

Project Completion Report

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Northern NSW farmers' markets foster connection and trust in the COVID era - a consumer perspective

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Aim

Local food systems such as farmers' markets (FM) encourage local food production and promote healthy social and physical environments. The aim of this study was to qualitatively investigate the motivations, beliefs and behaviours of FMs attendees in the Northern Rivers (Northern NSW), and explore the aspects that contribute to a sense of community and trust. Furthermore, the study will investigate the effects of COVID-19 on consumer attendance and the impact on health and wellbeing of the community.

Method

The study was conducted at Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby FM over two time periods. Online surveys (n=44, 13 items) and semi-structured qualitative interviews (n=94) explored the areas of demographics, purchasing behaviours and main reasons for attendance. Participants were approached using convenience and purposive sampling. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was completed and systematic coding (n=97) was used to identify emerging themes and subthemes.

Results

Demographic results obtained from the face-to-face interview showed a mainly female patronage (68%) and 47% >60 years, compared with online survey respondents (81%) and 30% >60 years. The strong overarching theme to attending FMs was the social benefits, particularly the sense of community and connection. This concept underpinned all further emerging themes of health, economic and environmental benefits. FM played an important role for participants during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 68% of Mullumbimby participants reporting no change to attendance. The markets cultivate social cohesion and trust, and provide additional benefits that may aid in alleviating feelings of isolation and loneliness felt by those during COVID-19.

Conclusion

This study identified that FMs are important to consumers for a variety of reasons, all underpinned by a strong sense of social connection and community spirit. FMs may also provide additional benefits aiding in alleviating feelings of isolation and loneliness during COVID-19. This research is valuable in providing site-specific data for future marketing and public policies to encourage people to access fresh produce from this alternative food supply and connect with local community.

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Background

One of Australia's largest health challenges is chronic diseases, accounting for 89% of deaths in 2018 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019). People living in lower socioeconomic areas are at higher risk of developing chronic diseases due to limited accessibility, variety and affordability of fresh produce (AIHW, 2014). The Northern Rivers is one of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas in NSW (Northern NSW Local Health District [NNSWLHD], 2013), with all local government areas, including Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby scoring lower for income, education and employment rate than the NSW average (NNSWLHD, 2013).

In 2019 the NNSWLHD launched the Healthy Communities Northern Rivers Action Plan 2019 – 2021 with the initiative to build community partnerships for preventative health in the region. One of the objectives is to increase access to healthy, locally grown food through their 'Liveable Communities' initiative by supporting existing farmers' markets (FMs) and community gardens (NNSWLHD, 2019).

Introduction

In developed countries, the consumption of regionally grown produce is becoming one of the fastest-growing food trends (Godrich et al., 2019). Local food systems such as FMs, aim to encourage local food production and agricultural sustainability while promoting healthy social and physical environments (Crawford et al., 2018). The number and popularity of FMs have rapidly increased in recent years. The first community FM was established in the USA in the 1970s and the first Australian FM opened in Victoria in 1999 (Crawford et al., 2018). The total number of Australian FMs has nearly tripled over the past 15 years, from 70 FMs in 2004 to 192 in 2020 (Australian Farmers' Market Association [AFMA], 2020). AFMA supports the development of sustainable FMs in Australia and describes FMs as:

“A predominantly fresh food market that operates regularly within a community, at a focal public location that provides a suitable environment for farmers and speciality food producers to sell farm-origin and associated value-added speciality foods for human consumption, and plant products, directly to the customer” (AFMA, 2020).

The coastal towns of Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby are located in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, 130-150km south of Brisbane, Queensland. In 2016, the estimated resident population of Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby were 9245 (52.5% female) and 3596 (54% female) respectively, with a median age of 45-46 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016). The Northern Rivers region is defined by its high biodiversity, local geography and natural attributes such as water, subtropical climate, and rich soils, which help support a strong and diverse agricultural sector and increasing levels of organic food production

(Regional Development Australia, Northern Rivers NSW 2010). The Northern Rivers region is also known for its vibrant and unique culture and alternative philosophical views as opposed to conventional practices (Burns, Cullens & Briggs, 2018). This is a contributor to the region's drive for alternative food sources not based solely on mainstream commodities (Burns, Cullens & Briggs, 2018).

The Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby FMs open weekly on Wednesdays and Fridays respectively from 7-11am and consist of approximately 30-60 stalls. They offer a variety of local produce which is mostly grown within a 60km radius of each site (Murwillumbah Farmers' Market, 2020, Mullumbimby Farmers' Market, 2021). Both markets share the vision of supporting local small business and food production and encourage community interaction. The Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby FMs continued to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic as FMs were declared by the Australian Federal Government as an essential service in the nation's food chain (Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, 2020). The FMs committees implemented COVID-19 safety measures in accordance with AFMA which included handwashing stations, consumer limits in stalls, single-use compostable serving vessels and QR Code sign-ins. Social distancing was also strictly enforced by the market managers (Murwillumbah Farmers' Market, 2020, Mullumbimby Farmers' Market, 2021).

