

Longing for a taste of home

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This study offers an understanding of the role of food in the adjustment journey of Nigerian students in the UK.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used, involving interviews with ten Nigerians studying in the UK.

Findings

Thematic analysis revealed that participants found the food they ate locally to be bland and fattening, and that they quickly adopted a home country diet, using ingredients bought locally or sent and brought from home to recreate Nigerian dishes. Eating Nigerian food had a positive emotional impact, and it was also a vehicle for social interaction.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that this is a small scale preliminary study that could be extended across the UK with a more quantitative approach to get a broader picture of the eating habits of Nigerian, students at British Universities. There is also an opportunity to widen it to include other African states who are neglected within the present literature. A more longitudinal study picking up migrants could also explore how adjustments have been made in their eating habits. Participants in this research equated fast food with local, English food due to their limited access to authentic local cuisine.

Practical implications

There are practical implications of this study whereby actions can be taken to help avoid the negative impacts experienced causing concerns in around mental wellbeing and poor health.

Originality

This study fills a gap in knowledge on how this important segment of the international student population adapts to a new food culture.

Key words

Nigerian international students bland food weight gain Nigerian dishes

INTRODUCTION

The number of international students worldwide stands at approximately 5 million, a 65% increase since 2005, and by 2050 this figure is set to increase to 8 million (ICEF, 2016). According to the OECD (2016), the United States of America is the most preferred country by international students hosting the largest number of international students with 26% enrolment at tertiary level in 2014, followed by the United Kingdom with 13%, Australia with 9%, France and Germany with 7% each. These countries account for two-thirds of total international students in tertiary institutions. Asia is the major source of international students, accounting for 53% followed by Europe at 25%, and Africa at 10%. The UK is said to enjoy the most diverse student population in the world, with international students attracted to the world's leading universities (OECD, 2016). It should however be noted that the most recent 2017 survey indicated a trend of a pronounced increase in the attractiveness of Canada, Australia, Germany, Ireland, and New Zealand rather than the USA and the UK. The report indicates that this continuing trend that may be informed by political or safety concerns (ICEF, 2017).

The UK government recently announced a new strategy to encourage international students to study in the UK and to increase the numbers from 438,010 studying in 2015/16 (UKCISA, 2016), to 600,000 by 2030 demanding an annual growth of 4% (ICEF, 2019). The International Education Strategy prioritises four “high-value” regions of which North Africa is one. This is likely to be in response to the expected UNESCO data for 2016, 2017 and 2018 becoming available showing the changes in terms of total international student numbers in tertiary education. Australia may have surpassed the UK in 2018, and if not will almost certainly have done so in 2019. The UK will be number three with the USA retaining the top position (Marginson, 2018)

Whilst only 10% of international students come from Africa, at over 43,000 and growing, this is a group that requires some further exploration. There were 35,015 Nigerian students studying abroad in 2015/16 (UKCISA, 2016). Nigeria is located on the western coast of Africa with a total population of 191,603,826. Between 2010 and 2015, of the 10 million applicants that sought entry into Nigerian tertiary institution, only 269 thousand gained admission due to insufficient supply. There are 150 private and public universities with a carrying capacity of 600,000 students. This has shown some improvement year on year however in 2015 only 415,500 out of 1.4 million

applicants were admitted to university. (WES Staff ,2017). According to Nnadi (2016), the poor quality of education in the country has contributed to the quest for foreign education. Scholarships to foreign universities represent one way in which most Nigerian students get to study abroad which gives them an edge in the competitive Nigerian job market.

The growth rate of postgraduate students is very high in Nigeria (+8.3%), compared with +7.5% in India. Nigeria was reported to have 17,973 students studying in the UK in 2015 (UNESCO 2016), with Nigeria's colonial ties and shared language pushing the UK to be favoured destination in which to study. Ghana has overtaken the USA to be the second favoured destination indicating a shift towards a more regional mobilization of international students, though leaving the UK as the number one destination (UKCISA, 2016) and the British Council have stated that Nigerian students studying abroad and choosing the UK will grow. This should be noted against the slower growth than other countries' student numbers coming to the UK (HESA, 2019). These students add to the migrant population in the UK. Arkwright (2015) states that there were 250,000 Nigerian migrant workers in the UK, living in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Cardiff and Sheffield.

