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Research Article

FOOD, CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND BELONGING: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH TURKISH FOOD CULTURE

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Abstract

The present research aims to investigate how interactions with Turkish food culture affect the adaptation and sense of belonging of international students studying in Türkiye. In this context, a qualitative method was adopted in the research, and a phenomenological design was used. Research data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a total of 20 international students from 11 different countries studying at Sivas Cumhuriyet University. The obtained data were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method. The findings revealed that the initial connection students established with Turkish cuisine was shaped within the framework of sensory perceptions and cultural comparisons. It was determined that the dominant flavor profiles and unfamiliar ingredient combinations perceived in Turkish dishes initially triggered a cultural food shock among students. The results indicate that students' adaptation processes were shaped by a series of barriers and facilitators, leading them to demonstrate diverse adaptation strategies, such as adjusting their daily lives, developing hybrid practices, or maintaining their own culinary cultures. It was determined that social interactions established through food culture play an important role in the development of students' sense of belonging toward Türkiye. Specifically, it was found that food-sharing practices and hospitality support students' perception of themselves as a part of the host society, thereby contributing to the reduction of feelings of alienation. Conversely, it has been observed that certain prejudices and distant attitudes towards different culinary cultures in the local community can weaken this process and reinforce feelings of exclusion. Therefore, it is concluded that belonging established through food culture is achieved not merely by adapting to the host culture, but through bidirectional interactions where students can share their own culinary practices and mutual acceptance is fostered.

Keywords: International Students, Food Culture, Belonging, Cultural Adaptation, Turkish Food Culture.

Introduction

With the growing influence of globalization, higher education has increasingly adopted an international dimension, driven by academic, economic, socio-cultural, and political rationales that vary across countries and institutions (Knight, 1999). Internationalization is widely regarded as a form of soft power that enhances countries' global visibility, strengthens diplomatic relations, and promotes knowledge exchange through mobility and academic cooperation, while also contributing to the social and economic development of host nations by generating revenue, enriching academic environments, and increasing cultural diversity (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Jibeen & Khan, 2015; Metzgar, 2015; Oz, 2020). Reflecting global trends, Türkiye has experienced a rapid rise in its international student population, which now exceeds 300,000 and represents a highly heterogeneous cultural landscape spanning neighboring regions, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia (YÖK, 2025). This diversity brings with it varied

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adaptation experiences, as international students often face challenges related to language, social integration, and everyday practices in the host country (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024; Kondakci, 2011; Özoğlu, Gür, & Coşkun, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Among these challenges, food culture plays a particularly central role due to its strong connection to identity, belonging, and social interaction (Fischler, 1988; Gosden, 1999). Unfamiliar tastes, ingredients, meal schedules, and communal eating practices may hinder students' social participation and delay the development of belonging, potentially leading to cultural dissonance or food-related culture shock (Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, 2020; Malota & Mucsi, 2023; Mulyadi et al., 2024). Yet, engagement with the host food culture can also foster meaningful connection, as shared meals, hospitality traditions, and food-sharing practices strengthen students' sense of belonging within the host society; moreover, cooking and offering home-country food can function as a vehicle for building social relationships and communicating cultural identity, while sometimes also evoking homesickness (Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2010). Despite the dual role of food as both a challenge and a facilitator in cultural adjustment, empirical work examining how host-country cuisine shapes international students' belonging remains limited. Addressing this gap, the present study explores how international students in Türkiye interact with Turkish food culture and how these interactions influence their sense of belonging and broader processes of cultural adaptation.

Conceptual Framework

The Relationship Between Food Culture, Social Adaptation and Sense of Belonging

Food, beyond being a biological necessity, is one of the fundamental elements that shape cultural identity at both individual and societal levels (Fischler, 1988; Gosden, 1999). Like language, food culture is a practice that people internalize from the moment they are born, and it has a multifaceted structure shaped by history, tradition, and social values (Dursun & Güzeller, 2023). At the same time, because food serves as an important expression of cultural identity, it also functions as a marker that distinguishes one society from another (Beagan & Chapman, 2013; Ray, 2004). In addition, the influence of food on identity appears to be rooted in emotional and contextual dimensions (Locher et al., 2005). Previous studies indicate that, through its emotional dimension, food fosters a sense of "home" in individuals, while smells, tastes, and cooking practices activate memory and connect individuals to their cultural roots (Abbots, 2016; Cumhuri, Bingöl, & Sevim, 2023). In this respect, food can serve as a powerful emotional bridge between cultural identity and belonging, as attachment to familiar "home" foods evokes nostalgia and a sense of cultural continuity while linking individuals to their cultural roots (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2008; Locher et al., 2005). Consequently, food-related practices are among the most resistant cultural elements during transitions between cultures (Gosden, 1999). Given that eating habits represent an inseparable component of one's cultural identity, a form of food-related culture shock is frequently observed during instances of migration or cultural displacement (Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2010; Finkelstein, 1999). Culture shock is defined as the anxiety arising from the loss of familiar social signs and symbols and their replacement by foreign elements (Hall, 1959). When examining this phenomenon through the lens of international students, similar experiences are observed among individuals who relocate to different countries for educational pursuits. During the process of adapting to a new cultural environment, these students encounter various challenges, including language barriers, social integration issues, and lifestyle discrepancies (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024; Kondakci, 2011; Özoğlu et al., 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Food culture is among the significant factors influencing this adjustment process (Snoubar, 2017; Titrek et al., 2016a). When students enter an entirely different cultural environment, they may encounter various difficulties associated with unfamiliar food practices and habits. Differences in taste preferences, meal schedules, ingredients, and communal dining practices can influence students' modes of social participation, occasionally creating circumstances that limit social interaction and delay the development of a sense of belonging (Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, 2020; Mulyadi et al., 2024). Encountering such differences in the food culture of the host country can lead to feelings of cultural maladjustment or food-related culture shock in some students (Malota & Mucsi, 2023;

Mulyadi et al., 2024). However, interaction with the host country's food culture can also serve as a powerful tool in establishing social connections (Malota & Mucsi, 2023). Shared meals, hospitality traditions, and food-sharing practices can strengthen international students' sense of belonging to the host community by promoting social interaction (Kaya, 2023). Consequently, it is evident that food culture plays a dual role in both cultural alienation and the process of establishing a sense of belonging within a new society (Sarıtunç, Ceylan, & Sarıışık, 2025).

