



RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIMENSIONS OF DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED ON CULINARY BY SOJOURNERS; THE NIGERIAN STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Findings from semi-structured interviews with the postgraduate students from a university in Malaysia, discovered the challenges relating to the feedings of the Nigerian international students in the new culture; Malaysian society. The study explored the Nigerian students' challenges as it relates to food in their host country. Many Nigerian students decried of the hostels allocated by the institutions to have no functioning kitchens. Findings revealed host's local food to lack variety, been cooked with sugar and not salt which they are accustomed with. Findings revealed that the host country's food is not satisfying and perceived as unhealthy due to its lack of variety.

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INTRODUCTION

One group of sojourners consists of international students, which move from their home country to another of choice in pursuit of higher education. Different reasons have been attributed to the pursuit of international higher education of which few include unavailability of such course in their home country or motivations from transnational exchange or integrating programs (Perez-Cueto *et al.*, 2009). Several literatures mentioned the advantages of obtaining an international higher education of which are often to the development of the benefactor; socially, psychologically, and human capital development (Ward *et al.*, 2001; Bailey, 2006; Araujo, 2011). The benefits of international education according to several literatures are not limited to the recipients. Brown *et al.* (2010), is of the opinion that international education has been seen to be a main export industry at the university level to the nations or countries which are hosting these students thereby contributing to financial health of the Higher education sector of such countries.

International education is known to be of immense benefit to it's recipients however, the socio-cultural effects on recipients could be traumatic as such a student leaves a familiar culture for a new environment with a cultural difference and a cultural distance (Ward *et al.*, 2001; Bochner, 2003). However, it is opined that the negative feelings or certain discomforts experienced by the sojourners are most times inevitable and

often time those who experience it are most likely to be effective in their roles (Marx, 2001). This phenomenon of having a negative feelings or anxiety resulting from losing accustomed cues is known as culture shock (Anderson, 1981). The period of culture shock is often likened to the period of mourning for the home world, described by feelings of grief, separation and anxiety (Brown *et al.*, 2010; Brown and Holloway, 2008). Many cues to how things are done daily socially and culturally could be loss to the new culture as observed by (Cullingford and Gunn, 2004).

It was observed that international students had some degree of shock regarding culinary due to the fact that food types is peculiar to a given culture and this makes it impossible to be able to separate food from the way of life of an individual's (Edwards *et al.*, 2010). According to Brown *et al.* (2010) and Mitchell (2006), food traditions and practices characterize a crucial element of culture a major reason which is why it is expected of international students would have difficulties to break away from the food choices, types they are accustomed to. This states clearly why one of the major indications of culture shock is an extreme worry over food as was noticed of some group of international students (UKCISA, 2013). However, Brown (2009), explains that emotional ties to home food is a result of the positive link between familiar taste and nostalgic thoughts of home and acceptance.

Perez-Cueto *et al.* (2009) stated that international students do experience difficulties in getting indigenous food and have to thereby devise a means of getting it in their new environment as

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it can help them to cope with the difficulties associated with moving to a new environment and also gives them a feeling of them still been in their home country. Feeding habit is one facet of international students' life that is least open to change and they therefore derive great satisfaction both emotionally and physically when they come in contact with indigenous food in a new culture (Wandel *et al.*, 2008). Studies also made it known that students' home sickness can be alleviated by eating from students home country food types as it brings them closer home (Amaechi *et al.*, 2013)

The change in the diets of international students is always been accompanied by different factors which could be unavailability of the local food of the students due to cultural differences, not restricted to unbalanced meal pattern, price of food, accessibility and convenience. Often times traditional food are imported to host countries, a major reason the prices are usually hiked, choices are limited and may only be available at special market far from the university campus (Cahill and Stavrianeas, 2013). So having just the choice of eating food of the host country, the international students who are new to the country will definitely have a problem with feeding. Therefore, having agreed that food is a symbol of culture and it varies from one culture to another, it can therefore be confirmed that there is possibility of the international students to experience difficulties in feeding habits due to certain conditions. This research, will consider food in respect to restriction in nutritional intake due to absence of international students' native food, difference in meals due to preparation method (Brown *et al.*, 2010). Different challenges as it relates to the feeding of these students will be delved into to, also the acceptability of the host country diets by the students having stayed for a while will also be considered.

