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Eating Your Way to Integration: The Making of a Diverse Community at LSE

LSE GROUPS Research 2018

Group 4

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Abstract

This research paper examines the significance of food on intercultural relationships that affect our sense of belonging. We analyse the extent to which consuming different cultural foods impacts the integration of students at LSE, a culturally diverse community. Although the existing literature explains how food is a symbol of cultural identity and helps integration in culturally diverse communities, there is none that focuses on students at LSE. Our research investigates student's consumption of different cultural cuisines and their experience of how important they deemed it to be in their social interactions. Based on our online survey of 103 LSE students, we found that there is a positive correlation between the diversity of students' choice of food and their degree of integration, confirming our hypothesis. Through this research, we try to emphasise the limitations of students' cultural experience. Thus, a further discussion can inspire new ways to improve integration at LSE and ultimately help students find a sense of belonging beyond the boundary of their national backgrounds.

Keywords: culture, food consumption, diverse community, integration, LSE.

Introduction

This research project explores the concept of belonging at LSE as a culturally diverse community. Our starting point is to question whether students get to experience the international outlook promised, and whether they get to integrate with others on a personal level. This is imperative for them to belong, where belonging requires active participation in the community, rather than simply co-existing in the same space. We go further to study the impact of sharing cultural food with others and how that affects and strengthens our interaction with other people in our community.

Our specific focus on food is due to how this is an easy method of communication between students, who might not share the same language, experiences or background. This can lead to greater open-mindedness and cultural awareness. The research question that we aim to answer is: *To what extent does consuming cultural food impact the integration of students in LSE's culturally diverse community?* Our guiding hypothesis is that there is a positive relationship between the students choosing diverse cultural cuisines and how integrated they are at the LSE. We will investigate the frequency to which they have tried different cultural cuisines, the diversity of their social circles, and how important they deemed food to be in establishing relationships with students from different nationalities.

The first part of this paper establishes the literature used and the methodology adopted. The second part discusses the results of our survey, by looking at the regression and two descriptive statistics parts. We conclude by making some policy suggestions for the LSE and LSESU to increase students' experience of cultural diversity.

Literature review

The following literature situates our paper in the existing research, by first focusing on the concept of integration and its significance within higher education institutions, secondly on the role of food in defining cultural identity, and thirdly the effect of eating food in building cross-cultural relations. What the existing research does not cover is the direct relationship between eating food and integration of university students.

I. Integration and Higher Education Institution

The concept of integration has long been studied within the context of immigrants' assimilation to their host society. Park and Burgess (1921) defined the concept as a process of fusion and permeation through the sharing of a person or group's experience and history, to ultimately incorporate them in a common cultural life with others. This process, understood as the assimilation theory, would occur over several generations.

The literature does not specifically focus on how students from different cultural backgrounds react to sharing a common space under a limited amount of time. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, integration simply refers to the extent of intercultural interactions and exchanges amongst students, to transcend their cultural differences and create an effectively diverse community. Since our main focus is on integration between university students, our understanding of culture is through the lens of the students themselves. Hence, culture is understood primarily as its members' general consensus on certain aspects which is regarded to be inherently characteristic of that culture (Wan & Chiu, 2009).

Globalisation has led to the increasing internationalisation of higher education institutions, and thus creates a demand for such institutions to pay attention to how integrated their students are, to ensure a rewarding student experience. Arambewela (2012) explains that institutions need to go beyond their academic educational function in ensuring positive student satisfaction. Furthermore, Rienties et al. (2012) suggest that integration is important to ensure student wellbeing and academic performance. Moreover, this enables students to gain an 'international outlook' and 'intercultural skills' that are favourable for future employment (Arambewela, 2012).

Hence, institutions are encouraged to understand their culturally and socially diverse student body, and train both staff and students to be cross-culturally aware. Halualani et al. (2004) further stresses the importance of active efforts on behalf of institutions, as there is a discrepancy between students claiming the need for diversity and the reality of integration. The reason being, the pressure of socially acceptable norms influencing students' claims, and the difficulty of following such principles that lead to limited intercultural interactions.

II. Food as a Cultural Identity

Eating food, which is a form of material culture, can be a way to promote intercultural integration. It is important to establish that food is linked to a person or group's sense of cultural identity. Fischler (1988) echoes this, by arguing that food does not only have physical importance but also a symbolic power, to the extent that it is an integral part of a person's sense of identity. Thus, consuming one's cultural food is considered to be accepting and representing one's culture, that is the result of socialisation from generation to generation. Effectively, internalizing that culture's norms, values, and expected social roles (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). Furthermore, food symbolises people's ethnic differences allowing them to retain their cultural distinctiveness despite being physically separated from their indigenous geographical location (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997).

