

Exploring food culture in India: Negotiating access, uses and experiences among migrant students using social media

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Abstract

Migration, either for short term or long term, is a shift from a certain set of norms and practices to another one. This is a gradual change. Among migrants, food culture can stay intact, be a mixture of home and host food culture, or completely change to the culture of the host place. The roles of social media in cultural communication and food communication have largely been investigated by academicians. The current study investigates the roles of social media in the food habits and the shift in culinary culture among the interstate migrant students. One part of the study deals with how students cope with the new culinary environment, which is different from their original one with the help of social media and the second part deals with the hands of social media in the exploration of the new food culture. The study occupies a questionnaire survey among interstate migrant students from Kerala who are studying across India to understand about the questions.

Keywords: interstate; migrant students; social media; food culture; culinary.

1. Introduction

Food is an integral part in the day-to-day life and for the same reason, it is also a cultural artefact. Each culture has its own specific food culture and tastes. These cultural flavours can be of geographical, social, religious or any other natures. Food is influenced by geography in terms of availability of certain raw materials and crops; here, climate also becomes an important factor. Those living in cooler areas can consume more spicy food but those living in warmer areas prefer it less. Rural-urban-semi urban differences can also be the reasons of differences in food habits. Social factors comprises of religion, beliefs and other socio-cultural aspects. In this case, certain religious beliefs might restrict community members from consuming certain food items. This, later on, can influence their food culture.

As a federal republic, India is a federation of several states and union territories. This division is not only based on administrative ease, but at the same time, there are many cultural differences between each state, even within the states. This is very visible in food culture. In some places, people see rice as the main dish, while some consume bread as their regular food. People in some geographical areas consume more spicy food while people of some other areas consume spicy food less.

Cultural studies in relation with migration and diaspora is subject to relevant academic investigations. Migrants include forced migrants, labour migrants, and student migrants.

Though students are well addressed in international migration research, their relevant population is often under addressed in internal migration research. This is visible especially in Indian context where state borders are the relevant indicators of cultural varieties and cultural gaps.

As previously mentioned, food is an integral part of every culture, making it more or less varied from one culture to another. When a person migrates to another state, he or she needs to cope with the new food culture for survival. Though many cities offer various cuisines, it cannot be always complete.

A student migrant is different from other migrants in terms of the purpose and duration of migration. The aim of a student migrant is primarily not economical, but knowledge is the motivational factor (Raghuram, 2013). The general short-term nature is another important aspect. The experiences of migrant students in terms of their food habits and consumption and its relation to the cultural coping has to be investigated. In the current study, the researchers analysed the food habits and food culture exploration among interstate migrant students from Kerala who are studying across various states across India. The study also investigated the effective ways for communicating food. Regarding the purpose of the migration, research indicated that 33.1% of total internal migration from Kerala is for education (Rajan & M., 2020). A proportionate number goes for interstate migration accordingly. It is high time to study the socio-cultural situations of the mentioned group.

International migration research describes social media as a cushion in the process of migration and settling in the new place (Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2020). The current study put social

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media in the middle for the investigation for finding how social media can help the student population in coping with and exploring a new food culture.

Migration is not a simple process, particularly for student migration. As youngsters (mostly), they may face many challenges, one of which is food as the one of the most prevalent. A number of previous research have clearly depicted how social media can function as a cushion in migration process, while the current study attempts to put the same in the perspective of food culture and food habits.

The literature lies around the cultural position of food, migrants' food habits and dietary wellness, social media and food and social media and migration.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984), one of the earliest scholars who studied about the sociological aspects of taste, in his book entitled "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste", proposed the agency of people with higher social capital to decide what is good taste and other (people with lower social capital) accept it, thus creating a disparity between high culture and low culture. Food is also a part of this distinction. Bourdieu's theory is important as an early effort to connect food with social distinctions along with other artefacts. Food, by many scholars, has been addressed as a cultural artefact ((Counihan & Van Esterik, 1997; Kittler et al., 2016; Montanari, 2006). Stajcic (2013) theorized food as a means of communication.