COVID-19 and social restrictions impacted multiple aspects of individual and community wellness, with social isolation and loneliness found to be associated with poorer health outcomes (Smith & Lim, 2020). Older adults are especially vulnerable to social isolation due to their dependence on family members and community services. While social restrictions are imperative to prevent the spread of the virus, it is vital that physical distancing should not compare to social disconnection (Hwang et al., 2020). There is limited existing research, especially in Australia, exploring the link between COVID-19, loneliness and social connection within local communities.

AFMA outlines four main domains that FMs offer communities: social, economic, health and environmental (AFMA, 2020). These domains intersect to impact consumer motivations to attend FMs, their engagement and purchasing patterns. A study completed by Azavedo & Walsh (2018) indicated an elevated importance of social connection above the purchase of fresh produce at FMs. This sense of connection was supported by Australian research conducted in Byron Bay where half of the interviewees found the FM was an important place to meet and interact with like-minded people of the community (Burns, Cullens & Briggs, 2018). However, existing research is inconsistent and varies significantly in terms of priorities for FM attendees, specifically in the areas of community and social connection. There is a lack of qualitative data focusing primarily on the consumer

perspectives of those who attend FMs. Additionally, there is minimal research into how COVID-19 has influenced consumer behaviours and attitudes towards FMs.

The primary aim of this study is to qualitatively explore the FMs from a consumer perspective, as well as investigate what social aspects contribute to a sense of community and trust with local farmers. Furthermore, the study will investigate the effects of global pandemic COVID-19 on consumer attendance to the FMs, and how this may impact the health and wellbeing of the community.

Methods

Ethics

The research was approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref. No:2020/781). Researchers provided a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (Appendix 1) to each subject and explained the project before gaining verbal consent. All participants were informed that face-to-face interviews would be recorded using a secure audio device and were aware of their rights to decline this. Participants who declined the interview were invited to complete either the paper based or online survey. No identifying information was collected for either the online survey or interviews and participants were allocated a unique research code (e.g. 3.1) to ensure confidentiality. All paper data was destroyed once analysed and electronic files were stored in Griffith University's research storage platform.

Study design and setting

The interviews and surveys were completed at the Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby FMs in the Northern Rivers between October and November 2020 and March and April 2021, respectively. A mixed-method approach was employed and integrated at both locations with market attendees invited to participate in the research project. Participants were approached either individually or in small, seated groups using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Data collection took place between the hours of 7-11am at both markets. The wider community was informed of the project via market newsletters and social media. The total number of participant interviews and online surveys conducted at each site are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Interview and survey numbers at each site

Participants	Murwillumbah	Mullumbimby	Total
Interview	60	34	94
Online survey	26	18	44

Small group/individual interviews

Researchers (AM, CR, TW) developed the semi-structured interview protocols in consultation with clinical educator (NG) and stakeholders from agribusiness, health promotion and the FMs (Amy Colli, Adam Guise, Sue Beckinsale). The interviews (Appendix 2) aimed to explore demographics, purchasing behaviours and the four domains outlined by AFMA. Five female dietetics students conducted the face-to-face interviews: AM, CR, TW at the Murwillumbah FM, and AM, SW at the Mullumbimby FM. Student interviewers completed quantitative research training prior to the interviews. Research methods used at Murwillumbah were replicated at Mullumbimby, with NG providing consistency between the two groups. A total sample size of 94 participants were recruited for the interviews and data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged.

Online surveys

Quantitative (categorical) and demographic data were collected via an online survey consisting of 13 items, and explored the areas of age, gender, levels of study, income, purchasing behaviour and main reasons for attendance (Appendix 3). A QR code was created for individuals to access the survey on their personal electronic device while at the FM. The intent of the online surveys was to capture the market attendees that did not have time to do an interview at the markets. Paper based surveys were available for participants without an electronic device. The surveys remained open throughout the duration of both research data collection periods.

Data analysis

All interview recordings were transcribed and documented in Microsoft Word. Interview recordings or transcripts were not reviewed by participants unless requested. Consumer demographics were classified into categorical data and collated using Microsoft Excel. The CREATIVE framework was used by student researchers to analyse qualitative responses (Figure 1). This included allocating themes and sub-themes to codes (i.e., theme A, sub-theme A2), which were associated with participant responses. An audit trail was kept so all student researchers compared results for consistency and reviewed the coding of

other members. Systematic analysis of the codes was used to identify initial themes, which were then discussed and refined between researchers and supervisors. Themes were further refined to enhance the consistency and reliability of the coding.