METHODS

The researcher adopted the qualitative method instead of the quantitative in this research using semi-structured interview technique, because, it is thought wise that the qualitative approach will help generate an ample information through conversation between the researcher and the respondent. The qualitative approach is often preferred over the quantitative because it can look out for problems related with feelings on a given subject (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, this approach is believed to reveal the difficulties encountered relating to feedings and the reactions accompanying feeding on the choice of food from the host community of this group of international students; Nigerian students. Undeniably, the probing that in - depth interview permits was maximally used in order for the students to reflect on their feelings and satisfaction on the food they consumed, knowing fully well that food consumption is accompanied with emotions (Brown *et al.*, 2010)

A group of Nigerian graduate students from a one of the public universities were used for the purpose of this research. All composed of different ethnic groups and religion. The consent of all the respondents was sought and were all assured of confidentiality and anonymity prior to the collection of the data through interview process. No monetary or other enticements were given prior to their participation as they all offered to partake in the research on request. Research ethics were accordingly followed as these students were assured of

the confidentiality of every information given during the interview session. A group of eleven Nigerian students were used for this research out of the twenty students previously selected but had to be limited having discovered saturation of data and believing that they would have given objective account of their experiences on the host country's cuisine. The time spent with each respondent varied based on the understanding of the questions by the respondent at the given time. However, the maximum recorded time spent with each respondent was approximately 28 minutes while the minimum was put at 19 minutes. The data were collected using an audio-tape recorder. Time variable, or length of stay of each student at the time of the research was considered to determine the satisfactoriness or to determine if time factor would have encouraged their adaption to the Malaysian cuisine. The summary below provides the information of all the respondents interviewed used in this research noting that all names are not original names of the respondents to protect their privacy.

1. **Faithia**: Length of Stay in Malaysia 28 months staying in the student family apartment with husband and children.
2. **Mathew**: 28 months in Malaysia, lives in student hostel (campus)
3. **Walter**: 72 Months in Malaysia, lives in town
4. **Kayin**: 20 months lives in town.
5. **Abudul**: has spent 17 months in Malaysia lives in student hostel (campus)
6. **Jarul**: has been in Malaysia for 33 months, lives in the students' hostel
7. **Ishaku**: has been in Malaysia for 15 months, lives in town
8. **Stean**: has already spent 12 months in Malaysia, lives in the campus
9. **Rilwan** : 16 months in Malaysia and lives on campus.
10. **Callie**: 5 Months in Malaysia and lives on campus.
11. **Ajadi** : 15 months in Malaysia and lives on campus.

The interview for all the participant was conducted at the library foyer due to its accessibility. The data collected were fully transcribed by the researcher and repeatedly read through while a comparison between the voice clips and the transcribed data was made to correlate the information given with the transcribed data. Having stated that semi-structured interview was adopted, the different topics considered covering issues such as; access to home food, satisfaction on host's food, disruptions in eating pattern. The transcribed data was coded, repeated words and phrases were underlined using different colors of marker pen until the major categories were identified. In so doing, the respondents' perception on food issue is being established and the major categories were;

1. Access to cooking
2. Description of local /host's food
3. Comparisons of home food with host country's food.

RESULTS

Students right to cook

Findings from the respondents who reside on campus; student hostels, made it known that cooking is being limited as it is officially not allowed to cook because kitchen facilities are not

made available in the students' lodge. The supposed cooking space is just a room with nothing to depict it as a kitchen. This makes majority of those who cook to do so in their rooms secretly.