The Case of International Students in Türkiye

In accordance with its internationalization policies in higher education, Türkiye has hosted a significant number of international students in recent years (Oz, 2020; Titrek et al., 2016a). Owing to its geographical location, historical and cultural ties, relatively low living costs, and scholarship opportunities, Türkiye has increasingly become an attractive educational destination, particularly for students from the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, and the Balkans (Kondakci, 2011; Özoğlu et al., 2015; Snoubar, 2017). This increasing international student population enhances cultural diversity in Turkish universities and also makes students' experiences of social integration and belonging more visible (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024). Studies conducted in the context of Türkiye show that international students strive to adapt not only in terms of academic processes but also in terms of daily life practices (Demir, Nam, & Foley, 2025; Titrek et al., 2016a; Titrek et al., 2016b). During this process, differences regarding language, social relations, housing conditions, and lifestyle are among the prominent adaptation challenges (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024; Kondakci, 2011). Among these factors, food and food culture stand out as elements that directly influence students' daily experiences and adaptation processes (Soylu, 2018). In the initial stages of the adaptation process, students may experience a kind of “culture shock” due to the stark differences between their own eating habits and Turkish cuisine (Sali, 2023). Fischler (1979) introduced the concept of “gastro-anomie” to describe a state in which eating norms and practices become unsettled and marked by uncertainty; drawing on this framework, Sali (2023) interprets international students' food-related uncertainty and anxiety in Türkiye through the lens of “gastro-anomie.” In particular, unfamiliar use of spices, fat content, and differing taste perceptions may cause students to initially avoid Turkish dishes or turn toward the consumption of fast-food alternatives (Aslan & Babirzade, 2020; Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2020). These behaviors are associated not only with taste-based preferences but also with individuals' desire to preserve their cultural identity and their longing for home (Sarıtunç et al., 2025). In addition, gastronomic culture can function as a social tool for international students in their process of integration into the host society (Aslan, 2025). The hospitality-oriented nature of Turkish cuisine, traditions of offering food, and the practice of eating together facilitate students' ability to build social connections and feel a sense of security (Kara, 2025). Over time, students develop a hybrid diet by blending their own culinary cultures with Turkish cuisine, which strengthens their sense of belonging to Türkiye (Sali, 2023). In this regard, although food is initially perceived as a cultural barrier, over time it plays a role that fosters familiarity and strengthens the sense of belonging (Sarıtunç et al., 2025). In light of all these factors, Türkiye is considered to offer a rich framework for examining how international students' interactions with local food cultures influence the development of cultural adaptation and belonging.

Method

In this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted to examine the cultural adaptation and belonging processes of international students through Turkish food culture from an in-depth perspective and to make sense of the subjective experiences in this process. Qualitative research was preferred for the purpose of this study, as it aims to explore the meanings individuals assign to social phenomena, conduct research in the natural settings where events occur, and describe phenomena from the participants' perspective (Creswell, 2025). A phenomenological design was employed for this research, because it is an approach that aims to deeply examine individuals' experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attribute to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2025; Patton, 2002). Since

this research aims to understand the real-life experiences, emotions, and challenges students face via food culture during their adaptation, a phenomenological design was chosen for this study.

The study population consists of 2,565 international students enrolled at Sivas Cumhuriyet University during the 2025–2026 academic year. In determining the study group, maximum variation sampling was preferred, as it allows for the identification of common patterns and core themes that reflect the research problem across diverse cases (Neuman, 2009). In line with the sampling method, attention was paid to ensuring diversity in participants' geographical backgrounds, gender distribution, length of stay in Türkiye, and accommodation types. Accordingly, the study was conducted with the voluntary participation of 20 international students (10 female and 10 male) from 11 different countries. Their length of stay in Türkiye ranged from 1 to 11 years, and their living arrangements varied between private apartments and state dormitories. This approach allowed for a more holistic analysis of the interactions between students from various cultural backgrounds and Turkish culinary culture.

The semi-structured interview technique, one of the qualitative data collection methods, was employed to gather the research data. This data collection technique was preferred because it offers a flexible dialogue platform that allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, emotions, and thoughts, while simultaneously providing a systematic data collection process that maintains the focus of the study (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interview questions were developed by drawing on previous studies that examined international students' eating habits, processes of cultural adaptation, and perceptions of Turkish cuisine within the context of gastrodiplomacy (Aslan, 2025; Aslan & Babirzade, 2020; Corcoran, 2018; Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, 2020; Kaya, 2023). The interview form included questions on participants' demographic characteristics and five core open-ended questions:

1. What were your first impressions when you first tried Turkish dishes?
2. After arriving in Türkiye, did you experience any challenges related to food or food culture?
3. Do you include Turkish dishes in your everyday eating practices?
4. Have you interacted with Turkish people through Turkish food (e.g., eating together, sharing food)? How did these experiences make you feel?
5. How have your interactions with Turkish culinary culture influenced your sense of belonging to Türkiye?

In addition to these predetermined questions, probe and follow-up questions were asked depending on participants' responses to encourage elaboration, clarify meanings, and obtain concrete examples (e.g., "Could you elaborate on that?", "Can you give an example?", "What do you mean by...?", "Why do you think that happened?"). These follow-ups were not designed as a separate set of standardized questions; rather, they were used to deepen the discussion without departing from the main topics covered in the interview guide. The interviews were conducted face-to-face between December 18, 2025, and January 7, 2026, in environments where participants felt comfortable. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded, and each interview lasted approximately 20-25 minutes.

To analyze the research data, the study employed qualitative content analysis, which serves as a powerful analytical tool for interpreting qualitative data contents in a systematic, context-dependent, and subjective manner (Selvi, 2019). Content analysis is preferred for data analysis when open-ended data collection techniques, such as interviews aimed at gathering detailed and in-depth data, are utilized (Forman & Damschroder, 2008). In this method, data are broken down into smaller units representing key concepts, which are then organized within a specific framework to describe or explain a phenomenon. Qualitative content analysis focuses on both subject and context, uncovering variations such as similarities and differences between sections of the analyzed text (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). This method allows for the analysis of both manifest and descriptive content as well as latent and interpretative content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The latent content analysis approach, as conceptualized by Kleinheksel et al. (2020), was employed during the data analysis

process of this study. The reason for choosing this approach is the necessity to uncover latent themes regarding the underlying deep meanings and emotional context of the statements, rather than just the manifest information in the participants' expressions, in accordance with the nature of phenomenological research. Therefore, the analysis did not rely on predefined categories; instead, an inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' experiences. Accordingly, the raw data were first transcribed and read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the material. The data were then divided into meaning units and condensed. These condensed units were coded by considering both their explicit and implicit meanings, after which related codes were grouped into categories and ultimately into overarching themes. To enhance the credibility and confirmability of the study, the coding process was supported with direct quotations selected from participants' statements.

