

**THE TASTE OF HOME: THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS  
THROUGH COMMENSALITY AMONGST FEMALE MALAY STUDENTS IN THE  
UNITED KINGDOM**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background and Purpose:** Commensality is an act of eating together among migrant communities as a means of passing down the culture and ethnic identity. There is very limited discussion on commensality that pays attention to food sharing and eating that extends beyond the traditional forms of social relationships, identity, and space among the Malay community abroad. Thus, this article aims to explore the connections of social relationships through food, space and identity amongst female Malay students in the United Kingdom.

**Methodology:** This research is based on one-year ethnographic fieldwork amongst female Malaysian Muslim students in Manchester and Cardiff. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with both undergraduate and postgraduate students from sciences and social sciences courses. Besides, in-depth interviews, participant observation, conversation and fieldnotes methods were deployed as supplementary for data collection.

**Findings:** This paper argues that cooking and eating together in a private space is a way for them to maintain social relationships and overcome stress in their studies, and fulfil their desire to create harmony and trust at home. Besides, places such as the kitchen, play an essential space in building the Malay identity and social relationships between female Malay students' communities in the host country.

**Contributions:** This study has contributed to an understanding of the meaning of friendship, identity, space, and the discussion on the anthropology of food from international students' perspectives and migration studies.

**Keywords:** Food and identity, commensality, Malay students, friendship, international students.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the context of migration, Counihan (2004) argues that commensality is essential among migrant communities as a means of passing down the culture and ethnic identity associated with food and eating to children and other members of the community. Besides, it is also considered as important for social communion, health and well-being (Jönsson, Michaud, & Neuman, 2021). In this study, I mean to analyze the experiences of commensality (the act of eating together) and how it relates to the social relationships among Malaysian Malay women living in overseas settings. The main reason why Malay students were chosen in this study is that Malay is the most significant ethnic group in Malaysia, who belong to the tribal proto-Malays. Malays are also known to be a mixture of modern Indian and Thai, with an Arab and Chinese ancestry, who inhabit the Malay peninsula, coastal Borneo and eastern islands (Md. Nor et al., 2012; Md. Sharif, Md. Nor, Mohd Zahari, & Muhammad, 2015). With these multicultural ancestry backgrounds, the findings of the study will contribute to the literature of commensality and the possibility of a multicultural way of being 'Malaysian' as one identity strategy (among many) used by young Malaysians (Joseph, 2014, p. 191) which has been paid little attention among Malay diaspora.

Commensality (the act of eating together) is a fundamentally social activity that involves eating and drinking at the same table (Fischler, 2011). In most cultural contexts, commensality signifies unity, exchange of sensory memories, emotions, substances and objects, incarnating remembrance and feeling (Tuomainen, 2014; Seremetakis, 1994). On the other hand, food consumption practices can be collectively understood as daily commonplace activities such as grocery shopping, cooking, eating and drinking (Bell & Valentine, 1997). Besides commensality, another aspect suggested by scholars for further research in the social sciences field is the consideration of space (Massey, 2005). According to a prominent scholar

in geography, Massey (2005), space should be understood as a dimension of the world in which we live, that presents us with the existence of ‘the other’; that is, a human being which is often abandoned by many scholars. In other words, space presents us with the social in the widest sense—a social of interrelatedness, multiple practices, and negotiation with diverse other people and communities.

As mentioned in her conceptual frameworks, “Produced through and embedded in practices, from quotidian negotiations to global strategizing, these implicit engagements of space feed back into and sustain wider understandings of the world,” (Massey, 2005, p.50). This can be explored through political reflection or personal stories. From this framework, the personal stories or experiences of the female Malay women community in the United Kingdom (UK) can be explored especially through their commensality and sociality in the private space such as a kitchen. In what follows I not only focus on cooking together and sharing food, or on the provision of the ingredients but relate this to the different groups or types of relationships that they build in the UK.

