective. The MGP have already transferred their expertise to platform regulation as they have consulted the state government of Maharashtra over algorithmic pricing tactics like surge pricing used by ride-hailing platforms like Uber and Ola.[142] Food delivery and quick commerce platforms have been observed to use similar algorithmic pricing tactics as ride-hailing platforms. It is common for users to see different prices for the same product. A news report found that Android users were shown lower prices whereas their counterparts using Apple phones running on iOS were shown higher prices.[143]

4.5 Findings: Serving food: leisure, entertainment, and money

This section examines platform users' experiences of being served (buying food) at home and serving (selling food) as businesses via Swiggy and Zomato. I map the contours of how serving and being served food both involve questions of leisure, entertainment, money and modalities of payment, not only the chores of production and preparation of food.

The first sub-section about restaurants as sites of serving offers a brief history of the relationships between chefs, venues like cafes, restaurants, and media and entertainment industries in India (4.5.1). Then, the figure of the daughter-in-law or *bahu* as entrepreneur aids a discussion on what

[142] https://www.freepressjournal.in/mumbai/consumer-connect-stuck-in-consumer-courts-give-mediation-a-try-says-expert. Accessed November 2024.
[143] https://www.medianama.com/2025/01/223-medianama-analysis-differential-pricing-instamart-blinkit-zepto/#:~:text=Overall%2C%20while%20Blinkit%20and%20Zepto,higher%20than%20Instamart%20and%20Blinkit.. Accessed November 2025.

women's economic independence means for home cooking and the gendered work of serving food within households (4.5.2). Finally, I discuss how the platformization of money and payments is crucial in enabling transactions between businesses and delivery workers serving food, and households being served on Swiggy and Zomato (4.5.3).

4.5.1 Restaurants as sites of entertainment

This sub-section analyses the empirical reality of service in restaurants as one that enables entertainment. This is significant because most global research on restaurants is focused on the service labour, as indicated in the literature review section towards the beginning of this chapter.

From sociological and anthropological research, we know that service work relies on service workers' knowledge, creativity, and use of their intellect. Workers' knowledge and efforts (Ocejo 2018) offers a predictive service even before the consumer can ask for what they want (Solomon 2016). Several elements in public dining — ranging from food, ambience, service at the table — predict what people *might* want, in service of their enjoyment. So in addition to manual effort, serving food and entertainment involves using one's hands *and* heads (Ocejo 2017).

Point of Sale (PoS) software company PetPooja are working on automating service workers' tasks to free their time so they can use their senses to attend to consumers and "focus on predictive things like which wine glass on the table is empty." At the cloud kitchen convention, food business owners complained about the challenge of finding the right service staff.

Entertaining and serving others is work done in both the food and hospitality industry and the media and entertainment industry. Due to this shared activity of being attentive to others and predicting what they might like, there is a channel between these two industries. Media entrepreneur Rishi Khiani, with investment from the NRAI, started up a job portal for hospitality staff called *kaam.com*.[144] Khiani's involvement in food and hospitality via a tech platform is interesting given his background in the media and entertainment industries. He founded UrbanEye Media, a marketing agency that was acquired via headed Web18 and went on to be the COO of Web 18, the digital arm of Network 18 and CEO of Times Internet.[145] With colleagues from Times, he co-founded Fork Media Group which owns travel and food companies that have a very popular social media presence like *Curly Tales* and *Mashable.*[146]

Restaurants and public eating institutions have long been venues that have curated and aggregated performance cultures ranging from jazz, cabaret, spoken word poetry, and comedy. Some singers in the Indian music scene and movies sang in public dining institutions and actors across the world have worked in the service industry.[147] Similarly, several chefs like Jiggs Kalra, Sanjeev Kapoor, Tarla Dalal, and Ranveer Brar have had close relationships with media and communications channels. These relationships have resulted in these chefs' appearances in newspaper columns like Kalra's *Platter Chatter*,[148] cookbooks, television shows like Kapoor's *Khana Khazana* that ran for 17 years,[149] reality TV shows like MasterChef, Zoravar Kalra's participation in dance reality show

[144] https://hospitality.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/hotels/the-platform-has-to-solve-not-just-the-problem-of-jobs-but-also-improve-quality-of-life/93631440. Accessed September 2022.
[145] https://about.me/rishikhiani. Accessed September 2022.
[146] https://www.afaqs.com/news/advertising/37376_former-times-group-employees-launch-fork-media. Accessed September 2022.
[147] https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2014/jul/23/I-am-a-Night-Club-Singer-and-I-Will-Always-Be-638981.html. Accessed September 2023.
[148] https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/jiggs-kalra-he-fed-his-curiosity-stirred-india-s-culinary-melting-pot-119060401240_1.html. Accessed September 2023.
[149] https://www.sanjeevkapoor.com/FoodFood-Shows/Sanjeev-Kapoor-Kitchen. Accessed September 2023.

Jhalak Dikhla Ja, and Brar's acting debut on *Modern Love Mumbai*, a web series on streaming platform Amazon Prime.[150] Given this proximity and participation in media and entertainment by famous food business owners, they have also developed friendships with actors. Pooja Dhingra, proprietor of Le15 Patisserie and her friendship with the movie actor Sonam Kapoor Ahuja have meant that Le15 shares retail space with Kapoor Ahuja's husband's clothing store in Bandra, Mumbai.[151]

Being a user of a food delivery platform is one of many media channels for food and hospitality businesses to serve consumers, alongside the platform offered by print, television, streaming platforms, and the Hindi movie industry detailed above. Platforms' aggregation occurs within these inter-industry dynamics. Food delivery platforms, especially Zomato, have taken the sensorial experiences and food's associations with leisure and entertainment seriously. It is no coincidence that Zomato owns ticketing platform *Insider,* one part of their "going out" business.[152] Even platforms' promotional communications are made by creative professionals, comedians, and the film industry, as analysed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis. On their app, Zomato introduced a "vibe check" section that enables restaurants to post short videos, a lot like Instagram stories. According to their website, they offer content creation services on behalf of restaurants by engaging freelancers.[153] A food blogger claimed that they engage their reviewer community to make this content[154] that restaurants posted would be reposted on their Zomato listings.

[150] https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/web-series/modern-love-mumbai-hansal-mehta-says-kiss-between-pratik-gandhi-and-ranveer-brar-was-deliberately-awkward-101653467765204.html. Accessed September 2023.
[151] https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/sonam-kapoor-anand-ahuja-bhane-mumbai/. Accessed September 2023.
[152] https://the-ken.com/story/artists-users-or-platforms-who-wins-in-the-zomato-vs-bookmyshow-fight/ Accessed September 2023.
[153] https://www.zomato.com/policies/vibe/ Accessed September 2024.
[154] https://socialmaharaj.com/2022/07/23/vibe-check-latest-feature-on-zomato/ Accessed September 2024.

This subsection has analysed how serving food involves entertaining others; serving is not only service labour or the chore of cooking. Perhaps in recognition of serving-as-entertaining, both the food and hospitality and media and entertainment industries have a long-standing relationship as briefly described above. At home too, people play host, entertain guests, and use platforms to engage with demands from members of the household, partners and so on. Therefore, the next subsection moves to the act of entertaining others like loved ones and guests by serving food via household kitchens.

4.5.2 *Bahu* as entrepreneur

This sub-section examines what Swiggy and Zomato's serving meals means for the gendered work of serving in households done by daughters-in-law or *bahus.* In 2008, anthropologist Harriss Solomon showed us how OilCo, the company that owns Saffola oil through their consumer ethnographies, learnt that women were decision makers at home. Women consumers were keen to make choices that would address husbands' health problems and so their ads spoke to women's "marital obligation" to manage their husband's health.

Thirteen years later, during my fieldwork, I found an ad for Gemini oil[155] that hooked women's care work not only to her husband's health but also her own ambitions. By buying Gemini oil, women consumers could find a way to make time to work outside the home. The ad was set in a multi-generational household in which a woman is rushing between the kitchen and dining room. She is repeatedly asked in Hindi "what have you cooked today?" and in this setting, her mother-in-law thinks to herself:

[155] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55TuL6mI1Rw. Accessed October 2024.

> *"What have you cooked today? I was caught up in answering this question in the past as you are caught up in asking the same question. I couldn't see past the kitchen in the past and today you can't see yourself outside the kitchen. Time has marched on but this question has not changed."* [156]

As she reminisces about how little things have changed, she sees a magazine report about a woman who went from being a "homemaker to entrepreneur." This spurs her to say: *So I'll ask you the question I never got asked. Beyond what have you cooked, I'll ask you, "daughter-in-law, what do you want to become?"*[157] The ad ends with suggesting that Gemini Oil believes in supporting women by helping them make time for their own ambitions outside the kitchen: "*We believe that your [women's] place is not only in the kitchen*."

In television (TV) soap operas between 2019-2020 this question of what women do with their time beyond gendered expectations of carework has been popular. The clearest example is the case of the Bengali show *Sreemoyee,* re-made in Marathi as A*ai kuthe kai karte! (What does mom even do!),* and then most popularly in Hindi as *Anupamaa*. Anupamaa, the titular character is a mother of four, has gone through two divorces, and turned her passion for dance and cooking into a livelihood. She even immigrated to the United States, based on recognition for her YouTube cooking videos, and worked in a restaurant. This show's popularity grew because of memes made by fans and their family members about the plot: women lip syncing to dialogues like "*duniya ka sabse bada rog, kya kahenge log" or (*the biggest ailment in the world is thinking "what will people say"*)*.

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[156] Original Hindi: "*aaj kya bana hai? Kal main iske jawab mein uljhi rahti thi,aaj tum isse puchne mein lagi rahti ho. Kal mujhe kitchen ke aage kuch dekh hi nahi tha aur aaj tum kitchen ke aage khudko dekh hi nahi paati ho. Waqt badal gaya par ye sawal nahi badla."*

[157] Original Hindi:
"*Toh jo sawal tumse nahi puchcha gaya woh mein tumse poochti hoon. Aaj kya bana gaya hai ke aagey, "bahu, aaj tum kya banna chhati ho?*"

Across ads and the TV shows described above, the figure of the *bahu* as entrepreneur shows how women navigate having to offer leisure and entertainment to the household and their own ambitions.

In my fieldwork with consumers, I found that women's individual ambition and enterprise are a means to deprioritise cooking and domestic duties if they came in the way of self-discovery and expression. An independent media professional told me that she resisted learning to cook because she thought it was a patriarchal expectation. However, once she started paying rent in Mumbai *and* had to hire a cook, she thought of cooking as a life skill that anyone who wants to be independent should know.

Young unmarried and married women in my sample use platforms as a bargaining chip with their families over the household division of labour. Ordering food online enabled them to make time for themselves to explore their interests. At the co-working space, I learnt from other young unmarried women that pursuing education or a career and financial independence were means to delay the familial pressure to get married and make time for oneself. Two young women between 20-25 years had started a marketing agency that had a turnover in a few crores. Several women who were already married "created content" on social media as a bargaining chip to free time from cooking or supervising cooks to have fun and explore their interests. They posted videos they filmed in office corridors, gyms, and in dance classes, often posting with their friends and co-workers. Those who did not have a job or had retired were pursuing their hobbies like singing, dancing, and having a cook was the norm.

This subsection has discussed how ordering food via Swiggy and Zomato did not overhaul gendered expectations of serving food at home. However, ordering in might seem to aid women's interests in deprioritising cooking and domestic duties that find representation in popular culture through ads and soap operas. This leads to emic association between ordering in and women's initiative, ambition, and enterprise. Buying food obviously requires money but what it enables, namely, being enterprising and ambitious, is not analysed simply as a triumph of neoliberal discourse and money making. Buying food seems to be bound up with women's efforts to seek time for exploration and fun and enables them to dodge gendered expectations.

4.5.3 Money and payment systems

This sub-section brings attention to the role of money and payment systems platform users' serving and being served via Swiggy and Zomato. In my fieldwork, QR codes — emblems of digital payments — were on the street on vendors' carts, behind auto-rickshaws, and in neighbourhood stores. On Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces in people's palms, united payments interface (UPI) was an option to pay. Out of India's 780 million internet users, 350 million have adopted digital payments[158] which enable instant debit from consumers to platforms like Swiggy and Zomato. The highest volume of UPI payments is made for purchases of groceries, fast food, and in restaurants.[159]

Swiggy and Zomato participate in the platformization of payments as they allow consumers to pay business users through digital payments like UPI but they also increasingly offer different financial

[158] https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-has-350-mn-digital-payment-users-count-set-to-double-by-2030-report-122121400405_1.html. Accessed October 2024.
[159] https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/data-shows-how-indians-use-upi-in-daily-life-from-groceries-to-debt-payments-13444577.html. Accessed October 2025.

services to their users. These services range from credit to logistics workers and buy now pay later (BNPL).[160] Thinking of these offers as a case of just one platform's expansion would be missing the woods for the trees because a wider platformization of banking is underway.

The central bank and public sector banks co-own payment infrastructure UPI with private banks. In 2016, the central government announced demonetisation to curb "black money" which resulted in existing currency notes of 500 and 1000 rupees becoming illegal tender. At the same time, they launched a new 2000 rupee note and a digital payments platform called United Payments Interface (UPI). The Indian state claims digital payment infrastructures like UPI as part of India Stack[161] are creating a "public good." As these infrastructures bring more people into the formal economy and enhance financial inclusion. The state owns UPI through the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), a "not-for-profit" company aiming to provide banking infrastructure for retail payments and create a cashless economy. Its shareholders are private and public sector banks, including the Central Bank or the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). It is worth noting that the NPCI, a non-profit, was one of India's most profitable fintech companies. [162] Given this wider platformization of payment systems, the modality of payments chosen by users is crucial for platforms.

[160] BNPL services enable purchase by deferring payment in a predetermined number of instalments. As lending service providers (LSPs) BNPL services are financed through various sources. Therefore, BNPL companies differ from banks and NBFCs that offer credit card and Equated Monthly Instalments (EMIs) from one financier (Dvara 2022).
In 2022, Swiggy and Zomato start offering BNPL themselves: https://www.livemint.com/technology/tech-news/virtual-credit-cards-buy-now-pay-later-for-those-with-no-credit-lines-1562744813721.html. Accessed October 2024.
[161] It is the moniker used to refer to the Indian state's efforts to build a "digital public infrastructure" with private capital. India stack includes digital identity system Aadhaar, payments systems like United Payments Interface (UPI) that aim to create a cashless economy and a paperless state through digital storage offered by DigiLocker.
[162] https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/specials/current-account/is-npci-ready-to-shed-its-not-for-profit-tag/article67544657.ece. Accessed October 2024.

