

# Platformed Foodways in Helsinki: Young Immigrant Men, AI Tools, and “Networked Eating”

Ali Sharifi 

Department of History and Geography, University of Eastern Finland, Finland

**Correspondence:** Ali Sharifi ([ali.sharifi@uef.fi](mailto:ali.sharifi@uef.fi))

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## Abstract

In a digitally saturated Helsinki, everyday eating is increasingly routed through apps, chats, and platform encounters. This article examines how young immigrant men (aged 21–35) activate these encounters and move across them to shape their food practices and a sense of belonging. In qualitative interviews, participants narrated how they search and share recipes and foods (e.g., through WhatsApp, Telegram, or Instagram), adapt dishes to cultural or religious preferences, learn new techniques, and use delivery platforms (e.g., Wolt) both as customers and, at times, as workers. I conceptualize these dynamics as “platformed foodways”: interactions between migrant customers and migrant couriers mediated via digital tools, which are embodied and embedded in everyday practices and create brief but meaningful encounters. This conceptualization draws on the broader notion of “platformization” (Poell et al., 2019), referring to the progressive embedding of routine food practices—recipe seeking, shopping, cooking, and social eating—into digital platform infrastructures and logics. I argue that platform-mediated weak ties function as “just-in-time” coaching, and that AI lowers language and knowledge barriers while sometimes creating new frictions (advice overload, cultural mismatch). The article makes an innovative contribution to the relationality of platformed foodways in Helsinki by centering networks, mobilities, and food practices, aligned with digitally saturated social worlds. With this study, I also make a timely contribution to the nuanced recognition and care of social inclusion studies with the everyday embedded role of generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini) in mediating migrants’ encounters and well-being.

## Keywords

digital foodways; generative AI; Helsinki; immigrant well-being; language barriers; online–offline mobilities; platform-mediated encounters; young immigrant men

## 1. Introduction

In Helsinki, everyday eating, preparing meals, finding ingredients, and learning how to cook often unfold through chats, online platforms, and short doorstep encounters (Arcadu, Reyes-Espejo, et al., 2025). As Oltmann and Espinoza-Vasquez (2024) noted, for many young immigrant men, these channels are not peripheral; they function as key pathways through which practical advice and recognition circulate.

Recipes and shopping knowledge travel quickly through WhatsApp and Telegram group chats, where peers exchange tips in real time (Calvo et al., 2024; Trauthig & Woolley, 2025); Instagram adds another layer to this by condensing cooking techniques into short and replicable videos (Marino, 2018; Ngqangashe & De Backer, 2021). Moreover, delivery platforms such as Wolt bring migrants to the threshold, where a few words at the pickup can carry encouragement or tips (Alyanak et al., 2023; Bonhomme & Muldoon, 2025). Alongside these social ties, AI tools like ChatGPT or Gemini are increasingly embedded in everyday food practices, supporting the translation of labels and menus, suggesting ingredient substitutions, and helping users build simple routines that feel manageable in a new environment (Catapang et al., 2025; Khozaei et al., 2025).

Drawing on 10 in-depth interviews and one ethnographic fieldnote, this article examines how these intertwined online–offline ties shape everyday eating and a sense of belonging among young immigrant men (aged 21–35) in Helsinki. The study deliberately focuses on young men because migrant men’s food practices remain significantly under-researched compared with women’s caring labor (Bodzan, 2020; Jin et al., 2023), offering a complementary perspective on masculine self-making and digital adaptation in the Nordic context. Also, the study further centers highly educated international students and early-career researchers, a growing group in student migration whose food adaptation strategies are rarely examined from a masculine perspective.

In the relatively quiet urban landscape of Helsinki, with a limited street food culture and fewer visible immigrant neighborhoods than in global metropolises such as London or New York, digital platforms become particularly central to the maintenance and adaptation of diasporic foodways. Therefore, in this study, I approach food practices as networked mobilities that move across screens, shops, kitchens, and doorstep exchanges (Erel & Ryan, 2019; Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2022).

The article addresses three core questions, which were developed from the interview guide, prior to data collection, and were refined during analysis:

1. How do online networks support recipe discovery, adaptation, and culturally meaningful eating?
2. How do migrant-to-migrant delivery encounters create exchanges of recognition, tips, and care?
3. How do AI tools, through translation, help allergen or halal checks, cooking, ingredient substitutions, and simple routine-building?

Throughout the article, I treat these practices as platformed foodways—the progressive incorporation of everyday food activities into platform infrastructures while migrants retain agency in shaping their use (Poell et al., 2019). This concept foregrounds the structuring role of commercial platforms in migrants’ food mobilities while retaining attention to agency and micro-scale interactions. The study, therefore, examines how these platformed foodways shape everyday belonging while acknowledging the particularities of the sample and the urban-digital context of Helsinki.

Rather than starting from platform algorithms or the conditions of gig work, this study begins with the everyday food practices of highly educated young immigrant men in Helsinki. This approach offers a complementary perspective to the more platform-centric literature on digital migration and platform labor (Maury et al., 2024; van Doorn et al., 2023).