In this regard, I particularly look at the migration context, by adding several important dimensions such as food, identity, and space into a discussion. Building on commensality and social relationships in private space as the main concept, in this framework, I first examined the food preparation in Malay women’s households; how these Malay women accommodate each other’s tastes or needs in the cooking and preparation of food when living together. The second part of the analysis is identity. By observing the cooking ingredients or food that these women bring from Malaysia, this is where I analyse to what extent this food is essential in representing their regional identity abroad. Lastly, I specifically analyse how the home kitchen as private space is an important space for unity, and what are the theme emerges that contributes to their social relationships. Thus, my analysis consists of several elements in the study of food and commensality in relationship to the Malay community, to spaces and identity (e.g. Massey, 2005; Joseph, 2014; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2010; Carsten, 1995; Duruz & Khoo, 2015).

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Malaysian food demonstrates that Malaysia is a multicultural and multiracial country. Additionally, it is essential to know that the Malay staple food is rice. There are many rice dishes in Malaysia, from different geographical states, such as Nasi Dagang from Terengganu and Nasi Kerabu from Kelantan. There is a great study by Janowski and Kerlogue (2007) which focuses on rice in South-East Asian communities. In the book, *Kinship and Food in South East*

Asia, the scholars discuss the importance of rice as an essential food in the construction of kinship and how it is used for religious festivals and daily consumption. In Eastern Indonesia, the rice rituals help to create kinship and strengthen ethnicity in the village community and ethnic groups (Janowski & Kerlogue, 2007). Rice is symbolized as a scarce and precious foodstuff in the Central Flores community. The study also shows that the rice ritual has created hierarchical identities in the community.

From the preparation and the taste of traditional Malaysian food, one can tell that this country is undoubtedly a melting pot of different cultures, races and ethnicities. Besides having various ethnicities such as Malay, Chinese, Indian and others, this nation also provides a rich food heritage that was highly influenced – by geographical region – by neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and Thailand. However, through the process of acculturation and assimilation with these neighbours, the taste and preparation of Malay-heritage food has undergone some alterations, but maintains its ancestral characteristics (Omar, Ab Karim, Abu Bakar, & Omar, 2015; Md. Sharif et al., 2015). In the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia, the states of Kedah and Perlis are profoundly influenced by the characteristics of Thai food, which is hot and spicy. Malay food in east-coast states like Kelantan and Terengganu is sweet and creamy, with glutinous rice, while the southern states like Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor have been significantly influenced by Indonesians such as the Minangkabau, Bugis and Javanese whose food is associated more with the thick, sour and spicy sauces (Md. Nor et al., 2012). As my informants came from all over Malaysia, I documented their experiences in preparing dishes for others, and how this regional identity emerged through homemade food in their daily lives.

In a book entitled, *Eating Together: Food, Space, and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore* by Duruz and Khoo (2015), the authors have developed interesting connections between food, space and identity by focusing on commensality at the ‘public’ spaces such as restaurants and coffee shops. In terms of identity and space construction, the scholars successfully explained the ways of specific ethnic restaurants such as *kopitiam* and *mamak* restaurant as an urban cosmopolitan and as an ultimate sign of Malaysian multiculturalism. Previous work by Longhurst, Johnston, and Ho (2009) on eleven migrant women of multiple nationalities in Hamilton, New Zealand, demonstrated that domestic space such as the kitchen was a comfortable place for them, while taste and aroma in cooking and sharing food was an essential way of staying connected with home. To build a good rapport with and trust by their participants, the researchers visited their homes, went to their kitchens, ate and shared food in a variety of ways. Building on the same approach as above, Neil (2015) furthers her work by

focusing on Egyptian migrant women settling in Waterloo, in Belgium. In her work, she interviewed her participant while they together prepared and consumed the significant ethnic cuisine chosen by the participant. She argues that the visceral approach, such as sensual experiences within the kitchen, is very useful in assessing the knowledge, experiences, sensations and moods of migrants that could not be obtained through the traditional interview process.

