

A Qualitative Study Exploring the Dynamics of Home Foodpreneurs in India

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Abstract

This article makes an attempt to navigate the landscape of home food business in India. The study undertakes a qualitative approach to unveil the experiences of home foodpreneurs. The perspective of 16 interviewees is studied using thematic analysis. It explores the nature of business, extent of burnout among foodpreneurs, challenges encountered, coping strategies and motivating factors. 'Passion' is observed to be the biggest motivating factor that drives the foodpreneurs. They do not feel burned out in spite of the challenges faced as they thoroughly enjoy the process. Positive customer feedback keeps them motivated and they derive immense satisfaction while carrying out the business operations. The findings of the study may practically help small aspiring entrepreneurs in home food segment to take well informed decisions. Theoretically, the study highlights the significant contribution of home food businesses to the potential growth of unorganized food service industry in India.

Keywords: Home food business, foodpreneur, food entrepreneur, home cook, home baker, small entrepreneur, qualitative study, India

Introduction:

The term 'foodpreneur' has become a buzzword in recent times, especially after covid-19. Coined by combining 'food' and 'entrepreneur', foodpreneurs are individuals who are deeply passionate about culinary pursuits and are driven by aspiration to transform their culinary skills into successful business undertakings. These entrepreneurs embark on various food-related business ventures, offering wide variety of food products right from freshly baked customised cakes, traditional snacks and savouries, daily meal options to specially curated cuisine according to customers' taste (Hijazi, 2020). Most of these foodpreneurs operate their business from home set up, often identifying themselves as home cooks or home bakers. Such foodpreneurs are referred to as 'home foodpreneurs' in the current research paper. The mention of term 'foodpreneur' is observed in the contributions made by Alam et al. (2021); Candra et al. (2022); PeshaveandChirmulay (2019).

The food service industry underwent significant transformation in wake of Covid-19 pandemic (Shah et al., 2023) contributing to the growth of home foodpreneurs. With home-based meal options available, customers are now empowered to relish lip-smacking and healthy food items at reasonable rates (Shah, 2021). As reported by Statista (2023), 70% Indians actively try to consume healthy food emphasising on freshness, quality and taste of food as key aspects. As home foodpreneurs satisfy all these three key factors, it is obvious that home food business segment has experienced an exponential growth over years.

Despite increasing reference to food entrepreneurship and foodpreneur by various researchers (Alam et al., 2021; Candra et al., 2022; Peshave and Chirmulay, 2019; Sayers, 2010; Shah et al., 2023; van der Gaast et al., 2022), there is a lack of literature uncovering the experiences of home foodpreneurs. This research makes an attempt to navigate the landscape of home food business exploring dynamics of home foodpreneurs. It explores if foodpreneurs experience burnout, challenges faced, coping strategies and motivating factors.

Literature Review

Passion:

Passion is an activity for which an individual has a very strong orientation (Vallerand and Houlfort, 2003). They derive immense satisfaction from the work without compromising their other interests (Vallerand et al., 2010). When individuals have very strong desire to voluntarily engage in work, they are said to be harmoniously passionate, which helps in preventing burnout occurrence (Benitez et al., 2023). Entrepreneurial passion is critical to success of businesses (Becker et al., 2023). Cardon (2009) refers to entrepreneurial passion as “consciously accessible, intense positive feelings experienced by engagement in entrepreneurial activities associated with roles that are meaningful and salient to the self-identity of the entrepreneur”. The concept of home cooks driven by 'passion for cooking' has gained momentum in recent times in India (Sadhale and Joshi, 2021).

