The Hierarchical Influence of Personal Values on Attitudes toward Food and Food Choices

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Abstract

It is estimated that humans could continuously immersed themselves in making roughly around 200 food choice decisions in a single day. Making and deciding on the choice of food are relatively complicated and varied greatly between people. Food is and has always been an important source of energy to the human body and studies on identifying key factors affecting consumers’ food choices have attracted many interests from various fields of expertise since they are somewhat closely related to the individuals’ motivations, preferences and habits. Among the factors, the cultural environment has been attributed as an important element in consumer’s food choices however; extant studies have also suggested the underlying motives of individuals’ food choice behaviors are influenced by both external and internal factors. Hence, this study aims to reveal and understand the influence of personal values on attitudes toward food and food choices among urban Malay Muslims by employing the value-attitude-behavior (VAB) model.

Keywords: Malay Muslim; Personal Values; Attitude; Food Choice; LOV Typology.

1. Introduction

It is estimated that humans could continuously immersed themselves in making roughly around 200 food choice decisions in a single day (Wansink & Sobal. 2007).

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Making and deciding on the choice of food are relatively complicated and varied greatly between people (Torjusen et.al, 2001). Shephard and Dennison (1996) stress that occasionally the food choices which individuals make would have an adverse or ill-fated effect to their well-being if the food preferences deviate from the needs of their bodies (as cited in Babicz-Zielinska, 2006). The cycle of life such as growth, development and evolution of mankind would have been impossible without food. Food is and has always been an important source of energy to the human body. Every culture and even the sub-cultures (e.g. Malays, Chinese, Indian etc.) have their own unique food dishes that represent their distinctive heritages, histories, customs and identities. Studies on identifying key factors affecting consumers’ food choices have attracted many interests from various fields of expertise since they are somewhat closely related to the individuals’ motivations, preferences and habits (O’Neill et.al, 2014).

Among the factors, the cultural environment (i.e. cultural and sub-cultural norms) has been attributed as an important element in consumer’s food choices since it appropriately describes the types of food that are permissible for group members to consume (Delaney & McCarty, 2009). According to Dindyal and Dindyal (2003) cultures influences in food and nutrition are well documented, however the degree of culture influences are based on the different beliefs within the culture. In addition, several authors have suggested that the underlying motives of individuals’ food choice behaviors are significantly influenced by both external (e.g. life course and influence) and internal (e.g. personal values and habits) factors (Mohd-Any et.al, 2014). As well, Qureshi et.al (2012) stress that religion is a key component of culture and also, a very influential determinant of dietary patterns or habits; so as to ones’ values, attitudes and behaviors (Alam et.al, 2011). Evidently, religion is a major cultural element in Malaysia and it imbues a very significant influence on individuals especially among the Malays (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009). However, Abdullah and Pedersen (2003) stress that Malaysians from all walks of life are now exposed to new sets of values owing to changes in the pace of life (as cited in Sumaco et.al, 2014). Whereas, Ali and Abdullah (2012) observe that Malaysians’ personal values, attitude and behavior toward food are gradually evolving; as they tend to become more individualistic as societies evolved to be more complex and prosperous (Triandis,1989).

Triandis (1989) posit people in a complex and affluent society (such as Malaysia) has the inclination to migrate from a collectivistic to individualistic individuals, since they could acquire financial independence that allows them to experience social and emotional freedoms. Rokeach (1973) stress any variations in the individuals’ personal, societal and cultural experiences would create disparities in their value systems as well as on the value systems’ stability. Earlier studies have suggested the disparities in any given ethnic group’s value systems are directly affected by changes in the social environment namely related to variations in ones’ incomes, occupations, condition of living as well as duration and intensity of exposure towards different cultures (Hassan, 2011b). Clearly, human value systems are altered when there are changes in one’s lifestyles (Hassan, 2011a). This assumption may be proven true namely among the Malay ethnic as there is a distinctive religious gap between urban and rural Malay Muslims; and this difference is widening due to the effect of globalization, the Internet and others such as the receptiveness of urban Malay Muslims toward pork-free foods (and alcohol-free) instead of food that are 100% Halal (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2014). Ismail (2015) revealed that RM42.6 billion were spent on imported food in 2014 whereas, Chin (2015) reported that in January 2015, imports for consumption goods expanded 2% to RM 4.4 billion from RM 85.4 million compared to the same period last year. Consequently, the extent to which religion effects the food consumption of its followers is highly contingent on the individuals’ submission and adherence to the teachings of their religion (Abdul et.al, 2009).

