Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional
Brazilian Journal of Occupational Therapy

ISSN 2526-8910

Original Article

‘I will eat the whole world’: exploring how mobilities shape migrants’ food-related occupations[1]

‘Vou comer o mundo inteiro’: explorando como as mobilidades moldam as ocupações alimentares de migrantes

Anne-Cécile Delaisse[a], Georgia Carswell[a], Katie Pagdin[a], Suzanne Huot[a]

[a]University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

How to cite: Delaisse, A.-C., Carswell, G., Pagdin, K., & Huot, S. (2025). ‘I will eat the whole world’: exploring how mobilities shape migrants’ food-related occupations. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional, 33*, e4061. https://doi.org/10.1590/2526-8910.cto413440612

Abstract

Introduction: Previous studies on migrants’ food-related occupations have largely focused on their transition from the sending to the receiving country’s foodscapes, overlooking their ongoing transnational and mobile practices. **Objective:** This article examines the interrelation between migrants’ transnational mobilities and their food-related occupations. **Methodology:** A secondary analysis of interviews with 16 Vietnamese migrants in Metro Vancouver and seven returnees from Canada to Vietnam used a transnational and mobilities theoretical approach to explore how cross-border movements, media, and culinary influences shape migrants’ food-related occupations. **Results:** Themes highlight dimensions including: a) Routine, mobilities and adaptation; b) (Transnational) social connections; and c) Global mobilities and power dynamics. **Conclusion:** Theorizations of transnationalism and mobilities offer a valuable framework for examining food-related occupations in occupational therapy and occupational science. This framework transcends simplistic distinctions between sending and receiving cultures, encouraging occupational therapists and researchers to critically engage with migrants’ transnational identities and occupations, moving beyond assimilationist approaches.

Keywords: Emigration and Immigration, Human Migration, Secondary Data Analysis, Diet.

[1] **Ethical approval and informed consent statements:** The study obtained institutional ethics approval from the University of British Columbia (protocol numbers: H21-01771, H21-03396). Informed consent was obtained from all participants via an online form.

Received on Feb. 2, 2025; 1st Revision on Mar. 12, 2025; 2nd Revision on July 8, 2025; Accepted on Sept. 18, 2025.

Resumo

Introdução: Estudos anteriores sobre as ocupações relacionadas à alimentação entre migrantes têm se concentrado amplamente na transição dos cenários alimentares do país de origem para o país de destino, deixando em segundo plano as práticas transnacionais e móveis contínuas desses indivíduos. **Objetivo:** Este artigo examina a inter-relação entre as mobilidades transnacionais dos migrantes e suas ocupações relacionadas à alimentação. **Metodologia:** Foi realizada uma análise secundária de entrevistas com 16 migrantes vietnamitas na região metropolitana de Vancouver e sete retornados do Canadá para o Vietnã, utilizando uma abordagem teórica baseada nos paradigmas de transnacionalismo e mobilidades. Essa abordagem permitiu explorar como os movimentos transfronteiriços, os meios de comunicação e as influências culinárias moldam as ocupações alimentares dos migrantes. **Resultados:** Os achados destacam três dimensões principais: a) Rotina, mobilidades e adaptação; b) Conexões sociais (transnacionais); e c) Mobilidades globais e dinâmicas de poder. **Conclusão:** As teorizações sobre transnacionalismo e mobilidades oferecem um referencial teórico valioso para a análise de ocupações relacionadas à alimentação nos campos da terapia ocupacional e da ciência ocupacional. Esse referencial transcende distinções simplistas entre culturas de origem e de destino, incentivando terapeutas ocupacionais e pesquisadores a se envolverem criticamente com as identidades e ocupações transnacionais dos migrantes, superando abordagens assimilacionistas.

Palavras-chave: Emigração e Imigração, Migração Humana, Análise de Dados Secundários, Alimentação.

Introduction

Migration has garnered growing attention within occupational science, as studies have shown that migrants' occupations are crucial for maintaining identity and continuity with values, culture, and roles while generating meaning and enacting agency across different places (Bezerra & Alves, 2022; Cirineu et al., 2025; Farias & Asaba, 2013; Maersk, 2021; McGovern & Yong, 2022; Wijekoon et al., 2023). Food-related occupations in particular, such as cooking, eating, ingredient sourcing, meal sharing, traditional celebrations, and eating out, among others, are a prime subject to explore the relationship between migration and occupational engagement. Food is a biological necessity, and in being so, many daily occupations are linked to food and make up a significant portion of daily lives (Aronsen Torp et al., 2013). Moreover, food-related occupations are deeply connected to traditions, social connections, and emotions, reflecting intersections of identity, environment, and culture (Aronsen Torp et al., 2013). Not only is the experience of preparing and serving food shaped by cultural practices (Crepeau, 2015), but the act of maintaining cultural identity can be carried out through food-related occupations. As international migrants move across borders, they are immersed in multiple culinary domains, expanding their networks of food practices, such as engaging in eating out, local food shopping, and trying new recipes (Knight & Shipman, 2020). This research explored how Vietnamese migrants in Vancouver and returning migrants in Vietnam negotiated their food-related occupations in relation to their mobilities across national borders.

We argue that adopting a transnational mobilities lens enables a broader and more critical examination of migrants' food-related occupations.

