

THE CHALLENGES OF MAKING FOOD CHOICE IN A NEW COUNTRY

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Abstract: *The experiences of the gradually increasing numbers of international students have received growing interest from academics, practitioners, and policymakers around the world. This was majorly due to the contribution from international students' fees and spending, and from the unique and subsequent changes in the culture and practice of this student group, making their well-being a focus. It was a fundamental challenge for the international students in a foreign country to locate and source for food choice that was familiar to them. Migration has become a major turning point to independent life for most international students in the new country. The experience was more challenging for them because it required their personal commitment to food provisioning responsibilities and a new food choice system alongside the stressful academic roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the context of international students' challenges when making food choice received dedicated attention to this study. A qualitative method using grocery shopping observation and an in-depth interview was conducted among ten international students at a university in Northern Malaysia. The key findings indicated that the adjustment experience in the new country greatly influenced the food choice decision of the international students. The main contribution of this study relies on the application of the life course perspective in the study of food choice decision because of the consideration of migration as a turning point and transition of food choices. In contrast to other studies on food choice and dietary acculturation, this study provides a valuable lens using the life course perspective that gives a wider context on the stages in food choice decision-making process. The results of this study can provide a better understanding of food choice among international students during their transition in the new country.*

Keywords: *Food Choice, International Students, Food Acculturation, Life Course Perspective*

Introduction

This aim of this study is to address the food choice process of international students at a university in Northern Malaysia. There are three objectives for this study; firstly, is to explore the perception of food choice. The migration for the international students was a turning point in their life course, and this study focused on the context of their adjustment experiences of new food choice in Malaysia during the transition. Secondly, this study will attempt to elucidate the life course perspective (Furst et al., 1996) on the food choice decisions, by identifying event and experiences during life course, the personal and social factors, cultural ideals, resources,

and current context and trends that influenced their new food choice construction. Finally, this research will examine food choice strategy in the new country.

The context of this study is within three area of focus; the international students, food choice process and food choice strategy. The life course perspective concept developed by Furst et al. (1996) was applied to explore the influences and the significant components of life course experiences in the construction of food choice during the early phase of transition. The study by Furst et al. (1996) includes three basic components in life course perspective model; the life course, influences, and personal system. It was explained in Sobal et al., (2006), that based on the life course perspective, the food choice patterns were often attributed to the factors or influences of past experiences and the current situation which shaped a personal system when selecting food choice. Thus, the life course perspective concept was employed in this study because it represents the important elements of experience, influence and personal system of the new food choice construction during transition.

Food choice is a dynamic process and major changes such as migration became a turning point that lead to disruption in food choice and undermined food habits and practice (Sobal et al., 2006). The disruption and changes in food habits after migration may cause '*dietary acculturation*', defined in Satia-Abouta (2003:74) as the 'process that occurs when members of migrating group adopt the eating patterns or food choices of their new environment'. In this context, the life course perspective may be able to further point out how international students adapt to the new food choice and practices using acculturation strategy such as; integration, separation, assimilation and marginalization (Berry, 1997). For the purpose of this study, the new food choice decision in the new country will be referred to as 'food acculturation'.

Luedicke (2011:2) explained consumer acculturation in a more specific context; 'consumer acculturation not only exists as a process of adaptation on the part of the immigrants but also manifests as experiences, interpretations, and practices through which immigrant and indigenous groups adjust to one another's consumption choices, behaviours, ideologies, and status ambitions'. It is important to note that acculturation is dependent upon specific context and it was suggested that it should be measured with qualitative methods (Rudmin, 2009; Luedicke, 2011). Therefore, this study employed qualitative approach for the main data collection using accompanied shop observation and in-depth interviews, in order to achieve the research objectives. It was found that the accompanied shop observation and in-depth interview both complement each other in exploring the food choice decision made during grocery shopping and food provisioning tasks and consumption. It gave access to a more holistic view on the food choice decisions made during transition of new international students to a new country.

