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THE DISPUTE OVER THE DISCURSIVE DOMINANCE OF ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONSTRUCTIVIST MARKET STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to analyze how the term "ultra-processed" is approached by different players in the food market, especially nutrition science professionals, government representatives, and the food industry. **Method:** Through interviews and document analysis, the data were analyzed using situational analysis, which is considered a new generation of grounded theory. **Main results:** The research indicated that two major visions dispute the discursive domain of ultra-processed foods. The nutrition discourse promotes public health, evidence-based food policies, and criticism of the excessive industrialization of food. It is firmly anchored in the concept of normative practices and representation. The technology discourse is based on the principles of food science and technology, arguing that all types of processing, including industrial ones, can be safe. It is more associated with transaction practices. **Relevance/originality:** The study shows how different actors dispute control of the discourse of the concept of ultra-processed food, affecting what is communicated to consumers and, consequently, their ability to make informed food choices, as well as understanding how the idea itself is constructed, disputed, and mobilized as an instrument of power and influence in the market. **Theoretical contributions:** The article treats the term "ultra-processed" as a performative sociotechnical device that directly affects the formation of value judgments, consumer behavior, and the organization of the market. It also shows that actors such as government and industry have extended calculative agency—equipped with power, technical knowledge, and discursive devices—capable of influencing consumers, who in turn have limited agency and depend on dominant discourses.

Keywords: Ultra-processed foods, Constructivist market research, Discourse analysis.

A DISPUTA PELO DOMÍNIO DISCURSIVO DOS ALIMENTOS ULTRAPROCESSADOS SOB A PERSPECTIVA DOS ESTUDOS DE MERCADO CONSTRUTIVISTAS

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RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar como o termo *ultraprocessado* é abordado por diferentes agentes no mercado da alimentação, especialmente profissionais da ciência da nutrição, representantes do governo e da indústria alimentícia. **Método:** Por meio de entrevistas e análise de documentos, os dados foram analisados à luz da análise situacional, considerada uma nova geração da *grounded theory*. **Principais Resultados:** A pesquisa apontou que duas grandes visões disputam o domínio discursivo dos alimentos ultraprocessados: o discurso da nutrição, que promove a saúde pública, políticas alimentares baseadas em evidências e crítica à industrialização excessiva dos alimentos, fortemente ancorado no conceito de práticas normativas e de representação; e o discurso da tecnologia, que se sustenta nos princípios da ciência e tecnologia de alimentos, defendendo que todos os tipos de processamento, incluindo os industriais, podem ser seguros. O segundo tipo está mais associado às práticas de transação. **Relevância / Originalidade:** O estudo mostra como diferentes atores disputam o controle do discurso do conceito de alimento ultraprocessado, afetando o que é comunicado ao consumidor e, por consequência, sua capacidade de fazer escolhas alimentares informadas, além de entender como o próprio conceito é construído, disputado e mobilizado como instrumento de poder e influência no mercado. **Contribuições Teóricas / Metodológicas:** O artigo trata o termo *ultraprocessado* como um dispositivo sociotécnico performativo que afeta diretamente a formação de juízos de valor, o comportamento do consumidor e a organização do mercado. Além disso, mostra que atores como governo e indústria têm agência calculadora ampliada — equipada com poder, conhecimento técnico e dispositivos discursivos — capazes de influenciar os consumidores, que, por sua vez, têm uma agência limitada e dependente dos discursos dominantes.

Palavras-chave: Alimentos Ultraprocessados, Estudos de Mercado Construtivistas, Análise Discursiva.

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INTRODUCTION

Constructivist market studies (CMS) conceives of markets as spaces in which institutions organize competition between autonomous and independent actors, creating and producing value (Çalişkan & Callon, 2010). The outcome of these interactions shapes the arena of market practices, which includes not only businesses and governments but also consumers themselves. This arena is shaped by sociotechnical arrangements—composed of devices, technical knowledge, skills, rules, conventions, infrastructures, and discourses—that structure the conception, production, and circulation of goods and properties. These elements form a dynamic space of confrontations and power struggles, marked by continuous transactions, representations, and normative practices that influence each other (Çalişkan & Callon, 2010).

In this sphere, the EMC framework provides analytical tools for understanding how different actors—such as consumers, industries, governments, social organizations, retailers, and marketers—contribute to the construction, maintenance, and transformation of markets through their practices (Çalişkan & Callon, 2010). In general, research in this field seeks to understand how markets are continually constructed by multiple materially equipped actors and how these actors perform market theories in their daily lives (Nøjgaard & Bajde, 2020). Thus, markets are considered as aggregates of diverse and often conflicting practices, requiring attention to efforts to address the tensions that emerge from these conflicts (Araujo, Kjellberg & Spencer, 2008).

In the specific case of the food market, Nestle (2019) emphasized that her analysis involves multiple interconnected factors. Among the most controversial points in this market is the use of the term "ultra-processed food" or simply "ultra-processed." According to the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population (Ministry of Health, 2014), these products are industrial formulations composed predominantly of substances extracted from food, derived from food constituents, or synthesized in the laboratory, such as colorants, flavorings, and flavor enhancers (Mendonça et al., 2016).

