

Industry Alert - June 2021

Industry Narratives: How ultra-processed food and beverage companies undermine healthy food policies to protect their corporate image

The Industry Narrative: What It Is and Why It Affects Healthy Food Policies

The “industry narrative” refers to the set of messages, arguments, discourses, and actions that directly and indirectly shape beliefs and perceptions about the role of the ultra-processed food and beverage (F&B) industry, and its products and brands in a given political, social, and economic context. These narratives are used to position companies and their allies as good corporate citizens in front of different audiences. Industry narratives are problematic because they are designed to permeate and neutralize any opposition to industry interests, often by influencing people’s views in subtle ways that don’t align with public interest.

Industry narratives promote alternative solutions to healthy food policies, focusing on personal responsibility, self-regulation agreements, and other arguments that are part of the historical industry playbook. These messages are distributed over time through various mechanisms, including but not limited to: marketing strategies, use of spokespersons, corporate social responsibility (CSR) actions, manipulation of evidence, and other tactics with massive investments that position corporations and their allies as part of the solution to global health issues, such as diet-related diseases.

These narratives leave a strong and lasting impression that often goes unchallenged by the general public. They often attempt to influence government functions and discourses, and appropriate social and human rights concepts to maintain a positive corporate image. Industry narratives also allow the private sector to strengthen its business interests, hinder regulatory efforts that threaten profits, and build the ultra-processed F&B industry’s legitimacy as a political, economic, and social actor.

This bulletin highlights for healthy food policy advocates the latest ultra-processed F&B industry narratives and discourses.

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Industry Narratives Explained and Materialized: Examples/Findings

I. Brands and name washing with three main strategies: a subtle way to captivate audiences

- As a private-sector actor, the ultra-processed F&B industry is driven by profits. Mounting evidence demonstrates that the high availability and accessibility of UPP reshaped global food environments, modified eating patterns, disrupted traditional agriculture, and launched an epidemic of chronic diseases with enormous health costs. At the same time, industry kicked-off multiple brand-washing activities to avoid being held accountable and to protect their products from any negative perceptions.
- The ultra-processed F&B companies have public relations (PR) teams, lobbying agencies, and financial resources to deploy large, sophisticated PR and marketing campaigns to maintain and increase their positive reputation. Strategies such as CSR programs, direct lobbying, and marketing that connects UPP to emotions have shaped social imagery in favor of the ultra-processed F&B sector.
- Moreover, industry acts of kindness serve to conceal efforts to block and weaken healthy food policies around the world. Through brand-washing actions, often linked to corporate charity, the ultra-processed F&B industry buys silence, prestige, and influence. The good press generates a shield against criticism, and behind its good deeds, these tactics allow private interests to advance on government roles and thus gain spaces in policy decision-making scenarios ([corporate capture](#)).
- Many of the messages companies use in their brand-washing activities turn out to be false solutions, empty promises, and merely marketing strategies. Industry narratives encompass many contradictions, and they can be represented as an iceberg: what they say is what we see, but there is a lot hidden below the surface.



How companies wash their image to build their reputation and consumer loyalty



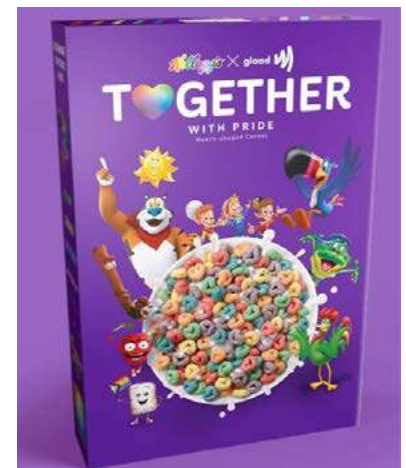
1. Social washing

To promote its corporate interests, the ultra-processed F&B industry capitalizes on social causes, including civil rights or social justice movements, women's empowerment, LGBT+ inclusion, and the fight against hunger, among others. For instance, as US citizens led national demonstrations to protest the killing of George Floyd, ultra-processed F&B companies shelved their COVID-19 campaigns and joined the #BlackLivesMatter campaigns through CSR donations and flashy marketing campaigns. They leverage multiple social causes through targeted marketing strategies, communications campaigns, changing products' packaging, and using ultra-targeted CSR programs, among other tactics.

