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The Impact of Migration on The Eating Habits of Romanians

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International migration has become an increasingly frequent phenomenon in recent decades, significantly influencing individuals' eating behaviors. In the case of Romania, this phenomenon has led to major changes in the population's diets, both through the emigration of Romanians to other European countries and the immigration of people from other cultures into Romania. This article examines the impact of migration on the eating habits of Romanians, addressing both the benefits and risks associated with these changes. By reviewing specialized literature and relevant case studies, the public health implications are highlighted, and recommendations for promoting a balanced diet are provided.

Keywords: Migration; Eating habits; Romanian cuisine; Dietary changes; Cultural identity; Mediterranean diet; Public health; Traditional diets; Food diversity; Romanian diaspora

Introduction

Migration is a complex process that affects multiple dimensions of human life, including diet and health. The emigration of Romanians to other countries and the immigration of people from other cultures into Romania have resulted in significant changes in eating behaviors. These changes are influenced by economic, cultural, and social factors and can have both positive and negative effects on public health. The objective of this article is to explore these changes from an academic perspective, using various sources and case studies.

Methodology and Data Sources

This paper is based on a systematic review of literature, including over 50 relevant academic sources covering the nutritional and socio-cultural aspects of migration. Data sources include articles from journals indexed in Web of Science, demographic studies, public health reports, and comparative analyses of population eating habits. The data is complemented by case studies that provide a detailed perspective on the impact of migration on the eating habits of Romanians.

Romanian Emigration and Adaptation to New Diets

The international migration of Romanians to various European countries and other regions has significantly impacted their eating habits. Whether it involves adapting to a completely different diet or attempting to integrate traditional elements into the local cuisine, the process of dietary adjustment is influenced by economic, social, and cultural factors.

Changes in the Food Environment

Romanians who emigrate to countries such as Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Germany, or France are exposed to a food environment entirely different from what they are accustomed to in Romania. In many of these countries, the local diet is characterized by a variety of foods and ingredients that may not be familiar to migrants, leading to a gradual shift in eating behaviors. According to a study conducted by Popescu et al. [1], during their first years abroad, Romanians tend to experiment with new foods but also consume more processed products due to their accessibility.

Western Diets and Health Impacts

The adoption of Western diets has had significant consequences on the health of Romanian migrants. Diets in countries like the United Kingdom and Germany are often high in saturated fats, sugars, and processed foods. A longitudinal study by Stanciu et al. [3] revealed that after five years of residence in the United Kingdom, Romanian migrants experienced an increase in Body Mass Index (BMI), as well as a higher incidence of type 2 diabetes and hypertension. This phenomenon is explained by the increased availability of fast food and calorie-dense products, combined with a lack of time to cook at home due to busy work schedules. An example of dietary adaptation was observed in Spain, where Romanians who emigrated to coastal areas gradually integrated more fish and seafood into their diets, influenced by the Mediterranean diet, which is associated with cardiovascular health benefits [2]. However, this adaptation was not complete, as many specific dishes were prepared in a manner resembling Romanian recipes, reflecting a tendency to retain some culinary traditions.

Economic Factors and Food Accessibility

Another major challenge for Romanian migrants is the disparity in food costs and the accessibility of ingredients. In many European countries, healthy foods such as fresh vegetables, fruits, and fish are often more expensive than in Romania. According to a report by Bădescu [6], Romanian migrants in the United Kingdom reported having to prioritize economically accessible foods, such as processed products, despite being aware of their negative health impacts.

In Italy and Spain, however, access to fresh produce, such as local vegetables and fruits, was easier, enabling some Romanians to adopt beneficial aspects of these diets. Nevertheless, those who migrated for seasonal work faced additional challenges, such as irregular work schedules, which limited their opportunities to prepare healthy meals [12].

Social Pressure and Cultural Integration

Integration into a new culture also comes with the pressure to adopt local customs, including dietary habits. In the United Kingdom, for example, Romanians were frequently exposed to habits like eating out or consuming fast food, leading to a change in their dietary preferences [7]. Additionally, socialization within new communities encouraged the consumption of foods specific to the host culture.

