

Are You a Dessert Pervert? A Study on the Cultural Modelling of Western Desserts at the Mercy of Asian Sugar Addicts

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Abstract

This research examines how Western bakery and confectionary is interpreted by Asian and Chinese cultural mental models of desserts, resulting in similar yet very distinctly different new treats to enjoy. Though historical research on the introduction of foreign food, this paper discusses how they are culturally assimilated by the new culture, finally even becoming a national dish. It answers the questions what makes a dessert special to the recipient culture, and why some desserts become commonplace while others continue to hold a place in the hearts and minds of dessert lovers as special, high-end treats? The researchers made great health sacrifices in the data collection process, by having to identify and taste various Asian cakes, then figuring out the flavour and appearances of the original Western source. Our theoretical framework draws on cultural modelling (CM) of perverted Western desserts, through which we conduct a qualitative study of the Asian concept of the sweet food category.

Keywords: cultural assimilation; cultural modelling; sugar addiction; Western and Asian desserts

1. Introduction

The act of eating has long been associated with pleasure across all living beings, but it is perhaps most pronounced in humans. Unlike other species, humans possess the ability to manipulate raw ingredients through various culinary techniques, resulting in complex flavors and textures. This ability has evolved over centuries, contributing to gastronomy as an art form that prioritizes pleasure at its core (Montanari, 2006). Among the diverse categories of food, desserts hold a particularly esteemed position due to their universally appealing sweet taste.

In cultures worldwide, the significance of desserts is reflected in idioms and proverbs. For instance, the adage "Life is uncertain. Eat dessert first," attributed to Ernestine Ulmer, underscores the desirability of sweets. Literary figures such as Wendell Berry have also poetically expressed the pleasures of eating, further emphasizing the cultural importance of desserts. Given this, the present research explores the processes of cultural adaptation and assimilation in relation to foreign desserts, analyzing the factors that contribute to their successful integration into new markets.

With China and India emerging as two of the world's largest consumer markets, understanding the reception of Western desserts in these regions provides valuable insights into broader patterns of cultural adaptation (Sen, 2015). This study examines the perspectives of younger consumers, assessing the extent to which foreign desserts continue to be embraced by new generations. The research begins with a literature review to contextualize historical and contemporary cases of successful dessert assimilation, ultimately identifying key factors that contribute to their global success. We explore the role of desserts within different cultural frameworks, considering their historical development, symbolic meanings, and contemporary transformations due to globalization. Additionally, it examines the intersection between food and social cohesion, questioning whether the rise of global food markets has altered the authenticity of these culinary traditions.

2. Literature Review

Sweet foods hold a unique place in human culture, often symbolizing love, celebration, and social bonding. Research has demonstrated that desserts evoke positive emotions and are associated with happiness and nostalgia (Sipple *et al.*, 2022; Kedzierski & Hernandez, 2022; Chow *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, their psychological impact extends beyond consumption; Riquelme, Robert and Arancibia (2022) found that merely hearing the word "dessert" can evoke pleasant associations, even among elderly individuals.

2.1. A Brief History of Western Desserts

In ancient Greece, cheesecake - dating back over 4,000 years - was considered an energy source and was served at weddings and athletic events (Dalby, 2003). The Romans later adapted this recipe, introducing ingredients such as crushed cheese and eggs, which were baked under a hot brick. As the Roman Empire expanded, variations of cheesecake spread across Europe, eventually evolving into distinct regional styles. Italians favored ricotta-based versions, while Germans used cottage cheese, and Americans introduced cream cheese as the defining ingredient of New York-style cheesecake in the C19th (Kraus, May & Hamblin, 2011).

Europe's diverse culinary landscape is reflected in its rich dessert traditions. Early European desserts were crafted using natural sweeteners such as honey and dried fruits. Sugar, introduced during the Middle Ages, significantly transformed confectionery practices. Affluent individuals enjoyed delicacies such as preserved fruits, gingerbread, marzipan, and jellies, with the Tudors famously using marzipan to create elaborate edible sculptures (Albala, 2011).

The Industrial Revolution marked a pivotal shift in dessert production, enabling mass manufacturing, preservation, and commercialization. Cakes, biscuits, gelatins, and puddings became widely available, evolving from artisanal products into commercial goods. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the introduction of iconic confectionery items such as chocolate bars, toffees, marshmallows, and ice cream novelties (Mintz, 1985; Lambert, 2013). Mass production made sweets more accessible, fueling their popularity across socioeconomic classes.

