

Factors Influencing Muslim International Students to Choose Malaysian Public Universities for Higher Education: A Case study of Pakistani Female Doctoral Students

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Abstract

International higher education especially in a developing country like Pakistan is very important as it leads to obtain a doctoral degree from a foreign university. Evidently, higher education is strongly related to students' social and cultural background and highly paid employment opportunities. Using grounded theory (GT) research method, this paper explores and analyses pull factor, specifically the availability of Halal food in Malaysia that attracts or pull Pakistani female students to choose Malaysian public universities for their higher education. Besides, other factors, including food neophobia, food facilities, its preparation time, cost and quality, have been found as push factors. However, food festivals and cooking and eating together have been revealed as positive factors minimizing the adverse impact of push factors on female doctoral students.

Key words: *Halal food, Pull factor, Food Neophobia, Coping, Pakistani female students*

Introduction

Food has a great importance in one's life especially the family and local food you are brought up with. This importance one can personally experience when a person is going to live in a foreign country, where on the one hand there are opportunities like

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exploring a variety of culture and the advanced paths of social learning, such as making international friends, observing cross-cultural behaviours, and gaining global knowledge (Andrade 2006; McClure, 2007). On the other hand there are possible challenges which could be explicitly observed in terms of various pull and push factors pertaining to acculturation, such as the different language, religion, and food. People, living abroad for a long period of time, encounter these factors, which eventually affect their social life in both positive and negative ways. The food, for example, these people have in a foreign country with the different culture and taste, and the food they leave behind in the country of their origin affect them both physically and emotionally (Brown, Edwards & Hartwell, 2010).

Likewise, international Pakistani students when going abroad to pursue their higher education are not far behind at least in the context of having their food. It is generally observed that these students also consider among others, food related issues when choosing international universities for their higher education. Prior literature reveals that there has been very limited number of studies addressing this important research topic of the food availability and its acceptability by the international students. These few studies, which are quite old, include Henry & Wheeler (1980), Zwingmann and Gunn (1983), and Hall (1995) whereas the most recent one is a study conducted by Brown (2009). Also, there exists no such study that examines the role of food among the international Pakistani students.

Knowing the huge literature gap in the global and Pakistani context, we have therefore selected this important issue for our research study. To our knowledge, this is the first kind of study ever conducted on the above mentioned research issue in Pakistan. We have selected Malaysian universities in the public sector, and examined both the pull and push factors attracting and distracting Pakistani doctoral students to and from these universities. The

following sections of this paper include review of prior studies, methods, research findings and conclusion of this paper.

Review of Literature

Food has a great emotional attachment in an individual's life and having the food that resembles in taste with one's home food can rejuvenate the feelings of joy and accomplishment (Brown, Edwards & Hartwell, 2010; Edwards, Hartwell, & Brown, 2010; Locher, Yeols, maurer, & Van Ells, 2010). Also, the availability of reasonable and quality food has a great emotional influence on international students. Food that tastes like food from their native place (i.e. the place of origin) can recreate the feelings of delight and comfort for the international students. When students feel lonely and experience isolation in the local culture of a foreign country they tend to feel more unhappy and depressed resulting in their adverse psychological and physical well-being (Locher, Yoels, Maurer, & Van Ells (2005). The depression is closely associated with social isolation, and when one develops such feelings of isolation, consuming foods that invokes images of meaningful past social relationships helps him/her to combat those feelings (Locher et al., 2005). It is also evident that familiar foods and tastes relieve the feelings of distress and anxiety; however, new (or unfamiliar) foods cannot have the same positive psychological impact because they tend to induce the feelings of anxiety and depression (Locher et al., 2005).