However, in certain Romanian communities, adaptation to the local diet was limited by the desire to maintain cultural traditions. Social events organized by Romanians in the diaspora often included traditional Romanian dishes such as *sarmale* (stuffed cabbage rolls), *mici* (grilled minced meat rolls), and soups. This preservation of food identity was essential for maintaining cultural ties and social cohesion.

Benefits and Challenges of Adapting to New Diets

Adapting to new diets can bring both benefits and challenges for Romanian migrants. On one hand, adopting healthy elements, such as increased consumption of fish and fresh vegetables from the Mediterranean diet, can improve long-term health. On the other hand, a busy lifestyle and the accessibility of unhealthy foods pose a risk to metabolic health [13].

Another important aspect is the impact on younger generations. Children born in the diaspora are exposed to Western diets from an early age, which can influence their long-term food preferences. A study by Stan [3] found that children of Romanian migrants in Spain tend to prefer fast food and processed snacks over traditional home-cooked meals.

Benefits of Maintaining a Traditional Diet

Maintaining the traditional Romanian diet among migrants is a significant factor that contributes to their nutritional well-being and a healthy lifestyle. The traditional Romanian diet is rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fermented dairy products, and includes a variety of home-cooked meals such as soups, broths, vegetable dishes, and stews made with lean meat. These eating habits are closely tied to cultural identity and are often preserved even in the diaspora, particularly in communities that emphasize social cohesion and the perpetuation of traditions. Research shows that retaining these dietary habits can provide significant physical and mental health benefits. A diet rich in vegetables and natural, home-cooked meals offers essential nutrients

and an optimal balance of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. Regular consumption of soups and broths, staples of Romanian cuisine, contributes to hydration and provides substantial amounts of fiber and vitamins. Additionally, fermented dairy products such as yogurt and homemade cheese are beneficial for digestive health and maintaining a healthy gut microbiota. Studies conducted by Stanciu [3] indicate that migrants who preserve elements of the traditional diet have a lower risk of developing metabolic diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension, compared to those who fully adopt Western diets.

Beyond nutritional benefits, maintaining a traditional diet provides important emotional support. Preparing traditional meals can offer comfort and a sense of continuity, helping migrants feel closer to their cultural roots, even when far from home. Furthermore, traditional meals shared with family or community members strengthen social bonds and enhance cohesion within Romanian communities abroad. These gatherings become opportunities to reconnect and celebrate shared identity, offering a culinary experience that transcends mere sustenance and transforms into a symbol of belonging and tradition.

Another advantage of maintaining the traditional diet is related to control over food quality. In a world where processed foods are increasingly accessible, home cooking allows for the selection of fresh and healthy ingredients, avoiding additives, sugars, and unhealthy fats. Romanians who have managed to preserve their habits of cooking at home demonstrate better capacity to maintain a healthy body weight and avoid sudden weight fluctuations, which are common among those who consume fast food or ultra-processed products.

However, maintaining the traditional diet is not without challenges. In some host countries, the ingredients necessary for Romanian dishes can be difficult to find or expensive. Nevertheless, many migrant communities have developed support networks and specialized stores that offer imported Romanian products, facilitating the continuation of these habits. Thus, the traditional diet becomes not just a source of nutrition but also a social and cultural bridge that helps Romanians preserve their identity in a constantly changing world.

Risk Factors Associated with Dietary Changes

Dietary changes associated with migration are influenced by various risk factors that can have negative consequences for the health of Romanian migrants. These factors include the accessibility of processed and unhealthy foods, a busy lifestyle, and social influences that come with integrating into a new culture.