The central problem this study addresses is how young immigrant men in a digitally saturated Nordic city construct everyday belonging and food practices when traditional family and local support networks are limited or absent. It argues that platformed foodways—through weak-tie coaching, doorstep micro-care, and AI-assisted navigation—create new relational pathways for social inclusion and well-being (Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2022). This study also highlights frictions such as advice overload, cultural misfit, and language demands (Catapang et al., 2025; Hua, 2025).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Networks, Mobilities, and Digitally Saturated Eating

Work on mobilities emphasizes how everyday life is organized by flows between places, technologies, and social relations rather than static locations. In digitally saturated cities like Helsinki, people move between screens, shops, and kitchens, activating ties across platforms and brief face-to-face encounters (Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019). The mobilities lens—particularly the formulation of mobilities, immobilities, and moorings—helps one understand ordinary eating habits as movements across infrastructures (apps, platforms, transport) and relations (family, peers, couriers) that enable culturally meaningful meals (Hannam et al., 2006).

At the same time, recent work on digital food culture shows that food practices are increasingly shaped by digital infrastructures and online power dynamics (Feldman & Goodman, 2021). Conceptual work on the digital food environment further supports this framing by highlighting how platforms, content creators, and non-human digital agents mediate food choices and routines (Granheim et al., 2025). Also, digitally mediated mobility research highlights the digital as a “mobilizing infrastructure” that shapes everyday movement across online–offline worlds (Anschütz & Judge, 2025). This relational perspective resonates with broader media and migration scholarship, particularly the ethnographic work of Georgiou (2013), Hegde (2016), and Leurs (2023), which emphasizes the mutual shaping of digital technologies and migratory practices while avoiding technological determinism.

Weak ties help explain how newcomers access timely information and support. Following Granovetter (1973), weak ties are social connections that are less emotionally intense than close family or friendship bonds but provide access to new information and opportunities. In this study, they function as low-cost, scalable channels for young immigrant men to obtain practical food-related advice when traditional strong ties are limited or absent (Granovetter, 1973). These connections can function as “just-in-time” support.

These findings echo Granovetter: App-based weak ties can quickly bridge information gaps, although they are not always beneficial and can shape adaptation in uneven ways (see Banzato & Serragiotto, 2025; Calvo et al., 2024).

These two strands—mobility and network ties—set the conceptual stage for my study. I treat everyday eating as a networked mobility, where advice and recognition travel across chats, apps, and doorstep exchanges (Akter et al., 2024; Granheim et al., 2025). These processes can be understood as platformed foodways, a specific manifestation of platformization in which digital platforms progressively mediate migrants' everyday food practices while leaving room for agency and meaning-making (Poell et al., 2019).

## **2.2. Platform-Mediated Encounters: Delivery Work, Recognition, and Micro-Care**

In Finland—in particular the Helsinki region—research shows how platform food delivery structures migrants' daily lives and exposes them to precarity and psychosocial strain while still providing income and a pathway into local routines (Mbare, 2023). Complementing this, ethnographic work shows how migrant couriers' lives are organized within a platform assemblage entangled with border regimes and administrative time—illustrating how migrant workers craft “life's work” under algorithmic conditions (Maury et al., 2024). This article aligns with the large phenomenon of student migration, as many food-delivery couriers in European cities are highly educated migrants (Kervola et al., 2024; Maury et al., 2024), while foregrounding men's food practices offers a complementary lens to the more common focus on women's caring labor.

Recent research shows that delivery platforms govern work through layered controls that compress interactions while still leaving room for social meaning (Wang & Yin, 2024). Beyond control, food delivery platforms act as social infrastructures that facilitate migrant-to-migrant encounters. Algorithmic matching and required doorstep hand-offs create hybrid “contact zones,” where highly educated migrant couriers and customers exchange brief recognition, tips, or micro-care (van Doorn et al., 2023). In this way, platforms function as relational infrastructures enabling the sociality at the heart of the present study.

For this study, platforms create migrant-to-migrant contact zones. Because many couriers are international students or highly educated newcomers, brief doorstep exchanges like saying thanks, dietary tips, or shop recommendations can carry recognition and micro-care. While some delivery research emphasizes control, classification, and scheduling, it also leaves space for relational moments and knowledge flows in the last meter of delivery. This literature supports that short doorstep interactions are socially meaningful and can feed back into healthier practices (Heiland, 2021). Research on courier–customer interactions shows these micro-encounters matter: Customer satisfaction and interaction quality shape courier satisfaction and continuance intentions, implying that brief recognition and gratitude are not trivial (Wang & Yin, 2024).

In Finland, surveys show couriers' preferences and working conditions vary, so platform work is not uniform, which matters because autonomy, rules, and time pressure determine whether doorstep interactions leave room for recognition or practical advice (Kervola et al., 2024).