Examples

a) Promoting ultra-processed products in the name of LGBT+ inclusion

- In the **US**, [Kellogg's launched the "Together with Pride" cereal](#) in support of the LGBT+ community, in partnership with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). The new themed cereal box contains [heart-shaped rainbow pieces and edible glitter](#), and it is connected to a cause-marketing campaign. For each box sold, the company would donate \$3 to support GLAAD's efforts towards advancing LGBT+ rights—a clear example of linking a social cause to the promotion of an UPP harmful to health.
- In **Mexico**, [the Memory and Tolerance Museum \(Museo Memoria y Tolerancia\) teamed up with Doritos Rainbow](#), a PepsiCo product branded in support of the LGBT+ community, to carry out activities for the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. According to PepsiCo, this strategic alliance seeks to be a platform to support the LGBT+ community and members' families. Likewise, Doritos Rainbow expressed that ["its target audience is young people, and that is why it seeks to make the product fun and daring, encouraging youth to make their dreams come true excitingly and differently."](#) Once again, a company is taking advantage of gender inequality causes to promote junk food and empathize with audiences through emotions to win over consumers.



*Doritos
"#PrideAllYearLong"*



b) The fight against malnutrition through ineffective corporate solutions

- In **Mexico**, multinational companies and allies ([BIMBO](#), [Danone](#), [Unilever](#), [Kellogg's](#), [Nestlé](#), [Walmart](#), [ConMexico](#), among others) launched a voluntary initiative to [tackle food waste, fight against hunger, and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). However, these same actors disrupted food systems, promoted malnutrition, and [challenged the advancement of evidence-based healthy food policies](#). They position themselves as part of the solution to the problems they are linked to. These companies have failed over the years to tackle other forms of malnutrition associated with UPP consumption, boosting global nutrition insecurity. Ironically, in our current food systems, [“more and more food is being produced, but 35% of what is produced is also thrown away, and 820 million people live with hunger.”](#)
- A [recently released documentary](#) reveals that Nestlé’s actions in the **Brazilian Amazon** caused an epidemic of chronic diseases in the area, disproportionately affecting children. The company sent a floating supermarket to sell its UPP between 2010 and 2017, under the promise to [“expand access to food and beverages and promote social development projects in remote communities.”](#)

PACTO COMIDA

JUNTOS VS LA PÉRDIDA Y EL DESPERDICIO DE ALIMENTOS

ALIADOS



2. Greenwashing

In the face of global warming and an [UPP industry linked to agribusinesses’ impact and plastic pollution](#), making environmental pledges is a [new way of attracting consumers](#). “Greenwashing is when a company or organization spends more time and money on marketing themselves as environmentally friendly than on minimizing their environmental impact.” This business practice uses environmental, ecological, and sustainability arguments to make businesses look “greener” than they actually are. Large corporations often affirm their environmental commitments with [data that are impossible to fact-check](#). Current trends show that, while some companies could make genuine efforts to reduce their environmental impact (for example, by using less plastic), the [inherent adverse effects associated with the industrialized manufacturing of UPP](#) and agribusiness-led food systems make it extremely difficult to counteract the industry’s negative impacts on human and earth health.



Examples

a) Green CSR, plant-based alternatives, and eco-labeling as marketing ploys

- Multinational ultra-processed F&B companies are constantly making environmental pledges in each country they work in. This year, companies have already leveraged World Water Day, [International Earth Day](#), and the [Global Recycling Day](#) to show off their sustainability commitments and CSR programs, [turning these “solutions” into marketing opportunities](#).
- Globally, the industry is also trying to look *greener* by [promoting ultra-processed plant-based products](#) as a more environment-friendly alternative. While [“Big Food is Marrying Big Plant Based”](#) to have a reputation more aligned with the sustainability demanded by consumers, [plant-based options will not be the solution to climate change](#). Moreover, a recent report found that while companies have made sustainability pledges at the global level, [“progress stalls in translating those approaches to countries and through supply chains.”](#)
- Knowing that human health is inseparable from the health of the environment surrounding us, in **Europe**, UPP now include “eco-labels” that indicate the products’ recyclability, [‘refill or return’ labels](#), [carbon emissions labeling](#), [eco-score](#), and other environmental attributes. In **Chile**, Nestlé is also making progress with [eco-labels on products with recyclable packaging](#). In general, these labels make products [“more appealing to consumers”](#), even when they can affect consumers’ health.



