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Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine on YouTube: a computational netnographic study of food-neophobic and food-neophilic audience reactions and the digital transmission of culinary heritage

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Abstract

Sri Lankan cuisine is a layered ethnic food heritage shaped by tropical agriculture and by centuries of Arab, Portuguese, Dutch, and British contact atop a South Indian rice-and-curry foundation, and it is increasingly encountered by global audiences not at the destination but on digital platforms. This paper analyses 21,984 predominantly English-language comments posted on 45 YouTube videos about Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine, using VADER sentiment analysis, LDA topic modelling, and a purpose-built keyword lexicon for phobic and philic markers. The findings challenge two conventions of the survey literature. First, philic markers outnumber phobic markers by about seven to one (13.1 vs 1.9%), and where both appear in the same comment (1.5% of the sample) the sentiment reads positive, not negative; because the unit of analysis is the comment rather than the commenter, this co-occurrence is reported as a discursive rather than a dispositional phenomenon. Second, phobic response is not concentrated in a single kind of content but spreads across every one of the eight topics recovered by the LDA. The strongest interpretive contribution of the analysis is the identification of peer-to-peer cultural translation as a discursive mechanism associated with the mitigation of neophobic framing: commenters writing from insider-like discursive positions routinely convert unfamiliar Sri Lankan dishes into familiar reference points for outsider viewers, performing what this paper argues is a contemporary form of oral tradition through which Sri Lankan ethnic food heritage is transmitted to global audiences. Long-form videos polarise audience response more sharply than Shorts do. Implications for ethnic food heritage preservation, cross-cuisine transmission, and destination practice follow.

Keywords Food neophobia, Food neophilia, Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine, Food heritage, Digital heritage transmission, Netnography, YouTube, Sentiment analysis, Topic modelling, Audience response, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine occupies a distinctive place among South Asian food heritages. Shaped by the island's tropical monsoon climate, its abundant coconut, spice, and rice agriculture, and its centuries-long position on the Indian Ocean trade routes, Sri Lankan food emerged from a South Indian rice-and-curry foundation that was successively reworked by Arab traders from the eighth

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century onwards, by Portuguese colonisation from 1505, by Dutch administration from 1658, and by British rule from 1815 until independence in 1948 [1]. The resulting cuisine is not a single tradition but a layered one. Rice-and-curry, the everyday meal that anchors Sinhala and Tamil food practice, sits alongside hoppers (appa), string hoppers (indi appa), pol sambol, and kiribath, which are distinctively Sri Lankan; kottu roti, a mid-twentieth-century street-food innovation from the Muslim-Moor community, has become a national dish; watalappan, a coconut-jaggery pudding of Malay-Muslim origin, is now a canonical dessert; lamprais, of Dutch-Burgher provenance, appears in fine-dining and family repertoires alike. Regional variation is substantial: Jaffna Tamil cuisine in the north emphasises seafood and heat; hill-country Kandyan cuisine centres milk-rich preparations; the east-coast Moor communities of Batticaloa and Trincomalee have their own biryani and watalappan traditions; and the southern coast around Galle carries visible Portuguese and Dutch influences [2].

These foundations are considerably older than the colonial layers built upon them, and the archaeological record now documents them directly. Archaeobotanical analysis of the Early Historic sites of Kantharodai, on the Jaffna peninsula, and Kirinda, on the southern coast, has recovered directly radiocarbon-dated rice (*Oryza sativa* subsp. *indica*) from as early as the fourth to third centuries BC at Kantharodai, together with a diverse range of cultivated millets, pulses of Indian origin such as mung bean (*Vigna radiata*) and horse gram (*Macrotyloma uniflorum*), coconut at Kirinda, and seeds of a plausible wild spice of the cardamom and ginger family; phytolith evidence indicates irrigated rice cultivation at Kantharodai and possibly rainfed cultivation at Kirinda [3]. At the north-western port of Mantai, a hub between the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian coastal routes from the first millennium BC, rice supported settlement from around 200 BC, black pepper was traded by the middle of the first millennium AD, and a clove from the Maluku Islands, some 7,000 km away by sea, has been recovered from deposits of around AD 900–1100 [4]. Rice, pulses, coconut, and spices were thus the basis of the island's food system for well over a millennium before Portuguese, Dutch, or British contact. A tropical climate suited to paddy, palms, and spice plants, and a maritime position at the centre of Indian Ocean exchange, produced the rice-and-curry foundation on which later influences were layered.

The same agro-ecological inheritance is increasingly examined for its nutritional and health properties, although the evidence is uneven and should not be overstated. Ceylon, or “true”, cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*), native to Sri Lanka and among the spices on

which the island's trading importance rested, has been associated in a systematic review of seventy studies with antimicrobial, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and glucose- and lipid-lowering properties; the reviewers note, however, that the evidence is predominantly in vitro and animal-based, and that randomised human trials are needed before its public-health relevance can be established [5]. Heritage rice provides a more directly human-tested case. In a controlled glycaemic-index study, traditionally parboiled preparations of six Sri Lankan heritage rice varieties elicited low glycaemic responses (GI 43–48), against 69–76 for the same varieties when polished, an effect the authors attribute to higher resistant starch; the study was short-term and conducted with healthy adults [6]. Waisundara's review of Sri Lankan traditional functional foods extends the pattern to red rice, leafy-green porridges (kola kenda), endemic fruits, and the spice complex of cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, black pepper, and gamboge, while cautioning that much of this evidence comes from laboratory models, that processing can destroy bioactivity, and that a gap remains between traditional knowledge and scientific proof [7]. The claim this paper draws from that literature is therefore a limited one. It is not that Sri Lankan cuisine is demonstrably healthy, which the evidence does not yet support in general form, but that the heritage now transmitted through digital discourse is one whose climatic, agricultural, and historical depth is beginning to be connected, cautiously, to measurable nutritional properties.

Traditional practices sustain this heritage as much as the dishes themselves. Maldivian fish (umbalakada), cured skipjack tuna that is boiled, smoked, and dried until it is as hard as wood, originating in the Maldives archipelago and central to Sri Lankan sambols and curries, is a preservation heritage that predates colonial contact: its processing and export were recorded by Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century, and by the eighteenth century it was so widely used in Sri Lanka that it had acquired its own local name [8]. Betel leaf chewing (bulath vita), while not a food in the strict sense, is a hospitality and social practice woven into food-consumption occasions across all ethnic communities on the island. Traditional milk rice (kiribath), prepared at every household transition point from the New Year through weddings to birthdays, marks the ritual life of Sri Lankan food. These practices, and the dishes that embody them, constitute what Kwon has called ethnic food heritage: a set of culturally and geographically specific food practices whose meaning is inseparable from the community and place that produce them [1].

How this ethnic food heritage reaches global audiences has changed decisively in the past decade. Where earlier generations of prospective visitors and diasporic

Sri Lankans encountered Sri Lankan cuisine through cookbooks, restaurant menus in the diaspora, and travel writing, the current generation encounters it primarily through YouTube food-tour vlogs, TikTok Shorts, and Instagram reels. The mediation is not incidental to the cuisine's global life; it is now its principal transmission channel. Yet food-tourism scholarship on Sri Lanka, and on ethnic food heritage more broadly, has largely continued to treat the destination and the tourist as the primary units of analysis, with digital mediation as a promotional accessory [9, 10]. This paper takes the opposite view.

Food neophobia has enjoyed roughly a decade of concentrated attention in tourism scholarship. Since Pliner and Hobden formalised it as a stable personality trait [11], researchers have shown that tourists high on the trait prefer local food less [12], eat less of it when they do try it [13], draw less well-being from authentic food experiences [14], and turn dining satisfaction into revisit intention less reliably [15]. Moderators of these effects have accumulated at a similar pace: food involvement [16, 17], destination food image [18, 19], prior experience [20], and crisis-specific anxieties such as corona-phobia [21] have all been shown to condition the strength of food neophobia's effect on downstream outcomes.

That evidence base has come, almost without exception, from cross-sectional surveys administered to tourists at or shortly after a destination encounter. The methodological monoculture has produced impressive convergence, but it also has known limits. Survey respondents are asked to introspect on a trait that may not be consciously accessible. They are usually asked in a second or third language. They are captured in a narrow time window that misses both anticipation and post-consumption reflection. The research setting is at least mildly performative: asking someone whether they would try local food primes them to think about the question in ways their everyday consumption does not [22]. And the survey format cannot easily detect whether phobic and philic dispositions co-occur in the same person, as argued by Wolff and Larsen [23].

This paper takes a different angle. It looks at food-neophobic and food-neophilic reactions as they show up in naturalistic, unprompted audience discourse: 21,984 predominantly English-language comments posted on 45 YouTube videos about Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine, published between 2019 and 2026 by 36 different channels. The theoretical warrant is simple. If food neophobia andophilia are dispositional traits, they should leave traces in the way audiences spontaneously respond to food content, without needing a survey to elicit them. The empirical warrant is equally simple. YouTube is now the dominant platform for pre-visit destination research in culinary tourism [21, 24], and, this paper argues, has

become one of the principal channels through which ethnic food heritages such as Sri Lanka's are transmitted to global audiences. Comment threads under food-tourism videos are therefore both a large source of evidence on how prospective and armchair tourists reason about unfamiliar foods and a large source of evidence on how ethnic food knowledge is being circulated, contested, and preserved in the digital era.