Literature review

The International Students

The continuous growth of international students worldwide was found to be parallel with the numerous studies dedicated to them with the most commonly research topic area on the cultural adjustments and personal changes (Tirelli & Martinez-Ruiz, 2014). The literature on international students goes on more detail on the importance of food during the adjustment; such as meanings attached to food such as emotional and physical sustenance, comfort, fulfilling and sense of belonging (Brown, Edwards & Hartwell, 2010; Collins, 2008); the dietary changes upon migration (Pan, Dixon, Himburg & Huffman., 1999; Alakaam, Castellanos, Bodzio & Harrison, 2015); and resistant to change eating habits (Perez-Cueto,

Verbeke, Lachat & Winter, 2009; Amos, 2014). However, there are still very little empirical studies focused on the role of food and how transition influence the food choice adjustment of international students (Brown, 2009, Amos, 2014).

International education is a major export industry at university level and international students made valuable educational and economic contribution to the host country (Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2009). Being a financial asset to universities, with wide range of knowledge and skills and rich in heritage and culture, the international students helped increase cultural awareness and appreciation to the country in which they are studying (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Andrade, 2006). Adding to this, Berry (2006) stated that the international student's stay is mutually beneficial; as the students bring a range of asset to the host country and in return gain higher education. Despite the significant contribution, the adjustment and transitional experience of mobile migration population such as international students remains unclear (Li & Gasser, 2005; Perez- Cueto, 2009). The importance on the contribution from the fees and the outcomes of hosting international students made it critical to gain a clear understanding and the mechanism of the adjustment process in order to increase awareness and inform the type and delivery of pastoral and academic support needed to improve adjustment experience, which in return, may increase recruitment of international students in the future (Ward, 2001; Chapdelaine et al., 2004; Brown, 2009; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Brown et al., 2010).

The Food Choice in the New Country

Attending foreign universities in a country with a different cultural background and practice means that international students not only have to manage common adjustment problems, but also balancing life in new social and educational organizations (Zhou, 2008). Among the international student's adjustment and challenges widely discussed were; English language proficiencies, academic concerns, culture shock, homesickness, new cultural experiences, building new friendship, and facing challenges associated with daily living (Yang, Berning, Colson & Smith, 2015; Mori, 2000). A study by Brown (2009) included the adjustment and challenges in food habits and practices during transition in an ethnographic study on postgraduate international students' adaptation to life in England.

Several studies claimed that international student's migration to another country could cause culture shock (Chapdelaine et al., 2004; Zhou et al., 2008), and the consumption of familiar and comforting food in the new culture was found to ease this symptom (Oberg, 1960; Garza-Guerrero, 1974). Food issues were only mentioned incidentally as one of the aspects that international students found distressing (Furukawa, 1997). Food became greatly important in providing support both emotionally and physically, as found in Brown et al. (2010) in the study on meaning attached to food eaten in the new culture among international students.

Furukawa (1997) noted that food can have the greatest impact on adjustment. However, Furukawa further commented that the importance of meals and food has not always received prominence when considering the overall acculturation process which the international students will go through. The move to a new country, exposed migrants (including the international students) to acculturation when they need to conform to the customs and culture of the host and it affected their dietary practice, eating patterns and other food related behaviour including food choice (Edwards et al., 2010). According to Berry et al. (1997), although factors leading to acculturation vary, the basic process of adaptation appears to be common to all migrant groups.

In a more focused note, Colby, Morrison and Hadelman (2009) and Satia-Abouta, Patterson, Kristal et al. (2002) defined the food related changes (food habits, practice, patterns and setting), as dietary acculturation. The adaptation to these changes was not a simple, linear process; but a very difficult, complex and dynamic process and was critical in the development of food habits in the new context (Satia- Abouta et al., (2002). Studies on the process of acculturation however, tends to focus more on the food habits after they have been established for some time (Perez- Escamilla & Putnik., 2007), although it was found in Brown et al. (2010) that international students' food habits were affected by a significant culture shock during the first period of their study.

Sobal et al. (2009) explained the complexity of food choice decision making whereby it is being examined on many aspects of social and behavioural sciences, for example; making food choice decisions requires complex considerations when deciding when to eat, either to snack first or not; where to eat, either at the comfort of own home or restaurant; with whom, either eating alone or with friends; what to eat, either freshly made or readymade meal; and thus posed a major challenge to the application of a single and simple theoretical model.