b) Leveraging water as a commodity

- In **Mexico**, Coca-Cola celebrated a project that will process more than [3 million liters of water per day for Mexican communities](#). In contrast, the company [extracts more than 55 billion liters of water per year to produce ultra-processed sweetened drinks](#).
- While Nestlé has chosen **Mexico** as a [key country within the company’s global strategy to combat climate change](#), the company [exploits the water springs](#) of poor communities in the state of Puebla, under the [unfulfilled promise of bringing development to its inhabitants](#). In the same area, Danone has been denounced by local communities for [exploiting water resources, leaving people without access to water](#), while extracting 1.641.000 liters of water daily.
- In the **US** state of California, [Nestlé](#) has also been accused of [exploiting water springs without valid entitlements](#).



c) Concrete lack of coherence between Coca-Cola's green promises and its actions

- In the **US**, Coca-Cola was recently sued for false advertising regarding sustainability claims. The lawsuit sought to end the company's deceptive practices around reducing its ["environmental footprint,"](#) [touting its investment in sustainable packaging,](#) [batting about the tagline "a world without waste,"](#) and [proclaiming that "our planet matters."](#)
- Moreover, in **Haiti**, ["a country where 40% of the population suffers food shortages, their most fertile lands are taken away"](#) through an agreement between the de facto president and Coca-Cola. The company was granted [exploitation rights of 8.600 hectares to cultivate Stevia,](#) an alternative sweetener for ultra-processed beverages. This type of business agreement displaces family farming, allows the destruction of organic agriculture, and forces farmers ["to work for factories, especially the one that provides stevia to Coke."](#)



Women Resist Land Grabbing and Free Zone in Haiti

Feminist farm school faces threat from Coca-Cola monoculture.



3. Nutri-washing or health washing

Industry promotes, markets, and sells products as healthy or with beneficial characteristics, while they have no nutritional value and are harmful to health. This approach allows the industry to better position its narrative before the public. It creates a halo around its products and brands, emphasizing that Big Food/Soda and UPP can be positive for health in order to avoid government regulations. Within this category, discursive corporate practices position UPP companies as a legitimate voice on public health issues, capturing government functions or spaces that belong to policymaking, academia, civil society, and other key stakeholders.

Examples

a) Nestlé took the blame for manufacturing unhealthy UPP, then announced global nutrition and health commitments

- Over the years, Nestlé, Unilever, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Danone, and other [companies have been denounced due to misleading health or nutritional claims about their products.](#) Reaffirming this global deception, an internal Nestlé document circulated in May 2021 showed that [60% of the company's edible portfolio consists of unhealthy products, most of which cannot be made "healthy."](#) Soon after, Nestlé claimed it was working to ["update its pioneering nutrition and health strategy."](#) Unsurprisingly, the International Food & Beverage Alliance (IFBA)—a global association of the largest ultra-processed F&B manufacturers on the planet—responded by publishing [an outdated \(2019\) report that showcased how multinational, ultra-processed F&B companies are contributing to global health and nutrition.](#) This was yet another nutri-washing effort to convince the public that unhealthy products have public health benefits. The report highlighted multiple brand-washing actions, solutions for protecting private interests, and tactics used by industry allies in different countries.



b) Longstanding industry efforts around the COVID-19 pandemic

- The [GHAI COVID-19 report published last year](#) records multiple examples of UPP companies leveraging this public health crisis to make a profit by marketing their products as immune boosters or flu remedies, for instance, and donating junk food to vulnerable populations. These practices position companies as part of the solution, while they are part of the problem that puts people living with NCDs at greater risk of hospitalization and death. Some of these practices are still underway, and while all the following messages and actions are health-oriented and positive, companies want to become a legitimate public health voice before the public.

Fomentar el uso masivo del tapabocas, la estrategia del sector privado



Encourage the massive use of masks, the private sector's strategy (Colombia)

- [Coca-Cola partnered with the Ministry of Health in Brazil](#) to spread information about the importance of immunization and to promote the country's vaccination campaign. In [Colombia](#) and [Mexico](#), the company launched campaigns to promote the correct use of masks.
- In [Jamaica](#), the Jamaica Manufacturers & Exporters Association (JMEA), an umbrella organization that represents the interests of the manufacturing sector and the ultra-processed F&B sector in policy lobbying, created content about [vaccination myths on social media](#) and had [direct involvement in the local vaccination program and its promotion](#).