A small body of scholarship has begun to work in this space. Rauf and Pasha analysed nine gastronomic vlogs by Mark Wiens, Sonny Side (of Best Ever Food Review Show), and Trevor James (The Food Ranger), using textual analysis and TextBlob sentiment classification on 128,000 comments to trace the Global North–South dynamics of international food-tourism discourse [25]. Those same three creators, as it happens, appear prominently in the corpus assembled here. Ma, Zhang, Sun, Wang and Tang applied LDA and SnowNLP sentiment analysis to 91,437 comments on 32 food vlogs by a Chinese Bilibili creator, and framed the vlogger as an “asynchronous host” [26]. Wang, Su, Wang and Zhang combined multimodal discourse analysis of 107 TikTok videos with ethnographic shadowing and 22 interviews of an agricultural-heritage influencer, and proposed a value-network model of digital food narratives [27]. Ahmed, Tisha and Roy triangulated 50 interviews with 500 YouTube comments to study the emergence of gastronomy tourism in Bangladesh through Experience Economy and Actor–Network theoretical lenses [28]. Lee, in a related contribution, argued that food memory work on digital platforms is now a substantial site of intangible cultural heritage transmission [29]. This study builds on and extends this work on three counts. Scale first: 45 videos, 21,984 comments, 36 creators, larger than most of the prior studies combined. Classifier choice second: VADER rather than TextBlob or SnowNLP, on documented performance grounds for English social-media text [30]. And the addition of an independent rule-based marker lexicon that tests the sentiment classification against explicit phobic and philic vocabulary, which none of the prior studies has attempted.

Four questions organise what follows. First, at what rates do phobic and philic markers actually appear in the discourse, and how do those rates compare to what one would expect from the survey literature? Second, do the two dispositions manifest as opposite ends of a continuum, as some tourism studies still assume (e.g., 2), or as separate constructs that can co-occur, as Wolff and Larsen argue [23]? Third, what discursive topics organise the audience response, and how do those topics map onto the antecedents, consequences, and moderators the survey literature has identified? Fourth, and building on the first three, how does peer-to-peer commentary on

YouTube function as a mechanism for the digital transmission of Sri Lankan ethnic food heritage to global audiences, and what does this transmission mode contribute to broader debates on the preservation and circulation of intangible culinary heritage?

Section 2 revisits the food-neophobia construct as tourism scholarship has operationalised it and sketches the recent conceptual work on digital food-tourism discourse. Section 3 describes the corpus, extraction, coding, and computational procedures. Section 4 reports findings against the four research questions. Section 5 discusses what those findings mean for the trait-based food-neophobia literature, for the ethnic food heritage transmission literature, and for the wider positive-psychology-of-tourism programme. Section 6 concludes.

Conceptual background

Food neophobia in tourism: what the survey literature has established

The tourism literature has measured food neophobia mainly through some version of Pliner and Hobden's 10-item Food Neophobia Scale [11], though which version varies considerably. The full ten items appear in Derinalp Çanakçı and Birdir [17] and Tarinc et al. [15]. Eight-item forms show up in Wolff and Larsen [23]. Five-item variants are used in Sünnetçioğlu et al. [12] and Cifci et al. [21]. Pourfakhimi et al. use just three items [14]. Factor structure is usually unidimensional, though Derinalp Çanakçı and Birdir recover a two-factor solution separating “fear” items from “novelty” items [17]. Reliability is consistently high, with Cronbach's alpha typically between 0.81 and 0.96.

Dependent variables cluster into four families: local food preference and consumption [12, 13], behavioural intention [16], satisfaction and post-consumption evaluation [15], and, more recently, subjective well-being [14, 20]. The direction of association is stable: higher neophobia, lower engagement. The strength of the direct effect is not stable. Where it fails to reach significance (as in Hashemi et al. [19], Caber et al. [16]), neophobia usually operates through mediators such as destination image, food involvement, or satisfaction. The best reading of this pattern is a conditional one: food neophobia is a reliable inhibitor of local food engagement, but its effect strength depends on the mediator structure of the specific research setting. This conditional reading is consistent with Mak, Lumbers, Eves and Chang's synthesis of the socio-cultural and psychological factors governing tourist food consumption [31], with Cohen and Avieli's earlier argument that local food operates simultaneously as an attraction and as an impediment [32], and with Choe and Kim's profiling of food-neophobic tourists across a large

destination sample [33]; it is also the reading supported by earlier Sri Lankan evidence [34].

Food neophilia has received less dedicated attention. Some studies treat it as the reverse pole of neophobia and measure it accordingly [35]. Others measure it separately using novelty-seeking rather than novelty-avoiding items [15, 36]. Wolff and Larsen argue against collapsing the two, on the basis that their correlational profiles differ [23]. Their evidence sits well with Tarinc et al.'s finding that neophobia and neophilia moderate the same satisfaction-to-intention path in opposite directions within a single model, which is exactly what one would expect if the two dispositions are conceptually distinct rather than opposite ends of a continuum [15].

The limits of the survey-only evidence base

Three limits of the survey-based evidence motivate this study. First, neophobia is a construct about hesitation before unfamiliar foods, and hesitation depends on context. A survey administered in a hotel lobby after three days in the destination captures a psychological state that differs meaningfully from one administered before arrival, or from one administered in a diasporic community where the respondent has never visited the country whose cuisine is being asked about. Second, virtually every study in the recent corpus is cross-sectional. Whether food involvement precedes or follows neophobia (or, more likely, whether the two share upstream causes) cannot be settled from cross-sectional data. Third, the survey format is intrinsically bad at detecting whether phobic and philic dispositions co-occur in the same person. If Wolff and Larsen are right about co-occurrence, survey work will systematically underestimate it [23]. A fourth limit, more particular to ethnic food scholarship, is that survey work rarely captures the transmission processes through which ethnic food knowledge moves from insider to outsider populations. Yet transmission, not just consumption, is where much of the interesting action lies for ethnic food heritage in the digital era.

Naturalistic audience discourse sidesteps these limits. Context is authentic. The disposition is revealed rather than reported. Co-occurrence within a single reader is directly observable in the form of comments that mix phobic and philic content. And transmission is directly observable in the form of comments in which insider commenters explain, correct, translate, and situate ethnic food knowledge for outsider viewers. What such discourse cannot do is establish causal ordering, control for confounds, or generalise to non-commenting viewers. The design is best understood as complementary to survey work, not as a replacement for it.

The digital foodscape: recent conceptual work

The theoretical vocabulary for treating YouTube food discourse as more than an epiphenomenon of the destination has developed quickly over the past five years. Nanjangud and Reddy, studying the Indian foodscape through in-depth interviews with bloggers and food professionals, introduced the concept of the social-mediatised gaze: an extension of Urry's tourist gaze that accounts for how platform-native aesthetic conventions shape what food is seen as, and how it is subsequently sought out [37]. Fischbacher and Richards, in a netnographic study of TikTok-induced food tourism at three sites in Amsterdam, coined the phrase social-media-induced food tourism and identified four constitutive dimensions: performative participation, algorithmic temporality, spatial amplification, and reflexive ambivalence [38]. Their framework describes how platform affordances translate into on-the-ground consumption. Wang et al. developed the related idea of creator–influencer hybridity to name rural creators whose legitimacy comes from place-based embeddedness rather than from celebrity capital, and argued that food narratives operate as a networked value system in which viewer engagement is constitutive rather than downstream [27]. Ibrahim, Wan Zain, Shariffuddin, Azinuddin, Salim and Zainul, in a PLS-SEM study of 312 domestic food tourists in Melaka, tested social media influencer engagement as a moderator of the food-value-to-attractiveness pathway and reported a small but statistically significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.068$) [39]. That negative direction is counter-intuitive, and it will come back in Sect. 5

Beyond these tourism-adjacent contributions, ethnic food scholarship has begun to take digital transmission seriously in its own right. Timothy and Ron have argued that heritage cuisines carry identity, authenticity, and change simultaneously, and that the digital environment is one of the sites where those tensions are now negotiated [2]. Bessière and Tibère, working on French rural food heritage, showed how tourist encounter is one of the mechanisms through which local food traditions become codified as “heritage” for external audiences [9]. Lee's work on cooking memories and intangible cultural heritage extends this argument to digital platforms: the memory work performed in food videos and their comment threads, she suggests, is now a substantive site of intangible cultural heritage transmission [29]. Kwon's foundational *Journal of Ethnic Foods* contribution has framed ethnic food as inseparable from the cultural, geographical, and historical context of the community producing it [1], which sets the terms for how the present study reads the Sri Lankan case.

Netnography as methodological frame

Kozinets's netnography provides the overarching methodological warrant [22]. Netnography treats platform-native user-generated content as an ethnographic field site, and combines interpretive coding with computational analysis at scale. Tourism scholarship has applied it widely, from destination image [40, 41] to service recovery [42] to, more recently, food-tourism vlogging [25–27]. This study takes what Kozinets calls a “digital-observational” stance: the researcher does not participate in the discourse being analysed, the unit of analysis is the comment rather than the individual, and the interpretive claims are bounded by the acknowledgement that YouTube's algorithms curate both what is uploaded and what is engaged with. Fischbacher and Richards call this the algorithmic temporality problem [38]. This stance carries an interpretive consequence that is observed throughout the analysis. The observational unit is the comment, not the commenter, and the corpus contains no reliable mapping between comments and persons: a single individual may post repeatedly, and the platform supplies no verified demographic or biographical information. All claims made in this paper about the co-occurrence of phobic and philic content are therefore claims about discursive co-occurrence within utterances, not claims about the co-activation of psychological dispositions within individuals. Where the discussion engages the two-construct argument advanced by Wolff and Larsen [23], it does so by noting that a strict single-continuum model generates a testable prediction at the level of discourse, and that the prediction is not borne out. It does not assert that the present data measure traits directly.