## **2.3. Artificial Intelligence, Digital Inclusion, and Language: The Finnish Context**

Recent interview-based studies with migrants in Finland show how digitalized public services (from banking to healthcare) can exclude newcomers when language and authentication barriers combine with limited support, making everyday digitalization feel coercive. Although this research has focused on women, its implications are broader: Proficiency, access, and confidence shape who benefits from digital systems. These insights anchor my attention to digital literacies when analyzing how young men navigate food apps, group

chats, and AI tools (Buchert et al., 2024). Similarly, a qualitative study of Nepali migrants in Finland highlights how language barriers, platform design, and limited support constrain access to digital healthcare, underscoring that “digital-by-default” systems may deepen inequality when usability and language access are weak (Khanal, 2025).

### 3. Methods

This qualitative study employs a semi-structured, story-eliciting interview design with ten highly educated young immigrant men (aged 21–35), mostly postgraduate students or researchers from nine nationalities (Italy, Azerbaijan, Iran, Spain, Turkey, Afghanistan, Ghana, Bangladesh, and Egypt), who had resided in the Helsinki metropolitan area for between six months and five years. They were recruited via purposive sampling through student associations and digital networks; some also worked part-time as food couriers.

Data collection took place in 2025. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were complemented by one ethnographic fieldnote documenting a grocery-store observation of a young immigrant man scanning a cereal box with his smartphone and using AI (or Google Translate) to understand ingredient lists due to language barriers. The field observation is clearly marked in sub-section 4.3 to distinguish it from interview data and provide contextual support for participants’ accounts of AI use.

The semi-structured interview guide was organized around the three research questions and used open-ended prompts to elicit concrete narratives on online recipe seeking, delivery encounters, and AI usage. Data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis: Transcripts and fieldnotes were first open-coded, then iteratively grouped into the three main thematic categories through reflexive team discussions.

All procedures followed ethical guidelines, utilizing informed consent, pseudonyms, and secure storage on encrypted University drives. The researcher leveraged his own migration background to build rapport while employing reflexive memo-writing and advisor discussions to prevent personal bias. Table 1 shows participants’ demographic characteristics and educational backgrounds.

**Table 1.** Participant characteristics: Name (pseudonyms), age, country of origin, and education.

Participant name	Age	Country of origin	Degree
Nima	29	Azerbaijan	PhD researcher
Hashim	32	Egypt	Postdoctoral researcher
Marco	25	Italy	Master’s student
Opoku	27	Ghana	Master’s student
Maziyar	35	Iran	Master’s graduate
Pol	23	Spain	Master’s student
AmirAli	30	Afghanistan	PhD researcher
Ahmed	21	Turkey	Bachelor’s student
Reza	34	Iran	PhD researcher
Sujan	35	Bangladesh	Master’s student

The sample consists of highly educated international students and early-career researchers, characterized by temporary stays, high English proficiency, and access to university networks. Because migrant men's food practices remain significantly under-researched compared with women's caring labor, the study deliberately focuses on young men. This homogeneity enabled a focused exploration of platformed foodways among educated migrants, and limits generalization to other migrant groups with different educational, class, ethnic, or legal backgrounds. Although issues of masculinity are addressed where relevant, other intersecting identities remain secondary to the study's emphasis on digital practices.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *From Phone to Plate: Weak Tie Coaching in Chats and Online Communities*

Across the interviews, participants described using online social networks—private WhatsApp groups, Discord chats, and larger Facebook/Telegram channels—for “just-in-time” food advice. These interactions show how weak ties can function as informal coaches, offering low-stakes, culturally relevant tips that newcomers can quickly try when local family support is absent.

Marco, a 25-year-old Italian student, relied on compatriot communities to navigate Finnish grocery stores: “I follow some Italian recipe groups on Facebook—it feels like a community where we help each other survive in Finland.” In these groups, members shared substitution ideas and ingredient sources: “90% of ingredients are easy to find [here], but the remaining 10% are harder....The group helped me figure out where to get good guanciale for carbonara.” Similarly, Hashim, an Egyptian postdoc, joined Egyptian recipe groups on Instagram for tips on living in Finland—like locating Middle Eastern shops in Malmi or adapting local products. For him, these ties were “not intimate, but informationally rich,” providing knowledge that close friends or Finnish colleagues could not.

Newcomers particularly leaned on these networks while lacking local culinary references. Pol, a Spanish master's student in Helsinki, relied more on immigrant peers than Finns: “My Iranian friends influenced my food habits more than Finnish people did. I tried Iranian food and cooked with them.” He jokingly framed this as “immigrants teaching immigrants.” Opoku from Ghana emphasized diasporic WhatsApp/Telegram groups for maintaining foodways: “My Ghanaian friends in Finland influence my food more—we share recipes on WhatsApp or Telegram groups and sometimes cook together.” As one of only a few Ghanaians in his area, he said, “without them [group chats], I feel something is missing.” These groups also helped adapt dishes using Finnish products. When making jollof rice, Opoku explained: “I asked in the group what kind of tomatoes and spices to buy here—someone always has an idea.”

