



GHAI Industry Alert No. 1 | Industry Alerts 2022 Series

Marketing of unhealthy ultra-processed foods and drinks: A key driver of corporate diets^a

In 2022, GHAI's Industry Alerts will explore marketing practices by the ultra-processed food and beverage products (UPP) industry. This first alert provides an overview on marketing practices that generally promote brand loyalty via subtle modes and messages so that companies make sure consumers' perception is positive and advantageous to their businesses.

I. Unhealthy food marketing is inescapable and destructive

A recent report from the World Health Organization collected overwhelming evidence on how “food marketing continues to be **prevalent everywhere** and predominantly promotes foods that **contribute to unhealthy diets**,”¹ while adversely impacting people's health.^{2,3} As food is an essential part of life, food marketing is the main tool that Big Food counts on to position its UPP, the consumption of which is associated with the global burden of diet-related disease and mortality.^{4,5,6}

Marketing entails a broad category of practices such as advertising, promotion, and sponsorship^b – all powerful mechanisms to influence attitudes and create consumption behaviors, new demands, sensations, and ensure the positioning of a corporate diet that

^a **Corporate diets are characterized by:** (a) hegemonic diets led with an agro-business perspective with predatory use of natural resources and profit maximization criteria; (b) global food systems being dominated by corporate actors with unlimited power and enormous political influence that has allowed them to position their unhealthy commodities as essential to national food baskets and, therefore, untouchable by public policies; (c) high availability, accessibility, and affordability of ultra-processed food and beverage products (UPP), which are associated with adverse health outcomes related to non-communicable diseases, morbidity, and mortality. Corporate diets have been positioned by a combination of different factors, such as urbanization, economic development, demographic changes, agriculture practices, lifestyle, technological advances, and marketing practices. These diets have also been supported by “state policies that enable corporations to become the key economic actors,” disregarding health, social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts. They are part of the nutrition transition from traditional eating patterns to the westernization of food, strongly affecting health outcomes in low- and middle-income countries. (Sources: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

^b **Advertising and promotion** mean any form of online or offline commercial communication, recommendation, or action, with the aim, effect, or likely effect of promoting a product or its use, either directly or indirectly. **Sponsorship** means any form of online or offline contribution to any event, activity, or individual with the aim, effect, or likely effect of advertising, promoting, or sponsoring a product or its use, either directly or indirectly. In both cases, online forms of commercial communication or contribution include all social media platforms and delivery apps. This definition arises from the merge of definitions offered by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, available at: <https://fctc.who.int/>.



weakens traditional and real foods. Marketing tactics, social media, television presence, product placement in movies, and flashy packaging are just some means through which private actors trigger decisions that modify diets. Neuromarketing and artificial intelligence add more problematic and complex layers to this issue, normalizing the everyday consumption of unhealthy products and commercially influencing credulous audiences^c. The main problem? Some industries exploit these common marketing practices at the expense of public health.

UPP marketing seeks to generate consumer engagement with brands and products, using compelling appeals to maximize exposure to, influence on, and power over peoples' food behaviors and dietary practices – sometimes even through deceptive, aggressive, or abusive advertising. Marketing strategies are aggressively deployed to increase profits, normalize the consumption of UPP, create demand for products and preference for brands, and, therefore, normalize corporate diets.

Companies invest millions of dollars in marketing practices – including corporate social responsibility programs – while damaging human and environmental health with misleading narratives. They position UPP and corporate diets as the driver of food systems and convince consumers that UPP deserve a spot on the family table.