A study by Pilkey, Scicluna, Campkin, and Penner (2017) provide a useful discussion on sexuality and gender at home. Building on the sexuality framework, the scholars discuss the relationship between sexuality, gender and home, especially towards same-sex sexualities. In the same vein, Gorman-Murray (2008) studied on the complex relationships between masculinity, domesticity and the home. Both studies emphasise the construction of sociality in a same-sex household, and how this contributes to the meaning of home. According to the prominent scholars of home, Blunt and Dowling (2006) argued that home can be perceived as a multi-scalar, where “senses of belonging and alienation are constructed across diverse scales ranging from the body and the household to the city, nation and globe” (p. 27).

In the anthropology literature on commensality, Carsten (1995) explains on the substance of kinship and the heat of the hearth, and highlights the importance of commensality and kinship in the Malay fishing community in Langkawi. This classic literature of anthropology is probably the only ethnographic research that documented the kinship and commensality in the Malay community. In Malay households, rice is perceived as the main substance which many Malay people always cook and eat together when sharing the same house. The main idea of commensality is that all the family members in a household should return and sit and eat together full rice meals. Carsten also analyses the construction of kinship and suggests flexible ideas of relatedness in anthropology analysis and Western notions. She emphasizes the importance of the house in South-East Asian societies. In Langkawi, for instance, the house is regarded as resistance to division and a symbol of unity.

The hearth, or *dapur*, is a place where women spend most of their time, performing activities such as cooking and preparing food. This is important for the Malay community, as rice is one of the main substances, besides blood and milk, in the reproduction of kinship and relatedness. Carsten (1995) argues that relatedness should not necessarily come from biological or social constructions but, rather, be expressed regarding procreation, and from living and eating together. Eating together is also a sign of trust and relatedness between two parties. Sharing food is regarded as a symbol of harmony (Janowski & Kerlogue, 2007). In this sense, the best way to understand kinship from Carsten's analysis is that it is a process where outsiders

can incorporate as kin through feeding, adopting children, marriage and living together in the same household. In her analysis, kin means when people in a house are living and consuming together (Carsten, 1995). Building on her arguments, I analyze the relationship that emerged among these young Malay students through their cooking and consumption practices in the household.

To date, research on commensality in the field of social sciences has been much focused on Western context and societies especially among the white middle class rather than other populations (Tuomainen, 2014; Fischler, 2011; Murcott, 1997). There are very limited studies on the commensality that pay attention to food sharing and eating that extend beyond traditional forms of social relationships, identity and space among the other groups such as migrants or ethnic minorities in the overseas landscape (Jönsson et al., 2021; Walker, 2012; Marovelli, 2019; Anigbo, 1987). Hence, this has become the gap that I am trying to address, by documenting the commensality of food in the construction of social relationships between female Malay students' space abroad.

Ethnographically, I am concerned by the role played by food in the construction of social relationships and identity between female Malay students in Manchester and Cardiff. To investigate these elements, I explore the importance of commensality in the private space (home) as a consumption site to these Malay students.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork amongst female Malaysian Muslim students in Manchester and Cardiff. The consideration of locations was chosen based on the statistical data related to the most favoured destination in the presence of Malaysian students. Thirty qualitative interviews were undertaken between January, 2016 and January, 2017 with both undergraduate and postgraduate students from sciences and social sciences courses. Most of the informants in this research were scholarship recipients awarded by the government and private agencies, such as the Public Services Department, Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) and PETRONAS.

The informants aged between the early twenties to mid-thirties and came from various cities or regions in Malaysia (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology* by European Commission, it is stated that 'The relationship with research subjects must be carefully managed and controlled at each stage of the research process'. Throughout my fieldwork, I introduced myself to each informant and explained my role as a research student interested in learning about their daily lives as female Malaysian

Muslim students in the United Kingdom. I handed the interviewee the information sheet and briefly explained the significance of my research before the in-depth interview and participant observation began. I convinced them of the study's ethical implications to instil a sense of security and comfort in the students as they shared their stories with me. Thus, giving the information of the research and informed consent was a critical step in my data collection phase. Additionally, it safeguarded their rights as research informants, in terms of confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity during their participation in my study.