".....it is one of the reasons I have to leave the campus to stay in town, you can't cook when you at least you have a reason to, not convenient for cooking and you're been monitored" **Kayin**. Wanting to cook and having what to cook most of the times is one of the challenges Nigerian students in Malaysian Universities often encounter. Lack of variety of food to cook also was another challenge which does not motivate these students to cook as it is always difficult to get what to cook and this results into cooking same type of food repeatedly in months. This was affirmed by one of the respondents. "nothing to cook....and rice is the only thing you eat for the whole year" (**Ajadi**)

However, majority of the students all attested to the fact that they still prefer to cook what they will eat as the host country food does not only lack variety but they also do not find it satisfying. "I cook, because most of their food has sugar, we are not used to it, I have to cook" (**Ishaku**). Other students also attested to the fact that cooking is still preferred to eating the host country's cuisine "I cook I didn't understand their food..." (**Ajadi**). "I Majorly, I cook. I go to the restaurants when I'm too busy to cook" (**Callie**).

Summarily, most of the students agreed that they prefer to cook even though the cooking could be tedious due to lack of an equipped kitchen and some said they do both cooking and visit the restaurant but not without complaining about Malaysian food which they said is normally sugary lack variety as it is only rice based.

Description of Host country's cuisine

This category is to investigate the view of Nigerian students on Malaysian food, from their responses, the themes which are generated include, sugary, lack varieties, not satisfying. Below are the responses of the respondent based on their depiction of the Malaysian food; "Malaysian food,....., any food looking delicious is mainly sugar, go for dull food, it is something sumptuous" (**Faithia**). Here Faithia, said was able to describe Malay food to be sugary, and when it looks attractive means it is not for African consumption. In a similar statement Rilwan described the host country food as "Too sugary Too sugary, but with time am getting used to it." (**Rilwan**). Findings made it known that the Nigerian students found the Malay food to be sugary, and also which result to some health discomfort but which the duration could not be ascertained "very sweet, initially was having a lot of running stomach problem, later found out, food I can eat, I now stick to those ones...I don't eat the kind of food that I don't understand." (**Walter**).

The local food was also described to lack variety and due to eating the same kind of food all the time, and made it known that they derived no satisfaction from eating "same type of food you eat every time... here we only have ... it is only rice, it is quite frustrating, I don't get the satisfaction after eating" (**Ajadi**). His statement was also confirmed by another student, "One aroma, almost the same kind of food" (**Callie**) this was the statement of Callie, simply stating that the Malay food lack

variety and has a particular smell. Another student did not fail to express how shocked he was to discover that sugar could be used to cook, a big disparity which exist between the host country's food and the food obtained in the country of birth. "Malaysian food is quite different from ours their foods are light, Africans foods are solid foods, heavy food when we were here newly could not eat for one week they use sugar in their food, Africans we use salt we were shocked seeing people eating food with, eating food cooked with sugar" (**Mathew**). Mathew in his own description of Malay food says it's not stomach filling, and are made with sugar instead of the salt taste Nigerians are used to back home, this brought about culture shock and this had had effect on their feeding habit for a while.

Food comparison with home

The question seems unavoidable so as to find the opinion of these students concerning the Malay and the Nigerian food, and also, this is to find out the differences which exist between the Malay food and that of the Nigeria in a brief. From the responses of these students, two themes were generated, and they are; incomparable, no much variety. Below are the responses generated from the question. Seeing things almost from the perspective of not been ethnocentric, **Faithia** said every society would want to say they are better than the other society, the same thing is applicable to this segment of the research. However, she admitted that Nigerian and Malay food are simply incomparable. She said and it's quoted;

"Incomparable, to them theirs is better, and to us, ours is better." (**Faithia**).

For Stean without mincing his words was able to state his opinion is the food is incomparable and that they lack variety.

"ok.... I will say.. they don't have food if you want to compare with my country because the choice are all center around rice" (**Stean**).

In the statement of Rilwan, he stated clearly that the Malaysians' food lack variety, which is also in line with the statement which was made by Stean when he said Malaysian food is only rice. He states thus;

"they don't have food, sorry to say, they have only rice, God bless Nigeria" (Rilwan, IQE, 4)

For Callie he was able to say "It is incomparable, my country have a very vast varieties of food....nasi, Rice is always in every of their food" (**Callie**).