Meanwhile, Lai et.al (2010) point out that young Malays adults are more susceptible to influences of foreign cultures as a result of repeated exposures from various media sources namely those from western origins. Likewise, western cultures have been openly embraced particularly by urban Malaysian families; where the effects are somewhat visible among the youth as they aspire to be more assertive and independent (Sumaco et.al, 2014). Equally, there is still a high percentage of Muslim consumers in Malaysia that are ignorant about the Halal concept and also oblivious to their absolute rights of buying and consuming 100% Halal food products (Aznam, 2010) especially when Malaysia is highly dependent on imported food products particularly from western nations (Pin, 2014). Ismail (2015) revealed that RM42.6 billion were spent on imported food in 2014 whereas, Chin (2015) reported that in January 2015, imports for consumption goods expanded 2% to RM 4.4 billion from RM 85.4 million compared to the same period last year. Consequently, the extent to which religion effects the food consumption of its followers is highly contingent on the individuals’ submission and adherence to the teachings of their religion (Abdul et.al, 2009).

Each culture has its own distinct cultural norm and behavioral pattern; on which these differences serve as the distinguishing factors that signify one group of people to another (Sumaco et.al, 2014) and Hassan (2011b) attributed these dissimilarities to the unique nature of the value systems that each culture upholds. Essentially,
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culture bestowed significant influences onto one’s values and lifestyle (Lai et al., 2010) and earlier studies have shown that the effects of values on attitudes and consumption behaviors are rather significant (Jayawardhena, 2004) owing to the more centrally connections that values have with the individuals’ cognitive makeup. Values are “deeply held feelings of what are important in life” (Goldsmith et al., 1997, p.352) which reflect human desire for a specific end-state of existence (Rokeach, 1973). Similarly, values are distinctive psychological variables that are centrally connected to people’s lives (Chryssohoidis & Krystallis, 2005) and they (i.e. personal and social values) have played prominent roles toward understanding consumers’ ways of living and behaviors (Brunso et al., 2004).

Nonetheless, most studies on human values systems revolved around developed western nations that hold similar cultural values and have somewhat neglected the influences of cultural values and personal values in developing countries (Hassan, 2011b). Unlike their western counterpart, developing countries consist of multicultural societies where their value systems differ between and among cultures (Hassan, 2011b) due to a much stronger interaction and structural changes in the societies (Hassan et al., 2009). Thus, little is known about the role of personal values as the underlying motives of urban Malay Muslims’ (such as toward food-related) behaviors in extant literatures; despite numerous researches on the Malay people, their cultural values and psychological aspects (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009). Moreover, Asma et al. (2010) implies that there are insufficient studies on food choice behaviors in Malaysia. Therefore, to bridge this gap, the study aim to reveal and understand the influences of personal values on urban Malay Muslims’ attitudes toward food as well as their food choice decisions by employing the value-attitude-behavior (VAB) model.

2. Literature Reviews

2.1. Malay Muslims

The Malays represent approximately 65% of the total population which is also the largest race in Malaysia (Lai et al., 2010). Kamaruddin and Kamaruddin (2009) emphasize that the Malay ethnic has a distinctive lifestyle from other ethnic groups in Malaysia since their cultural heritage is shaped by religion, society and family; and have its place in a collectivist society. Likewise, the main factor that distinguishes the Malays from the Chinese, Indians and other races in Malaysia is their close association with the religion of Islam (Mastor et al., 2000). The Malays in Malaysia professes the religion of Islam which is also served as the unifying factor that binds all the Malays in the nation (Lai et al., 2010). To all Muslims, religion plays an important role in their consumption choices (Rezai et al., 2012) and the Islamic dietary law or Syariah has clearly stipulated the type of food that are permissible for Muslims to consume must be both Halal and Toyyib (i.e. healthy, quality, safe, nutrition). For Muslims, the term Halal reigns supreme as it is a manifestation of one’s total submission and obedience to God’s commands as mentioned in the holy Quran:

“Eat of what is lawful and wholesome on the earth” (2:168).
“Then eat of what Allah has provided for you (which is) lawful and good. And be grateful for the favor of Allah, if it is (indeed) Him that you worship” (16:114).

According to Kamaruddin and Kamaruddin (2009, p.38) “a Malay is born into a culture and religion simultaneously and one who rejects Islam is no longer legally considered Malay”. Moreover, it has also been established that the relationships within the Malay ethnic are mainly hierarchical and collective as the younger generations are expected to submit and conform to the leadership of the elderly (Lai et al., 2010). Additionally, Lai et al. (2010) observes some of the attributes of the Malays have remained intact despite the massive influx of other cultures with different lifestyles and behaviors. The majority still preferred a serene life in the villages, favored a non-confrontation stance, maintained a laid back and easy going lifestyles as well as preferring the leaders of the communities to handle major issues within the society without questioning much of their authorities (Lai et al., 2010). Furthermore, the cohesiveness of the Malay families is very strong owing to their inherent culture that promotes a sense of love, peace and harmony; in addition to their close observance and strict devotion to the teachings of Islam (Lai et al., 2010). One of the most important aspects in a Malay life is “adat” or Malay custom on which it covers all facets of the Malay culture and social life (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009). In essence, “adat” in principles are standards that determine the behaviors of Malays to make sure that their actions are socially...
acceptable in any given situation; inherently, “adat” constitute “an ideal state in which an individual maintains harmonious social relationship with his fellow man” (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009, p.39).