Brown, Edwards and Hartwell (2010) in their study of understanding the meanings attached to food by international postgraduate students in England found that food being inseparable from culture has a great influence on an individuals' life. The authors found that some international students have a strong attachment to the variety of food of their home country and concluded that the food students ate was of great importance to them both emotionally and physically. Food was the main aspect of

these students' academic life in England that was least open to change, and when students move to a new country with a dissimilar culture this food shock becomes inevitable (Brown et al., 2010). The authors further confirmed that the familiarity of the food of home country could be reassuring as it alleviates one's feelings of loneliness and tends to make them feel rejoiced. Due to these reasons, familiar foods become capable of transporting students to a place and time where they feel safe without any stress in a new social environment that is not their homelike.

According to Edwards, Hartwell, & Brown (2010) food habits are difficult to change as the choice of food is not limited only to taste, but it has been the symbol of home and family get together. The researchers further elaborate that the majority of international students have food neophobia (i.e. the unwillingness to eat, or the hesitancy of having, new or unfamiliar food), and only the minority of them accepts new food and embrace its diversity, however, food habits in terms of liking and disliking also differ between female and male students. In their study of gender differences in factors affecting rejection of food, Nordin, Broman, Garvill, & Nyroos (2004) found that food dislikes or aversions are more common among female adults as compared to their male counterparts in Sweden. Their study results further explained that female adults tend to show more aversion to food and tastes other than of their own, regardless of the fact that both female and male adults have the same tendency to have food neophobia.

Importantly, the availability of *Halal* food to Muslim international students who only eat *Halal* food has been recognized the most important social factor. Putting differently, the non-availability of *Halal* food has been found as the major push (or non-incentive) factor resulting in the Muslim students' reluctance to choose many western universities for their higher education goals (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). In most of the universities around the world, the availability of *Halal* food is the major concern among the Muslim

students, as there are no special restaurants on the campuses that offer *Halal* food (Campbell, 2011). Although some previous studies have discussed the role of food, in particular *Halal* food, as a pull factor behind the promotion of international higher education, but still there exists a research gap in understanding to what extent the availability of *Halal* food influence Muslim students, specifically female doctoral students, to choose public foreign universities for pursuing higher education. Our study therefore explores and analyses a pull factor, principally the availability of *Halal* food in Malaysia that appeal Pakistani female students to choose Malaysian universities for the purpose of attaining their higher education. To our knowledge, this is the first ever qualitative research study conducted on this essential issue of international higher education system in Malaysia with an aim of learning key lessons for the promotion of higher education in Pakistan internationally.

Research Methodology

Knowing that all international students entering higher education in a destination country other than their own have to cope with the various aspects of educational, social, political and legal environments, the majority of international students have to deal with the additional cultural challenges, such as food and language shocks (Bradley, 2000). Using grounded theory (GT) research method (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) we first explored and then specifically analysed a major pull factor that is the availability of *Halal* food in Malaysian public universities that appeal Pakistani female students to pursue their higher education in Malaysia. Besides, we also analysed other factors, including food neophobia, food preparation time, food cost and quality, which altogether have become challenges for Pakistani students to attain higher education while living in Malaysia.

To capture students' emotional attachments to their native food in Pakistan due to its non-availability in Malaysian public universities

on the one hand, and their likes and dislikes associated with Malaysian food on the other hand, we decided to implement a qualitative research approach for which an open ended questionnaire was designed. Using this questionnaire, we were successful to conduct face-to-face interviews through open conversations with the female doctoral students who came from the different provinces of Pakistan to pursue their doctoral studies in Malaysian public universities. Our qualitative research analysis was conducted using NVivo-11 Pro software (NVivo, 2019). We collected the responses from 27 female Pakistani doctoral students currently studying in four selected public universities in Malaysia.