The corporate power of these predominant eating patterns boosted by marketing strategies substantially affects people's right to food sovereignty. Food sovereignty has individual and collective components that encompass self-determination related to people's food and the farming system overall – rejecting the concept of food as a commodity and enhancing local food systems that value natural resources and protect the rights of marginalized people.⁷

^c According to the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, **neuromarketing** is “the use of advances in the neurosciences to develop commercial advertising and marketing strategies. The neurosciences encompass all disciplines that study the nervous system, including biology, chemistry, genetics, computer science, and psychology. The aim is to send messages directly to the brain, thereby circumventing rational decision-making.” Source: [A/69/286, Par. 48](#)



Marketing these unhealthy products also undermines the respect, protection, and fulfillment of fundamental human rights – such as the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the right to adequate food and nutrition, and the right to access information that isn't confusing, deceptive, or misleading. Despite this, companies and their allies have lobbied to include UPP in the national basic food basket alongside milk, eggs, fruits, vegetables, and other basic nutritional foods and drinks in order to market their products as part of the basic food diet.

Marketing is a corporate behavior that helps positively position corporate diets that affect healthy food policies and environmental and health policies, defending a business model that shapes a food system affecting human and environmental health. Agrifood companies are concentrated in a few global commercial and institutional relationships, perpetuating a globally standardized diet designed to maximize profits, benefit only a few, and produce adverse implications on a global scale.⁸

The result? Mostly unregulated food environments, a growing prevalence of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), and empty pledges exposing people worldwide to unhealthy food advertising, often and from an early age.

II. Example snapshots: Building brand loyalty is everything for corporations

- A.** UPP as convenient and essential: A message targeting parents
- B.** Promotions as perfect ties to attract and maintain consumers
- C.** Self-indulgence and pleasure over health: Is it really a “good-for-you treat?”
- D.** Brands, bonds, and joy – a dangerous mix: Junk food across the lifespan in family moments, friendship, and physical activity

III. UPP industry is using marketing tactics to drive corporate diets

The UPP industry spends billions on marketing strategies to generate brand-loyal consumers attached to their particular brand, product, and/or company, tying them to unhealthy products at any cost. To guarantee profits over a lifetime and shape eating patterns that replace traditional and natural foods, it is critical to start young via



marketing directed at children and families. As food is intertwined with people's history, culture, communities, and families, the UPP industry deeply analyzes consumer needs and preferences, identifies their weaknesses, and leverages their vulnerabilities to convince them that certain products and diets are the best choice. Corporations use a wide variety of targeted tactics that normalize unhealthy environments, reinforced by promotions, offers, gifts, and discounts – online and offline – all appealing to consumer senses and feelings, making it all irresistible to the human brain and an ingrained part of daily life.

Simultaneously – as featured in GHAI's [Behind the Labels report](#) – the UPP industry promotes narratives related to freedom of choice and individual responsibility to choose healthy alternatives (or not), and couples them with positive emotions, enjoyment, freedom, pleasure, self-indulgence, youth, love, etc. Corporations put the burden of NCDs on individual behaviors. Under the spell of this supposed freedom and autonomy, a relationship begins, and feelings toward a brand appear – even from a very early age – making consumers choose brands no matter what, even if they are not the best option for their health.

The following distinct but connected categories are some prime examples of how the UPP industry implements its shady techniques. Examples may not be inclusive of the full complexity of marketing practices but are offered as a first step to deconstructing how companies position and promote corporate, hegemonic, and agro-industrial diets.

A. UPP as convenient and essential: A message targeting parents

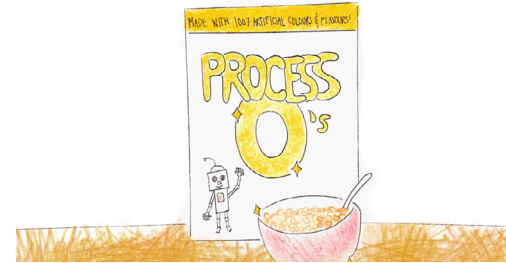
Some of the marketing strategies associated with corporate diets focus on extolling UPP as delicious, affordable, universally accessible, and timesaving. These narratives emphasize convenience to avoid discussing their adverse effects on health. Even worse, some are positioned as healthy alternatives. Likewise, corporations also make consumers believe that UPPs are nutritionally equivalent to homecooked, fresh, or minimally processed foods. Women and caretakers are the typical key target of this tactic.