Food, migration, and identity

Research within and beyond occupational science highlights the cultural significance of food-related occupations for migrants, identifying food as a vital element of identity formation and a marker of identity (Nyamnjoh, 2018; Parasecoli, 2014). In this paper, we consider culture to be "[…] the learned and shared knowledge that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience" (Spradley & McCurdy, 2012, p. 2). Parasecoli (2014) and Aronsen Torp et al. (2013) found that migrants' cultural identities are reshaped as their food preferences, cooking practices, and food-related occupations adapt to influences in the receiving country. Alternatively, many studies revealed that food-related occupations are powerful in strengthening cultural identity and maintaining connection to the sending country (Farias & Asaba, 2013). Notably, when migrants can engage in food practices associated with cultural or religious celebrations and traditions, such as fasting and ritual meals, such occupations may foster a sense of belonging to their country of origin and community in the host country (Nyamnjoh, 2018). Ore (2018) demonstrated that cooking allows migrants to satisfy their longing for home, connect with childhood caregivers, and establish identity in a foreign environment. Sharing meals and communal eating with compatriots can also enhance community building and collective cultural identity (Middleton et al., 2024). In summary, food-related occupations hold meaningful cultural value for many migrants, as food often serves as a marker of identity and a way to maintain ties to home.

Understanding food-related occupations in relation to transnational mobilities

While these studies provide a critical contribution to the literature, they mainly address migration as a one-way trip entailing an uprooting experience from the sending country's foodscape[2]. A key assumption is that migrants are severed from their sending country and must 'grow new roots' or rebuild their cultural identity in the receiving country's distinct foodscape. Much of this research tends to focus on the role of food in the settlement and integration processes, adopting an assimilationist and sedentarist approach to food-related occupations. An assimilationist approach views integration as a mostly linear process in which migrants gradually adopt the culture of the receiving society and abandon that of their sending country (Delaisse & Huot, 2023; Nayar, 2015); while a sedentarist approach emphasizes sedentarity and permanent settlement as the norm for developing belonging and identity (Halfacree, 2012; Yeoh et al., 2020). We argue that these previous studies overlook the dynamic and fluid nature of migration, as well as the ongoing cross-border and mobile practices associated with food-related occupations.

[2] A foodscape is a dynamic network of physical, cultural, and social environments where food is produced, accessed, prepared, consumed, and discussed, encompassing the institutional, cultural, and spatial arrangements that shape people's relationships with food (Vonthron et al., 2020). While foodscapes vary across space and time, they do not evolve in isolation but are interconnected through global mobilities.

To overcome these limitations, we adopt a theoretical framework inspired by transnational approaches and the mobilities paradigm. Transnational approaches emerged in the 1990s to better study transnationalism, which refers to the processes by which migrants, through their daily occupations, "[…] sustain social, economic, and political relations that link their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create social spheres that cross national borders" (Basch et al., 1994, p. 6). Transnationalism involves the cross-border relationships, identities, and occupations experienced by migrants (Bagwell, 2015; Vertovec, 2009). The mobilities paradigm studies "[…] the large-scale movements of people, objects, capital and information across the world, as well as the more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public space, and the travel of material things within everyday life" (Hannam et al., 2006, p. 1). The mobilities paradigm posits every interaction implies movement and encourages the consideration of the social implications of those movements (Sheller & Urry, 2006).

A small subsection of the literature on food and migration highlights migrants' transnational and mobile food-related occupations. For example, in response to the limited availability of ingredients central to the cuisine of their country of origin, some migrants received "food parcels" from back home or created a garden to grow such ingredients themselves in the receiving country (Bailey, 2017; Lin et al., 2020). Additionally, the sensory experience of making a meal (e.g., unique sounds, smells, the feel of certain utensils) could symbolically and viscerally transport migrants back to their home country (Bailey, 2017; Ore, 2018). These transnational practices have been shown to be instrumental in the continuation of cultural identity and sustaining connection to the sending country.

In this paper, we integrate a transnational and mobilities paradigm approach to enhance our understanding of migrants' food-related occupations. While these two theoretical frameworks remain under-used but increasingly adopted lenses in occupational science (Huot et al., 2022; Gonçalves & Malfitano, 2020), their use expands the theoretical repertoire of the discipline. As we examine how these frameworks can mutually inform one another, we argue that they provide a more comprehensive and critical perspective on the dynamics of food-related occupations within migrant communities. The purpose of our study was to examine the types of mobilities involved in food-related occupations and to explore how movement across countries influences these occupations.

Methods

This paper presents findings from a secondary analysis of data from a larger doctoral cross-national comparative ethnography examining the experiences of recent Vietnamese migrants, shaped by varying policies in France and Canada (Delaisse et al., 2025; Delaisse & Huot, 2025). While scholarship on Vietnamese migration has traditionally focused on post-war refugees (Barber, 2018; Dorais, 2009; Gayral-Taminh, 2010; Small, 2012; Tran Thi Nien, 2018; Valverde, 2012; Vu, 2017), the original study highlighted the distinct transnational occupations, belongings, and mobilities of recent highly skilled migrants, in Canada, France, and upon return to Vietnam.

This paper presents findings from a qualitative secondary analysis (Hinds et al., 1997; Laliberte Rudman, 2002) exploring a research question that was not directly addressed in the original study by re-examining data that had already been collected. Food-related occupations were not the central theme of the initial study; rather, the topic emerged inductively as participants discussed a range of occupations related to their migration experiences. This secondary analysis provided an opportunity to explore food-relations occupations in greater depth. In the original study, the first author conducted data collection in Vancouver, Paris, and Vietnam over 18 months (August 2021 to January 2023) with participants recruited through convenience and purposeful sampling. Participants included Vietnamese migrants living in Canada and France, as well as returnees—Vietnamese migrants who had returned to Vietnam from those countries. This secondary analysis focused on interviews completed with 16 recent Vietnamese migrants living in Vancouver and seven returnees from Canada Canada living in Hà Nội, Quy Nhơn, Đà Lạt, and Hồ Chí Minh city (see Table 1). Data collection with all participants in Vancouver and Vietnam entailed an in-depth interview addressing their sense of belonging, local and transnational occupations, and mobilities. Additionally, 12 recent migrants in Vancouver completed optional follow-up sessions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants' demographic data are presented in Table 2. The study obtained institutional ethics approval from the University of British Columbia (protocol numbers: H21-01771, H21-03396). Informed consent was obtained from all participants via an online form prior to starting sessions, and process consent was discussed during subsequent sessions.