Figure 1
CREATIVE framework (Pitney & Parker, 2009)

Steps	Descriptions
1	Consider study purposes and evaluation questions
2	Read through the transcript and understand the data
3	Examine the data
4	Assign the labels to these units of information
5	Thematised the data
6	Interpret the emergent themes to the evaluation questions
7	Verify the trustworthiness of the findings
8	Engage in the writing process to discuss findings

Results

Demographic and behaviour data

Consumer demographics obtained from the online survey and participant interviews from both Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby FMs was combined and is summarised in Table 2. Online survey responses (n=44) were lower than expected when considering the project timeframe. There was a predominant percentage of female participants in both the online survey and interviews with 81% and 68% respectively. The majority of interview participants were over 60 years (47%), whereas online survey participants were mainly from the 40-59 age bracket (32%). Weekly FM attendance was higher in interview participants (75%), compared with online survey results (45%). Almost 50% of online and interview participants purchased >50% of their weekly household shop at the FM.

Purchasing behaviours identified during interviews noted that when not buying from FM, 43% of Murwillumbah participants reported shopping at large chain supermarkets compared with 38% of Mullumbimby participants. This is followed by small chain supermarkets (28%, 26% respectively) and green grocers and farm stalls (15%, 18% respectively).

Table 2

Combined consumer demographics of online and interview participants from Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby FMs.

	Number of participants	
	Online survey (n=44)	Interview (n=94)
Gender, n (%)		
Female	36 (81)	64 (68)
Male	8 (18)	29 (31)
Prefer not to say	0 (0)	1 (1)
Age, n (%)		
Under 25	7 (16)	8 (9)
25-39	10 (23)	12 (13)
40-59	14 (32)	29 (31)
Over 60	13 (30)	44 (47)
Prefer not to say	0 (0)	1 (1)
Frequency of attendance, n (%)		
Weekly	20 (45)	71 (75)
Fortnightly	11 (25)	10 (11)
Monthly	8 (18)	5 (5)
Rarely	5 (12)	5 (5)
Not specified	0 (0)	3 (3)
In the last month, what percentage of your total household food purchases will you have bought from the FM?		
<25%	8 (18)	10 (11)
25%	16 (36)	11 (12)
50%	13 (30)	21 (22)
75%	6 (14)	16 (17)
100%	1 (2)	9 (10)
Not specified	0 (0)	27 (30)

Questions specific to online survey

The majority of participants at Mullumbimby (59%) reported postgraduate qualifications, compared with Murwillumbah responses which reported 28%, as well as 28% obtaining a bachelor's degree. Survey results indicate the majority of Mullumbimby respondents (35%) earn a household income between \$50,000-\$75,000, followed by 29% earning \$125,000 and above. In comparison, most respondents from Murwillumbah reported earning between \$20,000-\$50,000 (25%), followed by an equal number reporting a household income less than \$20,000 (21%) and between \$75,000-\$100,000 (21%).

Table 3*Attributes of online survey participants at Mullumbimby and Murwillumbah FMs.*

Attributes (single answer)	Mullumbimby (n=17)	Murwillumbah (n=27)	Total (n=44)
N = Number of participants (%)			
What is the highest level of study you have completed?			
Less than Year 12		1(4)	1 (2)
Year 12	0 (0)	5 (20)	7 (17)
Diploma/Trade Qualification	2 (12)	5 (20)	10 (24)
Bachelor's degree (including honours)	5 (29)	7 (28)	17 (40)
Postgraduate qualifications	10 (59)	7 (28)	7 (17)
Did not respond	0 (0)	2 (0)	2 (0)
What is your average household income per year?			
Less than \$20,000	0 (0)	4 (21)	4 (11)
\$20,001 - \$50,000	3 (18)	5 (25)	8 (22)
\$50,001 - \$75,000	6 (35)	2 (11)	8 (22)
\$75,001 - \$100,000	1 (6)	4 (21)	5 (14)
\$100,001 - \$125,000	2 (12)	2 (11)	4 (11)
\$125,001+	5 (29)	2 (11)	7 (20)
Prefer not to say	0 (0)	6 (0)	6 (0)
Did not respond		2 (0)	

Two extended response questions from the online survey explored main reasons for attendance with many indicating supporting local economy, the ability to purchase fresh, quality produce and environmental concerns as key motivators. Another strong theme found was the positive atmosphere and ambience, with entertainment, music and social spaces highlighted as key features that provide a valuable addition to the markets.

“I like buying local, quality produce. Like the atmosphere, we very often have breakfast there. Like knowing the growers rather spend my money with them for a good price than go to a large supermarket” (Participant O4).