Participants valued this advice because it felt culturally aware and doable. Ahmed, a 21-year-old with a Turkish background, ranked “group chats with friends” highest, “highest trust due to friends/social bond,” while placing random TikTok videos at the bottom. He still relied on small online circles for meal ideas: “I rely on my friend who is in culinary school or Discord groups with friends where we share food ideas,” adding that the social bond made advice “culturally aware...and feels doable,” unlike the overwhelming “food hacks” he encountered elsewhere.

Not everyone used large diaspora forums; some preferred tighter circles, but the weak-tie logic remained. Nima, a 29-year-old from Azerbaijan, described a WhatsApp group of seven Azerbaijani students: “We often plan a barbecue on weekends. Food is the reason we meet, and we usually share tips and tricks about food or other things.” Here, the group chat coordinated meetups and enabled micro-learning through repeated online and in-person exchanges.

Participants also stressed speed: Advice could move from phone to kitchen within hours. AmirAli, an Afghan doctoral student, described: “Often my wife sends me an Instagram video during the day; we agree to make the dish, I buy ingredients usually at Itäkeskus, and we cook it that night.” Maziyar, a master’s graduate, asked on Telegram for healthier snack ideas and several people replied within an hour; he applied one suggestion the next day—switching from a sugary pastry to rye bread with peanut butter. These accounts illustrate “just-in-time” coaching via weak ties: Bite-sized guidance that can be tested immediately.

Participants also filtered the volume of online advice and assessed source trustworthiness. AmirAli preferred “Telegram channels that cite sources” and said: “Sometimes I use Instagram too, but I want evidence.” Hashim noted: “Social media can be inspiring but also misleading....I rely more on AI or science news to double-check.” This triangulation—peer tips, followed by verification—suggests weak-tie networks work best alongside other resources.

Overall, digitally mediated weak ties extended immigrants’ food-related support systems. Through group chats and online communities, young men in Helsinki accessed collective knowledge that helped them adapt their foodways in culturally nuanced and immediate ways. Newcomers especially benefited from this “phone-to-plate” pipeline. As Hashim summed up: “Without the Instagram and WhatsApp tips, understanding labels, cooking, finding ingredients—it would be very difficult....They are the most helpful tools for an immigrant.” Weak-tie coaching via digital networks thus operates as a form of social inclusion, mitigating everyday challenges of eating in a new environment by crowdsourcing experience and practical knowledge. These practices strengthen bonds within diasporic communities, while also fostering broader social inclusion in Finnish society. Thus, by using digital platforms to navigate local supermarkets, exchange knowledge about Finnish products, and engage in micro-care with other migrants, participants build confidence, reduce isolation, and develop everyday forms of belonging in the host society.

#### ***4.2. At the Door: Recognition and Micro-Care in Delivery Encounters***

These doorstep encounters are enabled by platforms’ algorithmic matching and the required physical hand-off. Despite their emphasis on speed and ratings, they occasionally open genuine contact zones between migrant customers and migrant couriers.

A novel theme in participants’ accounts was how migrant-to-migrant interactions at the doorstep—during delivery hand-offs—sometimes became moments of recognition, practical support, and micro-care. Although most participants rarely used platforms such as Wolt or Foodora (mainly due to cost), those who did recalled meaningful exchanges with immigrant couriers. Even in compressed, time-pressured transactions, brief conversations carried significance beyond the purchase, suggesting that platform-mediated encounters can become sites of solidarity and knowledge circulation between strangers.

Ahmed described discovering a shared background with a courier: “Once, a courier noticed my Turkish accent, and since he was also Turkish, we had a nice chat about how we ended up in Finland.” Although short, it “left a good feeling—like a little reminder of home.” He also recounted an interaction grounded in shared interests: “A courier noticed my Grateful Dead t-shirt, and we discussed our favorite albums. I try to engage with them because I know service jobs can be draining and dehumanizing; I want to treat them as human beings.” Here, Ahmed explicitly framed doorstep talks as human recognition, with mutual benefits: The courier is acknowledged, and the customer experiences connection.

Ahmed’s approach of “treating them as human beings” was echoed by others who had experienced the grind of delivery work or similar jobs. Opoku, who works as a Wolt courier while completing his master’s in Helsinki, described peer support from the courier perspective: “I remember one time when another courier saw me struggling with my scooter in heavy snow, and he helped me push it. He was from Somalia. We didn’t talk much, but the moment felt supportive.” Although not a customer–courier exchange, it was still enabled by the platform labor context and illustrates micro-care between migrants in public space. Similarly, Sujan, a 35-year-old master’s student from Bangladesh who also works as a Wolt courier, added: “I usually get appreciation from customers as well as tips, which makes me really happy.”

From the customer side, Nima offered a clear example of practical knowledge transfer. Shortly after arriving, he received a delivery from a courier who spoke Turkish (close to Nima’s language):

We had a short chat...he mentioned he was a master’s student at the University of Helsinki. I asked where to find ingredients for a specific Turkish dish, and he told me to go to Itäkeskus or Malmi, where I could get everything for Azerbaijani dishes.