Parasecoli (2014) analysed how cultural reproduction occurs through food in immigrant communities. Mishra and Anand (2020) investigated the dietary diversity changes among internal student migrants. The evolving of food practices among migrants over the time has also been investigated (Greco Morasso & Zittoun, 2014).

Evidence for the dietary wellness of adolescents can be found in the presentation of food on social media by them (Holmberg et al., 2016). The language of food in social media was explored through a corpus analysis (Fried et al., 2014). Rousseau's (2012) work comprehended the food related discourses in social media. The phenomena of food vlogs and cooking videos are subjected to various questions of investigation (Abd Razak & Zulkifly, 2020; Benkhelifa & Laallam, 2018; Briliana et al., 2020; Lewis & Phillipov, 2018; Oh & Oh, 2017).

Social media, among migration scholars, is perceived as a helping hand for migrants in coping with the new socio-cultural environment while keeping rooted to their original place and culture (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Groenewold, 2018; Komito, 2011). Recent research explores the social integration and other aspects of migration among various group with the help of social media (Zhao, 2023). However, there is a significant gap in the investigations addressing the uses and experiences of social media, specifically in culinary practices among any kind of migrants, especially the internal ones. Yilmaz Hava (2023) explored the position of foodscapes as a place of network building among refugees.

Through the analysis of the existing literature, it is found that there are many studies that connect any two aspects of the constructs in this study which are food, migration and social media. Modifying the path, this study aims to connect all these three themes; therefore, it observed a comprehensive knowledge sphere on how migrants use social media in their day-to-day encounters with culinary practices in a multicultural setting.

This study aims to investigate the dynamic relationship between social media use, food culture, and dietary habits among interstate migrant students in India with a particular emphasis on students from

Kerala. It sought to understand how these students navigate their food preferences within an intercultural context, adapt to unfamiliar food cultures, and the extent to which social media shapes their culinary practices and exploration. Specifically, the research is focused on examining the food habits of interstate migrant students from Kerala, exploring their engagement with diverse food cultures in their new environments, and analysing the roles and influence of social media in shaping their dietary behaviours and culinary experiences.

2. Methodology

The study occupied the method of questionnaire survey that was quantitative and qualitative in nature and consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. The questions were constructed based upon the different aspects of the research problem as identified from literature and observations in real life and social media.

Responses were collected from 77 interstate migrant students from Kerala undergoing a study in different states across India. Responses were collected using the purposive and snowball sampling method. The researchers distributed the questionnaire to the students from Kerala who are studying in any other states of India and asked them to fill it up and share to their classmates and other acquaintances from the same institutions or any other institutions that matched the central criterion of the population i.e. the students from Kerala studying in other states of India. The collected data were mainly analysed with the help of descriptive statistics in the SPSS software. Qualitative answers received from the participants were also used in the study.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the study are divided to three parts. The first part is the demographic profile of the respondents, the second one deals with the culinary habits of interstate migrant students from Kerala and the third part deals with the role of social media in the culinary habits and food explorations.

3.1. Demographic profile

A total of 77 responses were collected from interstate migrant students from Kerala who are studying in various other states of India through an online survey by means of purposive sampling. Of the total respondents, 44 (57.1%) are male and 33 (42.9) are female students. The demography spreads across 8 states including Karnataka (63%), New Delhi (9.1%), Punjab (9.1%), Rajasthan (6.5%), Haryana (3.9%), Telangana (3.9%), Tamil Nadu (2.6%) and Uttar Pradesh (1.3%). Most of the students were in the age group of 21-24 years old (66.2%), followed by 17-20 years old (19.5%) and above 24 years old (14.3%).

In terms of the migratory period, 31.2% of the respondents were studying outside for 1-2 years, 24.7% of the respondents were outside for 3-5 years, while 22.1% were studying for above 5 years and 22.1% were only below one year since moving for education. For the educational level, 46.8% of the respondents were studying in the bachelor degree, 42.9% were studying for master courses and 10.4% of the respondents were the research students. 41.6% of the respondents studied humanities and social sciences, 22.1% studied Science, 16.9% studied Law, 16.9% studied Medicine, 1.3% studied Commerce and 1.3% studied Technical Education.