India:

Kellogg's campaign concentrates on how their food can be convenient and help provide people more time with their families - in this case, by providing breakfast cereals. The company's research confirmed that mothers have busy morning schedules, so Kellogg's cereals represent a solution to that everyday problem.

Lay's (PepsiCo brand) generated an Instagram post alluding to Women's Day, promoting the many ways women might enjoy the company's products - while studying, making work decisions, relaxing in the evening - and make UPP part of their daily life. Encouraging permanent consumption as part of everyday routines is another technique corporations use to keep consumers attached to unhealthy products.



Source



Indonesia:

Nestlé is using its Healthy Choice label to partner with the Indonesian government and advertise UPP - aggressively targeting mothers with claims that "Mothers always want to make sure they offer healthy options for their beloved family. This includes compliance with daily nutrition. (...) Therefore, you need to choose carefully the food and drinks you will bring to your family's dining table." This sort of corporate solution - like positive labeling - is put up against independent, evidence-based public health policies, endangering the development of healthy food measures.





B. Promotions as perfect ties to attract and retain new consumers

Promotions or contests linked to product or brand consumption add reasons for consumers to purchase a particular product. Through these marketing practices, companies enhance their persuasive power to sell UPP, foster direct interaction with consumers, and provide additional incentives and benefits – without acknowledging potential adverse health effects their products might cause – meant to tie consumers to these products over time. Promising prizes, apparent solutions to day-to-day problems, and corporate charity addressing social issues (even malnutrition) are some of the tactics UPP companies use to build and maintain product or brand loyalty among consumers. Junk food promotions connect people with brands, products, and companies, letting them become part of our homes, routines, and diets.



Brazil:

[A Nestlé contest was launched in Brazil](#), offering more chances to win cash prizes with more products consumed. Consumers had to buy at least two different products to participate. The message seems innocent, but beneath the surface, it's not: The more you consume (unhealthy products), the more chances of winning (disease and mortality).



Costa Rica:

Nestlé's brand Maggi launched its [“Maggi solves it for you”](#) campaign, raffling cash prizes to consumers who choose the brand's products. Company representatives stated the campaign was trying to reward consumer loyalty during difficult times with a simple, friendly mechanism that let them participate and win instantly.



Peru:

Bimbo organized and promoted the Global Energy Race, donating 20 slices of Iron Fortified Bimbo Rendidor bread for each race registrant to different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that assist vulnerable populations. [The company ultimately donated 700,000 slices to NGO, under its motto of delivering “delicious food and nutrition in everyone's hands.”](#)





This type of tactic, which links physical activity with UPP, is nothing new and hides its true purpose: Companies seeking to provide solutions to the problems they themselves are causing.



Global:

Nestlé promotes its chocolate using cartoon characters and gifts under the slogan *“The unforgettable taste of childhood,”* as though the ad is aimed at adults.



C. Self-indulgence and pleasure over health:
Is it really a “good-for-you” treat?

Brand loyalty is built upon the general population’s beliefs and perceptions about specific products. The industry has promoted UPP as something consumers consciously choose to enjoy, as “good-for-you” treats and snacks that connect you with other people (as the next category will expose), as well as fashionable lifestyles. But all that comes with its own keys – moderation and balance (is there a safe, innocuous level of consumption of UPP?). This approach puts the burden on individual responsibility – as if marketing and food environments’ conditions does not influence consumers to buy and eat UPPs early and often.