Burnout:

Burnout phenomenon is characterised by continuous

stress. An individual experiencing either physical or mental exhaustion indicates the process of being burned out. Job burnout comprises of three main attributes: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and diminished personal accomplishment (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001). Employees working with hospitality industry usually experience high levels of burnout. Their job necessitates working for long and odd hours causing both mental and physical exhaustion (Ayachit and Chitta, 2022). Hospitality research cites various antecedents of burnout such as emotional labour (Chen et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2019; KhetjenkarnandAgmapisarn, 2020; Lee and Madera, 2019; Rathi et al., 2013), work-related stress (Karatepe and Ehsani, 2012; Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007; Shani and Pizam, 2009), customer incivility (Alola et al., 2019; Boukis et al., 2020; Karatepe et al., 2009; Yang and Lau, 2019), self-efficacy (Nguyen and Chang, 2018) and job crafting (Cheng and O-Yang, 2018). Lack of job autonomy too influences level of burnout among employees. Empowerment of individuals helps them to reduce burnout whereas its absence will leave employees emotionally exhausted (Kim et al., 2007). Burned out employees exhibit several behavioral issues which adversely influence their job satisfaction (Cheng and O-Yang, 2018) and job performance (Al-Badarneh et al., 2019; Mansour and Tremblay, 2016).

Coping strategies:

Job induced stress in various occupations has been an extensively researched area (Meyerson et al., 2022). The behavioural and psychological effort of an individual to overcome stress is referred to as Coping (Folkman, 1986). While individuals make an attempt to relieve stress by adapting various coping strategies, they tend to take part in leisure activities (Lowe and Bennett, 2003). Leisure coping approach plays a very critical role in alleviating high levels of stress keeping up both mental and physical health (Iwasaki, 2003). In order to maintain health and respond to stressors at work, individuals engage themselves in various leisure activities (Lu et al., 2016). In the current study, researcher makes an attempt to investigate coping mechanism adopted by home foodpreneurs to remain energetic and face newer challenges each day.

Motivation:

An individual's behavior is guided by one's own motives with an objective to sustain and achieve success (Carsrud and Brannback, 2011). Motivation can be classified as intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation. An individual motivated by personal interest in an entrepreneurial activity can be referred to as being intrinsically motivated (Carsrud et al. 2009). Such an individual is not only deeply interested in the task but also experiences absolute enjoyment in the process (Elliot and McGregor, 2001; Grant, 2008; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards (Carsrud and Brannback, 2011). An extrinsically motivated individual engages in a task to obtain result that is separate from the task itself (Deci, 1975). The study of motivation is significant to gain insight into why people do certain things and what keeps them motivated (Cnossen et al., 2019). Autonomy, flexibility, work-life balance, knowledge, skills, self-fulfilment and innovation are important motivators (Muller et al., 2013). It is observed that women entrepreneurs are often driven by intrinsic motivators. Work life balance is one of the main intrinsic motivators indicating that women entrepreneurs manage family commitments while handling their business activities (Meyer et al., 2022). Employees tend to be more innovative with increased levels of freedom (De Spiegelaere et al., 2014). This interrelationship between innovation and independence mediated by passion for work can be applied to creative entrepreneurs too (Cnossen et al., 2019). The research conducted by Sadhale and Joshi (2021) mirror similar findings that home foodpreneurs are motivated by intrinsic factors.

Research Design:**Research Approach**

Qualitative research was used to investigate home foodpreneurs' perspectives, explore the operational challenges, stressors, coping strategies, benefits, and motivations in their businesses.

Data Collection**Recruitment of the participants for the study:**

Snowball sampling, a popular method in qualitative research (Parker et al., 2019), was used to identify home

foodpreneurs. This approach gave wider perspective of their diverse experiences. The participants were from the metro cities of India, namely Hyderabad and Maharashtra.

Data Collection Method:

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 16 participants, using guidelines given by Adams (2015). Demographic information pertaining to age, education and experience was collected. For convenience, interviews were conducted over phone, allowing participants to express their thoughts either in English, Marathi, or Hindi. The objective of interview was explained before commencement of each conversation and calls were recorded with consent. Call lengths varied from 12 to 30 minutes. Data saturation was reached after 14th interview; two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation.

During interview, participants were asked broad questions like:

- Describe your business briefly.
- Do you experience significant fatigue during your tasks?
- What major challenges do you encounter?
- How do you cope with stress?
- What motivates you to sustain your business?
- Follow-up questions were also posed to delve deeper:
- Competition in home food business is growing... do you feel insecure?
- Can you describe a typical workday?
- How does it feel being your own boss?

