

Exploring the Potential of Microphenomenology for Understanding and Designing for Lived Experience of Mindful Eating

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The increasing interest in HCI around the body and embodied experiences has led to the development of novel technologies and methodologies to actively align with and leverage these aspects. The design of health technologies often relies on behavioral metrics, such as in the case of designing eating/food-related technologies. This reflection paper explores the potential of micro-phenomenology, which is a rigorous first-person methodology to examine lived experience, to understand, and inform the design of mindful eating technologies that engage everyday embodied experiences in the context of HCI.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; **Interaction design**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Mindful Eating, Micro-phenomenology, Mindfulness, Subjectivity, Reflection, Food technologies

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1 Introduction

The act of eating is hedonic, embodied, and often habitual. Within the pace of everyday modern life, our attention can be interrupted by some external events while eating, such as digital devices, workloads, or other habitual routines [1]. Such mindless eating behaviors may lead to unhealthy food choices, which are linked to health issues, including overeating, binge eating, eating disorders (EDs), and negative relationships with food and body [34]. The growing interest in health research on mindful eating indicates the role of mindful eating in addressing such challenges by reducing mindless eating behaviors and increased quality of health food intake [21, 37] and its overall impact on general wellbeing [26, 37]. Such research has explored mindfulness-based interventions and their impact on people living with EDs [56], binge eating disorders [12], or diabetes [39]. Among these, the Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT) intervention is the most tailored approach, with its particular focus on mindful eating to address the disordered eating habits of individuals with emotional eating [32, 33].

A growing strand of research in HCI and Human-Food Interaction (HFI) is interested in food technologies, which promote healthy eating, such as apps to track calories, nutrients, and activity [2], social media for photo-based tracking of food and eating [5]. With respect to the latter, scholars critique compulsive tracking for its link to EDs, and instead advocate food literacy [2]. While other apps support ED symptom monitoring [7, 14] or digestive disorders [25]. To

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support healthy or hedonic eating, gustatory interfaces [51], AR/VR for food appearance [42], auditory feedback [4, 31, 38], olfactory cues [41], and multisensory methods altering taste and texture perception [22, 30] are designed.

Mindful eating is a type of mindfulness applied to eating practices [9, 55], which promotes nonjudgmental awareness of eating, including present-moment awareness of bodily signals for hunger and fullness, as well as the sensory modalities of food such as its taste, smell, sight, texture, and sound; while slowly savoring each small bite, by chewing thoroughly with small portions and showing gratitude for its sources, and labor that sustained its journey [34]. Such research explored the support of slow eating via wearables [28], smart tableware [24, 29, 58], 3D printed food [35], or AR/VR for small bites, portions, or for chewing [40, 52], or smart tableware for not multitasking [27]. However, limited technologies particularly designed to support mindful eating.

The Food4Thought app, which uses daily “*crumbs*” to cultivate awareness [8], but lacks emphasis on savoring and emotion [9]. Guluzada and Sas reviewed the top-rated commercial mindful eating 13 apps [13], and only two apps provide support for mindful eating meditation, mindfulness meditation, and psychoeducation, while the rest offer only fragmented support. The authors urged that apps should also cultivate awareness and understanding of bodily cues linked with hunger and satiety, and mindful eating interventions. Their recent functionality review of 27 commercial apps for mindful eating and EDs [14] indicates that these apps provide a range of interventions, such as CBT, guided mindfulness meditation, and mindful eating meditations. Most of these apps appear to be informed by MB-EAT interventions, usually offering the guided mindful eating of a small piece of fruit (i.e., raisin, chocolate, etc.) to fully immerse in its sensory aspects [23], which cultivated through slow observation, such as seeing the fruit for the first time, paying attention to its sight, smell, taste, sound, and texture; slowly chewing and swallowing, and if thoughts or emotions arise, noticing them non-judgmentally and returning attention to the fruit. Although such apps indicate support for mindful eating, a limited number of apps provided features to reflect on bodily signals of hunger and satiety cues, such as through Likert scales; portion size through photos and text entries, or diaries for thoughts and emotions.

An interview with 21 mindful eating expert practitioners (i.e., nutritionists, dietitians, psychologists, or mindfulness coaches, etc.) shows they utilise mindful eating, mindfulness, and mental health interventions for their four main client types: those living with EDs, including mental health conditions, non-clinical conditions, and those interested in improving overall wellbeing [15]. Experts also emphasized challenges associated with MB-EAT interventions, including limited interoceptive awareness of bodily signals associated with eating, such as hunger, thirst, sensory-specific satiety, stomach fullness, muscle tension, or breathing; challenges related to clients’ attitudes towards eating and limited food literacy; and challenges related to the eating environment, such as multitasking while eating. Most HCI research on eating technologies has focused on user experience, albeit less so on the lived experience of eating, despite its strong emotional and bodily qualities [11]. Lived experiences have been increasingly acknowledged in HCI and explored under the first-person methodology [6]. Drawing from the latter, we explore the potential of microphenomenology [49] for understanding the fine detailed lived experience [46] of mindful eating in order to better design for it.

2 Micro-phenomenology in HCI and Mindful Eating

In recent years, HCI research has explored theoretical work on the *phenomenology*, potential design of a first-person experience, such as somaesthetics, which focuses on the body as a site of sensory-aesthetic appreciation with the mind in interplay [20]. The idea of embodiment has supported the unity of the body and mind, resulting in the exploration of design solutions on the body’s association with interactive technologies [53, 54, 57], where designers’ own felt experiences play a crucial role.