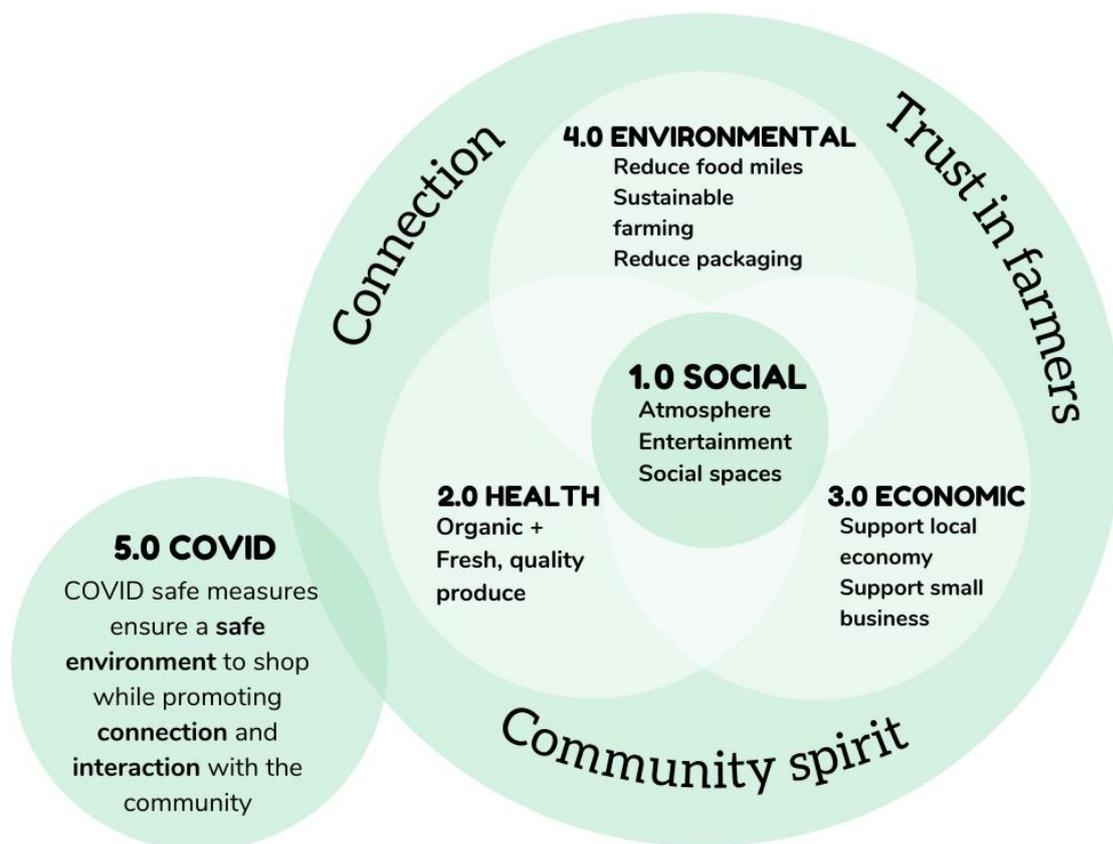
“Fab atmosphere, buying direct from producers, love sitting with a coffee listening to great music, best place in Mullum [*sic*] to tap into that real Mullum atmosphere and run fabulously by a great team who work very hard to give us this amazing market every week rain, hail or shine” (Participant O5).

Thematic analysis of interview responses

The overarching theme reported by FM attendees across both sites was the social benefits that FM provided. This was explored further to reveal themes of sense of community spirit, market atmosphere, trust, supporting local, and COVID19 impacts (Figure 2). Surprisingly fresh produce was a secondary theme. Whilst many participants described fresh produce as a key motivation to attendance, it was usually underpinned by socially conscious themes such as buying direct from farmers and sustainable farming practices.

Figure 2

Thematic analysis of main themes and subthemes



1.0 Social

1.1 Community spirit

Whilst almost all respondents noted the social nature of the markets, for many it was much more than that, describing a strong sense of connection to others, in particular the sense of community spirit that is experienced at the markets. This was important to many interview participants and was reported to make the markets special and unique.

“It feels like I am a part of a community and it makes me feel completely uplifted. I love the music and the atmosphere. [...] It feels like a thriving, sustainable, wholesome thing to be doing. Being able to engage and connect with people in the community.” (Participant SW14).

“It feels like a community and brings anyone together.” (Participant 44.1).

1.2 Atmosphere

Additionally, it was frequently mentioned that the markets have a certain ‘vibe’, with many participants relating this to the people of the community and the connections that the atmosphere of the market fostered. This was confirmed with online survey responses who also described the sense of atmosphere and ambience.

“I come for the atmosphere. [...] Just meeting people, sitting around and talking.” (Participant AM2).

“Fab atmosphere, buying direct from producers, love sitting with a coffee listening to the great music [...]” (Participant O5).

Furthermore, the setting and layout of the market also contributed to the overall ambience felt by participants, with many participants indicating that the setting encourages connection and interactions.