Furthermore, the symbolic role of food can be seen through various concrete studies on specific cultural groups. Gore (1999) showed that food acts as a token of good communication and understanding that binds the urban and rural Diné, a native American Tribal group together. Ma (2015) highlighted how Chinese food demonstrates the social function of food, such as in representing social status and establishing interpersonal relationships. Collins (2008), took the concept further by finding that consuming cultural food is about having familiar sensations of belonging and attachment experienced in the home. His analysis specifically explained why South Korean international students in Auckland, New Zealand go to Korean restaurants and recreate Korean dishes.

III. The Effect of Eating Food in Building Cross-Cultural Relationship

Through understanding the link between food consumption and its symbolic meaning, the importance of improving intercultural integration can be understood. Mennell, Murcott, and Van Otterloo (1992) explain that the practice of eating food together signals social solidarity, which acknowledges the equality within the group due to being socially similar. Gergen (2009) echoed this idea that, by establishing a group identity, a sense of belonging can be generated from similar eating habits. Furthermore, Beardsworth & Keil (1997) pointed out that food exchanges symbolise mutual reciprocity and interdependence.

Such concepts can easily be applied to sharing food between people of different cultures. Takenaka (2017), for instance, examined Japanese immigrants' integration into Peruvian life. Through the invention of Nikkei cuisine - a fusion of Japanese and Peruvian foods, the Japanese immigrants were able to consolidate their position as Peruvians, whilst retaining their Japanese heritage. Similarly, Parasecoli (2014) found that immigrants cope with dislocation and disorientation by recreating a sense of place around food production, preparation and consumption, which is shared and reinforced by the host community itself. He mentioned various examples that have become an accepted part of the American life: the Italian-American "Seven Fish" dinner on Christmas Eve, Seder for Jewish communities, Lunar New Year menus initially for immigrants of Chinese descent, Diwali specialties for the Hindus.

Methodology

We conducted an online survey on Google Forms, to gather accurate quantitative results. To get a representative sample of the LSE student population, we distributed our survey through a variety of LSE cultural, religious and food societies, as well as our own social networks. In accordance with ethics requirements, we assured respondents that they will remain anonymous and that their data will be deleted once used. We also informed respondents of the purpose and the nature of this research project, and that by completing the survey they would be consenting to the use of their data.

The first part of the survey gathers information on demographics (eg. gender, nationality), and asks respondents to specify the culture they identify most with, based on the idea that one's cultural identity might not correspond with their nationality. We then asked how strongly respondents feel they are a part of LSE, to establish their sense of belonging. They then ranked the factors that best helped them socialise with people from different cultural backgrounds. To capture how diverse social groups in LSE are, we asked respondents whether they have more friends from their own nationality or different nationalities.

The last part of the survey was divided into three sections. First, to quantify the diversity in respondents' food consumption behaviour, we asked them to indicate their frequency of trying different national cuisines. Second, we examined the impact of cultural food consumption by asking respondents to assess if trying a national cuisine (1) allowed them to interact with people of this nationality; (2) increased their interest in this culture; (3) encouraged them to participate in further cultural activities associated with this culture.

Lastly, to have a more complete picture, we investigate the effect of cost on accessibility to national cuisines, by asking respondents to rate if cost is a major factor in limiting their choice of food consumption.

Results and Discussion

Survey

Note: For key survey demographics, please see appendix.

The survey was completed by 103 LSE students of 21 nationalities from a wide range of departments and cultural backgrounds. We acknowledge that the method of survey distribution was not completely random since it was primarily distributed to extended friends of the researchers. Thus, there may be a potential bias from cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds to some extent. Moreover, a further bias may be introduced as the completion of the survey was voluntary and hence the people who chose to answer it may already have an interest in the topic and thereby more experience in eating food of other culture than, perhaps, an average LSE student. Nevertheless, it provides an effective demographic to examine, given the diverse nature of the sample.

Descriptive Statistics [Part 1]

The survey respondents were asked to rank the importance of 7 factors in socialising. We find that 57% of respondents assigned 'Food & Drink' as the first or second most important factor for socialising. This was the most popular factor followed by 'Language' and 'Lifestyle.' The same 7 factors were then ranked in their importance in belonging to a cultural group. Here 50% of respondents assigned 'Food & Drink' as the first or second most important factor, whilst 'Language' was the most important factor. It is important to note that there is potential bias towards the interpretation of the word 'Language' in the survey. While language was intended to be interpreted as a cultural factor, there is a possibility of it being interpreted merely as a main method of communication. Overall, it is evident that food and drink play a crucial role in one's social life as well as feeling of belonging to a cultural group.