Data Transcription and Translation:

The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews. The interviews conducted in either Hindi or Marathi were translated into English, ensuring uniformity of language (English) for further analysis.

Data Analysis:

A qualitative data analysis software, QDA Miner Lite was used to develop a thematic framework and analyse the data. Thematic analysis, following Sandler et al.'s (2019) definition, was employed to extract meaningful patterns.

The process involved identifying patterns, conducting iterative reviews and coding the data systematically leading to generation of themes for a comprehensive exploration of the dataset.

Ethical Considerations:

The interview process ensured voluntary participation with assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before recording the phone calls.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of participants

Table 1 represents demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the participants

		N	%
Gender	Female	16	100
Age Group (in years)	20-30	1	6
	30-40	1	6
	40-50	11	69
	50-60	1	6
	60-70	2	13
Education	Middle School	2	13
	High School	2	13
	Graduate (2 with culinary specialisation)	9	56
	Post Graduate	3	18
Category of home food business	Home Cook	11	69
	Home Baker	5	31
Experience (in years)	Up to 5 years	7	44
	6-10	7	44
	11-15	1	6
	15-20	-	-
	20 and above	1	6

Source: The authors

Themes

Various themes were generated based on responses gathered by conducting semi structured interviews. These themes were further categorised into five groups namely 1) Nature of home food business 2) The extent of participant burnout 3) Challenges encountered in operating home food business 4) Coping Strategies 5) Motivating factors. Following is the description of all five groups along with their respective themes. The letter 'P' followed by a number after each quote represents the participant number. For example: P1, P2 etc.

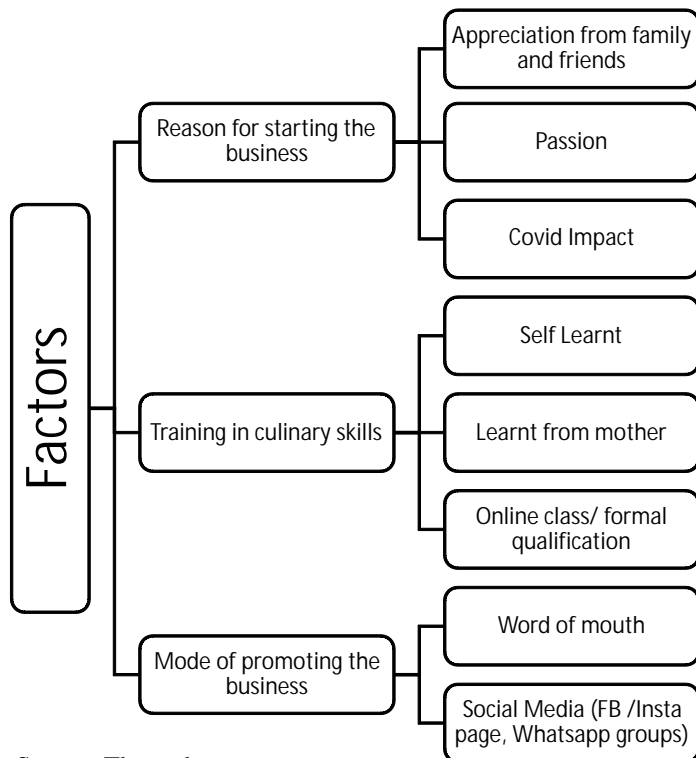
'Cooking is my Life! I am so passionate about cooking that even if I am asked to cook midnight at 2.00 am, I will happily cook for 100 people.'(P1)

The above quote clearly demonstrates that the driving force behind all home foodpreneurs is their unwavering passion for their work. Either a home cook or a home baker, all foodpreneurs have a different story to tell. It is interesting to understand how each one of them embarked on this journey and has successfully sustained ever growing competition in home food business sector, especially in the post covid era.