Results

The participant group, which forms the basis of the research findings, consists of 20 international students from a broad geographical spectrum, including countries such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Syria, Pakistan, Indonesia, Morocco, Ukraine, Egypt, the Union of the Comoros, Iran, and Afghanistan. The participants' ages range between 18 and 25, with an equal gender distribution. The students' duration of stay in Türkiye varies from 1 to 11 years, and they reside in either state-run dormitories or private apartments. Detailed demographic information regarding the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

| Participant Code | Country | Gender | Age | Duration of Stay in Türkiye (Years) | Type of Accommodation |
|------------------|----------------------|--------|-----|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| P1 | Kazakhstan | Female | 21 | 4 | State Dormitory |
| P2 | Kazakhstan | Female | 21 | 4 | State Dormitory |
| P3 | Ukraine | Female | 21 | 3 | Private Apartment |
| P4 | Ukraine | Female | 21 | 3 | Private Apartment |
| P5 | Azerbaijan | Male | 18 | 1 | State Dormitory |
| P6 | Azerbaijan | Male | 23 | 3.5 | Private Apartment |
| P7 | Azerbaijan | Male | 19 | 2.5 | State Dormitory |
| P8 | Union of the Comoros | Male | 24 | 4.5 | Private Apartment |
| P9 | Union of the Comoros | Female | 24 | 4.5 | Private Apartment |
| P10 | Syria | Male | 23 | 10 | Private Apartment |
| P11 | Syria | Male | 22 | 11 | Private Apartment |
| P12 | Syria | Male | 23 | 8 | Private Apartment |
| P13 | Pakistan | Male | 23 | 2 | Private Apartment |
| P14 | Morocco | Male | 25 | 4 | Private Apartment |
| P15 | Egypt | Female | 20 | 2 | State Dormitory |
| P16 | Indonesia | Female | 21 | 3 | Private Apartment |
| P17 | Indonesia | Male | 22 | 4 | Private Apartment |
| P18 | Iran | Female | 23 | 3 | State Dormitory |
| P19 | Afghanistan | Female | 20 | 2 | Private Apartment |
| P20 | Afghanistan | Female | 21 | 2 | Private Apartment |

Theme 1. International Students' Initial Impressions of Turkish Food Culture

The initial contact of international students with Turkish cuisine is shaped through sensory perceptions and comparisons made with their own cultures. Based on the content analysis of the participants' narratives, this initial encounter experience is structured into three sub-themes: sensory perceptions, perceived cultural differences, and perceived cultural similarities. Figure 1 presents the categories forming these sub-themes and the codes underlying these categories in a hierarchical arrangement.

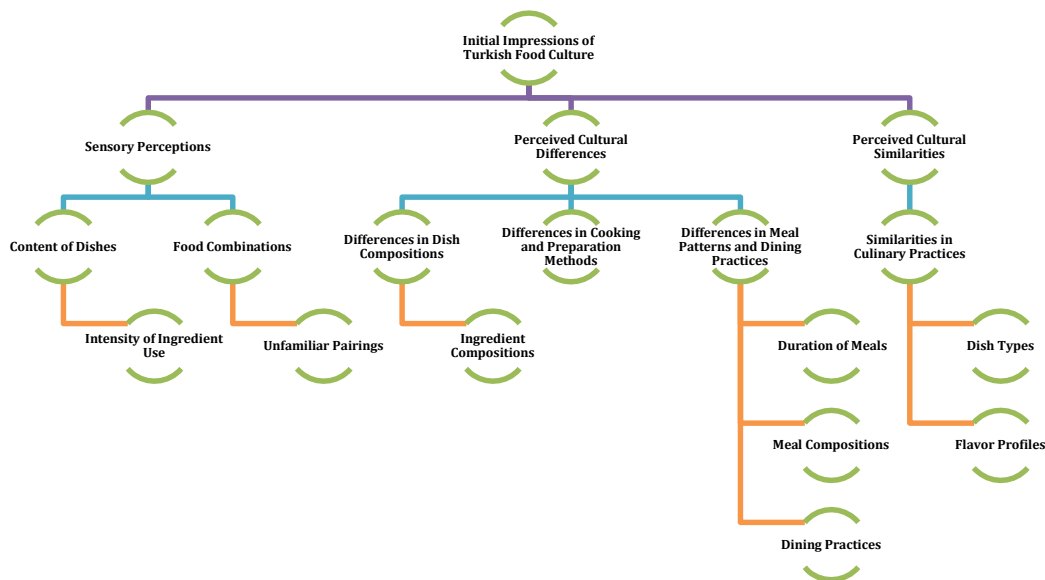


Figure 1. Thematic Schema of Initial Impressions Regarding Turkish Food Culture

In the sub-theme titled sensory perceptions, the flavor profiles perceived by students during their experience of Turkish dishes and their reactions to ingredient combinations not encountered in their own culinary cultures were evaluated. In the interviews, some students stated that the intensive use of ingredients such as tomato paste, spices, and oil in Turkish dishes was unfamiliar to them. For instance, P10 noted: *“You use a lot of tomato juice and tomato paste in your dishes; almost every meal contains tomato paste. This is a bit unusual for me...”* indicating that the frequent use of tomato paste creates a similar flavor profile across dishes, which they found unfamiliar. P18 expressed similar sentiments, stating, *“It’s a bit strange that most dishes contain tomatoes and tomato paste; I didn’t understand it at first...”*. Another group of students mentioned that the use of spices in Turkish food is excessive, specifically noting that they were unable to consume certain dishes due to their intense spiciness. Regarding this issue, P2 stated, *“I ordered Adana Kebab at a restaurant I visited; I didn’t know it would be so spicy, it was too spicy for me, so I couldn’t eat it and I never ordered that dish again...”*. Similarly, P1 shared their experience by saying, *“The use of hot spices in meals was a bit challenging for me. When I tried *çiğköfte* (kneaded bulgur patties with spices), my stomach couldn’t tolerate it because it was so spicy...”*. In contrast, P13 noted that spices are used much more diversely and extensively in their native cuisine, characterizing Turkish dishes as less spicy. Some participants also reported that when they tried Turkish food, they found it overly oily and unhealthy. In this regard, P4 explained their experience by stating, *“When I first arrived, I was only consuming Turkish food, and I gained a lot of weight here because it was so oily...”*. Similarly, P3 expressed their dissatisfaction with this situation, noting, *“Too much oil is used in Turkish food in restaurants, and I don’t like this...”*.