Method

Corpus construction

The corpus is a purposive sample of 45 YouTube videos about Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine, assembled through platform search (with the terms “Sri Lankan food”, “Sri Lanka street food”, “Sri Lanka food tour”, and destination-specific terms such as “Ella”, “Colombo”, “Galle”) and inductive expansion via the platform's recommendation graph. It was restricted to English-language content and to videos published between January 2019 and August 2026. The final composition is 25 Shorts (defined here as videos of ≤ 60 s) and 20 long-form videos (> 60 s), from 36 unique channels. Cumulative reach at the extraction date was 49,450,739 views and 1,495,387 likes. The sample deliberately spans creator types: high-profile international food-tourism channels (Best Ever Food Review Show, three videos totalling 14.9 million views); mid-sized travel channels (Steve Yalo, Bevetravels, Jora Worldwide, Cloutom); short-form single-item performers (Dale Philip, DRHOBS,

Alex Wanders); diasporic creators (Benz posting from London; saltandshaikh on Sri Lankan food made abroad); and Sri Lankan-resident short-form creators (PADANAMA Publication). Figure 1 situates the corpus within the wider culinary geography of Sri Lanka, showing the five ecological zones (dry, intermediate, wet, highlands, and hill country / plantation region), the principal food-production systems (rice, coconut, palmyrah, fishing, tea, spices, vegetables, plantation crops), the layered cultural influences on Sri Lankan cuisine (Sinhala, Tamil, Moor / Muslim, Portuguese, Dutch, British), the mobility and historical connections (maritime trade routes, colonial maritime connections, labour migration, internal cultural and tourism flows) that produced them, the key tourist destinations with high culinary interaction, and the six major culinary zones referenced across the corpus (North / Jaffna, East Coast, Central Highlands, Uva / Hill Country, Southern Coast, and Western / Colombo). The full corpus listing, with creator type, format, publication date, view count, and comment count for each video, is available from the corresponding author on request.

YouTube comment threads as a site for studying ethnic food heritage transmission

Three considerations support the choice of YouTube comment threads as an appropriate site for the specific question of ethnic food heritage transmission. First, comment threads under food-tourism videos routinely combine two speech communities that rarely meet in the same conversational space: outsider commenters who are encountering a cuisine for the first time and insider commenters (residents, diasporic co-nationals, regional neighbours) who possess embodied knowledge of the cuisine. Where a cookbook offers only the author's voice and a restaurant meal offers only the eater's voice, a YouTube comment thread stages the encounter between these voices at scale. Second, the discourse is persistent. Comments posted in 2019 continue to be read by viewers arriving in 2026, and translation work performed by an insider commenter early in a video's life reaches every subsequent viewer who reads the thread. This gives comment threads the durability that spoken oral tradition lacks and that has traditionally required the written form to secure. Third, comment threads capture the specific interpretive labour through which ethnic food

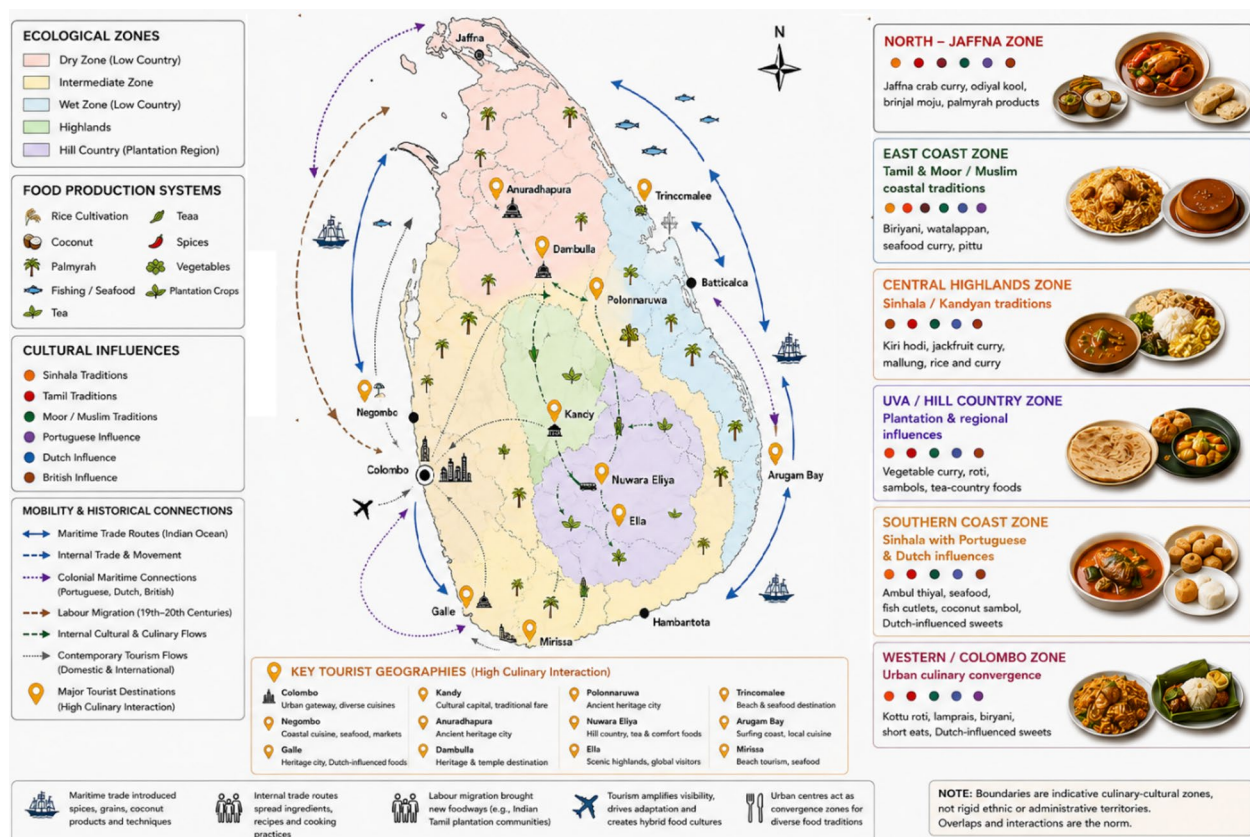


Fig. 1 Culinary geographies of Sri Lanka

knowledge moves across cultural boundaries: explanations of preparation and etiquette, corrections of outsider misapprehension, likenings to familiar reference points, and rebuttals of exoticising framings. This labour is analytically continuous with the transmission work that oral tradition, apprenticeship, and family teaching have historically performed, and it is empirically observable in a way that survey and interview methods cannot easily achieve.

Data extraction

For each video, metadata, subtitles, and the full comment thread including replies were extracted using `yt-dlp` (version 2026.07.04) with the flags `--write-info-json --write-auto-sub --write-comments --extractor-args "youtube:max_comments=all;comment_sort=top"`. Extraction was carried out in August 2026. All 45 videos returned data successfully. YouTube's comment API paginates in "top" order, which means the extraction is best characterised as capturing the platform's algorithmically-surfaced comment set rather than the totality of what has ever been posted. Total extracted comments across the corpus were 23,957, which matches YouTube's own comment count within a few tens of comments. After filtering for minimum length (three alphabetic characters) and successful language classification, 21,984 predominantly English-language comments constitute the analytical sample; language classification of short and code-switched text is imperfect, and a small share of retained comments contain Sinhala or Tamil script (Sect. 5.5). Two features of this extraction procedure require explicit acknowledgement. First, `comment_sort=top` returns comments ranked by YouTube's engagement-weighted relevance function rather than a random or exhaustive draw, so the corpus is best understood as the platform's curated and publicly salient comment set, the discourse that subsequent viewers actually encounter, rather than as a probability sample of everything ever posted. Second, because algorithmic ranking rewards engagement, and because strongly valenced comments attract engagement, top-sorted extraction can in principle inflate both enthusiastic and hostile content relative to the unranked population. A robustness check addressing this possibility is described in Sect. 3.5 and reported in Sect. 4.1.

Analytical procedures

Three procedures were run over the corpus. First, sentiment analysis was carried out using the VADER lexicon [30]. Ma et al. and Rauf and Pasha used the Chinese and English analogues (SnowNLP and TextBlob, respectively) in comparable food-vlog studies [25, 26]. VADER was preferred here for its documented stronger performance

on informal English social-media text and its handling of intensifiers, negations, and emoticons that pervade YouTube comment threads. Each comment received a compound score between -1 and $+1$, and was classified as positive (compound ≥ 0.05), negative (≤ -0.05), or neutral otherwise.

Second, a domain-adapted keyword lexicon was constructed to identify explicit phobic and philic markers in the text. The phobic lexicon contains eleven regular-expression patterns covering fear terms (afraid, scared, fear), hygiene and contamination terms (dirty, filthy, unhygienic, sanit), *somatic risk terms* (sick, ill, diarrhoea, poison), *chemical suspicion* (chemical, MSG, adulterat), rejection terms (weird, disgusting, gross), and avoidance terms (hate, avoid, refuse, never eat). The philic lexicon contains twelve patterns covering enthusiasm (delicious, amazing, incredible), affection (love, adore), authenticity (authentic, traditional, real), intent-to-try (must try, need to try, dying to try), and nostalgia and return (reminds me, going back, recommend). Comments were classified as phobic-only, philic-only, both, or neither. Both lexicons were developed inductively against a pilot sample of 500 comments and then held constant for the full run.

Third, latent Dirichlet allocation topic modelling was applied to the comment corpus, following the precedent Ma et al. established for LDA on food-vlog comments [26]. Text was TF-IDF vectorised after removing English stopwords, tokens shorter than three characters, tokens appearing in more than 60% of documents, and tokens appearing in fewer than 8. A domain-specific stopword list containing terms that saturate the corpus (Sri Lanka, Lankan, food, video) was added to prevent trivial solutions. The LDA was fitted with $k = 8$ topics, using scikit-learn's batch-learning implementation with 25 iterations and a random seed of 42 for reproducibility. Topic labels were assigned by the author on the basis of top-ranking words and inspection of the ten strongest-loading exemplar comments per topic.