Nature of home food business

The researcher explored the nature of home food business while gathering a broader perspective about the reasons for starting the business, requirement of formal training and mode of promotion, as provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Factors affecting Business Commencement, Training, and Promotion



Source: The authors

Reasons for starting the business:

Primarily it is 'passion' for cooking which made participants start the food business.

'Cooking is my passion... so rather than stepping out for work, I thought of utilising my skill of cooking and start the business from home itself.' (P4)

It was interesting to note that few of the participants started operating home food business as a result of appreciation from family and friends.

P6 reported 'my friends liked the food I cooked and suggested me to start taking orders for variety of food items'.

Though passion was the key driving force for most of the participants, six participants shared the ordeal they experienced during covid. For example:

'My husband lost his job due to covid so we needed financial support'(P7)

Training in culinary skills

It is observed that not many participants have acquired formal training in culinary skills. Most of them have learnt it on their own out of passion. The undeniable success of all participant home foodpreneurs serves as evidence that the art of cooking holds greater significance than mere formal training.

Mode of Promotion

While majority of the participants rely on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to promote their business, an interesting finding emerged during the interviews: 12 out of 16 interviewees emphasised the crucial role of word-of-mouth referrals as a primary source of acquiring new leads.

'I was never required to advertise ... word publicity serves the purpose.'(P9)

The extent of participant burnout

Instances of physical or mental exhaustion

The most commonly cited reason for exhaustion among participants was absence of full-time support staff.

'Yes, I definitely get exhausted as I am handling all stuff alone... there are many things to be handled... not just production... but procurement, dealing with customers, receiving an order, executing it, delivering it...the entire supply chain has to be managed' (P3)

Another instance prominently shared by participants was the need to work for long and odd hours.

'I have stayed awake till 2.00 am midnight to complete the order' (P6)

Despite the inevitable exhaustion that comes with running a business, few participants presented a contrasting perspective:

'NO, I have never felt exhausted till date' (P13)

All the foodpreneurs being passionate about their work, do

not feel 'stressed out'.

'No stress... but long hours of work are required often... for big orders placed last minute I bake overnight... but I enjoy... so no stress (laughs)' (P2)

No feeling of insecurity

All participant home foodpreneurs are very confident amidst growing competition and deny feeling of insecurity.

'Not to boast about myself (laughs) but yeah it's true that you feel insecure only when you are not confident about your quality of work...today's customers are observant, knowledgeable and choosy too... they approach you only after proper homework...the fact that they have been your repeat customers over the years, there is absolutely no need to fear the competing businesses around.' (P6)

Rare experiences of non-cooperative customers

The customer base of participants comprises friends and people from neighbourhood who are usually very cooperative. Despite encountering rare bitter experiences with non-cooperative customers, foodpreneurs generally enjoy a wonderful bond with them.

'I have few bitter experiences from customers' end... after the order is ready, there were last minute cancellations for no genuine reason. As I don't take advance payment, such instances are disturbing... more than the monetary loss, the efforts involved go in vain.' (P16)

It is equally important to note that a significant number of other participants have not encountered any such experiences to date:

'I have no experiences of customers not cooperating with us' (P15)

Challenges encountered in operating home food business

Inherent limitations of operating home food business

Two key limitations highlighted by participants in this business are:

i) Inability to delegate cooking - TASTE is the USP of business. Entrusting the task of cooking to someone else may not result in the same desired taste preferred by the customers.

ii) Freshness of food items –Even if an order is pre-booked, cooking or baking must occur just before delivering the order to maintain freshness.

'As the items need to be served fresh, cooking has to happen just before delivery... I cannot prepare it whenever I feel like' (P5)

Pricing

The participants openly acknowledge that pricing of their items is relatively higher compared to market price.

'Home bakers pricing will be on higher side as compared to commercial pricing... because of the quality of materials we use, the efforts we put in. Also, we cannot make wholesale purchases as our orders are inconsistent' (P2)

Home delivery through online apps

Indian app-based delivery services like Dunzo, Rapido, Porter have revolutionised the way home foodpreneurs deliver their items directly to customers' doorsteps, offering convenience and ease. However, delivery process through these apps poses a significant challenge for many participants.