Given the importance of international students to the economic health and sociocultural diversity of global higher education, there has been a growth of research on the issues faced during students' international sojourn. There has however been little research dedicated to the eating habits of international students despite the importance of food to well-being and adjustment (Brown, 2009). Furthermore, no research has been done on the food experiences of Nigerian students, who represent an important and growing segment of the international student population, particularly in the UK. This preliminary research provides an understanding of the link between food and adjustment among Nigerian students in the UK. The study carries practical implications for local retailers and university food providers who may be willing and able to adapt their food product and menu offerings to include Nigerian ingredients and meals at affordable prices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Moving to a new cultural environment is one of the traumatic events an individual can experience ensuing in some degree of culture shock (Brown and Holloway, 2008). Culture shock is defined as anxiety that results from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, and their substitution by other cues that are strange (Hall, 1959). The seriousness and duration of the trauma experienced during this stage are mediated by many factors including personality, purpose of visit and cultural distance (Kim, 2001; Hofstede, 2001; Sulkovski and Deakin, 2009).

The idea that a preoccupation with home country food is a symptom of culture shock was recognized over 40 years ago by Garza-Guerrero (1974). Food habits are integral to group identity (Gosden, 1999; Koc and Welsh, 2002; Crotty and Germov, 2004; Toussaint-Samat, 2008), and they are communicated from childhood (Verbeke and Lopez, 2005; Vilela et al., 2018), which is why they are stable, constant and resistant to change (Finkelstein, 1999; Miller and Deutsche, 2009). Culture is a key influence on food preferences and preparation (Kittler et al., 2001; Johnston and Longhurst, 2012). It is reflected in the type of food eaten, portion size, method of cooking, eating times, and the number of meals in a day (Hjalager, 2003). Food is used to mark religious festivals, rituals, and most social gatherings (Lupton 2005; Shermuly and Forbes-Mewett, 2016). It also plays an important role in family life, serving as a bonding agent and has an important role of food in social interactions (Kedia, 2004; Stewin, 2013). Indeed, in previous research conducted by Brown et al. (2010) the shared preparation of cooking food among international students was found to be an important leisure activity that allows them to share their culture with friends from other countries.

Research by Brown (2009) and Brown et al. (2010) on the role of food in the adjustment journey of international students reveals that nostalgia for home country food lasts throughout the sojourn and the emotional attachment to food and the physical health consequences of eating a new diet inform the food habits adopted whilst studying abroad. The tendency to avoid changing diet in the new country has been associated with some of the following; food neophobia which is associated with eating novel foods (Dovey et al., 2008); a lack of familiarity with flavours (Rozin, 2007); cultural or religious restrictions (Counihan, 1999); and a lack of comfort (Koc and Welsh, 2002; Locher et al., 2005; Rabikowska, 2010; Stewin, 2013). Ill health is a further motivator for reverting to a home food diet. Research has shown that migrants are unlikely to be overweight or obese upon arrival in a western country, but that they slowly converge to native-born levels over time (McDonald & Kennedy, 2005). This is supported by Rabikowska (2010) and Brown and

Paszkievicz (2016) who observe a link in Polish migrants between eating British food and weight gain.

A higher incidence of obesity and diabetes among migrants has been associated with an increased consumption of Western style food (Burns, 2004; Gordon-Larsen et al., 2003; Kedia, 2004; Saleh et al., 2002; Balasubramaniam, 2015). Researchers have also focused on changes in diet among the growing number of international students worldwide, and a link between weight gain and the taking-on of a western diet has similarly been made (Pan et al., 1999; Brown et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2010). Ayala et al. (2008) also observe that the health of Latinos' diet declines following the move to a new country. It is for these reasons that Pérez-Escamilla (2009) draws a pertinent link between acculturation and sickness. It must be acknowledged however that this is not always the case. In their study set in Spain, Martínez-Ruiz (2015) found that the Spanish Mediterranean diet was considered good for health by international students.