Fourth, to place the paper's claims about insider commentary on an empirical rather than an inferential footing, a self-identification coding pass was run over the full corpus. A regular-expression lexicon was constructed to capture explicit first-person claims of cultural, national, regional, or diasporic membership: constructions of the form "as a Sri Lankan", "I am Sri Lankan / Sinhalese / Tamil / Burgher / Moor", "in my country", "here in Sri Lanka", "my grandmother makes", "I grew up eating", "I live in Colombo / Jaffna / Kandy", together with analogous constructions for the neighbouring and diasporic identities that recur in the corpus (Indian, Tamil-Indian, Malaysian, Singaporean, Maldivian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan diasporic locations). The pass is deliberately conservative: it counts only explicit

self-ascription and makes no attempt to infer identity from display name, language variety, orthography, or topical knowledge. Locative formulae that signal presence without asserting membership (“love from Sri Lanka”, “from Colombo”) were held in a second tier and counted separately, so that the primary figure rests only on first-person membership claims. It therefore yields a lower bound on insider participation, and it licenses statements about self-declared insider positioning rather than about commenter demographics.

Fifth, a qualitative error analysis was carried out on the principal divergent cell of the marker-by-sentiment cross-tabulation: comments coded phobic-only by the marker lexicon and positive by VADER. All 113 such comments were coded by the author into mutually exclusive discrepancy categories, a census rather than a sample, the divergent cell being small enough to admit exhaustive treatment. The categories were developed inductively from a first pass over the full set of 113 cases and then held constant for a second, confirmatory pass. The coding frame and the coded sample are available from the corresponding author.

Correspondence between the marker coding and the sentiment coding was assessed via cross-tabulation. The term convergent validity is deliberately avoided. In its psychometric sense, convergent validity requires two independent instruments intended to measure the same construct, ideally assessed within a multitrait-multimethod design. The marker lexicon and VADER do not satisfy that requirement: they address related but non-identical targets, explicit neophobic and neophilic vocabulary on the one hand, generalised affective valence on the other, and both are rule-based lexicon methods applied to the same surface text, so their errors are not independent. What the cross-tabulation supports is the weaker and more defensible claim of inter-method correspondence. The two coding systems share no vocabulary and no training signal, so systematic alignment between them indicates that the marker coding tracks an affectively patterned signal in the text rather than an artefact of the lexicon’s construction.

Robustness check: engagement-stratified marker rates

To assess the sensitivity of the headline marker ratio to algorithmic sorting, the analytical corpus was stratified by the engagement signal on which YouTube’s ranking function operates. A reverse-chronological re-extraction of the same threads was not available at the time of revision, so the test reported here varies engagement exposure within the retrieved corpus rather than varying the sort parameter itself; the limitation this leaves is stated in Sect. 5.5. All 21,984 analysed comments were partitioned by like count into quartiles, and separately into

comments carrying no likes and those carrying at least one, at least ten, and at least one hundred. Comments with no likes are the closest available approximation to an unranked stream, since they carry none of the signal on which engagement ranking operates. A parallel partition separates top-level comments from replies, replies being displayed in thread order rather than ranked. The identical marker lexicon and VADER pipeline were run within each stratum, so the comparison holds the corpus and both instruments constant and varies only engagement exposure. Results are reported in Sect. 4.1.

Ethical considerations

The comments analysed are publicly available on YouTube and were extracted without user interaction. No comment author is named or identifiable in the paper. Direct quotations are truncated and lightly paraphrased, consistent with published ethical guidance for social-media research [22, 43]. Channel creators, who are public figures, are named. No demographic inferences about commenters are made beyond what commenters themselves choose to disclose. The self-identification coding described in Sect. 3.4 counts only self-ascriptions that commenters volunteered in the public text of their comments, is reported in aggregate, and reproduces no self-identifying comment in a form that would permit attribution.

Findings

Rates of phobic and philic markers

The lexical picture at aggregate level is one-sided. Of the 21,984 comments analysed, 13.1% contain one or more philic-only markers, 1.9% contain one or more phobic-only markers, 1.5% contain markers from both lexicons, and 83.5% contain neither. Philic content, in other words, outnumbers phobic content roughly seven to one. That ratio holds up well against the reasonable prior from the survey literature, which has repeatedly found low-to-moderate mean neophobia scores in international tourist samples [16, 23]. The robustness check described in Sect. 3.5

returns a philic-to-phobic ratio of 6.13:1 among the 14,619 comments carrying no likes, against 7.73:1 among the 7,365 carrying at least one and 8.96:1 among those above ten, with the corpus as a whole at 6.75:1 on the same coding. Across like quartiles the ratio moves between 4.24:1 and 9.13:1 without approaching parity and without reversing at any point. Engagement-selected comments carry elevated rates of both marker types rather than of one: liked comments exceed unliked ones on philic and phobic markers alike, which is the expected signature of engagement-weighted ranking favouring strongly valenced content of either sign, and which leaves

the ratio between the two comparatively stable. Replies, which are displayed in thread order rather than ranked, return 6.01:1 against 6.99:1 for top-level comments. The direction and approximate magnitude of the asymmetry therefore survive the removal of engagement selection, although the low-engagement stream is somewhat less polarised in absolute terms. The seven-to-one finding is accordingly not an artefact of algorithmic curation, though absolute rates should be read as properties of the platform-surfaced discourse rather than of the full posted population.

The aggregate ratio conceals substantial video-level variation. Table 1 shows the extremes. The most philic-dense video in the corpus is Benz’s “Trying Sri Lankan food #london #uk”, where 31.6% of comments contain philic markers and none contain phobic markers. At the other end, Jora Worldwide’s “Sri Lankan Street Food is topnotch” attracted 22.4% phobic-marker comments against only 4.6% philic, inverting the corpus norm despite the video’s own upbeat framing. More Best Ever Food Review Show’s “\$100 Sri Lanka Street Food Challenge” is the corpus’s most polarising video, generating both elevated philic content (11.0%) and elevated phobic content (4.4%) alongside an unusually high “both” rate. That polarisation is consistent with the channel’s deliberate curatorial-challenge framing, a mode of food-vlog presentation in which unfamiliarity is foregrounded as spectacle and which prior analyses of international food vlogging have linked to exoticising representation of the culinary “other” [25, 44].

The 1.5% “both” cell is small in absolute terms and substantively important. It gives direct discourse-level support to Wolff and Larsen’s argument that phobic and philic dispositions should be treated as separate constructs capable of co-occurrence, rather than as poles of a single continuum [23]. The inferential logic deserves to be stated carefully, because the size of the cell invites the

objection that 331 comments cannot bear the weight of a construct-level argument. Three considerations answer that objection. First, the argument is an existence argument rather than a prevalence argument. A strict single-continuum model does not predict that co-occurrence is rare; it predicts that co-occurrence is incoherent, in the way that a respondent cannot occupy both poles of a bipolar scale at once. Any reliable, non-trivial, non-ironic rate of co-expression is therefore diagnostic, and the relevant question is whether the observed rate exceeds what chance and measurement noise would produce, not whether it is large. Second, the observed rate substantially exceeds chance. If phobic and philic vocabulary were distributed independently across comments, the expected co-occurrence rate would be the product of the marginals, $14.6 \times 3.4\% \approx 0.50\%$, or about 110 comments. The observed 331 comments are three times that expectation ($\chi^2(1) = 537.5$, $p < 0.001$; odds ratio 5.01). Phobic and philic vocabulary are thus positively, not negatively, associated at the level of the utterance, which is the opposite of what a bipolar construct predicts and cannot be explained away by the low base rate of phobic vocabulary. Third, the evidential value of unprompted, open-ended natural language differs in kind from that of a forced-choice scale. Co-occurrence on scales is always partly an artefact of item wording, acquiescence, and midpoint use; in the present corpus no instrument prompts either register, so a commenter who writes both an apprehensive and an appreciative clause has spontaneously produced two evaluative stances towards the same object within a single act of expression, under no design pressure to do so. One qualification is essential. Because the unit of analysis is the comment and not the commenter, the finding establishes that phobic and philic framings are jointly expressible within a single utterance; it does not establish that two dispositions are simultaneously active within a single psyche, and no such claim is

Table 1 Video-level marker densities: five most philic and five most phobic (minimum 30 comments)

Rank	Video	Channel	Format	n	% philic	% phobic
Most philic	Trying Sri Lankan food #london #uk	Benz	Long-form	76	31.6	0.0
	Our honest review of Sri Lanka as british tourists	Bevetravels	Long-form	493	30.8	0.6
	10 Best Sri Lankan foods to try (Beginner’s guide)	Rockstar eater	Long-form	61	27.9	0.0
	Sri Lankan food is next level	Beryl shereshewsky	Short	199	25.6	1.0
	Sri Lanka must try food!	Urvi & animesh	Short	98	25.5	0.0
Most phobic	Sri Lankan street food is topnotch	Jora Worldwide	Short	152	4.6	22.4
	Is Sri Lankan & Indian food the same?	Chloe jade travels	Short	62	16.1	6.5
	Can I find 10/10 street food in Colombo?	Alex Wanders	Short	210	7.1	5.7
	\$100 Sri Lanka street food challenge!!	More BEFRS	Long-form	1,507	11.0	4.4
	Trying a strange Sri Lankan food	Dale Philip	Short	1,036	4.0	3.5

made. What the corpus rules out is the strong discursive form of the single-continuum model; adjudicating its dispositional form requires person-level data that comment threads cannot supply. Roughly one comment in every 66 mixes the two registers, and the rate rises meaningfully on the more polarising long-form videos. A typical “both” comment pairs an apprehensive opening (“it looks unhygienic to me but...”) with a philic recuperation (“... I would still love to try it once”), which is exactly what one would expect if the two dispositions are separately active and being reconciled within a single utterance.