Table 1. Number of interviews and inclusion criteria for each group of participants.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Number of interviews with migrants living in Vancouver</td><td>15
(two married participants were interviewed together)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Inclusion criteria:</td><td rowspan="4">Quotations from these interviews are identified as (Vancouver, [participant number]A).</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">In-depth interviews</td><td>● Vietnamese citizens</td></tr>
<tr><td>● born in Vietnam</td></tr>
<tr><td>● moved to Canada for the first time in 2010 or later</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">● not currently studying in a post-secondary institution</td><td rowspan="2">Additional (optional) interviews</td><td>12</td></tr>
<tr><td>Quotations from these interviews are identified as (Vancouver, [participant number]B).</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Number of interviews with returnees</td><td>7</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Inclusion criteria:</td><td>Quotations from these interviews are identified as (Returnee, [participant number]).</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">● Vietnamese citizens</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">● born in Vietnam</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">● migrated and lived in Canada for at least a year within the past 15 years</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">● moved back to Vietnam and currently reside there</td></tr>
</table>

Table 2. Demographic data of the participants.

Migrants in Vancouver	**Total number of participants**	16
	Age	Between 21 and 56 (average = 35)
	Gender	12 women / 4 men
	Time spent in Canada	Between 1 and 12 years (6 years on average)
Returning migrants in Vietnam	**Total number of participants**	7
	Age	Between 23 and 70 (average = 35)
	Gender	4 women / 3 men
	Time spent in Canada	Between 3 and 11 years (6 years on average)

A constructivist approach and the principles of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) were used to inform this inductive analysis. This involved becoming familiar with the data by reviewing the transcripts in-depth, generating and comparing codes, compiling the codes into a list, and organizing them into overarching themes (Braun et al., 2019). The full research team analyzed the same transcript separately and then met together to review and refine the coding approach. Remaining transcripts were divided between the second and third authors to undergo independent line-by-line coding using NVivo 12 software (Braun et al., 2019). The first author also coded all interviews. The team met regularly to discuss the ongoing coding process. Specific codes describing food-related occupations were developed through this process, for example: 'grocery shopping: Vietnamese food' and 'eating out: non-Vietnamese food'. Once all transcripts had been coded, the team met to generate categories, sub-themes, and themes based on relationships identified across multiple codes through an iterative process of refinement.

The analysis was guided by our theoretical framework. Drawing from a transnational approach, we paid particular attention to migrants' cross-border occupations and we highlighted how migrants actively maintain connections between their sending and receiving countries through food-related occupations (Delaisse & Huot, 2023). Additionally, we used the mobilities paradigm and examined how movement, on both a global and a local scale, was embedded in participation and engagement in food-related occupations. The analysis was also informed by the authors' positionality and we all exercised reflexivity throughout the study. As we examined how mobilities shaped the participants' food-related occupations, we simultaneously reflected on how our own past, present, and potential mobilities influence both our occupations and our interpretation of the findings. The first author is a White woman in her late twenties who came to Canada as an international student from France after having lived in Vietnam for a year. The second and third authors are White women in their mid-twenties who were born in Canada and completed this secondary analysis as part of their occupational therapy program. The senior author is a White woman who was born in Canada and has studied migration for two decades. While the first author has direct experience of international mobility, all four authors benefit from extensive mobility rights afforded notably by powerful passports.

Our analysis is thus shaped by these personal positionalities as well as our disciplinary perspectives, including familiarity with the mobilities paradigm and occupational science.

Results

Our findings include three main themes each with three subthemes (Table 3). The first theme addressing mobilities and adaptation highlights how migrants' daily food routines were influenced by economic, global, and local mobilities. Sub-themes address migrants' changing economic status, changing routines, and perceptions of the quality of available food and ingredients. The second theme outlining (transnational) social connections describes how participants' food-related occupations were inherently social and fostered communities. Sub-themes included the use of social media, maintaining social connections, and changes in socializing through such occupations. The third theme describes ways that mobilities were reflected in food-related occupations as migrants could assert cultural connections and belonging but also face discrimination through their food practices. Sub-themes included using food-related occupations to foster cultural connection, perform belonging, and navigate discriminatory norms and power dynamics.

Table 3. Thematic findings.

Theme	Mobilities and adaptation	(Transnational) social connections	Mobilities reflected in food-related occupations
Sub-themes	Adapting food-related occupations to economic changes	Food-related occupations and social media	Cultural connection through food-related occupations
	Adapting food-related occupations to changing routines and mobilities	Food-related occupations facilitating social connection within and across borders	Longing for food and performing mobile belongings
	Adapting food-related occupations to changing availability and authenticity	Changes in socializing through food-related occupations	Norms and power dynamics experienced through food-related occupations

Mobilities and adaptation

Adapting food-related occupations to social mobilities

Participants often adapted their food-related occupations to shifting economic conditions or social mobilities (i.e., the movement of individuals or groups within or between social strata or socioeconomic statuses within a society), as the cost of living and their personal income fluctuated with their global bodily mobilities. For example, while affordable street food in Vietnamese cities allowed daily dining out, in Vancouver, migrants faced high living costs and had to cook most meals due to expensive restaurant prices: "[In Vietnam]*, the food is cheap, street food is cheap so we have that habit, so moving here everywhere is far, eating outside is expensive, so I have to change that habit*"

(Vancouver 15A). Even when cooking meals at home, the cost of groceries greatly impacted migrants' lifestyles. Indeed, for one returnee this was a main reason they moved back to Vietnam, "*I decided to go back when I went to* [grocery store]*, when I bought a pack of meat and 'Oh my goodness it's like $10' I had to put it back, I was like wow … I can't even eat*" (Returnee 5).