Andean Region and Central America:

Bimbo launched a campaign seeking consumer support for a healthier diet that doesn’t sacrifice taste ([#DoltBecauseYouLikeIt](#)) for its product lines of whole meal, natural, and light breads – ironically urging people to keep the promises they make to their bodies. The main message is *“taking care of yourself is not eating less or not eating; it’s doing it while you eat something delicious. With the light Bimbo line, you can eat what you like best with less salt, fat, and added sugar.”*





Colombia:

Designing irresistible products is part of what UPP companies do. In an Instagram post, [PepsiCo asked consumers if they have the willpower to wait to open the Doritos' package on their way home.](#) Another PepsiCo Facebook post indicated how [snacks are so irresistible that you cannot reject them.](#)



India:

[Kellogg's invited consumers to break the endless cycle of indulgence and guilt](#) – the regret they feel over last night's binge-eating while watching sports – by beginning their days healthily with Kellogg's products.



Spain:

Coca-Cola has announced a commitment to help consumers reduce their sugar intake. Toward that end, [the company launched a no-sugar watermelon Fanta, expanding its portfolio of low/no-calorie products](#) – but with an ultra-processed beverage full of chemicals and additives.

D. Brands, bonds, and joy – a dangerous mix: Junk food across the lifespan, in family moments, friendship, and physical activity

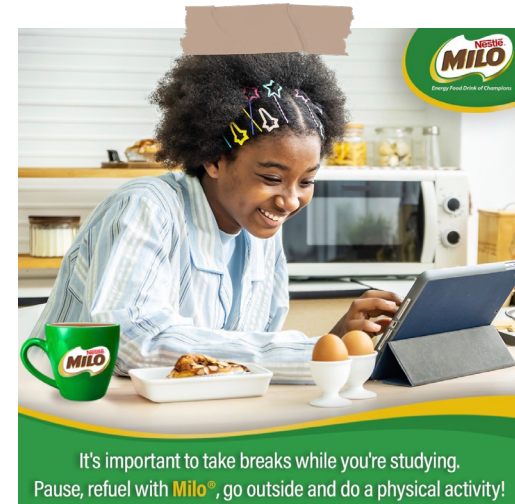
Along with other unhealthy commodity industries, the UPP industry has successfully intertwined its products with positive emotions and feelings of love, friendship, freedom, and youth in their different marketing strategies over time. A close family dinner or a fun night with friends are some of the favorite scenarios used to associate junk food with joy and pleasure. Companies use sports similarly, bringing people, passion, good times, and junk food together. These essential lifestyle connections have been critical to positioning UPPs in global markets.



Caribbean:

MILO, a Nestlé brand, has posted content about [taking study breaks with Milo and encouraging young people to exercise with the brand's physical activity content](#), i.e. *consume my product while you exercise so you do not get sick.*

As with many corporate narratives connecting UPP consumption with the importance of physical activity in order to maintain an energy balance (calories in/calories out), this approach puts the burden on individual responsibility, disregarding the harmful effects caused by the industry in creating unhealthy environments.



India:

An Instagram influencer posted a very flashy video created by Coca-Cola to promote its sugar-free version of a product (reformulation as a win for the industry rather than for people's health). The content included visuals of cartoons, couples, dating apps, people laughing, and other fun-filled scenes intended to answer the question ["Is this the best Coke ever?"](#) Companies associate the consumption of their brands and products with role models, and the Internet has opened up a completely unregulated arena in which corporations use social media influencers to promote their products indirectly, while connecting directly with consumers.



Latin America:

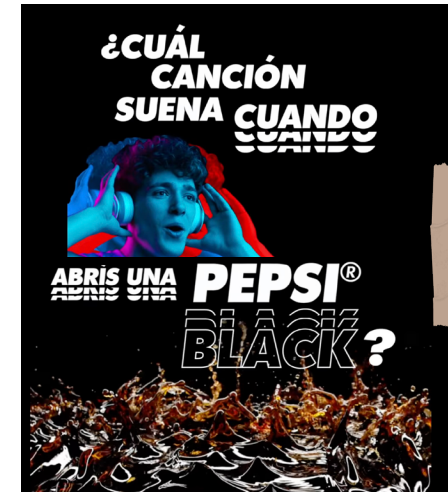
Kellogg's [continues to perpetuate the myth that breakfast is the most important meal of the day](#) through its campaign [#Let'sDoFamily](#), which aims to [motivate consumers with messages of encouragement and optimism in their cereal packages](#).