Some students shared their perspectives on the food and beverages that are consumed together in Turkish cuisine. In this regard, it was observed that students from geographically distant countries, such as Indonesia, experienced astonishment as an initial impression after encountering unfamiliar ingredient combinations. Some participants stated that various ingredient pairings used in Turkish dishes do not exist in their own cultures, making these dishes seem strange to them. For example, P16 recounted their experience *“I ate Iskender for the first time in a restaurant...The combination of yogurt and meat felt strange to me, so I didn’t like it at all at first...”*. Similarly, P17 remarked, *“In our culture, yogurt is consumed as a dessert, so I found it odd to eat it with meals, as well as the consumption of ayran (a drink made of yogurt and water) alongside food...”*. Referring to the consumption of ayran as a beverage with meals, P20 noted, *“People here drink ayran with most meals; it seemed different to me when I first saw it...”*.

During the process of experiencing Turkish culinary culture, students frequently referred to comparisons they made between their native countries and Turkish culture. In this context, regarding the differences in ingredient usage observed in the dishes, P7 stated, *“Even though some of our dishes are culturally similar, you use less meat in your meals; for example, in our country, we use more meat in yaprak sarma (stuffed grape leaves)...”*. Similarly, P4 highlighted the difference they experienced: *“For instance, dolma (stuffed vegetables) also exists in our culture. But, of course, there are differences. Here, dolma can be either with or without meat. In Ukraine, it is only prepared with meat...”*. P18 shared their thoughts by noting, *“When we make pilaf, we generally use spices, and the rice itself is different; here, people eat it oily and plain...”*.

Students also expressed their observations regarding the variations in the preparation methods of food and beverages. P6 highlighted the impact of this difference, stating, *“We boil rice like pasta. Here, they sauté it directly in oil. This really upset my stomach...”*. Referring to the way eggplant is prepared in Türkiye, P9 mentioned that in their country, they peel eggplants completely before cooking; therefore, trying karnıyarık (stuffed eggplant) for the first time felt different in this regard. Additionally, P5 and P6 mentioned that using olive oil in Turkish cooking was an unusual practice for them. P5 stated, *“Using olive oil in meals is a problem for me. I don’t like olive oil much. For example, we don’t use olive oil in meals...”* while P6 shared their thoughts: *“There is a lot of olive oil in Turkish dishes. We only add olive oil to salads and greens. That is, olive oil is never used in the preparation of meals...”*. Furthermore, P13 touched upon the differences in tea preparation methods between the two cultures *“Turks boil tea in water here and use a teapot for this; in Pakistan, we make tea with milk and there is no such thing as a teapot; we make it in a pot...”*.

Students also expressed their views on the differences that emerged when comparing Turkish meal patterns, table settings, and presentation styles with those of their own cultures. Regarding the content of meals in Türkiye, participant P2 stated *“Here, when you sit down at a table, people eat several dishes together—main course, soup, rice, salad, everything. In our culture, it is not like that. We do not prepare separate dishes like this. We usually cook one large main dish with plenty of meat and serve only that. This felt unfamiliar to me...”* thereby conveying how this cultural difference made them feel. P7 found the frequent consumption of soup before meals in Türkiye surprising and noted that soup does not occupy such a central place in their own food culture: *“You Turkish people drink soup a lot. We do not consume it that much. For example, here there is soup before almost every meal. That is not common in our culture...”*. Regarding breakfast, P4 shared their observations *“Breakfast, for instance, is very different. There is much more variety, and it lasts longer. In my country, breakfast is very quick, like we eat just an egg and some salami. That’s it. Here, the variety and the amount of time dedicated to breakfast are quite different...”*. Similarly, P6 remarked that the breakfast meal in Türkiye is highly exaggerated and that they prefer a simpler start to the day. In terms of table settings, P3 stated that eating at a floor table was an unusual arrangement: *“Also, in some places in Türkiye, people eat on the floor. This would never happen in our culture...”*.

During the interviews, experiences regarding the similarities and proximity observed by students between their own cultures and Turkish culture were also emphasized. In this context, the expressed similarities between Turkish cuisine and the participants' native cuisines were included in terms of both flavor profiles and specific dish varieties. For instance, P10, P11, and P12 stated that Hatay cuisine, in particular, is almost identical to their own and that flavors such as Hatay doner kebab, kunafeh, and çiğköfte perfectly match their palates. P11 noted on this matter, *“When we first arrived in Türkiye, we lived in Hatay; since we were already very close, our food was also similar; Turkish cuisine is a very delicious one...”*. P9 indicated that similar types of food could be consumed in different cultures, saying, *“In my opinion, the culture here is the same; we eat a lot of rice in Indonesia, and it’s the same here, which is a good thing for me...”*. P19 and P20 expressed that they have dishes like kebab and meat skewers in their own cultures, and therefore liked these dishes when they tried them in Turkish cuisine. P19 shared their thoughts *“We also have grilled kebabs, so I eat them here; when I eat out, I love meat skewers and kebabs...”*. Additionally, P1 stated that similar

dishes can be found in different culinary cultures, remarked: “*Our food is actually not extremely different; for example, there is hingel (traditional Sivas dumpling) in Ukraine, but the shape is different; ours is a bit larger...*”.

Theme 2. The Adaptation Process in the Context of Food Culture

International students’ processes of adapting to Turkish cuisine are shaped by the challenges they encounter and the factors that facilitate this process, which in turn leads to changes in their everyday eating practices. Based on the content analysis of the participants' narratives, the adaptation process is structured into three sub-themes: challenges encountered during the adaptation process, facilitating factors, and daily practices. Figure 2 presents the categories forming these sub-themes and the codes underlying these categories in a hierarchical arrangement.

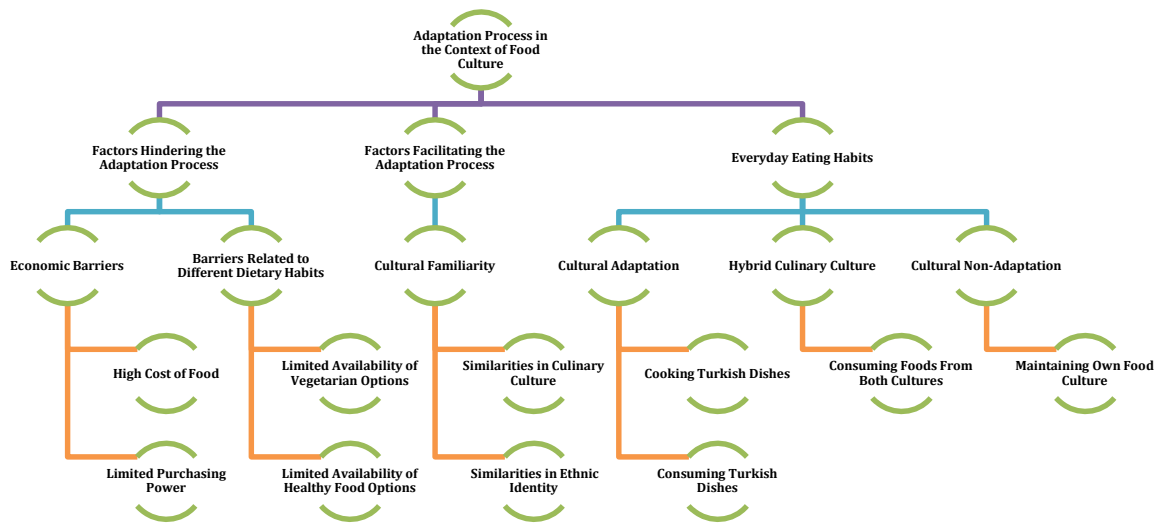


Figure 2. Thematic Schema of the Adaptation Process in the Context of Food Culture

