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Food Practices, Consumerism, and Cultural Identity in Dutch and Nepali Families

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationships between food practices, consumerism, and cultural identity within Dutch and Nepali families. Through semi-structured interviews with 12 families (6 from each cultural context), provides a rich, comparative analysis of how daily food-related activities, shopping, cooking, and eating are shaped by and, in turn, shape cultural values, global market forces, and notions of family cohesion. The primary objectives are to document and analyze daily food practices, explore the cultural meanings attached to food, investigate the influence of globalized consumerism, understand family negotiation strategies, and compare the findings to develop a richer theoretical model. Thematic analysis revealed a stark contrast: Dutch families exhibit a highly pragmatic, efficient, and individualistic 'Food as Fuel' paradigm, viewing meals through a lens of logistical management and conscious consumption. In contrast, Nepali families demonstrate a holistic, relational, and ritualistic 'Food as Love' paradigm, where food is a core medium for expressing love, maintaining tradition, and reinforcing social bonds. Despite these divergent cultural logics, both groups actively navigate the pressures of global consumerism, with Dutch families leveraging it for convenience and ethical distinction, while Nepali families engage with it as a means of cultural preservation and status negotiation. This study concludes that the kitchen remains a vital, dynamic arena where global and local forces converge, and family identities are continuously cooked, consumed, and redefined.

Introduction

Food is far more than mere sustenance; it is a primary cultural code, 'a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviours' (Collins et al., 2021). It is through food that we express love, enact tradition, demarcate social boundaries, and negotiate our place in the world. Within the family unit the primary site of cultural reproduction this code is learned, performed, and transmitted, making the domestic kitchen a critical locus for understanding social continuity and change (Sharma, Devkota, et al., 2024). The daily, often mundane, practices of planning meals, navigating supermarket aisles or local markets, and the shared rituals of cooking and eating are deeply embedded in a complex web of economic constraints, social obligations, and profound symbolic meanings (van der Heijden & Wiggins, 2025). These practices are not static; they are dynamic processes through which family members 'do' family, creating and reaffirming their collective identity with every chopped vegetable and shared meal.

In an increasingly interconnected and commercialized world, these traditional foodways are encountering the powerful, homogenizing forces of global consumer capitalism. The global food industry, with its standardized supermarkets, ubiquitous branded goods, and marketing narratives that promise convenience, health, and modernity, presents both opportunities and challenges to local culinary traditions (Scapin et al., 2025). This intersection creates a complex terrain where families must constantly make choices that balance inherited cultural scripts with the seductive appeal of globalized products and lifestyles. How families negotiate this terrain how they incorporate, resist, or adapt to global

consumerism within their unique cultural frameworks is a central question for understanding contemporary social life and the evolving nature of cultural identity itself (Sharma & Devkota, 2024).

To explore this nexus of food, family, and consumerism, this paper undertakes a comparative qualitative analysis of two profoundly distinct cultural contexts: the Netherlands and Nepal. The Netherlands represents a prototypical Western, post-industrial, and highly individualistic society. It is characterized by a high gross domestic product (GDP) (Nepal & Shakya, 2025), a robust welfare state, and a food culture often described in academic and popular discourse as practical, frugal, and de-emotionalized (Santos & Simões, 2021). The iconic Dutch aardappel, vlees, groente (potato, meat, vegetable) meal structure speaks to a historical and cultural prioritization of efficiency and nourishment over gastronomic pleasure. Conversely, Nepal is a South Asian nation with a deeply collectivist, family-oriented social structure, a developing economy, and a rich, diverse culinary heritage deeply intertwined with Hindu and Buddhist traditions, geography, and seasonality (Sharma et al., 2024). The staple dal-bhat-tarkari (lentils, rice, and vegetables) is not just a meal but a cultural institution, eaten twice daily and symbolizing sustenance, hospitality, and cosmological order (Magar et al., 2023).