The ultra-processed food market in Brazil has experienced significant growth over the past few decades, reflecting changes in the population's dietary patterns. In 2023, the Brazilian food and beverage industry recorded revenues of R$1.161 trillion, representing 10.8% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Given that ultra-processed foods occupy the top spot in Brazilians' diets, with a 22% share, it is plausible to estimate that this segment accounts for a substantial share of the food industry's total revenue (Louzada et al., 2023).

The consequences of consuming ultra-processed foods on public health are significant. Studies associate high consumption of these foods with an increased risk of chronic non-communicable diseases such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some types of cancer. Furthermore, there is evidence that the consumption of ultra-processed foods is linked to increased all-cause mortality (Louzada et al., 2021).

In general, studies investigating the relationship between diet and chronic diseases (Rico-Campà et al., 2019; Srour et al., 2019) have solidified the association between ultra-processed foods and adverse health impacts. This relationship has sparked discursive disputes among different stakeholders, particularly between health scientists and food industry representatives (Nestle, 2019).

Given this scenario, this paper aims to analyze how the term "ultra-processed" is approached by different stakeholders in the food market, especially nutrition science professionals, government representatives, and the food industry. Understanding the discursive dispute in this context is crucial, as it directly impacts the population's food and nutritional security, and the discourse is also one of the points of interest for EMC. Consumers' difficulty in interpreting information about the products they consume and relating it to their well-being has been identified as one of the causes of consumer harm (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009; Adkins & Ozanne, 2005), reinforcing the relevance of investigating how the meanings surrounding the term "ultra-processed" are produced, organized, and disputed in the food sector.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kjellberg and Helgesson (2004, 2007) proposed an analytical framework for markets through their practices, conceptualized through transaction or exchange practices, representation practices, and normative

practices. Transaction practices are the concrete and perceptible activities related to individual everyday economic transactions, such as products, communication techniques, prices, delivery, and the like.

Representation practices refer to how market representations influence performance, since, according to the authors, markets are abstract entities. They are the activities that represent economic exchanges, representing markets and how they function (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2004, 2007).

Normative practices, on the other hand, refer to the norms governing how the market should be configured according to a group of actors, in an attempt to establish normative determinants that affect its functioning. These practices include non-voluntary and voluntary normative standards, both private and public, including management-related activities. In other words, how a market and/or its actors should be (re)shaped according to a given group of actors.

The authors explain the connection between these practices through the concept of translation. Translation is the basic social process through which something disseminates across time and space, generating investigable associations between them (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007). Ideas, norms, texts, products, technologies, and other factors can participate in translation (Latour, 2005).

Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007) stated that significant variation is expected in the presentation of practices across different markets. According to them, the strength of each of the three types of practices, the links between them, and the actors involved overlap across all activities, offering opportunities to analyze the differences between market structures and their potential implications (Maciel & Leme, 2023).

Thus, at this point, it is necessary to advance the concept of value calculation. In a market, making a product calculable means objectifying and singularizing it, that is, defining its properties objectively so that it can become part of the consumer's world (Merabet, 2020). The work of adjustment is the substance of any market transaction. Therefore, product properties are jointly developed by various professionals (Callon & Muniesa, 2005), such as nutritionists, advertisers, and food engineers. For this to occur, the actors involved must possess calculating agency. Possessing calculating agency means that the actors are equipped with tools and capabilities capable of influencing a market, being able to compete, cooperate, or be disconnected in their actions.

Thus, value is constructed through interactions between consumers, producers, regulators, experts, technical devices (labels, seals, rankings), public discourse, and other actors involved. The value of something is established in a context based on the material, symbolic, discursive, and technological interactions between market actors (Callon & Muniesa, 2005). According to Callon and Muniesa (2005), for an actor to calculate value, they need to be equipped with cognitive and material tools: nutrition labels, price lists, categories such as ultra-processed foods, and the like. Thus, the calculation of value depends on the available material and symbolic infrastructure and is co-produced by human beings (people) and non-humans (objects, tables, formulas, systems)—an idea influenced by actor-network theory.

In the food market, an important translation circulates between practices and performs the calculation of food values: the debate surrounding the term "ultra-processed food." The term "ultra-processed food," or simply "ultra-processed," constitutes an idea that attributes property to the product. Initially, the term "ultra-processed" emerged with the development of the NOVA classification system and is widely used in academic research and by various professionals, especially nutritionists, physicians, public policy makers, and researchers in the field of human nutrition (Monteiro, 2019). NOVA divides food classification into four types, with ultra-processed foods having the highest level of industrialization, associating the consumption of this type of food with the development of obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and heart disease (Monteiro, 2019).

In this context, it is possible to understand that the actors' agency can shape the transactional, representational, and normative practices of a market through the knowledge it produces (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2004, 2007). In the case of the academic actor, particularly in the field of nutrition focused on the food market, the fruit of this production comes primarily, but not exclusively, from research on the properties of foods (Louzada et al., 2023)—which are representational practices—which ultimately informs decision-making in various spheres, such as the formation of public policies, the development of professional

guidelines for nutritionists, physicians, and the like (Louzada et al., 2023)—which are normative practices; consumer behavior; and the market practices of the ultra-processed food industry—which are transactional practices (Dalmoro, 2023).