'Another stressor is delivery of the cakes... timely and safe delivery is a challenge when you rely on delivery apps. The cake should reach in the same form as readied before handing over' (P8)

Whereas, P5 mentions the benefit of using app-based service from her firsthand experience:

'I had appointed a delivery boy.. but after delivering food and collecting money from the customer, he didn't return to me to handover the amount. With bookings through app, I can track everything.. so I use Uber.. at times even Dunzo or Swiggy or Rapido... now I am used to. Payment too happens online'(P5)

Coping Strategies

Engage in physical, spiritual or recreational activities

Some participants engage in physical activities like exercise and yoga, while others find solace in meditation to relieve their stress. "Spending quality time with family members" (P16) is another method of relaxation. Rest of the participants pursue their hobby or entertain themselves to feel refreshed.

'We take a break of 4-5 days after every 3 months. We believe this helps in refreshing ourselves and getting back to work with new energy'(P7)

Being engaged with WORK itself

Some extremely passionate home foodpreneurs shared a unique perspective on their preferred method of relieving stress:

'I love cooking.. whenever I am troubled, not feeling good and wish to relax, I COOK. It's a de stressor'(P16)

Motivating Factors

Passion

Passion for culinary craft motivates the home foodpreneurs. Following are representative quotes:

'I bake out of passion. Profit is not sole motive. Baking is therapeutic'(P1)

'I started the business out of passion... Idle mind is devil's workshop. I remain engaged and am always active at this age. Being engaged, negative thoughts don't creep in'(P10, senior citizen)

Positive customer feedback

Satisfied and happy customers express their appreciation through positive reviews on social media, word-of-mouth referrals and repeat orders which results in boosting the morale of home foodpreneurs.

'Baking gives me immense satisfaction... especially when I get positive reviews, appreciation from my clients, I feel overjoyed'(P8)

Work Life balance

Home foodpreneurs carry diverse household responsibilities alongside their business. Operating the business from home gives them greater flexibility in managing work-life balance. The participants' expressions imply preference for independence rather than working under someone else's authority.

'Being your own boss offers flexibility... you have a choice to either take or deny orders unlike in a job. In case of personal commitments, you can prioritise whether to take orders or not'(P1)

Discussion

Nature of Home Food Business

Home food business has become a significant sector of food service industry in recent times in India (Sadhale and Joshi, 2021). During Covid-19, while few started operating home food business due to appreciation from family, friends and relatives, others took it up due to economic hardships (Shah et al., 2023). Surprisingly, home food business is mostly operated by women as against the male dominated organized food service industry segments such as independent restaurants, casual dining and luxury restaurants. The home foodpreneurs do not require any mandatory formal training or qualification to operate the business. Another interesting aspect is the minimal to zero investment in promotion, enabling easy entry of foodpreneurs in the home-based food service industry in India.

The extent of participant burnout

Exhaustion is one of the key determinants of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Yet another cause leading to exhaustion is long and odd hours of work (Ayachit and Chitta, 2022). However, the study reveals that home foodpreneurs, despite working long hours and getting exhausted, do not experience burnout. Various factors highlight this fact - firstly, burnout is characterized by continuous stress whereas the participants experience stressful situations intermittently which last for a very short duration of time. Secondly, home foodpreneurs hardly experience customer incivility, an antecedent of burnout (Alola et al., 2019; Boukis et al., 2020; Karatepe et al., 2009; Yang and Lau, 2019), due to the strong bonds fostered with their clients. Thirdly, there is absolute absence of feeling of insecurity of losing customers as they have loyal customer base. Autonomy in decision-making empowers them preventing burnout, aligning with study of personality characteristics (Kim et al., 2007). Unlike negative impact of burnout on job satisfaction (Cheng and O-Yang, 2018), the study demonstrates that foodpreneurs derive immense satisfaction from their work. Moreover, home foodpreneurs are harmoniously passionate about their work, thereby

preventing the incidence of burnout (Benitez et al., 2023). The study concludes that home foodpreneurs driven by passion do not experience burnout reverberating previous research (Sadhale and Joshi, 2021).