Sentiment distribution and inter-method correspondence

VADER classified 55.3% of the corpus as positive, 33.6% as neutral, and 11.1% as negative, with a mean compound score of 0.31. The baseline audience response is therefore moderately positive, consistent with the marker analysis and with the wider observation that voluntary YouTube commenters tend to skew appreciative [41].

Format matters. Long-form videos attract slightly more positive comments than Shorts (57.8 vs 52.4%) and also slightly more negative comments (12.0 vs 10.0%). The spread of sentiment is wider on long-form; Shorts are more heavily neutral (37.6 vs 30.2%). One reasonable reading is that Shorts sit within a shorter attention window and tend to attract brief, transactional comments (“try Elephant House ice cream”; “coconut sambol is the best”), while long-form viewers commit a larger attentional unit and register a more definite evaluation, in whichever direction.

Table 2 shows the marker-sentiment cross-tabulation, which is the paper’s inter-method correspondence check (Sect. 3.4 explains why the stronger term convergent validity is not used). Comments coded philic on the marker lexicon are 82% positive on VADER; comments coded phobic are 52% negative and only 38% positive. The correspondence is striking given that the two coding systems share no vocabulary and no training signal. VADER does not know anything about the philic/phobic distinction, and the marker lexicon does not overlap with

VADER on its strong-signal terms. The correspondence supports the reading that both coding schemes respond to the same affective patterning in the text, and offers limited evidence that VADER transfers reasonably well to food-tourism discourse [30]. It does not license the inference that either instrument is a validated measure of the neophobia or neophilia construct, and the substantial off-diagonal cells, in particular the 38% of phobic-only comments that VADER reads as positive, mark precisely where the two instruments part company. Those cases are analysed in Sect. 4.2.1 rather than set aside.

The 331 comments coded “both” are 68% positive on VADER, closer to the philic pattern than the phobic. When a commenter combines phobic and philic content, in other words, the philic frame usually organises the affective register, with the phobic content inserted as a hedge or a realism marker. The philic frame dominates even in the hybrid case.

Error analysis of divergent classifications

The most informative cell in Table 2 is not on the diagonal. Thirty-eight per cent of phobic-only comments, approximately 160 comments, are classified positive by VADER, and a discrepancy of that size in a cross-tabulation offered as evidence of inter-method correspondence requires explanation rather than assertion. A set of 113 such divergent comments was therefore coded qualitatively using the procedure described in Sect. 3.4. Five discrepancy mechanisms account for every case in the coded set, and they are informative about the limits of general-purpose sentiment tools in ethnic-food discourse.

The first and largest mechanism is displaced reference (53 comments; 46.9% of the coded set). The phobic term is present, but it attaches to something other than the cuisine, the presenter’s on-camera reaction, traffic, heat, price, politics, a video thumbnail, or the commenter’s own medical history. Three sub-patterns recur often enough to be worth naming, because they are systematic rather than incidental. Idiomatic use is the largest, dominated here by a single viral formula responding to a mis-translation joke in one video (variants of “Siri did him dirty”), together with “dirty politicians”, “hate to say this”, and “I’m afraid” as a marker of polite disagreement. Normative use forms a second group, in which “never eat” introduces a rule of correct culinary practice rather than an aversion (“we never eat papadam with kottu”, “never eat rice without dhal”); these are instructions issued by insider commenters and are, if anything, instances of the translation labour analysed in Sect. 4.3 rather than of neophobia. Orthographic collision forms a third and smaller group, in which the contraction “I’ll” written without an apostrophe matches the somatic pattern “ill”.

Table 2 Marker × sentiment cross – tabulation (n = 21,984)

Marker class	n	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Neither	18,352	51%	11%	38%
Philic-only	2,880	82%	8%	10%
Phobic-only	421	38%	52%	10%
Both	331	68%	15%	17%

Percentages are row percentages of VADER sentiment classifications within each marker class. Values in bold denote the theoretically expected sentiment for each single-marker class (positive for philic-only; negative for phobic-only). Bold type indicates emphasis only and does not denote statistical significance

The marker lexicon has no referent-resolution capacity and cannot separate any of these from genuine phobic reference.

The second mechanism is negated or counterfactual phobic vocabulary (35 comments; 31.0%), “not gross at all”, “nothing to be scared of”, “people say it’s dirty, but it really isn’t”. Here VADER’s negation handling is correct, and the marker lexicon is wrong: the phobic term is present but its polarity is reversed by the surrounding syntax. In this corpus the category is dominated by a distinctive sub-pattern in which commenters writing from local positions refute an imputation of dirtiness or contamination, frequently one they attribute to a video’s thumbnail rather than to its content (“Sri Lankan food is not dirty”, “you won’t get food poisoning”, “most of our eateries are maintained well”). The phobic vocabulary appears because the commenter is quoting a proposition in order to deny it. These are genuine false positives of the lexicon rather than failures of the sentiment classifier, and they set a precision ceiling on regular-expression marker coding.

The third mechanism is emoji and intensifier collision (13 comments; 11.5%): comments pairing genuine phobic content with heavy positive emoji, repeated exclamation, or capitalised praise, which VADER’s booster and emoji rules amplify well beyond the phobic term’s weight. Warnings delivered with a laugh are the characteristic form (“you are eating too much, will get sick” followed by three laughing faces). Unlike the first two mechanisms, the phobic reading here is correct and it is the aggregate sentiment score that misleads.

The fourth mechanism is hedged or concessive phobia (6 comments; 5.3%). Comments of the form “it might sound weird, but the spice and the sweetness blend so well” place an explicit phobic marker inside a subordinate or concessive clause while the matrix clause carries strongly positive vocabulary. VADER aggregates valence across the whole comment and has no syntactic model of concession, so the phobic clause is arithmetically outvoted by the appreciative one, while the marker lexicon, which fires on presence rather than on aggregate weight, correctly records the phobic content. Neither instrument is wrong; they answer different questions. It is worth noting that this mechanism, the one most often invoked in discussions of lexicon-versus-sentiment disagreement, is among the least frequent in these data.

The fifth mechanism is sarcasm and ironic register (6 comments; 5.3%), including mock orders placed in bad faith (“one cup of diarrhoea water please”), incredulity expressed through repetition of the imputed term, and the colloquial reversal of negative vocabulary. VADER performs no irony detection, and the marker lexicon cannot distinguish literal from figurative uses of sick, hate, or

insane. This category is the one most likely to be undercounted by both instruments simultaneously, and its low observed frequency should be read accordingly. No comment in the coded set resisted classification: the five mechanisms are jointly exhaustive of the divergent cell as coded, leaving a residual of zero.

Two conclusions follow. Substantively, the divergence is not random error but a structured artefact of the difference between presence coding and aggregate-valence coding, and most of it, every category except the second, together 69.0% of the coded set, reflects VADER’s insensitivity to clause structure, figurative language, and reference, or the marker lexicon’s inability to resolve reference, rather than any failure of sentiment measurement as such. This strengthens the case for reporting the two codings separately instead of collapsing them into a single index, and it qualifies the correspondence reported in Table 2 as an alignment of two partial instruments rather than as validation of either. Methodologically, the second category is a genuine limitation of the phobic lexicon: a negation-scope detector, calibrated against the 113 hand-coded cases and discounted by its measured precision, estimates that approximately 15% of phobic-only classifications in the corpus are negation false positives. The phobic rates reported in Sect. 4.1 should therefore be read as inflated by roughly that margin. Correcting for it does not weaken the headline asymmetry but sharpens it, moving the phobic-to-phobic ratio from 6.8:1 to approximately 7.9:1. A caution is nonetheless in order: a refutation is not the absence of neophobic discourse but a response to it, and a stricter reading would treat these comments as evidence that phobic framings of Sri Lankan food circulate widely enough to require rebuttal by those who consider themselves insiders. Future work applying marker lexicons to food discourse should incorporate a negation-scope rule and should treat sentiment-tool disagreement as a diagnostic signal worth inspecting rather than as noise to be minimised.

Self-identified insider participation The interpretation developed in Sects. 4.3 and 5.2 rests on the claim that a meaningful share of the explanatory and comparative commentary in the corpus comes from commenters with insider knowledge of Sri Lankan or adjacent South Asian food cultures. Because YouTube profiles carry no verified demographic information, that claim is grounded here in explicit self-ascription rather than in inference. Applying the self-identification lexicon described in Sect. 3.4 to the full corpus, 1,568 comments (7.1% of 21,984) contain an explicit first-person claim of Sri Lankan, Sri Lankan diasporic, or neighbouring South Asian membership. Admitting the second tier of locative signals raises the figure to 1,909 comments, or 8.7% of the analytical sample.

These are corpus-level figures. The self-identification pass was run over the corpus as a whole and not within topics, so this paper reports no topic-level decomposition of self-ascription and makes no claim that insider self-ascription concentrates in the translation-dense topics. Establishing that would require joining the self-identification flag to the document–topic assignments, and it is left to future work; the interpretation developed in Sects. 4.3 and 5.2 therefore rests on the discursive character of the comments in those topics rather than on any measured difference in self-ascription between them. What the figures do establish is a floor. On the most conservative reading available, roughly one comment in fourteen carries an explicit, volunteered claim of Sri Lankan, Sri Lankan diasporic, or neighbouring South Asian membership, which is sufficient to support the claim that a meaningful share of the commentary comes from self-declared insiders.