Nima recalled: “Although I have never seen him again, that tip was incredibly helpful—since then, whenever I need specific ingredients, I go to Itäkeskus or Malmi. It was a small tip, but very memorable and useful for me as a newcomer.” In this instance, the courier operated as a cultural broker, and the doorstep became a contact zone where local knowledge moved across migrant networks.

At the same time, participants emphasized that such exchanges were not routine. AmirAli noted: “Usually we don’t chat—they seem busy and leave quickly,” adding that “they looked very busy and were not interested in talking.” Participants linked this to time pressure, deadlines, and ratings, which often constrain interaction. Yet when a connection did emerge, it could be affectively meaningful. Marco recalled one courier who was Italian: “I recognized his accent; we talked a bit about challenges living here and how difficult it is to find good quality Italian pizza here, and I suggested he switch to whole-grain pasta. It was nice and cheered me up.”

This role reversal—customer advising courier—highlights the peer-like nature of these encounters, where shared migrant status can momentarily soften service hierarchies.

Overall, the qualitative material suggests that when time pressure eases—even briefly—or when affinities are quickly recognized, doorstep encounters can become micro-lessons or small solidarities that “feed back” into later practices. Participants who received tips (e.g., Nima’s guidance about where to buy ingredients) reported acting on them. Others described emotional recognition as shaping their sense of belonging. Hashim, reflecting on a short exchange in Arabic about winter, said, “it felt warm and familiar.” In his account, that familiarity

carried into the rest of the day by lifting his mood, aligning with micro-care as small gestures that convey camaraderie within an otherwise impersonal urban routine.

However, when conditions did not allow conversation, deliveries remained utilitarian. Many participants—such as AmirAli and Reza—rarely used delivery apps, preferring to cook or eat at student cafeterias at the University of Helsinki or Aalto University (Unicafe). Their accounts contained few doorstep interactions beyond the briskness of the hand-off, which underscores that such moments are opportunistic rather than guaranteed, depending on willingness to initiate conversation, shared language or cultural cues, and time availability. In this sample, roughly half had experienced a meaningful courier encounter and half had not.

For those who had experienced a meaningful courier encounter, the interpretations often extended beyond the single event. Participants described these moments as evidence that “the city isn’t as lonely as it seems” (as Marco put it) or that “people help each other out here, even strangers” (Opoku’s takeaway from the scooter incident). In this sense, brief doorstep exchanges can counteract isolation by providing mutual recognition. Structurally, platforms inadvertently enable these migrant-to-migrant links because immigrants are often present on both sides of the service encounter. What may appear as a byproduct of the gig economy can, in some instances, become a micro-inclusion event.

In sum, the doorstep—positioned between private and public space—marks a threshold between isolation and connection in newcomers’ everyday lives. These findings add a relational nuance to discussions of platform work by highlighting a human layer of care and knowledge-sharing enacted despite algorithmic constraints.

#### **4.3. Ask the AI: AI as Translator and Tutor in Daily Food Practices**

All ten participants had experimented with generative AI tools—especially ChatGPT—in relation to food, making AI a recurring element in their digitally embedded foodways. They used AI for translation, dietary guidance, recipe generation, and as a conversational partner for refining ideas. Overall, participants positioned AI as more trustworthy than random social media content, yet less authoritative than vetted sources or knowledgeable friends; it was treated as a powerful but fallible assistant. The notion of a “double-edged sword” (or similar phrasing) emerged across interviews, capturing cautious optimism: AI could rapidly reduce language and knowledge barriers, but still required human sense-checking and judgment.

A frequent use case involved translating labels and menus. Participants described difficulty navigating Finnish (and sometimes Swedish) food packaging and restaurant texts. AmirAli, reflecting on use during travel and in Finland, explained: “I photographed many labels and menus and gave them to ChatGPT to list the ingredients—it was super helpful.” He contrasted this with Google Translate, noting that ChatGPT handled context better and could flag certain ingredients. Hashim similarly reported: “I often take pictures of Finnish labels and ask AI to translate.”

Fieldnote observation aligned with these accounts:

In one instance during a grocery run, a young immigrant man was observed scanning a cereal box with his smartphone. When I asked him about it, he explained that, despite eight months of Finnish language studies, he still cannot understand most ingredient lists on products. Consequently, he uses AI or Google Translate to help him.

Collectively, these practices suggest that AI-supported translation increases confidence to try unfamiliar products. For AmirAli, this extended to religious dietary needs: “I use it sometimes for halal checks—if I’m not sure about something in the ingredients, I ask ChatGPT or Gemini, and it explains what it is.” In this sense, AI functions as just-in-time translation and interpretation, strengthening everyday navigability without requiring a human translator.

