

EVALUATING THE ROLE OF HALAL FOOD IN MALAYSIA AS AN EDU-TOURISM HUB: THE CASE OF MUSLIM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Edu-tourism is now an alternative strategy to the mass tourism development effort. Therefore, it is of importance to study the factors that may boost Edu-tourism for Malaysia as a halal hub. This paper focuses on evaluating the food choice experiences for the Muslim international students studying in Malaysia, for the purpose of understanding the issue and offering solution to support their well-being. The area of Muslim international students' acculturation experiences has been documented in extant literature. The process and issues when making halal food choice upon migration however, received little attention compared to other studies concerning international students' experiences. For the aim to explore the Muslim international students' halal food choice experiences, two methods of qualitative approaches were applied; using accompanied food shopping observation, followed by an in-depth interview with new international students. The findings identified the halal food perception, the factors that influence the halal food choice and the food adjustment strategy as the themes emerged from the observation and interviews. The study further extends the knowledge on the halal food choice experience and elucidates the importance of halal food management in Edu-tourism. Future studies related to food choice could be extended to a wider international group to provide a significantly valuable lens towards the literature on acculturation experiences and managing halal food choice for Edu-tourism practitioners.

Keywords: *Edu-tourism, halal food choice, acculturation, Muslim international students.*

INTRODUCTION

Edu-tourism is a notion used to explain the practices or program, which may include several other tourism sub-types such as eco-tourism, heritage tourism, or students exchanges between educational institutions with the aim of travelling for educational purposes (Ankomah & Larson, 2004). Edu-tourism is not new and its popularity in the tourism market is increasing (Zarzuela, Pernas, Calzón, Ortega, & Rodríguez, 2013). Several authors have noted the growth in the provision of education, including international educational experiences. More specifically, Edu-tourism industry is expected to attract 1,070,000 students by 2017 (Ortiz, Chang and Fang, 2015), and the global spending on educational products and services is expected to increase from USD4.4 trillion in 2012 to USD6.2 trillion in 2017 (Ortiz, Chang and Fang, 2015).

Universities and other international institutions are adopting globalization strategies, to enable them to attract and recruit international students, and to increase their market share (Cubillo, Cerviño and Sánchez, 2006). The global demands have increased the intakes of international students in tertiary education, whereby, from 1.8 million in 2007, the number of students is forecasted to be 7.2 million in 2025 with 70% of them coming from India and China (Bohm et al. 2002). The value placed on an international education and the higher cost of education in home country „push“ many students to seek cheaper and affordable education overseas like Malaysia, Singapore, China or Australia. Malaysia, as a Muslim country has an advantage and must take this opportunity to promote itself as a halal Edu-tourism hub.

Universities and other academic institutions must offer efficient and effective support system to facilitate international students' well-being. All aspects of everyday life, which includes academic and social aspect, must be managed to provide a better life experience and sustain Edu-tourism in Malaysia. To date, little has been written about tourism impact or issues surrounding the management of Edu-tourism market segment and the special role of Malaysia as a halal Edu-tourism destination. Understanding educational tourists and the issues surrounding international students is critical if this form of tourism is to be managed efficiently and effectively.

In addition, little empirical research exists on the role of food in the academic sojourn of international students, although food emerged as a major category and was very important to international students' life (Mustafa, 2016). Furthermore, it remains unclear to what extent the Muslim international students cope with the different food and dietary environment in Malaysia, how they perceived dietary changes during acculturation and what the main determinants were for their halal food choices. The knowledge on this context will help gain a better perspective in providing support to the Muslim international students' well-being. Furthermore, it provides deeper insights on the current support provided by the Malaysian educational institutions. In addition, it elucidates the institution's role as a halal destination for Edu-tourism segment.

The international students

International education is a major export industry at university level and international students have made valuable educational and economic contributions to the host country (Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2009). Being a financial asset to universities with a wide range of knowledge and skills and rich in heritage and culture, the international students have 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 students' stay is mutually beneficial because they bring a range of assets to the host country and in return gain higher education. Despite the significant contribution, the adjustment and transitional experience of mobile migration population including international students remain 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. Improvement of overall adjustment experience may increase recruitment of international students in the future (Ward, 2001; Chapdelaine et al., 2004; Brown, 2009; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Brown et al., 2010).