Two cautions attach to these figures. They are a lower bound: explicit self-ascription is optional, many commenters with insider knowledge never announce it, and the great majority of comments in the corpus carry no identity marker at all. And they are self-reported, with no possibility of verification. The paper's claims are therefore framed in terms of insider-like discursive roles, the positions commenters take up in the text, marked by explanatory, corrective, comparative, and proprietorial moves, rather than in terms of commenter demographics. References to diasporic or native commenters should be read throughout as shorthand for this discursive positioning, anchored where possible in the self-ascription rates reported here.

Topic structure Eight interpretable topics emerged from the LDA modelling. Table 3 summarises them.

Two things about the topic structure matter for the argument. Five of the eight topics (T0, T5, T4, T6, T1) are dominated by enthusiastic, instructional, or culturally warm content. This is consistent with the aggregate sentiment picture. The other, more theoretically interesting,

observation is that no single topic corresponds to *food neophobia* as the survey literature defines the construct. Phobic markers are distributed across multiple topics rather than concentrated in one: hygiene apprehension appears in T0 and T7, spice-tolerance concern in T6, unfamiliarity apprehension in T1, ingredient-source suspicion in the “\$100 Challenge”-adjacent content of T7. The distribution suggests that food neophobia in naturalistic discourse is not a single lexical topic but a disposition that colours engagement with multiple content topics. Survey instruments that measure it as a single scale score capture the dispositional trait correctly but flatten the topic-level heterogeneity of its expression.

T2 (cross-cultural comparison and identity) has no clear counterpart in the survey literature and deserves attention on its own. Comments in this topic argue over whether specific Sri Lankan dishes are “the same as” Indian, Tamil, Malay, or Muslim/Moor cuisines, sometimes with substantial ethnographic detail. Its comments are characterised by insider-like discursive moves, correction, elaboration, and claims of ownership, whatever the unverifiable identities of their authors, although the self-identification pass reported in Sect. 4.2.2 was not decomposed by topic and so cannot establish that self-ascription is denser here than elsewhere in the corpus. The discursive stakes are as often about ethnic identity and cultural ownership as about food per se. From a food-neophobia perspective, T2 is illuminating because it is the region of the corpus in which cultural translation between neighbouring cuisines is most densely performed, and also the region in which phobic markers are scarcest. Comments that argue “this is essentially [our familiar dish X] with a Sri Lankan twist” recast the novel as the familiar, and are almost never coded phobic (median phobic-marker density within T2 is 0.4%). Whether translation lowers phobic response, or whether commenters already disposed to engage appreciatively are the ones who translate, cannot be settled with observational

Table 3 LDA topics (k = 8; n = 19,191 comments meeting minimum length)

#	Label	Share	Top terms
T0	Travel enthusiasm and thanks	25.1%	thank, visiting, want, try, eating, description, guide, said, ice, cream
T2	Cross-cultural comparison and identity	17.6%	indian, lankans, india, malay, tamil, south, cuisine, culture, country, different
T5	Welcome, pride and hospitality	11.7%	country, welcome, proud, visit, beautiful, delicious, amazing, hope, enjoy, halal
T6	Cooking instruction and etiquette	10.1%	eat, roti, sambol, spicy, katta, coconut, sambal, tasty, bread, pol
T4	Snack and brand recommendation	9.5%	chocolate, chicken, butter, chips, revello, milk, tip, cheese, tea, biscuits
T7	Best-in-world claims and controversy	9.1%	best, nepal, thumbnail, use, trying, restaurant, hands, mix, review, world
T1	Betel and paan cultural translation	8.7%	betel, leaf, nut, ate, rupees, tried, price, kind, drink, chew
T3	Chewing instructions and religious side-content	8.2%	eat, live, brother, god, bruh, chewing, chew, thing, way, dont

cross-sectional discourse data: the association is robust, the direction is not established. What can be said is that cultural translation is a discursive resource available to the audience for managing potential phobic response, and one the survey literature has been unable to observe because it treats “local food” as an undifferentiated category.

T1 (betel and paan) is a smaller-scale version of the same pattern. Betel-and-tobacco paan features in several corpus videos and reliably triggers apprehensive commentary from viewers unfamiliar with the practice. Yet the topic is not overwhelmingly phobic. Many of the strongest-loading T1 comments are patient explanations of how betel is prepared, chewed, spat, and enjoyed, a substantial minority of them from commenters who explicitly identify as Sri Lankan or South Asian (Sect. 4.2.2). These comments perform cultural translation from an insider-like position towards outsider viewers whose initial reaction was closer to disgust. The T1 discourse rehearses at cuisine-item scale what T2 performs at cuisine scale.

One further check is required before the combined T1 and T2 share can be described as cultural-translation labour. A topic share is a measure of lexical co-occurrence, not of discursive function, and it would be a category error to assume that every comment assigned to a translation-dense topic performs translation. Two considerations support the description, and a third bounds it. First, the topics were labelled from their ten strongest-loading exemplars, and translation moves, likening, explaining, correcting, situating, are the dominant rhetorical pattern in those exemplars for both topics. Second, the marker evidence is consistent with the reading, at least for T2, where phobic-marker density is the lowest of any topic at 0.4%: that is what one would expect if comparison to a familiar cuisine is doing work to domesticate the unfamiliar. Third, and most importantly, neither consideration licenses a point estimate, and none is offered here. The combined 26.3% topic share is an upper bound on the corpus share of translation labour rather than a measure of it. Establishing a measure would require hand-coding a probability sample of T1 and T2 comments for the presence of at least one translation move, a three-category frame of translation present, comparative or identity claim without explanatory content, and neither would suffice, and that coding has not been undertaken. Claims about translation labour in Sect. 5 should accordingly be read as claims about a discursive practice whose presence in these topics is evidenced by exemplar reading and by the marker profile, and whose corpus-wide extent is bounded above by the topic share without being otherwise quantified.

Format effects Table 4 compares the format-level results across the three coding approaches. Long-form videos attract higher rates of both philic and phobic markers than Shorts (16.1 vs 9.5% philic; 2.1 vs 1.6% phobic), and slightly more polarised sentiment on both sides. Long-form content, which has more attention time, more visual detail of preparation and consumption, and more room for creator commentary, produces stronger evaluative reactions in both directions. Shorts produce faster, more transactional, more neutral responses.

Shorts produce a *higher* “both” marker rate than long-form (1.8 vs 1.3%), which cuts the other way. One plausible reading is that the compressed format of Shorts forces creators to present one food item quickly and vividly, and the compressed audience response often comes out as a hedged single sentence (“looks scary but I’d try it”) that combines both markers. Long-form videos, with more elaborated narrative, sort viewers more cleanly into one register or the other.

Discussion

A conditional trait made visible in a new way

The picture that emerges is one of a predominantly enthusiastic audience response to Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine content on YouTube, with a small but substantively important minority of phobic reactions and a further small band of hybrid reactions in which both dispositions co-occur. This is consistent with the trait-based literature: mean neophobia scores in international tourist samples are usually moderate to low [16, 23], so a seven-to-one philic-over-phobic ratio in the discourse is roughly what the survey literature would predict. What the discourse-level analysis adds is a set of patterns survey work systematically misses: the co-occurrence of phobic and philic markers within the same comment (Sect. 4.1), the topic-level heterogeneity of phobic expression across content categories (Sect. 4.3), and the format-level pattern in which longer content polarises response in both directions (Sect. 4.4).

Table 4 Format comparison across coding approaches

Metric	Shorts (n = 10,046)	Long-form (n = 11,938)
VADER positive %	52.4	57.8
VADER negative %	10.0	12.0
VADER neutral %	37.6	30.2
Mean compound score	0.289	0.320
Philic marker %	9.5	16.1
Phobic marker %	1.6	2.1
“Both” marker %	1.8	1.3

The empirical support for Wolff and Larsen's two-construct argument deserves a closer look [23]. If neophobia and neophilia sat on a single dispositional continuum, the discursive prediction is straightforward: apprehensive and appreciative framings of the same object should not be jointly producible within a single unprompted utterance. The 1.5% "both" cell, and the 331 comments underlying it, show that they are, at three times the rate statistical independence would generate (Sect. 4.1). This is evidence against the strong discursive form of the single-continuum model. It is evidence about utterances rather than about persons: the design cannot link comments to individuals, and the paper accordingly treats the result as a constraint on how the two constructs can be modelled at the level of discourse, and as corroborating rather than confirming the person-level two-construct claim. And the sentiment profile of those "both" comments, 68% positive and closer to the philic pattern, suggests that when both framings appear together, the philic frame usually organises the overall affective register. The phobic content shows up as hedge, not as headline.

Peer-to-peer cultural translation

The most theoretically generative finding concerns peer-to-peer cultural translation and its apparent role in the audience's own management of potential neophobic response. Topic T2 (17.6% of comments) and Topic T1 (8.7% of comments) are both dominated by comments that reduce the novelty of Sri Lankan food by connecting it to something the commenter, or the presumed audience, already knows. "This is essentially our familiar rice-and-curry with a Sri Lankan twist"; "here's how to chew paan properly, and why it's not gross". Those comments perform an interpretive service the survey literature has never noticed. How much causal weight the description can carry requires care. The observational design supports three claims: that translation work and low phobic density co-occur systematically across topics and videos; that translation comments are frequently addressed to, and answered by, apprehensive commenters within the same thread; and that the mechanism is plausible on established familiarity-and-exposure grounds. It does not support the claim that translation demonstrably lowers any individual viewer's neophobia, which would require an experimental or longitudinal design. The formulation preferred here is accordingly that peer-to-peer cultural translation is a candidate mechanism of neophobia mitigation, evidenced at the level of discourse and awaiting causal test (Sect. 6).