In Vancouver, migrants often found themselves in food-related careers as this offered low-barrier employment for those whose certifications were not recognized internationally: "*Because of* [the] *language barrier and my degree in Vietnam cannot be used here,* [...] *it was hard for me to find* [work in] *my field* [...] *so I was working in* [sandwich shop] *for the morning shift and then at night I* [was] *working in a restaurant*" (Vancouver 6A). When bodily mobility across borders intersects with downward social mobility, food can become not only a source of sustenance but also a site of subsistence labor and a means of navigating new social and economic realities. This shift—from private, home-based food practices to public, commercial food work—challenges a narrow focus on food-related occupations as solely domestic or recreational, and highlights how food-related occupations are deeply embedded in global systems of inequality and power.

Adapting food-related occupations to changing routines and mobilities

Participants' location and daily mobilities shaped their food-related occupations in distinct ways in Vancouver compared to cities in Vietnam. Routines like grocery shopping and dining out were often based on convenience, with participants frequenting places near home or along their work commutes. "*I could just pop [into] the supermarket on the way home,* […] *get some food and* [...] *hop back [on] the train* [... it's] *very convenient*" (Vancouver 4B). However, in Vancouver, migrants would sometimes choose to travel further to buy special ingredients for Vietnamese celebrations or to get higher quality Vietnamese food. "*They don't do much celebration* [in Vancouver …] *You have to go to Surrey. 45 minutes from here*" (Vancouver 10A). Participants observed that access to food in Vietnamese cities was spontaneous and facilitated by easy motorbike mobility, while in Vancouver, it required entering restaurants or grocery stores: "*It's just so easy in Vietnam when you can just hop on [a] bike and there's food on the street* [...]. *Unlike here, there is no street food* [laughs]" (Vancouver 4A). This lack of spontaneity in accessing food in Vancouver was another factor prompting migrants to cook more often to enjoy the dishes they missed from the sending country: "[…] *in Vietnam* [...] *I don't really make soup at home, because they're always outside there,* [...] *so when you step out, they're always street food and so I don't have to cook* [...] *so when I got here, I just developed this soup*" (Vancouver 14A). Indeed, migrants had to adapt their food-related routines and mobilities to ensure access to Vietnamese food in the Vancouver foodscape.

Adapting food-related occupations to changing availability and authenticity

Migrants' perceptions of the authenticity and availability of Vietnamese food in Vancouver were shaped by their prior mobilities, influencing their daily food-related occupations. Opinions varied widely; for example, those who had lived in Canada rurally viewed Vietnamese food in Vancouver as highly accessible, whereas migrants

who had visited or lived in bigger cities viewed the opposite. Additionally, migrants from South and North Vietnam, with distinct culinary styles, perceived the availability of their local cuisine differently: "*I guess there's two big differences with the northern side and southern side. The northern one, the broth tastes quite different,* [...] *the southern style is a bit more sweet*" (Vancouver 2B). Overall, participants reported being able to access most ingredients in Vancouver, with some exceptions for specialty items and fresh meat and produce:

> [Maybe] *like something very unique, very particular then it's hard* [to find]*, but like when you have places like* [grocery store] *or like* [supermarket]*, they have like exclusive Vietnamese kind of products you know? I don't really think that I lack anything here* (Vancouver 2A).

That said, Vietnamese food was never exactly the same, "[…] *the most authentic Vietnamese food is just about 70%* [laughs]" (Vancouver 10A). In addition to the high cost and difficulty of accessing food outside the home as previously mentioned; migrants were motivated to cook at home when they perceived limited authenticity in Vietnamese food outside: "*My favorite food is Vietnamese but Vietnamese food in Vancouver sucks so that's the reason why I have to cook; otherwise, I wouldn't cook*" (Vancouver 5A). In that sense, participants' perceptions of availability and authenticity influenced their food-related choices; nonetheless, migrants continued to frequent Vietnamese restaurants and cook together.

(Transnational) social connections

Food-related occupations and social media

Migrants exchanged food-related information locally and transnationally via social media, which informed their participation in food-related occupations. Participants used social media groups to share recipes, recommend restaurants, and sell homemade Vietnamese food: "*I follow this group on Facebook. It's called 'group of Vietnamese in Vancouver.'.. like sometimes posting like - oh like you know, they have like this handmade food thingy that they're selling*" (Vancouver 2A). Beyond 'official' Vietnamese restaurants, participants highlighted a parallel food scene where individuals cook at home and sell unique dishes or desserts online, often items that are too costly to produce or unlikely to be available in traditional restaurants. Additionally, one participant in particular was very involved in creating and sharing Vietnamese cooking on YouTube:

> *I also like to share the traditional recipes of my family, and then later if my son wants to cook that recipe I can* [...] *share the link, and also I want to share for the local people here* [...] *the beef in Vietnam is different from the beef here, that's why the way we cook here is different. In the beginning* [upon arrival in Canada] *I just kept the same style of cooking than in Vietnam but it tasted really bad, so it takes time to learn, so I want to share that* (Vancouver 15B).

Ultimately, social media provided Vietnamese migrants with a platform to connect by sharing information about food-related occupations.

Food-related occupations facilitating social connection within and across borders

Food-related occupations brought migrants together in the same space, either physically or virtually, as they remained a consistent way to establish and maintain relationships both within and across borders. Participants consistently mentioned food-related occupations—such as eating together, cooking, or trying new restaurants—as a routine way to maintain their relationships. This included family: "[For dinner we have] *Vietnamese food* [...] *every night, we talk* [on the phone] *to my grandma, we ask about our close relatives, like my grandma, my uncle, my aunties, I talk to my dad* [who lives in Vietnam]" (Vancouver 14A), as well as friends: "*I also have Vietnamese friends here and there, sometimes I invite them for food and drinks*" (Vancouver 12A). Transnationally, some participants maintained connections with family living in different countries by cooking together over FaceTime: "*So now we are dating. I also do some video chat with him and we talk about our day while I* [am] *cooking and eating. Because he lives in* [name of city in the United States]*, so it's 2 hours ahead. I would talk* [to] *him when cooking and eating*" (Vancouver 4A). Food-related occupations were essential in facilitating social connections both locally and transnationally.