Regression Method

In order to assess the impact of consuming a diverse range of food on integration within LSE, we ran two sets of regression to examine the association between '*Food Index*,' (measuring respondents' diversity of food consumption) and 2 proxies for how integrated the student is within LSE. These proxies are the variables: (1) '*Frequency of having meals with LSE friends of different nationality*' (F~M) and (2) '*Number of LSE friends of different nationality*' (No~Fr).

The '*Food Index*' was measured by taking into account the frequency of respondents trying 20 different cuisines (BBC Online, 2018) and determined as follows:

$$\text{Food Index} = \text{No. of "Very Frequently"} * 3 + \text{No. of "Frequently"} * 2 + \text{No. of "Sometimes"} * 1 + \text{No. of "Never"} * 0$$

*Since the variables are measured in psychological scales on an arbitrary metric, both the independent and dependent variables are standardised in order to produce meaningful interpretations.

In addition, we controlled a number of variables: gender, being a UK/EU/international student, LSE department and cultural group.

Key Results

A. *Correlation Between Diverse Food Consumption and Integration*

1. Model 1: Controlling '*Nationality Group*'

Our results find that a 1 standard deviation increase in '*Food Index*' is associated with an increase in 0.195 standard deviations in (No~F) and an increase in 0.283 standard deviations in (F~M).

Both results have been found to be statistically significant at 1% significance level, suggesting that there is indeed a strong association between the diversity of a student's food consumption and how integrated the student is within LSE. (See Model 1 in Table 1&2).

2. Model 2: Controlling '*Cultural Group*'

As we hypothesise that one's belonging to a cultural group has a larger impact than nationality on the extent of integration, we control the variable of '*Cultural Group*'.

The coefficients on '*Food Index*' have been found to be significant at the 5% and 1% significance level respectively.

Table 1: The impact of consuming a diverse range of foods on how many friends they have outside their own nationality.

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>
Constant	0.030 (0.2924)	-0.047 (0.3200)
Food Index (standardised)	0.195*** (0.0730)	0.181** (0.0793)
UK/EU/International	Yes	No
Cultural Group	No	Yes
LSE Department	Yes	Yes
Gender (1=female, 0=male)	Yes	Yes
N	103	
R-Squared	0.050	

Table 2: The impact of consuming a diverse range of foods on frequency of meals with friends outside nationality.

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>
Constant	-0.595* (0.3341)	-0.008 (0.3360)
Food Index (standardised)	0.283*** (0.0834)	0.280*** (0.0833)
UK/EU/International	Yes	Yes
Cultural Group	No	No
LSE Department	Yes	Yes
Gender (1=female, 0=male)	Yes	Yes
N	103	
R-Squared	0.099	

B. Correlation Between Socioeconomic Factors and Accessibility of Consuming Diverse Food

We recognised that socioeconomic factors are likely to play a role in determining the diversity of a student’s food consumption. Therefore, we ran a third set of regressions to examine the association between ‘*Food Index*’ and indicators for socioeconomic status. These indicators include: (1) whether at least one parent has a university degree, (2) whether the respondent attended a state-school or private school and (3) whether the respondent views cost as a major factor in preventing them from trying different national cuisines.

Table 3: The impact of socioeconomic factors on consuming a diverse range of foods.

	<u>Model</u>
Constant	-0.351 (0.2181)
Parents' Education	-0.019 (0.2587)
School Type	0.028 (0.1927)
Cost as a major factor	0.171** (0.0812)
N	103
R-Squared	
*** Significant at 1% significance level.	
** Significant at 5% significance level.	
* Significant at 10% significance level.	
Yes: This variable is controlled.	

These results find that having at least one parent with a university degree and the type of school attended do not have a statistically significant association with students' diversity of food consumption.

However, the association between cost as a major factor affecting the accessibility to national cuisines and '*Food Index*' is statistically significant at the 5% significance level. We gathered this information by asking respondents how far they agreed with this statement: "Cost is a major factor in preventing me from trying different national cuisines." A change in answer from 'strongly agree' to 'agree' is associated with a 0.171 standard deviation increase in '*Food Index*'. Hence, students with higher socioeconomic status are likely to have a more diverse consumption of food.