In the sub-theme titled factors hindering the adaptation process, various obstacles faced by students while trying to adapt to the food culture in Türkiye were emphasized. In this context, economic barriers and obstacles related to dietary habits mentioned by the students during the interviews were addressed. From an economic perspective, some students expressed experiencing financial difficulties because food was expensive when they arrived in Türkiye, while others cited the lower purchasing power in their home countries compared to Türkiye. Regarding this, P1 stated, “*I like meat dishes; I would like to consume them more, but the prices are problematic. I wish they were more affordable...*” noting that dishes made with meat are particularly expensive. P14 drew attention to rising prices and costs, stating, “*When I first arrived, even a small salad was 50 TL at a restaurant, now it’s even more, very expensive...*”. P17 explained the difficulty they faced during their initial period in Türkiye as follows “*I struggled with money; food was expensive. It was harder at first, of course, because our currency has lower value...*” referring to the low value of their native currency and the financial pressure it created. P18 also mentioned the barriers created by financial struggles “*Everything is very expensive; I didn’t have much money when I first arrived. This is a bit challenging in markets and restaurants; sometimes, even if I like the food, I don’t eat out...*”. Finally, P20 touched upon their struggles, saying, “*I find food prices expensive, I wish they were a bit cheaper because sometimes we really struggle...*”.

Regarding barriers related to dietary habits, the challenges expressed by students with different dietary styles or health-related concerns were emphasized. P14 highlighted the difficulties faced due to the incompatibility of Turkish dishes with their preferred dietary model, stating “*I was a vegetarian when I arrived here; since there is so much meat in the dishes, I struggled a lot because of that at*

first. It was hard to find food, and I was only eating salad... ”. P3 and P4 mentioned that Turkish food is generally oily and therefore not suitable for a healthy diet, they also noted that they could not find the healthy product varieties from their own cultures in the markets. P3 stated that they cook versions of Turkish dishes at home that could be considered healthier to consume them “I mean, I’ve adjusted and actually find Turkish food pleasant because I live in my own home, I can make it less spicy and less oily than it is outside. That’s why I can make it healthier... ”. Finally, P6 expressed their thoughts on local dietary patterns, saying “A lot of desserts are consumed here. But they are too sugary. The sugar content is very high. That also affected me significantly, so I didn’t consume them... ”.

In the sub-theme titled factors facilitating the adaptation process, the elements that played a supportive role in students’ adjustment to Turkish food culture were highlighted. Within this context, the concept of cultural familiarity was emphasized. Particularly, students from regions geographically close to Türkiye, such as Syria, and those from Turkic Republics like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, stated that possessing similar cultural backgrounds played a significant role in the adaptation process. P12 stated that they were able to easily adapt to the food culture thanks to both their ethnic identity and coming from a close geography, saying “*One side of me is Turkmen. Therefore, I did not struggle much in getting used to the dishes. I liked the food when I tried it. Because I lived in Hatay, we have the same dishes; I did not feel a sense of difference... ”. P7 shared their experience “Since Azerbaijani and Turkish cultures are already very similar, it wasn’t much of a difference for me. Of course, there are still differences, but since there were no major differences, they were dishes I was already familiar with. For instance, the names of the dishes are the same, but some of the ingredients differ. Therefore, there was no serious situation that challenged me... ”. P3 also expressed their thoughts, stating “My mother is Ukrainian, but my father is Azerbaijani. This is why the culinary culture here is closer to me. We cook both Ukrainian dishes and Turkish and Azerbaijani meals. Because of this, I didn’t experience a shock when I arrived. Being accustomed to this situation made it easier... ”.*

In the sub-theme titled everyday eating habits, the study explored how the daily culinary activities of students were formed during their adaptation process in Türkiye. Within this framework, it was observed that while some students did not experience major issues with adaptation and consumed Turkish dishes voluntarily, others could not get used to the Turkish food culture and predominantly maintained the culinary practices of their own cultures. Some students stated that they were able to adapt to Turkish food culture. For instance, P15, who mentioned working in a restaurant during their spare time, stated: “*I make soup, grilled dishes, and many other things. I have almost forgotten Egyptian food, I cook Turkish dishes now, and I think they taste better, I don’t know... ”. P8 described preparing Turkish meals at home with the following words “We prepare things like menemen (Turkish scrambled eggs with tomatoes and peppers) for breakfast at home. There is an eggplant dish that I also prepare. I enjoy these... ”. P19 also noted that they cook Turkish food in their household “We cook Turkish food; there is a soup, lentil soup, it’s very delicious and we make it often... ”. P18 shared that while they do not cook Turkish food at home, they love eating certain dishes outdoors “I love döner very much; I eat it once or twice a week. I also like çiğköfte and lahmacun (a traditional thin piece of dough topped with minced meat, vegetables, and herbs), I eat dishes like these... ”. P17 expressed their thoughts by saying “I enjoy eating Turkish food outside. I like döner and kebab... ”. P12 expressed themselves on this matter as follows “Since we stay at home, we cook our own meals... but we also eat Turkish food outside. I like it, not every dish, but there are ones I love... ”. Other students stated that they had not fully adjusted to Turkish food culture and were trying to maintain their own culinary practices. P4 explained their perspective on this “Since I am married to a Turk, I cook Turkish food. But normally I don’t like it much anyway because it’s too oily for me. I don’t think it’s very healthy. So, I make it for my spouse, but I don’t eat much of it myself. I would have preferred dishes from my own culture... ”. P1 mentioned consuming Turkish food because they reside in a student dormitory “If I stayed in a house, I would cook Kazakhstani food. Because we truly like it more. We make more meat-heavy dishes... ”. P9, P10, P11, P13, P16, and P17 used similar expressions, stating that they live with different people from their own countries and therefore predominantly cook and consume their own cultural meals. Some participants mentioned that they*

could consume dishes from both their own culture and Turkish culture together. P19 noted their enjoyment of combining foods from two different cultures *“We cook our own meals, but we’ve gotten used to it here; for example, we sometimes make soup to go with those meals. Also, I really liked the pickles here; I eat those...”*. P3 explained that they created a hybrid dietary pattern, cooking and consuming Ukrainian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani dishes together due to their family background. P14 also stated *“We make our own meals with Turkish ingredients; we have a dish similar to menemen, and we make those...”*.