To understand better the mechanisms of cultural adaptation, this study examines two case studies: ice cream and cake, both of which have successfully transcended cultural boundaries. Ice cream's origins can be traced back to China as early as 3000 BCE. It was later refined in C17th Italy, where it became a staple of European cuisine. Historical records suggest that ice cream was introduced to England by the 1670s, with the earliest English recipe appearing in Mary Eales' 1718 cookbook (Davidson, 1999). In the United States, ice cream gained prominence in the C18th century, particularly after the American Revolution, as French culinary influences permeated American society (Stallings, 2009). By the C19th century, technological advancements facilitated widespread consumption, establishing ice cream as a global delicacy (Ayto, 2002).

Food historians have documented ice cream's transformation from an elite indulgence to a universally enjoyed dessert. Hesse (1981) notes that the first American ice cream recipe was published in *The New Art of Cookery* in 1792, signaling its growing acceptance. Similarly, Dickson (1972) describes how Parisian cafés played a crucial role in democratizing frozen desserts, making them accessible to a broader population. Today, ice cream remains a key example of cultural adaptation, with flavours and formulations tailored to regional tastes.

From the accidental invention of the Tarte Tatin in 1889 France to the refined elegance of Austria's Sachertorte, desserts represent more than indulgence; they symbolize national identity, social bonding, and even economic prestige. As food historian Kronndl (2011) describes, the Sachertorte is "... an edible manifestation of an urban, cosmopolitan Vienna, as smooth and fitted as a little black cocktail dress."

Its deep association with Viennese heritage underscores the broader relationship between food and culture.

The European dessert landscape is deeply intertwined with artisanal craftsmanship and historical influences. In Austria, beyond the famed Sachertorte, the Fächertorte, "... a layered combination of yellow cake, poppy seeds, and apples wrapped in brioche" remains a lesser-known but equally treasured confection (*ibid.*). Meanwhile, in the Middle East, desserts such as baklava, with its "... thousand and one sweet layers," demonstrate the historical importance of nuts, honey, and filo pastry in the region's culinary identity (Davidson, 2014). Similarly, Japan's kasutera cake, introduced by Portuguese traders in the 16th century, exemplifies how foreign influences shape local food traditions (Hosking, 2015).

The evolution of European desserts extends into modern culinary experimentation, particularly in the realm of molecular gastronomy. Pioneered by Ferran Adrià of El Bulli, this movement challenges traditional forms by deconstructing flavors and textures. Krondl (2011) describes how Adrià's creations included "... oysters with gin and tonic foam" and "... seared foie gras served with cherries and octopus," reflecting a scientific approach to dessert-making. Today, such innovations influence global dessert trends, from London's Eccles cakes at St. John Bakery - served uniquely with Lancashire cheese - to the Ispahan croissant at Pierre Hermé in Paris, which combines classic French pastry with raspberries and marzipan.

2.2. Globalization and the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Desserts

With increased mobility and international trade, desserts have transcended their places of origin, adapting to new cultural landscapes. For instance, the honey cakes of Prague, traditionally found in Central European cafés like Café Savoy, now exist in various iterations across the globe. Italian gelato, once exclusive to Italy, is now a staple in dessert parlours worldwide, often adapted to local taste preferences. Even cannoli, a Sicilian pastry, has seen variations that incorporate different fillings and toppings outside its original context (Capatti & Montanari, 2003).

A particularly illustrative example of cultural adaptation is Sweden's Prinsesstårta (Princess Cake), a layered dessert of sponge cake, jam, vanilla custard, and whipped cream covered in green marzipan. At Stockholm's Taxinge Slott Café, this cake remains a visual and culinary icon.

Meanwhile, in Poland, paczki - yeast doughnuts filled with jam or chocolate - are not just a delicacy but a food tied to tradition, particularly on Fat Thursday, a pre-Lenten festival. The poppy-seed cake (Makowiec), traditionally served during Easter and Christmas, further exemplifies how desserts reinforce cultural rituals (Wojciechowska, 2017).