Food Choice and Culture

Culture is perhaps the most obvious influence on food preferences and choice, and has strong historical antecedents, rooted in unique combinations of environment (geography, climate, and range of native plant and animal species), ritual and belief systems (religious and secular), community and family structure, human endeavour (innovation, mechanisation, experimentation), mobility (exploration, immigration), and economic and political systems, which are integrated into a range of particular 'traditional' and accepted rules of cuisine and appropriateness, and 'ideals' (Furst et al. 1996; Koster, 2009). A study by Contento et al. (2006) found that food choice is deeply embedded in culture and food carries many different meanings to an individual. Honkanen et al. (2009) suggested that understanding the motives that determine food choice is important for the successful design of promotional campaigns especially the development of effective food and health policies. Upon deciding food choice, immigrants often adopt stages of dietary acculturation in their new environment; for example, preserving traditional foods, reject others, put a new twist on traditional foods and/ or adopt dietary patterns of the host population (Franzen et al., 2009).

Every culture in the world has food system with its own patterns of symbolic meanings (Jamal, 1996). The consumption of food helped consumers expressed themselves and moreover, when ethnic identity became a vital issue, ethnic food is re-created. Jamal's study proved further that through eating ethnic food objects, the feeling of bonding and conformity with their original culture. It was later concluded that ethnic foods have been consistently consumed since migration as learned habits help shaped current food choice and create patterns that are resistant to change (Mennel et al., 1992; Jamal, 1996). Eating foods from home for migrants caused 'memory of homes to linger, recreated in new localities through the medium of food' (James, 1998:91).

The roles of many kinds of social change including migration have been relatively neglected in the food studies (Mintz et al., 2002). It is important to understand the role that all factors played in the food choice process and other aspects of dietary changes, as well as the extent of these changes, to establish an environment of positive learning and healthy lifestyle for international students.

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective (LCP) is a holistic approach examining people's life over time, representing a whole life analysis perspective which originated from the field of sociology (Wethington et al., 2009). The LCP is also an emerging framework in research and educational practice in food studies, especially nutrition. Dubowitz et al. (2007) stated that the relationships between acculturation, life course experiences, social and physical contexts are important in our daily life activity and especially central to the cultural phenomena of diet, food preparation and eating. Devine et al. (1999) discussed how life transitions and changing environment are associated with ideals, identities, and roles in stimulating reassessment of ethnic food consumption and the roles of food in the enactment of ethnicity during acculturation.

Food choices are developed and changed over time, shaped by the environment and over life courses that involves past and current food experience (Sobal et al., 2006). According to Elder (1985), LCP considers a person's agency in determining food choice trajectory, accumulation of experiences over time, the anticipation of future, and the importance of changes in context at specific points in time. There are various food choice models that included the contributions of life course experience to current food choice ideals, identities and strategies in a food context, however, the assumptions that past experiences helped form the current food choice characteristics is often unstated and not investigated (Devine, 2003).

Sobal et al. (2006) summarized that the concept of life course and its components provide ways of conceptualizing both dynamic and constant aspects of food choice decisions that are constructed with respect to past experiences, present situation and future expectations. The life course perspective is applied for this study because it provides multiple perspectives in the way people construct food choice decision, taking into consideration the events and experiences, and the situational factors and migration as a turning point in the context of international students.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative methods for the main study. An accompanied shop observation and in-depth interview were adopted, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The qualitative approach to explore the food acculturation process using the life course perspective was appropriate and fit with the purpose, aim and objectives of this study. Moreover, this study is concern with the lived experiences of international students when deciding food choice to understand food acculturation process. A qualitative approach is the most appropriate to address the issue. A total of 10 international students studying at a university in Northern Malaysia have volunteered to take part in this study.

Accompanied shop was intended as an opportunity to observe how the students conduct their food shopping. During the accompanied shop session, the researcher followed the participant while they shop for food, observing and taking notes based on an observation protocol developed, focusing on their behaviour when deciding a purchase. Since some of the students chose to do their food shopping at different stores, sites and times, the venue where the observations were conducted varied. The objective of the accompanied shop was to observe the behaviour when making food purchase decision in a new food setting and environment.

