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# Analyzing the Challenges of Affordable Daily Meals for Urban Working Professionals and Students in Indian Metro Cities

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**ABSTRACT:** In today's city life, a large chunk of the working class and students are not being able to afford quality, decent meals a day. Metro cities like Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai, and Delhi have witnessed an overnight hike in living expenses, and the price of meals has become a deciding aspect among the budgetary constraints. Working young adults, many of whom are newly out of their college days, and student-residents who pay rent for boarding houses or reside in paying guest (PG) facilities hardly ever get wholesome home-like food within reach. Lack of time to cook a meal, extended working hours, high prices of food at company towns, and excessive delivery rates charged by online food businesses add to the problem. This research explores the feasibility of a hybrid meal service concept integrating affordability, convenience, and quality to target this segment in particular. The future potential of the project is to expand into other urban areas, improve meal customization capabilities, and advance technology in order management and customer experience. This study has a compelling argument to create a systematic meal service that meets the need for an appropriate balance among cost, convenience, and nutritional value, to create a sustainable and effective solution for urban consumers.

**KEYWORDS:** Hybrid meal service, Affordability, Convenience, Quality, Urban professionals, Subscription-based meal options.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The sudden urbanization of Indian metro cities has revolutionized the lifestyle and eating habits of its people. With Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai, and Delhi still drawing professionals and students from all corners of the nation, the demand for affordable and quick meals has risen many folds. With longer working hours, hectic academic schedules, and the rising cost of living, it is increasingly becoming hard for many to afford healthy, home-prepared meals on a daily basis. Restaurant, food delivery, and instant packaged food reliance has increased manifold, but these options are typically paired with drawbacks such as high cost, nutritional losses, and unreliable food quality. Indian food services have seen a shift towards convenience-driven consumption, with food ordering websites Swiggy and Zomato dominating the market. Their model, however, is restaurant tie-ups and commission-based pricing, which translates into per-meal expenses of ₹250 to ₹400. This study aims to explore the challenges urban working professionals and students face in getting affordable, healthy food and determine if a hybrid meal service platform that solves these problems can be made viable. The business model of ₹100 - ₹200 per meal is also kept in sync with the purchasing ability of the market being targeted so that the business is affordable as well as cost-effective. This research also examines the operational feasibility and feasibility of the model proposed by considering factors such as pricing strategy, competitive situation, and delivery mechanism.

## II. OBJECTIVES

- To research the food consumption patterns and issues of Gen Z, millennials and working professionals in metropolitan cities, determining drivers such as affordability, convenience, and food quality influencing their eating decisions.
- To investigate the feasibility of a subscription meal program offering economical, home-prepared meals. A study of consumer demand, price liking, and willingness to adopt such a program.

### III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*Rathi et al. (2020)* in their study on healthy eating and cooking attitudes among Indian adolescents, noted that although a majority of adolescents had a taste for water over sugar-sweetened beverages (65.7%) and enjoyed the use of fresh fruits and vegetables during cooking (76.5%), a significant barrier to healthy eating still existed in the need for great motivation (56.1%). *Kashyap and Mehta (2021)* employed a qualitative study to investigate the evolving eating habits of India's urban middle class. They found a rising trend towards processed and convenience foods due to factors such as busy lifestyles, increased disposable incomes, and aggressive marketing by food companies. *Johnson et al. (2022)* describe how food delivery apps might fight food insecurity. They suggest that although convenience is offered, these apps primarily serve the wealthier segments and in doing so may reinforce unequal access to food. *Rao et al. (2020)* in their systematic review, identify specific urban poverty barriers to access of healthy diets. These include limited financial means, higher costs of food, and limited access to nutrient-dense food options, all of which affect worse nutrition outcomes for urban poor populations. *Sharma (2023)* study of consumer sentiments towards online food delivery apps reveals that convenience, variety, and time-saving are the primary drivers for usage. There are, however, persistent concerns regarding food quality, hygiene, and delivery charges with consumers.