To gain a better understanding of these students' lives, I rented a house that was previously occupied by three female Malaysian students, who were also the primary subjects of my research. I spent the majority of my time in the city with these students and their closest friends, who lived less than a five-minute walk from our house. By sharing a house with my participants, I was able to document their daily routines, particularly their cooking and eating activities. At home, we had a cooking rota, and I cooked dinner for them on days when I was on duty; I also assisted them in the kitchen when they were on duty. Apart from observing how they cooked and enquiring about how they learn to cook or who taught them, I also had numerous conversations with them about their personal lives, family backgrounds, and interests or hobbies.

Additionally, my presence in the house has provided me with warm glimpses into their global friendship networks, academic lives, roles and routines in the house, as well as how they spent their time as international students in the UK. Besides my role as a researcher, the household members regarded me not only as their 'new housemate', but also as the *kakak* (older sister). I began to adapt to my new role as *kakak* and as a researcher in the house.

Most of the participants in my research were recruited through snowball sampling, based on the recommendation by the students that I lived with, and the people that I met during the housewarming or social gathering with the Malay student's community. To build a rapport with new participants, I have to put more effort into hanging out with them several times before I decide to interview them individually. The majority of the in-depth interviews were carried out in the native language, Malay as preferred by the participants which range from 45 to 120 minutes. Besides in-depth interviews, I also used participant observation, conversation and fieldnotes as supplementary for my data collection. These methods are very important as I need to discover in what ways food, commensality and friendship play a crucial role in their transnational life. After the interview, I wrote a summary of the findings and show to the participants for confirmation. All interviews were fully transcribed and translated into English before coding.

Additionally, I obtained consent from my informants to record the interviews using a voice recorder. They were free to withdraw at any time without explanation and could respond to my questions in either Malay or English. Following the interviews, I typically summarised the data verbally with my informants. If I discovered any ambiguous statements or content in the transcription, I would share them with the interviewees to ensure they were accurate and to determine which portions were particularly sensitive. Furthermore, if I required additional information, I could call or text my informants via WhatsApp – for instance, if I needed to confirm any jargon or the specific name of a location or event mentioned during the interview. This aided me in ascertaining the accuracy of the data obtained. The qualitative tool, Nvivo, was used to analyse participant observation notes and interview transcriptions.

## **4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Commensality and Food Preparation**

As I explain in the above section, Malays' taste characteristics are highly influenced by the region they come from in Malaysia. Therefore, when these students lived in one house, they would potentially meet members from different parts of Malaysia. The new Malay housemates may come from the southern region, such as Johor; some may come from far away from Borneo, like Sarawak. Some may eat spicy food; others may prefer sweet food. Thus, it is not always easy to accommodate each other's tastes or needs in the cooking and preparation of food.

In this study, the Malay students were well informed and aware of each other's food allergies and tastes. Afia, one of the housemates, explained how her cooking and food preparation decisions were affected by one of these factors:

*In this house, we try to avoid cooking seafood because two of our housemates have food allergies.*

Similarly, Dayah, 28, from Cardiff also stated that she would make sure that the food she cooked and prepared would suit all her housemates' tastes so that they would eat her dish without feeling uncomfortable.

*There is only one person who can't eat if the food is too spicy – the others can eat spicy food. So whenever I cook, I make sure that my cooking is not too spicy so all of us can eat.*



My interviews have shown that these students manage to tolerate change and are prepared to familiarise themselves with each member's food habits. Thus, living together and cooking for each other formed a great understanding of their friends' food restrictions, created consideration through food preparation and trust in each other. They became more tolerant when preparing food each day. Though I was living there for a short period, the girls accepted me as their guest and 'new' housemate by preparing food for both of us in their everyday meal. As Carsten (2004, p. 40) has noted, in many parts of South-East Asia, the consumption of rice meals, "not only strengthens existing ties of kinship between household members, it can create such ties with those who recently come to share residence".