Not only that the food cannot be compared but that Malaysian food is just rice based, Mathew was in support of what Callie said, In Malaysian rice is been made into different foods. "10times better than Malaysian food, Malaysia only rice. Nigeria so many, so many food this thing, Its incomparable, if you are staying ten years you eat one type of food for ten years. It's very frustrating" (Mathew, IQE, 4).

For Ishaku, he simply said "It is not comparable at all" (**Ishaku**).

From the responses generated, it is obviously stated that the Nigerian food and that of the Malaysians cannot be compared as their food is said to lack varieties because all their diet is rice based.

DISCUSSION

Results obtained from this research indicate that Nigerian students experienced difficulties regarding feeding in the host country, a challenge which is common among sojourners. The challenges as discovered ranged from lack of functioning kitchens in the hostels which makes cooking meals of their choice to be quite difficult. This as recorded also made those who want to cook to hesitate thereby depriving them of having a taste of food like home country food. The Nigerian students had a first-hand experience of an adage which says “one man’s meat is another man’s poison.” To these students, it is quite illogical and shocking to know that sugar can be used to cook food instead of the salt they are familiar with. For this reason, most of them described the Malaysian food as being sugary. For the fact that the Nigerian students are used to food being salted, confusing as well as shocking because only beverages are permitted to be sweetened and therefore felt confused with what is practiced in the host culture. However, it could be noted that with time, some of the students stated that they accepted it to be the norm in the society but had to devise a means of avoiding the meal with sugar which is almost impossible if one stays in Malaysia.

Aside the fact that the host food is majorly sweetened, Nigerian students affirmed they resulted to cooking often to have the Nigerian food taste mainly because the Malaysian food sold at the restaurant lacks variety. Few of these students said they visit the restaurant when they have no time to cook but would prefer to do the cooking to have a taste of home. Describing the host country’s food, the Nigerian students said they don’t derive satisfaction upon eating the Malaysian food as they described it to be sugary and also it lacks variety as rice is said to form the basis of all their food and this makes it to be possible to eat rice throughout the period of studying. Having described the food as unsatisfying and to lack variety, findings revealed that this significantly altered their meal pattern and the frequency of feeding. Some of the students also complained of the health discomforts experienced due to the consumption of the local food at the initial stage of their sojourn in the host country. This confirms that the more disparate the native food of the sojourner from the food available in the host country, the more the adverse effects on such an individual. While asked to compare the host country’s food with home’s, the Nigerian students agreed that it is incomparable, as the Nigerian food is in variety as one can choose not to eat a kind of food for a given period this which they said is impossible in the Malaysian context. Findings also made it known that they prefer home food because it is more appealing to them. However, research shows that the longer the students stay in Malaysia, they could adapt to the taste and the “smell” as they initially described and the better the taste become to them, but some of them stated that all the Malaysian food all taste alike even after having spent much time in the host culture.

CONCLUSION

It is worth noting that culture shock is inevitable amongst international students, sojourners due to cultural difference and distance. Therefore, it would be recommended for students to have a foreknowledge of their host culture and make adequate preparation both psychologically and material

wise before setting out to study in a foreign country with different culture. In relation to food and feeding, international students would be advised to travel with a small quantity of their favorite home-grown food as many have professed it helpful. In the same vein, the institutions would be implored to provide adequate cooking facilities for students residing in the school premises to alleviate their cooking difficulties as many students alleged they would be more relieved of the challenges if cooking can be done more conveniently. It would also be suggested to the students’ association of every country to communicate through the International students’ office to see the possibility of introducing different nationality’s cuisine as this will reduce the necessity to cook most of the time as the students complained.

Further research should consider the effects of long term and short term of poor feeding on the academic and emotions of the students having affirmed that these students have feeding related issues in their host country. Therefore, this study indicates that time factor, that is the time a sojourner spends in a given host country has a role to play in responding to culture shock, the longer a sojourner stays, the more comfortable they become with such culture. Similarly, the impact of culture shock on individual varies, for some, the effect is short termed while for others, a longer time is required to acclimatize to the host culture.

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