Changes in socializing through food-related occupations

While socializing through food-related occupations was a consistent practice regardless of location, participants noted that the ways they engaged in these activities were shaped by different forms of learned and shared knowledge—what they identified as cultural influences. Specifically, they observed differences in social behaviors surrounding food that reflected variations in cultural norms between Vietnamese cities and Vancouver. While participants described Vietnamese culture as fostering spontaneity and fluid social connections, they perceived that Vancouver's different social norms necessitated more planning for social food-related occupations.

> [In] *Vietnam it is easier to get close to a person,* [...] *I am very close to my coworker, after work we go out eating, because it is small and crowded* [...] *it is easy to hang out, and we have more connection, but* [... in Vancouver] *everywhere is too far, people finish work they go home,* [...] *so it is quite hard to get the connection with the Canadians* (Vancouver 15A).

Moreover, several migrants noted that meals in Vietnam are typically served 'family style' with shared dishes, whereas individual portions are more common in Canada, leading to a diminished sense of community.

Participants highlighted other differences, such as the urban café culture: Vancouver coffee shops were said to focus on the quality of coffee and having take-out options but were often closed in the evening, limiting social opportunities. Whereas Vietnamese coffee shops focused on fostering socialization and community, often remaining open late. Participants continued to visit coffee shops in Vancouver, but modified their habits by visiting at different times and for different purposes.

> *In Asian culture we go to coffee shop as a hangout place, coffee shops are open until 10 PM* […] *but here everything closes at four or five because no one would drink coffee after 4* [...] *here* [I go to coffee shops] *because I just enjoy reading quietly somewhere* (Vancouver 8B).

Furthermore, some returnees noted that they were drawn back to Vietnam by its rich social life and vibrant street food and café cultures, among other reasons. "*There are many more cafes here in Vietnam, and the focus on the ambience - yeah so here the cafes are much better*" (Returnee 2).

Although food-related occupations were commonly used for socializing in both Canada and Vietnam, they were found to be practiced in different manners, due to an interplay between environmental factors and cultural attitudes. For example, variations in how dishes are served and café opening hours both reflect and shape cultural expectations around socializing through food. These differences in "[…] the learned and shared knowledge that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience" (Spradley & McCurdy, 2012, p. 2) could be significant enough to play a role in participants' migration decisions.

Mobilities reflected in food-related occupations

Cultural connection through food-related occupations

Food-related occupations served as the primary means for participants to connect with their culture and share it outside their home or within their community, particularly with their children: "*I have to keep the culture for my son* [...] *he was born here, my husband doesn't speak Vietnamese, so that's why it's important for me, I try to cook Vietnamese food* [and] *speak Vietnamese*" (Vancouver 15A). During cultural celebrations, food-related occupations were essential for engaging in traditions while living in Vancouver. For example, during Lunar New Year, some participants chose to purchase culturally significant food from a Vietnamese-owned business that donated profits to charities in Vietnam, reflecting the transnational social, cultural, and financial reach of such occupations.

> *It's because* [...] *the owner she does a lot of charity, so she makes banh trung, the rice cake throughout the year and all the money goes to charity in Vietnam, that's why I know about this place so during Tet or whenever I crave for banh trung, I would go here* (Vancouver 4B).

When asked if there were any other ways to connect to their culture one participant replied "[…] *no, because mostly my culture is related to food* [laughs]" (Vancouver 14A). Food-related occupations were a key aspect of participants' transnational cultural connections and belongings.

Longing for food and performing mobile belongings

Participants expressed a longing for food, which reflected their previous global mobilities and fueled their current and future mobilities. For migrants living in Vancouver, Vietnamese food was the main thing they missed: "*You know homesick is not bad but I mean food-sick right? The food here doesn't even look like* [Vietnamese food] [laughs]" (Vancouver 10A). Missing the food seemed more emotional than missing the physical space. This longing not only motivated them to seek Vietnamese food regularly in Vancouver but also inspired future plans to travel to Vietnam "*I think that when I'm back* [to Vietnam] *I will eat the whole world* [laughs]" (Vancouver 1A).

Interestingly, while returnees appreciated being surrounded by authentic Vietnamese food again upon return, they also missed the multicultural cuisines of Vancouver. When asked what they missed from Vancouver one participant replied:

> *the cuisine of course* [...]*, me and my husband, we love to try different cuisines.* [... We] *would try* [...] *Korean, Japanese or Indian,* [...] *because in Vancouver it is multicultural, the owner actually is from that country so they have their authentic cuisine compared to here* (Returnee 6).

Expressing a longing for food can signify a connection to a distant place—in this case, beyond the homeland—and demonstrate cosmopolitanism by reflecting an appreciation for diverse cuisines, thereby enhancing an individual's social status.

Norms and power dynamics experienced through food-related occupations

As with all occupations, food-related occupations are governed by power structures, social norms, and expectations. We have illustrated how narratives of longing for food can be leveraged to assert belonging, sometimes conferring social status or power. Conversely, participants could encounter discrimination within their food-related occupations.

> *There are some behaviors that are frowned upon* [...] *like how you cook on the floor, you eat with your hand and then you share* [...] *a big dish. But here* [people] *do individual serving*[s]*, that is very different and some people don't like it here so they use* [their] *own chopsticks to serve food while they have their own set of chopsticks for themselves, but like in Vietnam we never do that* (Vancouver 11A).