For the social media usage statistics, every of the respondents used social media, one or more. WhatsApp here became the most used social media platform. 96.1% of the respondents used WhatsApp followed by YouTube by 92.2% respondents. Instagram was used by 89.6% of the respondents whereas Facebook and Snapchat were each used by 51.9%. Twitter (41.6%), Pinterest (35.1%), Reddit (9.1%), Telegram (3.9%) and LinkedIn (2.6%) were also used by the students.

Usage time is also an important element in research on social media. 39% of the respondents used social media 3-4 hour every day, while 37.7% used for 1-2 hours. It is important to note that 18.2% of the respondents used social media above 4 hours per day. While, it was only 5.2% of the respondents using social media below one hour.

3.2. Culinary habits of interstate migrant students

An important part of the research deals with the food habits of interstate migrant students after their moving. The difficulty level faced by students was evaluated through a survey. 33.8% of the respondents found it difficult to cope with the new food culture. The same number of students have not found it easy or difficult. 22.1% found it easy to cope with the new food culture. Table 1 provides a comprehensive idea about the difficulty level. The mean of difficulty level was 3.22 meaning that the most of the respondents were neutral to coping to a new food culture.

Table 1. Difficulty Level

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Difficult	26	33.8	33.8
Easy	17	22.1	55.8
Neutral	26	33.8	89.6
Very difficult	6	7.8	97.4
Very easy	2	2.6	100.0
Total	77	100.0	

58.4% of the respondents likes going to both Kerala style restaurants and local food places. While, 24.7% liked going to Kerala restaurants only and 13% preferred local food places. Responding to the question about exploring local food in the current place of residence, the mean was 3.88 indicating the students' tendency of exploring local culinary culture often.

Response for the question of cooking habit came to a mean of 3.16 showing that the group liked cooking often. Question about watching cooking video provided a mean of 3.27 close to the previous one. Respondents liked watching cooking videos sometimes as they liked to cook (Table 2).

In cooking, 86.7% of the respondents only preferred Kerala dishes, whereas 33.3% of the students liked cooking the dishes of the current place of residence. Interestingly, 40% of the respondents liked to cook the dishes from cultures other than the abovementioned. Further explanation can be seen in the question about what videos they like to watch. 74.3% of the respondents liked watching cooking videos from Kerala, whereas 40.5% liked watching cooking videos on dishes in the current place of residence. 58.1% of the respondents liked watching the cooking videos of dishes from other places.

Table 2. Cooking and Watching Cooking Videos

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Cooking	77	1	5	3.16	.988
Watching					
Cooking videos	77	1	5	3.27	1.021
Valid N (listwise)	77				

3.3. Problems faced by interstate migrant students regarding food

3.3.1. Unavailability of native and preferred food items

Many students expressed frustration over the lack of availability of food items specific to Kerala (home state), especially those tied to Kerala's culinary traditions. One student noted, "I miss *puttu* a lot," highlighting the emotional and cultural disconnected feeling due to the absence of familiar dishes. Another student shared, "As a non-vegetarian, it is difficult to adjust with the food culture of a vegetarian area," underscoring how dietary preferences could impact their adaptation to a new food environment.

3.3.2. Difficulty with food preparation and flavour differences

For numerous students, adjusting to local food flavours has been a challenge. Students mentioned that the difference in spices and oils used has altered the taste significantly. As one student put it, "The spices and oil people use here are different. Sometimes, it tastes good but sometimes it is really bad." Another added, "The masala will be different; sometimes they put large amounts of masala, which creates stomach problems." This unfamiliarity with local spices and preparation methods not only disrupts eating habits but also leads to digestive issues for some.

3.3.3. Adjustment to spicy and oily foods

For many migrant students, the intensity of spices in the local cuisine can be difficult to handle. One student remarked, "The amount of spicy is the main trouble," pointing out how this preference could affect their ability to enjoy meals. Another comment revealed a preference for milder flavours: "Trouble adjusting to their spicy taste." The transition to a diet richer in spices can lead to discomfort, as reflected in feedback about the impact on digestion and the onset of acidity issues.