Thus, NOVA (Monteiro, 2019) can be seen as one representation of food market practices by reflecting the set of processes that ultra-processed food industries use to modify foods. Its promulgation through documents of different types and origins makes this classification function as a device capable of influencing the consumer's calculative agency. Devices are objects with agency that articulate actions; they act or cause others to act. They can also be considered material and discursive arrangements that intervene in the construction of markets (Maciel & Leme, 2023; Çalişkan & Callon, 2010), such as NOVA and the term "ultra-processed" it presents.

The attempt to dominate the discourse on the term causes its debate to overflow at various points. Overflows result from imperfections or failures in framing attempts and the processes that led to them and are linked to the occurrence of externalities. Thus, the effort to frame and stabilize the market is never-ending, especially when disputes arise (Araujo, 2007; Çalişkan & Callon, 2010; Callon, 1997a, 1998; Oliveira, 2013).

2. METHOD

The methodology of this work is inspired by situational analysis (SA), proposed by Clarke, Friese, and Washburn (2018). SA has roots in pragmatism, Chicago School sociology, symbolic interactionism, and Strauss's framework of social worlds and arenas, and is considered the third generation of grounded theory (GT). Its roots are based on the critical interactionist paradigm (Clarke, 2018). SA is part of an emerging current of interactionism that adheres to the critical interactionist paradigm, supported by nonstructural approaches (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018).

The interpretative properties of SA include (a) the notion of perspective through which partiality and the situation are analyzed; (b) constructivism is considered social and materialist; (c) a first level of interpretation is carried out through open codes with the support of literature and simultaneous interpretations; (d) the analysis is carried out through abduction in data theorizing; (e) the analysis is oriented toward action, procedural analyses, and negotiations between actors as anticipation of instabilities; and (f) the method encourages the diversity of elements as a focus of analysis, such as the explicit, the implicit, the significant, the underestimated, the silenced (or unspoken), and their differences (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2018).

Interviews and document analysis were the two data collection methods used. In the interviews, open-ended questions were asked, understood as relevant to the research (Charmaz, 2009), using questions that used the theoretical framework as a source of guiding topics (Bauer & Gaskell, 2002). As data collection progressed, other questions intentionally deemed appropriate were inserted into the data collection instrument, a semi-structured guide, to enrich the analysis (Charmaz, 2009). In the second data collection method adopted, document analysis, Clarke (2005) recommended the use of all types of documents, also called discursive materials, that can contribute to the research.

The research corpus, which followed accessibility criteria (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006; Charmaz, 2009), was formed by two PhD researchers in the field of nutrition, identified as P1 and P2, specialists in obesity epidemiology, and a Ministry of Health employee, identified as MS, allocated to the General Coordination of Food and Nutrition Policy, the Ministry's department responsible for producing the "Food Guide for the Brazilian Population." The employee participated in the development of the document.

The documents analyzed were the "Food Guide for the Brazilian Population," second edition, published by the Ministry of Health in 2014, and the e-book "Processed Foods: Their Importance for Brazilian Society" (Rego, Vialta & Madi, 2018), published by the Food Technology Institute (ITAL), affiliated with the São Paulo Agribusiness Technology Agency (APTA) of the São Paulo State Government's Secretariat of Agriculture and Supply (SAA), in partnership with the Brazilian Food Industry Association. The documents were chosen because the first presents the discourse of the health sector, formed by the government and researchers in the field, and is the official guidance regarding food consumption for the population; and the second, with government support from the State of São Paulo, presents the official position of the Brazilian Food Industry Association.

The data analysis process was carried out through theorizing (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018). First, data were collected and analyzed through open coding. At this point, words, phrases, or excerpts were given freely named labels. In parallel, new data were collected and continually compared with the data already collected, supported by the Atlas-ti software, which allowed for continuous changes in the process of producing the analysis results. As a final objective of the analysis, a representation inspired by the cartography proposed by SA was created, called a positional arena. In this method, positional arenas expose the leading positions adopted and not adopted in the discursive data found in the situation about specific axes of concern and controversy. Thus, positional arenas detail the central debates of the situation to reveal the range of positions adopted and not adopted in the data, concluding the theorizing process (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018).

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. Processing and quality

It is in industry and in some fields of academia itself, such as food engineering, food science and technology, and other related fields, that the NOVA organization finds its leading opposition players. One of the industry's first claims, available in the industry document, involves the use of the most basic terms of the ultra-processed food market and the generalizations attributed to it (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018, p. 18):

> It is common to find news articles and even scientific papers that use distorted concepts about the food industry, processed foods, and industrialized foods. Generally speaking, it is common to generalize prejudices about industrialized companies and products, since, in reality, there are thousands of companies and products with very different characteristics.