Cash on delivery (CoD) is a popular mode of payment that enables platform expansion, yet it creates risks and costs. After selecting CoD, consumers can cancel or refuse to pay, logistics workers can get mugged, or they can pocket the money. In Mumbai, a delivery worker and unionist I knew from 2019 explained to me that platforms had partnered with local grocery stores that served as cash collection points. These collection points received money from delivery workers on behalf of the platform. Platforms did not do an in-person due diligence when these stores signed up which resulted in platforms being defrauded by fly by night operators.

As a result of these risks, when users select CoD as a mode of payment, most e-commerce platforms have a maximum purchase limit (MPL) generated by a trust and security (TnS) system that caps the amount up to which cash as a mode of payment will be accepted. This TnS system generally uses information about location such as city or zipcode to filter consumers. Swiggy's data scientists identified the need for a more accurate MPL based on past behaviour. In response, they built DyCoD, an algorithm that assessed risk in setting CoD limits more dynamically rather than solely relying on location. The literature review in their paper explained that due to a paucity of literature on MPL, they engaged with computer science literature on credit scores and propensity modelling or how the study of the likelihood of behaviour from groups of consumers (Deep et al 2023).

Cash increases risks for platforms but cashless digital payments mean new risks for consumers due to the lack of a dispute resolution mechanism in digital transactions.[163] In a webinar organised by the IAMAI, Department of Consumer Affairs, and Invest India, Adv Deshpande of the

[163] https://dci.mit.edu/cbdc-fi-1. Accessed January 2023.

consumer organisation MGP brought attention to risks, vulnerability, and technology gaps in online payments alongside advantages and convenience. He critiqued companies' claims of a lower percentage of errors by bringing attention to how even one failure in a billion successful transactions was a "100% loss for one person. Adv Deshpande stressed on the importance of thinking about regulation and protection by looking at the RBI, not only the OECD and World Bank. The RBI had issued 2 major circulars: one addressed to banks in 2019, and another one for non-bank [pre-paid payment] PPI issuers which take care of consumer protection on paper. However, he detailed the "practical difficulties" in terms of their implementation. While the circulars offer zero liability protection to consumers in cases of fraud being reported within three days of its occurrence, banks and non-banks often breach their obligations.

Banks' disregard of RBI regulations around digital payments gives rise to prolonged disputes that languish in consumer court. In the webinar, Adv Deshpande appealed to the industry representatives "to not force the consumer to go to the consumer court" because the ground reality is that courts have "failed in their mandate of giving justice in 3-5 months, it takes 3-5 years." He then proposed a "speedy, transparent, effective dispute resolution mechanism" that was better for both businesses *and* users. This he remarked, would be in the form of a conciliation bench, similar to the MGP's work in the context of the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act (RERA) with representation from industry and consumers organisations.

This subsection has analysed how the act of making payments enables food to move from businesses, through delivery workers, before finally reaching households. Activities of serving and being served are linked by platform users' cash or digital transactions. Swiggy and Zomato prefer

that consumers choose digital payments as cash-based transactions are riskier for platforms. However, for all users, disputes arising from digital payments threaten to create grievances that cannot be resolved straightforwardly. Swiggy and Zomato's push away from cash and diversification into financial services can be analysed within a wider platformization of banking. In this wider process, the state has participated in platforms' making a market stack through non-profit "ventures" with industry like the NPCI that built UPI or Invest India that gathered fundraising for national development via a cashless economy.

4.6 Discussion: Cooking, eating, and serving in platformization

In this section, I will discuss the implications of my findings about how domestic and commercial cooking and serving that surround Swiggy and Zomato. So far, platform mediation has been analysed as leading to a rearrangement in users' practices and infrastructures, rather than analysing platforms' mediatory work as predatory inclusion.

It is insufficient to suggest that Swiggy and Zomato have marketized cooking, eating, and serving as these practices and infrastructures have been mediated via the market prior to platforms. Instead of marketization, I will reflect on how platforms stack a multitude of preexisting forms of economisation (Çalışkan, Callon, and MacKenzie 2025). Economisation is at once an empirical and analytical process of making people and things 'economic,' and marketisation is one form of it (Çalışkan and Callon 2009).

Through my findings, I have studied how Swiggy and Zomato's making of a market stack involve economisation of commercial and domestic cooking practices and processes, cooperatives,

payment systems co-owned by the state, and non-market exchanges. Reframing marketization as economisation enabled me to examine people's platform use in various capacities. Using platforms to buy and sell food involves our hands or what we do, *and* our heads or how we think as food businesses (individually and as an industry) and consumers (individually, as households, and as civic minded collectives).

Economisation of cooking occurs in commercial kitchens, through a fragmentation of the production process of cooking, that resembles the fragmentation of production process in offices due to scale enabled by cloud computing (Narayan 2022). In commercial kitchens, this fragmentation began with QSRs that 'automated' cooking via standardising, and better inventory management. Software as a service (SaaS) and kitchen as a service (KaaS) platformise older convenience technology by streamlining consumer insight and branding. Therefore, businesses, whether they are Swiggy and Zomato users or not, rely on platforms for inventory management, order flows, menu, and payments. These services are located outside of Swiggy and Zomato but they offer the convenience of coordinating and scheduling everyday tasks across platforms and actions that enable businesses to sell smoothly via Swiggy and Zomato.

Consumers — individually and collectively as households and as the MGP — wrestle with the economisation of cooking and engineering efficiency through convenience foods. Especially after 2020, the Godrej Trends Report identified that people were seeking convenience in home cooking because of pandemic induced fatigue. So "ready-to-cook, ready-to-eat and everything in between to support new work-life systems" would work. By 2022, the report sensed a *convenience versus*

consciousness conundrum as people were keen to go beyond seeking convenience so food businesses and professionals could bring "*desi* vegetables back."

Platforms' making of a market stack comprising commercial and household cooking also included its concomitant process of *serving* food. Economising service was less straightforward as efficiency in cooking does not offer a leisurely commensality (Warde 1999). The limits to engineering efficiency via convenience technologies for commercial kitchens are reached if we consider that how food is served and experienced is of consequence. Leisure and entertainment are crucial experiential aspects of service work in commercial settings. The connections between hospitality venues and live performance cultures, and chefs' relationships to media print, TV, streaming platforms and so on point to relationships between the media and entertainment and food and hospitality industries.

Finally, this chapter highlighted how transactions and modalities of payments are practices that link businesses and households. This does not seem to be simply an Indian phenomenon. Recent scholarship from outside India has highlighted the centrality of payments in enabling platformization and two instances can be recounted. The first instance is the case of digital payments in Japan and how the retail network of convenience storeswas crucial in enabling digital payments prior to platforms (Steinberg 2025). The second instance is of how cashless transactions are shaping people's access to money *beyond* wages through credit, gifts, cashbacks, and buy now pay later services (BNPL)[164] (Evans and Gregson 2023. Swiggy and Zomato began hosting BNPL

[164] BNPL services enable purchase by deferring payment in a predetermined number of instalments. As lending service providers (LSPs) BNPL services differ from credit card and Equated Monthly Instalments (EMIs). They are financed through various sources, rather than one financier as in the case of banks and NBFCs. BNPL companies are lending service providers (LSPs) who

services Simpl and LazyPay in 2019 and by 2022, Zomato and Swiggy offered their own wallets and BNPL services.[165] The RBI has estimated BNPL offerings to form 37% of all bank-lending and 11.9% of lending from Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs) (RBI, 2021).

Another underestimated terrain of action even beyond the MGP is the collective and civic convictions of being platform users who buy online. One instance of this is the civil society action around digital payments. A group of "software developers" who "have the privilege to understand and study these systems/standards and simplify them", formed the Cashless Consumer Collective. Their advocacy online has repeatedly highlighted that cashlessness is "less about money, more about data."[166]

4.7 Conclusion: Tethering care work and leisure through commercial and domestic kitchens

It would be insufficient to conclude this chapter by suggesting that platforms mediate predatory inclusion or marketisation. This kind of conclusion would be insufficient because the Godrej Trends report, right at the start of this chapter, is as an example of how domestic cooking relies on several businesses since as consumers, we buy ingredients, furniture, and appliances to cook at home. For this reason, the previous section discussed the advantages of analysing platformization in terms of how various forms of economisation of cooking, eating, and serving are stacked. So, what is the conclusion?

mediate between banks, merchants, and buyers. They claim to offer credit to those outside the banking system and reduce costs of lending. However, preliminary examinations have found unpredictable monetary costs for merchants and buyers(Research 2022).

[165] https://www.livemint.com/technology/tech-news/virtual-credit-cards-buy-now-pay-later-for-those-with-no-credit-lines-1562744813721.html. Accessed October 2023.

[166] https://medium.com/cashlessconsumer/cashlessconsumer-why-a689bec858d1. Accessed October 2023.

The three findings sections in this chapter have analysed how platforms' mediatory work exists with rearrangements in the care *work* of cooking both commercially and domestically. These rearrangements include concomitant practices of eating and serving (RQ 2.2). Commercial and domestic kitchens are both sites through which care work and leisure get tethered to Swiggy and Zomato's mediation between users.

Commercial cooking was analysed to be reliant on the use of preexisting convenience technologies outside food delivery platforms that enable businesses to fulfil online orders from Swiggy and Zomato. These technologies range from ingredients to mechanisation of activities like stirring and tossing. Studying these specifics situated cloud kitchens as successors of quick service restaurants and called attention to the business fundamentals of cooking. Food businesses grapple with identifying how they could build consumer habits of ordering in without relying on discounting and burning cash. At the level of an industry, the NRAI attempt to mediate competition by suggesting norms of starting up and raising funds. These norms of raising money circumvent what the NRAI referred to as a "distasteful" path to scale created by Swiggy, Zomato, and VCs that compel burning investors' cash by "buying revenue" through discounts and offers rather than earning revenue by improving the quality of food.

Consumers' habits of ordering in are part of their arrangements of and concerns with home cooking and eating. Cooking is perceived by many households to be harmful due to the purchase of ingredients and vessels from the market. Therefore, the decision to order from Swiggy and Zomato is part of these ongoing efforts to minimise harm; balance maximising time and effort in cooking

at home; as well as communicating affection and care for others. Domestic consumption, be it through ordering in or buying to cook at home, is informed by people's activities as workers. The case of the MGP is useful to think about how wider civic concerns are also at stake in household consumption.

Finally, platform users' serving food and being served food involve considerations of leisure, entertainment, money, and payments in addition to service labour and paid or unpaid domestic labour. Restaurants and cafes are run on principles of entertainment and have even become incubators for the performing arts. At home, the figure of the *bahu* as entrepreneur is useful to track how women deprioritise cooking to negotiate gendered expectations from them. This negotiation means that women are purchasing as a means to make time for their own interests, it does not mean an overhaul of gender norms or a complete disinterest in cooking. As a collective of consumers and households, the MGP bring attention to the profit motive of the market by raising consciousness around people's choices of vessels, salt, sugar, oil and the mediation of digital payments by platforms.

Therefore, the three sections together expand the meaning of tethered carework (Ticona 2022) to include tethered leisure, recreation, or entertainment. Examining rearrangements of carework *and* leisure enables studying how users compose their experiences across *surrounding platforms* (inventory management; order flow management; payments), *activities*, (ordering; delivering; paying), and *multi-scalar processes* (business habits created by VCs of buying revenue by burning cash; the platformization of banking and payments; the gendered division of labour).

In the next chapter, I will examine what buying and selling via Swiggy and Zomato means for routines and habits at various levels: homes, workplaces, food businesses, and amongst investors.

Chapter 5: Making routine meals with platforms

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5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter, chapter 4, queried the implications of the platformization of cooking, eating, and serving. In this chapter, I will examine what Swiggy and Zomato's aggregation means for the schedules, rhythms, habits, and routines of platforms' consumer and business users (RQ 2.3). I adopt a broad scholarly focus to map existing demands on people's time like the approach adopted in the three other chapters that precede this one.

I will attend to demands on users' time from various quarters outside of Swiggy and Zomato. These demands on time emerge from people's livelihood activities, unpaid care work at home, spending

time with friends, leisure, and commuting. In Mumbai, the site of my fieldwork, commuting takes up a large part of an average person's day. People living in Mumbai have some of the longest commutes compared to other cities and towns in India.[167] Over 10 million commuters on the Central and Western train lines[168] including myself, use a free app called 'M-indicator' (figure 16). The app has aggregated the schedules of various forms of public transport such as local trains, buses, metros, and ferries and allows users to post real time updates such as any changes in the platform numbers of trains.[169]



Figure 16: Author's watercolour illustration of M-indicator.

The example of M-indicator can illustrate how people compose daily routines and habits by addressing demands across various scales. Even in the seemingly humble act of commuting, people

[167] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/surtis-commute-the-least-mumbaikars-most-study/articleshow/65096432.cms. Accessed November 2025.
[168] https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/2015-heroes/city-improvement/sachin-teke-easing-travel-and-time/mumbaihero/49262642.cms. Accessed December 2024.
[169] In addition to this, there are job postings, a map, information about auto and cab fares and listings of exhibitions, plays, penalties for traffic and railway offences to arm commuters with information should they run into authorities like traffic policemen or ticketcheckers (TCs). There's also a section that helps "explore the city" through lists of popular places, shopping, food and drink and so on.

navigate demands on their time placed by public transport systems, workplaces, households, and friends. M-indicator was started in the 2010s, by Sachin Teke, an IT engineer who took Mumbai's notoriously overcrowded local train from his home in Nerul to his office in Seepz. During his approximately 30 kms long commute, he saw timetables being sold and thought it would be useful to bring these onto mobile phones.

In the same year that Teke started M-indicator, in London, another tech worker, Azmat Yusuf started a transport tracking app named Citymapper due to his own commuting woes. Yusuf used the data that the Greater London Authority (GLA) had offered for entrepreneurship (Taveman 2011) whereas in the case of M-indicator, Teke digitized the data about transport schedules himself. People assumed that M-indicator was a government initiative[170] it was used to make announcements regarding changes in train schedules due to routine maintenance and care work for trains on Sundays, commonly referred to as mega blocks. However, the state was only using the app, and Teke was the entrepreneur who turned his dissatisfaction with his IT job — no revisions in salary and being supervised by unsupportive managers — into building a company called 'Mobond.' The aim was to be "bonding the mob," by building useful software[171] that he was able to keep free, as he drew revenue from ads using Google's Ad Mob, a platform to monetise apps. Both M-indicator and Citymapper were enabled by individuals who leveraged economic-political changes at work, advertising systems, and changes in city planning.

Therefore, the habitual use of M-indicator and Citymapper are enabled and sustained by the reality of having to *switch between activities and hold together demands* from work and home and

[170] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sy9Clv_900. Accessed December 2024.
[171] http://m-indicator.mobond.com/desktop/index.html#about. Accessed December 2024.

livelihood and leisure; habit is not something platforms could simply enforce through clever design. The emergence of both these apps offers a useful insight about how routine making, be it of commuting or making meals, occurs at the micro level of the everyday involves people's navigation of macroeconomic-political realities. In this micro navigation of macro realities, platforms like Swiggy and Zomato are one of many entities. Therefore, this chapter will examine how platform users' schedules, routines, and habits from work, commuting, leisure and their lives outside of Swiggy and Zomato might contribute to making platform use a viable option.