2.3. Desserts and Social Bonding: The Role of Cultural Models

Cultural models (CM) are defined as cognitive structures and shared patterns of behaviour that shape how individuals within a society perceive and interact with the world (Holland & Quinn, 1987). They provide a framework for understanding the deeply ingrained ways in which food is produced, consumed, and valued within different cultural contexts. According to Rozin (1996), food attitudes and preferences result from a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and cultural influences.

CMs also dictate food trends, influencing the rise of health-conscious alternatives such as organic, vegan, or plant-based desserts. In modern food culture, the preference for "healthier" desserts such as dairy-free ice cream or sugar-free chocolate is an extension of broader societal shifts towards wellness and ethical consumption (Arbit, Ruby & Rozin, 2017). However, individuals often remain unaware that their food choices are culturally conditioned, assuming instead that their preferences are universal rather than contextually shaped.

In the context of desserts, cultural models shape how individuals experience sweetness, pleasure, and social bonding. The shared consumption of desserts reinforces group identity and belonging, as observed in rituals surrounding birthday cakes, wedding cakes, and celebratory pastries. Desserts, in particular, carry implicit meanings associated with celebration, luxury, and hospitality. For example, in European societies, desserts are often linked to generosity and gift-giving. The practice of offering sweets to guests or bringing a cake to a gathering is a culturally ingrained norm, reinforcing the idea that food serves as a gesture of care and friendship. This is reflected in the popularity of shared desserts in public spaces, such as shopping centers and street cafés, where people gather to enjoy pastries, chocolates, or ice cream together. The act of sharing food, rather than merely consuming it alone, is central to the social experience of desserts (Fischler, 1988).

Consequently, food consumption is more than a biological necessity; it is deeply embedded in social structures. As Parker and Freeman (2005) suggest, the act of sharing dessert is deeply embedded in European social practices, often serving as a medium for strengthening relationships, fostering social cohesion, and even reconciling historical tensions. For example, Europeans not only enjoy desserts with close friends but also with individuals from cultures they once colonized, highlighting how food can act as a bridge in post-colonial interactions.

While the consumption of desserts is frequently accompanied by messages of moderation and restraint - particularly in contemporary health-conscious discourse - their social and symbolic significance remains profound. As Rozin (1996) notes, food is not merely sustenance but a vehicle for psychological and cultural meaning. In the case of desserts, these meanings are intertwined with rituals of pleasure, hospitality, and generosity. This section explores how CMs influence dessert consumption, how food meanings vary across societies, and the tensions between the pleasures and dangers associated with indulgence.

Finally, food consumption is linked to status and identity. Research suggests that consumers perceive foreign desserts as more luxurious or desirable than local counterparts. Brunsø, Grunert and Bredahl (1996) argue that while the tangible qualities of food matter, perceived quality - driven by branding and origin - often carries greater significance. This phenomenon explains why French macarons or Belgian chocolates are viewed as high-status desserts, even when comparable products exist locally. Moreover, desserts play a role in shaping cultural identity and well-being. Guptill, Copelton and Lucal (2022) highlight how restricted access to culturally significant foods can lead to cultural stress, particularly among immigrant populations. In cases where traditional desserts are unavailable, individuals may experience a disconnect from their heritage, reinforcing the importance of preserving food traditions in a globalized world.

2.4. The Pleasures and Dangers of Dessert Consumption: Understanding Perversion

From a sociocultural perspective, dessert consumption can be seen as an act of resistance against dietary restrictions. Contemporary discourses on health often emphasize moderation, calorie-counting, and guilt associated with indulgence. However, the pleasure derived from eating desserts - particularly in social setting - suggests that food is more than a sum of its nutritional components. The phrase "to hell with the calories" encapsulates the idea that the social experience of eating dessert outweighs concerns about dietary restraint. People derive emotional satisfaction from indulging in "forbidden" treats. This perspective aligns with cultural models of food, where pleasure and restriction exist in a delicate balance. This aligns with Brillat-Savarin's (1825) assertion that food should be enjoyed as a fundamental aspect of human pleasure rather than merely evaluated through the lens of nutrition.

While desserts bring joy and cultural continuity, concerns over sugar addiction and overconsumption have prompted debates about their role in modern diets. Studies indicate that sugar triggers the brain's reward centers similarly to addictive substances, leading to cravings and habitual overindulgence (Avena, Rada & Hoebel, 2008). Excessive consumption of sugary desserts is linked to health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and metabolic disorders.