Challenges and Coping strategies

Foodpreneurs face numerous challenges in running their home food business due to its inherent limitations. Delegating cooking to hired staff may not meet the customers' expectations of taste while effective time management is paramount for freshness and prompt service. Pricing decisions are also critical as procuring ingredients at wholesale rates may not be feasible. Furthermore, home delivery through delivery apps poses further challenge. However, to cope with unavoidable stress, foodpreneurs engage in various activities such as physical exercise, spiritual practices or recreational pursuits, supporting the leisure coping approach (Iwasaki, 2003; Lowe and Bennett, 2003; Lu, et al., 2016). They also find relaxation in cooking or baking itself as it brings them a profound sense of peace and contentment, thus acting as a natural stress reliever. This observation aligns with Folkman's (1986) study on coping efforts.

Motivating Factors

The study reveals a common motivating factor among all foodpreneurs – 'passion'. Their work brings them immense satisfaction, aligning with Vallerand et al.'s (2010) observations on passionate individuals. It is evident that the home foodpreneurs are intrinsically motivated due to their personal interest in the work (Carsrud et al., 2009). Their love for what they do, along with the joy they find in the cooking and baking process, resonates with the research findings of Elliot and McGregor (2001); Grant (2008); Van den Broeck et al. (2021). Positive feedback from customers, flexibility and autonomy offered by home-based business model serve as powerful motivators for home foodpreneurs, echoing the research by Muller et al. (2013). Autonomy empowers home foodpreneurs to creatively craft their culinary recipes, aligning with the findings of De Spiegelaere et al. (2014) and Cnossen et al. (2019), who investigated correlation between the variables autonomy,

innovation and passion. While monetary gains in the business serve as an extrinsic motivator (Carsrud and Brannback, 2011), current study on home foodpreneurs reinforces the observation by Meyer et al. (2022) that women entrepreneurs are often driven by intrinsic motivators.