### IV. RESEARCH GAP

Despite extensive research on food consumption trends and dietary habits in India's urban setting, there is still much that needs to be understood and redressed regarding working professionals' and students' individual requirements. While the earlier studies have tried examining the growing reliance on convenience food and home delivery systems, hardly any of them specifically examine the affordability and availability of healthy meals among people of low incomes. Little research exists to support hybrid meal service models blending physical spaces with subscription meal plans to address the specific needs of urban professionals and students.

### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study employs a mixed-method approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to acquire in depth understanding of the difficulties experienced by working professionals and students in urban areas in getting access to cheap and healthy food.

### VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This part of the report includes an in-depth examination of consumer behavior, concerns, and preferences towards meal subscription services and food ordering. The information has been collected from surveys and plotted in the form of charts to determine trends.

The Figure 1 shows the age group and occupation of the respondents. The data illuminates the primary audience composition, which is discovered to be predominantly youthful students.

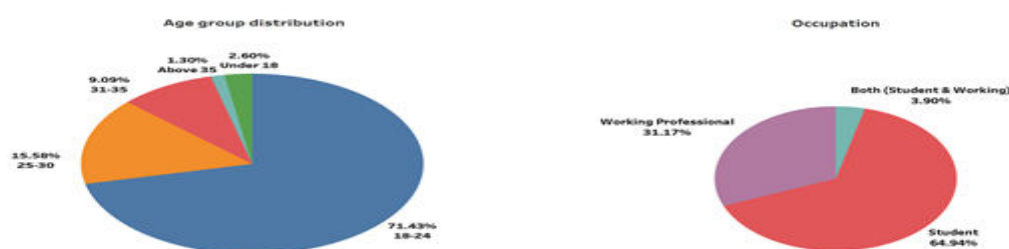


Fig 1: Age group and occupation wise distribution

**Interpretation:** The information shows that a large percentage of the respondents fall within the 18-24 age bracket (71.43%), suggesting that most are young adults, probably university students or recent career starters. Working professionals account for 31.17%, and the remaining small group (3.90%) do both work and study. This Figure 2 illustrates the **geographical distribution** of survey respondents based on their city of residence, providing a clear visual representation of participant demographics across South India.



Fig 2: Geographic Distribution of Respondents by City

**Interpretation:** The majority of the respondents (54) are from **Bengaluru**, and therefore, it has the largest number of representations in the survey. **Hyderabad** is next with 10 respondents, and then **Coimbatore** and **Chennai** with 4 and 3 respondents respectively, which are fairly represented. The smaller towns such as **Hubli** and **Madikeri** each have one respondent, indicating negligible response from the regions.

Figure 3 shows an in-depth examination of respondents' spending on food on a day-to-day basis, categorizing expenditures into three distinct brackets: ₹100-₹200, ₹300-₹500, and above ₹500.

