

International Students in Australia and Demand for Cultural Foods

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Abstract

The aim of this review paper is to evaluate the literature available on international students and their demand for cultural and traditional foods. It also aims to show that such studies are required in the case of Australia as well. Australia attracts thousands of students from around the world to its universities every year. Even though it is a well-established fact that international students in foreign countries prefer traditional and cultural foods, there have been very few studies conducted on the topic, especially Australia-specific studies. This review has covered studies which are mostly conducted on international students in the U.S. and U.K; only some of the studies reviewed have been carried out in Australia.

Keywords: International Students, Purchase Behaviour, Culture, Marketing

Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, Australia has been witness to increasing numbers of international students coming in for higher studies. This has been a part of a larger, worldwide phenomenon of students going to foreign countries to pursue higher education.

This population of expat international students in Australia also forms a major portion of the population demanding cultural and traditional foods. International students in Australia, especially the ones who have newly arrived from their home countries, would like to eat their familiar, traditional cultural foods.

This paper aims to review the research studies carried out international students around the world and their demand for traditional cultural foods. Since most of the studies reviewed in this paper have been carried out in the UK and the US, this paper also aims to provide recommendations on how such a similar study could be beneficial in the case of Australia.

Methodology

For the purpose of this review study, search terms were used in the Google Scholar search engine. The results of these searches were shortlisted as per the year of publication. An attempt has been made to review recent literature.

Results and Discussion

The terms 'traditional foods' and 'ethnic foods' have been used interchangeably in this paper. Both of these mean 'cultural food' or food that international students consumed in their home countries. Trichopoulou, Soukara, and Vasilopoulou (2007) define traditional food as food with particular characteristic in term of the use of raw which makes it different from other processed and convenience food (Alakaam, Castellanos, Bodzio, & Harrison, 2015).

Challenges Faced

According to a study in the US, international students faced a number of challenges such as language barriers, stress due to expectations of academic performance, loneliness, homesickness, discrimination leading to depression, and practical problems due to change in environment (Smith, 2011 – as cited in Lee, 2017). There have been a number of studies which have proved that international students are more prone to stress, anxiety and depression because of the extra challenges they face when they have to adapt to a different country and culture (Chen, 1999; Krämer, Prüfer-Krämer, Stock, & Tshiananga, 2004; Owens & Loomes, 2010; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006 – as cited in Loomes & Croft, 2013). According to a survey study of international students at the University of Wollongong, Australia, international students reported relative unhappiness and disorientation on arrival (Neri & Ville, 2008 – as cited in Loomes & Croft, 2013).

Acculturation

According to Hartwell, Edwards and Brown (2011), there is limited research on the acculturation of international students with respect to food habits. Acculturation to a foreign country may be a stressful experience for international students and food could be a means to ease the process out. Unfortunately, there are not enough studies which have been carried out on the subject.

According to Newman and Sahak (2012), acculturation can be explained as a learning the practices and customs of a new culture, “acquiring the capability to function within the main culture while preserving the original culture” (- as cited in Ishak, Zahari, & Othman, 2013, pg. 439). It can be referred to as an act in which people belonging to a culture adopt the beliefs and behaviours of another culture. According to Sam and Berry (2010), acculturation can be said to be the process of cultural and psychological change resulting out of meeting of cultures (- as cited in Ishak, Zahari, & Othman, 2013). As per a study by Lopez-Class, Castro, and Ramirez (2011), acculturation can be seen as a multi-dimensional process where individual and groups undergo adjustment stages and changes in language, socioeconomic and cultural values (- as cited in Ishak, Zahari & Othman, 2013). The study by Jennings, Forbes, McDermott, and Hulse (2006) says that there are elements to ethnic cultures across the world which are disappearing or being retained, due to the process of participating in a larger identity (- as cited in Ishak, Zahari, & Othman, 2013). Hence, when people move to foreign countries, in an effort to merge with or adapt to the foreign country’s culture, parts of their own culture might either decrease or increase. According to a study by Ishak, Zahari, Ahmad and Ibrahim (2018), attributes of acculturation such as education, social interaction, and media provide an understanding of food cultures. These also nurture familiarity as well a preference for food of different ethnic origins. This study says that in a multiracial country, the cross-culturing of food happens gradually through education, social interaction, and media. Ishak et al. (2018) say that factors of acculturation play an important role in influencing the preparation and consumption of food from other ethnic groups.