By placing these two disparate contexts in dialogue, this research moves beyond quantitative consumption data to uncover the lived experiences, moral reasoning, and emotional landscapes that define what it means to 'eat as a family' in the 21st century. The core research problem this study addresses is the lack of a deep, contextual, and comparative understanding of how the core cultural values embedded within Dutch and Nepali family structures shape their engagement with contemporary food consumerism, and how this engagement, in turn, influences the perpetuation or transformation of their cultural identities. To systematically address this problem, this explore and interpret the cultural meanings, values, and beliefs attached to food, the act of cooking, and the ritual of eating together within these family units. To investigate the multifaceted influence of globalized food consumerism evident in the presence of supermarkets, international brands, and convenience foods on these traditional practices and cultural meanings. to understand the conscious and unconscious strategies, that families employ to negotiate the daily tensions between convenience, cost, health, taste, and cultural authenticity and to compare and contrast the findings from both cultural groups in order to develop a richer, more nuanced theoretical model of the relationship between food, family, and consumerism in a globalized world.

Through in-depth inquiry, this study aims to illuminate the profound ways in which culture mediates the relationship between family life and the market. It asks: How do the logics of the market and the logics of the hearth interact, conflict, and merge within these distinct cultural frameworks? The answers, gleaned from the voices of the participants themselves, reveal that the kitchen is not merely a room where food is prepared, but a dynamic frontier where the global is domesticated, and the local is globalized, one meal at a time.

Research Problem

The global food system is a dominant force shaping modern life, yet our understanding of its impact on the intimate sphere of the family remains fragmented. While quantitative studies from fields like nutrition, economics, and market research provide valuable macro-level data on caloric intake, spending patterns, and market shares, they often fail to capture the 'why' behind food choices. The subjective, symbolic, and deeply emotional dimensions of food practices within the family the stories, the struggles, the smells and tastes that constitute culinary culture are largely rendered invisible by surveys and consumption figures. As Villeneuve, (2024) argues, to understand consumption, we must study it not as an economic act but as a process of 'appropriation,' where mass-produced goods are transformed into personal and cultural possessions.

This methodological gap is particularly pronounced in a comparative context, especially between a Western European and a South Asian society. The existing academic literature on food consumerism, particularly concerning trends like convenience food, ethical consumption, and the 'family meal,' is heavily dominated by Western perspectives (Duralia, 2023). Concepts such as 'time scarcity' and 'convenience' are often framed through a Euro-American lens that presupposes a specific set of social structures, gender roles, and economic pressures. This creates a significant theoretical and empirical blind spot. We lack a clear understanding of how these very concepts are interpreted, valued,

or resisted in non-Western, collectivist settings where the very definition of 'family,' the social role of food, and the division of domestic labour may be fundamentally different.

Furthermore, even within Western contexts like the Netherlands, the prevailing narrative of a pragmatic and frugal food culture is often accepted at face value. There has been insufficient critical investigation into the emotional and social costs of this pragmatism, or into how this traditional model is evolving under new pressures, such as the rise of foodie culture, health trends, and the intensification of work-life balance challenges. The Dutch kitchen is often portrayed as efficient, but what does this efficiency feel like for those who maintain it? What meanings are lost or gained in the process?

Conversely, in rapidly urbanizing contexts like Kathmandu, Pokhara etc the narrative is often one of a simple 'loss of tradition' in the face of globalization. This deficit model overlooks the agency, creativity, and complex negotiation strategies employed by families as they incorporate new foods and practices into their lives. The story is not merely one of erosion, but also of adaptation and syncretism. Therefore, the core research problem this study addresses is twofold. First, it tackles the 'epistemological problem' of relying solely on quantitative and Western-centric frameworks to understand a fundamentally qualitative and culturally specific phenomenon. Second, it addresses the 'substantive gap' in our knowledge regarding the lived experience of food consumerism in two contrasting cultural settings. By privileging the voices of Dutch and Nepali families, this research seeks to provide a thick description (Scholten & Holzhacker, 2009) of their culinary worlds, moving beyond simplistic binaries of traditional/modern or local/global to reveal the complex, often contradictory, realities of feeding a family today.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative, comparative case study design, rooted in an interpretivist paradigm. An interpretivist approach is concerned with understanding the subjective world of human experience (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). It posits that reality is socially constructed and that the researcher's aim is to understand the meanings that people assign to their experiences. This philosophy is particularly suited to the study of food, which is dense with symbolic meaning. A qualitative methodology was therefore deemed essential for capturing the complexity, nuance, and lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, W. John and Poth, 2018). The comparative element between Dutch and Nepali families was deliberately chosen to facilitate a cross-cultural analysis that would highlight the profound role of specific cultural contexts in shaping what might otherwise appear to be universal practices like 'grocery shopping' or 'the family meal'.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide rich, information-dense cases relevant to the research objectives (Creswell, 2014). The study involved 12 families while six from the Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and six from the Pokhara, Nepal. To ensure a degree of comparability in terms of market access and socioeconomic status, all participating families self-identified as middle-class, owned their home or rented a stable apartment, and had access to both traditional markets and modern supermarkets. A key criterion was that each family had at least one child under the age of 18 living at home, ensuring that the dynamics of child-rearing and intergenerational transmission were present.