At the same time, dessert consumption can be viewed as an act of pleasure and resistance against dietary restrictions. Desserts are more than mere confections; they are vessels of tradition, social connection, and evolving consumer preferences. The globalization of desserts demonstrates how culinary traditions adapt while maintaining their cultural roots. However, as foreign influences shape dessert consumption in emerging markets like China and India, questions arise about the longevity of these adaptations. Will global marketing redefine traditional palates, or will cultural heritage prevail in shaping dessert preferences?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the phenomenon of successful and enduring foreign-origin desserts that have been embraced as national favorites by youths in China and India. Qualitative research is particularly suited for this investigation, as it allows for a deeper understanding of cultural preferences, consumer perceptions, and the socio-cultural dynamics influencing food consumption (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given that China and India represent the world's largest consumer markets, both in terms of domestic populations and global diasporas (Kshetri, 2013), these countries provide a rich context for examining cross-cultural dessert preferences.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Fournier's (1998) relationship theory, which examines the emotional and symbolic connections consumers form with brands and products. Fournier's framework suggests that consumer-brand relationships evolve over time and are shaped by cultural and individual experiences. Applying this theory to the realm of food consumption, we investigate how foreign-origin desserts have been adapted and localized to create a sense of cultural belonging and widespread national appeal.

3.3. Sampling and Data Collection

The research employs purposive sampling, selecting key informants who are Chinese and Indian youths with a demonstrated interest in desserts and active participation in food-related discussions on social media platforms. Purposive sampling ensures that respondents possess relevant knowledge and experience to contribute meaningful insights.

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group discussions, a method well-suited for capturing diverse perspectives and uncovering shared themes. The research team, composed of scholars from Chinese, French (Western European), and Indian backgrounds, facilitated these discussions, ensuring a nuanced and cross-culturally informed approach. A discussion guide with open-ended questions was developed to explore the participants' favorite foreign-origin desserts and the specific localized adaptations that contribute to their appeal. A total of 14 mainland Chinese, 6 Taiwanese Chinese and 13 Indian young people were interviewed for the project.

Each respondent was asked to name a single foreign-origin dessert that they perceived as having been fully assimilated into their national culture. Follow-up questions probed their rationale for this perception, including identifying the unique "wow factors" that contribute to the dessert's success within their culture. This approach aligns with prior studies on food globalization and cultural adaptation (Mintz, 1996).

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and categorize recurring themes and patterns emerging from the discussions. A systematic coding process was used to analyze responses, allowing for the

recognition of key factors contributing to the cultural assimilation of foreign desserts. Themes were categorized based on elements such as flavour adaptation, ingredient modifications, branding strategies, and emotional associations with national identity. A total of nine Chinese desserts and three Indian desserts were identified through this process.

Comparative analysis was then conducted to highlight similarities and differences between the two countries in terms of dessert preferences, adaptation processes, and consumer perceptions. This cross-cultural comparison provides valuable insights into the broader phenomenon of localized food globalization, illustrating how foreign desserts are integrated into national culinary identities.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process, adhering to ethical guidelines for qualitative research. The study was conducted in accordance with institutional review board (IRB) guidelines to ensure ethical integrity.

By employing a qualitative approach grounded in relationship theory, this study offers a culturally rich analysis of how foreign-origin desserts become embedded in national identities. The combination of focus group discussions and thematic analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing dessert preferences and their successful localization in China and India. Future research may expand upon these findings by incorporating a broader demographic sample and quantitative methods to assess market trends more extensively.

4. Findings and Analysis

It is important to note that Indian desserts are not just about the food; there are the stories, the history, and the cultural tapestry that each dish represents. There are several desserts in India that have originated from Persia (Iran). The following examples emerged from our discussion, and constitute the core description on which we based our subsequent analysis.

4.1. Dessert Selection and Cultural Association

Respondents in both China and India identified foreign-origin desserts that have become deeply integrated into national food culture. In China, desserts such as egg tarts (originating from Portugal), matcha-flavored pastries (influenced by Japan), and tiramisu (Italy) were frequently mentioned. Indian respondents highlighted gulab jamun (with Persian influences), jalebi (Middle Eastern origin), and Black Forest cake (German origin) as desserts widely considered to be part of their local cuisine.