When people move to foreign countries, whether as immigrants or sojourners, they carry their eating habits and food patterns with them. Some studies, Oswald (1999) and Penaloza and Gilly (1991), have explored how immigrants adapted to new and foreign cultures “through food consumption, in circumstances characterized by multiculturalism or globalization” (- as cited in Tirelli, Martínez-Ruiz, & Gómez-Ladrón-De-Guevara, 2013, pg. 104). As per other studies such as Jamal (1998), Laroche, Kim, and Tomiuk (1999), and Verbeke and Lopez (2005), in addition

to factors related to food such as taste, tradition, origin, or appearance, variables related to cultural and psychological adaptation also influenced immigrant purchase and consumption patterns significantly (as cited in Tirelli, Martínez-Ruiz, & Gómez-Ladrón-De-Guevara, 2013). Hence, alongside acculturation, dietary acculturation also affects these patterns purchase and consumption behaviour of immigrants in a foreign country. Dietary acculturation can be explained as the process which happens when immigrants start adopting the food choices and eating patterns of the new host country (Satia, 2003; Satia et al., 2001 – as cited in Tirelli, Martínez-Ruiz, & Gómez-Ladrón-De-Guevara, 2013).

For international students arriving in foreign countries, transition to a new and unfamiliar environment is a complex process. Often, the host countries are very different from their home countries and initially, it can be tough for these students to adapt to these new conditions. This adaptation is more than a socio-cultural process for them, and affects their living conditions as well as their health (Yue, Le, & Terry, 2014). During their stay in foreign countries for attaining higher education, international students experience many cultural differences, which may result in them adapting to these differences and finally, acculturating to the foreign culture they are living in (O'Sullivan & Amirabdollahian, 2016). Various studies indicate that food is an important as well as distressing issue during international students' cross-cultural transition (Furukawa, 1997; Pan et al., 1999; Brown, 2009; - as cited in Mustafa, 2016). International students moving to foreign countries might get homesick and depressed and traditional and ethnic foods might be a way for them to feel more at ease in the new environment. Studies such as Brown et al. (2010) and Collins (2008) have shown that familiar and preferred foods provide a sense of ease, nostalgia, comfort, emotional attachment and a sense of belonging to international students in foreign countries (as cited in Stewin, 2013).

But due to various reasons, a lot of these international students may not be able to stick to their consumption of traditional food in the foreign country for a long time. As per some studies, such as Hulin-Salkin (1987) and Lau-Gesk (2003), the change of environment makes immigrant consumers abandon consumption habits of their home country and acquire products belonging to the new culture more easily. This shows acculturation in the immigrant consumers (Tirelli & Martinez-Ruiz, 2012). The same is true for international students as they start adapting to newer, more readily available and often cheaper food options.

Amongst international students, food acculturation in foreign countries could result in both positive and negative outcomes in relation to changes in their dietary habits and health status. In a study, Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson (2006) examined the health habits and well-being of predominantly Asian international students at the University of Melbourne. They found that many of these students were successful in maintaining positive perceptions regarding the nutritional aspect of their eating habits (- as cited in Luo, 2015). As opposed to this, the study by Pan et al. (1999) found that Asian international students in the U.S. changed their dietary patterns for the negative with significant increase in intake of fats, sugars, salt as well as dairy products during their time on American university campuses (- as cited in Luo, 2015).

Food Habits

The eating behaviour of students is a subject that has been researched extensively. According to Deliens et al. (2014), studies have been carried out on university students which indicate that there are many determinants of eating behavior among this population including individual factors, social environment, physical environment, macro environment and university

characteristics (- as cited in Corcoran, 2018). Lacaille et al. (2011) state that on a macro level, the university's social and physical environment also determine eating behavior among students (- as cited in Corcoran, 2018). As per Murray et al. (2016), the ability of university students to cook and eat healthy food is restricted due to financial instability, and limited time, among other factors (- as cited in Corcoran, 2018).

In case of international students, the food habits are more complex. According to a study by Yue et al. (2014), being unaccustomed to the local food in a foreign country could be a significant challenge in front of international students, which may lead them to, consciously or unconsciously, change their food choices due to unavailability of cultural foods or ingredients. This change may also be brought about due to different concepts of nutrition or different food processing methods in the new, host country that they have moved to. Many times, there is limited availability of traditional or ethnic food, in and around university campuses. Most of the times, these foods are more expensive and take up more time to cook. These reasons may motivate international students to change their food habits.

According to Luo (2015), food related factors such as taste, appearance and traditions could predict dietary habits of immigrants from various countries of origin. Studies by Mansoor and Quillin (2007), and Pérez-Cueto and Verbeke (2009) say that international students display strong capacity for adapting to foreign cultures and this could be visible in their dietary habits (- as cited in Luo, 2015).