In this excerpt, there appears to be an attempt to equate home food processing with industrial practices, which are market practices, as there is a claim that the terms "processed" and "industrialized" tend to be negatively associated with industrial practices. The element that supports the excerpt's defense is the process. Thus, if any processing is performed in the consumer's home, it is on the same level as industrial processes or classified as such.

Consequently, the industry document generalizes the term "process" and argues that any transformation or processing practice attributed to food makes it processed, regardless of where it occurred. In other words, the term "processing" is used broadly, but not incorrectly, from a food science and technology perspective. This leveling of industrial and domestic processes is typically technical, failing to consider all the other variables involved in food production, such as food quality, origin, degree of freshness, quantity of ingredients, added substances, cultivation practices, and many others. In the following excerpt, the industry document reinforces the focus on food science and technology, not public health, as addressed by the Guide (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018, p. 36):

> The term "processed food" has been confused with a small portion of the food consumed by the population and used inappropriately and prejudicially to define foods of inferior quality and nutritional value. However, from a technological standpoint, any food that undergoes any intentional modification before consumption is considered processed. There are several types of processes used to modify foods, many of which are used in homes, such as washing, slicing, grinding, extracting, heating, cooking, cooling, and freezing, among others.

The excerpt presents a pertinent argument, since industrialization typically occurs in industrial settings. Initially, it is important to keep in mind that all documents consider the common behavior of the actors involved in the debate, not the exceptions. Thus, when discussing industrialized products and quality, we are talking about different things, which may or may not coexist. Furthermore, the document draws attention to the different types of industries, implicitly stating that the products offered for sale differ between them, as do their processes, according to Rego, Vialta, and Madi (2018, p. 53):

> Processed food can also be classified as processed food, but the opposite is not always true, as food processing also occurs in homes and various foodservice establishments. Another misconception is that the food and beverage industry is a single entity with common characteristics.

The terms "multinational" and "small" industries are often used in interviews and documents analyzed to differentiate these actors' ability to influence discourse in a given arena. Some industries, typically Brazilian or non-Brazilian multinationals, have access to Brazilian political circles due to their economic power. They may also receive support from their home countries as part of foreign policy negotiations.

3.2. Public policies and health

The Brazilian Food Guide, on the other hand, recommends reducing the consumption of processed foods and acknowledges the possibility of domestic processing of various types. "The Guide does not say we should ban ultra-processed foods, right? It says we need to reduce our consumption of ultra-processed foods" (P2). However, one of the problems implicitly highlighted in the industry document (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018) is that the discursive construction of the term "ultra-processed" forms one of the pillars considered problematic in the Brazilian Food Guide (Ministry of Health, 2014), which leads to some of these provisions being challenged by the industry.

As this is a government guide, any challenge to its content should be made directly to the Ministry of Health. This is standard practice in the eyes of the General Coordination of Food and Nutrition Policy, as challenges to parts of the Guide have been ongoing since its inception, according to an interviewee from the agency above, where the document was produced. Since the Guide was formulated through studies that produced quality evidence, it is necessary to point out new evidence to change it.

> What we received was the following: when questioning our Food Guide, and specifically the section on ultra-processed foods, they argue that a healthy diet includes all types of food, that everything can be part of a healthy diet, that this classification is wrong, that there is no evidence regarding its relationship with health. ... But they cited, for example, three bibliographical references, none of which mentioned ultra-processed foods. (MS)

It is important to consider that the Brazilian government appears to be divided into two distinct actors, one more concerned with public health and the other more susceptible to the interests of large industries or other governments. This ultimately generates an internal conflict that, according to the concept developed by Araujo (2007), Çalişkan and Callon (2010), Callon (1997b, 1998), and Oliveira (2013), transcends the delimitations initially envisaged in this study. Although these internal divisions do not act in a synchronized manner, this study has chosen to use the term "government" to refer to this actor in a general sense, highlighting its internal divisions when necessary.

> Our argument, always, always, is that we are the Ministry of Health. So, we are defending health. It is not profit; it is health. So, if the evidence shows that a particular food is harmful to health, then we will argue that it should be avoided. This is our conversation with the industry, with other ministries, so we always focus on scientific evidence and also on health. (MS)

For the General Coordination of Food and Nutrition Policy, an internal division of the government, the evidence that the industry is attempting to alter the Guide is of low quality. In the space where the Guide's recommendations are challenged, there is a perception of the different types of arguments used to support the proposals. There is a clear division of viewpoint among the actors who meet to discuss the provision. As indicated in the data, the Ministry of Health, represented by the General Coordination of Food and Nutrition Policy, needs to maintain its position of prioritizing public health. At the same time, the industry wants to soften the claims made in the Guide in its interests. At the heart of this dispute are ideas, understood as concepts, categories, or mental models that contribute to market construction (Nøjgaard & Bajde, 2020), about the concept of ultra-processed foods. As seen, the claim of classification as ultra-processed foods is an element that bothers the industry.