One of the most significant risks is the accessibility of processed foods. In many European countries, these foods are readily available and often cheaper than healthier options, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Many supermarkets offer a wide range of products high in saturated fats, sugars, and additives, making the adoption of an unbalanced diet a constant temptation for migrants. Studies suggest that, in their efforts to quickly adapt to new economic conditions and meet financial demands, Romanian migrants may frequently consume fast food or ready-made meals, contributing to an increased risk of obesity and metabolic diseases. Another significant risk factor is the busy and stressful lifestyle. Many Romanians who migrate in search of better job opportunities face demanding schedules and long working hours. This intense pace of life leaves little time for home cooking,

making quick and convenient meals the first choice. The lack of time and fatigue lead many migrants to rely on fast food options, which are often calorie-dense and low in essential nutrients. Over time, this lifestyle contributes to an increased risk of chronic conditions such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.

Beyond economic and lifestyle influences, social pressure and the desire for integration play an important role in dietary changes. Migrants often feel the need to adapt to the host culture, including participating in local dietary habits. For instance, in the United Kingdom, fast food consumption is a common part of daily life, and Romanian migrants may feel pressured to conform to these practices to make friends and integrate more easily into the local community. This social influence can profoundly impact dietary habits, encouraging the consumption of unhealthy foods and thus contributing to health deterioration.

Another major risk is linked to the psychological challenges that arise during the migration process. Migrants often face stress, anxiety, and homesickness, which may lead them to seek comfort in calorie-dense and sugary foods. Unhealthy foods, such as sweet or salty snacks, often become a source of emotional relief, contributing to the development of unhealthy eating habits that are difficult to change later. In this context, the combination of social pressure, psychological stress, and the accessibility of unhealthy foods creates an environment where health risks become increasingly pronounced.

In addition, a lack of access to adequate nutritional education is another contributing factor. Many migrants do not have the knowledge needed to make healthy dietary choices in the context of their new living conditions. Limited nutritional education, combined with exposure to processed foods in host countries, contributes to an increased incidence of diet-related health problems. These risk factors associated with dietary changes pose significant challenges for the health of migrants, emphasizing the importance of prevention strategies and support systems that encourage a healthy lifestyle.

The Role of Cultural Identity and Social Cohesion

Cultural identity plays a fundamental role in how Romanian migrants form and maintain their dietary habits. Even when settling in countries with completely different culinary traditions, many Romanians continue to respect and promote their traditional diet, considering it an essential part of their cultural identity. Food becomes more than just a source of nutrition; it symbolizes continuity, family, and traditions that connect the community to its roots.

In this context, preparing and consuming traditional Romanian dishes is often linked to a sense of belonging and reconnection with the cultural values of the homeland. Soups, stuffed cabbage rolls (sarmale), cozonac (sweet bread), and other traditional dishes serve as cultural anchors for Romanians in the diaspora. These meals not only provide familiar flavors but also evoke strong emotional connections to home, family, and cherished moments. Especially during holidays, traditional meals become a way to revive the atmosphere and rituals of Romanian culture, strengthening community bonds and preserving their national identity.

The role of cultural identity is closely tied to social cohesion within Romanian communities in the diaspora. Social gatherings

and family reunions around food are an essential part of community life, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual support. These events become important opportunities to strengthen social relationships, where stories, experiences, and, of course, traditional food are shared. This phenomenon not only provides a sense of safety and belonging but also helps migrants adapt more easily to new living conditions by offering them a space where they feel accepted and understood.

On the other hand, cultural food identity can serve as a form of resistance to the pressures of adapting to the host country's dietary culture. While migrants are constantly exposed to different foods and eating practices, many Romanians consciously choose to preserve their recipes and traditional ingredients, either by bringing them from Romania or by seeking out specialized stores that sell Romanian products. This behavior reflects their desire to protect and perpetuate cultural identity, even in a foreign environment, and to ensure that Romanian culinary traditions are passed on to future generations.

However, this attachment to cultural food identity can sometimes create tensions or intergenerational conflicts, especially within migrant families. Children raised in the diaspora are often influenced by the local diet and culture of the host country, which can lead to conflicts with parents who try to pass down their culinary traditions. Nonetheless, in most cases, food becomes a point of reconciliation, offering an opportunity to learn and share both cultures and create a balance between the past and the present.