Previous studies by Zhai (2002), Andrade (2006), Gu et al. (2010), and Smith et al. (2011) found that international students must manage not only adjustment issues and challenges including the general difficulties often faced by other domestic students, but they also must face the added stress of adjustment and acculturation. Recent studies are limited on food related issues that negatively affected international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment during acculturation (Furukawa, 1997; Brown, 2009). On the other hand, only few studies addressed satisfying adjustment experience among migrants (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).

For international students, migration became a turning point and the start of an independent life and new responsibilities in the host country. This experience is quite challenging because the students are required to develop a new food choice system and were constantly being expose to unfamiliar food and culture, and they must personally commit to food provisioning responsibilities; which added to the stressful academic roles and activities (Mustafa, 2016). The process of deciding food choice in a totally different and new culture requires a person to relate their past food experience and skills, social support system (co-national friends), and meaning-making of the food they are eating, and these considerations gradually complicates the food choice process (Mustafa, 2016).

Comprehending these issues from the international students' perspective will assist higher institutions and related bodies handling this group, in the attempts to implement and improve the overall adjustment experience that will later lead to higher satisfaction rate among the international students.

Halal food choice for the Muslim international students

Musaiger (1993) highlighted that religion has a noticeable influence on food choice, in a study on how social, cultural and economic factors determine food consumption patterns in Muslim countries. Moreover, the impact of religion was greater than economic or any other factors on people's food habits (Musaiger, 1993). The impact also depends on the religion itself and to the extent of how devoted the followers were to the teachings of their religion (Bonne, Vermeir, Bergeaud-Blackler, & Verbeke, 2007). In their study on halal food determinants in France, Bonne et al. (2007) mentioned that most religions forbid certain foods; for example, pork in Judaism and Islam, or pork and beef in Hinduism and Buddhism. One of the religions governed by rules and custom with food prohibitions is Islam, where Muslim has to follow a set of dietary prescription or „halal dietary laws“ (Regenstein, Chaudry & Regenstein, 2003).

The personal factor when identifying oneself with Islamic beliefs carried very meaningful influence on the halal food choice that conforms to it. It was agreed that the fundamental challenge for the Muslim international students in a non-Muslim country was locating halal and sourcing other food permitted by their religion (Hopkins, 2011; Novera, 2004). For example, Novera (2004) found the Indonesian postgraduate students in Australia complained about the difficulties in finding halal food because the Muslim's halal practices were not always understood or appreciated in Australia. Hopkins (2010) used data from the narrative of 29 Muslim students attending a British Higher education institution to understand their experiences, where the complexity of finding halal food was mentioned as one of the challenges and students had to travel many miles to get halal food.

In the other hand, adhering to the halal rules and regulations, restrictions, and permitted food choice is not an issue in Malaysia where majority of people followed the same set of rules. This study found that one of the factors that drive international students to choose Malaysia as their destination for further studies is the status as a Muslim country. On the first view, this study found that the halal food was available around the university and it was not actually the major issue for the Muslim students. The halal label was easy to spot and most of the food sellers were wearing hijab, which indicates to them the halal food availability. The „suitable for vegetarian“ option was also an alternative, with most of its features allowed in the Islamic laws.

Nevertheless, the transition of the Muslim international students to Malaysia still has its challenge, which includes the trustworthiness of their halal food choice and unfamiliar taste. It came to a point where the students need to reconsider their halal food choice although they are in a Muslim country. However, the trust issue on the halal food claims outside the university was found to be the biggest challenge due to perceived complexity of the preparation and handling of halal food. It was mentioned that the students were not concern over the availability of halal food at first, but it was later found that certain halal food like chicken, meat, frozen food, ready meals, and the range of vegetarian food options were sometimes sold in various areas alongside non-halal foods outside the university. In addition, some food sellers were not Muslim, but they claim to be selling halal food or pork-free food. This caused the Muslim international students to be more selective and careful when making food purchases outside the university.