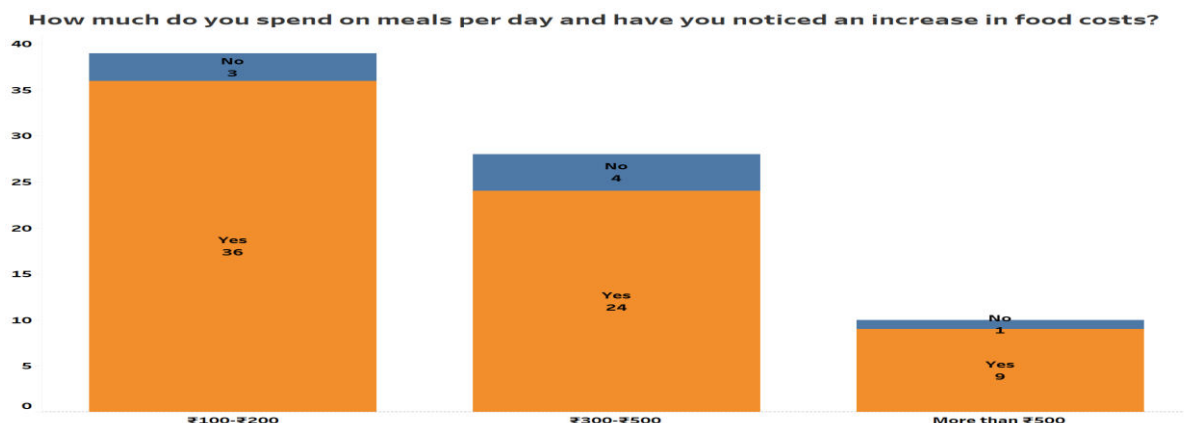


Fig 3: Daily Meal Expenditure and Perception of Rising Food Costs

**Interpretation:** Most (36) respondents spend ₹100-₹200 per day on food and the majority of them (92.3%) identified an increase in the price of food. Among the respondents who spent in the range of ₹300-₹500, 24 respondents identified increasing prices, but only 4 respondents did not. Figure 4 consolidates a detailed analysis of how respondents typically get their daily meals, with an emphasis on prevailing consumption patterns among urban professionals and students.



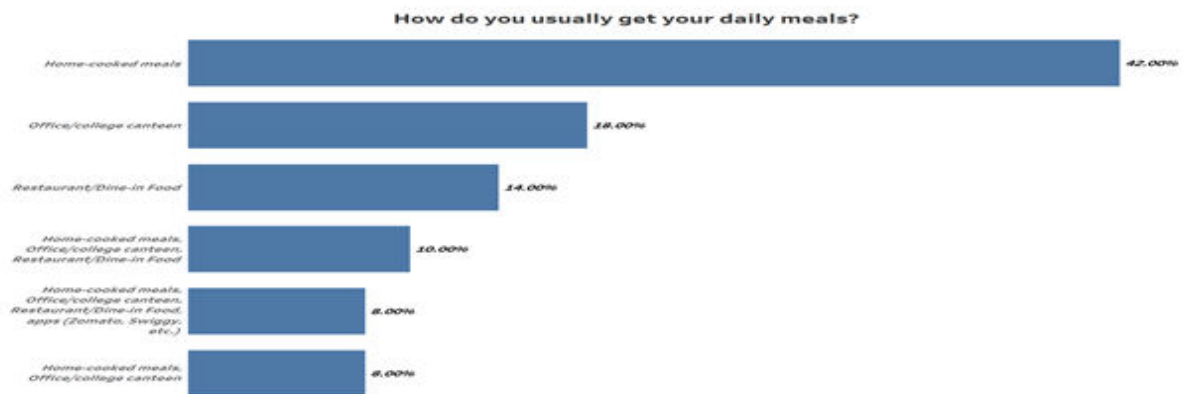


Fig 4: Sources of Daily Meals Among Respondents

**Interpretation:** A major majority (42%) of the people depend on **home-cooked food**, and hence, it is the most predominant source of food. Moreover, 8% of the respondents employ a mix of **home-cooked food, canteens, dine-in restaurants**, and food delivery apps such as **Zomato and Swiggy**, reflecting dependence on more than one source of food.

Figure 5 is a clear representation of the frequency with which people buy food online, categorizing their answers into four groups: 1-2 times a week, 3-5 times a week, daily, and occasionally.