“[...] one of the things that make this market so successful is we have such a wonderful setting for it. The setting is really important and the opportunities for social interaction, like the chairs down the centre and the music and the things that encourage people to linger and provide that opportunity. But the setting is incredibly important.” (Participant AM8).

“The random interactions you have in a relaxed setting are really nice. The social atmosphere is better here in comparison to other markets” (Participant SW15).

1.3 Trust in farmers

Relating to the sense of community is the concept of trust in the local growers and vendors, with many participants discussing an innate sense of trust with the farmers due to the local nature and familiarity of the market.

“I just trust them, yeah. You just trust people; they’re doing the right thing” (Participant 24.1).

“I think it’s ingrained in the fact that it’s a direct relationship, that you’re taking the middle trader out of it and it’s between the person who’s going to consume the food

and the person who's growing the food and I think that direct connection, that's a much more trusting thing." (Participant AM8).

2.0 Health

2.1 Organic and fresh, quality produce

Another strong theme to emerge was the intent to purchase organic produce. The word 'organic' was intentionally not defined by the researchers and was used interchangeably by participants to describe FM produce, for example fruit and vegetables generally, certified organic, or chemical-free produce. When asked what their understanding of organic meant many participants commented on soil quality and the absence of chemicals, as well as the health benefits.

"It's grown pesticide and insecticide free. I understand they use organic sprays sometimes. So that means the soil will stay good and we are not killing off all of the insects and it's healthier." (Participant SW3).

"Spray free and the way the soil is kept. It's to do with what animals have been fed, non-sprayed with fertilisers, pesticide free." (Participant SW14).

Our study found an equal amount of attendees were motivated by sourcing certified organic produce or spray/chemical free produce (without organic certification). The freshness and quality of the produce was a main motivator as opposed to the organic status.

"There are some local farmers that are not certified organic but not using pesticides. Doesn't have to be organic but just don't use pesticides or chemicals" (Participant SW7).

"As much as possible, stay true to organic and regenerative. That is very important to me" (Participant 6.1).

"For me, the main thing is it's preservative and chemical free, biodynamic is also great." (Participant AM7).

3.0 Economic

3.1 Supporting local economy

Supporting the local economy was a prominent motivator amongst participants for attending the markets. Consumers felt that purchasing directly from farmers was of economic benefit, with some highlighting the importance of supporting community-based small businesses.

"To know the farmers who I buy from is something I really value. To have those ongoing relationships over many years with people that I buy from. To feel like I'm

actually supporting and paying a fair amount of money for the produce, that they are getting paid appropriately for their work.’ (Participant AMG2.1).

“I prefer to put my money into something local. I like to know the people I am buying from” (Participant SW2).

4.0 Environment

Environmental reasons for attending the FMs were surprisingly not as strongly represented among participants compared to social, health and economic areas. For interview participants, the subthemes of wanting to reduce food miles and packaging were discussed but not in depth.

“Definitely the food miles thing is really important to me. To know the farmers who I buy from is something I really value.” (Participant AMG2.1).

“And also just knowing people who have grown a lot of the food. So it’s authentic.

People also try and reduce all the packaging. So that’s really important. [...] And we don’t want to buy things in plastic, so we come here for that.” (Participant AMG3.1).

5.0 COVID-19

Based on preliminary results from the Murwillumbah data collection, further exploration into the impact and management of COVID-19 on consumer purchasing behaviours and trends in accessing local food was sought. COVID-19 did not have a negative impact on market attendance. Most participants reported no change to behaviour whilst some participants reported an increase in attendance during the pandemic.

“COVID completely changed my buying habits as my work came to a halt, I was introduced to this amazing market and it has changed the way I think and purchase food.” (Participant 28.1).

“No, it didn’t stop me at all. [...] “It was very encouraging for it to stay open and really important. Because people were locked up in their homes and couldn’t do a lot of things, so coming to the market was really beneficial for people and was a way for people to connect.” (Participant AM9).

Many participants stated that the safety restrictions were well-handled, and described the open air and spacing of the stalls as a safer environment to shop.

“We really appreciated that they had all the markers out and hand washing facilities and all the rest. People were good at social distancing.” (Participant AMG1.2).

“I was really, really impressed by all the management and restrictions that were put in place. I think they are needed.” (Participant AM7)

Discussion

Social benefits, community spirit and connection

Consumer engagement in local food supply and consumption patterns are influenced by a multitude of factors. Existing research highlights the inconsistencies among studies regarding the main priorities for FM consumers, both within Australia and overseas and the consumer voice is poorly represented (Crawford et al., 2018; Dodds & Holmes, 2014). The present study explored the social aspects that act as main motivators for attendance. The way in which participants discussed how they resonated with health, economic, social and environmental reasons for coming was often underpinned by the sense of community the market gave them.