METHODOLOGY

The main data collection method and design was developed based on a qualitative research approach. An accompanied shop shopping observation and in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted with new Muslim international students at a university in northern Malaysia.

Grocery shopping involves more than an act of buying; it is also a complex practice based on a range of associated experience (Thomas & Garland, 2004). In the study of shopping behaviour, it was noted that a method termed shopping with consumers (SWC) has enabled the researchers to create rich datasets and indicate shopping behaviour in specific contexts (Lowrey, Otnes & McGrath, 2005). The method generated text that “in conjunction with depth interviews, yields insights that may otherwise remain hidden from researchers” (Lowrey et al., 2005:176). Lowrey et al. (2005:177-179) listed several key guides when conducting SWC (Table 1):

Table 1: Key Guide when Conducting ‘Shopping with Consumers’ (SWC)

1	The first guide is recruitment followed by an initial one-to-one in-depth interview designed to establish rapport prior to the accompanied shopping
2	It was essential to allow informants to shop as “naturally” as possible
3	The process of taking notes during the trips should be explained beforehand so participants would not be alarmed during the actual trip
4	The initial shopping trip began at a predetermined retail setting
5	Interviews were designed to clarify specific questions the researchers may have had about the behaviours observed during the first shopping trip and to develop insights that may not have been evident during the first interviews but became salient once actual shopping behaviour was observed
6	The second shopping trip, which used identical procedures as the first trip, although the shopping venue might change based on preferences of the participants

Source: (Lowrey et al., 2005).

Accompanied shop was intended as an opportunity to observe how the students do food shopping. During accompanied shop session, the researcher followed the participants while they shopped for food, observing and taking notes based on an observation protocol developed and focusing on their behaviour when deciding a purchase. Because 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 students’ behaviour when making food purchase decision in a new food setting and environment.

A semi-structured interview was then conducted to understand the students’ behaviour while making food choices during grocery shopping. The method allowed the meaning making of the participant’s actions, and to be translated into the form of contextual data fitting the objective of this study. The interviews were also to capture in-depth explanation, personal experience, issues, and perception as well as to deepen the meaning of the student’s food choice during their time in Malaysia. The most widely used form of interview is the semi structured, which consists of a mixture of open-ended and specific questions designed to elicit both expected and unexpected information and evolves in situ (Fetterman, 1998). According to Kvale (1996:70), the qualitative interview is “a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects’ everyday world.”

For the purpose of the study, only participants with the attributes in the inclusion criteria were selected. It was important to specify the criteria for participation so the purpose of the study can be accomplished. The inclusion criteria were: 1) new international students, 2) Muslim, and 3) able to converse in English.

All the students are taking bachelor's degree or postgraduate studies at the university. New students’ experience was crucial because the issues faced during their stay reflected and helped explain the food choice process. Table 2 provides list of participants’ demographic and social characteristics:

Table 2: Participants’ Demographic and Social Characteristics (n:6)

Pseudonyms/ Gender	Country of origin	Age
Anna (F)	China (CHINA)	22
Firman (M)	Indonesia (INDO)	23
Isah (F)	Indonesia (INDO)	21
Sada (F)	Thailand (THAI)	22
Imiz (F)	Yemen (YEMEN)	30
Mon (F)	Nigeria (NIG)	28
Fisah (F)	Saudi Arabia (SA)	24

In total, there were six students: one from China, two from Indonesia, and one from Thailand, Yemen, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia respectively. Age range is from twenty-two to thirty-one years old. Five

female and only one male student were observed and interviewed. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. There were altogether six transcripts which then was coded and analysed using thematic analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Four themes were developed from the observation and in-depth interviews: the perception on halal food choice, the issues and challenges in halal food choice, and the food choice adjustment strategy. These themes are discussed in detail subsequently.

Halal food choice perception

According to this study, the halal food choice perception was found to be one of the pull factors that encouraged the Muslim international students to choose Malaysia as their destination. The students perceived the local halal food as easily accessible, sufficient resources, economically affordable and physically easy to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Food access is also associated with economic factors, time of immigration, and/or employment status (Winham, 2009).