Beyond translation, participants used AI as a personalized dietitian and micro-tutoring. Nima described ChatGPT as “basically my best friend” for nutrition guidance: “When I want to change something in my diet, I ask it because it’s fast and convenient....I prefer a science-based approach—I ask AI and also ask for references and proof, then check the articles myself.” He commonly followed a practical query (e.g., meal planning) with “can you give me academic references?” framing AI as both instructor and librarian. Reza reported a similar routine: “Often I ask ChatGPT a question and then say, ‘Give me relevant articles,’ and I go and read those to confirm.” Participants thus treated AI as a high-utility intermediary rather than a final authority. Pol emphasized this advantage: “AI understands context better than social media and can personalize advice. It can check diverse sources and scientific papers....I double-check things, but AI gives more balanced information compared to some influencer online.” Indeed, he ranked AI as his primary learning source, ahead of YouTube and far above social networks.

Based on the participants’ responses, efficiency was a major driver regarding AI. Participants repeatedly framed AI as faster than conventional web searching. Hashim explained: “Google takes more time because you have to open many pages until you find what you are looking for. With AI, I ask, and it gives an explanation with sources in one go.” This speed mattered for participants balancing studies, work, and cooking. Opoku described using Gemini or ChatGPT in the moment in the supermarket—“Is this food healthy?”—rather than reading multiple websites. “I use AI regularly,” he noted: “I take pictures of food products and ask AI...or when I see a new product in Prisma, I quickly Google or ask AI if it’s healthy or not.” The value lay in immediate, context-specific guidance that could be acted upon in real time.

Crucially, participants articulated AI’s risks and limitations, often unprompted. Ahmed described AI as “a double-edged sword,” noting that it hallucinates and requires human verification. Maziyar, a heavy user, echoed this skepticism: “It works, but for critical information, you must double-check. You cannot trust it 100%. For example, ChatGPT gave me wrong info about [an unrelated topic]—so critical things must be verified.” He also pointed to the role of prompting and user competence: “Prompts are important. The more details you give, the better answers you will get. Free version is enough for me....But it cannot think like a human—it only analyzes data.” Taken together, these accounts reflect a form of digital literacy: Participants recognized hallucination, calibrated trust, and emphasized cross-verification.

Some participants encountered an overload or cultural mismatch with AI-generated content. Nima noted:

Sometimes they [AI or social media] make things really complicated and long, as I’m busy, I need simple and short advice. If AI and social media do not work for me, I will call my mother—she always knows tips and tricks.

This highlights that if AI’s answer was too complex or not to his taste, he reverted to human help. Also, Nima mentioned checking the comment sections of Instagram recipes to see real-user tips when an AI recipe felt doubtful: “There are usually very useful tips in comment sections.”

In another case, Pol attempted to use ChatGPT to get a traditional Catalan recipe (fricandó, a beef stew). However, he found the output lacking: “For cultural foods, it wasn’t accurate. So, I called my grandmother. She sent me the real recipe. Then I gave her recipe to ChatGPT and asked it to make it step-by-step. So, I combined both.” This is a fascinating example of human-AI collaboration: AI alone didn’t have the authentic accuracy, but once armed with his grandmother’s recipe, it could help format and simplify the instructions, which underscores that AI’s knowledge may have blind spots, especially with niche or deeply traditional dishes, and human knowledge is still crucial.

AI was also used for substitutions and “healthier” adaptations. Participants asked questions such as “What’s a healthier substitute for X?” or “How can I make this dish less oily?” Nima shared a concrete example:

About four or five days ago, I asked ChatGPT for a healthier carbohydrate swap. It suggested using bulgur instead of rice, so I researched it and learned that bulgur causes a lower blood-sugar spike and has more fiber and protein than brown rice. I decided to switch, and since then I’ve been using bulgur as my main carb source.

Hashim described a similar pathway from an AI suggestion to verification: “I asked ChatGPT to give me some tips so I can improve my eating habits; it told me about how frying onions in olive oil changes the glycemic impact of rice. I checked some papers and found studies about fiber and fat slowing digestion.” In these cases, AI acted as an initial prompt for insight, which participants then filtered through external evidence and personal evaluation. Marco’s account further suggests complementary tool use across platforms: “Use YouTube because it’s validated visually. And if something looks helpful, check it with AI. YouTube helps with cooking visually and then AI helps verify what you saw.”

Participants also anticipated an increase in reliance on AI in the coming years. AmirAli predicted: “AI will likely have a positive effect,” adding, “social media influences me less because I want evidence.” Similarly, Hashim stated, “AI for sure will affect my diet more. It’s more reliable and you can ask follow-up questions.” Nima expects that “AI will likely be the main influence” on diets, with social media remaining secondary. Yet, participants also articulated concerns: Ahmed warned about “corporate manipulation where AI-based apps encourage unhealthy habits for profit,” while Mazyar emphasized the need for user competence: “There is helpful information, but People need education to use AI and other platforms correctly and identify trustworthy sources.” These comments point to digital literacy and governance as key mediators of AI’s future influence on food choices.