Further in this chapter, I will review the literature on habitual and routine meal making. Then, I will detail my findings about how decisions about ordering food are made in between demands from employers and acts of commuting with an eye to balancing work-life and alternating between slowing down and speeding up. I will discuss the implications of these findings and close by offering a conclusion.

5.2 Literature review: platform use in habitual and routine meal making

This section will review (1) pre-platform scholarship on how temporal demands from work shape eating and consumption in order to contribute to (2) platform studies literature on how platforms influence users' habits and routine. The major contribution of this chapter is therefore, to draw insights from pre-platform scholarship and apply them to understandings of habit and routine in platform studies. My empirical material about platforms contributes to pre-platform scholarship since this research has not reckoned with empirical developments posed by platforms on how temporal demands from work shape eating and consumption.

(1) *Pre-platform scholarship on how temporal demands from work shape eating and consumption* has two major approaches. The first approach directs scholarly attention to the notion of "being on employers' time" by arguing that employers' interventions in work**,** food, and leisure aim to maximise workers' productivity. Most strikingly, the popularity of watches and clocks during industrial production has been analysed as one that created demarcations of time between work and leisure (Thompson 1967). Another instance is that of how employers encouraged tea and coffee at break times (Sedgewick 2020) and as substitutes to alcohol in leisurely interactions outside work (Menon 2015).

This has established a link between what it means to be on employers' time and workplaces and households' habits and routines of eating and drinking. Commuting between home and work led employers to offer office workers meals or just spaces such as canteens at work. In contemporary Mumbai, several workers rely on "technology of purity" or home cooked food delivery service of the *dabbawallahs.* Those less concerned about purity pick up snacks from street vendors dotted along streets leading to railway stations or *khau gullies* (eat streets) (Kuroda 2018). In North Mumbai, clusters of hawkers offer various snacks to those working the night shift at BPO/ITeS offices (Patel 2010). Informal workers have historically eaten at women-run boarding houses or *khanavals* that have offered subsidised food (Abbott 1993; Lalvani 2023; Roncaglia 2013). In this way, existing scholarship has shown how temporal demands of paid work have wide implications as they shape unpaid work of arranging meals at home or through the market. Employers' time has increasingly become difficult to demarcate from one's own time with the fragmentation of the production process and flexible work (Graeber 2019).

Some scholars have noted how people struggle to find time to do unpaid care work like cooking and cleaning for themselves and their families due to the blurred boundaries between work and life. This difficulty manifests in simple things like not having the time to cook healthy food. To balance work-life, Robert Rhinehart, a tech worker, started Complete Foods (CF), a meal replacing micro and macronutrient powder. This "edible data driven solution" to everyday food problems is popular among Silicon Valley tech workers (Markéta Dolejšová 2020). Furthermore, remote working arrangements have meant that connectivity carries expectations of unpaid care from homes, not only from employers (Ladner 2009; Ticona 2022). Expectations of care work from home often manifest as a home-work conflict regarding meal times since these require synchronisation between members of the household and with work (Ladner 2009).

I extend the literature cited above by examining how consumers' domestic time for care in terms of food habits are surrounded by demands from workplaces and commuting between home and work. These dynamics are outside platforms, yet they surround platform use and have a bearing on it. Additionally, I map the time-pressure created by platforms for the households of the ad and marketing creative professionals who make timely communications for platforms' promotions. We already know that food delivery platforms create a rush for food delivery workers but our examination to managerial workers shows us what working platforms means for different kinds of workers and their experiences as households. What does writing timely push notifications and social media content on platforms' behalf mean for the time that creative workers have to care for themselves and their loved ones?

The *second approach in pre-platform scholarship* adopts a practice-oriented and material culture informed view. In this view, habits and routines are defined as activities that involve balancing multiple scales — the everyday and institutional, households and industries, and the space *between* structure and agency. In other words, people's habits and what they do are not simply a result of external enforcements such as employers' attempts to maximise productivity, or heroic individual decisions. Informed by anthropologists Alfred Gell and Sidney Mintz, scholars studying individual habits acknowledge that daily life is a struggle about what things become routine (Shove, Trentmann, and Wilk 2009). Being habituated involves being attentive *and* being inattentive, as it is an "interplay between internally produced rhythms, the strains resulting from coordination between practices themselves, and associated pressures and opportunities for temporal change arising from technologies and social agencies" (Wilk 2009).

This multi-scalar definition of habit enables scholars to appreciate how consumption, through the use of objects, *makes time* and is not only a drain. For instance, sociologists Alan Warde and Elizabeth Shove identified how flexible working and informalisation of social life in industrialised countries in the 1990s led to a deroutinisation of life. Deroutinisation refers to the difficulty of finding continuous blocks of time (Warde, Shove, and Southerton 1998). In this context, convenience technologies like email and convenient objects such as microwaves, freezers, and refrigerators, enable people to *shift* time. Shifting time meant people could change the sequence of tasks when using these devices to be able to make continuous blocks of time available, not simply saving time or labour (Warde 1999). Informed by this practice oriented, material culture informed approach to time and consumption, I will analyse how Swiggy and Zomato's users balance multiple scales through their use of platforms in reordering their routines and habits.

The findings in this chapter will also examine how platforms like Swiggy and Zomato tether leisure, in addition to care work. Studying how platforms tether leisure means analysing how *people use platforms to shift time* and *balance demands* on their time emerge from work, family, interpersonal relationships, and individual interests. These demands on time are multi-scalar: at an individual level (consumer/business) and group level (household/industry) and so the findings in this chapter examine how people act in their capacities as individuals and as groups.

Around the same time as this understanding of deroutinisation emerged from sociology, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was fielding a similar question: what is the best way for individuals to use continuous blocks of time? (Hong 2022) He identified 'flow' as a state of being able to work smoothly without experiencing either anxiety or boredom. To be in a flow state, work has to be challenging enough to not be boring and not so challenging that it makes you anxious. The flow state is also a coveted feeling state in start-up circles that diagnoses people's inability to work productively *and* offers a framework to self-manage (Ladner 2009).

The findings in this chapter will bring the literature on flow cited above upto, speed with the empirical development of how individual consumers find flow in the use of food delivery platforms and other platforms to shift time and attention. Shifting time and attention aims at finding balance between work and life and family and self as people navigate feelings of boredom, anxiety, and laziness over the course of a week. Furthermore, I will examine what flowing means for coordinating and syncing with others. One instance is considering how businesses reflect on the

impact of platforms on their own habits as individual firms or enterprises, as an industry, and on consumers' expectations from them.

(2) *Platform studies literature on users' habits and routines* is dominated by discussions on gamification or behavioural interventions that addict users and programme habits (Zuboff 2019**).** Platform scholarship has viewed habits of consumption via platforms as a result of platforms' squeezing delivery workers' time (Healy, Pekarek, and Vromen 2020; Lalvani 2021; Stark and Levy 2018). Parallel to consuming, selling via setting up virtual shop fronts on platforms is studied in two major ways. One, in terms of what it means for making consumption "unconscious" by retaining consumers' focus on their consumption while keeping from them the reality of the implications of their consumption (Hill 2020). Two, virtual shopfronts have been studied in terms of how they lead to a change in the use of urban space — away from retail and towards storage in dark stores and cloud kitchens (Shapiro 2022).

In contrast to the two approaches in pre-platform scholarship reviewed above, the understanding of habits and routines as being located in between work and home is not a popular approach in platform scholarship. Having stated that, a few platform scholars have studied platform use in people's existing habits, routines, schedules, and rhythms of life. From the case of consumers of food delivery platforms in Australia, we have learnt that habit making is bound up with people's dissatisfaction with using smartphones and screens, work-life, the life stage they find themselves in and so on (Bissell 2020). Such an empirically grounded examination of platform or tech use more generally is emerging, and it has taken scholars beyond Big Critiques of Big Tech (Burgess et al. 2022). In between these two poles, is emerging research with user experience and interaction

designers who use behavioural interventions. The aim of these interventions is to offer useful software solutions that users cannot do without; some designers do not simply seek to hook or addict users but rather attempt to build software based on understanding what people need and might use in the long term (Doyuran 2024).

Furthermore, it is not the case that any one platform can influence behaviour but people's computational experience is *distributed across* different apps. How users behave emerges from their experiences as owners of phones, and not from any one app (Dourish 2021). Cumulatively, different apps like instant payments and instant delivery form a logistical surround that people inhabit. In this setting, convenience is a demand that is placed on consumers and is not simply an ease (Neves and Steinberg 2024)**.**

I contribute to this emergent stream in platform studies by examining how individuals, businesses, and industries pace platforms and the temporal demands of convenience through their use. I will detail how users tinker with their habits as individuals, households, businesses, and industries to influence the pace and direction of their lives.

Even though my 'focus' are Swiggy and Zomato, I examine what how consumers and businesses toggle i.e., switch between and hold together livelihood activities, care, and consumption. In other words, I will study what users do before, after, and around those two platforms: how do consumers in households and neighbourhoods collectively reflect on questions of habit and repetition in terms of meal arrangement and tinker with the pace of their lives? What does selling food via platforms

do to business habits? What habits do platforms as businesses need to adopt to pace their operations with investors' expectations of return?

The findings in this chapter examine how Swiggy and Zomato influence the schedules, rhythms, habits, and routines of commercial food establishments and households (RQ 2.3). They draw from (1) my digital ethnography and (2) in-person qualitative and ethnographic fieldwork with platform users in Mumbai.

5.3 Findings: Food between domestic time, employers' time, and leisure

This section surrounds Swiggy and Zomato by the demands that consumers' livelihoods make on their habits and routines of provisioning meals. Eating and consumption of food via platforms are imprinted by three kinds of everyday routines — firstly, from the workplace (5.4.1). Secondly, from commuting between home and work (5.4.2). Thirdly, timely promotional flows that consumers receive reminding them to order food. The final sub-section asks: what does making routine and temporally sensitive flows on behalf of platforms means for creative workers' work-life balance? (5.4.3)

5.3.1 Food in offices

On my first few days at the co-working space, where I did fieldwork in to meet consumers-at-work making their livelihood, I was nudged by a co-worker sitting opposite me to go pick up my free juice. Every summer afternoon, an iced tub of RAW pressery juices would be brought out after 1600h. Over the course of 9 months, I witnessed several food and wellness companies offered free goodies laid out in the pantry. There were also pop-ups of food businesses that sold cooked food,

almond milk, or cooking aids like zipper bags, oil-free cooking sheets and foils etc. The wellness and networking events organised by the co-working space involved food too: a truffle making workshop, *roohafzah*[172] workshop around Eid, and so on.

In addition to the rotation of food-led breaks described above, there were some relatively permanent fixtures. One was the Big Basket Instant vending machines, stocked with largely dry snacks like chips, biscuits, bars of chocolate, salted almonds and cup noodles. There was a *chai* counter, built like a street vendor's stall, in one corner of the office. They served freshly brewed, free tea, using between 16-25 kgs of milk and 7 kgs of lime, in the famous cutting chai glasses that are sized like alcohol shot glasses.

During lunch time at the co-working space when people were eating packed lunch from home, arranging meals at work was a subject that came up often, alongside questions about setting wages for cooks. These discussions had led to suggestions and complaints to the managers at the co-working space to offer lunch, resulting in a vendor being hired to sell packed lunches. Other than this arrangement, a start-up staffed largely by young, single male migrants who lived without family had set up a *dabba* delivery service from a home cook.

Even those whose work involved working from different locations, with clients directly — be it auditors or a classical musician — had to navigate clients' pampering them with food. A classical musician explained to me how her hosts generally offered rich foods like *pooris* and *gulab jamuns* to express their appreciation and gratitude for her singing. When I met her over lunch, she said she

[172] *Roohafzah* is a popular rose flavoured sweet drink often mixed with milk or water.

would eat only one *roti* and a legume salad so that she is able to eat the food she would be offered at the end of her performance later that evening. Similarly, the chartered accountant (CA) who audited big firms and had to work out of their offices, explained how clients asked her about her favourite foods, making it very difficult for her to exercise restraint. She knew some things were 'bad' for her but since she was asked what she wanted, she would request for those foods anyway.

This young CA told me that "every job has a lifestyle," so a range of eating options canteens, vending machines, restaurants, and habits around commuting, socialising which bled into life outside work. She was the first CA in her family and did not know about the lifestyle this job comes with, she only knew it was "good money." Actually, working the job made her feel her body was "rusty" because she had no time for dance, her hair greyed, and fell more than before. The CA explained that she quit *before* she got into the cycle of getting married and having children, which would have trapped her. I sat with her in the residential complex she grew up with her neighbourhood friend, an engineer who was also in his mid-20s.

Both these friends had quit their management consulting jobs to "pursue a career that involved a better life." When we met, the CA was teaching yoga online and ran a popular Instagram account. Similarly, her engineer friend had quit to pivot to a career in marketing. In his free time and with his friends' encouragement, he would repost Swiggy and Zomato's push notifications with his own one liners. Growing up in a residential complex for scientists that had labs and residences within the same perimeter, my interlocutors had seen their parents go to work a few buildings away from their homes. As a result of this, they had a shared understanding of how a career could shape a

better life, which meant better sleep schedules, not having to rush to work, and being surrounded by food and friendships that enabled these habits.

In the everyday, quitting these workplaces meant that these young people did not have what they identified as an unhealthy routine of congregating around and drawing energy from coffee machines and cigarette breaks across the working day and alcohol during leisure time. Even at the co-working space, my co-workers explained that they associated drinking tea and coffee with being at work — *officewallah vibe.* Several people named specific brands of coffee because most offices had vending machines from coffee shops like Cafe Coffee Day, FMCG company Nestle's Nescafe, or Kaapi and coffee ground and beans from Blue Tokai etc. The two young professionals who had quit their consulting jobs explained that they had noticed poor food habits amongst colleagues who were "killing themselves," by refusing to eat and being addicted to coffee and cigarettes because of the stress of work:

> "When we used to give him lunch, he used to give it to someone else, he never had food also. So that's how he was ruining himself because that's what kept their brains working and reduced their stress levels."

The two professions were teetotallers who also did not smoke. Even though their colleagues might not treat them differently or pressure them, these two professionals felt like they would not be able to participate in the fun. The CA told me how she felt a bit like Rachel from the sitcom FRIENDS when Rachel tries smoking to impress her boss.