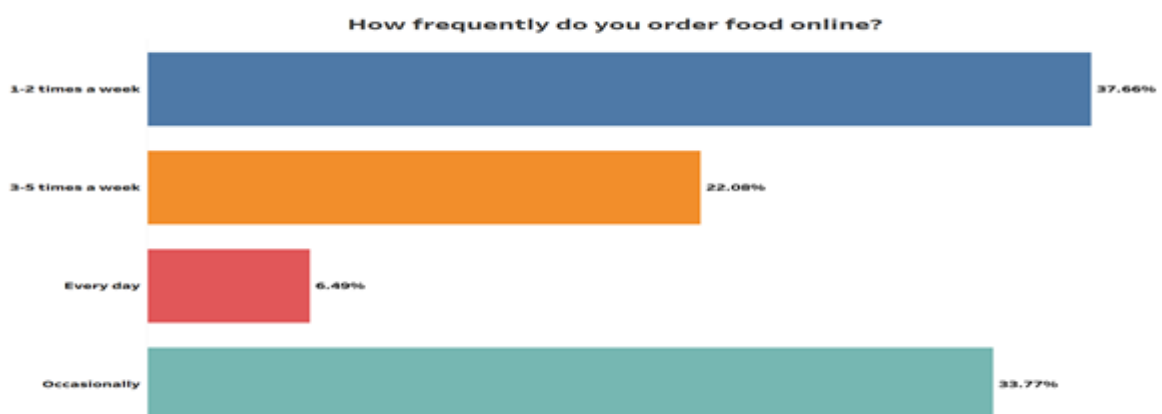


Fig 5: Frequency of Online Food Orders Among Respondents

**Interpretation:** The **highest frequency** of ordering food online is **1-2 times a week**, cited by **37.66%** of the respondents. It is followed by **orders sometimes at 33.77%**, which states that most respondents utilize food delivery services irregularly.

Figure 6 presents the major concerns of respondents when ordering food online, grouped into six categories: Food Quality, High Cost & Food Quality, High Cost, Delivery Time & Food Quality, Delivery Time, and Delivery Time, Food Quality & Nutritional Value.

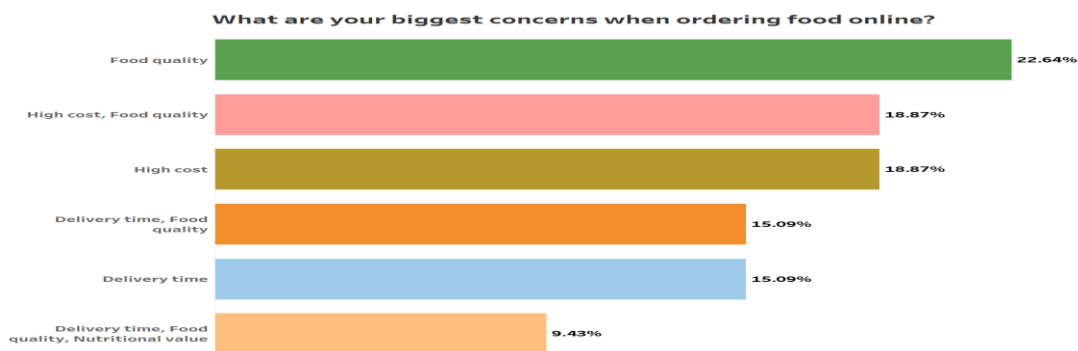


Fig 6: Biggest Concerns When Ordering Food Online

**Interpretation:** The most significant concern among respondents is **food quality**, with **22.64%** of individuals highlighting it as their primary issue. The least mentioned concern, reported by **9.43%**, includes **delivery time, food quality, and nutritional value**, showing that fewer respondents prioritize nutrition when ordering food online. Figure 7 presents comprehensive data on the impact of rising food prices on consumer eating habits, shedding light on behavioral adaptations in response to inflationary pressure.

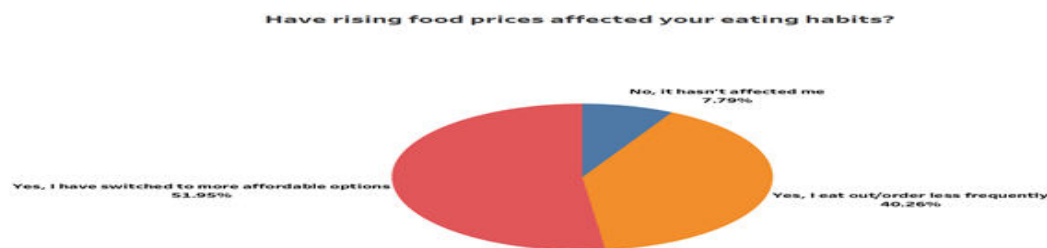


Fig 7: Impact of Rising Food Prices on Eating Habits

**Interpretation:** The majority (**51.95%**) of respondents have switched to more affordable food options due to rising prices. A significant portion (**40.26%**) has reduced the frequency of dining out or ordering food. This indicates that price fluctuations in food have a considerable impact on consumer behaviour, prompting shifts toward cost-effective choices.