Theme 3. The Construction of Belonging Within the Context of Food Culture

It was observed that social interactions established through culinary culture play a significant role in the development of international students' sense of belonging toward Türkiye. As a result of the analysis conducted in this context, the findings were structured into three sub-themes: cultural and social practices strengthening belonging, cultural and social factors weakening belonging, and subjective evaluations regarding belonging. Figure 3 presents the categories forming these sub-themes and the codes underlying these categories in a hierarchical arrangement.

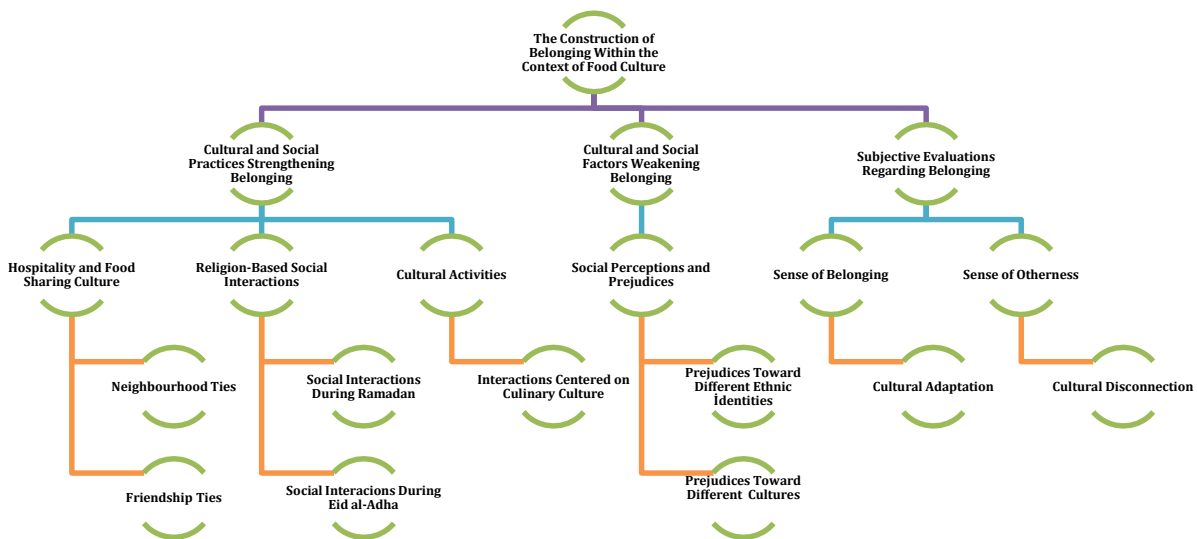


Figure 3. Thematic Schema for the Construction of Cultural Belonging Within the Context of Food Culture

In the sub-theme titled cultural and social practices strengthening belonging, social and cultural factors that positively affect the development of international students' sense of belonging toward Türkiye were emphasized. During the interviews, students frequently mentioned the emotions evoked by the hospitality and offering behaviors they experienced in Türkiye. In this context, students staying in houses particularly referred to neighborhood relations and discussed their neighbors' approaches toward them. P12 stated that they felt less like a “stranger” thanks to this approach shown by their neighbors to help them, saying *“Our neighbors there were bringing food to our house. This is something that makes you feel good. Because in the end, you don't feel so foreign to everyone. Because people think of you. For example, they would say, 'Do you have any problems? Come to us if you want anything, we will help you...”*. P9 shared their own experience on this matter *“Some of our neighbors give us food, they bring Turkish food. We tell them in advance which dish we want, I mean which dish we like, and they make it. It is a very nice thing that they strive to be helpful in this way...”*. P19 touched upon how the bond established with their neighbors through food made them feel *“Our neighbors always bring us food, they ask if there is anything you crave, let me make it and bring it to you; this was something that moved me, people help you, so I feel better, having someone who thinks about you reduces loneliness...”*. Some of the students focused on the concept of visiting

(hospitality) and mentioned how their thoughts and experiences on this subject had changed. For instance, P3 stated that in their own culture, visiting is planned in advance; therefore, they were surprised that neighbors or relatives in Türkiye could come to visit suddenly. However, they added that over time they realized this is a feature that brings people closer and increases sincerity, sharing their thoughts with these words *“In my country, when a guest is coming, we invite those people beforehand. For example, I'm expecting you a month from now. In this way, or for example tomorrow or something. Here, they come suddenly. And I think like this now, if guests have come, I have to prepare a beautiful table. Because that's how it is with us. If you invite a guest, you prepare a very large table. But here it's not like that and this was very strange for me. But now I actually understand that this is better because people are constantly coming to each other's houses, they are chatting. They become closer like this. This is very nice for me...”*. P4 shared their thoughts on the culture of hospitality and how it made them feel with these expressions: *“I think things like going to visit and sharing food are very nice because people here, I mean Turks, give importance to this. This is important for them. If they invite you to their homes, especially if they invite you to their table, it means you are an important person for them or they respect you. Also, in Turkish culture, visiting is a very popular thing. I mean, guests are constantly coming. For some families, this is an important part of life. Therefore, this is of course a very good thing. I find it very good...”*.

Students also discussed friendship bonds in relation to food and food culture. They provided information about the feelings evoked by sharing food and establishing social interaction with their friends. Regarding this subject, P1 stated *“Sharing with Turks is a beautiful thing. We have Turkish roommates in the dormitory. They let us try different things. I mean, they give us food they brought from their own cities. For example, I tried sarma. It was very good. We try different coffees. Yesterday, we tried a coffee that came from Diyarbakır. I liked it very much. I mean, food is always in our conversations...”*. P18 mentioned how the closeness shown by their friends helped in this process *“We share food with my friends in the dormitory; when someone eats something in the room, they always tell me, do you want to eat, eat some of this, and they give me their own food. When I first arrived, they explained Turkish dishes to me outside, telling me what was in them. They helped me, this is very nice; people showing closeness makes adjusting much easier...”*. P7 talked about their own experiences, saying *“For instance, I have a classmate. Their mother had invited me, saying come to our house and have a meal. This is something that makes you feel very positive. My adjustment wasn't very difficult anyway, but it definitely helped a lot. It made me feel comfortable, at least it allowed me to adjust faster...”*.