Firman (Indo, 23) believed that the halal food here is trustworthy compared to his home country, "It is easy to spot Muslim and non-Muslim food sellers here compared to my country. So, I believed it more." Sada (Thai, 22) perceived the food in Malaysia is similar and she can adjust well to it, "It is the same. Maybe less spicy but similar taste. It's near the border, so easy to get." It was believed that due the proximity to Thailand border makes the local halal food available to Sada acceptable because of its similar taste. She also claimed the reason she chose to study in Malaysia is because it is a Muslim country and she can adjust well to it. Isah (Indo, 21) supported this, "Malaysia is better. Easy to get halal food, culture is same and I understand the language. I need international exposure and education in Malaysia is good."

Mon (Nig, 28) responded similarly, "The food not the same, but I can managed because all halal. I don't worry about food here." Most participant agreed that they do not have much issue with the availability of halal food. The respondents concur that Malaysia is a perfect destination for international studies because of its status as a Muslim country.

The Issues and Challenges of Halal Food Choice

Food cost plays a role in the dietary pattern changes. The participants from Middle East and Asia said that fruits and vegetables are in the same price range in Malaysia, whereas in their home country meats are cheaper. Anna (Chi, 22) claimed that it was easier to get halal meat here but it was expensive compared to home, so she is eating more fruits and vegetable. Fisah (SA, 24) agreed on the cost, "I wish they were cheaper especially lamb meal. I miss lamb and eat it almost every day back home. Now maybe twice a month."

The participants also mentioned that the traditional food stores were in big cities, so they must buy their foods from local cafes and restaurants, convenience food stores and fast food restaurants, which are closer to them. Public transportation to the traditional stores is limited, especially in the university they are studying. The students rely on friends who have cars to go to the big city, or they go to shop as a group once a week or a month. Fisah (SA, 24) claimed it was a struggle and said: "The first year I didn't have a car so I would ask my friends to take me because the public transportation is bad here. I also ask my family to send me some food from Saudi".

On the other hand, although the local food was easily available, it did not suite their taste and they do not feel fulfilled when eating the food here. "I'm Chinese so I need my food. The Chinese food here is not halal. The other halal food is like normal Malaysian food, which is different. I don't like it too much" (Anna, China, 22).

Dissimilar and dissatisfaction to the taste of local halal food, enticed the international students to find alternative food source around the area. However, it was found that across the respondents, access to the fast and local convenience foods were easy, while authentic traditional foods were difficult to obtain. Furthermore, the traditional food items are more expensive and poorer in quality.

Imiz, (Yemen, 30) said: “The food in Middle-eastern restaurants are not good and international aisles (in supermarkets) here have traditional food but with a very near expiration date, like a few months, so I can’t save it for a long time, and it is expensive.”

Isah (Indo, 21) mentioned an incident that made her more cautious when making food purchases, “But my friend went to a wet market once and he sees non-Muslim selling pork dishes next to Muslim seller. Maybe they should separate. Luckily the seller told my friend, not halal, not halal.”

Food Choice Adjustment Strategy

To compensate for the dissimilar and dissatisfaction of local halal food, the Muslim international students were found to develop certain strategies. For example, bringing their own food when they came to Malaysia or having some of their traditional food sent to them. As Anna (China, 22) and Mon (Nig, 28) pointed out that most of their luggage were filled with food when they first came to Malaysia. Anna mentioned, “I need to have this (referring to the food she brought with her). This is real food to me.” Anna also foresees that although it is a Muslim country, it would be difficult to find halal Chinese food, as she was told by other friend who have been to Malaysia.

Firman and Isah, both from Indonesia, claimed they had to learn how to cook in order to satisfy their Indonesian food cravings. “I found there is a lot of „ayam penyet“ or „bakso“. But it is never the same. I miss my „real“ Indonesian food. So I ask mum for recipe and learn how to cook them” (Isah, Indo, 21). It was a weekly affair for her to gather with her Indonesian friends and made Indonesian dish together. She admitted that this activity helps her eliminate homesickness and allow studying better. The retention of food habits and co-national friendship networks were among the most accepted dimensions of international identity (Laroche et al., 1998). It was stated in Holloway et al. (2009) that creating a co-national network can help reduce stress related to food choice decisions upon arrival in a new country.