3.3.4. Poor quality and cleanliness of available food options

Food quality and cleanliness also emerged as the significant issues. Students noted that "the local restaurants are budget-friendly but very dirty," contrasting with higher-end establishments that "provide good service but poor taste." This dilemma highlights the lack of affordable yet clean and tasty food options for students. The food cleanliness was a recurring theme with comments like, "The trouble I am facing commonly is the cleanliness of restaurants," emphasizing the need for improved hygiene in dining establishments frequented

by students.

3.3.5. Challenges posed by food culture and serving style in hostels and PGs

Hostels and PG accommodations often serve food that some students find difficult to enjoy due to the differences in preparation style and flavour. One student explained, "In the beginning... I eagerly ate everything... but later, unfortunately, I do not like the curry from the college." Another added, "I live in a PG, and the food is not great. There are not enough healthy options, and I am facing vitamin deficiency," underscoring nutritional gaps in their daily meals.

3.3.6. Social media as a tool for food exploration and adjustment

While adjusting to the new food culture is challenging, some students viewed social media as a beneficial tool. As one student suggested, "Social media has a great role in introducing the new kinds of foods, helping other state students to explore new food items and cope with the change." Another added, "Food vloggers should promote a healthy food culture." They here emphasized the importance of promoting the less-known, healthy, and affordable local food spots over the paid promotions to create genuine values for the interstate students.

3.3.7. Initial adjustment difficulties and adaptability

Some students, despite initial struggles, mentioned that they eventually adapted to the new food environment. "First time, I was so struggling with food... now it is changed a little," one student remarked, reflecting the gradual adaptation process. Another shared a similar sentiment: "Not much trouble. I settled in soon. I do not follow social media for food." Yet, others still feel a strong disconnection with local food, expressing a deep attachment to Kerala's cuisine that adaptation alone cannot bridge it.

3.3.8. Cost of food and financial constraints

The price range of food in the new environment became a concern as one student remarked, "Foods are not so clean and so expensive... so we are not able to afford nice food." This financial strain often forced students to choose budget-friendly options, which may lack quality, cleanliness, or nutrition.

3.4. Role of social media in culinary habits and exploration of interstate migrant students

This part deals with the role and help of social media in the food habits and culinary explorations of interstate migrant students from Kerala. Of the respondents, 55.8% followed food vlogs, while 26% followed cooking videos. The photos of food (7.8%) and recipe note (2.6%) were also followed. Most of the participants rated food vlogs, cooking videos, photos of food and recipe notes as good in a rating question. A mean of 3.58 has been derived from responses to the question about watching the level of food vlogs indicating that respondents watched food vlogs often (Table 3). It was also identified that most of the respondents go to food places introduced by food vloggers sometimes (m. 2.95). The motivations behind going

to such places included cleanliness (56.8%), ambience of the place (39%), and favourite food (51.4%), food presentation (43.2%) and vlog presentation (39.2%). Convenience, ratings and prices were also marked as the motivation factors.

Table 3. Food Vlogs and Its Impact

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Watching food vlogs	77	1	5	3.58	.978
Visit to places introduced by vloggers	77	1	5	2.95	1.062
Valid N (listwise)	77				

While most of the respondents liked watching food vloggers from Kerala (74.7%), 54.7% liked vloggers from the current place of residence. Most favoured handles included Village Food Channel, Mysurufoodie, Basim's Plate, and Sujith Bhaktan. It was only 2.7% voted for both. Some students also expressed their dislike towards vloggers.

As stated earlier, the respondents watched cooking videos often (m. 3.27). Most of them liked watching Kerala cooking videos (86.7%) whereas 40.5% of the respondents liked watching cooking videos on dishes from the current place of residence. Interestingly, many of the respondents (58.1%) also liked watching cooking videos on dishes from other places. It can be understood that respondents relied on cooking videos sometimes (m. 3.00). Most of the participants (76.5%) depended on the cooking videos for Kerala dishes while many of them (38.2%) were dependent upon videos for cooking dishes of the current place of residence. 51.5% of the respondents depended on cooking videos for cooking dishes of other places.

Another part of survey intended to check the likeliness of seeing and posting food related contents. 55.8% of respondents somewhat liked seeing the photos of dishes in social media platforms. 57.1% of them somewhat liked watching videos related to food. But, those who liked to post photos or videos of the food items were significantly lower than this.