A semi structured interview was conducted after the observation. It allowed the researcher an opportunity to understand the behaviour while making food choices during grocery shopping. It also allows the participant's actions to be translated into the form of contextual data fitting the objectives of this study. The interview was also to capture an in-depth explanation, personal

experience, issues and perception as well as to deepen the meaning of the student's food choice practice in the new country.

Findings

Personal factors

Previous studies mentioned personal factors that establish personal food and eating identities which includes; physiological factors (sensory, genetic); psychological or emotional characteristics (preferences, personalities, moods, phobias); and relational factors (identities, self-concept) (Jabs et al., 1998; Bisogni et al., 2002; Sobal et al., 2006). These factors represent self-image as a specific type of eater and operate to shape specific food selections (Sobal et al., 2006). Personal factors that were important to the participants in deciding food choice, such as self-identity, cultural background and religious belief would sometimes restrict their food selection.

Student 1, from China tried to reconnect her Chinese roots and learned how to cook Chinese food when she first came to Malaysia. The strong identity tie help shaped her food choice, which is mainly Chinese food.

'I have to learn to cook by myself the real Chinese food from my own place. I only eat that now' (Student 1)

The relationship with food and culture was also indicated by one participant who perceived assimilating eating patterns with the host country as 'bad', considering how strong the culture identity is within her.

'Because our culture is what we grow up with having this type of food. I would not want foreign food' (Student 2)

It was acknowledged by Finkelstein (1999) that cultural background has very strong influence in eating behaviour. Furthermore, a study by Mintz et al. (2002) established the relevance of food and the food culture as markers of ethnic identity. Retaining the sense of ethnic identity may benefit the functioning of individuals within multicultural societies (Berry, 1997). Bisogni et al., (2002:129) defined the term identity as 'the mental self-images that a person assigns to herself/himself based on everyday interactions with people, groups and objects' which can reveal many cultural, structural, social and individual meanings and that food serves as a tool that people can utilize as a means of confirming and reaffirming identity to one's self, and others.

Familiarity of home food

Collins (2008) mentioned that sojourners such as international students use food as a medium to connect with their home country by creating familiarity and a sense of belonging in their lives. Food plays an important role in international students' attempts at establishing identities especially during transition, which allowed them to connect with the host culture and country of origin. It was found that familiarity of the taste of home country food influenced positive feelings for the international students. Their past experiences of eating ethnic and home country foods established the ideal version of the taste and flavour which signifies the emotional meanings of food that the students carried with them. Words such as satisfying, fulfilling, enjoyable, and healthier as well as comforting were often mentioned to associate emotional attachment and memory of having something familiar, especially ethnic and home country food. One participant described having her ethnic food made her feel like she is home.

'Eating my ethnic food is so comforting because familiar and I know the taste. (Student 4)

Locher et al. (2005) talked about how food objects were associated with the relief of distress and manipulated to modify or change emotional states or feelings. The emotion and comfort felt when eating home country food reflected the social construction of some food objects as 'comfort foods' (Locher et al., 2005); and therefore, suggest the importance of demonstrating how both the social and physiological dimensions of food must be considered in any efforts to understand food choice decision after migration.

One participant recalls trying to make a home country dish because she was feeling homesick and cooking made her think of her mother.

'I tried cooking this food using my mother's recipe. We used to cook together, and it made feel a bit better although she is not here now' (Student 5)

In Collins (2008) study, it was found that international students were reconnecting with their pre-migration lives through the act of consumption and the re-creation of their home country's national dishes to replicate a space reminiscent of home. The act of re-creating ethnic home dishes displays strong connection to the home country by preserving national identity through food.

Food Choice Strategy

The participants also discussed the strategies developed to make their adjustment better and how they adapt to new food choice. One student brought a whole bag of food filled with spices and canned food as she felt she was not ready to adapt to foreign food.

'I have all these food with me in one bag. I must be prepared. I cannot eat the food here I think' (Student 3).