#### **4.2 The Cooking Rota**

The cooking rota or culinary division of labour is a domestic task whereby the household members agree to take a shift and cook and prepare a meal for each other. In this task, the girls not only share the cost of the ingredients but also put their trust in each other to cook and prepare the meal for the new households that they meet in the host country, which also means that they learn to prepare and cook food for someone who has no biological kinship to them in the household. The cooking schedule in a house also reveals the Malay students' friendship and the extent to which food consumption and preparation play a role in their everyday activities. Anisa suggested the idea of this culinary division. She first learned about this activity from her former housemates with whom she lived in her first year of study.

However, the activity only lasts for a few weeks because of dietary changes among the members of the household. The barriers happened when some of them started to adopt a healthy lifestyle (eating brown rather than white rice); there was also a member who could not commit to cooking for others because of a tight study schedule. This task, which could bring the people together, may also potentially rupture the relationship within the households. The changing patterns of food consumption and personal lifestyle choice resulted in them eating separately, which is often perceived as a rejection of the household's food and the family (Bell & Valentine, 1997). Despite what happened in her previous house, Anisa tried to implement this idea of the culinary division of labour with her current housemates as a way for them to strengthen their friendship and socialize through food. The reason why these students agreed to this routine was that sharing the food was cost-efficient, and they felt happy and emotionally comforted when someone was preparing food for them. When living abroad, especially, having a cooking rota was good because they did not have to cook every day. The most important thing was that these students became closer to the food-sharing and everyday commensality.

After moving to her new home, Anisa and her housemates managed to maintain their cooking rota. They would take a turn and each pick at least one day when they would be free to cook for their housemates. The students were free to decide what menu they wanted to cook – usually, their own favourite meal. On weekdays, the students would cook around 5 or 6 pm, after returning from class. This was not a problem for them because they were studying the same course at the university, and their daily schedules were not much different each day. The cooking routine was suspended during reading and examination weeks because the students needed to focus on their studies. If someone could not cook on her duty day, either because she was too busy or feeling unwell, another person could replace her. Table 1 is an example of the cooking schedule in the houses I live during my fieldwork:

Table 1: Sample cooking rota

Day	City	
	Manchester	Cardiff
Sunday	Free/anyone	Sakeena
Monday	Author	Yatie
Tuesday	Afiqa	Maya
Wednesday	Anisa	Sakeena
Thursday	Author	Yatie
Friday	Afia	Maya
Saturday	Free/anyone	Free/anyone

In Manchester, as a new member of the household and knowing that these students each have a cooking shift, I volunteered myself to cook for two days a week as my contribution to the household chores. Since they did not have a schedule indicating who will run errands, etc., I established the habit of accompanying the girls on their trips to the market and to buy groceries. As we can see, there is a similarity for the groups in both Manchester and Cardiff on Saturdays, where everyone is free to have their meal at home or to eat out. This is because, at the weekend, the students would go into town together – perhaps to a car-boot sale or to the stadium to watch a football match – or hang out with their friends at their favourite restaurant. On Sunday, there would usually be someone who would volunteer to cook, and others would help in the kitchen. I occasionally wandered into the kitchen to help. While helping them, I took the opportunity to conduct informal interviews with them by asking where they got the recipe from, and what the food meant to them.

My ethnographic findings also show that cooking and eating Malay dishes together could also help to overcome stress in their studies. For example, when exams were just around the corner, they would plan the menu, mostly Malay cuisine, and share the cost of the ingredients. They would cook together in the kitchen, laughing, talking and gossiping about local and international artists. This activity is a way for them to relieve their stress before an exam and also to overcome their longing for Malaysian food. This is an important dimension of the contribution that geography and migration studies make to our understanding of female student migrants in their relationship with their kitchen, through food, through the home, through the visceral realm (Longhurst et al., 2009). Moreover, it is also economical because the students can eat many national meals by sharing the cost of the food. This might be different in Malaysia, where my informants told me that they could simply go to any local restaurant and order the local meals that they wanted to eat together. According to Farah:

*'It is easier in Malaysia – whenever you wish to eat, you can just go and buy the food that you want on the street or in a restaurant. Here, you have to cook because the options are not available. – Farah, Manchester*

Thus, the above demonstrates the importance of cooking together and sharing food for the Malay students' friendship and education.