On top of stress from work, how offices offered specific foods like coffee, cupcakes, biscuits, and co-workers' own habits, were all leading protagonists in the playing out of temptations at the workplace. Office buildings either had multiple restaurants or like the offices I was immersed in,

were near shopping malls with food courts, cafes, and restaurants. Some offices had canteens and pantries, which had free and purchasable snacks like cupcakes, pastries, chocolates, "everything sugar and *maida* (refined flour)." It was largely agreed upon that these snacks were unhealthy because they made you sleepy, fat, and addicted. In addition to foods inviting you, others' presence and habits played a role. Two 20-year-olds, in their first job explained to me that never ate rice with a spoon or used a fork at home but at the office, in the presence of colleagues, they felt the need to be formal. A young marketing professional told me how her boss is a "big foodie even though he's on a diet" and he takes the team out to lunch even if they have their *dabbas.*

Platforms recognise that their consumers' livelihoods imprint the rhythms, routines, and schedules of meal arrangement and have even attempted to find a business for themselves in this. After I completed my fieldwork, both Swiggy and Zomato offered their food delivery by emphasising it as a billing solution to corporations that have to go through the hassle of reimbursing their employees' meals. Zomato for Enterprise (2024) enabled employees to bill their meals directly to their employers, reducing the hassle around reimbursements.[173] Similalry, in August 2025, Swiggy launched *DeskEats* which is available in techparks, business centres, and corporate complexes. They offer "stress munchies," and "one-handed grabbies" that people can eat at their desks. DeskEats also enables employers to offer Swiggy coupons and/discounts as incentives and/as their wellness offerings.[174]

[173] https://inc42.com/buzz/zomato-unveils-zomato-for-enterprise-to-ease-corporate-food-expense-management/. . Accessed September 2025.
[174] https://inc42.com/buzz/swiggy-launches-deskeats-to-tap-office-goers-in-30-cities/. Accessed September 2025.

This subsection has dotted a field of multifarious food-related demands on Swiggy and Zomato's consumers from their livelihood making activities. These demands ranged from workplaces' and clients' organisation of snacks and meals to facilitate break time, co-workers' personal habits, and the rhythms of stress at work. The aim here has been to extend scholarly attention to platform users' livelihood-making activities that occur outside the moment of purchase but are crucial as they inform people's buying behaviour and decisions, especially that of food.

5.3.2 Food in commute: hawkers, socio-religious rhythms, and transport systems

This subsection moves from sites of work described above to commuting or the process of getting to work. It will continue to detail the demands on consumers' time from their livelihood.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most households in my sample were commuting less to the office because of hybrid work arrangements and few were exclusively working from home. The absence of co-workers or spaces like the canteen as a change in routine distorted people's experience of mealtimes and breaks. It made it easier for people to skip meals or breaks. Additionally, many people reported extended working hours at least initially.

When I was commuting to the co-working space from home, a new metro line was constructed with a stop in walking distance from my housing colony. Outside this exit, earlier there was only a congregation of cigarette shops and pan stores given that there were only hardware and tiling shops around the area. Soon after the foot over bridge was constructed and started to be used, a hawker selling *bhel* (popular puffed rice snack) had popped up right outside it. He was followed by hawkers selling *anda bhurji* or scrambled eggs, spiced with turmeric, chillies, sandwiches etc.

As described in chapter 3, hawkers have developed a more mobile form of street vending to serve commuters who travel by road and are stuck in traffic and those who travel by train.

In my daily commute between one of my fieldwork sites, the co-working space, and home, I crossed a Sai Baba temple. The temple had kept a board outside its gates that invited devotees to make donations of various ingredients like 35 kgs rice, 35 kgs of flour, 20 kgs sugar, 20 kgs potatoes etc (figure 17). Using those ingredients, the temple would cook and serve free meals in the community feeding event of the *bhandara* every Thursday, which is considered to be "Sai Baba's" day. Deciding what to eat is also based on socio-religious rhythms created by religious calendars and their temporalities that attribute both menus *and* moods to days, weeks and months. These include cycles of fasting-feasting to appease Gods and to regulate health and dispositions. During the week, one deity represents a particular day in the week — Monday is Lord Shiva's day, Tuesday is Lord Hanuman's day and so on. This means people decide menus — especially if meat and alcohol are consumed — based on the day of the week (Kuroda 2017). *Shraavan, mohorram, lent,* Jainism (*paryushan*) are solemn periods marked by moods of auspiciousness and mourning respectively.



Figure 17: Author's photograph of a board listing the items required in the *bhandara,* outside the Sai Baba temple.

Platforms too found commuters through ads in commuting infrastructures. The backs of auto rickshaws carried ads for Swiggy and Zomato's Blinkit. As I took the newly constructed metro home from fieldwork, I saw that the entire train was wrapped with ads for Meta's Creator Day, and ads were plastered within the compartment (figure 18). This event mimicked the common creator practice of "meet and greets," in which individual creators cement relationships with their audiences. Meta's creator day featured content creators like Saransh Goila, who is a chef and founder of Goila Butter Chicken, an international cloud kitchen brand.[175]

[175] https://www.socialsamosa.com/2022/09/creator-day-2022-meta-indian-creator-economy/ Goila is an interesting figure because his popularity as a creator was preceded by his relationship with celebrity chef Sanjeev Kapoor's television show. See: https://yourstory.com/2020/11/cloud-kitchen-goila-butter-chicken-indian-food-global/amp. Accessed October 2024.

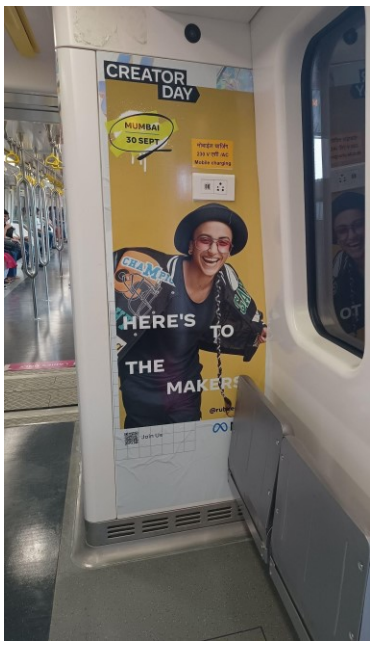


Figure 18: Author's photograph of an ad for Meta's Creator Day with dance and comedic content creator Ruhee Dosani.

This subsection has examined commuting as an act that makes demands on consumers' time which has a bearing on the food alternatives that they encounter and the choices they make. This subsection has analysed how food choices and the time people have left to arrange meals are imprinted by people's interactions with commuting infrastructures such as public transport, roads, as well as social infrastructures provided by hawkers and religious public feeding. The springing up of these social infrastructures around people's routes and routines of commute show how convenience offered by Swiggy and Zomato exist alongside these older forms of convenience. It is perhaps in recognition of people's reliance on commuting infrastructure and food infrastructures around it that platforms identify metros and the backs of autorickshaws as worthwhile sites of advertising.

5.3.3 Consuming work

This subsection moves shifts attention away from consumers' livelihoods to managerial platform workers' livelihoods. It analyses the writing and strategizing of Swiggy and Zomato's timely push notifications and their topical social media content as consuming work. Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis have examined how this promotional material is attentive to demands on consumers from their livelihoods and other topical developments in the weather, political climate, memes, and so on. This creative work is examined as being consuming in the sense that it leaves creative workers with less time and energy for themselves and their personal lives.

During my digital ethnographic observations of creative workers' use of social media, I noticed #agencylife being used to reflect on, joke about and convene around the tribulations of working in an agency. The posts using this hashtag included complaints around how making timely and topical content creates work-life imbalance. In May 2021, creative agency, Social Samosa, posted an open letter on Instagram, that suggested demanding overtime compensation across agencies. At that time, posts with #detoxwork were trending and many agencies responded with offering a 4-day work week as a solution.[176]

Advertiser and entrepreneur Varun Duggirala's newsletter in April 2022, spoke to these concerns about work-life imbalance by suggesting changes at an individual level. He wrote that creatives should stop overthinking by dropping 'enough' from worries about if their content is 'good enough,' and persist. Eventually, repetition will make their work better. Duggriala recommended that his audience tune into a conversation between entrepreneur Shaan Puri and comedian Hassan

[176] https://www.instagram.com/p/COw7etxJd08/?img_index=1. Accessed May 2021.

Minhaj about balance when doing work that consumes you based on their experiences doing different kinds of creative work like business and entertainment. In his podcast, Minhaj puts forth a 4-burner theory. Four burners refer to the four areas of life that require balance: work, family, friends, and health. Duggirala highlights how two burners of 'work' and 'friends' can help create a balance since friendship can be productive: "Good friends consume together, great friends create together."

This subsection has offered insight into how platforms' timely communications or media flows offer ordering in as a way for consumers to cope with demands from work yet making these communications and flows is demanding work. Writing on behalf of platforms is consuming work that creative workers jostle with to find a work-life balance. The point of this discussion has been to map the extent of temporal pressure created by platforms. It is already well-documented that platforms create time pressure for delivery workers and that our lives as consumers are sometimes experienced as rushed but from the account in this subsection, we can also consider how writing timely promotions on platforms' behalf is consuming work that throws creative workers lives out of sync.

5.4 Findings: Balancing work-life as households and industries

In this section, I describe how Swiggy and Zomato's users — consumers and businesses — attempt to shift time, make time, and find balance through their use of platforms and other devices. Beginning at the level of an individual, the first subsection details how individuals attend to their metabolism to make sense of their habits (5.5.1) and coordinate with others in the household and friends, through the ebbs and flows of the days of the week (5.5.2). The third subsection will examine the work-life balance of business users or how individual businesses view their role in

syncing work and consumption by others and what that means for the collective future of their industry (5.5.3).

5.4.1 Individual metabolism

In this subsection, I detail how Swiggy and Zomato's consumers tinkered with their individual metabolism through a variety of devices like smart watches, activity trackers, dietary practices like intermittent fasting, and being selective of what they consumed through social media content.

Balancing work-life means attending to your individual metabolism through physiological conditions: how your gut responds, the life stage you're in, and what events are unfolding in your personal life. One consumer told me they had a "sensitive tummy" this meant he did not have "the privilege to eat whatever" he wanted so he relied on home cooked food, preferring to repeat orders. Similarly, big changes in one's personal life like marriage, death, and separation, among others led to new routines. One young woman whose parents were going through a separation explained to me that she treated her body "like a temple" but since the past 4 months she has been eating everything: "this is not me, but this is the pattern now."

Smartwatches and activity trackers were used by many people to shift attention to their physical body. One way in which people attended to their physical bodies was by using the affordance of filtering notifications, especially when at work. A counselling psychologist who worked from home, explained to me how during work hours, she programmed her watch to show notifications only from her work calendar and family. As a result of this filtering of notifications, she would not have to check her phone and be distracted. The previous chapter described how soaking foods like millets before cooking them was a useful affordance as soaking started digestion on your behalf,

even before you ate food. A break from eating was perceived as important because after the act of eating, digestion takes time and effort:

> "Your body can either digest or heal itself.. I don't know if it is accurate but a *chapati* takes 14 hours to digest completely but a fruit will take 3 hours to digest. So your body cannot just keep digesting food, that's why you need to have good breaks, light food or time difference or gap so that your morning is fresh and bright."

Intermittent fasting (IF) is a popular meal scheduling practice that recommends maintaining a 12-, 14-, or 16-hour fasting window, outside which eating was permitted. Several people experiment with IF for medical and weight loss related reasons. Whatever the reason might be to fast, these efforts share a spirit of attempting to shift eating time and tasks in a predetermined and predictable window to bring 'balance.' Earmarking time to eat in this way aims to detox from over-consumption whether it is caused out of boredom, stress, or tempting communications from platforms. A limited eating window, premade the decision of *when* you can eat and helped curb stress eating for many and made them "conscious eaters" who reported feeling more energetic and appreciated "light" foods.

Many people identified that the content they consumed on social media or push notifications was *temptation as distraction*. They described the effect it had on their minds, moods, appetites through sights, smells, thoughts, other people, push notifications, all of which could make them inattentive from what is good, their schedule and so on. So, people were mindful about what kinds of content they scrolled past by following hashtags such as #healthyrecipes and #veganrecipes or following creators like chefs or food bloggers whose content they considered positive, healthy, or interesting. This often led them to ads for ingredients and snacks like rice cakes, peanut and other nut butters,

Korean ingredients like gochujang and doenjang paste. These ads could also appear as brand placements or in collaborations through popular creators' posts.

On the other end of temptation as distraction is *distraction as detox* which was an attentive distraction away from temptation. This involved curating social media feeds and some people responded to extended periods of indulgence by fasting, drinking *nimboo pani (*lemon-water), and arranging other harm minimisation practices described in the previous chapter. One consumer explained to me how she was keeping a track of her expenses due to which she learnt that ordering in was 30% of her expenses. She said "shut up" by turning off her push notifications to avoid getting tempted by discounts. She also set a timer (figure 19) to her Swiggy and Zomato for 30 minutes. When she had exceeded her budget she set 0 minutes on the timer for various platforms including make-up and beauty marketplace Nykaa and Instagram. This meant that these apps were greyed out on her phone, and she could not open it. and other apps too.

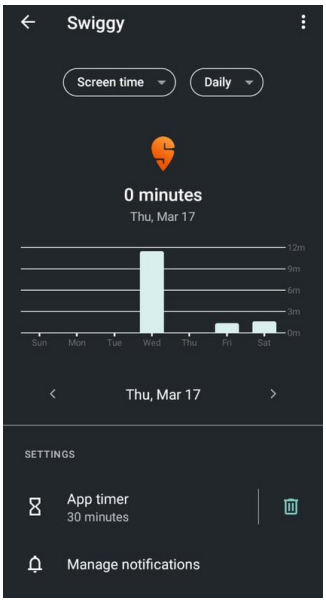


Figure 19: Screenshot of the app timer my interlocutor used.

5.4.2 Weekday versus weekend meals

This sub-section examines how consumers' meals balance work-life across the ebbs and flows of demands on their time across various days in the week. During the week, especially weekday lunches, people preferred 'light' rather than 'heavy' foods. Heavy foods were those that might take long to cook, were difficult to digest, and made people feel sleepy like the Telugu *pappu dal* served with rice and ghee. Heavy foods and new cuisines were reserved for dinner or even meals on the weekend. At these times people felt bolder to experiment than they did during the week. Many of my interlocutors explained that working in the corporate sector meant that the weekend was a time "you have to live life to the fullest". One corporate worker explained that his weekday meals could not be:

> "Something that will make us sleep..I can't afford to have something that is heavy on my tummy on the weekdays because that will make me sleepy. I'll try to eat something light that will sustain me for the day..So on the weekends I would look forward to heavy meals..I'm from Andhra, so I will have Andhra meals I love like Andhra dal or probably I'll go and have chicken biryani."

Similar to the corporate worker's concern about the energy spent in digesting food above, most households plan meals to map easy-to-digest meals for weekdays. This ensures that they are able to be attentive at work. Planning often involves listing the week's meals on a board on the refrigerator and instructing the cook to purchase ingredients in advance. Especially in flat shares, cooks schedule and plan with each member separately and this is often done in advance. Alternatively, some households decide what they would eat on a day-to-day basis and purchase ingredients themselves. When the cook arrives, they plan the day's meals together if they are working from home or if they had to go to the office, they might receive a phone call from the cook. Which member of the family received the phone call was a source of controversy especially

if both members of the couple were working. Those who were afraid of losing their cook and did not know how to cook themselves, would let the cook decide their meals, and make requests only occasionally.