Micro-phenomenology is a systematic interview and qualitative research method designed to explore the fine-grained details of subjective lived experiences through careful questioning and prompting that guides people to become aware of and describe the subtle and reflective aspects of their experiences [45]. This reflective approach is significant when designing for health and body technologies [19, 48, 50] to understand the needs of the real users. *Micro-phenomenology* has been used to study diverse phenomena [47]. In the field of HCI, Prpa et al. interviewed HCI and design experts who utilised micro-phenomenology, explaining their experiences with the method and illustrating how it has been applied through designing a practice, conditions under which descriptions of experience unfold, and the values the method provides to the HCI/design field [49], Heimann et.al. examined the experience of using *WeUsedTo*, a website for sharing COVID pandemic experiences [16], or for immersive VR systems for eliciting breath awareness [48], sense making of data visualisation and representation [17, 18].

Other strand of research has explored bodily experiences, such as Obrist et al., focused on articulation and verbalization of sensorial [44], and gustatory experiences [43], which becomes a knowledge source for taste-enhanced designs. Gayler and Sas, designed to sensitize participants toward their food experiences through sensory deprivation/ augmentation techniques, such as eating with blindfolds, nose clips, earplugs, and gloves, along with body mapping booklet of food experiences over time by reflecting on sensory aspects through both internal (mouth and tongue, stomach and gut, brain and nervous system, heart and circulatory system) and external senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing) [10]. Although some research has chosen micro-phenomenology to develop and deepen an HCI understanding of human experience that goes beyond a focus on body and cognition, there is a potential for utilizing micro-phenomenology in designing mindful eating technologies.

The potential of *micro-phenomenology* consists of helping to uncover the hidden dimensions of the act of eating experience by drawing attention to subtle, moment-by-moment experience, which might reveal design opportunities that are often overlooked. Mindful eating promotes presence with food by slowing down, noticing the food sensations, and bodily sensations. Yet, if we look closely, we might recognize how such experiences often avoid awareness; the sequence of movements, which includes preparation of food, reaching out, and anticipating its taste, its first touch by hand or inside of the mouth by tongue, micro adjustments of chewing, where it is mixed with saliva, and breaks down in the stomach shifting attention between bodily sensation. This process often unfolds rapidly without pre-reflection, where self-reports are mainly used after eating, such as "*Why did you eat? - hungry, cravings, stress, social, etc.*" [13, 14], which simplifies the complexity of internal and external aspects of eating. Utilizing *Micro-phenomenology* into mindful eating can help with promoting different perspective, instead of asking thoughts, emotions, behaviors in general, the method guides one to tune in with focused attention on how the experience unfolded in time, by reconstructing each single bite, anticipating its taste before touches the tongue, noticing a slight tightening in the jaw, a pause between bites while evaluating its temperature, texture, taste, which might involve multiple sequenced sensory, cognitive, affective layer of eating. Such granularity can shift perceiving eating from a discrete action to a series of embodied micro events.

Body Transformation Experiences (BTE) refer to one's own perception of bodily signals, emotions, thoughts, or behaviors through interaction with technologies, practices, or environments. Mindful eating practices promote such transformations, i.e., shift from auto-pilot, or mindless eating, toward heightened interoceptive awareness of hunger, satiety, and sensory aspects of food. These shifts can reconfigure how the body is felt (e.g., noticing stomach fullness, jaw tension, or breathing rhythm), how agency is enacted (slowing down, choosing portions intentionally), and how emotions and identity around food are built sequentially. From an HCI perspective, this redirection is important. Such technologies are often designed around food to track meal [8, 14], calorie [29], eating speed [28, 35, 36], portion size [3, 35] by considering eating as a measurable behavior, by including quantities consumed, time stamps or nutritional

data (macro/micro nutrients). While such metrics are useful, they often ignore the experiential structure that shapes the act of eating. Such technologies often do not consider external factors such as distraction in the environment during eating as "multitasking", in a behavioral sense, but as lived experience, it appears as attention frequently sliding toward the screen while hindering connection with the sensory aspects of the food, i.e., its taste [27]. Designing only for measurable events might risk missing the subtle temporal thresholds where experience and change occur. A novel interface for mindful eating can benefit from micro-phenomenology reflection. Such as before eating, if anticipation shapes taste, the interfaces might encourage a brief pause and breath exercises before the first bite, which promotes sensory engagement; or to cultivate awareness of bodily signals of hunger and satiety cues, interfaces could provide ambient feedback to ambiguously intensify awareness rather than impose external feedback that fragments the experience. *Micro-phenomenology* provides a way to access tacit knowledge that users struggle to articulate, which might help to leverage the reveal concrete episodes of eating, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors around it by explaining step by step.

To conclude, this paper reflects on how *micro-phenomenology* can provide a valuable lens for designing mindful eating interfaces, by adapting the rigorous first-person lived experience of food experience. Rather than solely focusing on tracking metrics of eating behavior to promote behavior change towards healthy eating, *micro-phenomenology* informed designs support real awareness of lived experience, including sensory aspects of food and bodily sensations that include eating, by outlining stages of preparation, experience, and reflection.

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