> It is like marketing itself, in that area, that is what is argued the most. That is why the arguments are so bad. They want to sell the product, but they are talking to people who are talking about evidence. It seems like it is a concoction, I do not know. Because it is always the same argument. (MS)

3.3. Disputes over the ultra-processed term

In addition to contesting parts of the Guide in its document, the industry points out some precautions in the production of scientific articles to avoid what it explicitly calls fake news (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018, p. 18): (1) do not use the term "food industry" in a generalized way; (2) do not confuse a specific product with the category of processed food to which it belongs; (3) do not use the terms "processed" and "industrialized" as synonyms for bad, unhealthy, low-nutrition food, or food containing too much sugar, salt, or fat; (4) do not make mistakes when evaluating the quality of an industrialized product based on the quantity of ingredients; (5) do not make mistakes when classifying the quality of an industrialized product based on its degree of processing. At this point, the criticisms allude to the Brazilian Food Guide. Next, a critique of the NOVA classification is made (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018, p. 20):

> The NOVA "classification" is based on several assumptions that are unsupported by food science and technology, and it also directly conflicts with the regulatory authorities that approve the processed foods it challenges for consumption. Several of its assumptions contradict basic principles of food science and technology (S&T), perhaps due to ignorance, prejudice, or both.

An interesting analysis here is that the excerpt offers a critique with direct reference to a field within the study of food—food science and technology, which focuses heavily on the technological aspects of food production, disregarding other perspectives. Thus, it is possible to glimpse different paradigmatic perspectives regarding ultra-processed foods, varying according to the actors who manage them and the agency they carry, as defined by Callon (2009).

Thus, from a food science and technology perspective, the claims are correct; however, from a public health perspective, they are not capable of altering dietary guidelines for promoting healthy and adequate nutrition (Louzada et al., 2018). In the industry document, the argument for the inconsistencies in the NOVA classification is presented through five points (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018):

(1) *From a technical perspective, there is no classification based on degrees of processing*. This again brings a perspective linked to food science and technology. From a statistical perspective,

(2) *There is no evidence of a significant difference between the nutritional contents of foods processed in homes, restaurants, and industries*. To illustrate this point, the document presents an image (Figure 1) of processed meat-based foods, displayed in well-designed foreign and domestic packaging, with numerous references to home-cooked, high-quality food using natural products.

(3) *From a scientific perspective, there is no evidence that convenience foods adversely affect culture, social life, or the environment.* This point is a direct critique of the current Brazilian Food Guide, which highlights the effects of ultra-processed foods on culture, social life, and the environment. These include the global standardization of foods and packaging; aggressive advertising campaigns; the promotion of a desire to consume more and more of these foods; the reduction in learning related to cooking, sitting at the table, and sharing meals; and the impacts on the planet's sustainability (Ministry of Health, 2014).

(4) *From a scientific and regulatory perspective, the presence of industrial food ingredients and additives cannot be used as a criterion to define a food as unsuitable for consumption*. However, this point

Figure 1. Examples of various meals with different types of meat.
Source: Rego et al. (2018, p. 23)

is disputed by researchers, who assert that there is sufficient evidence to link the consumption of some aspects to certain health risks.

(5) *From a practical and statistical perspective, it is impossible to establish that the moderate use of sugar, salt, and fat is recommended for home cooking while simultaneously producing products that should be avoided because they contain excessive amounts of these ingredients*. A comparative figure of sugar use in the industrial and home yogurt manufacturing processes is then presented, with the claim that the addition of sugar alone accounts for the difference between the ultra-processed and minimally processed classifications.

However, there is silence (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018) regarding the amount of added sugar and the type of sugar used, focusing only on the procedural aspect of food preparation. Excessive amounts and the resulting high consumption of sodium or animal fats reflect one of the main concerns of the Brazilian Food Guide (Ministry of Health, 2014), as they are associated with cardiovascular disease.

The concept of ultra-processed foods derived from the NOVA classification, as mentioned previously, is central to all these debates. The industry opposes the use of the concept of ultra-processed foods and makes the following claims (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018, p. 30). Although lengthy, the excerpt is important because it presents the industry's position.

> All this hype surrounding the NOVA "classification" ignores whether or not there is empirical verification of its functionality in choosing healthier and more nutritious foods. However, a brief analysis of the products sold in supermarkets can demonstrate that the concept of "ultra-processed food" fails to fulfill its intended purpose—identifying foods suitable for consumption—when a consumer tries to select products by comparing them based on the characteristics identified by NOVA. ... the difficulty of identifying "ultra-processed" foods in practice, since the NOVA "classification" is generic and condemns categories, not specific types of foods. If a person goes to a supermarket and tries to check the specific products identified as "ultra-processed" based on the characteristics used by the NOVA classification, they will be surprised to find that very little adherence to most of these characteristics is observed.

The main arguments in the excerpt reveal that the Guide fails to fulfill its purpose, that consumers will be surprised to find the Guide's lack of consistency with reality, and that the Guide makes purchasing confusing. However, studies indicate that the technical language on packaging fails to help consumers understand what they are buying; that consumers have little understanding and knowledge of the information about processed food products, a situation the Guide attempts to alleviate; and that, with little understanding, they feel confused during the purchasing and consumption process (Scrinis, 2021), leaving the purchasing decision to be pre-calculated by the industry, something the Guide seeks to mitigate.