Thus, the Malay people are essentially those who profess the religion of Islam or in other words, are Muslims; speak the Malay language habitually as well as submit to the Malay custom or “adat”; and the majority of Malay Muslims are from the Sunni or “Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah” sect (Lai et.al, 2010). According to Goddard (1997), Malays by nature are quite discerning toward the feeling of others as well as on their spoken words and behaviors so as to not deviate from the social and religious norms; in addition to being extremely sensitive to what other would think about them (i.e. the feeling of shame or “malu”) which to the Malays, this social emotion equates to “an element of basic goodness in the society” (Mastor et.al, 2000, p.98). Meanwhile, Kamaruddin and Kamaruddin (2009) found that pious Malay Muslims tend to seek out high-quality products, always looking for the best value for their money, quite thrifty and expect high standard of products. Interestingly, they also discovered that both highly and casually religious Malay consumers would exhibit similar attitudes and behaviors; owing to the fact that religion and culture are probably so interwoven together and basically, just a little conscious effort is needed in their decision-making processes. Essentially, religion plays a major part in Malay Muslims’ food choice behaviors, decision-making processes and responses to promotions; particularly those residing in the urban areas (Asma et.al, 2010).

2.2. Food Choices and Values

Food choices can be describe as unique psychological processes consisting of multiple factors such as motives, personalities and attitudes that combined to influence individuals’ minds in all sort of ways; which would subsequently resulted in either the foods being preferred or dislike (Babicz-Zielinska, 2006). Evidently, food is embraced for its nutrition worth, the pleasure and gratifying experience that it invoked as well as a source of relaxation (Pollard et.al, 2002). Nonetheless, food choice decisions are complex, continuous and repetitive where individuals would dwell in some sorts of decisions several times a day, on what food to eat. According to Kitsawad (2012) the complexity of consumers’ food choice decisions is due to the interconnectivity between people, environment and the foods themselves. Taking notes from Kurt Lewin works; Falk et.al (1996) stresses the differences and strengths of cultural, sociological and psychological elements among individuals as well as towards types of foods, typify the complexity of food choice processes. Hassan et.al (2009) postulate personal and cultural values determine food choices and these values are dynamic. Adding further, Hassan et.al (2009) mention this dynamism is significantly linked with time-related aspect and variations in the socio-demographic (i.e. gender, social class, age, education) as well as culture factors.

Cultural values shaped personal values but both are distinct constructs; individuals would probably have a few cultural values but could attain many underlying values within their lifetime and consequently, it is the individuals’ themselves that decide either to adhere, adapt or discard these cultural values (Yau, 1994). Essentially, individuals’ behaviors are directed and driven by their underlying motives (Goldsmith et.al, 1997) and these values are very influential in shaping their attitudes and food choice decisions (Homer & Kahle, 1988; Connors et.al, 2001; Wang, 2005; Hassan, 2011b). In addition, De Run and Jee (2009) suggest individuals’ preferences such as towards food are closely associated with personal values that are partially developed through their initial values and beliefs. Additionally, Vinson et.al (1977) postulate that individuals’ values dictate their attributes, on which any changes to the existing centrally held values would certainly affect the persons’ attitudes and behavior. What's more, values are significantly prominent in situation where individuals’ experiences conflict of choices in their decision-making processes (Vincent, 2014).