In conclusion, cultural identity and social cohesion play an essential role in shaping the dietary habits of Romanian migrants, helping them maintain a sense of belonging and facilitating adaptation to the new realities of life in the diaspora. These cultural and social elements provide an anchor amidst change, allowing migrants to preserve a part of their identity, even in the midst of a constantly changing world.

Immigration and Dietary Diversification in Romania

Immigration to Romania in recent decades has had a significant impact on dietary diversification, gradually transforming the country's culinary landscape. As Romania has become an attractive destination for individuals from various regions of the world, particularly Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, these communities have brought with them a wealth of flavors, ingredients, and recipes that have influenced the eating habits of Romanians. The diversification process has been particularly accelerated in major cities, where cultural interaction is more intense, and access to international foods is more accessible.

One of the most visible changes has been the emergence and spread of ethnic restaurants offering a variety of dishes from world cuisines. Cities like Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and Timișoara have become diverse gastronomic hubs where Romanians can experience dishes like sushi, curry, falafel, Asian wok dishes, and African specialties. This expansion of culinary options has led to increased interest in exotic foods and altered the dietary preferences of many Romanians, who have begun incorporating new ingredients into their diets, such as avocado, quinoa, exotic spices, and various international sauces.

The growing interest in foods from other cultures has not been limited to restaurants but has also influenced home cooking habits.

Increasingly, Romanians have begun experimenting with international recipes, drawing inspiration from Asian, Mediterranean, and South American cuisines. This culinary openness has been supported by the expanded offerings in supermarkets, which now include a wide range of international products, from Asian spices to authentic Italian pasta and Mexican sauces. Thus, food has become a way for Romanians to explore cultural diversity, turning daily meals into opportunities for culinary journeys across the world.

The impact of immigration on dietary diversification has not only been gastronomic but has also had broader cultural implications. People have become more open and curious about other culinary traditions, contributing to greater intercultural understanding and acceptance. For example, Middle Eastern dishes such as hummus, tabbouleh, and kebabs have become common on many Romanian tables, while Asian influence has expanded from Chinese-specific restaurants to Japanese and Vietnamese establishments. Immigrants who have started businesses in the food industry have become cultural ambassadors, helping to change perceptions about food and enriching culinary experiences.

However, this dietary diversification has not been without challenges. Some new ingredients are perceived as expensive or difficult to find in certain regions of Romania, making their integration into daily diets less accessible to all consumers. Additionally, new dietary habits may sometimes conflict with local culinary traditions, particularly in rural areas where food remains closely tied to local cultural identity. Despite these challenges, dietary diversification has brought significant benefits in terms of health and flavor. The consumption of healthy and nutritious foods, such as exotic fruits and vegetables or fresh fish, has been encouraged through the introduction of international dishes.

Thus, immigration and dietary diversification in Romania have had a profound effect on how people think about food, contributing to a richer and more varied gastronomic landscape. This openness to global cuisines has been accompanied by an evolution in dietary preferences and a greater appreciation for cultural diversity. Romania, a country with a rich culinary history of its own, has thus become a space where tradition and innovation coexist, offering opportunities for experimentation and exploration of international flavors.

Case Studies

The case studies provide a concrete perspective on how migration has influenced Romanians' eating habits, offering detailed insights into these transformations through well-documented examples. These case studies illustrate not only changes in individual diets but also the profound impact of migration on health, cultural identity, and dietary choices within various Romanian diaspora communities.

A prominent example is a study conducted among the Romanian community in Italy, a country where the Mediterranean diet plays a crucial role. Romanians who emigrated to Italy faced a dual influence: on the one hand, they had the opportunity to adopt a diet rich in vegetables, fish, and olive oil, renowned for its cardiovascular health benefits. On the other hand, they were exposed to Italian culinary temptations, such as pasta and pizza, which, though delicious, can contribute to weight gain when consumed excessively. A study by Popescu et al. [1] revealed that many Romanians began integrating

elements of the Italian diet, leading to reduced incidences of heart disease among those who opted for a balanced diet. However, the same study also highlighted the risks of adopting unhealthy habits, such as excessive consumption of carbohydrates and sweets, which negatively affected the metabolic health of some migrants.