Community spirit has been defined as a "willingness and desire to participate in activities that promote a community" (Collins Dictionary, 2020). This was particularly evident when discussing the social nature of FMs, which has been supported by a study conducted in Brisbane, Australia which found sociability to be a higher motivator for market attendance than any other factor (Azavedo & Walsh, 2018). It has been reported in research that FMs develop a personality that mirrors the community which appeared to be evident for the areas in this study (Tiemann, 2018).

While there are a number of different types of farmers' markets existing today, not all meet AFMA's definition of the best-practice, which outlines the importance of a central location and suitable environment in the success and sustainability of a FM. When discussing what consumers believed to be behind the sense of community spirit at the FMs, many commented on the setting, location and layout of the markets to be a key factor. It could be discussed that this is an important feature of the markets, fostering well-being and community connection through the use of communal seating and social spaces. This has encouraged FM attendees to linger and promote interactions between market goers and vendors. This study focused primarily on qualitative face-to-face interviews, offering a unique finding when compared with literature of a similar demographic or region, which do not thoroughly explore the social aspects important to consumers.

Additionally, the sense of community seemed to be ingrained in the connection between the consumers and vendors, with many commenting on the importance of their interactions with the local farmers. This was also found by Burns and colleagues (2018), at the Byron Bay FM with a similar demographic. It has been suggested that this perception of trust is more apparent in regional consumers than their urban counterparts, due to the appreciation of an embedded relationship with local producers (Meyer et al., 2012).

Perceptions of organic, quality of produce and trust in farmers

This sense of trust in the farmers was also prevalent when discussing organic accreditation with consumers, with many commenting that official accreditation was not a priority for them and many simply trusting that the farmers were using spray/chemical free farming practices. This may be based upon the vendors being small businesses, with some consumers recognising the significant cost and rigorous process needed to become accredited. Those who primarily bought organic described preferring it due to the lack of chemicals involved and the quality, freshness and shelf-life of the produce being of a much higher standard. However, approximately half of respondents were content to purchase produce based on its locality, freshness and quality, as opposed to its organic status. This is supported by previous literature which has found consumers were more motivated to purchase local produce over organic (Adams & Adams, 2011, Crawford et al., 2018). Many interview participants reported they had been attending the FM for many years therefore may have been building trusting relationships with the vendors over a period of time. This intertwines with the notion of social connectedness and community spirit outlined in the social benefits. However, a similar number of comments from participants relatively new to the region or the FMs, were also underpinned by an innate trust in vendors based on the sense of community felt at the markets.

Benefits of FM during COVID-19

Whilst many food and hospitality businesses closed with COVID 19 restrictions, FMs were allowed to operate under adapted policies. According to AFMA, federal government recognition of FMs contribution to the food supply and economy was vital to the advancement of FMs in Australia (AFMA, 2020). It was clear from our findings that market attendees not only came to purchase fresh food, but to also connect with their community, whether that be with growers, stallholders, or familiar faces also shopping. It was also noted that the market sites studied were perceived to handle physical distancing and hygiene practices particularly well, providing shoppers with confidence in uncertain and fearful times. This is the first known study to explore Australian consumer perceptions in the context of a pandemic and highlights that FMs are highly valued within the community and provide beneficial opportunities for social connectedness. Smith & Lim (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated individuals' feelings of disconnection and loneliness. Therefore, these findings are especially relevant to the older population who have been found to be more vulnerable during periods of social isolation (Hwang et al., 2020) and coincides with the average age of FMs consumers of over 50 years (Crawford et al, 2018).

Demographics of FM attendees

The demographic data obtained from this study whilst not conclusive, found a predominant percentage of female consumers which is consistent with existing quantitative research (Dodds & Holmes, 2014). Most FM research describes consumers to be well-educated and of higher socioeconomic status (Crawford et al, 2018), however, one third of online survey participants in this study reported a household income of less than \$50,000. This may reflect the lower socioeconomic status of the local area or could be representative of differing priorities in relation to health and food when compared to other geographical locations (Burns, Cullens & Briggs, 2018). However, this theory was not explored as part of this study. The term 'household' income is a limitation as it does not describe how many people live in the household. As FMs have a reputation for being more expensive than mainstream shopping locations, this is an interesting finding and further research is needed to explore if cost is a barrier that prevents people shopping at FMs (Burns, Cullens & Briggs, 2018; Godrich et al., 2019; Dodds & Holmes, 2014).

Study Limitations

Participation in consumer interviews was often driven by market attendees approaching the researchers to contribute to the study. It could be argued that participants who willingly sought out to engage in the research may hold stronger beliefs and opinions. Secondly, as these participants were already at the FM it was not possible to delve into the perspectives of those who did not attend. As the aim of the study was to determine the motivations of those who attend, the perspectives of those who do not attend is a recommendation for future research.