The reluctance to adopt new eating habits has seen a rise in the transport by post or in person of food and spices from the home to the host country (Hall and Mitchel, 2002) with the purpose of recreating traditional dishes in foreign land (Crevellon and Dube, 2005). Rabikowska (2010) along with Brown and Paszkiewicz (2016) indicate the importance of food parcels sent from Poland to the UK. Bailey (2017) also reported the important link for Indian migrants in Holland between importing and cooking home food and comforting memories.

One significant demographic group that has seen recent changes is their access to food ingredients and meals is the UK's Polish population. Whilst food parcels are common place among many migrant populations, migration is often accompanied by the appearance of related food shops, cafes and restaurants, as noted by Burrell (2009), Sklepynawyspach (2016) and Brown and Paszkiewicz (2016) on the link between the change in food supply and Polish migration to the UK. As Rabikowska (2010) notes, Polish shops allow Polish migrants in the UK to buy traditional foodstuffs, which is vital to their ability to replicate traditional dishes. Though migrants may shop online, depending on prior internet experience (Naseri and Elliot, 2011), these shops are not only a place where Poles buy food, but they are also information centres for the local community and they act as a shipping service or the chance to order special products from Poland (Brown and Paszkiewicz, 2016). With the Polish population now at over 600,000 in the UK there is critical mass to allow for these specialist shops. Holmboe-Ottesen and Wandel (2012)

observe that a more diverse customer base may form as migrants become more acculturated into a new culture.

It is clear according to Parzer et al. (2016) that immigrant grocery stores play a crucial role for immigrant communities as they offer immigrants not only familiar products but also co-ethnic contacts and job opportunities. It is noted that they also offer, at a more symbolical level, a means of constructing identity and the feeling of belonging. Outside of the growing number of specialist Polish shops there is little evidence of other immigrant groups having the same growth within the UK and therefore the availability of many international foods within the UK is limited particularly outside of the large cities.

NIGERIAN FOOD CULTURE

Context is important as whilst Nigeria is one country it is made up of a number of regions and could also be divided by religion and ethnicity. The three main groups are Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. There are up to 250 ethnic groups in all. The country's main divide is a North/South divide, being Muslim and Christian. This also reflects affluence and employment with the south having a more affluent economy. Both religion and affluence impact upon people's eating habits. Many food dishes are shared not just across Nigeria's divide but also across other African neighbours, though they have been given a different name. A prime example of this is fried beancakes. It is eaten in Nigeria as both a snack and for breakfast. In the south, it is known as Akara while in the North it is called Kosai. As well as being made at home it can be bought cheaply from roadside food vendors (Emezie-Egwuonwu, 2019).

Nigeria's food consumption is predominately based on two foods: grains and root crops/tubers (Accueil 2019). Meat also plays a part in many dishes, and poultry farming is the leading form of meat production in Nigeria, accounting for 36% of total livestock production. Emezie-Egwuonwu (2019) states that from east, west, north and south to virtually every corner in-between the country, there are a plethora of spice-rich flavourful dishes that tie Nigerians together. Maziya-Dixon et al. (2004) showed that whilst there is some variation across Nigeria the staple foods that are available and affordable do not vary significantly. The core foods are: rice, cassava, maize and yam: of these maize is the most frequently consumed staple with 20% of the population consuming it more than once a week either as green maize or as maize grain processed to flour.

Regarding legumes, cowpea groundnut and soybean are all available staples. Other staples consumed are plantain and sorghum. Nationally other common non-staple foods are meat products non-leafy vegetables such as onion, carrot, cabbage, cucumber, pepper, tomato and okra.

Fruit is also consumed as part of many Nigerians' diet and tends to include fruits such as orange, mango, pawpaw, guava, pineapple, and grapefruit. Hobbs (2017) states that it is not easy pinning down a national favourite dish for Nigeria. She gives the size of the country and the many distinct regional cuisines as a reason. One dish that is favoured both within Nigeria and across West Africa is Jollof rice, which can be found at many Nigerian parties. It is a rather simple, spicy one-pot dish comprising, at its most basic, rice, tomatoes, onions and pepper. It uses thyme, salt and pepper along with Nigerian curry powder to flavour the dish. It is often served with other Nigerian favourites such as egusi soup (made with ground melon seeds and bitter leaf), fried plantains and pounded yam or fufu (maize). Flo (2109) and Emezie-Egwuonwu (2019) through their Nigerian food blogs and TravelStart (2014) indicate essential spices that are found in Nigerian dishes including the widely available, thyme, salt, pepper, ginger, garlic, nutmeg and stock cubes as well as the less UK accessible Nigerian curry powder, Ogiri Okpei, and Ogiri Igbo.