Even in a multicultural environment like Vancouver, dominant norms surrounding food-related occupations persist, leading to the stigmatization of certain practices. This participant also mentioned that migrants face discrimination in the housing market, as landlords often assume they will cook their 'cultural foods', which are perceived to leave an undesirable smell in the apartment or for neighboring tenants.

> *Or like fish sauce,* [...] *people don't like it even in the apartment where you stay, they are not* [friendly towards] *Asian* [...] *cooking* (Vancouver 11A).

These forms of discrimination faced by migrants, particularly judgments about which foods and cuisines are considered 'smelly,' are racialized (i.e., they reflect underlying racialized prejudices). This quotation illustrates how seemingly mundane and intimate food-related practices can become sites of racism with significant implications for migrants.

Discussion

To summarize our key findings, migrants adapted their food-related occupations based on changing economic status, changing routines/daily mobilities, and dynamic perceptions of the quality of food. Despite these changes in their practices, food-related occupations remained inherently social and fostered community both locally and across borders. While these occupations play a key role in connecting migrants to various cultures, they are also influenced by power dynamics in a world where food-related occupations are shaped by societal norms, with some practices being stigmatized within particular contexts.

Our findings highlight that migrants' daily food routines may be influenced by economic, global, and local mobilities, as the shift in economic status, routines, and perceptions resulting from migration pose novel barriers and facilitators to certain food-related occupations at the exclusion of others. While much literature emphasizes how migration-related change in food routine has subsequent implications on health, weight management, and risk for disease (Franzen & Smith, 2009; Lee et al., 2022), our study centered occupation in the analysis to explore the dynamic relationship between persons, food-related occupations, and transnational mobilities. Without emphasizing how changes in food routines have positive and negative influences on health, as done by Lesser et al. (2014), we explored such routines with regard to contextual constraints and important needs for migrants, such as convenience, affordability, and preference.

In this discussion, we underscore the value of adopting a transnational approach and the mobilities paradigm in the study of food-related occupations. While certain forms of food mobilities—such as the circulation of ingredients, recipes or global culinary trends— occur across diverse populations regardless of migration status, the international migration context uniquely highlights embodied mobilities related to food, transnational personal ties, and the influence of diverse cuisines across and beyond sending and receiving countries through diaspora and transnational networks. Our theoretical framework enables a more exhaustive examination of food-related occupations, both in terms of breadth—by exploring aspects that have been previously overlooked—and in terms of depth—by moving beyond simplistic cultural binaries of sending versus receiving countries. Additionally, it fosters a more critical perspective on occupations in which notions of power have remained understudied.

Firstly, drawing from a transnational approach and the mobilities paradigm allows for a more comprehensive examination of food-related occupations, recognizing that they are not solely local but also transnational in nature. Consistent with Middleton et al. (2024), this study highlights that food is powerful in community-building by migrants. Further, the capacity of food-related occupations to establish cultural ties for migrants is widely documented (Nyamnjoh, 2018;

Parasecoli, 2014; Farias & Asaba, 2013). However, the majority of these studies neglect to consider engagement in *transnational* food-related occupations and their ability to strengthen cross-border social connection and the maintenance of cultural identity. As found by Bailey (2017) and Delaisse and Huot (2023), transnational practices have been shown to be instrumental in the continuation of cultural identity and sustaining connections to various cultures across borders, both in the receiving country and upon return to the sending country. Interesting examples of transnational food-related occupations identified in our findings include making phone calls while cooking or eating, posting cooking videos for fellow migrants or those back home, and searching for recipes online. These practices illustrate how social media plays a crucial role in facilitating real-time food-related social connections across national borders.

Secondly, our theoretical framework enabled a broader examination of the impact of mobilities on food-related occupations. Previous studies on food-related occupations have primarily focused on migrants' transitions from one isolated foodscape to another (e.g., Kavian et al., 2021). For instance, Aronsen Torp et al. (2013) demonstrated that migrants often experience conflicting motivations to either remain authentic to their food traditions or conform to contextual norms for social acceptance. However, this perspective risks perpetuating a narrow, assimilationist view in which migration, settlement, and integration processes are understood as a one-way, linear transition from one culture to another. In our research, people's perceptions of food in Vancouver or Vietnam were diverse as they were shaped differently depending on their respective mobilities. Specifically, these perceptions were influenced by the various countries, provinces, and cities that participants had previously visited or lived in—including, but not limited to, the sending and receiving countries—allowing them to make nuanced comparisons beyond a simple binary framework. Our study also highlighted how food-related occupations are shaped not only by the past and present mobilities of migrants' bodies but also by the mobilities of ingredients, recipes, and culinary practices online (Hannam et al., 2006). These layered mobilities underscore the interconnectedness of foodscapes in both sending and receiving countries; in a globalized context, few, if any, foodscapes remain isolated. Furthermore, food-related occupations can influence further mobilities, by motivating individuals to return to Vietnam for a visit or for long-term migration. In this context, exploring the experiences of returnees provides valuable insights. Our findings indicate that individuals do not simply revert to their previous food-related habits in the country of origin; rather, their transnational connections continue to shape their practices. While Ore (2018) demonstrated how migrants engage in food-related occupations to satisfy their longing for home; we found that return migrants can express a longing for the food of their receiving country.

Thirdly, our theoretical framework enabled a critical examination of food-related occupations, which have often been perceived as predominantly 'positive' or neutral, thereby overlooking the power dynamics inherent in these practices. For example, our study shifts the focus beyond domestic and recreational food-related occupations to examine how bodily and social mobility intersect when migrants become overrepresented and/or confined in the underpaid and undervalued food industry (Zou, 2022). Our findings also echo other studies indicating that migrants may encounter discrimination within food-related occupations, as certain practices can be

stigmatized (López Salinas & Teixeira, 2022). At the same time, these occupations can serve as a means for migrants to assert their sense of belonging. For example, we suggest that narratives surrounding a longing for food can function as a powerful tool for claiming belonging—particularly a cosmopolitan sense of belonging that is associated with social power.