In summary, participants engaged with generative AI as a tool for translation, education, and ideation within daily eating practices. While AI lowered language barriers and offered rapid, customized guidance (“micro-tutoring”), supporting healthier or culturally meaningful adaptations, participants approached it with informed skepticism, commonly cross-referencing with scientific articles, human advice, or other evidence. AI functioned as a supplement—not a replacement—for the broader ecology of support (friends, family, community, and expert knowledge) that shapes their foodways. As one participant put it: “AI is like a horse—the human is the rider. It assists but does not replace the human.”

## 5. Discussion

This study shows how young immigrant men's food practices in Helsinki are shaped by weak-tie networks, delivery micro-encounters, and generative AI. These platformed foodways also serve as resources for broader social inclusion in the host society. While the empirical material shows strong maintenance of diasporic networks (Arcadu, Zanolin, & Migliorini, 2025), the weak-tie coaching, doorstep micro-care, and AI-supported navigation observed here simultaneously open pathways to the wider Finnish context. By reducing isolation and fostering everyday belonging through digital and relational practices, they extend food-mediated integration processes documented in recent migration-food scholarship. The discussion situates these findings within scholarship on mobility and digitally mediated social relations.

First, my findings underscore the importance of weak ties and networked mobilities in newcomer foodways. As Liu and Yeo (2022) demonstrate, mobile-mediated weak-tie communication significantly enhances migrants' adaptation and sense of belonging, especially in urban environments. Consistent with Granovetter's classic argument that weak ties often serve as bridges to new information, participants relied on acquaintances and community networks via WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, or AI to obtain timely advice (Granovetter, 1973). This extends prior research on migrant information ecosystems (Moran, 2023) to a demographic (young immigrant men) and a domain (online foodways) that have been less examined. Similar to findings from WhatsApp support-group ethnographies, participants benefited from the low-friction exchange of practical tips and solidarity in group chats (Calvo et al., 2024; Mendivil-Aguayo et al., 2024).

Opoku's Ghanaian recipe chats and Marco's Italian Facebook groups reduced isolation and provided culturally relevant guidance. These weak ties operated as on-demand, "just-in-time" support, where a quick message could shape shopping and cooking choices. The examples also show networked mobility: Advice moves from online groups into offline routines, linking platforms to stores, kitchens, and social gatherings.

Secondly, my results highlight an often-overlooked site of integration, the micro-encounters at the doorstep in platform-mediated deliveries. While much literature on the gig economy emphasizes worker precarity and algorithmic control (Maury et al., 2024; Mbare, 2023), my focus on relational moments aligns with emerging perspectives that, even within highly structured "last-meter" interactions, there is room for human connection and interaction (van Doorn et al., 2023). Indeed, the interviews provided concrete examples of what I term "micro-care," small acts of kindness or knowledge exchange between migrant couriers and migrant customers. In line with Heiland's (2021) argument that gig work is shaped by situated interactions, my data show that shared identity cues such as a familiar name or accent, can briefly disrupt the scripted handoff and create a moment of connection.

Ahmed's effort to humanize his interactions, or Nima receiving a valuable shopping tip from a courier, demonstrates that the doorstep can become a contact zone rich with meaning. These findings support the idea of migrant-to-migrant contact zones: Platform deliveries can create brief connections between people with shared backgrounds that may ease adaptation. As Korver-Glenn et al. (2023) point out, even mundane service encounters can carry significant weight in shaping feelings of belonging for immigrants.

However, such moments were not guaranteed. As AmirAli noted, time pressure and platform norms often prevent conversation, and the variation in experiences suggests that both platform design and individual willingness shape whether micro-care emerges. Still, the presence of any positive exchanges points to small intervention opportunities, such as prompts or community initiatives that encourage brief, safe interaction and reinforce that even short recognition can support inclusion in everyday life.

Third, the findings show that generative AI can function as an everyday integration aid while highlighting the importance of digital literacy (Haman et al., 2024). Participants mainly used AI for translation and dietary guidance, suggesting that LLMs can reduce language frictions and support routine food decisions. In their study, Jahani et al. (2024) highlight that tools like ChatGPT can deliver personalized and multilingual support to migrants, directly aligning with how the participants used AI to interpret food labels or brainstorm meals. In practice, participants used AI to interpret Finnish labels, check halal suitability, suggest healthier swaps, and generate meal ideas—tasks that would otherwise require a native helper or substantial effort. While this aligns with evidence that ChatGPT can support translation, it also requires oversight; accordingly, participants treated AI as a first step and routinely verified its suggestions elsewhere (Niszczota & Rybicka, 2023).

The present study cautions that, while AI's dietary advice is often sensible, it can misfire in specific contexts (Ponzo et al., 2024). Although men in this study intuitively understood this, many treated AI as a knowledgeable friend rather than a scientist or nutritionist—useful for a first draft or quick check, but to be second-guessed.