Figure 8 provides an in-depth analysis of consumer interest in a hybrid meal service that integrates physical outlets, subscription-based meal plans, and delivery options.

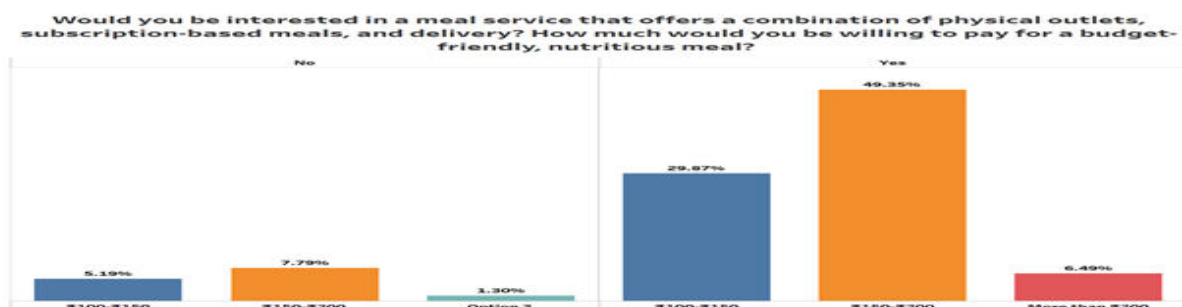


Fig 8: Interest in a Budget-Friendly, Nutritious Meal Service

**Interpretation:** A significant majority (85.71%) expressed interest in such a service, with the highest willingness to pay between ₹150-₹200 (49.35%). This data suggests a strong demand for affordable and nutritious meal solutions, particularly within the ₹150-₹200 price range.

Figure 9 provides a detailed illustration of consumer preferences for various meal subscription models, highlighting the popularity of different options such as monthly subscriptions, weekly subscriptions, and on-demand ordering.

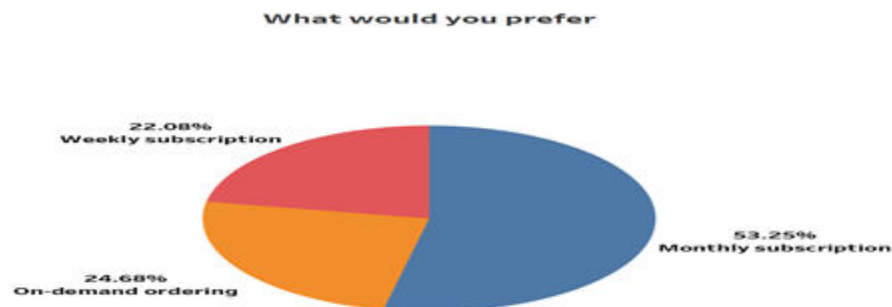


Fig 9: Preferred Meal Subscription Model

**Interpretation:** The majority (53.25%) chose a monthly subscription, indicating a preference for long-term, convenient meal plans. The dominance of the monthly subscription model indicates that consumers prefer cost-effective and convenient meal-planning options to repeated ordering options.

Figure 10 provides the full analysis of the key drivers of consumer interest in a meal service, revealing such critical sectors as pricing, convenience, flexibility, and meals variety.