#### **4.3 Commensality and Identity: Taste of Home**

After the summer break, my housemates in Rusholme would bring Malay cooking ingredients with them. While in Malaysia, they would discuss what kind of ingredients each would take to avoid buying the same food and to control the weight of their luggage. When the list was prepared, they would buy them at their nearest market or grocery. Anisa, one of my housemates, told me that, a few days before she went back to Manchester, her mum would take her to the supermarket to buy food stocks for her. In the kitchen, she showed me a 2-litre bottle of black sweetened soy sauce (kicap manis) she had brought from Malaysia. I was surprised because the bottle was huge and this sauce meant a lot to her. She said her family had been consuming this sauce for so many years, so it was necessary when she cooked many Malay dishes in Manchester. It was not surprising to me because, in the house where we lived, Anisa was known for her Malaysian spicy soy sauce chicken dish, which she always prepared for us when it was her turn to do the cooking. According to her,

*“ I love this kicap manis. The sweetness of the black soy sauce helps me to reduce the spiciness of the food. I can simply adjust and balance my cooking. This reminds me of my family”*

Thus, the taste of the dish she cooked had a balanced mixture of spicy and sweet. This shows how balancing the taste of food using ingredients from home was vital in satisfying the taste of home in the host country. The students would play with their local food ingredients and adjust the flavour to suit the taste of the food they consumed when at home in Malaysia.

My experience in Cardiff was particularly interesting because the food that my Malay informants had brought caught my attention. In the fridge, I saw that there were frozen torch ginger flowers, curry leaves, lime leaves and frozen Pengat Durian (sweetened durian pulp), all of which were nicely packed in a plastic bag brought from Malaysia. I was so impressed with how they stored the food and packed it carefully in the fridge. One of the housemates, Yatie, a Penang-born Malay, told me that her mother helped her pack the food. Penang is a state that is famous in Asia for its good street food. Penang Laksa is a popular dish which is also known as Assam Laksa. It consists of thick round rice noodles, and is served with mackerel soup. The main feature is tamarind and frozen torch ginger flowers. It is a noodle soup with a sour taste.

*“Whenever I feel homesick and longed for home food, I would cook Penang Laksa,,,, my mom taught me how to cook Penang Laksa, and I am happy that my friends (in Cardiff) love the dish. Sometimes, whenever I feel like craving for durian, I will heat the frozen Pengat Durian (sweetened durian pulp).”*

As we know, Durian is identified as the king of fruit in South-East Asian countries. It is also famous for its strong odour and thorn-covered husk. Durian fruit is used in much Malay cooking. According to Yatie,

*‘It's hard to get durian here (UK), and even if it's sold here, the price of the durian slices can be too high’.*

Yatie's statement also proves that she is also driven by the need for frugality, a typical condition experienced by many international students, mainly from Asia, living in developed Western countries (Brown et al., 2010). In the same vein, in Manchester, a Malay student from Borneo

Island, Yasmin, also brought Sarawak Laksa paste in her luggage from Sarawak. According to her, Sarawak Laksa is easier to make because it does not require as many ingredients as Laksa from Malaysia. The most important ingredient for making Sarawak Laksa is the paste, which is manufactured from an extensive range of components. The paste is the key ingredient for the delicious taste of Laksa Sarawak soup. Other ingredients are rice vermicelli, prawns, chicken, coconut milk, coriander and bean sprouts.

Besides cooking ingredients, Yasmin also brought tea and palm sugar (known as gula in Borneo) to Manchester in her luggage. When I went to her house for a gathering, she would serve three-layer tea as a signature beverage. I remembered I used to drink three-layer tea sometimes back in Malaysia, but did not know that it originally came from Sarawak. In Sarawak, three-layer tea is known as *The C Peng* and is a local speciality drink served throughout Sarawak. After visiting Yasmin's house several times, my housemates and I often had an opportunity to eat Sarawak Laksa and Three-Layer Tea prepared by Yasmin and her housemates, which we considered to be extraordinary authentic meal from Borneo.