c) Linking health causes to ultra-processed products and brands

- In Barbados, the Pine Hill company hosted a national art competition for school children focused on the benefits of water. However, among the prizes of the contest, [the company was offering cartons of their ultra-processed juices](#).
- At the regional level in the Caribbean, Nestlé set up an initiative called Wellness on Wheels to bring health education to the population. The company recently introduced a [nurse to this effort to promote essential health checks](#).

d) Neuromarketing as a tool to make products look healthier

- Ultra-processed F&B companies also use sophisticated tactics to strategically target products to their consumers, including methods to make their products look healthy when they are not. According to a report on neuromarketing, [PepsiCo redesigned the FritoLays packaging to make the product look healthier and naturally derived](#). The company found that the yellow and bright packaging was associated with high fat, working as an inhibitory effect to buy the product. After the change to a matte beige pack, sales grew satisfactorily.





II. Alternative “solutions” to public policy: individual responsibility and voluntary agreements

- Over the years, the ultra-processed F&B industry has interfered in several ways in regulatory processes surrounding healthy food policies. Tactics include promoting biased and ineffective policy solutions that only protect industry interests and do not tackle the NCDs public health crisis. These practices include, but are not limited to: diverting attention from unhealthy environments to individual responsibility, promoting self-regulation agreements, judging governments as interventionists when implementing health policies, and manipulating scientific evidence in favor of the industry.
- While positioning industry-preferred solutions, the UPP sector takes ownership of terms that belong to real solutions such as agroecology, resilience, circular economy (a social justice concept), and human rights, in its own interest. Companies normally use these definitions to promote themselves as part of the solution to the problems they are causing.
- Maintaining these strategies and discourses, companies fail to accept any responsibility to protect population health. While performing acts of corporate kindness and pushing freedom-of-choice arguments publicly, the UPP industry challenges public health laws and policies around the world to protect its interests.

Examples

a) The industry playbook around individuals bearing the burden of unhealthy food environments

- Individual responsibility and personal choice are the usual arguments to discredit public health regulations. Industry glorifies arguments of portion control and moderation and strongly supports educational measures and physical activity interventions. These arguments overlook unhealthy food environments, focusing only on individuals. A combination of these arguments is seen on this [Instagram post from Nestlé Caribbean](#).
- In **Mexico**, where a ban on the sale of sugary drinks and foods with high caloric content in educational facilities is being discussed, [representatives of the UPP industry raised the need to improve nutrition and food education starting at home](#), placing the burden on parents and caregivers. Nestlé social media calls on consumers [to enjoy salty and sweet foods](#) with a focus on [portion control](#) and [physical activity](#).
- A recent [Coke-funded study](#) highlighted by Marion Nestlé shows how the industry is pushing for regulations and narratives to target people’s behaviors and sedentary lifestyles. She notes that the study recommends: [“Do not target sugar-sweetened beverages with tax or warning label policies alone. If you want to improve unhealthy behavior, you have to target all of those behaviors—screen time, jobs, transportation, dietary intake, and alcohol—at the same time.”](#)



b) Ultra-processed F&B companies as part of the fight against NCDs

- In **South Africa**, Coca-Cola has expressed its commitment to [fight obesity and NCDs in partnership with the Department of Health](#). Company representatives have argued that sugar is okay in moderation and that they respect parents' choices about their children's diets. The company has also committed to the [Healthy Food Options Initiative, a forum established by the food and non-alcoholic beverage industry](#) and led by the Consumer Goods Council, to promote healthy eating habits to manage obesity. Once again, the industry is blaming individual behaviors for the obesity epidemic.

c) Deflecting attention from the public health problem to paternalism

- In **Mexico**, critics are calling the government paternalistic because of measures complementing the front-of-package warning labeling regulation, such as how and where to locate products with labels. Opponents have noted that [“regulating the location of goods in stores is not intended to help the consumer, the goal is ideological: to impose and dominate.”](#)