Within each family, the method of data collection was interviews with the person(s) most responsible for food-related decisions and cooking. In practice, this was most often the mother, reflecting the persistent gendered nature of food work cross-culturally (Oleschuk, 2019). Data was collected In-depth interviews, lasting between 40 and 60 minutes, were conducted in the participants' homes. This setting was chosen to make participants feel comfortable and to allow for spontaneous references to their kitchen, pantry, or cooking utensils. A flexible interview guide was used, covering key thematic areas derived from the research objectives: Interviews in the Netherlands were conducted in English; those in Nepal were conducted in Nepali or English. All interviews were professionally transcribed and translated, with careful attention to preserving cultural idioms and conversational nuance.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in writing (Sharma & Devkota, 2024). They were thoroughly informed of their right to withdraw at any time, the

confidentiality of their data, the use of anonymized verbatim quotations in publications, and the steps taken to secure the data.

Results

The thematic analysis revealed several powerful, contrasting themes that articulate the core cultural logics governing food practices in Dutch and Nepali families. The following section presents these findings, using extensive verbatim quotations to ground the analysis in the participants' own voices and experiences.

The Foundational Philosophy of Food-Fuel vs. Love

For the Dutch participants, food was predominantly framed in functional, pragmatic terms: as fuel for the body, a biological necessity to be managed efficiently within the constraints of modern, busy lives. The language of logistics, nutrition, and time-management was pervasive. Dutch 1F (30) Teacher, Amsterdam: 'For me, it's fundamentally about efficiency. I plan the week on Sunday, make a strict list, and do one big shop at the Albert Heijn. Dinner is... well, you know, the classic 'aardappels, groente, vlees'. It's not very exciting, and I know the rest of the world might find it boring, but it's healthy, everyone eats it, and it's done quickly. We are not a family that spends hours in the kitchen. Life is too busy for that. The goal is to get a balanced meal on the table with minimal fuss'. The emotional or symbolic weight of food was often consciously downplayed. The primary goals were health, efficiency, and maintaining a peaceful routine. The satisfaction derived was not from the culinary creation itself, but from the successful execution of a domestic task. Dutch 1M (45) IT Consultant, Amsterdam said 'I see food as fuel, honestly. Good fuel, of course, we make an effort to buy organic meat and seasonal veggies from the market but still, fundamentally, it's fuel. The emotional part, for me, is less important than the nutritional and practical. The togetherness at the table is more about the conversation, about hearing about everyone's day, than it is about the food itself. The food is almost the excuse to sit down'.

In contrast, Nepali families described food in deeply emotional, relational, and spiritual terms. Cooking and feeding were articulated as primary languages of care, love, and religious devotion. Food was inextricably linked to concepts of Maya (love), Sewa (selfless service), and Sanskar (cultural imprint). Nepali 1F (38) Housewife, Pokhara, said that 'When I cook dal-bhat-tarkari for my family, it is not just cooking. It is my sewa, my love made tangible. I know exactly how my husband likes his lentils a bit thicker, how my son prefers his potatoes less spicy. When they eat the food I made with my hands and say, 'Aama, mitho chha!' (Mother, it's delicious!), my heart is full. This is my dharma (duty/righteous path) as a wife and mother. This food is their health, their happiness'. The spiritual dimension was equally potent. Food was tied to notions of purity and the divine. The practice of offering food to the gods before consumption was a common thread, embedding the act of eating within a cosmological framework. Nepali 1M (68), Pokhara, Retired Teacher opined that 'The food we eat becomes our body and mind. It is prasad (divine offering). We cannot eat without first thanking God. We offer a few grains of rice from our plate. This is how we teach our children respect for the food, for the farmers who grew it, for the hands that cooked it. It is all connected. A meal without this gratitude is just... filling a stomach'.