Findings and Discussion

Halal food as a pull factor

Halal literally means permissible in Arabic and refers to foods that Allah has not forbidden in the Holy Quran. Muslims all over the world practice this and availability of *Halal* food in the destination country of higher education is proved to be a major pull factor for attracting international students. In this study, all most all of the respondents (N=27) mentioned that availability of *Halal* food in Malaysia is one of the main reasons for them to choose this country as a destination for the higher education (PhD in this case). This is evident in the following narratives of the respondents:

There is no Halal food issue here in Malaysia, so I am satisfied though the food is not very tasty all the time here... (A respondent from the first year in her doctoral study)

Another respondent stated that just the idea that you do not need to worry about *Halal* or not when you eat every time. This is explicitly a positive factor that it is for sure *Halal* as it is a blessing that even you do not like the food but you can eat it as it is *Halal*. The same respondent explains further:

Yes, eating local food was also a challenge here for the first few

months and still I cannot eat some of the local foods though everything is Halal here in Malaysia for Muslims. I cook at my home because Malaysians eat rice all the time and we Pakistanis cannot eat rice day in day out. However, one thing is encouraging that the availability of Halal food is a blessing when even if you do not like the food, but still you can eat it because it is Halal. In many foreign countries, it is not the matter of taste, but you cannot eat the food as just because it is not Halal. The funny part of the local food is that sweets are not sweet and curry is more sweet (laugh). I don't know why they put sugar in curry?

Furthermore, the decision to choose a particular country for international higher education has also been implicitly influenced by other significant factors, which include but are not limited to the teachers in the home country who obtained doctoral degrees from abroad, relatives and family friends who studied or visited other countries, and alumni of Malaysian universities in Pakistan. These factors have played an important role in decision making of Malaysia as the country of choice of prospective Pakistani students. A respondent from a university located in east Malaysia commented that:

My choice to come to Malaysia is because of Halal food. Besides, one of my teacher also told me about Malaysian culture and encouraged me to pursue my higher studies in Malaysia. He acknowledged that Malaysia is a moderate Muslim country, where quality of education is offered at lower fees, and is secured for women and there is no issue of Halal food.

Pakistani international students do compare their choices in terms of advantages and disadvantages associated with higher education system particularly foreign country of their destination. Food, particularly the accessibility of *Halal* food, that makes international

students culturally comfortable in a foreign country, thus play an imperative role. To quote one respondent, who is unmarried and studying in her second year of doctoral studies affirmed that:

I also got an admission in Chinese university supported by the Chinese government scholarship, but as I told you the reasons I chose Malaysia as it is an Islamic country, and yes, the availability of Halal food is not an issue here.

Food Neophobia

Food neophobia is generally interpreted as the unwillingness to eat, or the hesitancy of having, new foods with which one is not familiar (Birch & Fischer, 1998). On the contrary, 'picky or fussy' eaters are typically defined as children or adults who consume an inadequate variety of foods through rejection of a substantial amount of foods that are familiar or even unfamiliar to them. Therefore, the people with food neophobia are not similar to picky or fussy eaters. A respondent from the University of Malaya said:

Pakistani food has importance in my life, even though I am here in Malaysia, but whenever I eat Pakistani food here it brings tears in my eyes. I cry in happiness and miss the food of my home. It means a lot for me even I bring with me the tea from Pakistan I bring the stock for one year. I can compromise on food but not on tea.

By recognizing this important factor that plays a vital role in ensuring the wellbeing of international students in Malaysia, we also found that there is a research gap in the literature pertaining to food neophobia, specifically in terms of its role in the daily academic life of Pakistani female students pursuing higher education in Malaysian universities. Our qualitative data reveals that more than half of the respondents (N=27) are affected by food neophobia. They face difficulties to tackle this issue because there are no efforts from the university authorities including the health departments on the

campus. Most of the campuses have been privatized and outsourced the food and dining facilities, such as cafes and restaurants, to the local entrepreneurs, who are not aware of food neophobia and, as a result, preferences of international students and their food needs are not properly met (e.g. Nordin et al., 2004). In Malaysia, the local food vendors mainly focus on Malay students (or local Chinese and Indian students only) and therefore expect that rest of the international students could be adaptable to their local food. Hence, local vendors' decisions are mostly driven by their profits other than the students' preferences, specifically food recipes preferred by Pakistani students. According to one respondent studying in her third year of doctoral studies in a university located in the Kuala Lumpur:

For us (Pakistani students) the food is a big issue on the day one we arrive because we are not aware of it. We cannot simply adjust with the local Malay food and there is no information available in the university as to where to find Pakistani food. Again, even if you tell them about our food problem, they will come at you like an aggressive person and show their annoyance. Mainly because of this reason, most of Pakistani students do not go to the local restaurants, which resultantly develop food neophobia among us and brings emotionally negative impact on our health... Before leaving Pakistan, I thought somewhat we have the same culture in Malaysia which is being advertised as Truly Asia. But then again, one of the many things that shocked me was the food. Food is not tasty here at all. We Pakistanis are very stubborn to our food and habits.

Other challenges: Facilities, time, cost and quality

This study also captures multiple other challenges that respondents mentioned during their interviews, such as cooking facilities, time to prepare Pakistani food in Malaysia, its cost and quality. The

following narrative captures the multiple problems that female Pakistani higher education students face in Malaysian Universities which are noticed neither by the University authorities nor by the local health officials:

The one and only important reason I miss Pakistan and feel homesick here in Malaysia is the food. I miss my Pakistani food a lot. The problem here is the plain boil rice. I cannot eat boiled rice, so I was having severe stomach problem. Within the first month, I applied for the permission to cook Pakistani food at my hostel. I got the permission and now I am cooking at my room, but the rooms are very small and there is no pantry or kitchen available at the hostel. It is a real problem for all international students who cannot eat the local food. I suggest for international students they should provide cooking facilities at the hostels with proper kitchen with fridge, oven and stove facilities on every floor or even one at every hostel, so that students can cook for themselves.

Other students mentioned that access to good food has been a major issue with them. Some students mentioned that they were initially lucky to have been received by Pakistani students already on the campus (a program known as ambassadors), who offered some cooked food. But later, these newly arrived students had to manage on their own because there are no cooking facilities, which as a result, leaving them with only available option of consuming local Malay food. After the first week, even some food items and sweets that were brought from home are also over, so students ultimately feel helpless and miserable. Luckily, we came here in group of five people because we were all friends from 6 years and we did MBA together in Pakistan. We all ate only once a day for few weeks as cooking food takes time, however, it costs us relatively lower as the food cost is shared by all of us. It is also the quality of Pakistani food that we cannot adjust with the local Malay food. One student narrates:

The day we arrived most of us are already not feeling well leaving family members though we were excited initially. From the first day, I was shocked to see how they (local students) eat boiled rice, since we cook rice very differently in Pakistan. One more thing I would like to mention is that the food available in the campus has a strange kind of smell, like everything you eat has a smell of a fish. To some extent, we were delighted when we knew that there was a Lebanese restaurant nearby our hostel. So, we used to eat rice over there as they (Lebanese) almost cook rice the same way we Pakistanis cook. Another reason we go to the restaurants is because [that] cooking is strictly prohibited in the hostels (or students accommodations) of this university which claims very international....

The agent, who facilitated us to get an admission in Malaysian public universities, also cheated us by exaggerating about the quality of food, employment and about other facilities here. Even there was no facility such as pantry or kitchen at the hostel. Nothing was there, no oven, no fridge or even an electric kettle. Whether one likes it or not, one is left with only one option of eating outside.

Another respondent regarding food cost and quality narrates:

We can adjust with local food. Alhamdulillah (thank God), I am a wonderful cook and I love to try different recipes. Being a self-paid student, I do not have much budget to dine out every day here in Malaysia, hence I rarely dine out or go out for socialisation with others. Occasionally, it may be only once in a month and that too when I go for shopping with other Pakistani female students. We prefer the quality of fast food or Tomyam a Thai dish that I like the most here when eating outdoor... Sometimes, I really cry when I cook alone, but now I am used to it.