A key limitation of this secondary analysis is that the original interview questions did not directly address food-related occupations. While this allowed migrants to naturally introduce food-related occupations and generated substantial discussion, it may not have been consistently addressed by all participants. In the future, having a primary study about food-related occupations would allow us to expand the number of participants potentially lending to more diverse findings. Further research should continue to draw from social theories, such as transnationalism and the mobilities paradigm, to enhance the theorization (Delaisse & Huot, 2020) and understanding of food-related occupations beyond mere biological needs.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that migrants' food-related occupations are shaped by—and in turn shape—various forms of mobilities, including physical migration, the movement of ingredients and recipes, and social mobility. Migrants adapt and sustain food-related occupations by navigating cultural norms and maintaining connections, though individual experiences vary based on each migrant's unique mobility history. Additionally, food-related occupations can influence migration decisions, potentially prompting further movement. These occupations also play a key role in how migrants negotiate and express their identities across both their sending and receiving countries. The findings of our study underscore the value of adopting a transnational approach and mobilities paradigm in occupational therapy and occupational science, particularly in the examination of food-related occupations. This theoretical framework facilitates a more comprehensive understanding by exploring previously overlooked aspects and transcending simplistic distinctions between sending and receiving cultures. In practice, this approach encourages therapists and researchers to adopt a more critical perspective that acknowledges migrants' transnational identities and occupations, moving away from assimilationist and sedentarist approaches.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge that this work was completed on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō, Səl̓ílwətaɁ (Tsleil-Waututh), and kʷikʷəƛ̓əm (Kwikwetlem) Nations, where the authors live as uninvited settlers and where the University of British Columbia is located. We hope that this critical paper inspires actions to dismantle pervasive colonialism reproduced through food-related occupations. We would like to thank the participants of this study, as well as the community partners, including the Southeast Asian Cultural Heritage Society, for their invaluable support in data collection. Their contributions in discussing the research design, granting access to their activities, and assisting with participant recruitment were essential to this study.

References

Aronsen Torp, J., Berggren, V., & Erlandsson, L.-K. (2013). Somali women's experiences of cooking and meals after immigration to Sweden. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *20*(2), 146-159. http://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2012.734426.

Bagwell, S. (2015). Transnational entrepreneurship amongst Vietnamese businesses in London. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *41*(2), 329-349. http://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.907739.

Bailey, A. (2017). The migrant suitcase: food, belonging and commensality among Indian migrants in The Netherlands. *Appetite*, *110*, 51-60. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2016.12.013.

Barber, T. (2018). *The integration of Vietnamese refugees in London and the UK: fragmentation, complexity, and "in/visibility"*. Helsinki: The United Nations University. http://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2018/444-5

Basch, L. G., Schiller, N. G., & Szanton Blanc, C. (1994). *Nations unbound: Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nation-states.* London: Routledge.

Bezerra, J. B., & Alves, H. C. (2022). Na EKO na EBA, goes and comes from immigration: daily, identity and demands of African immigrants' university students. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, *30*, e3073. http://doi.org/10.1590/2526-8910.ctoao232630731.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2019). Thematic analysis. In: P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 843-860). London: Springer. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4_103.

Cirineu, C. T., Pacheco, C. P. M., Lara, B. I. O., Zuñiga, V. I. O., & Mejías, F. C. O. (2025). Migrant women: leisure occupations in public and private spaces. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, *33*, e3865. http://doi.org/10.1590/2526-8910.ctoao398238653.

Crepeau, E. B. (2015). An ethnographic analysis of a church supper in New England. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *22*(1), 54-70. http://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2014.908817.

Delaisse, A.-C., Barber, T., Zhang, G., & Huot, S. (2025). A dynamic and critical approach to belonging as a dimension of occupation. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *32*(1), 36-53. https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2024.2394157

Delaisse, A.-C., & Huot, S. (2020). Using theory to inform understandings of occupation in a migration context. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *27*(3), 359-375. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2020.1734961.

Delaisse, A., & Huot, S. (2023). Embracing transnational approaches for a more thorough and critical understanding of occupation in research on migration. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *30*(3), 503-518. https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2021.1987972

Delaisse, A.-C., & Huot, S. (2025). Studying occupations across borders: methodological reflections on the value of cross-national comparative research. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *32*(3), 420-437. https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2025.2505207

Dorais, L.-J. (2009). The Vietnamese in Montreal, Canada: reflections on intangible capital and immigration. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, *18*(2), 231-254. http://doi.org/10.1177/011719680901800203.

Farias, L., & Asaba, E. (2013). "The family knot": negotiating identities and cultural values through the everyday occupations of an immigrant family in Sweden. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *20*(1), 36-47. http://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2013.764580.

Franzen, L., & Smith, C. (2009). Acculturation and environmental change impacts dietary habits among adult Hmong. *Appetite*, *52*(1), 173-183. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2008.09.012.

Gayral-Taminh, M. (2010). Voyage au bout de la mer: les boat people en France. *Hommes & Migrations*, (1285), 163-171. http://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.1200.

Gonçalves, M. V., & Malfitano, A. P. S. (2020). Brazilian youth experiencing poverty: everyday life in the favela. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *27*(3), 311-326. http://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2020.1757495.

Halfacree, K. (2012). Heterolocal identities? Counter-urbanisation, second homes, and rural consumption in the era of mobilities. *Population Space and Place*, *18*(2), 209-224. http://doi.org/10.1002/psp.665.

Hannam, K., Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). Editorial: mobilities, immobilities and moorings. *Mobilities*, *1*(1), 1-22. http://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489189.