To support its argument, the industry document presents some industrialized products, or those classified as ultra-processed by the NOVA classification, that use few ingredients in their production. All of them are packaged French fries. However, some topics remain silent (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018) in the figure, such as portion sizes and individuals' total daily intake of nutrients and non-nutrients. By using the term "total daily intake of nutrients and non-nutrients," this analysis refers to the set of macro- and micronutrients consumed throughout an individual's day and the various elements added to the products during their production process, but which are not nutrients, such as food additives.

The nutritional table for French fries (mentioned above), for example, shows the consumption of the products per serving. Consuming one serving, which is the same as a two-pack of the products shown, represents the consumption of approximately more than 10% of the average daily calories for an adult and 15% for a child, based on the reference of 1,600 calories per day for children and 2,000 for an adult (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2021). To this end, industrialized French fries (Figure 2) are used (in the industry document) to counter some of the Guide's arguments, such as:

(1) *Regarding the presence of fresh foods, all the characteristics are false.* This is an attempt to contradict the Guide by demonstrating that processed foods can be of the same quality as fresh potatoes, for example. However, the argument does not generate evidence capable of contradicting the Guide.

Marca	Classic Potato Chips	Lay's Classic	Lay's Kettle Cooked	Kettle Chips Olive Oil	No Added Salt Potato Chips
Fabricante	Deep River Snacks	Frito-Lay	Frito-Lay	Good Health Natural Foods	Freedom Foods
Ingredientes	Batatas, óleo de girassol, sal marinho	Batatas, óleo vegetal (girassol, milho e/ou canola), sal	Batatas, óleo vegetal (girassol, milho e/ou canola), sal	Batatas, azeite de oliva, sal marinho	Batatas, óleo de girassol
Peso líquido na embalagem	42g	42,5g	38,9g	141,7g	100g
Número de porções	1	1	2	5	4
Conteúdo por porção:					
Peso de cada porção	42g	42,5g	28g	28g	25g
Calorias	230	240	130	150	127 (530Kj)
Gordura total	15g	15g	5g	8g	6,9g
Gordura saturada	1,5g	2g	0,5g	1g	0,7g
Gordura trans	0g	0g	0g	0g	Menor que 0,1g
Colesterol	0mg	0mg	0mg	0mg	0mg
Carboidrato total	24g	23g	20g	16g	14,3g
Açúcares	0g	1g	1g	0g	0,1g
Fibra alimentar	2g	2g	2g	0g	0,5g
Sódio	260mg	250mg	135mg	65mg	4mg
Proteína	3g	3g	2g	2g	1,9g

Obs.: A informação nutricional da rotulagem dos produtos também cita a presença de vitaminas A e C, Cálcio, Ferro e Potássio, que não estão relacionados neste quadro.

Figure 2. Presentation of products defended as non-ultra-processed by the industry.
Source: ITAL (2018, p. 31)

(2) *Regarding the presence of industrially used ingredients, some characteristics are false, while others depend on how various manufacturers manufacture the product*. Here, there is a concern to ensure that industrial processes are safe and do not interfere with product quality. The Guide's recommendation is based on reducing the consumption of ultra-processed foods, understanding that these foods generally contain a higher volume of calories, salt, sugar, and fat. Thus, the Guide reaffirms its commitment to a broad-based diet.

(3) *Regarding the additives' ability to make the product extremely attractive, all of these characteristics are false.* In its explanation, the industry document argues that additives are regulated by ANVISA (National Health Regulatory Agency) and that no additive can addict consumers. One point that is overlooked (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018) in the document is the lack of transparency regarding the amount of non-food substances added to products. The Guide addresses this concern as a whole, with the outcome of food consumption. Viewing food separately implies a reductionist view of nutrition (Scrinis, 2021).

(4) *Regarding the number of ingredients, all the characteristics are false.* This is a criticism of the Guide's assertion that foods with a long list of ingredients are typically ultra-processed and should be avoided.

(5) *Regarding the ingredient names, the characteristic is false.* The figure presents products with names familiar to consumers in their composition to argue that the presence of difficult-to-understand names is not a characteristic of ultra-processed products.

(6) *Regarding the addition of air or water, the characteristic is false.* Again, products without the addition of known or unknown elements are presented.

(7) *Regarding nutritional value, one of the characteristics may be considered valid, others depend on how the various manufacturers make the product,*

and still others are false. At this point, the document acknowledges the high-calorie content of the products, but notes that they are also high in calories if made at home. It also acknowledges the existence of products reduced to several elements. Once again, there is a narrative that promotes the leveling of industrial and domestic practices, as they tend to produce the same results in nutritional terms.

Thus, the industry's nutritional claims are valid, but they consider a particular situation, according to Callon's concept (1997b, 1998), that of the food itself. The overflow (Araujo, 2007; Çalişkan & Callon, 2010; Callon, 1997c, 1998; Oliveira, 2013) of the vision of food is a characteristic declared in the Brazilian Food Guide, which seeks to reconnect food to broader social aspects (Ministry of Health, 2014).

