

Consumers treat superfoods as 'extra insurance'

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Australian consumers are skeptical about new superfoods as they enter the market but still consume them for a bit of "extra insurance" for their health, according to new research at the University of Adelaide.

For her PhD studies, Jessica Loyer from the University's Food Values Research Group has conducted the first research of its kind looking at superfood production, consumption and discourse in Australia.

"The term 'superfood' started appearing on items in Australian supermarkets in the late 1990s, and since then consumers have appeared to become much more conscious of the nutritional content of [food](#)," Ms Loyer says.

"The word 'superfood' itself is a creation of marketing and media, and on the surface it seems easy to dismiss the entire concept as a clever marketing ploy aimed at duping gullible consumers. But in fact, the history and use of superfoods globally goes much deeper than that, and the reasons for their popular appeal today are more than just superficial," she says.

Ms Loyer – who conducted focus groups with Australian consumers and visited local producers of the superfood maca in Peru as part of her research – says consumers are drawn to superfoods because they are seen to be somewhere in between food and medicine.

"In our [focus groups](#) with consumers, we found that this in-between

quality is part of what makes superfoods so alluring, or 'seductive' as one participant put it. However, while there is a strong awareness among consumers about superfoods, they are also confused by what's on offer, what benefits they might provide, how much to consume, and many other aspects of their production and origins," Ms Loyer says.

"For example, superfoods are often considered to be linked with the 'exotic' or 'primitive' and their consumption, in a way, is a rejection of highly processed food that consumers have been exposed to for many decades. Despite this, most consumers are unaware of the kinds of processing that superfoods themselves undergo.

"Interestingly, the taste of superfoods did not play an important role in consumers' decisions to purchase them. These foods are often consumed in smoothies, where they are blended together into a meal that is considered to be part multivitamin and part preventative medicine."

Ms Loyer says most consumers express skepticism towards superfood health claims and understand that they are being "sold an image".

"Nevertheless, [consumers](#) are happy to succumb to a bit of magical thinking and eat superfoods as a sort of extra insurance, because they believe that these foods might help their health, and probably can't hurt," she says.

"This research helps us to examine and better understand ideas about what constitutes 'good' and 'healthy' foods, and our society's response to them.

"We shouldn't forget that superfoods are real agricultural products that are produced, transformed and consumed by real people, that they play an important role in the global food economy – they're not just an invention of marketing spin."

Provided by University of Adelaide

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