4.2. Adaptation Strategies

A key theme in the findings was the adaptation process, which allowed these desserts to be embraced as national favourites. Respondents highlighted several adaptation strategies:

- Flavour Modification: many desserts were altered to incorporate locally favored ingredients, such as red bean paste in Chinese pastries or cardamom in Indian sweets.
- Texture Adjustments: some desserts were reformulated to match local preferences, such as making egg tarts less sweet for Chinese consumers.
- Branding and Marketing: local brands often emphasized the desserts' connection to national traditions, further cementing their cultural belonging.

4.3. Emotional and Social Factors

The success of these foreign desserts was linked to emotional and social factors. Many respondents associated these desserts with childhood memories, family celebrations, and cultural rituals, reinforcing their status as local delicacies. Additionally, the role of social media was highlighted as instrumental in popularizing and sustaining the appeal of these desserts, particularly among younger generations.

4.4. Comparative Insights

While both Chinese and Indian youths embraced foreign-origin desserts, differences were observed in adaptation strategies. Chinese respondents emphasized subtle modifications that preserved the original flavors, whereas Indian respondents highlighted the importance of integrating local spices and textures to create a fusion product. Moreover, globalization and urbanization were noted as key factors driving dessert consumption patterns in both countries.

5. Discussion and Managerial Implications

By employing a qualitative approach grounded in relationship theory, this study offers a culturally rich analysis of how foreign-origin desserts become embedded in national identities. The combination of focus group discussions and thematic analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing dessert preferences and their successful localization in China and India. Future research may expand upon these findings by incorporating a broader demographic sample and quantitative methods to assess market trends more extensively.

Qualitative data gathered from experience-sharing sessions with dessert enthusiasts in China and India reveals several critical adaptations made to foreign desserts to align with local preferences and conditions. Firstly, ingredient adjustments are commonly driven by the availability and convenience of local resources. For instance, ingredients originally used in foreign recipes may be substituted with locally accessible alternatives that fulfil similar functions. Taste profiles are modified according to regional flavour preferences and the availability of raw materials, reflecting a nuanced adaptation to local palates. Moreover, cooking methods are often tailored to fit the prevalent lifestyle and the utensils and equipment commonly used in the locality. This includes modifications in preparation techniques and cooking processes that align with local practices and available technology.

Packaging is another crucial aspect that undergoes adaptation to resonate with local cultural norms, consumption habits, and lifestyle. Effective packaging must reflect local aesthetics and practical needs, enhancing the product's appeal and functionality within the specific cultural context. The successful introduction of foreign products and services, such as cars, machinery, and various service businesses, necessitates similar considerations for long-term success in a globalised market.

This involves not only adjusting raw materials and production methods - such as incorporating local skills, machinery, and tools - but also aligning with local ergonomic designs, sizes, and shapes. Ensuring that packaging meets local cultural and consumption preferences is equally important.

From a managerial perspective, these adaptations have several implications. First, companies must invest in market research to understand local preferences and cultural norms, ensuring that packaging and product modifications align with consumer expectations. Managers should establish partnerships with local suppliers and production facilities to facilitate the integration of region-specific ingredients and materials, which can enhance efficiency and reduce costs. Additionally, adapting production methods to utilise local machinery and tools can optimise manufacturing processes and support the development of a sustainable supply chain. Furthermore, understanding local ergonomic and design preferences can guide product development to better meet consumer needs and preferences, potentially increasing market acceptance and customer satisfaction. In essence, a comprehensive strategy that

integrates local insights into packaging, ingredient selection, and production processes is essential for the successful and sustainable introduction of foreign products into new markets.

6. Conclusion

Despite the outlined managerial implications, this research is not without its limitations. One primary limitation is the reliance on qualitative data, which may not fully capture the breadth and depth of local preferences and cultural norms across diverse regions. Additionally, the generalisability of findings may be constrained by the specific markets studied, limiting the applicability of insights to other geographic or demographic contexts. The effectiveness of local partnerships and adaptations is also influenced by dynamic market conditions and evolving consumer preferences, which may not be fully accounted for in static research. For further research, a more comprehensive approach could include quantitative studies to validate qualitative findings and assess their broader applicability. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how local preferences and production methods evolve over time. Exploring case studies from a wider range of industries and regions may also offer a more nuanced understanding of how adaptations impact market success. Finally, incorporating feedback from consumers and local partners through iterative research could enhance the practical relevance of findings and support more effective strategy development.

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