It is important to note that the Northern Rivers region was seldom directly affected by cases or level 4 lockdowns as a result of COVID-19. The behaviours and perceptions of our participants may not accurately represent FM attendees in directly affected areas such as urban centres.

Interviewer and participant bias may have occurred, which is unavoidable with the nature of the study design involving semi-structured interviews conducted by various interviewers. To minimise this, a list of prompts and areas for clarification were discussed before data collection and the clinical educator (NG) was consistent across the data collection and analysis stages.

Recommendations

To further improve the knowledge base around consumer motivations and perceptions for attending FMs, the following recommendations for future research questions have been made.

- A qualitative study to consider the perceptions, motivations and beliefs of consumers who do **not** currently attend FMs, and to investigate the barriers and enablers in their purchasing decisions.
- To qualitatively explore the motivations, attitudes and behaviours of market attendees in an urban setting more directly affected by COVID-19.
- To explore the perceptions and beliefs behind social connection and sense of community with market vendors and farmers.

Conclusion

This project identified that the Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby FMs are important to consumers for a variety of health, economic and environmental reasons which are all underpinned by a sense of community spirit and connection. The markets were able to cultivate social interconnectedness and trust, and provide additional benefits that may aid in alleviating feelings of isolation and loneliness especially during COVID-19. This could also be transferable to mental health in general, with FMs providing opportunities to participate in the local community and promote a sense of social well-being. This research is valuable in providing site-specific data for future marketing to encourage people to access fresh produce from this alternative food supply and take part in the local community. Additionally, the findings may be beneficial towards creating public policies to promote the economic support of local farmers and growers.

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Farmers' Markets – A consumer perspective

INFORMATION SHEET

GU Ref No: 2020/781

Who is conducting the research

Ms Narelle Greenlees, Dr Lisa Vincze, Ms Alyra McKinnis and Ms Shelby Wilkinson
Nutrition & Dietetics, School of Allied Health Sciences
Phone (N.Greenlees) 0422 651 490
Email n.greenlees@griffith.edu.au

Why is the research being conducted?

Farmers' market popularity is increasing, playing a role in the community on an economic, environmental, health and social level and as such further research is needed to determine what the impact of these unique retail environments are. Australian research has focused on the stallholders and managers and little is known about the consumer.

What you will be asked to do

We would like you to participate in either an online survey, group interview or focus group answering questions relating to farmers' market attendance behaviours and perceptions. Surveys can be completed in your own time (7 mins), group interviews will take place at the market at a time convenient to you (20 mins), and focus groups will be conducted outside the market at a time convenient to you (60 mins). Focus groups and interviews will be audio recorded.

The basis by which participants will be selected or screened

You have been selected to participate as an attendee or stall holder of the Mullumbimby Farmer's Market. This has been either random or you have been selected because of a desired demographic we wish to capture (e.g. mother of young children, seller of organic produce).

The expected benefits of the research

The economic, social and environmental benefits of FMs are widely documented. By investigating consumers of Mullumbimby FMs, it enables the local community to better target strategies to promote FMs and provides much needed information to the broader population about the motivations and beliefs of FMs patrons in 2020.

Risks to you

The risks to you are minimal. Participation will be during market time or at time convenient to you.

Your confidentiality

All surveys, notes and audio files are confidential and will be de-identified. Individuals will remain anonymous. Any note takers or observers will keep information confidential. Online surveys are anonymous. All paper data will be destroyed once analysed and electronic files once analysed will be stored in Griffith University's research storage platform. Data will be stored for up to 5 years. A student report will be developed based on results, and information disseminated by way of media and possible publication. Results will be reported to key stakeholders including the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market, Destination Tweed, NSW Health Promotion, and will also be disseminated via the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market newsletter and the website.

Verbal Consent – Surveys, Interviews or Focus Groups

Verbal consent will be sought for face to face surveys, interviews and focus groups. Participants will be provided with a written information sheet or have read/had read to them a short overview of the research aims, what activities they are being asked to undertake. Recorded audio will include verbal consent and understanding of the nature of the research and their participation.

Your participation is voluntary

Your participation is voluntary. If you consent and then change your mind you are free to withdraw it at any time. If interview participants wish to enter a draw to win one \$100 market voucher, first name and preferred contact will be written down. Draw will take place at the market by the manager on April 9.

Further information

For further information, please contact Narelle Greenlees (0422651490) or any member of the research team outlined above.

Ethical conduct

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 07 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

Feedback to you

An executive summary of the report will be made available on the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market website.

Mullumbimby Farmers' Market Consumer Interview



We appreciate the time you are able to provide, and your responses will assist us to promote local and sustainable farming.

Participation is voluntary, no identifying information will be collected, and responses are confidential.