One cook often cooked for several flats in a neighbourhood. So, weekday meals, especially breakfast and lunch, rested on cooks' planning their access to homes and cooking process. One rushed morning I was in a consumers' household I saw a cook preparing a *poha* breakfast whilst kneading dough for *rotis* she would come back to make at lunch. She explained to me that if she were to start kneading the dough right before she needed to make the *rotis,* she would be late to another house that would be waiting for lunch. Therefore, especially on weekday mornings until the afternoon, she said she felt like the "hands in a clock." Very often, in rushing between households, she found that she moved like a machine if the menu was the same across the houses she was cooking in.

This subsection has analysed how people balance their choices in food and arrangement of meals by considering demands from work on their time and bodies across the days of the week. The use of Swiggy and Zomato is often informed by this ongoing attempt in which weekday meals are predictable, light on the stomach, and carefully planned with other members of the household and cooks to ensure that consumers could be attentive at work. In contrast, weekends are occasions to experiment and indulge in food as there were generally no responsibilities from work. Experimentation and indulgence on weekends could be by going out, eating heavy foods, or occasionally cooking oneself.

5.4.3 Syncing workers and consumers

This subsection turns to how platform users such as food businesses and consumers reflected on the implications of their selling and buying on others' experience of time**.** In 2022, Zomato rolled out a ten minute or instant delivery which generated massive conversation and reflections on convenience and how it syncs consuming bodies with working bodies in a way that privileges consumers.

However, several consumers in my in-person fieldwork were reflecting critically on the convenience offered by instant delivery. Many people are concerned that 10-minute deliveries can be detrimental for both working bodies that delivered food and their own consuming bodies. Some of my interlocutors used instant delivery to plug mistakes in grocery planning at moments when "the cook said we don't have *paneer.*" This kind of occasional reliance did not come in the way of consumers admitting that planning in advance was better to maintain their own household budget and it had the added benefit of not compelling delivery workers to rush and speed on their behalf. Furthermore, in cases where a family member or housemate had an illness, diabetes, or heart problems or if young children had autoimmune conditions, the existence of quick commerce invited critical reflection for their practices as a household.

Food businesses were reflecting critically on instant commerce too. Edible Issues (07/04/2022), a newsletter I had subscribed to, stated that quick commerce could contribute to creating a pace of life that is unhealthy for consuming *and* working bodies. Almost sounding like a social scientist, they asked who needed this speed, what it costed in terms of its impact on labour and ecology:

> "What's the idea behind 10 minutes? Who is this for? Why do we demand such convenience in food? And what precedence does this set for other urban consumer brands? What kind of pressure does this put on people who participate in making our food and making sure we have it in our homes and offices?…It takes two-three months (2 months = 86400 minutes) for vegetables (and chickens - scary!) to grow - seed to fruit. (There are tons of binge-worthy time-lapse videos of food growing - but this is a favorite). We often think about food innovation today and if it's really meeting people's needs. In today's chaotic world as convenience grows to be more convenient, who is it really inconveniencing? And as food parasites living in our little bubbles would we ever know the effort, and hardship to grow the things that take us 1/8640th of the time to consume?"

DigitalFoodLab, another newsletter that I had subscribed to, carried a blog post about alternative proteins. It had a list of familiar plant-based substitutes along with less familiar ones like "algae, insects for humans, cellular agriculture, precision fermentation, biomass fermentation, molecular agriculture." Alongside these were estimates of how long these experiments will take to be "in our plates" and which start-ups are working on them.

These alternatives may seem far-fetched and may not even materialise. However, analysing this kind of internal deliberation is useful because it can capture how businesses match perceptions about the market and investments and define what is sustainable. All of these internal deliberations and perceptions eventually culminate as what businesses offer us as choices that we then encounter in retail. A simple instance of this is a flood of plant-based alternatives like almond milk, soya milk, vegetarian sausages, steaks in supermarkets in industrialised countries and to some extent in big metropolises in India.

This subsection has examined how platform users reflect on how their actions of ordering food sync their habits and pace of life with the lives of workers that deliver things to them. Individual business owners and industries reflect on how their work shapes the wider economic-political production system and syncs working and consuming bodies. Businesses' motivations to reflect critically on their role and that of their fellow business owners may be varied. However irrespective

of what might motivate this reflection, it is what shapes what ends up as options on shelves in shops and on virtual shopfronts.

5.5 Findings: Pacing platform use: slowing down and speeding up

This section considers how people are pacing their use of platforms by alternating between slowing down and speeding up. This analysis of pacing platforms is developed in light of the previous sections' discussions about livelihoods imprinting food habits and how people find balance by using devices to make and shift time.

I will first describe how some people use social media platforms to slow down what users experience as a hurried pace of life in Mumbai by gathering for leisurely walks which involve eating together (5.6.1). Businesses and industries are confronted by a conundrum: digital payments enable consumers to pay instantly but platforms' slow payment cycles create a lag between credit from consumers and debit to businesses, causing issues in cash flow (5.6.2). Finally, this section turns to the case of two dead platforms that started before Swiggy and Zomato to highlight how platforms too have to keep pace with investors, not speed ahead or lag behind (5.6.3).

5.5.1 Consumers slowing down through leisure in the city

This subsection uses the case of a city walks business as an example of how people turned their individual use of social media platforms into a collective enjoyment of the city by slowing down to appreciate the city's quirks.

*Go hallu hallu (*slowly slowly*)* was co-founded by Mohmad Aslam Shaikh (@Bombay*kashaana*) and Gopal MS (@mumbaipaused). Both Aslam Shaikh and Gopal MS' social media handles have been popular for documenting the city's quirks, moods, and banalities. Starting Go *hallu hallu* involved other city-dwellers in their enjoyment and documentation of the city. Inspired by journalist Paul Salopek's call for journalists to develop slow journalism, they promised to offer a "break from hare-paced life" by walking to "discover things hidden in plain sight and meet people, birds, rivers, ponds, animals and plants that will restore your faith in humanity."[177] By walking together, "the idea is to slow down, be yourself and allow a city or a part of it to reveal itself to you. There will be someone leading a walk, but there's very little talk, no facts getting rattled off, no *gyaan*."[178]

I attended an Easter Walk in Marol, an urban village or *gaothan* on Easter Sunday hosted by an East Indian family. The walk was led by a 19-year-old student of history and her maternal grandmother or *nana*. Aslam and Gopal's social media presence was felt in person because Aslam was wearing a t-shirt that read "*kaun/who*?" in Devnagri on the front and "*bombay ka shaana"* at the back. During the walk, we referred to a parish-made map in a book titled *Souvenir of the 4th Centenary*, written by a priest V.N. Pimenta, published by St John the Evangelist Church, Marol. We walked through the schools, church, graveyards, over the choked Mithi river, and listened to anecdotes. Marol's demographic composition of being dominated by East Indians and Goans influenced what the neighbourhood supplied to the city: *paos*, breads from Florence Bakery, cashew, and coconut trees, and hospitality workers to the city's five-star hotels when they started.

[177] https://gohalluhallu.wordpress.com/why-go-slowly-slowly/. Accessed November 2022.
[178] https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/mumbaiwale-how-to-fall-off-the-map/story-RWAguW0gzeVbkhpE4XnJJP.html. Accessed November 2022.

Many of these traditions were now threatened by builders eyeing this land for redevelopment. These anecdotes were met with co-attendees' questions about East Indian cultural practices: do East Indians intermarry? What language do they speak? Does the municipal corporation make internal roads? The walk ended with an Easter dinner in the walk leaders' home with pork vindaloo, chicken chilly fry, chicken *khuddi* (a coconut gravy made with the East Indian "bottle masala"), raw mango salad, rice, small fermented deep-fried breads called *fugiyas* (literally translates to balloons), bread pudding, and easter eggs. At their home, we learnt how in contemporary times, the neighbourhood offers residences to young women working in the airline industry due to its proximity to the domestic and international airports. These women lived as paying guests with elder householders whose families had moved out to newer buildings.

The WhatsApp group created by the organisers to coordinate everyone's arrival was used to continue the conversation. After the walk, before it wound down, the chatter on the group continued. Someone posted an East Indian song by a popular singer whose house we passed by in Marol. A few days later another attendee posted an article by an East Indian journalist and long-time resident of Marol about the neighbourhood's history and significance.

People's interest in slowing down or thinking about the past was wider than this one company. In the previous chapter it was evident in people's adoption of clay, copper vessels and so on. On X, formerly known as Twitter, Go *hallu hallu*'s re-tweeted writer and radio personality Neelesh Misra who started Slow Content Private Limited and the Slow App. Their Twitter bio read: "Slow down your life to live longer. #TheSlowMovement is an effort to go back to an unhurried world through products, content and experiences." I downloaded the app and was greeted by Misra's voice and

as the visuals walked me through a street, I was asked in Hindi *whose address are you hunting for? Could it be your own? Atleast tell me your name! How should I refer to you?* At this point, I was asked for my full name and could press "cancel" or "continue." When I typed my name and pressed continue, Misra talked again, walking through a street with young boys playing gully cricket and now said, *Okay, if you think it appropriate, tell me your phone number, address. How will I find you if I wanted to get in touch with you?* I was then supposed to share my phone number and email ID but could not proceed without sharing it. Misra was back and he introduced himself as a storyteller and said: *you got delayed coming to your own home? Welcome to a slow world, your world, to your own home!* Misra went away and I was left in a room where I could "listen," "watch," "read" and "participate" largely with his own content.

In this subsection I have illustrated, through the case of Go *hallu hallu* and the wider slow living movement, how people use platforms to *make time.* Time is made for enjoyment and appreciation of others' company, their culture, and the ecological environment of the city and often coincides with making a livelihood. Swiggy and Zomato have been emblematic of pressures from work and demands from fast paced city-living that robs people of the time to cook and care for themselves, yet interestingly, people seem to use other platforms in their attempt to set a pace for their lives. This use of platforms for setting what people consider a better and more enjoyable pace of life is civic-minded and involves a collective use of platforms. This section has demonstrated the importance of scholarly examinations of how people use different platforms to make time, modulate the pace of life, in addition to describing what platforms do the pace of life.

5.5.2 Slow platform payment cycles and cash flows[179]

This subsection examines the pace Swiggy and Zomato set for their business-users who speed up service to consumers by cooking on-demand. Consumers can pay instantaneously, if they choose to pay online, but the pace of businesses receiving those payments is set by the platform. So instant debit from consumers does not instantly credit in businesses' accounts.

Swiggy and Zomato pay restaurant partners seven days after a transaction has been completed but cloud kitchens have high daily expenses, many to be made in cash. A cloud kitchen owner explained to me that most owners prefer to use their credit card for their expenses because credit repayment cycles offer them a buffer or liquidity in the moment. However, several vendors from whom they purchase ingredients like vegetables, meat, oil and cylinders everyday, prefer cash. The vendors of these items offer a 14-15 day credit cycle but after Covid-19, these businesses have been unable to offer credit and demand settlements to be made "bill to bill." To make matters of lack of liquidity worse, the high commission fees charged by platforms eat into restaurants' margins, he explained:

> "This industry is of negative cash flows. That is why many restaurants shut down, they didn't have a very good cash flow. *Dhandha kaise hona chhaiye aapko pata hain?* Do you know how a business should run? I sell you something, you pay me then and there. This is not happening right now. I pay my vendor, in let's say 15 days, Swiggy or Zomato pay me in let's say 7 days. So, I am juggling between paying different people.. Earlier there used to be healthy margins, 30% and up but today most of the cloud kitchens are somewhere between 7-10% because a major chunk is taken over by Zomato and Swiggy."

A mismatch in the pace of instant debit and delayed credit to businesses, along with high commission fees have led to negative cash flows or businesses' expenses exceeding their incomes. Due to this, the life of a cloud kitchen is approximately six months to a year. In the previous

[179] I am grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in the CBDCs Expanding Financial Inclusion or Deepening the Divide? Project at MIT Digital Currencies, co-led by Dr Lana Swartz, Julie Frizzo-Barker and Neha Narula. When doing fieldwork for this project, I was sensitised to the centrality of payment systems.

chapter, I described how the NRAI, expressed concern over the bad business of scaling through undercutting without care for profit, funded by venture capital, created discount hungry consumers.

As opposed to what the NRAI framed as "distasteful" scale to signal that discounts were an unhealthy business practice *if* used without moderation, they recommend at the cloud kitchen convention (2022) in Mumbai, that discounts be used "as yoga, not a ventilator". Discounts without moderation in their view led to a "negative cash flow treadmill" that is unhealthy for the business-body. Through various panels at the convention, they defined healthy discounting as something that is offered at the discretion of the food business owner not the platform. Healthy discounts pay attention to whom they have to be offered to, how much of a discount to offer, and when they are offered. Platforms' relationship managers can assist businesses arrive at this insight.

As payments from consumer-users are routed via platforms, a slow credit pace threw businesses' existing payment cycles asunder. Additionally, it amounted to negative cash flows, creating a high mortality rate of food businesses, reliance on noncompetitive businesses practices to achieve scale, and an industry-wide problem. In response, industry associations intervene to create healthier business habits and pace which in turn would not encourage discount hungry consumer behaviour and ensure positive cash flows.

5.5.3 When a platform is before its time: Burrp! And Tiny Owl

This subsection turns from the pace of selling as business-users of Swiggy and Zomato to the pace of platforms-as-businesses.

At the Easter walk, I met a young woman, who worked as a lifestyle journalist and a food writer who had worked at Burrp!, a menu aggregating service that started in 2006, two years before Zomato. Currently, it is not operational under the same name but I remembered it from the walls of several restaurants that hung certificates from them. It was co-founded by North California resident Deap Ubhi[180] and software worker Anand Jain. Burrp! positioned themselves as a service "that helped you plan your leisure time" and reminded users that "time is short, use it well." Ubhi and Jain had moved to Mumbai to run Burrp! And started out of a one bedroom hall kitchen or as it referred to in Mumbai, a 1BHK, out of Andheri. At the time, they faced difficulty hiring talent who could not imagine working out of the living room in a flat.