Linking this back to the regressions in Table 1 and 2, this suggests that part of the association between diverse food consumption and integration can be ascribed to one's socioeconomic

status and thus students with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be able to integrate through food.

Descriptive Statistics [Part 2]

In order to assess whether eating other national cuisines has in fact led survey respondents to react positively, we asked participants to respond to whether this has led to:

- a) Increased interest in that culture.
- b) Interactions with people from that country.
- c) Participation in further cultural activities.

We found that:

- a) 66.7% of respondents either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that eating other national cuisines has increased their interest in that culture.
- b) 48.1% either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that trying food from other countries has led them to interact with people from that country.
- c) 25% either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that it has led them to participate in further cultural activities.

The responses from the first 2 questions in particular, support the idea that students react positively to trying other national cuisines and support our findings of an association between the diversity of food consumption and how integrated the student is.

Figure 1

Eating other national cuisines has increased my interest in that culture.

108 responses

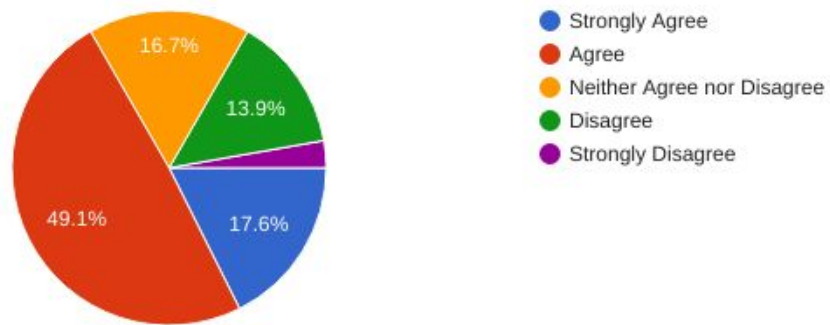


Figure 2

Trying food from other countries has led me to interact with people from that country.

108 responses

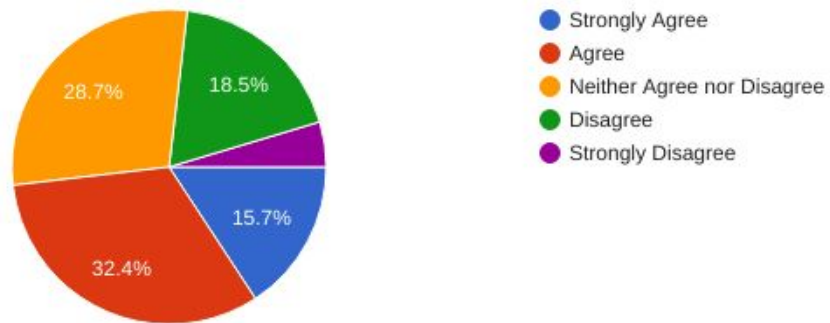
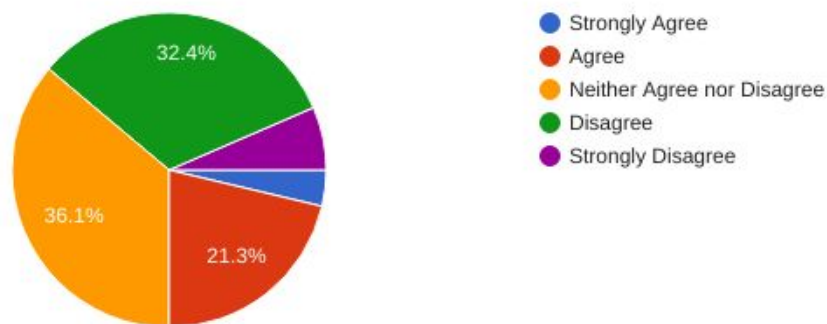


Figure 3

I have been participating in further cultural activities after eating this country's cuisine.

108 responses



Conclusion

From our analysis, we find that food consumption is an important factor in socialising and contributes strongly to one's sense of belonging to a cultural group, supporting the relationship suggested in the literature review. Through the regression analysis, we confirm our hypothesis since we find a statistically significant association between the diversity of food consumption and the degree of students' integration within LSE. We also find that students with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to consume a diverse range of food. This serves as a reminder that students with lower socioeconomic status may be less likely to utilise consumption of diverse food as a gateway to integration. Lastly, we find that students are more likely to be more interested in other cultures and interact with other students of that country as a result of consuming a more diverse range of food. However, we recognise that this research is not detailed enough to provide evidence for causality between the diversity of food consumption and integration within LSE. Given more time and resources, we can incorporate more variables and reach a larger and more representative sample of the LSE student population so that we

not only get closer to establishing causality but also draw inference on different demographic groups and put forward more effective policy recommendations.