1. What is your age?

- <25 25-30 40-60 >60

2. Gender

- Female Male Other

3. Are you a Mullumbimby resident? If no, where do you reside?

4. How often do you come to the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market?
(weekly, fortnightly, monthly, rarely)

5. How long have you been coming to the market?

6. When shopping at the Mullumbimby Famer's Market, who are you buying for?
(E.g. yourself, couple, family, business)

7. People attend farmers' markets for a variety of reasons.
E.g. Social (catching up with friends), Economic (supporting local farmers), Health (fresh produce) or Environmental (low food miles).
What would be the main reasons for you attending the Mullumbimby Famers' Market?

8. Can you please expand on your reasons for attending the Mullumbimby Farmer's Market? (e.g. I attend to support local growers/be involved in the community/etc)

9. How much of your total food shopping for the week do you get from the Mullumbimby market?

10. Can we talk about what other places you do your shopping? (E.g. Coles, IGA, Woolworths, local F+V shops). What influences your decision to shop there?

11. Are there particular products that you come to the market for?

12. Do you prioritise purchasing organic produce over non-organic produce? Why or why not? Is the organic certification important to you?

13. How important to you is your interaction with the farmer? And why?

14. Do you trust the farmers/growers/vendors here? If so, why?

15. Do you think community connection is important at this market? If so, why do you think that is?

16. What do you think makes this market successful?

17. What, if any, are the barriers to you **not** attending the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market (e.g. work, travel, weather, parking, other commitments etc)

18. If none, how have you made attending the market a priority?

19. Has COVID-19 had an impact on your market attendance? How?

20. What, if any, media do you engage with to stay up-to-date with this market? (e.g. Social media, Echo, Radio – Bay FM or ABC, advertising around town)

21. In your opinion, are there any improvements that could be made to the Mullumbimby market?

Thank you for your time.

Mullumbimby Farmers' Market Survey

We are Nutrition and Dietetics students from Griffith University completing research on the perceptions and beliefs of consumers attending the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market.

We are looking to understand the motivations, reasons and beliefs behind why people attend these markets.

We appreciate the time you are able to provide, and your responses will assist us to promote local and sustainable farming.

Participation is voluntary, no identifying information will be collected, and responses are confidential.

Survey time 5-7 minutes.

Participants Information Sheet:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1B71HZkYb0zYIHuNYOgyITQtD-E_gwsRF/view?usp=sharing

* Required

1. Are you a Mullumbimby resident? (If no, please comment where you reside). *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

Other: _____

2. What is your age? *

Mark only one oval.

Under 25 years

25 - 39 years

40 - 59 years

+60 years

3. What gender do you identify with? *

Mark only one oval.

Female

Male

Non-Binary

Prefer not to say

Other: _____

4. What is the highest level of study you have completed? *

Mark only one oval.

- Secondary School
- Tafe
- Tertiary Education
- Other: _____

5. What's your average household income per year? *

Mark only one oval.

- Less than \$50,000
- \$50,000 - \$75,000
- \$75,000 - \$100,000
- \$100,000 - \$125,000
- +\$125,000

6. How often do you attend the Mullumbimby Farmers' Markets? *

Mark only one oval.

- Weekly
- Fortnightly
- Monthly
- Rarely

7. What percentage of your total household groceries do you purchase at the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market? *

Mark only one oval.

- 25%
- 50%
- 75%
- 100%

8. Who are you shopping for? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yourself
- Couple
- Family
- Business
- Other: _____

9. What is your main reason for attending the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market? *

Mark only one oval.

- Economic (cost of produce, supporting local economy)
- Health (quality produce, nutrition, spray free/organic)
- Environment (seasonal produce, lower food miles, organic farming practices, ethical treatment of animals)
- Social (Meeting with friends, supporting local or something to do)
- Other: _____

10. Please expand on your reasons for attending the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market? (e.g. I attend the markets to support the local growers and be involved in the community). *

11. What, if any, barriers are there to you attending the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market? *

Mark only one oval.

- Market Hours/Day
- Location
- Weather
- Affordability
- Other: _____

12. What, if any, media do you engage with to stay up-to-date with this market? *

Mark only one oval.

- Social Media (Instagram, Facebook)
- Website
- Newspaper (Echo or others)
- Radio (ABC/Bay FM)
- Advertising/Flyers around town
- Other: _____

13. In your opinion, is there any improvements that could be made to the Mullumbimby Farmers' Market?

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Google Forms

Australian Farmers' Markets

A recent study conducted in Northern NSW found that farmers' markets are not only an essential service, but provide people with much needed community connection!

Consumers are motivated to attend for the following benefits...



SOCIAL

Community spirit
Atmosphere + entertainment
Trust in farmers/growers
Connection to others



HEALTH

Organic or spray/chemical free produce
Fresh, quality produce

ECONOMIC

Support local economy and small business

ENVIRONMENT

Reduce food miles
Sustainable farming

COVID-19

Essential service
Safe environment to shop
Place to connect with the community