As an early-stage start-up they also faced trouble raising money. According to Ubhi this was partly due to his own immaturity given his young age as well as the lack of a risk appetite in the Indian angel investors and VC firms, compared to what he was exposed to in the Valley. There was an "inner circle" in the valley and a lot more competition but also a "stronger, healthier angel funding ecosystem" to get a "proof of concept" and get 5-10 thousand people as users. In comparison, in India there was less of a structured angel funding network and less experience with early-stage start-ups: "having a few rich guys that have done it before that are very, very willing to take on that risk..at that early stage, the guy has to be willing to throw that money away.."[181]

[180] After Burrp! Ubhi returned to the United States and his ex-employer Amazon. Before this, he did a short stint at the Department of Defense and was later involved in Amazon providing the Pentagon cloud services for the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure (JEDI) see https://www.seattletimes.com/business/judge-clears-way-for-amazon-and-microsoft-to-compete-for-giant-pentagon-contract/. Accessed November 2024.
[181] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_kb0ImvjVs. Accessed November 2024.

Being out of pace with the funding ecosystem in India led to Burrp!'s acquisition by Network18[182] a media conglomerate "over beers" at Taj Lands End, Mumbai in 2014. Burrp! was not run like a start-up. Rather than making a market, the management at Network18 monetised discovery, charged consumers, and fell behind Zomato. Today, the businesses is owned by ticketing platform BookMyShow.[183]

In the same year of Burrp!'s acquisition, Ubhi became an angel investor for Tiny Owl, another food discovery and delivery service started by four IIT graduates.[184] By this time, "wave of the consumer internet circa 2013-14 had swept the market" and VC firm Sequoia reportedly changed their strategy. They had invested in Zomato (2013) and later TinyOwl and Runnr.[185] By 2016, Tiny Owl was acquired by Road Runnr, a business to business (B2B) logistics workers' service in Bangalore started by ex-Flipkart employees. They saw Tiny Owl as a direct to consumer (D2C) complement to grow and became Runnr.[186] A year later, Runnr was acquired by Zomato.[187]

Through this subsection's focus on the case of two dead platforms I have highlighted how platforms-as-businesses have to keep pace with investor sentiment, platforms do not simply get to set the pace for their users. Being "before time" or ahead of investor sentiment led to the death of TinyOwl and Burrp! This short history illuminates how food delivery platforms have evolved from

[182] Interestingly, Burrp! were in conversation with the South African Ibibo platform whose acquisition lawyer got poached by Network18's VC arm. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_kb0ImvjVs. Accessed November 2024.
[183] https://yourstory.com/2017/07/burrp-bookmyshow-acquisition-what-next. Accessed November 2024.
[184] https://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/six-mistakes-of-tinyowl-the-blue-eyed-start-up-child-116031400038_1.html. Accessed November 2024.
[185] https://www.forbesindia.com/article/vc-and-pe-special/exclusive-how-sequoia-became-indias-biggest-venture-capital-firm/54475/1. Accessed November 2024.
[186] https://www.livemint.com/Companies/ZtTlUh3lhx4cBnPzFZ6GaJ/Roadrunnr-acquires-Tinyowl-rebrands-as-Runnr.html. Accessed November 2024.
[187] https://www.livemint.com/Companies/W8wu28THxovZpVYufEvrnL/Zomato-acquires-delivery-startup-Runnr.html. Accessed November 2024.

a platformization of the food and hospitality industries but also that of media and entertainment corporations being confronted by start-ups.

5.6 Discussion: Toggling between livelihood, consumption, and care

This section will discuss the implications of my findings about how users attempt to find balance and a good pace as they toggle i.e., switch between and hold together demands on time and attention from employers, domestic spaces, and leisure.

In contrast to the analysis in this chapter, most platform scholarship has inherited a line of thinking on social reproduction (Doorn 2017) and the time that people have for it (Stark and Levy 2018; Lalvani 2021; Healy and Pekarek 2022) from critical theory approaches. The time people have for care has been analysed largely in terms of whether work creates a surplus or deficit of time. One instance of this approach is how work was understood to have made us "entropy converting subjects" who were expected to turn experiences into productivity (Skeggs 2004).

This chapters' analysis has hinted at how the arrangement of routine meals is not simply about what people do with a surplus or deficit of time. Routine meal arrangements involve people holding together competing demands as they switch between different sites and scales. In this universe of humble actions like commuting and billing cycles, people encounter devices and platforms, and use different combinations of them to shift time, attention, tasks, and make time to find rhythms, routines, and schedules of meal arrangement. These compositions of devices and platforms hold together ecological, workerist, familial, religious, and biological considerations for households and businesses to be able to reproduce themselves. Therefore, users' efforts of navigating flows by shifting and making time to balance work-life and pacing platforms and their demands of

convenience shows limits to engineering efficiency. Engineering efficiency and productivity through convenient buying and selling of food also generates feelings, concerns, and overall experiences that people push back against in various capacities as consumers, citizens, business owners, investors and so on.

Through this analysis of *toggling* as a way of *switching between and holding together* competing demands in people's capacities as individuals, households, businesses, and industries, I extend a less popular style of analysing social reproduction. This less popular view has argued that employers (English-Lueck and Avery 2017) and commercial entities like grocery stores (Weinbaum and Bridges 1976) might inadvertently enable embodied care. Employers maximize productivity by offering 'corporate care,' or institutionalised care through cooked meals, yoga, and wellness services at the workplace. These instrumental offers cultivate new habits and expectations amongst workers that cannot be dismissed as productivity maximization because demands by labour have often been based on habits of embodied care like rest, recreation, health and so on (English-Lueck and Avery 2017). In the context of commercial entities like grocery stores, workers provision for their households as consumers. In this activity of workers using their wages for consumption, we encounter capital and commerce. Feminists have argued that grocery shopping is "subject to and structured by capital," yet it "embodies needs antagonistic to capitalistic production" (Weinbaum and Bridges 1976).

Like the research cited above on the inadvertent enabling of embodied care by employers and commercial entities, research on workers' use of media for leisure has arrived at similar arguments. Workers' use of media for leisure is structured by commercial entities, but it embodies needs that

go beyond commercial calculations. This research has shown how low-wage workers in hospitality used their phones to vent on social media and resist the demands of service work by being absently present at work. Their higher wage counterparts in highly connected, remote work on the contrary disconnect from digital technologies since these are central to the mediation of the work that they seek to resist (Ticona 2022). Service workers used digital technologies to fill times when there were lulls in work to keep in touch with families and goings on in their rural homes (M. 2018; Madianou 2016).

I contribute to the research cited in the two paragraphs above by remaining attentive to what platforms might inadvertently enable in the lives of platform users as they toggle or hold together as they switch between competing demands.

5.7 Conclusion: Shifting time, tasks, and navigating scales through platform use

At the start of this chapter, taking the example of M-indicator demonstrated the way this chapter analyses the influence of platform use on consumers; and businesses' routines, rhythms, and schedules (RQ 2.3). A wide kind of focus on habits outside Swiggy and Zomato enabled showing how *three ongoing provisioning efforts* to find rhythms, routines, schedules of buying and selling food surround platform use. These provisioning efforts are outside platforms but are crucial in making platforms' intermediation make sense to users. Platform use for provisioning by households and businesses involved toggling between activities of livelihood, consumption, and care, indicating that platform influence on time is composed across scales. In other words, people and organisations use platforms to shift time, tasks, and navigate various scales in running households and businesses.

Firstly, my findings detailed the relationship between flows from working and what they mean for how people arrange meals. Consumers' user behaviour is imprinted by multifarious flows from offices and commuting. Additionally, making timely promotional materials on behalf of platforms is consuming work that creates work-life balance problems for creative workers.

Secondly, navigating demands from work and doing demanding work, leads people to *seek balance in* work-life by shifting and making time as individuals navigating health concerns, planning meals with households and cooks, keeping in mind the rhythms of weekday and weekend. Instant delivery and promises of 10-minute delivery were occasionally useful for consumers. Yet, amongst consumers and food tech businesses there was some hesitance with a long-term reliance on instant deliveries: in seeking balance, how can households and businesses sync better with working bodies, agricultural systems, and ecology?

Thirdly, efforts of balancing demands from various quarters, includes people's attempts to pace platforms by alternating between slowing down and speeding up in various capacities. Go *hallu hallu* is an example of how people, as city-dwellers and social media users, make a livelihood out of collective leisure centred on slowing down and enjoying the food and ecology in the city's diverse neighbourhoods. As business-users, people have to pace cash flows because instant digital payments enabled instant debit for consumers but routed credit to businesses via platforms, creating negative cash flows. Platforms too must pace their own efforts with investors' sentiments in order to survive as businesses.

In sum, a wide focus has enabled viewing platform users' routines, habits, schedules across sites and scales. Users' provisioning efforts also point to the fact that platforms tether leisure, not only care work. Furthermore, what users do on platforms is informed by a range of multi-scalar phenomena: how consumers navigate commitments at work, commuting, how creative workers and managerial workers navigate the pressures of making timely communications, the wider food tech industry, the cash flows of restaurants, and cloud kitchen businesses.

Conclusion Chapter

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1. "What's for dinner?" An overview of socio-technical processes of aggregation and toggling

"What is for dinner?" is a question that gnaws at most people every day. Here, in this chapter, I invoke it to assist in concluding this thesis' examination of two processes of socio-technical change. What might arranging dinner have to do with platforms' aggregation and users' toggling?

In answering a simple question about dinner, we navigate various scales of the everyday and the institutional by using our heads, hands, and fingers as we move between both household and commercial settings. Arranging a meal — be it by buying food online, buying food from a hawker,

or buying ingredients and cooking at home — involves macro realities of the economic system, livelihood, ecological conditions, systems of logistics like platforms, and micro realities of the sexual division of labour, household budgets, feelings of hunger, satiety, and temptation. Resolving this simple question every day, even three times a day, involves making calculations about many different considerations that surround the moment of cooking, such as considerations from making a livelihood, doing care work, and having fun. Internet users have made many attempts to reduce decision fatigue from this question even prior to the popularity of food delivery platforms. Writer and director Zach Golden created a website called whatthefuckshouldimakefordinner.com and wrote a cookbook by the same name.

Similar to how people analyse an overwhelming number of surrounding phenomena when making decisions about dinner, this thesis has cast a wide and navigational gaze over what surrounds moments of platforms' aggregation and platforms users' experiences and interactions of buying and selling food. As indicated in the Introduction chapter of this thesis, analysis of phenomena that surround platforms and their users' behaviour is normally ignored by scholars of digital platforms. Even though in reality, socio-technical systems like open network systems, blockchain, AI, bitcoins and so on are often bundled with platforms in practice (De Seta, Pohjonen, and Knuutila 2024).

Instead, in platform studies literature, platforms' branding efforts and their impact on users are analysed in relatively deeper and more focused yet isolated ways. Deep yet isolated analysis of branding by individual platforms is understood to create a culture of convenience amongst platform users, especially consumers (Huberman 2021; West 2022). This culture of convenience

rests on virtual shopfronts and spaces like dark stores, and cloud kitchens that consumers rarely encounter (Shapiro 2022). Most literature on consumers assumes that they succumb to the culture of ease and convenience as consumers are imagined as being unconscious of the labour and ecological impact of their actions (Hill 2020). Most of the very limited literature on consumers inherits this framing of consumers being seekers of convenience. Due to this, most research has focused on consumers' impact on workers (Healy, Pekarek, and Vromen 2020; Stark and Levy 2018).

Food delivery platforms in this thesis have been analysed as cultural agents with links to the rapidly platformizing media and entertainment industries as well as the food and hospitality industries and banking and payments activities. The term 'cultural agents' unifies platforms' hyperconnected and distributed activities by offering a view of how they are sites and participants in labour and culture or how they do everything, everywhere, all at once. This thesis has analysed how Swiggy and Zomato both individually and collectively aggregate users and spin a web of relations involving various participants. In addition to well-studied delivery workers, this thesis has detailed the role of managerial platform workers; creator culture and social media platforms; the media and entertainment industries; consumers and consumers' collectives; culinary cultures; the food and hospitality industries; payments platforms and banks; the regulatory environment; and investors.

This thesis' examination of the hyperconnected character of food delivery platforms marks a significant departure from most scholarly analyses of platforms which reflect the binary between labour-culture and production-consumption. Predominantly, logistics platforms are examined as sites of labour and employers and social media platforms as sites of culture. Here, I followed both labour-culture and production-consumption by offering the under-studied perspectives of platform

users, such as consumers in households and businesses in the food and hospitality industries. Consumers' buying and businesses' selling behaviours have been examined in compositional terms, i.e. how people hold together demands from activities of livelihood, consumption, care, and leisure and switch between these activities.

To examine how platform use had a bearing for consumers' composing their experiences across three sites, I met consumers in their households, as a consumer organisation, and at a coworking space. The rationale of meeting consumers across these sites was to examine how buying actions and behaviours are informed by activities and demands outside that particular moment. People do not compartmentalise life but as scholars we are interested in particular compartments. Therefore, this thesis approaches that tension by viewing how consumers' purchases may be informed by their livelihood as well as their civic concerns, both of which are generally outside deep scholarly focus on purchase. I met consumers as people with civic commitments through research at a consumers' cooperative, the Mumbai Grahak Panchayat (MGP). I met consumers as they moved between being household members, people with civic commitments, and workers, not only recipients of services. I met consumers as workers in a co-working space. Therefore, buying and selling have been studied widely and navigationally, alongside other activities on and off their devices that enable buying and selling behaviours; user behaviour is not studied deeply and positionally, as isolated actions occurring on devices.

"What to eat for dinner?" is also useful in identifying the implications of this research and the emerging directions of socio-technical change. This question was invoked even at the Global Fintech Fest 2025 in Mumbai in a presentation about agentic shopping and payments. Google's

AI ‘Gemini,’ payments platform United Payments Interface (UPI), and grocery delivery platform BigBasket made a presentation about how AI systems can act as agents and use platforms on users’ behalf. So, for instance, when users are looking at a recipe via Gemini, the AI can query Big Basket’s catalogue of ingredients, order, and pay via UPI. Similarly, payments platforms Razorpay and UPI have been working together with ChatGPT to enable agentic shopping.

These developments indicate the importance and import of this thesis beyond platform studies. Agentic shopping systems involve the convergence of different techno-material systems such as AI and platforms. These systems also aggregate user activities such as discovery, adding items to the cart, payments, and so on. Together different systems aim to compose the actions that a human user would undertake were they to recreate a recipe. Therefore, emerging agentic systems involve the two socio-technical processes examined in this thesis: how techno-material systems aggregate users and activities and how users toggle from one app to another on their devices.

The rest of this Conclusion chapter is organised like a curtain call at the end of a play. Before the curtain falls, I invite the actors of this thesis onto the stage to recount the key arguments and how they address the two main research questions. The actors of this thesis are the five objects that I encountered as a scholar-critic-user during my remote and in-person fieldwork and placed at the start of each chapter: Google Assistant Routine; Instagram’s ‘order food’ button; grocery delivery platform BigBasket’s vending machine; Godrej Trends Report; and transport app M-indicator. These objects surround platform use and do not necessarily emerge from or directly relate to Swiggy or Zomato. Instead, they draw our attention to the rims, edges, or peripheries of Swiggy and Zomato’s operations and invite scholars to look around widely, not just deeply. Looking

widely at the surfaces of platforms and attending to the dynamics of aggregation and platform use requires reckoning with our positionality as scholar-critic-users. As users ourselves, we can reflect more earnestly on our own personal attachments to platforms and socio-technical systems that we might be critical of in our research.