DISCUSSION

Major’s (2005) study on Asian-born international students at a university in the United States, identified halal food as a major concern for Muslim international students. This may be true, as for international students living away from home for the first time, their transition normally includes new experiences and responsibilities such as food choices when buying and preparing food or planning meals (Mustafa, 2016). The institutional orientation to academic and campus life, with added new responsibilities, can be overwhelming to international students upon arrival in the new country (Major, 2005). The experience can be even more challenging for international Muslim students as they need to conform strictly to their religious belief especially concerning halal food. In this note, this study identified the emerging themes on halal food choice, which are: (1) limited trustworthiness on halal food choices, (2) dissimilar and dissatisfied taste, (3) the need to make extra effort to get authentic food that is halal and (4) cost of authentic traditional home country food.

The Muslim international students were aware that halal food was served at various food outlets in the university. Nevertheless, it was admitted that although being in a Muslim country, a few students were unable to fully trust the halal claims of certain food sellers outside the university. They had doubts about purchasing halal food outside and felt that the safest way to be sure the food conforms was to ask other Malaysian Muslims. It was not sufficient that a „pork-free“ or „vegetarian“ claims were clearly stated on the food. They must search more about Malaysia’s halal food claims through the internet. It was very important for the Muslim international students to be sure that the food they consumed complied with Islamic law and they were not willing to compromise.

To resonate with the other findings from this study, Mehdizadeh et al.’s (2005) study on Iranian international students in Scotland stated that the least cultural problems appeared to be on issues like finding food items or ingredients that the students were used to. This is because ethnic food stores selling imported cooking ingredients are increasingly available and even local supermarkets have supplies of such ingredients. Vallianatos et al. (2008) found that the availability of ethnic food stores was like a haven for migrants where they can find the comfort of familiarity from the same food products with the same packaging as back home. The availability of ethnic food ranges in large

supermarket chains attempting to meet the diverse population's needs has made it easier to recreate ethnic traditional cuisine (Vallianatos et al., 2008). This means that the availability of the authentic ingredients to recreate a home country meal must be facilitated to make it much more accessible and affordable.

Personal grocery shopping and food preparation in a foreign country was a new experience for the international students. It was easy to constantly choose to eat convenient food because of the need to prioritise between the role as a student and various other life practices, such as cooking and cleaning, within scarce time and resources. However, this stereotyping of university students eating fast food, ready meals, or eating out most of the time may be misleading because this study also found a different context of food choice among the new international student who chose a healthier diet and had less problems and challenges related to food. The students were competent in managing new food choices and they actively developed new food habits and adapted to the changes in the new environment. They can easily adapt to the local Malaysian food and halal food choice were abundant.

This study found that halal food choice was one of the important factors that influenced the Muslim international students for their decision to study in Malaysia. However, the issues and challenges pertaining to halal food management in educational institutions must be managed efficiently and effectively. This in turn, will allow Malaysia to become a favorable halal Edu-tourism hub.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations associated with this study that must be noted. This study applied qualitative approaches conducted among six respondents. Due to the limited number of participants, cultural limitation might exist and caution must be taken when generalizing the findings to the overall international students. The in-depth interview format enhanced data but cultural distance must be taken into consideration in evaluating the perception towards local food. The analysis style in this qualitative study used subjective interpretation to identify the themes; however, member checks were used to check for consistency and to improve reliability of findings. One of the limitations that must be considered is the limited ability of some of the participant to fully express his or her thoughts and opinions by English language as not all the participants speaks English as their first language.

Implications for future research

Knowledge of halal food choices and preferences of international students from various ethnic groups is necessary in order to provide effective nutrition education and care to an increasingly diverse population (Brittin & Obeidat, 2011). The present findings could have practical implications informing the development of university policies that facilitate a healthy food environment that is culturally appropriate for Muslim international students. The university will attract more international students, and thus increase its competitive advantage in becoming a halal Edu-tourism hub. Therefore, this research suggests that the university work with the food service companies to offer a wider variety of foods and more dietary options for Muslim international students such as offering authentic and ethnic halal food items to Muslim students.

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