Students who finished their first year of doctoral studies mentioned

that they have strongly developed some level of taste, quality and appreciation pertaining to food they consume on daily basis at their homes in Pakistan regardless of their living in rural or urban areas. Most of the respondents mentioned that they do not want to give up the appreciation for their food in Pakistan and eat tasteless food while they are abroad. They further mentioned that they are careful even when choosing food from the multi-national corporation (MNC) food chains, such as KFC and Pizza Hut. Many respondents mentioned about digestive and stomach problems initially when they arrived and consumed mostly the local Malay food available on the campus.

Food as a means to socialization: A positive coping tool

Despite facing challenges pertaining to push factors, including food neophobia, the lack of cooking facilities, food preparation time, its cost and quality, and pull factors, specifically the availability of *Halal* food that attract doctoral students to choose Malaysian public universities, a question still arises as to how the students still manage to live and study in the destination country like Malaysia. One possible answer is food when it is regarded as means to socialize, hence becomes a positive coping tool for the foreign students to socially sustain in a country of destination. Notably, our respondents are only female doctoral students from Pakistan, so therefore addressing gender dimensions in this context is beyond the scope of this study as male students are not included.

Practically, Pakistani international female graduate students have to negotiate multiple aspects of their identities as non-native students while studying in Malaysia, whereas women in a Malaysian Islamic society which is far different from the Pakistani Islamic society at most in terms of its different gender norms. Some respondents mentioned that they faced some restrictions when they socialise with male Pakistani students following the Pakistani Islamic norms as well as the rules to be followed by their male counterparts at the

same time while in Malaysia. These factors led Pakistani female students to self-isolation in Malaysian society. More surprisingly, the female students were not allowed to attend food festivals and parties, not even birthdays of their male counterparts and Pakistan Independence Day, where they have at least a chance to eat their native food.

In fact, the decision not to allow foreign female students to attend their native cultural activities creates explicitly a form of patriarchal practices and end expectations that may likely to transform social life of students in the foreign universities, including Malaysia. Hence, food and celebrations are strongly associated and regarded as a means towards socialisation among the students coming from the same country and culture like Pakistan, and living in the country of destination like Malaysia. However, resistance and exclusion of students from these celebrations or events as mentioned above may result in another push factor. According to one student:

I have tried my best but cannot eat the local food even after spending more than a year of my time here on this campus which is far from the urban life style. I cannot believe this is Malaysia... I lived for more than one month in a guest house, and of course, I was not allowed to cook over there and was forced to eat outdoor. I cannot even go and eat with the male students with whom I could have gone to the city sometimes ... It was a terrible experience for us. Afterwards, I finally asked one of my Pakistani family friends to allow me to cook at her home and she gladly allowed to cook my own food in her kitchen.

Learning life skills and coping

Like domestic students, international students are also at risk of developing mental health problems; however, the risk is higher for the international students due to the loss of social support, the absence of family system and the stress from acculturation

(McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Respondents mentioned they have gone through many challenges but were able to cope by learning new skills. One respondent explained that how she learned coping skills which helped her to adjust in the Malaysian society:

I really miss my mother's chapatti (wheat bread). I also really miss my mother's Pulao (Biryani rice). Sometimes, I try cooking Pakistani food at my room, but whenever I cooked, I was eating alone. I used to cry while eating alone. Then, I used to make a call on Skype and talk to my family back in Pakistan. My parents really helped me a great deal to adjust. My friends from here also helped me and now we started cooking and eating together. I totally cannot bear the local food. I tried to eat but could not may be because I am not an adventurous person by nature. So, it can be the reason. I really miss the Pakistani food.