Hinds, P. S., Vogel, R. J., & Clarke-Steffen, L. (1997). The possibilities and pitfalls of doing a secondary analysis of a qualitative data set. *Qualitative Health Research*, *7*(3), 408-424. http://doi.org/10.1177/104973239700700306.

Huot, S., Aldrich, R. M., Rudman, D. L., & Stone, M. (2022). Picturing precarity through occupational mapping: making the (im)mobilities of long-term unemployment visible. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *29*(4), 529-544. https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2020.1821244

Kavian, F., Coveney, J., Matwiejczyk, L., & Mehta, K. (2021). Food acculturation experiences of new Iranian skilled migrant mothers in South Australia. *Nutrition & Dietetics: the Journal of the Dietitians Association of Australia*, *78*(4), 434-441. http://doi.org/10.1111/1747-0080.12659.

Knight, C., & Shipman, J. (2020). Food in contemporary migration experiences between Britain and Australia: a duoethnographic exploration. *Food & Foodways*, *29*(1), 24-43. http://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2021.1860328.

Laliberte Rudman, D. (2002). Linking occupation and identity: lessons learned through qualitative exploration. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *9*(1), 12-19. http://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2002.9686489.

Lee, S. D., Kellow, N. J., Huggins, C. E., & Choi, T. S. T. (2022). How and why diets change post-migration: a qualitative exploration of dietary acculturation among recent Chinese immigrants in Australia. *Nutrients*, *14*(17), 3573. http://doi.org/10.3390/nu14173573.

Lesser, I. A., Gasevic, D., & Lear, S. A. (2014). The association between acculturation and dietary patterns of South Asian immigrants. *PLoS One*, *9*(2), 1-6. http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0088495.

Lin, H.-M., Pang, C. L., & Liao, D.-C. (2020). Home food making, belonging, and identity negotiation in Belgian Taiwanese immigrant women's everyday food practices. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, *7*(29), 1-18. http://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-020-00061-5.

López Salinas, A., & Teixeira, C. (2022). Settlement and housing experiences of recent Mexican immigrants in Vancouver suburbs. *GeoJournal*, *87*(1), 377-402. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-020-10257-6.

Maersk, J. L. (2021). Becoming a self through occupation: occupation as a source of self-continuity in identity formation. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *28*(4), 469-478. http://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2020.1861972.

McGovern, A., & Yong, A. (2022). The experience of meaning and value in occupations for forced migrants seeking asylum, and factors that facilitate occupational engagement: a meta-ethnography using a strength-based approach. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *85*(10), 747-760. http://doi.org/10.1177/03080226221109141.

Middleton, G., Velardo, S., Patterson, K. A., & Coveney, J. (2024). The value of social eating at culturally and linguistically diverse lunch clubs: a descriptive study. *Food, Culture, & Society*, *27*(3), 635-657. http://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2022.2116202.

Nayar, S. (2015). Resituating models of acculturation: an occupational dimension. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *16*(4), 1141-1155. http://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-014-0379-8.

Nyamnjoh, H. M. (2018). Food, memory and transnational gastronomic culture amongst Cameroonian migrants in Cape Town, South Africa. *Anthropology Southern Africa*, *41*(1), 25-40. http://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2018.1442728.

Ore, H. (2018). Ambivalent nostalgia: Jewish-Israeli migrant women "cooking" ways to return home. *Food, Culture, & Society*, *21*(4), 568-584. http://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2018.1481332.

Parasecoli, F. (2014). Food, identity, and cultural reproduction in immigrant communities. *Social Research*, *81*(2), 415-439. http://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2014.0015.

Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment & Planning A*, *38*(2), 207-226. http://doi.org/10.1068/a37268.

Small, I. V. (2012). "Over there": imaginative displacements in Vietnamese remittance gift economies. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, *7*(3), 157-183. http://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2012.7.3.157.

Spradley, J. P., & McCurdy, D. W. (Eds.) (2012). *Conformity and conflict: readings in cultural anthropology* (14th ed.). London: Pearson.

Tran Thi Nien, M. (2018). *Vietnamese Catholic immigrants in Australia and France: a comparative study of their cultural and linguistic adaptation, 2000-2005* (Ph.D. thesis). University of Adelaide, Adelaide.

Valverde, K.-L. C. (2012). *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: community, culture, and politics in the diaspora.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism.* London: Routledge. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203927083.

Vonthron, S., Perrin, C., & Soulard, C.-T. (2020). Foodscape: a scoping review and a research agenda for food security-related studies. *PLoS One*, *15*(5), 1-26. http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233218.

Vu, A. N. (2017). The politics of memory and commemoration: the flag debate and perspectives of Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals in North America. *Diaspora Studies*, *10*(1), 25-44. http://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2016.1239434.

Wijekoon, S., Rudman, D. L., Hand, C., & Polgar, J. (2023). Late-life immigrants' place integration through occupation. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *30*(1), 37-53. http://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2021.1960589.

Yeoh, B. S. A., Somaiah, B. C., Lam, T., & Acedera, K. F. (2020). Doing family in "times of migration": care temporalities and gender politics in Southeast Asia. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *110*(6), 1709-1725. http://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2020.1723397.

Zou, C. (2022). *The accommodation and food industry: Labour market trends and skills needs.* Diversity Institute, Toronto Metropolitan University. Retrieved in 2025, July 7, from https://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/news-events/2022/12/the-accommodation-and-food-industry-labour-market-tends-and-skills-needs/

Author's Contributions

Anne-Cécile Delaisse conducted data collection and analysis and refined the work of the second and third authors into the present manuscript. Georgia Carswell and Katie Pagdin performed the secondary analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript as part of their Master of Occupational Therapy program. Suzanne Huot supervised the project and provided support throughout all stages, including data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. All authors approved the final version of the text.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Corresponding author

Suzanne Huot
e-mail: suzanne.huot@ubc.ca

Section editor

Profa. Dra. Ana Paula Serrata Malfitano