Pepsi's campaign ["Yes with Pepsi"](#) is meant to reach young people, urging them to live by their own rules and positioning the brand within the gastronomic arena. [The campaign introduced the term "Snackers,"](#) a group the company describes as *"adventurous people, capable of trying new things, experimenting with unknown recipes, and combining them until discovering new flavors. You can accompany each of these recipes with Pepsi."*



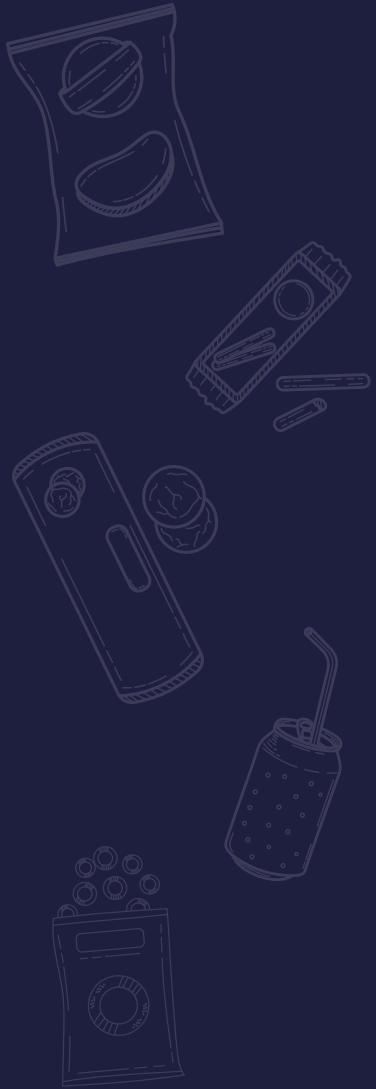
Global:

As part of its “*Real Magic*” campaign, Coca-Cola launched a space-inspired “new world”-flavored drink in select countries. [The campaign is intended for young people and celebrates the experiences that make them happy](#) - such as [games, music, sports, and time with friends](#) - trying to [recruit new consumers from Gen-Z](#). Pepsi has promoted its zero-sugar soda with the message that the beverage is like the song you can’t get out of your head, so open up a Pepsi Black to take a break from your routine.



IV. Conclusion

Junk food marketing is ubiquitous, and a crucial driver of UPP demand and consumption. Its main goal is to secure consumers’ loyalty and high-profit margins, to the detriment of human and planetary health. The UPP industry’s responsibility and recklessness in promoting corporate diets flooded with UPP have dramatically influenced societies toward a nutrition transition to a stage characterized by a high prevalence of diet-related diseases. The next alert in the series will focus on marketing to children, exploring how some practices commercially exploit this group’s vulnerability and violate their human rights, while also serving as a weak criterion for self-regulatory pledges.



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- 2 *A Crisis in the Marketplace: How Food Marketing Contributes to Childhood Obesity and What Can Be Done.* Jennifer L. Harris, Jennifer L. Pomeranz, Tim Lobstein, Kelly D. Brownell; Annual Review of Public Health, 2009. 30:1, 211-225
- 3 *Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent, and effects of food marketing to children: A retrospective summary.* Georgina Cairns, Kathryn Angus, Gerard Hastings, Martin Caraher. Appetite, Volume 62, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2012.04.017>.
- 4 *Consumption of ultra-processed foods and health outcomes: A systematic review of epidemiological studies.* Chen, X., Zhang, Z., Yang, H., et al; Nutr J 19, 86 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12937-020-00604-1>.
- 5 *Ultra-processed foods increase noncommunicable chronic disease risk.* Mariana Zogbi Jardim, Bruna Vieira de Lima Costa, Milene Cristine Pessoa, Camila Kümmel Duarte; Nutrition Research, Volume 95, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nutres.2021.08.006>.
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