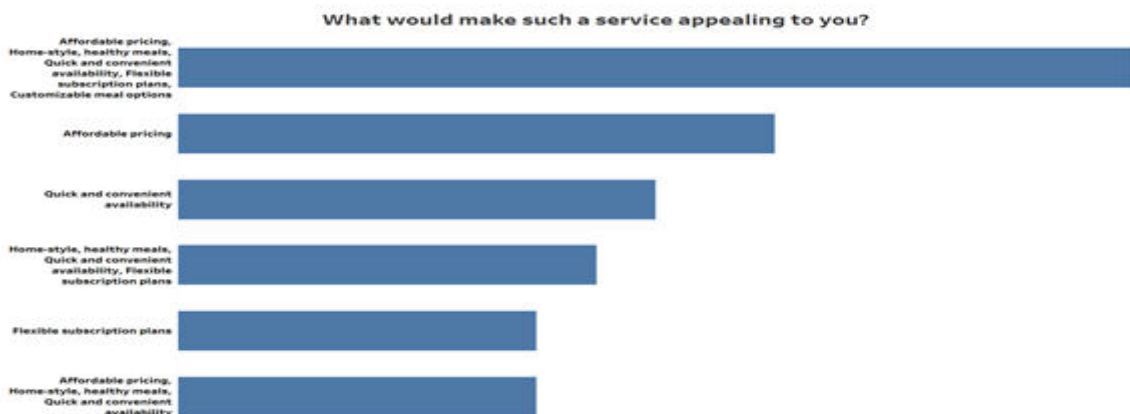


Fig 10: Factors That Make a Meal Service Appealing

**Interpretation:** The most important consideration for participants is a mix of **affordability, home-style healthy dining, speedy availability, flexible plans, and customization**, ranking it as the **highest desired service attribute**. Low cost is the second prominent factor, closely followed by **speedy and convenient availability**, showing that **cost and convenience** are foremost considerations.

## VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The increasing price of food is a significant issue for urban professionals and students, impacting their consumption decisions related to meals directly. Most people, especially those with low disposable income, actively look for cost-effective and quick meal alternatives that are not at the expense of quality or nutritional content. The trend towards

greater dependence on online food delivery services has resulted in widespread discontent because of high prices, extra charges, and apprehension regarding meal quality. Meal services based on subscription have come as a possible answer, offering predictability of costs and convenience, which is appealing for planned meals. A hybrid meal service model offers the potential to span this gap through the integration of physical stores, subscription meal plans, and delivery services to reach the varied urban population needs. This model is highly viable in metro cities, where demand for affordable, convenient meal options is increasing exponentially. By pricing meals strategically between ₹100 and ₹200, the service can position itself at the expenditure level of the target group, being affordable yet upholding high standards of food quality and nutrition. Meals should be structured to provide a home-style, balanced diet with a focus on fresh, high-quality ingredients to address the customers' expectations for health and hygiene. By integrating these strategic elements, the discussed hybrid meal service model has the ability to rethink the access of urban consumers to healthy and affordable meals, simplifying the major issues of affordability, quality, and convenience. Along with convenience and economy, the system further ensures a sustainable business model that can be scaled in numerous metro cities to cater to the increased demand for ordered, cost-effective meal choices. As a consumer-based program, it is likely to transform urban meal patterns and develop a new paradigm in affordable foods.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

The investigation examined the eating behaviours of Gen Z and working professionals in metropolitan cities, noting affordability, convenience and food quality as main considerations in decision making. Meal choices being altered by rising food prices, and consumers actively seeking healthy, budget conscious alternatives. While online food delivery was popular among the participants, the higher food currency and quality compromises led to dissatisfaction with it. Market model was found to effectively satisfy affordability, food quality, and accessibility in sustainable ways. To address this gap in the market, a hybrid meal service was considered which would consist of a physical presence, meal subscription program and delivery service. The study also assessed the feasibility of a subscription-based meal program, which emerged as a viable solution due to its cost predictability and convenience. Beyond what the urban professional might prefer, this study provides consideration around the affordability, consumer driven food service conversations, understanding user satisfaction and use of more food delivery services in a hybrid service model.

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