Another significant case study focuses on Romanians settled in the United Kingdom, where traditional British dietary practices differ considerably from Romanian ones. Here, Romanian migrants faced challenges related to the accessibility of healthy foods and the temptation of fast-food meals, which are highly popular in the UK. Research conducted by Stanciu et al. [1] showed that after a few years of living in the UK, a significant number of Romanians experienced increased Body Mass Index (BMI) and higher prevalence of hypertension and type 2 diabetes. The deterioration in health was mainly linked to frequent consumption of high-fat and high-sugar foods and a more sedentary lifestyle influenced by work conditions and the British climate.

The case studies also emphasize the importance of preserving cultural ties through diet. In Spain, for example, Romanians working in agriculture had greater opportunities to consume fresh produce and prepare traditional meals, enabling them to maintain a more balanced diet. A study by Rusu et al. (2020) found that many of these migrants managed to preserve traditional Romanian recipes, adapting them to locally available ingredients. This adaptation had a positive impact not only on physical health but also on emotional well-being, as traditional meals helped sustain a sense of community and belonging.

The case studies are not limited to Romanians emigrating to other countries but also include the impact of immigration on Romania. An interesting example is the influence of Asian and Arabic cuisines on Romanian dietary practices, particularly in large cities. In Bucharest, for instance, Asian restaurants and shops selling international products have become increasingly popular. Research by Dumitrescu et al. [9] highlighted how this diversification was enthusiastically received by Romanians, who began experimenting with new recipes at home, adding an exotic touch to their diets. However, the researchers also noted that while this diversification brings nutritional benefits, such as increased consumption of vegetables and healthy spices, there are potential risks of adopting less healthy habits, such as excessive consumption of fried or heavily salted foods typical of some international cuisines.

These case studies demonstrate how migration has led to complex transformations in eating habits, influenced by a variety of factors, from individual preferences to social and economic pressures. They underscore the importance of balancing adaptation to new diets with maintaining healthy habits rooted in traditional Romanian culinary practices. Dietary adaptation is not a linear or uniform process; instead, it reflects an ongoing interaction between tradition and innovation, between external influences and the cultural values of the Romanian community.

• **Conclusions** Migration has caused significant changes in Romanians' eating habits through both emigration to other European countries and immigration to Romania. These changes have been influenced by economic, cultural, and social factors, with effects visible at both individual and community levels.

- Adapting to local diets in host countries has had mixed implications for the health of Romanian migrants. Adopting healthy elements, such as the Mediterranean diet in Italy or Spain, has brought substantial cardiovascular health benefits. Conversely, exposure to processed foods and a more sedentary lifestyle in countries like the United Kingdom has led to an increase in metabolic diseases.

- Maintaining elements of the traditional Romanian diet has played a crucial role in sustaining health and cultural identity. Traditional dishes rich in vegetables, fiber, and fermented dairy products have contributed to reducing chronic disease risks and provided significant emotional support for migrants. However, preserving this diet has often been challenging, particularly due to difficulties in sourcing necessary ingredients in host countries.

- Dietary diversification in Romania due to immigration has introduced a wealth of flavors and new ingredients, which have been well-received, particularly in urban areas. However, integrating international foods has required adaptations in Romanians' preferences and eating habits, with potential risks related to adopting less healthy practices.

- The role of cultural identity and social cohesion has been central to how Romanians in the diaspora have maintained their eating habits. Traditional meals have strengthened community bonds and preserved a sense of belonging. This aspect has been crucial for emotional well-being and for protecting culinary traditions across generations.

- The impact of migration on public health requires special attention. Authorities and nutrition experts should develop educational programs and prevention strategies to support migrants in maintaining a healthy diet. These measures should include promoting healthy eating habits and facilitating access to nutritious ingredients.

The future of Romanian cuisine is one of continuous evolution, shaped by migration and globalization. Striking a balance between tradition and innovation will be essential for ensuring the health and well-being of the population, both at home and in the diaspora. This balance will require a deeper understanding of the cultural impact of food and how migration continues to transform dietary preferences and behaviors.

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