The analysis showed that most of the participants liked posting their photos and videos related food on Instagram (55% and 52.5% respectively) followed by WhatsApp (45% 44.1% respectively). Snapchat also became an important platform where students liked posting their captures.

By asking about their awareness about famous Indian food content creators and Kerala specific food content creators, the study also tested which area they were more familiar with. It was found that they were far more aware about Kerala food content creators than the former one.

In response to the question asking their favourite food vloggers and cooking video producers, most of the respondents wrote food vloggers from Kerala. Some of them wrote vloggers from the current place of residence. Some responses also mentioned the national- and international-scale vloggers.

Respondents gave their culinary hardships and experiences and the help of social media in the survey. This was majorly about the troubles they were facing as the interstate migrant students, exploration of local culinary culture, and the role of social media in overcoming the culinary gap after their moving.

Table 4. Consumption and Posting Patterns

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Whether the respondents liked seeing food photos	77	1	4	2.97	.778
Whether the respondents liked watching food videos	77	1	4	3.22	.681
Whether the respondents liked posting food photos	77	1	4	2.10	.926
Whether the respondents liked to posting food videos	77	1	4	1.91	.920
Valid N (listwise)	77				

3.5. Role of Social Media in Bridging the Culinary Cultural Gap for Interstate Migrant Students

3.5.1. Discovering local food options and hidden gems

Many respondents emphasized social media's role in helping them to find good food spots and hidden gems that serve affordable, tasty, and culturally familiar food. Students often relied on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to locate new eateries and to identify where they can find specific dishes or flavours. One student noted that social media "helps to explore new places," while another mentioned its utility in "finding delicious food" nearby. This ease of discovery is particularly valuable in unfamiliar cities where local knowledge can be limited.

3.5.2. exposure to diverse cuisines

Social media has enabled students to explore a wider variety of food options they might not have encountered otherwise. Some students expressed that platforms like YouTube and Instagram not only introduce them to new dishes but also make them more open to trying diverse cuisines. "It shows us the different varieties of food and makes us familiar with them," one respondent remarked, indicating that social media helps to bridge the cultural gap by expanding students' culinary horizons.

3.5.3. guidance on quality and budget-friendly choices

The financial constraints many interstate students face make social media particularly useful in finding restaurants offering quality food at reasonable prices. Platforms often host reviews and recommendations that highlight affordable and quality dining options, with one student observing, "Social media helps a lot to sort out nice and budget-friendly restaurants." This guidance can be crucial in cities where the cost of eating out varies widely and where students may not be familiar with local food pricing.

3.5.4. Gaining knowledge of new food trends and local flavours

Social media provides interstate students with an up-to-date view of the food scene in their new city, exposing them to trending dishes, new restaurants, and even seasonal specialties. "Social media is

helpful for what type of food and new trends are available," one respondent mentioned, adding that they gained insight into where to find popular local items. This can be particularly beneficial for students keen on experimenting with regional dishes and adapting to the local food culture.

3.5.5. Promoting cross-cultural food awareness

Some respondents suggested that social media plays an important role in globalizing food cultures, allowing for a wider appreciation of regional cuisines. "Social media should globalize food items beyond territories and culture," one student recommended, highlighting the platform's potential to reduce cultural barriers around food. By showcasing diverse cuisines, social media can inspire students and locals alike to embrace unfamiliar dishes, fostering a more inclusive food culture.

3.5.6. Support through cooking content and recipe sharing

For students who preferred to cook their own meals, social media offers a wealth of resources in the form of recipe videos and cooking channels. These resources can be especially valuable for students who miss specific dishes from Kerala, helping them to recreate homely meals with local ingredients. One student shared, "The recipe notes and cooking channels have helped a lot," highlighting how this content allows them to maintain a connection to familiar tastes.

3.5.7. Potential for greater awareness of interstate students' food-related challenges

One suggestion is that social media can serve as a platform for students to share their food-related struggles and to raise awareness among a broader audience. A respondent suggested, "They should have a page where people can share the problems they are facing in terms of food," highlighting the need for the better representation of interstate students' experiences. Such platforms could foster discussions on issues like flavour adaptation, dietary needs, and cleanliness concerns, and even encourage local eateries to be more accommodating.