The food that these students brought from Malaysia was not seen as a symbol of national identity, but it told us a lot about their family background and regional identity. My findings also show that regional foods were more important in satisfying the students' longing for home. As Longhurst et al. (2009, p. 342) argue, the "taste, texture, touch, look and smell of food may not be the same when it is created in a new home, but it does so in a visceral (deep inward feelings) way". Besides sharing these ingredients from the home country, the students also worked together when preparing the food.

#### **4.4 Commensality and Space: Eating Together or Alone?**

When these students came to the UK, they lived in rental accommodation with other Malays. Only some lived in university accommodation with other international students. Therefore, it is essential to understand the role of food and commensality where these students live. In this case, the Malay students' commensality and consumption experiences can be separated into two situations. First, those who live with other Malays may have fewer intercultural adjustment problems compared to those who live with international students. However, they might experience a new role as a household member – to commit to certain rules or agreements when living as a Malay in the same household, such as culinary divisions that lead to the construction of social relationships. Second, those who live with international students, sharing the communal areas and kitchen, may experience the cultural difference and learn to negotiate food storage and space division in the fridge to retain their Muslim identity.

For example, Jasmine, a 22-year-old urban planning student from Selangor, Malaysia at the University of Manchester, shared her experiences of living with international students in university accommodation during her first year of study. The household consisted of eight members, of whom she was the only Muslim. At first, she was very anxious because it was her first time living with non-Muslims. She had to explain to them what she could and could not share with them while living in one unit – especially when her housemates decided to share the cost of buying kitchenware:

*When they proposed to share the pots and pans, and I was like.. umm. I said no, which was a horrible way to start with your housemates but that's one thing, you know, we had to differentiate. There is a halal section in the fridge that I got for such a very long time.*

Since Jasmine was the only Muslim and ate halal meat in the house, the other household members decide to provide her with a small compartment in the freezer to keep her halal meats separate and to avoid confusion between halal and non-halal meats. Therefore, though living with others, Jasmine had her pot and pan and only cooked food for herself. She also mentioned that she usually ate alone in her room as other members had different meal preferences and different eating times. They only used the communal area to play games and have snacks. In this case, the idea of commensality and consumption occurred in different ways, whereby Jasmine would only have a light meal with others in the communal area, when they were playing games and would have a proper meal alone due to different meal preferences. Hence, as argued by Massey (2005), this finding presents how space presents us with the social identity in the widest sense, a social of interrelatedness, multiple practices, and negotiation with diverse other people and communities.

The situation was similar for Anna, who lived in a private housing. Anna, a doctor in philosophy (PhD) student at Cardiff University, stated that, although she lived with Malaysian Chinese students, they did not eat together due to her busy schedules and religious boundaries. When I visited her house, she told me she usually cooked large quantities of one dish and froze them so that she had a stock of food for a week.

*Kak, this is my one-week stock of chicken curry (showing her freezer compartment to me). You know, sometimes I feel tired and lazy, so I just reheat the food and eat it with rice. I usually eat alone because I always come home late from my office.*

From her explanation, we can see that Anna preferred to have a home-cooked dish rather than eating out every day. Due to her busy schedule, she decided to cook a week's worth of her favourite dish and freeze it. Eating home-cooked frozen food shows the transition she had to deal with in her busy life as a PhD student abroad. Moreover, she finds eating rice and Malay cuisine at home gave her a sense of comfort because she is a *tekak melayu* (Malay taste) person, and rice could make her feel *rasa kenyang* (full) and *sedap* (tasty) compared to other cuisines. As Brown et al. (2010) stated above, eating a national home-cooked dish at home was perceived as healthy, tasty and emotionally comforting for international students. However, the impact of this was that she did not have time to cook and eat together with her housemates. Another reason why she ate alone at home was due to her identity as a Muslim, and because her two Chinese housemates were siblings and commonly shared their food.