Nigerian dishes whether normally eaten as meals or as snacks are not easy to replicate without the essential ingredients indicated above. Common dishes whether main meals or soups such as pepper soup are flexible in that any meat or fish can be added depending on availability, cost and desired taste. Whilst it is evident that many of the food stuffs, staple and non-staple, are available in the UK, some are not readily available in local or major supermarkets. The spices in particular are difficult to come by without the specialist African food suppliers and thereby impact upon the authenticity of any dish and its availability outside of Nigeria. Their lack of availability is an acknowledged part of the context in setting this research.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A qualitative approach to data collection was adopted because it was felt that only in conversation would participants be able to express their feelings about the food they eat. As food, emotion and identity are commonly entwined (Locher et al., 2005), the deeper feelings associated with food habits could only be accessed through an approach that values subjectivity and rapport between interviewer and interviewee (see (Figuroa-Domecq et al., 2015). The interviewer in this study is a Nigerian lecturer, pursuing government-sponsored postgraduate study in the UK, where the research was conducted. She was able to create rapport with the participants based on shared

heritage and shared experiences of food whilst studying abroad. This was felt to be beneficial for the quality of the data collected.

Interviews were conducted with ten Nigerian international students, both postgraduate and undergraduate. Purposive and convenience sampling was employed in order to select information-rich individuals (Jones et al., 2013). As can be seen in Table 1, the sample comprises a mixture of gender, age and length of stay. Though all participants are students, two also have permanent resident status. In addition, six participants are from south west Nigeria, two from the south east and two from the north.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Interviews were semi-structured: an interview guide was prepared, covering the following topics: participants' experiences of life in the UK; their feelings about British food and their home food habits. Interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, and flowed according to the participants' responses, and many prompts and probes were used to elicit good quality data. To comply with ethical guidelines (Jones et al., 2013), participants were informed of the aim of the research and were asked for their consent to participate and for the interview to be recorded. They were also given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity and were informed of their right to withdraw from the project at any time. Pseudonyms are used to protect identity.

Interviews were digitally recorded and data were analysed thematically. This involved the four steps of transcription, familiarisation, coding and categorisation (Braun and Clarke, 2007).

Transcripts were read and reread, in order to get a sense of the whole. Then a process of coding took place during which the transcripts were separated into manageable chunks and labelled as discretely as possible. Codes were subsequently put into broader categories, which represent the main themes of the research, as reflected in the section headings of the findings section. In order to improve trustworthiness, coding was carried out by one researcher and was then checked and discussed among all three researchers. As is common in an inductive qualitative study (see Jones et al., 2013), the research themes are emergent from the data and indicate participants' particular biases. The following themes were identified: feelings upon arrival, eating new foods, cooking

Nigerian food, feelings attached to home foods; and food and social interactions. These themes form the structure of the findings section that follows.

RESULTS

The themes presented in this section are interrelated and indicate a journey followed by participants from initial openness to eating local food to a determination to resume the diet associated with home, with Nigeria. As will be shown, this decision was borne of a dislike of the food available to them locally and its impact on their health. It was also a response to the emotional attachment to the home cuisine and to its power as a social bonding agent.

Meeting a new food culture

Participants were positive about their move to the UK to study for a degree because they were aware of the beneficial implications for their employability. On arrival in the UK participants first ate the food available locally, which tended to be fast food. Participants complained about the fattiness of the food they ate. As stated by McDonald & Kennedy (2005), migrants are likely to become overweight and even obese following their adoption of a western diet but they gradually revert to their usual weight once they return to their home country foods. The particular issue of weight gain is borne out in this study, with participants developing health concerns as well as gaining weight following their consumption of fast food, as Mariam reports:

When I first came I initially had a lot of McDonalds. I had a lot of spots on my face, I gained more weight.