According to the statements of international students, it was observed that religion-based social interactions, specifically the practices related to the month of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, played a powerful role in helping students feel a sense of belonging to Türkiye and providing them with emotional support. Regarding this subject, P13 stated *“There is a teacher here who invited us to their house for iftar during Ramadan, I was very happy at that time...”*. P18 expressed the feelings evoked by the social bonds they established, saying *“Neighbors bring us Turkish food. They mostly invite us to their homes during the month of Ramadan. We have iftar together. They also invite us at other times. We invite them to our house as well. This allowed us to become closer to these people, which is why I feel good. We've become very accustomed this way...”*. P10 shared their own experience on this matter *“While I was doing an internship in Antalya, I had a friend there, a Turkish friend. They had rented a private house and made very nice oven-baked dishes. They invited us during Ramadan and served us food. It was very beautiful, and I still thank them for their help...”*. P18 shared their thoughts and feelings *“My friend had a house, they invited us, and we had iftar with their family. Being with people was very nice because it reminded me of the times I spent with my own family, and I didn't feel lonely...”*. P19 referred to Eid al-Adha, sharing their experience *“We have neighbors here; they brought us meat during Eid al-Adha, and I really liked that they thought of us...”*. Similarly, P20 stated what these experiences felt like emotionally *“They gave us meat during Eid al-Adha and told us to let them know if we needed anything; my friends and I were very happy, it is very beautiful for people to help you in another country...”*.

It was observed that some international students established social interactions and had positive experiences through cultural events organized within the university, particularly through an event held as part of Turkish Cuisine Week. For instance, P8 mentioned the feelings evoked by their competition experience with the following sentences *“I participated in a food competition, I made hingel there and I think it was good. It went extremely well. I mean, I liked it. I met people. At least, thank God. I love things like that. I mean, meeting and mingling with people makes me feel more at home...”*. P6 shared their views by saying *“I think foreign students should be included in events like this. Maybe we should make them think not like let me just come here, get a diploma, and leave, but rather let me gain something from here. I mean, the food of Turkish culture is very beautiful. If it is made in a healthy way using the right products, there is no problem. This needs to be explained and taught to the student correctly. A desire, a spark should form in that student to cook the food of this country...”*. At the same time, although these types of events were generally welcomed by students, some offered different perspectives on the content of these organizations. P4 expressed their perspective on such events with these words *“Actually, events like this make me feel further away from my homeland. Because I am cooking food from another culture. I mean, even if I get used to this place, it means I am moving away from there. Therefore, I think it should be the opposite. I mean, for us to adjust, if an event were held where we could also make our own food, it would be something more unifying. Because we are already in Türkiye. We are already staying here for a long time. If we can show our own dishes to other people, I think we can feel better...”*. P3 expressed their thoughts on this subject as follows *“There are people from many different nations studying here at our university. For this reason, I think it would be nice if they gave everyone a chance to cook food from their own country. For example, let Turks come and taste our food. Maybe someone will say this is good, and maybe someone will say no, it’s not for me. The important thing is to establish interaction. Everyone’s palate is different, but we also want to share something from our own country. Because we have started to feel at home here in Türkiye. And Turks treat us very well, so we want to do something of our own. Our food is like home to us. And we want to share that with Turks too...”*.

In the sub-theme titled cultural and social factors weakening belonging, social and cultural factors that negatively affect international students' development of a sense of belonging toward Türkiye were emphasized. During the interviews, students discussed the emotions evoked by various prejudices they encountered. In the narratives of some participants, it was observed that prejudices originating from the social environment hindered the communication expected to be established through culinary culture. For instance, P15 stated that they were excluded by their roommates due to their ethnic origin and described their experiences *“I never shared food or anything else with my first roommates because they didn't like me. They said they didn't like me because I am Arab. I was the only foreigner in the room; the others were Turkish. But then I moved to another room. The girls here are Turkish, but they like Arabs. They treat me well...”*. P3, P4, and P20 observed that Turks generally avoid trying foreign dishes or approach them with prejudice. It was observed that this situation discouraged students' desire to share their own cultures and caused them to feel bad. Regarding this issue, P3 stated *“For example, if you are cooking like that, most Turks are even afraid to taste that food. It's really strange for me because they say, 'We haven't eaten this, and we actually don't want to try it.' And for me, this is truly a bit odd. Because the world is changing anyway. There are actually many foreigners in Türkiye. For example, after the war started, a lot of Ukrainians came here. Families were established here. So, that's why I think they are prejudiced against you. This is something that makes you feel negativity, makes you feel bad...”*. P20 mentioned a similar situation *“I once offered one of our dishes to a friend who came to our house, but they didn't want to eat it; I was sad because of this because I wanted to share things from my own culture with them, just as they shared with us...”*.

In the sub-theme titled subjective evaluations regarding belonging, the emotions felt by students as a result of their time spent in Türkiye and their interactions with food culture were emphasized. While some students stated that they felt a sense of belonging toward Türkiye because of their experiences, established bonds, and social interactions, others expressed that they still felt like a stranger in this

country. In this context, P5 used the following expressions *“As I said, we are already very similar culturally, including in terms of food culture; therefore, I see this similarity and feel that I belong here more over time. Just like my own country. But I think this is because we are similar; if we were very different, I think I would probably have struggled...”*. P8 talked about how the process of adaptation and feeling a sense of belonging was shaped for them *“When I first arrived, I didn't understand anything. Maybe people were acting kind to me, but I didn't understand. I mean, because our culture is a bit different. But then I met many people; they took us in, shared their food with us, and helped. After that, I started to like it. People treat us very sincerely. That's it. Of course, I got very used to this place because of that. I really don't feel like a stranger here. Wherever I go, I don't feel like a stranger here. It's a beautiful thing...”*. P11 stated on this matter *“I didn't really feel like a stranger; for example, especially when I was in Hatay, I didn't feel like a stranger at all, as we are already very similar to the people there. Therefore, they didn't see me as a stranger either. They saw me as a Turk. As time passed, I got more used to it; I don't feel like a stranger...”*. P18 shared their own feelings *“I struggled when I first came, but I got used to this place over time; the people are good, the food is nice, I have friends, so it's like my home here now...”*. P7 used these expressions on the subject *“I already feel like I belong here. The only thing that affects me here is being a bit far from my family. Other than that, if we speak in terms of culture, it's the same; in terms of food, as food culture, it's the same. So not much happened to me. I mean, I didn't feel major differences when I arrived...”*. P19 touched upon how their own emotions were shaped over time *“I love Türkiye very much, I also love the food culture, and I don't feel like a stranger here; I had this feeling when I first arrived, but I don't anymore, I'm happy to be here...”*. P17 expressed their thoughts with a similar statement *“Of course, I thought I was a stranger when I first arrived. But now there's no such thing, I don't feel that way, I've adjusted...”*.