3.5.8. Limited help for some, but significant for others

While some students found social media extremely helpful in adjusting to new food cultures, other mentioned limited reliance on it. Responses like "Not helped much" and "I only less depend on that factor" illustrate that social media's impact varies based on individual preferences and interest in food-related content. For students who are less food-focused, social media's role may be minimal, while for others, it is a key resource in navigating the culinary landscape.

3.5.9. Encouraging an open-minded approach to new cuisines

Social media's influence often extends beyond merely finding food spots; it can also encourage a more open-minded approach to food culture in general. As one student commented, "Social media has made me open to all kinds of food cultures," highlighting how continuous exposure to diverse foods can build curiosity and reduce reluctance toward trying unfamiliar dishes. This openness can significantly ease the adjustment process for students in adapting to a new culinary environment.

The present study sheds light on the food habits and cultural adaptations of interstate migrant students in the context of social media's influence. It underscores how social media functions as both a bridge and buffer, helping students to manage cultural and dietary transitions. This aligns with Dekker and Engbersen's (2014) research, highlighting the dual role of social media in easing adaptation while preserving ties to one's cultural origins. Migrants use social media not only to discover food spots or recipes but also to find cultural familiarity through shared food practices. In alignment, Komito (2011) discussed how social media fosters a support network for migrants, reinforcing cultural identity while facilitating new cultural exposure.

Respondents in the current study notably expressed frustration over the lack of familiar native foods and cited health and quality issues with local options. This frustration parallels findings in the work of Mansour Et al. (2020), which emphasized that dietary adjustment often becomes one of the most challenging aspects of migration, even for younger, more adaptable populations. However, unlike international migration studies where language barriers further complicate access to food information, interstate migrants here can rely on regional social media content, particularly in Malayalam, their native language, for ease of communication. Language-specific content has helped students to feel being represented and understood, confirming studies that highlight the importance of native-language resources in migrant adjustment (Esser, 2006).

Social media's role in introducing students to new culinary options also aligns with research studies, finding out that social media not only aids in finding familiar food but also piques interest in exploring new cuisines. This study reflects this trend with respondents demonstrating an eagerness to experiment with local and even international cuisines. This openness differs slightly from findings in some migration literature, where traditional foods are often preferred over local foods, even with the availability of social media (Parasecoli, 2014). However, the difference in this case can be attributed to the tech-savvy, younger demographic of students, who are more inclined to cultural experimentation.

Furthermore, students expressed their concerns about the prevalence of unethical paid promotions in food content on social media, suggesting that the misleading portrayals of food quality could affect their culinary experiences. Thus, while social media offers benefits, findings suggest that transparency in food-related content remains a critical need for this group.

The respondents' reliance on cooking videos and recipe-sharing also echoes Dekker and Engbersen's (2014) assertion that migrants turn to digital communities for practical solutions to challenges in their daily lives. Additionally, those in international migration studies who rely on recipes to recreate traditional foods, interstate migrant students relied on similar content to achieve dietary wellness while being far away from home. However, unlike international migrants, interstate students have an access to local ingredients, which may slightly reduce the complexity of recreating familiar dishes.

In sum, while this study aligns with broader migration literature in many respects, it also offers unique insights into

the experiences of interstate students. Their tech-savviness, preference for regional content, and openness to trying new foods suggest specific avenues for leveraging social media to support dietary wellness and cultural integration. The students' preference for Instagram and Snapchat as primary channels highlights the importance of visually-driven platforms in creating awareness and engagement, reinforcing existing research but also suggesting further exploration into platform-specific content creation for migrant well-being.

4. Conclusion

The current study has found that social media has a significant role in the culinary life of interstate migrant students. Migrant students are more less finding hardships in food consumption. Social media and its handles can help the group in this regard to some extent.

The study identified various problems related to the food habits of interstate migrant students and how social media can be used for improving these situations. Social media also helps students in cultural exploration in their current place of living and even cultures of other geographical areas. It is hereby suggested various social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat for the cultural education and dietary wellness awareness communication.

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