The Rhythm of Consumption-Structured Planning vs. Dynamic Provisioning.

A near-universal practice among Dutch families was the weekly meal plan and the corresponding single, large supermarket trip. This was the cornerstone of their food management system, a disciplined strategy aimed at minimizing waste, saving money, and, most importantly, reducing daily cognitive load and decision-making stress. Dutch 2F (50) School Teacher, Amsterdam: 'The list is sacred! (Laughs). No, really, if it's not on the list, it doesn't get bought. On Saturday morning, I sit with my coffee and I ask everyone if they have any requests for the week, I check the Albert Heijn app for discounts, and I plan seven meals. Monday: pasta. Tuesday: fish. Wednesday: vegetarian and so on. It means I never have to stand in front of the fridge at 5 PM thinking 'what's for dinner?' That, for me, is the definition of stress. This system brings peace'. This hyper-organized, forward-looking approach reflected a broader cultural value of orderliness, control (beheersing), and the rationalization of domestic space and time.

Nepali families, while also engaging in a degree of mental planning, maintained a much more fluid, sensory, and social relationship with food procurement. Daily or every-other-day trips to the local

pasal (small shop) or the vibrant vegetable market were the norm, not the exception. Nepali 2M (35) Banker, Pokhara: 'My wife goes to the market every morning, or at least every other morning. She says she needs to see what is fresh, what looks good, what is in season. It's also her social time. She meets her sisters, the neighbours, they talk about what they are cooking, they exchange recipes. The supermarket is for bulk items like rice, oil, and lentils, but for vegetables, for fish, for spices, it has to be the local market. The smell, the noise, the bargaining it's part of the cooking process itself. It's alive'. This practice emphasized freshness, sensory engagement, spontaneity, and the deep integration of shopping into the social fabric of daily life. Provisioning was a dynamic process of discovery rather than the execution of a pre-set plan.

Global Consumerism: Conscious Convenience vs. Glocalized Status

Dutch families were not opposed to global food trends or convenience foods; in fact, they actively engaged with them. However, this engagement was characterized by a sense of empowered, critical selection. Convenience foods like jarred pasta sauces, pre-cut stir-fry vegetable mixes, and meal kits were common, but their use was often justified through a lens of "smart" and responsible time management. Dutch 3F (39) Graphic Designer, Amsterdam: "I buy that packet of pre-cut stir-fry vegetables. Is it a bit lazy? Maybe. But you know what? It means we eat a vegetable-heavy meal on a busy Wednesday instead of resorting to pizza or a frikandel. I see it as a tool for maintaining a healthy standard on a hectic day. It's a strategic convenience. 'Furthermore, a strong and consistent theme of conscious consumerism' emerged. Many participants spoke proudly and at length about buying organic, free-range, biodynamic, and locally produced items. This was not just about personal health; it was a way to align their pragmatic consumption with a set of ethical values concerning animal welfare, environmental sustainability, and support for local producers. Dutch 2M (41) Civil Servant, Amsterdam: 'We consciously pay more for our milk from the Dutch cows you see in the fields around the city. It's a choice. We can afford it, and it feels better, more responsible. The same with our eggs they must be free-range. It's about quality, of course, the taste is richer, but it's also about knowing where your food comes from, even within this vast, globalized system. It gives us a sense of connection and making a good choice'.