Students who expressed that they could not adapt to Türkiye culturally and felt like a stranger talked about their experiences, P2 stated *“I won't lie. I don't feel like I belong to Türkiye. Because sometimes, as one fails to get used to the food, one feels like a stranger. In a foreign country, you feel even more like a stranger. And yes, sometimes our culture or some of our dishes might be similar, but some differences I see still make me feel like a stranger...”*. P14 shared their experience and mentioned how this process worked for them *“I haven't quite adjusted. I don't know, I guess it's also partly due to this city, I mean Sivas. It's also very cold here and so on. In my own city, there is the sea, the ocean, etc. For example, because of this, we consume a lot of fish, but here it's almost never consumed, very little. Therefore, I'm in an average place. I've gotten used to this place, but I haven't quite embraced it; I miss my home...”*. P9 stated *“I still feel like a stranger, it's still like that, I haven't really gotten used to the food either...”*. P16 expressed their thoughts similarly to other students *“I can't say I've adjusted much, the food still feels different, so I feel like a stranger, yes...”*. P1 shared that while they felt a sense of belonging as a result of the time they spent, they still felt like a stranger from time to time *“Because I have lived here for a long time, meaning my student years were spent here, I feel a sense of belonging to Türkiye, but sometimes when I taste a different dish, I still get that foreign taste; I feel like a stranger...”*.

Conclusion

In this research, the interactions of international students with Turkish culinary culture were examined as a dynamic process extending from the initial encounter to the construction of social belonging. The findings show that students' first contacts with Turkish cuisine were shaped by sensory perceptions and cultural comparisons. It was found that some students experienced alienation by going through a “food shock” in the initial stage due to the flavor profiles they intensely perceived in Turkish dishes or unfamiliar ingredient combinations. In this regard, participants in the present study also frequently highlighted the intensive use of spices, tomato paste, and oil in Turkish dishes as shaping their early reactions. In line with this, some studies on international students similarly report that Turkish foods may be described with expressions such as “spicy” and “oily,” suggesting that sensory intensity can influence first impressions (Girgin, Oflaz, & Karaman, 2017; Kara, 2025; Soyulu,

2018). At the same time, it was examined how students experienced the differences and similarities identified through comparisons between their own food cultures and Turkish food culture. At this point, it was observed that the differences identified in the ingredients of dishes, preparation methods, table habits, and meal patterns made some students feel that they were now living in a different cultural environment. For some students, however, this situation developed in the opposite direction and resulted in the discovery of similarities existing in both cultures.

It was observed that international students' adaptation processes to Turkish culinary culture are shaped by factors that contribute to or hinder this process, and that daily practices change depending on these experiences. During the adaptation process, it was determined that some students faced difficulties accessing the foods they wished to consume due to economic challenges such as high food prices and low purchasing power. This observation is in line with evidence highlighting that financial constraints constitute one of the prominent problem areas for international students, with food-related expenses and access difficulties explicitly discussed among these challenges (Topal & Tauscher, 2020). Additionally, it was identified that some students struggled during the adaptation stage due to the limited food options available for individuals with health-related dietary concerns or those adopting different dietary models, such as vegetarianism. Aside from these, cultural familiarity was found to be among the elements that facilitate the adaptation process. In this regard, it was revealed that students coming from nearby geographies or Turkic Republics experienced a smoother adaptation process thanks to the similarities in their food cultures. Similarly, studies focusing on students from Turkic Republics report that Turkish cuisine is often perceived as familiar and evaluated positively, which supports the facilitating role of cultural proximity in culinary adaptation (Girgin, Oflaz, & Karaman, 2017). In the subsequent process, while some students developed an adaptation to Turkish cuisine and consumed Turkish dishes voluntarily and with enjoyment, others were unable to get used to Turkish food culture and predominantly maintained the culinary practices of their own cultures. It was also determined that some students adopted a pattern that incorporates elements from both cultures by developing a hybrid dietary arrangement.

It has been observed that social interactions established through food culture play a significant role in the development of international students' sense of belonging toward Türkiye. Specifically, social bonds forged through neighborhood and friendship, combined with the hospitality and food-sharing rituals inherent in religious practices, emerged as the most decisive factors enabling students to redefine an unfamiliar landscape as home. This is consistent with evidence emphasizing the role of hospitality and food-sharing in Turkish culinary culture and the ways in which such practices support social connection and positive experiences among international students (Aslan, 2025; Kaya, 2023). On the other hand, it was observed that certain prejudices encountered in their social environments and the distant attitude of the local population toward different culinary cultures weaken the unifying power of food culture, leading students to feel more excluded. It was determined that in the process of feeling a sense of belonging to their new environment, students desire to share their own cultures and gain social acceptance by establishing a bidirectional interaction. Indeed, as with many migrants who are away from their homelands, their own local cuisines represent a symbolic “home” that international students carry with them. As a response to the help and hospitality shown to them, students carry a desire to share their own cultural identities with the local community and to be accepted. In this context, it is considered that gastronomic belonging can be achieved not only by being a guest at a presented table but also by students being able to include their own cuisine at that table and having this sharing find appreciation from the other party. In conclusion, international students' current perceptions of belonging toward Türkiye reside on a dynamic spectrum shaped by the interaction of these supportive and inhibiting factors. While some students position Türkiye as a home thanks to social acceptance and cultural familiarity, another significant portion continues to feel like a stranger due to various factors. Although Turkish culinary culture practices contain elements that contribute to students developing a sense of belonging to Türkiye, it is considered essential that the interaction be placed on a bidirectional ground, allowing students to showcase their own cultural identities, and that the local community adopts a more accepting attitude.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as the research was conducted at Sivas Cumhuriyet University and limited to this institutional and local context, the findings are context-specific and may not be directly transferable to other universities or settings in Türkiye. Second, the qualitative phenomenological design and the sample size enabled rich, in-depth insights but limit broader generalizability. A significant limitation is the language barrier, as conducting interviews in English or Turkish may have prevented some participants from expressing complex cultural nuances or specific traditional culinary terms in their native languages.

Building on these findings, future research could employ mixed-method designs to generate more comprehensive and generalizable findings from larger international student populations across diverse Turkish universities. Comparative studies may examine how adaptation processes vary across different Turkish universities and settings. Future studies could also investigate the role of digital gastronomy by examining how social media platforms shape students' food choices and adaptation experiences. Moreover, research informed by nutritional anthropology could explore the longer-term implications of students' perceptions of Turkish food as “oily” or “unhealthy.”

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