2. Platforms' aggregation of users through branding and promotions

Chapters 1 and 2 offer answers to the research question about platform aggregation through branding and promotions (RQ 1) by drawing on my digital ethnographic research and experience as a scholar-critic-user. I examined how I was being pushed by information through platforms' apps (Chapter 1) and became attentive to their use of Instagram and Twitter handles to create content (Chapter 2).

Through the case of Swiggy and Zomato, these two chapters contribute to emerging platform scholarship on how convenience is a demand placed on consumers by platforms (Neves and Steinberg 2024). Swiggy and Zomato's apps place the demand of convenience on users through push notifications, by gathering user data, and operationalising it. In pushing information through apps or creating content on social media handles, food delivery platforms engage with and shape developments in India's advertising, media, and entertainment industries. Together, chapters 1 and 2 in this thesis offer an understanding of platforms' emergence as cultural agents due to the professions and professionals who make this content on platforms' behalf. In doing so, it diverges from the dominant approach of examining these platforms as employers of delivery workers. By pointing to Swiggy and Zomato's roles in the media and entertainment industries, professions, and

professionals' lives, the analysis in this thesis furthers arguments about how platforms create dependencies among workers, businesses, and consumers (van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma 2021).

As stated in the Introduction Chapter, there are at least three advantages of focusing on platform agnostic processes (processes that can move across platforms and are not specific to one platform) of promotions to aggregate users and activities, as opposed to focusing deeply on any one platform: first, these objects and processes often outlive individual platforms. Second, platform agnostic objects and processes make it difficult to affix qualifiers like 'food delivery,' 'quick commerce,' and 'social media' in front of the common noun 'platforms.' Thirdly, platform agnostic objects and processes in aggregation enable highlighting the role of logistical platforms as cultural agents, not only employers. On-demand platforms are generally studied as sites of labour and work, siloed from questions of culture and leisure that are the mandate of a separate literature on social media platforms.

2.1. Being pushed by information

Chapter 1 has examined how Swiggy and Zomato use the interface of their apps in promotions and platform-user relationships (RQ 1.1). Based on my digital ethnographic observations as a researcher-critic-user, I have highlighted how being pushed by information is central in users' experience of aggregation. I recount how the simple action of dismissing an alarm on my phone led me to be pushed by information in the form of a prompt from Google Assistant that reminded me to "check Swiggy and Zomato for lunch recommendations" (figure 1). I use the example of

Swiggy and Zomato's integration with Google Assistant to ensure that my analysis of information push attends to cooperation between techno-material systems.

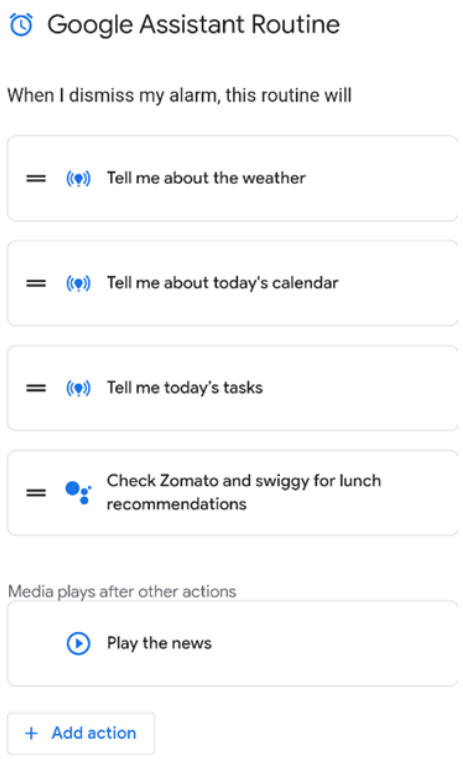


Figure 1: Screenshot of the settings page of Google Assistant Routine on the author's phone.

In the chapter, I have analysed how Swiggy and Zomato's push notifications are written by creative workers from India's media and entertainment industries in a customised, temporally sensitive, informal, friendly, and flirty style. Furthermore, different managerial platform workers across departments contribute to how apps are coded, how data is gathered, and later operationalised. This chapter has suggested that platforms have to be cautious about appearing pushy because users make decisions about platform use by considering their existing arrangements of time and tasks.

2.2. Being attentive to how promotions are made and evaluated on social media

Chapter 2 has examined how Swiggy and Zomato use other platforms like social media platforms in promotions and to build and maintain platform-user relationships (RQ 1.2). As a researcher-critic-user, I became attentive to how Swiggy, Zomato, and their counterparts across the world worked with Instagram to introduce a platform agnostic 'order food' during the covid-19 lockdown in 2020. This button is visible in the screenshot of popular restaurant The Bombay Canteen's Instagram page below (figure 3).

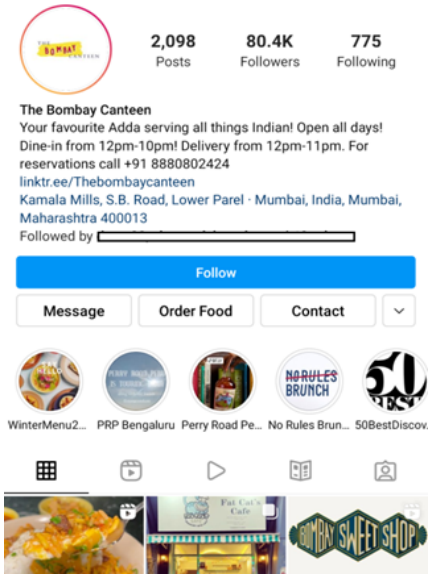


Figure 3: Author's screenshot of the Instagram page of a restaurant that shows the newly introduced 'order food' button.

I use the button as an example to call for a soft and diffuse kind of scholarly focus on phenomena surrounding the subjects we choose to focus on. In the case of the button, it was made by various combinations of professionals like designers, marketers, and engineers working across organisations from a wider logistical surround, that exist around Swiggy and Zomato. Informed

by this, this chapter has analysed how content posted on food delivery platforms' official social media is created by combinations of in-house and external creative workers.

By asking who made this user generated content on behalf of platforms, this chapter has situated food delivery platforms in India's mediascape. Platforms' promotional activities aim to aggregate users by sounding like influencers but end up fielding two kinds of risks and the unanticipated outcome of unofficial promotional cultures. First, is the risk to their reputation from users who escalate complaints on Twitter, exceeding the private space of in-app resolution and handles dedicated to complaints. The second reputational risk is from platforms' own employees and creative workers. I have reflected on the implications of managerial platform workers' personal brands for their future in their jobs, in addition to confirming influencer creep and highlighting the role of Swiggy and Zomato's organisational cultures in it. Therefore, social media as a site of attempting to aggregate users enables common users to use various affordances such that platforms' branding and promotions do not simply shepherd and push users from social media to Swiggy and Zomato.

3. Users' toggling across livelihood, consumption, and care

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 offer answers about platform users' experiences and interactions with platforms' aggregation (RQ 2) based on my in-person fieldwork. Together these three chapters offer an account of how platform users' experiences and interactions are composed or how people toggle between livelihood activities as workers, self-employed professionals, households, businesses and so on. Through these chapters, I apply to platform studies, Warde's approach (2002) of examining consumption within the economy and Miller's (1987) point about remaining

open to the “progressive possibility” of consumption and people’s work of imbuing affect and meaning into what appear to be replaceable goods (Miller 2012). These chapters offer an account of how using surface-level capacities of toggling across activities can be ontologically transformative (Maurer 2013).

I have drawn attention to how in the making of market encounters between platform users on crowded phone screens, crowding remains insufficiently analysed (Chapter 3). After consumers find food businesses to order food from, the following chapter has examined what being a platform user has meant for making a meal or the cooking practices and infrastructures in both commercial and domestic kitchens (Chapter 4). Finally, platforms are situated in how people have been making routine meals by detailing users’ routines, rhythms, and schedules of buying and selling food (Chapter 5).

Analysing user behaviour in compositional terms through how people make encounters, meals, and routines makes three contributions. First, it addresses an empirical gap about user cultures on food delivery platforms. Second, it offers a way out of behaviouralist explanations which explain what people do in response to stimuli from apps or devices. Third, studying the compositional nature of user-experience of buying and selling enables me to attend to the many scales of platform use: users are individuals as well as organisations.

Attending to multi-scalar platform use in homes and businesses has enabled examining domestic questions in studies of how platforms stack economization. Caliskan et al (2025) suggest that platforms stack existing modes of economization by combining gift-giving, barter, and so on;

platforms are not simply multi-sided markets or surveillance technologies. Layering different modes of economization means that people use platforms to explore their needs. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 analyse how both individuals' and organisations' use of Swiggy and Zomato to buy and sell food occurs between demands from the productive and reproductive spheres of livelihood and home, without reproducing binaries between domestic and commercial or economy and culture. For example, buying food is examined as an act of consumption, purchase, and an economic action for the self or the household that enables people, families, and commercial entities to rethink their relationships with each other. Ordering food online is composed by people's holding together demands from their switching between engaging in livelihood making activities, seeking leisure, maintaining their individual physical and mental health, and connecting with the city, commuting, and so on that occur outside Swiggy and Zomato, both on and off devices. Similarly, selling food online via Swiggy and Zomato is an economic action of commerce. However, selling is composed by businesses' holding together demands about quality, taste, and price from consumers, expectations on returns from investors, their own convictions for selling specific kinds of food, food and safety standards, and switching across different technologies of cooking and workflow management in their daily operations.

I have also analysed users' attachments (Cochoy, Deville, and McFall 2017) to platforms by reflecting on how the term 'user' can refer to consumers in households who buy food as well as businesses in industries that sell food, and workers who deliver food. This means that people's attachments with platforms exist in different capacities: as consumers, households, managerial workers, creative workers, city dwellers, businesses in industries and even as researchers. What

transpires on the interface as user-behaviour of buying and selling unfolds in relation to a mundane, pragmatic, and humble universe of actions which surrounds buying and selling food.

3.1. Making encounters with platforms

Chapter 3 has examined how consumers and businesses find each other on Swiggy and Zomato's interfaces (RQ 2.1). I have used my own market encounter with a grocery delivery platform, BigBasket's vending machine (figure 5) to illustrate a conundrum for both platforms and their users. I found the machine or the machine found me during my in-person fieldwork even though the goods in it are designed to be found via interfaces of platforms like BigBasket, Swiggy, or Zomato.



Figure 5: Author's watercolour illustration of the BB Instant vending machine. It has a neon green side, a lamp on top that spotlights three shelves below that each have a QR code.

The fact that BB chose to make physical encounters by placing stock from dark stores literally in people's way points to the fact that virtualizing shopfronts does not automatically guarantee encounters. Therefore, the conundrum is that even though shopfronts are increasingly virtualized, encounters on interfaces between consumer users and business users are not guaranteed due to a crowding of listings of virtual shopfronts. This conundrum around how users encounter each other has loomed large in this chapter and has been analysed insufficiently in critical platform scholarship. The dominant scholarly assumption is that virtualizing shopfronts automatically catapults businesses' visibility into demand and sales (Shapiro 2022). In contrast, the findings in this chapter have drawn attention to how crowding can be a detrimental aspect of platforms' popularity amongst users. Crowds and crowding of businesses' listings also result in consumers struggling to find restaurants to order food from and restaurants struggling to be found amongst the crowds of other restaurants. To navigate crowds of listings, platforms offer their algorithmic curation based on user data, reviews, and ratings, as neutral aids.

This chapter has also offered an understanding of the user cultures of buying and selling on food delivery platforms. Such an examination is consequential because on-demand platforms have largely been examined only as sites of delivery work. Platform users tinker with and investigate algorithmic curations to tilt experience of navigating crowds in their interests. This action of users of food delivery is much like what we know of social media users' circumventions of algorithmic norms of visibility (Abidin 2021). What happens 'after-visibility'? More recent scholarship has examined if visibility and attention translate into sales (Wang 2025). Delving into moments of how users encounter one another furthers recent 'after-visibility' scholarship: consumers and businesses in my sample were critically reflecting on ranking, ordering of search results, and

businesses' reviews and ratings. Therefore, encounters are fleeting moments, but this chapter has suggested how encounters still have a bearing on business bottom lines, competition between businesses over being seen by consumers, culinary cultures of reviewing, rating, advertising standards, and so on. Studying how users encounter one another can offer less totalising or technologically deterministic, more realistic, and hopeful accounts of platform-user relations. These accounts are more hopeful because they enable us to identify newer paths of civil action undertaken by consumer organisations like the Mumbai Grahak Panchayat.

3.2. Making meals with platforms

Chapter 4 has examined how Swiggy and Zomato influence cooking and serving in commercial and household kitchens (RQ 2.2). In it, I have examined how platforms are surrounded by cooking practices and infrastructures that link people and commerce; platforms are not simply sites of aggregation that link people and commerce. The Godrej Trends Report at the start of this chapter is an example of a cooking practice and infrastructure that surrounds platforms and links people and commerce. I have discussed how domestic cooking has relied on several businesses since consumers buy ingredients, furniture, and appliances to cook at home. I have also discussed how delivery platforms emerge alongside these existing channels like the Godrej Trends Report, owned by the media and entertainment industries.



Figure 14: Screenshot of the cover page of the Godrej Trends Report 2022.

The chapter has analysed how rearrangements in the care work of cooking — commercially and domestically — include concomitant practices of eating and serving through three sections. First, commercial cooking has been analysed as being reliant on various convenience technologies, profit and loss management through rationalizing ingredients and effort, as well as norms around discounts, raising money, and costs. Second, consumers' habits of ordering in have been analysed as part of their existing arrangements that aim to minimize harm from eating out, communicate affection, and are informed by people's actions as workers. Finally, platform users' serving and being served food both involve considerations of leisure, entertainment, and payments systems in addition to service labour.

Buying and selling food on Swiggy and Zomato occur alongside the use of surrounding platforms (inventory management; order flow management; payments; social media), adjacent activities (delivering food; payments; serving food to families and loved ones; raising money for a food

business), and multi-scalar processes (business habits created by VCs of buying revenue by burning cash; the platformization of banking and payments; and the gendered division of labour).

These platforms, activities, and processes that surround Swiggy on Zomato have a bearing on what occurs on Swiggy and Zomato even though they are located 'outside' platforms. By analysing cooking like this, this chapter expands the meaning of tethered care work (Ticona 2022) or the performance of care work through digital technologies like video calls. I suggest that the platformization of cooking compels us to consider how tethered care includes tethered leisure, recreation, or entertainment, in addition to the act of making a meal.