Participants mentioned the need to prepare food independently, which they never did before. Transitions from living with parents to living on their own made them realize the need to manage everyday tasks and acquire certain skills to adapt to new food choice.

'Now I am independent. I cook my food. Not too good but I have to do it. YouTube teach me a lot.' (Student 3).

Acquiring cooking skill was important in the food adjustment process in order to be able to fulfil cravings of ethnic and home country foods and to be able to cook something they prefer. For a few participants, it was difficult in the beginning because they have never cooked before and had to learn and manage this skill independently for the first time in their life.

Dissimilar taste of ethnic and home country food and new food choice is an issue for the participants because food was considered an immediate stress reliever. International students can choose to cook food they were craving for like ethnic or home country food instead of buying ready meals. Through cooking, they would be able to adapt to the new food choice better and moreover, they can choose to cook healthier meals. Brown (2009) mentioned cooking could guarantee both emotional and physical sustenance.

Discussion

It was found that the food choice decision was a complex process among the international students and migration did impact on the construction of the food choice process. The international students' experiences when making food choice during their transition were faced with several challenges such as dissimilar food and culture, unacceptable taste and lack of cooking skills. The element in life course perspective that influences new food choice was very

significant. The factors such as culturally ideal food availability and accessibility, resources (the cost of food and lack of cooking skills), the personal factor (dietary restrictions, self-identity, healthier food) and the context of a new life in a foreign country with new roles and responsibilities in food provisioning practices; all represent most of the elements in life course perspective.

The acculturation strategy conducted such as willingness to try new food, acceptance/ rejection of local food, changes in food choice and habits during transition; demonstrates the international students' acculturation experience. In addition, there are references made about acceptance of new food choice due to previous experience. However, food choice decision was more complex due to lack of competencies in food provisioning roles, but the students embraced much of the new food culture and enjoyed their adjustment experience. The dependencies of ethnic food were apparent due to increased availability and accessibility and the cost of food was not an issue for some students because the new independent life was a chance to discover and try various food choices.

A new food choice system was actively developed as the international students move through life during migration. The continuance of food shopping practice or food preference during migration, influenced by the students' upbringing in their home country, has led to constant patterns of food choice in the new country. However, the students were continuously being exposed to new food choices thus require the students to redefine and reconstruct new way or system of making food choice decision since they moved to a new life, away from home and their family. The trajectories in the new, foreign and unfamiliar surroundings added the stress of constructing a food choice system.

The meanings attached to food consumed during the transition brought different symbols to the international students. The personal, social and culturally ideal foods influenced the continuance of familiar and ethnic food, which is considered an immediate relieve for adjustment stress. It was found that the comfort foods, the staple and ethnic foods, and the nostalgic foods, symbolized emotional attachment, comfort, personal identity and sense of belonging (Collins, 2008; Brown et al., 2010). Findings on the preference and choice to have foods that symbolized important meanings during the transition revealed why some international students were reluctant to change their food choice.

Conclusion

The observed accompanied shop, paired with in depth interview and the adoption of life course perspective, provided a more holistic approach on food choice process among international students. The methods employed enabled the explanation and gave meaningful context of each stage that required food choice decisions; during grocery shopping, food preparation and cooking, and consumption. This study supports that during transition of new life in a culturally different environment; a person will integrate, assimilate, marginalize or separate themselves in order to adjust themselves to the new context. The new life of international students demanded changes and commitment in roles and responsibilities, resources, and context that is disruptive to the usual or established personal food systems and lead to reconstruction of food choice pattern and consequently, food acculturation.

In practical views, the findings from this study may assist the university in constructing a more relevant policy and services that support the food adjustment and differential needs of international students. Identifying the key influences in shaping food choice may improve healthy eating among international students. The findings may inform the international students

support centre and students' counsellors on the food related challenges faced by the international student during the early stage of their transition especially on the adjustment stress concerning food provisioning tasks, undertaking the new roles and responsibilities of a new independent living and guidance and support in managing a healthy lifestyle. The study also benefits other international students (upcoming and existing) in their orientation on food provisioning with focus on addressing the differences in the new culture and create awareness on the expectations.

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