On the contrary, another student who has food allergies stated that:

I am an allergic to seafood, so you can assume how it could be difficult to live in Malaysia with lots of seafood around. I cannot eat seafood and there is almost nothing to eat other than only seafood. They (Malaysians) put raw fish in every dish, which brings the seafood smell in everything they cook. When I came here I told my parents about the food issues I was having. My parents used to send me the packed food (tin food) from Pakistan. However, they stopped sending me packed food nowadays because how long they could continue doing this. But, luckily I am with my Pakistani friends, and now we cook and eat together. To tell you the truth, food has lots of importance in my life, and specifically Pakistani food, as we say in Pakistan "acha khao gey tu khush raho ge" (good food guarantees your happiness). After experiencing the local food here and missing my native food, I strongly believe in that phrase. I really miss Pakistani food.

Most of the respondents shared that like their Pakistani peers they initially suffered, but soon they joined Facebook groups and exchanged the information about availability of food. Also, they joined their mates from other countries and learned about cooking and eating together as a form of social and coping skills that eventually made them to feel like at their homes in Pakistan. One respondent shared:

Like most of the Pakistani students who came earlier than me, I also faced the similar food issues in the first few weeks. So, I tried very hard to manage and adjust by dining out. However, later when I was bit settled I decided that I cannot bear anymore, so I started cooking for myself. Though it is very difficult to cook three times a day because it takes much time and then you also have to study. You know that you came here for study not for cooking all the time, but sadly what to do as there is no other choice. If you really want to live and survive here, you have to cook also. To me, if the food is good you are happy and your stomach is happy too. This also helps you avoid the health problems pertaining to the unhygienic food available outside, that made me realise that it is better to cook at homeI wanted to come to Malaysia knowing that it is an Islamic country where Halal food is frequently available and women is secure. I can tell you my sister did MS from USA and she said to me that there is a big issue of finding Halal food in a non-Muslim country.

Conclusion

The objective of our paper was to explore and analyze the impact of various food-related factors on the overall wellbeing of Pakistani female doctoral students studying in the four different Malaysian public universities. We have initially collected qualitative data by conducting interviews with 27 female students (N=27), and then analyzed the experiences of these students regarding food related

factors, which eventually affect students' academic and social life in both positive and negative ways. Being international students themselves all the respondents brought their self narratives which later helped to have detailed conversations. We used open-ended questionnaires to record the comments made by these students. The participants were different if not diverse in terms of their origin (rural and urban Pakistan), academic programs (all doctoral students but from the different disciplines), different classes, some of them are married and others not, some of the are with their spouses and other married but alone. Thus, our participants represent a varied life situations of international Pakistani female students in Malaysia which shows the strength of this paper.

The research findings indicated that despite of many challenges that comes with non availability of and accessibility to culturally dissimilar food, the international female doctoral students perceived these challenges as a positive, life-changing, and transformative experience for them. The findings demonstrated that students have finally found the ways to cope with these challenges, mainly related to food and other issues, which are not discussed here as they are beyond the scope of this research. In this paper, it is revealed that in spite of pull factors, such as *Halal* food, Malaysia being a moderate Islamic country with better higher education standards and lower fees, there are many other push factors, like food neo-phobia, food facilities, time and cost required for food preparation, and food quality, which may likely and adversely affect the admissions of doctoral students in the Malaysian public universities.

Although the study findings exhibit that food festivals and gatherings, which were self-explored and learned by these students, have been found as social and coping skills to confront the above mentioned push factors. We suggest that the Malaysian government should consider these factors, which play very essential role for the betterment of the higher education system in Malaysian public universities in the future. For instance, the revenues generated from

the fees of international students is one of the key factors behind the financial sustainability of any country's higher education system as a whole. Thus, it is suggested to the Malaysian policy makers that the higher education policy in Malaysia must also address the push (or adverse) factors in parallel, while taking the advantages of various pull factors as mentioned above, so that more doctoral students, specifically from Pakistan, can choose the Malaysian public universities in the years to come.

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