

The Social Lives of Superfoods

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Abstract

Superfoods have emerged as an increasingly significant category of health food products and related popular discourse about food, health, and values. They are celebrated for their purported extraordinary nutritional and/or medicinal values, 'natural' qualities, associations with 'exotic' or 'pristine' places of origin, and histories of traditional or indigenous use. However, the term 'superfood' defies precise definition, and both products and discourse are poorly understood by the public and regulatory bodies.

Existing scholarship has examined social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of related concepts and products, such as functional foods and low-carbohydrate diets, demonstrating ways in which new forms and ideas emerge through the convergence of nutritional science discourse, globalised food provisioning, and the commodification of food and health. These studies have largely focused on the nutritional anxieties felt by Western consumers. Other literature has paid greater attention to the impacts of the globalisation and industrialisation of food and agriculture on producers, often located in the developing world. Research bridging worlds of food production and consumption is called for, but only recently beginning to emerge in the scholarly literature.

There is currently no existing scholarship examining superfoods in particular. Because superfoods can be understood both as a discourse about food and health and a group of agro-food products, they offer a distinctive lens through which to conceptually bring together geographically (and, often, socioculturally) distant worlds of production and consumption. In drawing together these diverse worlds, I have employed a 'biography-of-things' approach inspired by the work of Appadurai and Kopytoff. Drawing upon assemblage theory, actor network theory, and circuits of culture theory, and employing a case study design encompassing diverse social science methodologies, this study examines the emergence of superfoods as a sociocultural form.

The research demonstrates how a range of seemingly disparate existing elements, including developments in nutritional science, neoliberal trade agendas, traditional indigenous knowledge, food processing and transportation technologies, changing ideas about food, health, and ethics, and the proliferation of digital media, are drawn together in the creation of a new form with broad social and environmental impacts. It has implications for future research into the cultural power of in-between (food) objects and the ways in which they enable us to examine the tensions that pull at contemporary food culture.

Thesis Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Jessica Loyer

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