The finding extends but also modifies Rauf and Pasha's argument about the Global North–South dynamics of vlogged gastronomic tours [25]. They demonstrated that international vlogging can operate as a partial de-colonial

discourse, with power imbalances between the vlogger-narrator and the local site partially reversed through appreciative teaching-and-learning interactions. Their evidence sits at the level of the on-camera vlogger–host relationship. The present analysis shows that a parallel and possibly more consequential negotiation takes place in the comment thread, among viewers, with commenters occupying knowledgeable insider-like positions, a proportion of whom explicitly identify as Sri Lankan, diasporic, or regionally proximate (Sect. 4.2.2), taking on the interpretive role that the on-camera local guide performs in the video. That translation work then reaches every subsequent viewer who reads the comments. Ma et al. identified "communication between viewers" as one of four comment categories in their Chinese Bilibili corpus [26], but they read it primarily as evidence of asynchronous community rather than as substantive interpretation. The present analysis makes the substantive move: a meaningful share of that inter-viewer communication does interpretive work, reduces perceived novelty, and reframes the food subject. Ahmed et al. document a similar pattern in the Bangladesh gastronomy tourism context, where YouTube comment threads under food vlogs by Rafsan TheChotoBhai, The Metro Man, and international vloggers such as Mark Wiens function as sites where sensory, authentic, and cultural experience dimensions are co-constructed by creators, insiders, and outsiders together [28].

Peer-to-peer cultural translation as contemporary oral tradition for ethnic food knowledge transmission

The translation labour concentrated in Topics T1 and T2 (a combined 26.3% topic share, which Sect. 4.3 treats as an upper bound on rather than a measure of the corpus share of translation labour) invites a broader interpretation than the neophobia-reduction reading alone can supply. Read together, these comments constitute a contemporary form of oral tradition through which Sri Lankan ethnic food knowledge is transmitted from insider communities to outsider audiences at scale. The functional continuity with pre-digital oral tradition is close. Commenters writing from insider-like positions explain preparation techniques (how string hoppers are pressed, how coconut sambol is smashed, how betel leaf is folded); they correct misapprehension (that eating with hands is not unhygienic, that mixing curries is not a mistake but the intended method); they situate dishes within community histories (Moor watalappan, Burgher lamprais, Malay pastol); they distinguish Sri Lankan preparations from adjacent South Asian and Southeast Asian cuisines with which outsiders confuse them. These are precisely the interpretive acts that pre-digital oral tradition

performed within families, temples, and neighbourhood cooking exchanges.

What is new is scale and durability. Where oral tradition operated at the scale of the household and the village, and where knowledge lost with a generation was often lost permanently, digital cultural translation operates at the scale of the platform (millions of viewers per video) and persists (the comment remains legible to every subsequent viewer for as long as the video and its comment thread exist). This is a substantive change in the transmission ecology of ethnic food heritage. Timothy and Ron's argument that heritage cuisines carry identity, authenticity, and change simultaneously [2] becomes more concrete in this reading: the digital comment thread is one of the sites where the negotiation between these three dimensions is now visibly and permanently conducted.

The geographical and historical depth set out in the Introduction gives this transmission much of its content. What commenters translate is, in large part, the material inheritance of a tropical rice, coconut, and spice agriculture and of more than two millennia of Indian Ocean exchange [3, 4]: why rice anchors the meal, why coconut appears in almost every preparation, how the spice complex distinguishes Sri Lankan curries from their Indian and Malay neighbours, and which communities brought which dishes to the island. The nutritional dimension of that inheritance is far less visible. A keyword search of the analytical corpus for health, nutrition, digestion, medicine, and Ayurveda vocabulary returns 111 comments, about one in two hundred, and those comments do not speak with one voice: betel is described in one thread as a traditional aid to digestion and dismissed in another as tobacco that is bad for the health. The emerging scientific evidence on Ceylon cinnamon, parboiled heritage rice, and traditional functional foods [5–7] has, in other words, barely entered the peer-to-peer oral tradition documented here. That gap is itself informative for heritage practice. Digital transmission currently carries the cultural and historical meaning of Sri Lankan food far more readily than its nutritional value, and heritage and destination communicators who wish to connect the two will need to supply evidence-based content that audiences can then translate onward, taking care not to claim more than a still-preliminary evidence base supports.

The finding also speaks to the growing ethnic food scholarship on food-boundary work: the interpretive labour through which communities define what counts as “their” cuisine, what is legitimate variation, what is illegitimate appropriation, and where the edges of the tradition lie [1, 9, 29]. Topic T2, in particular, is dense with boundary-work commentary. Comments that argue whether kottu roti is “essentially” Indian, Tamil,

or something distinctively Sri Lankan; whether watalappan is Malay, Moor, or Sri Lankan; whether the “correct” way to serve rice-and-curry involves specific accompaniments or specific serving orders, these are the everyday micro-arguments through which Sri Lankan food heritage is being defined and redefined by a distributed and self-selected community of commentators, in a discourse open to the world. Lee's work on cooking memories and intangible cultural heritage transmission on digital platforms provides a compatible framing [29]: the memory work performed in these threads is now a substantive site of intangible cultural heritage transmission for Sri Lankan cuisine, alongside the traditional sites of family kitchen, festival table, and cookbook.

This reframing has direct implications for ethnic food heritage preservation practice, particularly in destinations where the diasporic community is large, digitally active, and multilingual, Sri Lanka being an exemplary case. Heritage-preservation strategies that treat digital audience discourse as a resource to be cultivated (rather than as noise to be ignored or as marketing to be managed) will access a substantial and low-cost transmission channel that operates continuously and reaches audiences the destination itself could not otherwise reach. This argument extends and complements traditional heritage-preservation approaches focussed on cookbooks, festivals, and formal culinary education.

Practical implications follow. Destination marketing content that frames Sri Lankan food through cultural bridges rather than through pure exoticisation may prove more effective at limiting neophobic framing than content emphasising radical novelty, although this expectation follows from an observed association and would require experimental confirmation. Comment moderation and cultivation on a destination's own YouTube presence, whether by encouraging translator comments, thanking them, or pinning particularly good ones, is a low-cost mechanism for destination management. Creator–audience partnerships with knowledgeable commenters are a plausibly undervalued channel for lowering neophobic barriers. Ibrahim et al. reported a counterintuitive negative moderation effect of social media influencer engagement on the food-value-to-attractiveness pathway in their Melaka sample ($\beta = -0.068$), a finding they left largely uninterpreted [39]. The peer-to-peer translation mechanism identified here offers one plausible explanation. Influencer-only content that lacks audience-side interpretive support may generate value that fails to convert to attractiveness. Content that generates rich audience discussion may convert more effectively because the audience performs interpretive work the influencer alone cannot do, a reading consistent with evidence that viewer-generated commentary is central to

how YouTube travel content projects destination image [45] and with the co-constructive vlogger–audience dynamics Rauf and Pasha document [25].

Format and the marketing mix

The finding that long-form videos polarise response more sharply than Shorts has direct implications for the destination marketing mix. Shorts appear to be optimal for building passive familiarity at scale: high views, moderate positive sentiment, relatively low variance in phobic/philic markers. Long-form content is less good at passive familiarity per view, and better at conversion, both because it produces stronger evaluative response in both directions and because its longer running time accommodates the explanatory and contextualising content that is, on the present evidence, associated with lower phobic density. A destination-marketing strategy that used Shorts for reach and long-form for engagement and conversion would, on this evidence, be defensibly aligned with how audiences actually respond to each format.

The signal-to-noise problem in the phobic minority

The 1.9% phobic-marker rate is small in aggregate. Two considerations argue for taking it seriously anyway. First, YouTube's comment-ranking algorithms surface comments with strong reactions disproportionately, both enthusiastic and critical, so the 1.9% figure understates the visibility of phobic response to subsequent viewers. Second, phobic comments cluster on specific videos rather than distributing evenly across the corpus. Jora Worldwide's Colombo Short, at 22.4% phobic markers, is not representative of the corpus but does exemplify the kind of viral phobic-response cascade that can attach to individual pieces of destination content. A destination management organisation that ignores the phobic minority on the grounds of small aggregate share risks allowing a small number of pieces of content to become disproportionately visible cautionary framings. This connects directly to the extraction procedure. Because the corpus was assembled under top sorting, the phobic comments within it are disproportionately those the ranking algorithm has already elevated. The engagement-stratified robustness check reported in Sect. 4.1 indicates that phobic content is somewhat less prevalent in absolute terms in the low-engagement stream, while forming a slightly larger share of all marked comments there, but the visibility asymmetry remains the practically relevant fact for destination managers, since viewers encounter the ranked thread rather than the chronological one.