For Nepali families, global consumerism was not primarily about convenience in the Dutch sense; it was powerfully linked to ideas of modernity, prestige, and social status. International brands like Kellogg's cereal, Maggi noodles, Heinz ketchup, or Lay's chips were often incorporated into the traditional meal structure, creating a fascinating form of 'glocalization' the intermingling of global and local elements. Nepali 2F (39) Engineer, Pokhara: 'My children love Maggi noodles. They see the ads on TV, their friends eat it. So sometimes, I will make dal-bhat for lunch, which is non-negotiable, but for their evening snack, I will make Maggi with some vegetables mixed in. For them, it's a treat, a fun food. For me, it's easy and it makes them happy. We also buy Kellogg's Cornflakes now for breakfast, though my father-in-law says it's not as filling or good as chiura (beaten rice) with curry'. These products acted as tangible symbols of a global, modern identity. However, this adoption was often cautious and accompanied by a palpable undercurrent of anxiety about the potential erosion of traditional knowledge, tastes, and health. Nepali 3F (44) Business Owner, Pokhara: 'My teenage daughter doesn't know how to make gundruk (fermented leafy greens) from scratch. She says, 'Why bother, Aama, when we can buy it ready-made in a packet?' But it's not the same taste, and more importantly, it's not the same sanskar. The process of making it, the waiting, the knowledge passed down these packaged foods are easy, yes, but they have no soul, no memory. We must be careful that in embracing the new, we do not forget the old that sustains us'.

The Family Meal: Negotiated Individualism vs. Collective Duty

The Dutch family meal was often described as a site of negotiation between individual preferences and family togetherness. The cultural ethos of child autonomy and personal choice was strongly reflected at the dinner table. Meals sometimes involved preparing multiple variations to cater to different tastes within the same family.

Dutch4 F (37) Nurse, Amsterdam: 'My eldest is going through a phase where she doesn't eat red meat, for ethical reasons, so I make a separate veggie burger or a quiche for her. My youngest absolutely hates cooked carrots, so I serve them raw with a dip for him. It's a bit more work, and

sometimes I get tired of being a short-order cook, but I want mealtime to be a peaceful, positive experience. I believe everyone should have a say in what they eat. So, we negotiate'. The meal's primary function was consistently identified as a time for communication and connection, but the food itself was treated as a customizable commodity that facilitated this social interaction.

In Nepali families, the meal was a powerful, non-negotiable collective ritual. Everyone, with rare exceptions, ate the same food from shared central dishes thali. The act of serving each other especially serving elders and children first was a key practice that visibly reinforced family hierarchy, respect, and unity. Nepali 3 M (33) Official Pokhara: 'In our house, everyone eats the same dal-bhat. There is no 'I don't like this' for the main meal. It is what our mother has cooked with her love and effort. To refuse it would be to refuse her love. We sit together on the floor, we share from the same pots. My father is served first, then the children, then us. This is how we are. This shared meal, this same food, is what binds us. It makes us one family, one body'. The meal was a performance of collectively, where individual preferences were subsumed for the greater good of family harmony and tradition.

Discussion

The findings from this qualitative inquiry reveal two profoundly distinct, yet internally coherent, culinary cosmologies. The Dutch model can be characterized as a 'Food as Fuel' paradigm, a system deeply rooted in a modern, secular, individualistic, and time-scarce society. Its hallmarks are efficiency, rational planning, pragmatism, and the systematic management of food work. Consumerism is embraced not as a threat, but as a toolbox for achieving these goals. The widespread use of convenience foods is justified through a discourse of 'smart' time-management that ultimately serves the higher value of family harmony (by avoiding stress) and individual autonomy (by catering to preferences). This aligns with Warde (1997) concept of the 'antinomies of culinary culture', where the competing pressures of convenience and care are constantly negotiated.

A particularly nuanced finding is the Dutch twist on ethical consumption. The choice of organic, free-range, and local products allows these families to maintain a moral identity and a sense of 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 2018) while remaining within their pragmatic framework. Their 'good taste' is demonstrated not through elaborate culinary techniques or exotic ingredients, but through informed, ethical, and health-conscious sourcing. This represents a form of 'care at a distance' (Cairns et al., 2013), where the ethical consumer becomes a responsible global citizen through their supermarket choices, reconciling the global market with a local, moral conscience.