It must be noted that the judgement participants made about British food mostly concerned the fast food that they ate outside of the home. They had no contacts with members of the host community who might introduce them to healthy and traditional British dishes. The rejection of food in a new country is a common theme among migrants and sojourners, regardless of age, profession or length of stay (Edwards et al., 2010). There was also evidence of the students rejecting the UK's most famous dish. Joy commented on the classic British dish that she had heard so much about:

I tried eating fish and chips but the fish was not cooked because in my country the fish is well cooked but here it is not really cooked at all compared to my country! There was no pepper, no salt!

Joy's comment over the lack of seasoning in her fish and chips appears as a recurrent complaint across a range of food dishes bought locally, as indicated in the comments below:

The English food is not spicy at all; sometimes it is not salted and besides they eat lots of preserved foods. Tayo

I think the main thing is they don't add a lot of salt; their meals are not spicy. Fumi

Joy, Tayo and Fumi, who come from different regions in Nigeria, refer to the spiciness of food and also mention salt. It appears that both seasoning and piquancy are missing from the food they ate locally. As Kim et al. (2017) observe, Nigerian meals are usually spicy (as is common in most African countries): Nigerians enjoy a lot of seasoning including salt, pepper and thyme.

Cooking Nigerian food

In order to resolve their health issues and to improve the taste of the food they were eating, participants returned to their own/home country food within weeks of arrival. Thomas explained as follows:

I try to compare basically the taste of my own traditional foods to the new place I found myself in and for me it is more comfortable to go with what I am used to in terms of the taste which is so important to me.

Though participants had to use some western food stuffs such as potatoes and pasta they cooked them in the Nigerian way. Thomas' use of the word 'comfortable' may denote not only taste however, but also emotional sustenance, which eating home country food may give to him.

Participants adopted various strategies to enable them to cook their traditional dishes: bringing ingredients from Nigeria on the advice of former students in the UK, shopping in local African shops or asking relatives or friends to post them from Nigeria or to bring them when they visited.

However, there was a limited repertoire of dishes that participants could make due to the lack of or the expense of ingredients available locally as Fumi observed:

You can't cook a wide range of Nigerian dishes here because the ingredients are kind of limited and so the few you can cook, you eat them over and over again; that is another struggle!

In addition, the quality of ingredients was not deemed to be as fresh or as unadulterated as in Nigeria:

In Nigeria, food is more naturally prepared; we don't really have foods that are made days before you eat. Also our foods are not grown with chemicals, so you can have vegetables and tomatoes that are more natural, and yeah, they taste better.

These comments reveal that reverting to home country food was not without limitations.

The emotional attachment to home country food

The emotional response to eating Nigerian dishes was pronounced, as Kemi observes:

Ah I feel really good about it because of the spices, they remind me of home. Oh my God! It makes me remember home and it makes me stronger, like I have to deal with whatever I meet here.

Emotive language was used by participants, including 'happy, joyful relaxed, at home, really good' as well as exclamations and laughter, revealing the power of food to influence mood and to instil a sense of well-being. It is also able to recreate a link with home, and with family. This is supported in research by Locher et al. (2005) who argues that food carries the power to manipulate emotions. It is possible therefore that participants idealised their home country food due to homesickness and their enforced separation from home cuisine. As Zwingman and Gunn (1983), note, food helps the sojourner to remember a happy past.

Food and socialising

Food is an important vehicle for social interaction, with meal times being valuable occasions for communication and bonding (Hall et al., 2003). They also permit bonding with other cultures,

particularly in the international student context (Brown et al., 2009; 2010). Similar findings were discovered in this study, as Joy described sharing food with friends from other nationalities:

I eat with many other people here. I have a group of friends one from Thailand, Caribbean, and the other from Nigeria, and we eat together. I have eaten Korean food, Chinese food, Thai food. We also take them out to eat the African Nigerian food too. So it is just like mixed up here. I have a Caribbean friend, she shares similar food, similar way of eating. It's just called a different thing in their country.

Food is also shared among Nigerians friends, who provide support, as Lydia describes:

Food kind of brings us all together. I have been here for, this is my fourth year now but this is the first year I actually made Nigerian friends. When we eat together, we just bring our own ingredients. I might have pounded yam; someone else will bring egusi, so we can make it and eat together and it helps us save money as well.