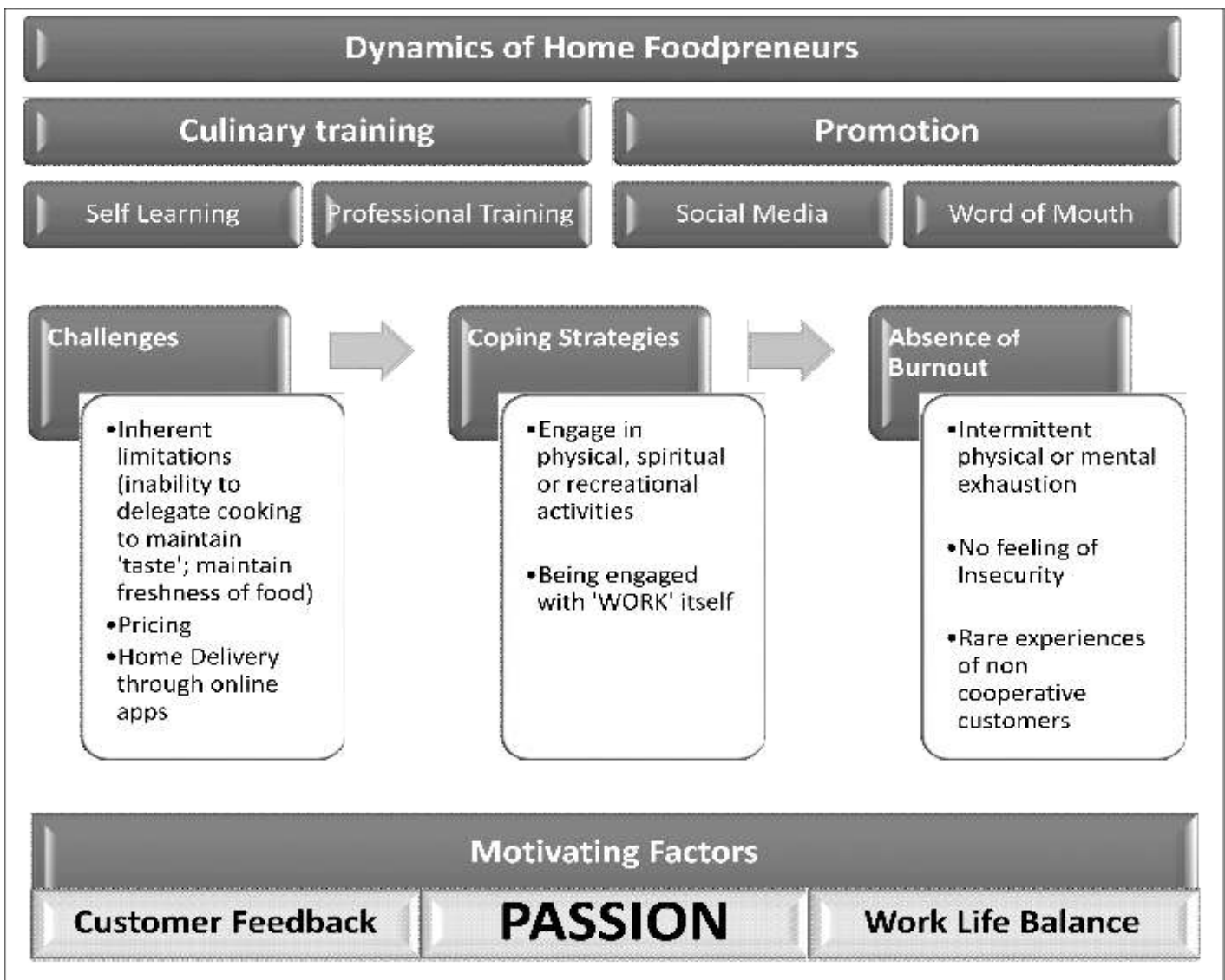
Implications

This qualitative study facilitates understanding the nuances of home food business and the experiences of home foodpreneurs. The study may practically benefit the aspiring small entrepreneurs contemplating to initiate a home food business to make well-informed decisions. While the study sheds light on challenges and stressors involved, it emphasises the significance of self-motivation, dedication and passion to mitigate burnout and sustain cut throat competition. The findings highlight the importance of consistent quality service as a key to excel while focusing on the role of autonomy, creativity and intrinsic motivation as driving force for both the home foodpreneurs and hired staff. These insights may help budding small entrepreneurs in similar domain to succeed in their business.

The study theoretically contributes to the literature on food service industry. The Indian food service industry is classified into organized and unorganized segments (Singh, 2021). Home food businesses, previously overlooked, are now gaining popularity, attracting customers with their homely taste, custom-made items, healthier alternatives to dining out and home delivery option, significantly contributing to the growth of unorganized sector. The market value of unorganized food service segment in India is estimated to be around 3075 billion Indian rupees in the financial year 2025 as against 2519 billion Indian rupees in financial year 2020 (Statista, 2022). This growth can certainly be attributed to many home foodpreneurs stepping into the home food business.

The study provides insights into the unexplored segment of home food entrepreneurship, a significant component of food service industry in current times. The findings are presented in the model as represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Dynamics of Home Foodpreneurs



Source: The authors

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of the study are applicable to Indian food service industry. These findings cannot be generalised across the food service sector globally unless comprehensive research covering diverse geographical locations is conducted. The study pertains to women foodpreneurs only. A purposive study of male foodpreneurs may reveal different perspective on the areas studied in the current research. Also, study on various other factors like procurement of raw material, kitchen infrastructure,

revenue generation model etc. may give a deeper insight into the functioning of home foodpreneurs. A study on awareness among home foodpreneurs about the FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) licensing may result in the observations useful for the policy makers to devise strategy to ensure the home food businesses abide by the food safety standards.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

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