Limitations

Several limitations of the design should be acknowledged. Two of them arise from the platform and from the

language restriction, and bear most directly on how the findings should be read; they are stated first. The first is English-language filtering, which operates at three levels. Videos were selected only if their content was in English, so creators presenting Sri Lankan food in Sinhala or Tamil, who are disproportionately likely to be Sri Lankan themselves, are absent from the sample. Both analytical instruments, the VADER lexicon and the marker lexicon, are English-language instruments. And comment-level language classification of short, code-switched, and romanised text is imperfect: on inspection, 911 analysed comments (4.1%) contain Sinhala or Tamil script, most of them written predominantly in Sinhala. Neither instrument can read that text, and both respond only to whatever English words and emoji such comments contain. Because these comments enter the denominator, absolute marker rates are slightly understated, although the philic-to-phobic ratio, which does not depend on the denominator, is unaffected. Romanised Sinhala and Tamil written in Latin script are subject to the same limitation and cannot be separated from English by the procedures used here. The consequence for the argument is directional. The voices most likely to be excluded or under-read are those of Sinhala and Tamil speakers addressing one another in their own languages, so the corpus captures the outward-facing, English-mediated part of the transmission process rather than the in-community conversation that sustains it. Sinhala, Tamil, or major European-language commentary would probably produce different topic and marker profiles, and the self-ascription rate reported in Sect. 4.2.2 is a lower bound partly for this reason. The sample is purposive rather than random and reflects the platform's recommendation graph at the time of extraction; more recent uploads and non-recommended content are systematically underrepresented. The most consequential limitation is algorithmic curation. YouTube's comment API paginates in "top" order, and that ranking is an engagement-weighted, undisclosed, and non-stationary function of likes, replies, recency, channel-owner endorsement, and viewer-specific signals. Three distinct biases follow. Ranking bias: highly engaged comments are over-represented relative to their frequency in the posted population. Valence bias: because both enthusiasm and hostility attract engagement, the ranked set is plausibly more polarised than the unranked one, which would inflate philic and phobic rates simultaneously while leaving their ratio comparatively stable. Survivorship and moderation bias: comments removed by creators, by automated moderation, or by their own authors never enter the extraction, and removal is non-random with respect to hostile or transgressive content, so the phobic rate reported here is a lower bound on what was originally posted. The engagement-stratified

robustness check reported in Sects. 3.5 and 4.1 addresses the first two directly and indicates that the philic-to-phobic asymmetry is not an artefact of sort order; it cannot address the third. Two readings of the corpus follow. As an estimate of what all commenters wrote, it is biased in known directions. As an estimate of what subsequent viewers actually read, which is the object of interest for the heritage-transmission argument, since transmission depends on what is visible rather than on what was posted, the top-sorted corpus is arguably the more appropriate sampling frame. Two further platform features qualify both readings. The comment set is a single snapshot taken in August 2026 under a ranking function that YouTube does not disclose and revises without notice, so a later re-extraction of the same threads would not return an identical corpus, and the findings describe what the platform surfaced at that moment rather than a fixed property of the threads. Algorithmic curation also operates on videos as well as on comments: because the 45 videos were assembled through platform search and the recommendation graph, both of which are themselves engagement-ranked and personalised, the sample over-represents popular and highly recommended creators, and the two layers of curation compound rather than offset one another. The marker lexicon, though developed carefully against a pilot sample, is not exhaustive; ironic and heavily coded expressions of neophobia or neophilia may be missed. VADER, though well-validated, does not always handle sarcasm, contextual negation, or code-switched multilingual content well. The design is entirely observational: no causal inferences about the effect of specific creator behaviours on audience response can be drawn without an experimental or longitudinal complement. Four further limitations follow from the additional analyses reported above. The unit of analysis is the comment and not the commenter, so nothing in the design permits inference about how dispositions are distributed across individuals, about how many distinct individuals the corpus represents, or about repeat commenting; discursive co-occurrence and psychological co-activation remain distinct claims, and only the former is evidenced here. Insider participation is measured by explicit self-ascription alone, which is a conservative lower bound and is unverifiable in principle, so identity claims in this paper are confined to discursive positioning. And the error analysis in Sect. 4.2.1 establishes that a minority of phobic-only classifications are negation false positives, so the marker rates carry a known precision ceiling that a syntax-aware coder would improve upon. Finally, the description of Topics T1 and T2 as translation-dense rests on exemplar reading and on the marker profile rather than on a coded probability sample, so the combined 26.3% topic share bounds the corpus extent of

translation labour from above without quantifying it, and no point estimate of that extent is claimed.

Conclusion

This paper has read the audience response to Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine on YouTube as more than a marketing signal or a tourism-behaviour antecedent. It has read that response as evidence of the digital transmission of ethnic food heritage. Across 21,984 predominantly English-language YouTube comments responding to 45 videos about Sri Lankan ethnic cuisine, food-neophilic markers outnumber phobic markers by roughly seven to one, and a small but non-trivial minority of comments (1.9% phobic-only, 1.5% both) surface phobic reactions that survey work has documented at the individual level but rarely observed in the wild. The lexical marker coding and the independent VADER sentiment classification correspond closely, and the cases in which they diverge are structured, interpretable, and analysed rather than set aside. Eight interpretable topics organise the audience discourse. Topics T1 and T2, a combined 26.3% of the modelled corpus, are given over substantially to peer-to-peer cultural translation between Sri Lankan and neighbouring cuisines, and this translation labour, this paper has argued, constitutes a contemporary oral tradition for the transmission of Sri Lankan ethnic food heritage to global audiences at a scale and durability that pre-digital oral tradition could not achieve. Long-form videos polarise response more sharply than Shorts.

The contribution this paper regards as most significant for ethnic food scholarship is the reading of peer-to-peer cultural translation in YouTube comments as a contemporary form of digital oral tradition. Intangible food heritage has always depended on transmission that is informal, relational, and conversational: the correction offered in the family kitchen, the recipe passed between neighbours, the explanation given at the festival table. The comment threads analysed here perform the same functions, explaining preparation and etiquette, correcting misapprehension, situating dishes in community histories, and distinguishing Sri Lankan food from that of its neighbours, but they do so in public, at the scale of the platform, and in a written record that every subsequent viewer inherits. Three features make this form of transmission significant for the preservation of intangible ethnic food heritage. It is distributed, resting on a self-selected community of commenters writing from insider-like positions rather than on institutions. It is dialogic, so that the tradition is not merely repeated but contested and refined in the open, which makes the boundary work of heritage definition directly observable to scholars. And it is global in reach, carrying knowledge of a small island's cuisine,

and of the climate, agriculture, and trade history that shaped it, to audiences that no cookbook, festival, or destination campaign could reach unaided. Digital oral tradition does not replace the family kitchen as a site of transmission, and its record is only as durable as the platform that hosts it. For cuisines such as Sri Lanka's, whose communities at home and abroad are digitally active, it has nevertheless become a significant channel through which intangible ethnic food heritage is preserved and passed on to the world. The bound stated in Sect. 4.3 applies here as well: the argument concerns the nature and function of this transmission, not a measured share of the corpus.

The findings carry three implications for the ethnic food heritage scholarship this journal advances. First, digital audience discourse is now a substantive site of ethnic food heritage transmission, alongside the cookbook, the family kitchen, the festival table, and the formal culinary curriculum. Ethnic food scholarship that continues to treat digital platforms as merely promotional or as external to the heritage tradition proper will miss the site where much of contemporary transmission is now occurring. Second, the boundary work through which ethnic cuisines are defined, contested, and rearticulated is unusually visible in digital comment threads, and offers a productive empirical site for heritage scholars interested in identity, authenticity, and change [2, 29]. Third, heritage-preservation strategies for cuisines with large diasporic communities have an under-recognised resource in the interpretive work their audiences are already performing at no cost; modest curation of that work would amplify its transmission effect substantially.

For food-neophobia scholarship specifically, three implications follow. Methodologically, the close correspondence between marker coding and sentiment classification, together with the structured and interpretable character of the cases where they diverge, suggests that computational netnography is a productive complement to survey-based food-neophobia research, and that comparable studies on other destinations and cuisines are warranted. Theoretically, the discourse-level evidence that phobic and philic framings co-occur within the same comment at three times the rate independence predicts is inconsistent with a single-continuum treatment of the two dispositions at the level of discourse, and corroborates, without directly testing, Wolff and Larsen's person-level two-construct argument [23]. Future measurement work should treat the two dispositions separately rather than as opposite ends of a single scale. Practically, the peer-to-peer cultural translation mechanism identified here is a candidate moderator to be added to the food-neophobia literature's growing catalogue of situational and audience-community moderators.

Two directions for extension are salient. First, a longitudinal design that tracks changes in phobic-versus-philic marker rates over successive years of YouTube content about a single destination, capturing the effects of policy and marketing interventions. Second, a comparative study across ethnic cuisines (Sri Lankan against, for example, Ethiopian, Peruvian, or Georgian) to establish whether the philic-to-phobic ratio and the cultural-translation mechanism vary systematically with cuisine profile, diasporic community size, and heritage-preservation infrastructure. Both are logical next steps for a research programme that treats naturalistic online discourse as a first-order data source for ethnic food heritage scholarship. A third and now more pressing extension is experimental. An exposure design in which participants view identical food content with and without translator commentary present in the comment thread would convert the associational claim advanced here into a causal one, and would test directly whether cultural translation lowers neophobic response or merely accompanies its absence.

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Author contributions

W. M. R. Laksiri is the sole author and is solely responsible for the conception and design of the study; data extraction and analysis; interpretation of findings; and the drafting, revision, and approval of the final manuscript. W. M. Rohan Laksiri is a Senior Lecturer in Tourism Management at the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka. His research interests include food tourism, food neophobia and neophilia, ethnic food heritage transmission, and the digital mediation of destination experience

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Data availability

The video metadata, transcripts, and comment corpus analysed in this study were extracted from publicly accessible YouTube content using yt-dlp (version 2026.07.04) with the flags described in Sect. 3.3. Because YouTube's terms of service restrict redistribution of platform data, the raw extraction files are not publicly deposited. The full list of 45 video URLs, the coding lexicons, and the Python analysis scripts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. The engagement-stratification script, the self-identification lexicon, and the complete coded error-analysis set introduced at revision are available on the same basis.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study analysed publicly available YouTube video content and associated public comment threads. Data were extracted using yt-dlp without user interaction or intervention, in line with published ethical guidance for social-media research [22, 43]. No individual commenter is named or identifiable in this paper; direct quotations are truncated and lightly paraphrased. Channel creators are public figures and are named. Because the analysis draws exclusively on public data with no identifiable human subjects, formal ethics-committee

approval for human-subjects research was not required by the author's institution. The research nonetheless follows the Association of Internet Researchers ethics guidelines for observational netnographic work [46].

Consent for publication

Not applicable. No individual person's data, personal information, or identifiable images appear in this manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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