One interesting insight is how AI and peer networks complement each other. Participants often bounced between asking AI and consulting their human networks. For example, Nima combined AI references with his mother's traditional knowledge, Pol combined ChatGPT's step-by-step clarity with his grandmother's authentic recipe. This suggests a model of hybrid knowledge-building in which AI augments human support rather than replacing it. In terms of social inclusion, generative AI provided a form of individual empowerment, an immigrant can independently figure out what *hernekeitto* (pea soup) is or whether a Finnish yogurt contains gelatin, without feeling helpless. Though this autonomy can improve immigrants' confidence and ability to participate in local food culture (e.g., trying Finnish dishes with the help of AI translations of recipes), without the ability to critically evaluate AI outputs, there is a risk of misinformation or overwhelm. Participants, mostly well-educated and digitally savvy, largely avoided these pitfalls. They exemplified the “educated rider of the AI horse” metaphor that Maziyar articulated. But not all newcomers might have such a level of skill or skepticism, which points to the importance of digital literacy training as part of integration programs. As Zhao et al. (2025) demonstrate, improving migrants' digital literacy significantly enhances their integration outcomes by increasing access to useful information and social networks.

Connecting back to the “digitally saturated social worlds” theme, this study demonstrates that young immigrants navigate blurred online–offline boundaries in daily food practices. Recipes may be crowdsourced online, executed offline, and shared back online for feedback. Thus, smartphones have become as essential as the cooking pot for immigrant households.

In addition to the above, my findings contribute a gender lens to research on migrant food networks. While much literature on food and integration has focused on women (Bodzan, 2020), the present study shows that young men also engage in significant food work and community knowledge exchange, often through digital platforms. Although the male participants in this study framed their cooking in terms of independence

and health, they readily asked for help and shared advice. This suggests that digital platforms provide a comfortable space for men to discuss food without identity threat, an interesting point for inclusion efforts (Mendivil-Aguayo et al., 2024).

While the study offers rich insights into platformed foodways among highly educated young immigrant men, its findings are situated within a specific Helsinki-based sample and a rapidly evolving technological landscape. Consequently, future work could usefully extend the analysis to other migrant groups, genders, and longitudinal changes in digital practices.

## 6. Conclusion

Everyday food practices provide a rich lens through which to view social inclusion in a digitally saturated world. This study showed that for young immigrant men in Helsinki, food choices and habits are not developed in isolation, but rather are digitally embedded in networks of people and tools. These platformed foodways, therefore, serve as resources for broader social inclusion in the host society by facilitating cross-cultural knowledge exchange, practical adaptation, and everyday belonging beyond diasporic networks. Through group chats and social media communities, newcomers tap into weak-tie networks that act as on-demand coaches for navigating a new foodscape. Through the brief but significant interactions on delivery platforms, such men find moments of mutual recognition and care that can alleviate the anonymity of city life. And through generative AI assistants, they overcome language barriers and obtain personalized guidance that aligns with both local realities and their cultural preferences.

These findings highlight the importance of viewing integration as a relational, dynamic process. The relationships in question include human ties (friends, peers, fellow migrants met by chance) and human–technology relationships (with algorithms and AI). Mobility is evident not only in physical movement but in the mobility of information and support across online–offline boundaries. In Helsinki’s highly digital environment, the smartphone has become as essential as the cooking pot for immigrant households. Indeed, it is a tool for learning, connecting, and adapting on the go.

This study suggests several avenues to bolster social inclusion via food-related channels, including moderated WhatsApp or Telegram groups with vetted cultural coaches, platform encouragement of brief interaction when ratings permit, and culturally adapted AI tools with guidance on safe use.

In the study, though all participants were adept, not everyone will naturally verify AI answers or understand its biases. Thus, providing guidance in integration courses on using Google, nutrition apps, or ChatGPT for daily life could enhance self-sufficiency.

In conclusion, young immigrant men in Helsinki navigate their new food environment by moving through networks (social and digital) that enable them to carry tastes, techniques, and healthy habits across distances. Their foodways become “platformed” not in the sense of being controlled by technology, but in being supported and extended by it. This article has shown that inclusion can happen through something as ordinary as cooking dinner: When that dinner is informed by a friend’s WhatsApp message, a two-minute doorstep chat, or a quick AI consultation, we can see a form of inclusion that is interactive, immediate, and empowering. By embracing the possibilities at the nexus of mobility, relationships, and digital saturation, we

can better support newcomers in not only finding their next meal but also finding community and well-being in the process.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability

Due to ethical and privacy restrictions, the data are not publicly available. The interview data are stored securely at the University of Eastern Finland and are accessible only to members of the research project.

### LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Grok (xAI) primarily for grammar and language editing purposes.

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## About the Author



**Ali Sharifi** is a PhD researcher in social sciences and geography at the University of Eastern Finland. With a multidisciplinary background combining food science, geography, and social research, he holds a master's degree in food science from the University of Padova, Italy. His research explores the intersections of migration, masculinities and gender, food practices, digital technologies, and immigrant well-being in Finland and Nordic contexts.