Food Insecurity

According to Abe (2016), food insecurity was a significant problem amongst international students and hence, there was an urgent need to increase the accessibility, availability and affordability of traditional and cultural foods preferred by international students. Studies have researched food insecurity amongst university students in general. Abe (2016) says that university students, especially immigrants, are generally identified as being vulnerable to food insecurity. The author says that immigrant university students or international students may be negatively impacted by non-familiar food. International students might find it difficult to adapt to foreign food, at least initially. The availability of familiar and comforting food might not be present, or may be too expensive for the budget-conscious international students. In such cases, they may resort of skipping meals or choosing unhealthy, fast food options. As per Loomes and Croft (2013), the staff working at the Central Queensland University which worked international students became concerned that some of these international students were 'at risk' due to their diet and nutritional intake as during interviews, there were some students who reported not eating for days due to insufficient funds, depression or illness. The authors are of the opinion that poor nutrition has a negative impact on academic performance, an opinion that is supported by numerous studies. According to a study by Hughes, Serebryanikova, Donaldson, and Leveritt (2011), there is a link between diet and health in Australian university students, where "those with 'food insecurity' due to a lack of money tended to have a lower overall perception of their health" (as cited in Loomes & Croft, 2013, pg. 484).

Limitations Contributing to Food Insecurity

The food insecurity faced by international students in foreign countries is caused by certain limitations. The study conducted by Abe (2016) showed that international students want familiar foods and these were limited due to availability, accessibility and affordability. These students were inclined to choose traditional, cultural foods over the ones readily available in the host

country because they have not yet “acculturated to their host country’s food” (Abe, 2016). Unfortunately, due to unavailability of cultural foods, international students have to substitute locally available foods, frequently settling for cheaper and more readily available food, which may or may not be healthy. According to Corcoran (2018), the “social economic conditions such as local availability of foods clearly impacts on the decisions to substitute foods instead of using traditional ingredients”.

Another limitation which contributed to food insecurity amongst international students was the fact that these students had to make time in their busy schedules to prepare food, whereas at home, family members would have provided them with prepared food. International students are frequently very busy with their classes, assignments, projects as well as on-campus jobs which help them with their tuition and living expenditures. In order to eat foods which are traditional and cultural to them, they also need to make time to cook this food. In their home countries, these international students would not have to face the issue of shelf life or storage of food products (O’Sullivan & Amirabdollahian, 2016).

As per the study carried out by Lee (2017), the consumption of home country food decreased once East Asian international students arrived in the U.S. due to lack of availability and due to the time it took to prepare the food. Hence, these students had difficulty maintaining their native diet due to limited number of stores selling ethnic food. In addition, the quality of the available local food did not match the expectations of these students. The author states that ethnic food may be expensive for the international students and they also face a shortage of time when they can cook native food.

According to a survey study carried out on an Australian university campus, some of the international students interviewed admitted to not preparing their own food, mainly due to lack of cooking facilities at their accommodation. Hence, they opted for purchasing food instead, which narrowed down the possibility of them eating traditional or ethnic food. The study showed that international students frequently arranged for accommodation around their chosen universities from offshore, and this accounted for the reason for them not having the knowledge of whether their accommodation included cooking facilities (Loomes & Croft, 2013).

Conclusion

Recommendations

One of the primary recommendations of this paper is that attention needs to be focused on increasing the food security of international students on campuses of Australian universities. According to Stewin (2013), cultural and traditional foods must be made available on campuses to make sure that international students are able to maintain food and identity security. This may be done by establishing international food stores on campuses and reducing the cost of cultural foods preferred by international students. Building on the proximity of international grocery stores by improving the transport system will also go a long way in improving the food security situation for international students studying in Australian universities. Universities can also work with local service providers and food retailers to increase the access of international students to cultural foods which are good in quality.

In case of the study conducted by Amos and Lordly (2014) on international students studying in Canadian universities, this pool of students has emotional as well as physical needs which can be met through food. This study suggests that Canadian universities have an opportunity to

incorporate strategies for food acculturation into campus events and menus. The authors say that the staff on university campuses can help facilitate a positive food environment which can lead international students in cultural identity formation (Amos & Lordly, 2014).

Another recommendation is that universities need to provide extensive education on nutrition to international students coming to Australia. According to some studies, such as Brittin and Obeidat (2011) and Verbik and Lasanowski – Hobsons (2007), it is important to have extensive knowledge of food preferences and eating habits of international students from various ethnic groups, in order to provide appropriate nutrition education as well as care to an increasingly diverse population (Alakaam et al., 2015). If Australian universities arrange for special nutrition seminars and information booklets/brochures for international students arriving on campus, then these students would be better equipped with knowledge regarding their food choices and buying behaviour while on campus. They will be in a position to make informed decisions regarding their food consumption.

Strengths

One of the primary strengths of this review study is that it has identified the need for more Australian studies on the food acculturation patterns and the rising demand for traditional and cultural foods amongst the international student population in Australia. As mentioned above, the research studies reviewed in this study have been conducted in the US and UK. There has been very limited research which has been carried out in Australia. Hence, this paper identified that there is a research gap which currently exists in this field which needs to be filled. It has also been mentioned above that Australia has been attracting high numbers of international students to its universities every year. Therefore, it is imperative that a study such as this would be extremely beneficial for the policymakers, university administration, and businesses such as restaurants, grocery stores etc. Any action resulting from such a study would also help international students combat any food insecurity issues that they might face.

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