The Nepali model, conversely, represents a 'Food as Love' paradigm, emerging from a collectivist, relationally oriented culture where interdependence is paramount and the self is often defined through its connections to others. Here, food is a sacred, symbolic currency of care, tradition, and identity. The practices of daily shopping, from-scratch cooking, and shared meals from a common thali are not viewed as inefficiencies but as essential, performative acts of family identity and social-religious obligation (Marcel, 2024). The time invested is not time wasted; it is the very substance of the relationship.

Global consumerism enters this system not as a replacement for tradition, but as a new element to be assimilated and assigned meaning. The adoption of Maggi noodles or Kellogg's cereal is a textbook example of 'glocalization' (Byrnes, 2007), where the global product is localized and woven into the existing cultural fabric. It becomes a 'treat', a 'modern snack', or a symbol of status, but it rarely replaces the core of dal-bhat, which remains the bedrock of culinary and cultural identity. This challenges simplistic narratives of cultural erosion and highlights the agency of local actors in consuming the global.

A critical point of divergence, with profound implications for cultural reproduction, lies in the transmission of culinary knowledge. In the Dutch context, cooking skills are often framed as a practical life skill for independent living, a part of equipping children for their future as autonomous individuals. In the Nepali context, it is the sacred transmission of a cultural heritage, a sanskar. The anxiety expressed by Anjali about her daughter not knowing how to make gundruk is not merely about the loss of a recipe; it is a fear of a broken chain, a rupture in the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory and identity.

However, it is crucial to avoid reinforcing a simplistic traditional-vs-modern binary. Both groups are active, strategic agents navigating their respective food environments. The Dutch use

meticulous planning and ethical consumption to create a sense of order, virtue, and control in a chaotic world. The Nepalis use selective incorporation of global goods to signal modernity and navigate a changing social landscape without fully abandoning the core relational and spiritual logic of their culinary identity. In both cases, the family kitchen is a dynamic space of negotiation and 'everyday activism', where cultural identity is not a static inheritance but is actively cooked, consumed, and remade in the crucible of global flows and local realities.

Conclusion

This in-depth qualitative study demonstrates unequivocally that the journey of food from the market to the plate is a profound narrative about who we are, what we value, and how we connect. For the Dutch families of Amsterdam, this narrative is one of pragmatic individualism, managed through the disciplined tools of lists, schedules, and conscious consumer choices. Theirs is a world where food is rationalized to serve the higher goals of family time, personal health, and ethical living. For the Nepali families of Kathmandu, it is a sacred story of relationality, tradition, and love, performed through daily rituals, the sensory engagement of the market, and the shared pot of dal-bhat. Theirs is a world where food is the glue that binds the family to each other, to their ancestors, and to the divine. The findings robustly challenge homogenizing and simplistic views of global consumerism. It is not an irresistible steamroller erasing all cultural difference. Rather, it is a repertoire of resources products, images, and ideas that are taken up, used, and transformed in culturally specific ways. The Dutch leverage it for efficiency and ethical identity-building; the Nepalis for status and managed modernity. The core cultural logics the paradigm of 'fuel' versus the paradigm of 'love' remain powerfully resilient, acting as prisms through which the dazzling light of the global market is filtered and refracted into the familiar patterns of daily life.

Limitations

This study is intentionally limited by its focus on urban, middle-class families, which provided a necessary basis for comparison but excludes the experiences of rural and working-class families. Future research could fruitfully explore these dimensions, investigating how economic constraints or rural isolation shape food negotiations differently. A fascinating extension would be a study of second-generation Nepali immigrants in the Netherlands, which would provide a powerful lens on cultural hybridization, conflict, and the creation of new food identities at the literal intersection of these two paradigms. Longitudinal studies tracking how these food practices evolve over a decade could also reveal slower, deeper shifts in cultural values in response to ongoing globalization.

Ultimately, this research affirms that in a world of seemingly endless choice and relentless change, the age-old, fundamental questions of 'what's for dinner'? and 'with whom shall we eat'? continue to be answered in ways that deeply reflect our most cherished cultural values and our enduring human need for connection, meaning, and belonging. The kitchen, therefore, remains one of the most important and revealing rooms in the world a laboratory, a sanctuary, and a stage where the future of family, culture, and identity is constantly being tested, tasted, and transformed.

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