Cooking and eating home country food allows participants to relax and to take a break from academic stresses, as Mariam commented on her regular Sunday dinner with Nigerian friends. Meanwhile those unable to share Nigerian food with their compatriots spoke of loneliness and demotivation:

When I cook my food, I eat alone; nobody else shares with me. My flatmates are not friendly, they cook their thing and go to their rooms to eat; I cook my thing and go to my room and eat. I am left feeling sad and unhappy. Kemi

Using food as a medium for socialising is important to those who share food with other nationalities or with fellow Nigerians but eating alone generates feelings of isolation and homesickness that are perhaps even more pronounced among those from a collectivist culture that is characterised by togetherness and belonging (see Brown et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study offers an understanding of the importance of the role of food in the adjustment journey of Nigerian students in the UK, adding to the developing literature within this area. This clearly

fills a gap in the literature focusing on the Nigerian international student experience of meeting a new food culture. Analysis of the qualitative data led to a number of interrelated themes that point to a journey from openness to new food habits to an eventual return to eating food associated with home. The study shows that participants struggled to accept the food they ate locally when first arriving in the UK. Whilst they experienced it as bland and fattening, it is noted that their newly experienced meals were prominently fast food experiences. This experience meant that they quite quickly rejected much of the local food and attempted to adopt a more familiar home country diet, using ingredients bought locally or sent and brought from home. These ingredients were used to recreate traditional Nigerian dishes. This range of dishes was though limited due to the limited availability of some food stuffs. Where local ingredients were bought there was concern regarding their “adulteration”. It is likely that the local shops used were not supplying organic produce and the students were not aware of where any could be bought. This reinforces the ignorance of the range and extent of ingredient availability within the UK’s food retailers.

The study shows that when eating Nigerian food, a positive emotional impact was noted. Nigerian meals gave nostalgic feelings about home giving an emotional boost during challenging times. Of note, supporting wider literature, is that eating Nigerian food was also shown to be a vehicle for social interaction, when participants introduced others to their home country dishes, or when they ate with other Nigerians. Conversely meal times were lonely occasions for those who did not enjoy connections with compatriots: they acted as reminders of the more communal life they enjoyed at home reinforcing their collectivist culture. This conflict shows how food and eating impacted upon emotions both positively and negatively depending on the social environment, and interactions experienced, in which it was consumed.

There are practical implications of this study whereby actions can be taken to help avoid the negative impacts experienced causing concerns in around mental wellbeing and poor health. It has to be acknowledged that these derive from a small-scale study, and more support for these recommendations would be obtained through further research. Firstly, where there is a high proportion of African and Nigerian students, the university could work with local stakeholders, including local food retailers, to ensure that main ingredients are stocked where the students reside. To help support the students’ more general wellbeing and help with faster settling into the area, as well as to encourage social inclusion, a host scheme could be created whereby Nigerian students are put in contact with the local Nigerian migrant community enabling the social and

emotional elements to be personalised. This also gives a clear benefit of simple useful, tangible tips being passed on and shared, such as where to buy certain products or ingredients.

Actions by the universities themselves would include student unions and on campus restaurants actively engaging in welcoming international students through including Nigerian dishes to help the adjustment of Nigerian and African students as well as encourage other students to try these dishes. The restaurants, along with the Student Unions, could create a programme of food-themed events, designed to bring students of different nationalities together to sample each other's cuisine and thereby promote the social interactions important in avoiding isolation and homesickness.

It is acknowledged that this is a small scale preliminary study that could be extended across the UK with a more quantitative approach to get a broader picture of the eating habits of Nigerian, students at British Universities. There is also an opportunity to widen it to include other African states that are neglected within the present literature. Furthermore, a more longitudinal study of migrants could explore how adjustments have been made in their eating habits. In this study, Nigerian students' concerns about their physical health were noted, including weight gain and skin problems. A longitudinal study of before-and-after health measurements could be undertaken in future research. This study indicates a demand from Nigerian students and migrants for a wider food offer. Future research could identify the modification of food supply by retailers and restaurants according to the size of migrant/international student populations across the UK, and beyond.

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