3.3. Making routines with platforms

Chapter 5 has examined how Swiggy and Zomato influence schedules, rhythms, habits, and routines in commercial food establishments and households (RQ 2.3). People compose schedules by addressing demands on their time that emerge from different quarters and scales, not only what platforms offer. The example of a transport app, M-indicator (figure 16) at the start of the chapter illustrates this approach to analysing time. Even in the seemingly mundane act of commuting, people navigate demands on their time placed by public transport systems, workplaces, households, and friends. Furthermore, the story of M-indicator's emergence brings attention to how routine making at the micro level of the everyday involves people's navigation of macroeconomic-political realities in which platforms are one of many entities.



Figure 16: Author's watercolour illustration of M-indicator.

This chapter's wide focus on habits enables scholars to surround their analysis of what users do on platforms with empirical data from outside those platforms. Specifically, there are three ongoing provisioning efforts: firstly, consumers' habits of purchase via platforms are influenced and financed by their livelihoods, commuting, and office spaces. Secondly, buying is part of consumers' efforts to seek balance in work-life by shifting and making time as purchases are a result of people navigating demands from work and doing demanding work. Thirdly, users as city dwellers and business owners attempt to pace platforms by alternating between slowing down and speeding up. Platforms too must pace their own efforts with investors' sentiments in order to survive as businesses. In sum, users' experience and use of time on platforms is informed by a range of multi-scalar phenomena: how consumers navigate commitments at work, commuting,

how creative workers and managerial workers navigate the pressures of making timely communications, the wider food tech industry, the cash flows of restaurants, and cloud kitchen businesses.

4. Limitations of this thesis

This thesis has two main limitations. One limitation is that I have not examined the dynamics of quick commerce and instant commerce platforms that offer the instant delivery of a range of goods and now services, such as domestic work, in as little as ten minutes. I have only been able to note their importance and the fact that they share with food delivery platforms, the physical infrastructure of dark stores and cloud kitchens as well as and the virtual infrastructure of virtualized shopfronts. Instant delivery of goods is offered by food delivery platforms (Blinkit owned by Zomato and Instamart owned by Swiggy), grocery delivery platforms (BB Now owned by BigBasket), e-commerce platforms (Amazon Fresh and Flipkart Minutes) and platforms dedicated to instant commerce like Zepto. These platforms were emerging as popular and important during my fieldwork and sometimes my interlocutors were offering examples of how they used Blinkit to order paneer, instead of ordering food in, but at that time, I was worried that probing further about this would lead me astray from the focus of my project. Therefore, this thesis does not have a full examination of this development.

The second limitation is in the thesis does not offer a complete understanding of what is underway in platformized convenience. The next section will detail how the empirical material about convenience has been analysed in way that opens a door, so to speak, in scholarly analysis of convenience for future research to consider walking through.

5. Reframing platformized convenience

What does an understanding of platforms' aggregation and users' toggling mean for how we conceptualise convenience? Platformized convenience is a demand placed on consumers, as pointed out by Neves and Steinberg (2024). This demand of convenience placed on consumers and businesses by platforms is also about attachments between people and platforms that involve practices of shifting time and tasks; notions of care, leisure, provisioning, competition, commerce, and livelihood; and organisations whether they are households, neighbourhoods, businesses, or business associations. Convenience is not simply a 'culture' or a 'lifestyle' of ease that platforms can create by pushing information, creating content, or habits.

Being attached to platformized convenience has meant that people are quite often self-critical of their actions and attachments as users of platforms and socio-technical systems generally. In the introduction chapter of this thesis, I recounted recurring public debates around Amazon Prime Day to steer scholarly focus to how common users of the internet engage in a version of the agency-structure debate over the role of users' individual actions on platforms' fortunes.

Further along, the findings chapters in this thesis have described-analysed the contingent relations between platforms and their users. Many users turn off push notifications if they think they are likely to be tempted to order food in (chapter 1) and sometimes users escalate complaints outside in-app chats to increase pressure by complaining publicly on X, formerly known as Twitter, and tagging other authorities (chapter 2). These individual actions often gain enough popularity that platforms are compelled to alter their strategies. One example of platforms' evolving positions and

strategies is the reviews and ratings sections (chapter 3). Furthermore, ordering food online is not a perfect substitute for cooking at home since cooking, serving, and eating food are also used for leisure, fun, entertainment and enjoyment (chapter 4). Similarly, people use platforms to pace life by gathering with other city-dwellers and enjoying the city's food and neighbourhood cultures (chapter 5). Consumer and business users both 'put platforms in their place' or playfully smack platforms alongside their existing arrangements of buying and selling food. Users' evaluation of platforms is a pragmatic criticism of platforms that wedges itself between two explanatory frameworks of in scholarship about either platforms' gamification or users' agential gaming. Therefore, if common users engage in often well-informed criticism of socio-technical systems that does not simply collapse into gamification or gaming, what can we, as scholar-critics say through our criticism? (Lalvani 2026).

What we now need to do is to further some of these insights about users' actions that are pragmatically critical of platforms and their aggregation. As platform users, people seem to intuit as a group, given the shared experience of using platforms that seems to have been ontologically transformative. Being moved as a user involves civic-minded action around people's activities and identities as users.

The two sub-sections below outline directions for future research building on the insight that users are moved to action in unforeseeable and sometimes strange ways and are not only pushed by information.

5.1. Future directions: caste and commensality; AI and platforms

This thesis has identified but not examined two developments that could benefit from further study. The first development noted in Chapter 3 is how platforms reduce the barrier to entry into the food and hospitality industries. Future research could study systematically what platforms do to the dynamics of caste and commensality. Does the lowering of the barrier to entry invariably enable food entrepreneurship from underrepresented castes? Is there a widening of what is on the menu in culinary culture due to more diverse ownership? Elsewhere, I have noted that platform's mediation has invariably enabled shifts in the interpersonal interactions for food delivery workers as a professional group. Workers-as-platform-users, compared to their off-platform counterparts who are engaged by restaurants directly, are enabled to 'flex' in ways unavailable to their off-platform counterparts (Lalvani, September 2026).

The second development noted but not examined is that of convergence between AI and platforms. It could be useful to examine how agentic systems and AI are being bundled with platforms. For instance, Swiggy launched 'Builders Club' in April 2026. Through this initiative, they are inviting startups building agentic systems and AI solutions to use Swiggy's Model Context Protocol (MCP) servers and API tools "so they can build AI commerce applications at scale on top of Swiggy".

5.2. Future directions: emergent futures of user advocacy

The chapters in this thesis have also detailed the civic role played by users as a collective entity. I identify user advocacy as a broad and compelling area of action that can also be a promising area for future research, in addition to advocacy on labour rights. Thinking of users as capable of acting collectively is significant because most often, civic action around platforms has been organised around workers experiences. However, labour scholars have pointed out that the institutional

power of labour has been declining, and these scholars have redirected attention to other forms of power available to labour for civic action. They suggest that workers might still be able to exercise 'societal power' which refers to coalitional and discursive power or even 'structural power' which refers to labour using their role in the marketplace (Schmalz and Webster 2024). Does this insight about societal and structural power that workers-as-platform-users might hold, also be relevant for other platform users, like consumers and businesses?

The research in this thesis has identified new paths of civic action through user advocacy along three paths. One path of user advocacy is creative work in marketing and design. Competition policy is another path, and finally, consumer rights and their relationship to workers' rights, and researcher-critic-users' role in interpersonal relations are a kind of user advocacy.

The first path of future research on user advocacy could involve following how 'dark patterns' have emerged as an issue that is seen to reduce user agency in public discussions and civil society organisations in India. Some examples of dark patterns are "false urgency" and "confirm shaming." As the names suggest, a false urgency tactic often misleads users into believing that there is either high demand or time pressure of a limited discount. Some platforms add donations to charity without users' consent and when users uncheck such boxes, confirm shaming prompts induce guilt, shame, or ridicule by labeling checkboxes with statements like: "charity is for the rich, I don't care." These dark patterns are often deployed in promotional information push, examined in Chapters 1 and 2 in this thesis. The Ministry of Consumer Affairs (DoCA) have been regulating manipulative platform design by issuing 'Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Dark Patterns (2023).' This document listed thirteen tactics that various digital platforms utilize to

deceive users.[188] Alongside the actions of the DoCA and civil society organisations, the discussion platform Reddit has been a site of users' calling out deceptive design practices through communities like r/darkpatterns or even r/FuckZepto that is dedicated to exposing malpractices specifically on India-based quick commerce platform Zepto.

The second path of future research, as pointed out in this thesis, especially in Chapter 3, could be to examine the importance of creative interpretations of competition law by business associations, scholars, and civil society. Developments in antitrust and competition regulations are of most obvious relevance to businesses and their associations.[189] However, these regulations are also crucial for consumers and workers as famously demonstrated by legal scholar and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) former chair, Lina Khan, through the case of Amazon. Anti trust policy influences market structures in a way that some businesses can engage in predatory pricing practices which involve drawing consumers with low prices, driving out other competitors, and then raising prices (Khan 2017). Therefore, the relations between businesses influence how we as people, can use wages to provision for households and care for ourselves and our families. To some extent, civil society in India is already putting into action this insight of using competition policy and law. A case in point is the legal case against Meta's violation of users' privacy that was built by using competition law. It resulted in the Competition Commission of India (CCI) imposing a penalty on Meta, the parent company of Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and so on for violating users' privacy. This was a landmark case due to the amount of the penalty — Rs 213.14 crores or

[188] See the DoCA's guidelines (2023) here: *https://doca.gov.in/ccpa/files/The%20Guidelines%20for%20Prevention%20and%20Regulation%20of%20Dark%20Patterns,%202023_1732707717.pdf*. Accessed October 2025. Civil society organisation, the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) have argued that the DoCA guidelines rely heavily on users' complaints and that they would be more effective if they relied on a proactive enforcement. See their criticism here: https://internetfreedom.in/turn-on-the-diyas-turn-off-the-dark-patterns/. Accessed October 2025.

[189] The association between industrial policy and anti-trust might not be as obvious either, see: (Wu 2025).

approximately USD 25.25 million — as well as the fact that it was for the first time outside of the European Union that any nation had penalised Meta.[190]

The third path of future research could be to analyse platform workers or work together with consumers or consumption, in a non-dualistic way. This thesis has narrowed the intellectual and practice-based gap between consumer and worker organisations. Chapters 4 and 5 highlighted the role of Mumbai-based consumer rights organisation Mumbai Grahak Panchayat (MGP) and more recent civic-minded city-walks organisations like Go Hallu Hallu that acknowledge their activities as consumers, workers, *and* citizens. In the state of Maharashtra, there have been cooperatively owned grocery store chains like *Apna Bazaar* (Our Supermarket) owned by workers' and middle-class consumers' organisation called Mumbai Maryadit Kamgar Madhyawarti Grahak Sahakari Sanstha.' [191] Even outside India, workers' unions and consumers' organisations in the United States of America, investigated algorithmically determined prices of groceries. Their research recognised that the price for the same item is different for different users and overall has adverse implications for people (Same Cart, Different Price: Instacart's Price Experiments Cost Families at Checkout 2025).

Through this thesis, my attempt has been to contribute to an emergent scholarly field of platform studies; observe people and platforms' relations widely with a soft, diffuse, and rhizomatic focus; and analyse these observations as a researcher-critic-user. I have also aimed to make space within

[190] See the CCI's press release here: https://www.cci.gov.in/antitrust/press-release/details/451. Accessed October 2025.

[191] https://www.apnabazar.co.in/about_us.html#:~:text=Mumbai%20Kamgar%20Madhyawarti%20Grahak%20sahakari%20Sanstha%20Maryadit. Accessed October 2025.

critical scholarship, to acknowledge the pragmatic criticality of common users that compels me to reckon with my positionality as a user, alongside other users. Irish poet Seamus Heaney's navigation of the public expectation from poets and his own interests and convictions is instructive for my methodological orientation as a researcher-critic-user. Similar to my critique of dominant norms of positionality and criticality, Heaney noted in his Nobel lecture that "As writers and readers, as sinners and citizens, our realism and our aesthetic sense, make us wary of crediting the positive note…" For this reason, he thought his role as poet was to be "bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world."[192]

Therefore, the epigraph at the start of this thesis borrows from Heaney, a reminder he wrote to himself and anyone else who needed it, "to walk on air against your better judgement." His instruction to himself to navigate heavy complexities by widening the edges of judgement such that it keeps room for possibility and lightness. For platform scholarship or critical scholars in general, "walking on air" might mean widening our scholarly gaze beyond our "better judgement" or atleast dominant judgement which almost programmatically leads us away from banal descriptions (McFall 2010) to focusing deeply on only one platform, or only on Big tech and/ Big Critique (Burgess et al 2022).

By casting a wide gaze at platforms' aggregation and users' experiences as consumers and businesses, this thesis has made three contributions. The *first contribution* has been made through my analysis of food delivery platforms as cultural agents. The term 'cultural' corrects the isolated

[192] https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/. Accessed January 2024.

manner in which platforms' actions have been studied, primarily as employers; I do not intend to reinforce the binary between what constitutes as cultural or as economic. Thinking of food delivery platforms as cultural agents enables attending to how these platforms are enmeshed with the media and entertainment industries, banking and payments, as well as the food and hospitality industries. Attending to the hyperconnected nature of platforms through a wide range of activities such as promotions, payments, and culinary cultures has a corrective effect as these developments remain understudied. Due to the dominant approach of examining food delivery platforms as employers, workers as platform users receive the most scholarly attention. Less is known about their consumers' and businesses' experiences and interactions as platform users.

Therefore, the *second contribution* made by this thesis is that it has offered the understudied point of view of consumers and businesses buying and selling food via platforms. Specifically, I have drawn attention to a vast range of commitments that surround domestic and commercial platform use and have a bearing on how people toggle (hold together and switch between) activities as they buy and sell food. Such a wide gaze credits people's pragmatic criticality, giving it analytical credence, even if it does not result in structural change immediately.

Finally, the *third contribution* made by this thesis is that it has cleared the methodological and conceptual path for more research on platformized convenience, consumption, and platform use. By drawing attention to shifting equations between people as workers, consumers, business owners, and platforms, my intention has been to tilt scholarly criticism more towards curiosity and empathy and away from guilt associated with consumption and use. I have built on other scholars' work, whose attempt it has been to redefine scholarly tools of judgement and analysis to make

space in between the two pillars of what counts as criticality: accusatory analysis by distant critics of socio-technical systems or rituals of self-flagellation in the name of reflection. If socio-technical systems are converging and are increasingly marked by a 'creep' (Koops 2021; Bishop 2023), then a wide scholarly gaze and situating ourselves as scholar-critic-users alongside other users, can help study and reimagine the dynamics of our lives as workers, consumers, researcher-critic-users who do care, consumption, and convenience. Scholar-critic-users walking on air can tread with levity, lightness, and openness to possibility, even as we carry heavy loads from our observation, participation, living alongside others, our using and being used by socio-technical systems.

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