#### **4.5 Commensality and Social Relations**

In this section, I look at the importance of food to social relationships among young Malays in the UK. Previous literature on Malay food and kinship has significantly highlighted the house as a site of unity – resistance to division and sharing the *dapur* (hearth) and rice could produce kinship (Carsten, 1995; Janowski & Kerlogue, 2007). During my ethnographic fieldwork in Manchester and Cardiff, I had the opportunity to cook many Asian and Western dishes with my informants. After a year of living with Malay girls in the two cities, I found out that *kepercayaan* (trust) is the key to their everyday consumption. This element is entangled through the models of food consumption and commensality that are active in a Malay's household. The female Malaysian Muslim students with whom I worked preferred to cook at home every day and have lunch or dinner together.

My findings show that these students not only live in one house, but they also develop their friendship as housemates through cooking and preparing food for each other. When I moved into the house, I was the oldest among them. Because of that, the girls addressed me as *kakak* to create a fictive kinship. As Karim (1995) notes, “as if to recreate intimacy and familiarity of consanguineal and affinal ties in local groupings in other spheres of life” (p. 37).

According to Janowski and Kerlogue (2007), this practice is evident in everyday life in

central Seberang; kinship relationships are invoked regarding the form of address used when speaking to anyone, whether there is formal kinship or not. As I lived with them, I learned that the most critical thing that connected us was food. The Malay students with whom I worked often built their trust and friendship by sharing and cooking together for each other. These girls each have their role in the house which makes trust important in notions of friendship. Trust is established by each other through the sharing of space, food and utility bills.

Thus, Malay students also learn to be responsible as household members, committed to domestic tasks and contributed to domestic expenses. Besides cooking, these students also demonstrated their regional identity through the menus and ingredients they brought from their home country. This gives us some idea of how the role of food in the transnational education migration process plays a part in Malay students' experiences. According to Marovelli (2019), eating the same food at the same table increases trust and 'relatedness' between two parties. Here, I argue that the friendship and trust among these students were not only about the sharing of the food, eating together and sharing the kitchen, but also about the roles they played in preparing the food and sharing of the ingredients they brought from Malaysia.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

This ethnographic research demonstrates how social relationships grow in the community of Malaysian women in the UK through commensality. By focusing on food, identity and space in the private space, I highlighted the notion of kinship relations in the everyday lives of Malay female students abroad in the migration context. The findings in this research show how, through practices of commensality, female Malay students from Malaysia in my sample quickly built quasi-kinship relations in the UK, and how important it affected their relations to each other, as well as negotiated their Malay identities in overseas settings. One of the main findings in this research is that eating together and cooking for each other formed a great understanding of their friends' food restrictions, created consideration through food preparation and trust in each other. From the food in the luggage across the border to the domestic work at home such as the cooking rota, this study has contributed to an understanding of the meaning and role of food for international students. The cooking rota is one of the significant discussions in this paper that unpacks the transition between the students' role and the emotions that transformed the social relations by starting to establish trust between the new housemates and develop a friendship. These students also learnt to cook for the first time while dealing with each other's dietary requirements, and the obstacles posed by a busy study schedule in the preparation of food. It is also a way for them to maintain the relationship and overcome stress



in their studies, and fulfil their desire to create harmony at home. I suggest that places such as the kitchen play an essential space in building their Malay identity and social relationships between female Malay students' communities in the host country. However, the findings in this research do not represent the entire Malay woman households in the UK, as some students preferred to live alone or lived in non-Malay housing. Here, I argue that friendship and trust among these students were not only about the sharing of the food, eating together and sharing the *dapur*, but also about the roles they played in preparing the food, and the sharing of the ingredients they brought from Malaysia. Thus, I suggest that further ethnographic research should be done in the future by exploring the emotions of nostalgia among student migrants eating at public spaces such as Asian restaurants in overseas settings.

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