2.3. Values, Attitudes and Behaviors

Homer and Kahle (1988, p.638) describe a value system as “an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferred modes of conduct or end-states along an important continuum”. Whilst, Solomon (2012) define a value system as a moral code which is embodied by the constant elements of personal values and cultural values; and according to Schwartz (1992) an individual’s values system is relatively difficult to change. Hence, they have been widely adopted by social scientists to understand numerous attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Chryssohoi...
Inherently, values are determinants of a given behavior (Vincent & Selvarani, 2013). Values are suggested to be more stable motivators for behaviors than attitudes owing to their more intrinsic connection to humans’ cognitive systems (Rokeach, 1973; Aertsens et al., 2009). As such, the stability of values has become an importance criterion for their adoption as the foundation of various market-related activities (Nepomuceno & Porto, 2010). Moreover, values are significantly better motivators of behaviors than demographic profiles (Chryssohoidis & Krystallis, 2005). Likewise, values or specifically personal values have inspired many studies owing to the significance of these variables in influencing human behaviors (Homer & Kahle, 1998; Chryssohoidis & Krystallis, 2005; Wang, 2005; Nepomuceno & Porto, 2010; Cai & Shannon, 2011). These associations led Homer and Kahle (1998) to propose a sequence of effects theory that begins from abstract values to midrange attitudes and consequently, towards specific behaviors; which eventually served as the basis for the VAB hierarchy. This theoretical flow found support in several studies (McCarty & Shrum, 1993; Jayawardhena, 2004; Cai and Shannon, 2011; Paulssen et al., 2014) where the results showed significant causal relationships between personal values and attitudes as well as between attitudes and behaviors; therefore, empirically proven the applicability of VAB hierarchy as a useful framework to understand human behaviors (Deng et al., 2013); including their consumption behaviors (Jun et al., 2014).

Additionally, findings on natural food shopping study showed that personal values consist of two distinct dimensions (i.e. internal and external) which have strong positive impacts on attitudes than with behaviors; thus, validating attitude’s role as a mediator between personal values and behaviors relationships (Homer & Kahle, 1998; Deng et al., 2013; Jun et al., 2014). Schwartz (2012) reveals values have been widely used to characterize the distinctions and changes in lifestyles as well as the preferences between various groups and also among individuals; with the purpose of gaining greater understanding toward the motivational aspects that influence their attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, the theoretical relationship of the values-attitude-behavior (VAB) hierarchy employed in this study to understand the influences of personal values (examine by the LOV typology) on Malay Muslims’ attitudes and food choice behaviors is illustrated in Fig.1.

2.4. List of Values (LOV) Typology

Evident in existing marketing literatures revealed the extensive usage of list of values (LOV) typology in studies pertaining to individuals’ personal values (Homer & Kahle, 1988; Chryssohoidis & Krystallis, 2005; Weng & De Run, 2013). LOV is introduced for the purpose of assessing consumers’ attitudes and behaviors (Cheng & Fleismann, 2010) and strongly emphasis on the significance of others in value fulfillment (Homer & Kahle, 1988). According to Kahle and Kennedy (1989) placing the significance of individuals in value fulfillment analysis is the true essence of LOV. Furthermore, LOV is relatively much easier and quicker to be administered than other values measurements instruments (Beatty et al., 1988; Homer & Kahle, 1988) as well as its ability to differentiate the distinct effects of demographic factors and values on consumers’ behaviors (Kopanidis, 2009). The scale consists of nine items which are sense of belonging, security, being well respected, self-respect, self-fulfillment, sense of accomplishment, excitement, fun and enjoyment and, warm relationship. Moreover, the LOV scale is a shorter and yet an identical version of the eighteen terminal values (i.e. values that people aim to realize in their lifetime and they vary across cultures) items of the Rokeach Value Survey (Kahle & Kennedy, 1989). Results from previous studies have validated LOV typology as an efficient measuring tool to better understand the underlying values of consumers’ food consumption behaviors in cross-cultural researches. Similarly, Chryssohoidis and Krystallis (2005) mention that their findings demonstrated the robustness, validity and suitability of the LOV scale to understand different cultures underlying motives towards their food choices. Besides, the parsimonious of LOV coupled with its
higher degree of relevance and influence over daily lives (Beatty et.al, 1985) provide further justification for this typology’s adoption in this study.

3. Methodology

Data would be collected at several popular shopping destinations for urban Malay Muslims in the Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley areas, by utilizing appropriate survey instruments; whereas, secondary data would be extracted from publications, articles, books and others so as to draw conclusions from the findings.

4. Conclusions

The uniqueness of the Malays is vastly attributed to their close association with their religion and they viewed values to be inseparable to the teachings of Islam as it “emphasizes the immutable principles of values of specific conduct or behavior” (Mastor et.al, 2000, p.109). Even though diversity in life is tolerated within the Malay society nonetheless, it must be consistent with the Malay and Islamic values (Sulaiman, 1981, as cited in Mastor et.al, 2000). Conversely, employing personal values constructs are significantly appropriate towards understanding the underlying motives of urban Malay Muslims’ attitudes toward food and food choices, since personal values are closely related to choice behaviors (Kitsawad, 2012). As Chang (2005) reveals, culture has a major effect on individual’s consumption, purchasing motives and choices (as cited in Alam et.al, 2011). In addition, the applicability of LOV typology in a collectivist and non-western country has received numerous supports from existing literatures (see Weng & De Run, 2010; Humayun & Hasnu, 2013; Vincent, 2014).

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