In spite of this, we hope this paper can inspire LSE to introduce policy changes to support students' integration and their sense of belonging. We encourage LSESU as well as various departments to organise more cultural food sharing and appreciation days of low cost so that the event would have wider reach. We believe that this is a good way forward in improving LSE, not just as an academic institution but also as an inclusive place for all.

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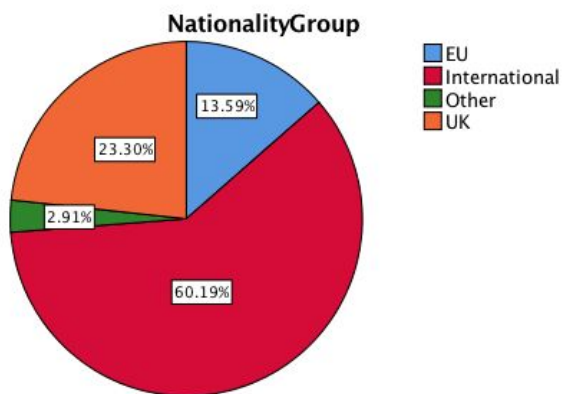
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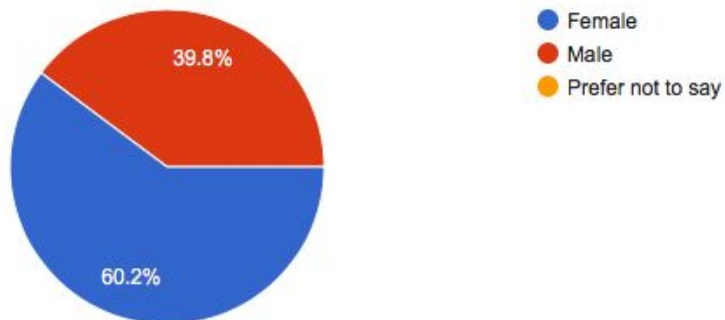
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Appendix



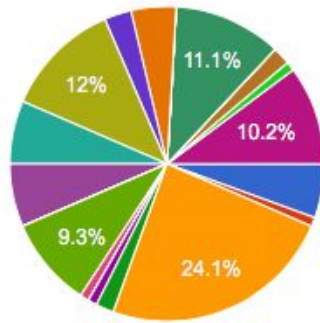
Please indicate your gender:

108 responses



Which department are you from?

108 responses



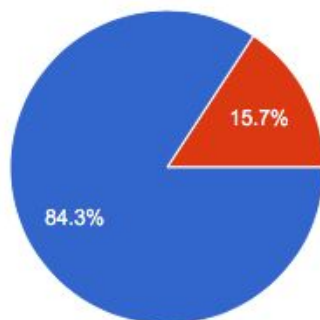
- Accounting
- Anthropology
- Economics
- Economic History
- Finance
- Gender Studies
- Geography & Environment
- Government

▲ 1/3 ▼

- Health Policy
- International Development
- International History
- International Relations
- Law
- Management
- Mathematics
- Media & Communications
- Methodology
- Philosophy, Logic & Scientific Method
- Psychological & Behavioural Science
- Public Policy
- Social Policy
- Sociology
- Statistics

Does at least one of your parents have a university degree?

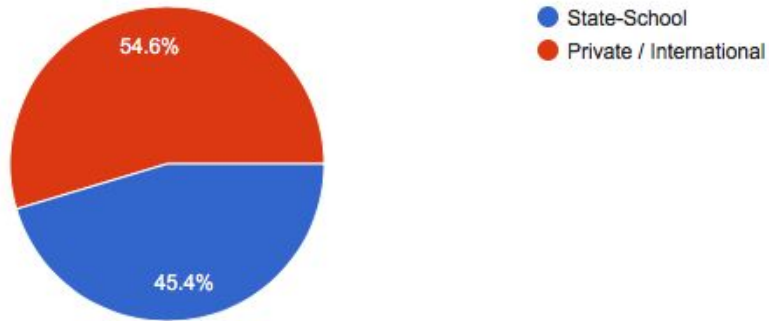
108 responses



- Yes
- No

What kind of school did you attend?

108 responses



Cost is a major factor in preventing me from trying different national cuisines.

108 responses