The very concept of characterizing food as industrialized represents a reductionist view, based on the principles of the food science and technology paradigm, typically focused on the procedural aspects of food processing. This is not a problem; it is an important industry for the country when considering economic aspects (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018).

However, the argument based on the food science and technology paradigm used in the industry document (Rego, Vialta, & Madi, 2018) does not aim to promote public health or consumer behavior, as marketing practices often influence these (Santana et al., 2020).

Regarding marketing and advertising practices, the products used for this argument contain a series of claims such as "40% less fat," "salt-free," or "sea salt." The industry document takes a contradictory stance on the use of this communication, stating that there is no record of any association between healthiness and the foods that illustrate this debate. The three phrases retrieved from the front of the packaging are typical indications of claims belonging to the healthiness discourse, used as a practice that aids in the calculation of value.

The industry document associates the use of healthiness discourse with mentioning the presence of nutrients capable of conferring a healthy aura to the product, such as fiber, protein, or potassium. However, the healthiness discourse should be understood as that capable of inducing an increased sense of health associated with the food, regardless of whether there is direct mention of any nutrient (Ricci, Brasil, & Almeida, 2020).

To visualize the discourses present in this arena, the positional schema (Clarke, 2003, 2005) is presented in Figure 3. In SA, positional schemas expose the leading positions adopted and not adopted in the discursive data found in the situation about specific axes of concern and controversy. Significantly, positional schemas are not articulated with individuals or groups, but seek to represent the full range of discursive positions on particular issues, allowing us to demonstrate the articulation of various adopted positions, as well as contradictory positions held by individuals and collectives (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018).

Based on four themes, the discourses can be divided into two: the nutrition discourse and the technology discourse. The nutrition discourse, delivered by health researchers and the Ministry of Health, pays greater attention to aspects of public policy development, supporting their development; generalized health care, which encompasses social, cultural, epidemiological, nutritional, and food security dimensions—related to food availability—among other topics discussed within the scope of the Unified Health System; and food quality, which encompasses elements such as food storage and handling and

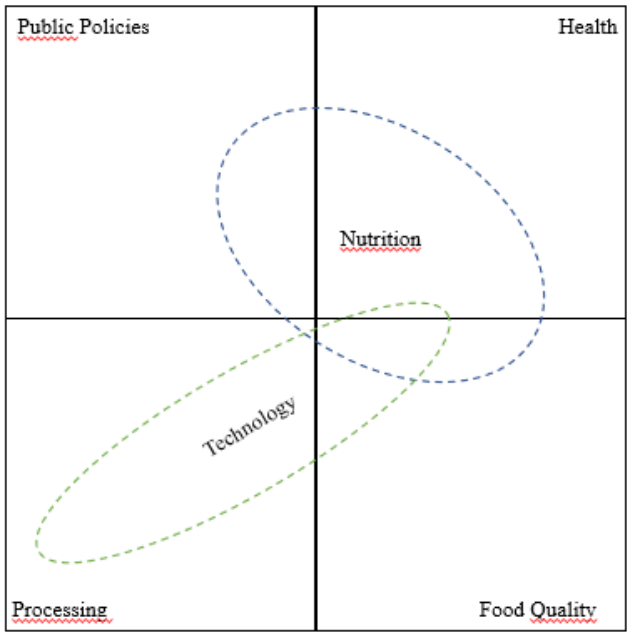

Figure 3. Positional arena of discourses related to ultra-processed foods.
Source: Prepared by the authors (2022)

attention to the degree of processing. This does not mean that this discourse fails to consider the other elements of the framework, but it touches on them less intensely, demonstrating its desired anchoring. Generally, the elements that shape the discourse include more pronounced concerns in the following order: health, public policies (access, for example), food quality, and processing.

The technology discourse, expressed in documents representing the food industry, pays special attention to the technological aspects of food processing, development, and innovation; food safety, aimed at reducing poisoning and other illnesses caused by poor hygiene; and health, a dimension closely linked to innovation, aiming to offer foods that optimize and enhance physical functions. The technology discourse prioritizes the debate on processing, followed by food quality and, by far, health. There is no mention of public policies.

The spaces occupied by the discourses in each of the dimensions reflect an attempt to demonstrate the level of participation of each of them in shaping the discourses included in the documents and interviews analyzed, even though they are still discussing the same topic: ultra-processed foods.

The analysis reveals that the different discourses identified mobilize material, technical, and symbolic elements in order to *convey* the value of food. Following Callon and Muniesa (2005), we approach value not as an intrinsic property of products but as the outcome of calculative processes mediated by sociotechnical devices that equip actors' agency, such as the discourse surrounding ultra-processed foods. For instance, the adoption of the NOVA classification by the Ministry of Health operates as a valuation device anchored in epidemiological evidence and normative practices aimed at safeguarding public health. In contrast, industry actors seek to delegitimize this basis of calculation by promoting an alternative valuation framework centered on physicochemical and technological parameters, where processing alone would not necessarily entail nutritional harm.