d) Labeling schemes that favor ultra-processed F&B industry interests

- In **Europe**, the front-of-package labeling (FOPL) scheme known as NutriScore is a tool designed by the industry that started as a voluntary commitment to provide better information to consumers. However, as highlighted in [our April Industry Alert](#), there are discussions about NutriScore becoming mandatory in some European countries and at the regional level. This system is strongly pushed forward by the UPP sector because it allows companies to hide critical nutrients behind positive ones: NutriScore uses an algorithm to calculate the “score” of a given product, which offsets the presence of critical nutrients with other beneficial ones. For instance, a high-in-sugar cereal gets a positive score for containing whole grains under the NutriScore method. Because of this, [Nestlé has been a strong supporter of this graphic system](#).
- [“The Big NutriScore Lie”](#) report published by Justicia Alimentaria speaks out in detail about how the food industry has tried to deny evidence about edible products becoming the main risk for human health around the world. This is also related to [how the industry has disrupted scientific standards](#), for instance, by using front-groups and sponsoring education.
- In **Peru**, [Coke partnered with a local university to promote an online free course to comprehend back-of-pack nutritional labeling](#). Across the four modules, there is no mention of the FOP warning labeling regulation implemented in the country, which proved to be more effective than the nutritional panel in guiding consumers to make healthier and informed purchasing decisions.



The Big Nutri-Score Lie: a tool at the service of large multinational food processing companies.





III. Capturing relevant global policy arenas

The UPP industry is highly concentrated in a few multinational companies that infiltrate global food policy decision-making in country policies. Many of these practices put global corporate interests before population health. Given that many international spaces involve multiple stakeholders, including the private sector, this direct intervention opens the door for the industry to exert undue influence in less visible ways. For instance, the ultra-processed F&B industry has captured the discourses around the SDGs, particularly those related to nutrition, health, NCDs, and climate change.

Examples

a) Nestlé donation to the WHO Foundation

- Nestlé provided [financial support to the WHO Foundation's COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund](#), and this caused serious concern among [health experts](#), [researchers](#), and members of the public who knew [“about Nestlé’s appalling record on baby foods, water, and ultra-processed products.”](#) The WHO Foundation’s CEO affirmed that [“no contribution should be interpreted as undermining the WHO’s ability to do its work, including asserting its norms and standards and what promotes good health.”](#) Given that throughout the years Nestlé has used “industry practices that may contribute to poor human health,” the WHO Foundation should not be receiving any donations from the ultra-processed F&B industry, in accordance with the due diligence process established in its [Gift Acceptance Policy](#). In addition, the WHO Foundation should prevent all linkages that could threaten public health policy with conflicts of interest and [stop UPP companies from making PR campaigns](#) about their relationship with UN agencies.



b) The corporate capture of the United Nations Food Systems Summit

The UN has called for [“urgent action to feed the world’s growing population healthily, equitably, sustainably,”](#) and [convened the UNFSS under the scope of a partnership with the World Economic Forum](#). This event has been entirely captured by private interests.



The UNFSS was organized without considering other ongoing mechanisms working within the UN for improved food systems. Civil society organizations around the world have [denounced the agenda being decided behind closed doors](#), without genuine [participation of rural and civil society groups](#). The scenario is prioritizing [corporate](#) and [agribusiness-led solutions](#).



“The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) has been [closely observing the UNFSS preparation since July 2019 and has expressed its concerns](#) about its course on multiple occasions at the CFS and through different publicly accessible communications.”





Civil society around the world is taking action and organizing parallel meetings to boycott the summit and genuinely transform food systems. During an event organized by organizations in Brazil, Elisabetta Recine, a Brazilian nutritionist and activist for the right to adequate food, clearly outlined the four different types of corporate captures occurring in this UNFSS: (1) capture of governance of the food and nutrition security agenda; (2) capture of science, what involves an intense process of generating evidence contaminated by conflicts of interest to confirm their arguments and narratives to provide false solutions to the food systems problems; (3) capture of public policies attached to the capture of science that will support decisions; and lastly, (4) the capture of narratives: documents being circulated across the summit's committees are mentioning terms, such as human rights, adequate food, food and nutritional security, among others.

c) The Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition by the UN Committee on World Food Security

- In parallel with the UNFSS, the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition endorsed by the UN CFS as a tool to eradicate all forms of malnutrition were also influenced by industry interests. The CSM challenged the guidelines and expressed concern about how the drafting process did not identify problems and solutions to transform food systems into more sustainable and healthy environments. They also exposed that the guidelines failed to recognize the “damage caused by ultra-processed edibles and beverages” and the challenges presented by the interests of agribusiness. Instead, IFBA endorsed the guidelines and remarked: “We are also leveraging our scale and expertise across the areas it can have the greatest impact—agriculture, climate, water, products, packaging and consumers.”

We welcome comments and feedback at fpp@advocacyincubator.org.