This struggle underscores that food value—whether defined as healthy, more or less processed, safe, or suitable for consumption—is not pre-given, but actively *performed* in discursive arenas where competing calculative logics vie for legitimacy. Accordingly, the dispute extends beyond the mere classification of products as ultra-processed or not; it encompasses the very criteria that should define how value is calculated. This, in turn, exposes the contingent, relational, and asymmetrical nature of valuation in food markets concerning the category "ultra-processed."

CONCLUSION

Much of the dietary lifestyle of contemporary societies has evolved toward a higher level of consumption of ultra-processed foods, a market dominated by food industries, especially large-scale transnational corporations. The relationship between ultra-processed food industries and society is mediated by the market. This relationship results in conflicts, such as the definition and use of the term "ultra-processed," which can confuse consumers (Nestle, 2019).

In this context, it is clear that major players in the food market are responsible for the majority of the production and sale of foods with a high obesogenic potential. Therefore, these companies have been criticized by various professionals who emphasize the importance of protecting consumers from harmful practices in this market (Baker, Gentry, & Rittenburg, 2005). After all, adopting a healthy diet is not merely a matter of individual choice; the environment in which an individual lives has a significant influence on eating habits from childhood (CONSEA, 2014; Swinburn et al., 2011).

Circulating discourses, as elements that affect market representation practices (Çalişkan & Callon, 2010), are the subject of constant contestation, as observed about the term "ultra-processed." From this perspective, the struggle for dominance of the term "ultra-processed" was represented in the positional arena and is the subject of disputes, given the conflicts, inequalities, the agency of each actor, and the power struggles to dominate it. This arena is marked by conflicts involving which actor maintains greater control over the use of the discourse surrounding the term "ultra-processed." From the consumer's perspective, it is possible to conceive that this arena involves what they will hear or read before and during their purchase, and their perceptions, meanings, and expectations regarding existing products. In addition to this complex scenario, it is expected that no business actor wants their product to be associated with any negative perception, nor their operational processes or raw materials to be negatively impacted.

For the consumer, what remains is the doubt, insecurity, and instability that these conflicts ultimately cause in the information available. For the government, regulation or even the creation of public policies would be sensitive and controversial issues, the subject of other arenas of dispute in which actors attempt to defend their interests, especially the industry. The main weapons used in these arenas are argumentation and scientific evidence, since much of an actor's resistance is measured by their quality.

Consequently, part of the agency received by the consumer is pre-calculated by actors with specific interests in the functioning of the market, which unbalances the relationships within it. As a result, market practices, including discursive disputes, could increase the harm to consumers regarding their knowledge, which could contribute to increasing food and nutritional insecurity in various scenarios and ways.

It is clear that the calculating agencies of the most powerful actors, laden with knowledge, skills, techniques, financial, and political clout, are capable of influencing consumer agency according to their interests, making consumers dependent on their control and their pre-calculated acted in the market. By acting in this way, the most powerful actors can evoke desired responses from consumers through their market practices. Thus, they contribute to unbalancing power relations, especially through the manipulation of information and related practices, such as different types of communication.

Some additional contributions lie in demonstrating how markets are not given, but continually constructed by diverse actors (nutritionists, government, industry, for example) through sociotechnical practices, as proposed by Çalışkan and Callon (2010). The analysis highlights that the practice of representation occurs when actors attempt to define what constitutes an ultra-processed food (e.g., NOVA, industry discourse, Food Guide). Normative practice appears in attempts to shape what should be considered healthy, adequate, and acceptable in the food market. Moreover, the practice of transaction is seen in arguments about sales, labeling, health claims, and consumption decisions. The study shows how these three practices connect and translate into one another (translation), performing in the market.

Furthermore, the article treats the term "ultra-processed" as a performative sociotechnical device (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010), which directly affects the formation of value judgments, consumer behavior, and market organization. Based on Callon and Muniesa (2005), the study shows that actors such as government and industry possess expanded calculative agency—equipped with power, technical knowledge, and discursive devices—capable of influencing consumers, who, in turn, have limited agency dependent on dominant discourses. The study reinforces that discursive disputes hinder consumer understanding and, therefore, increase their losses, as discussed by Shultz and Holbrook (2009) and Adkins and Ozanne (2005). This loss occurs precisely because consumers operate in a market shaped by conflicting, asymmetric, and often opaque practices.

That said, it is possible to consider some possibilities for future studies, as this work contributed a partial view of the topic, in line with the methodological approach. Although studies that consider the effects of poor nutrition are more frequent in the health field, they can become more prevalent in administration, as this is an area that informs managerial decisions that affect the market and public administration. Understanding the effects of practices, the necessary changes, the market's approach with a greater commitment to public health and social interests, and having a differentiated perspective on the consumer as an individual citizen can make a difference. Quantitative and qualitative studies can be conducted taking into account the consumer's perspective, which can help to understand the phenomenon in a more profound and more complex way, as well as its consequences for society. In addition, other actors may be considered, such as the Brazilian Institute for Consumer Protection (IDEC), the Brazilian Society of Food and Nutrition (SBAN), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa), and the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA).

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