

Executive Summary

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Advisory Committee for Social Science

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This review of international literature on consumer understanding and concerns about ultra-processed foods (UPFs) has been commissioned by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) from its Advisory Committee for Social Science. It seeks to identify gaps in the evidence on consumer perceptions of UPFs, particularly in the UK context, and suggest areas for further research.

There is no official classification of ‘ultra-processed foods’ in the UK, but coverage of classifications and debate from outside the UK has helped to stimulate debate in this country. There is increasing interest in the concept of ultra-processed foods (UPFs), with growing media attention to the potential negative health consequences of diets that consist of a significant proportion of energy from UPFs. Whilst there is mounting scientific evidence that high consumption of UPFs could have adverse health consequences, the findings of many of these studies are still

subject to question.

Studies suggest that, whilst consumption of UPFs varies appreciably within the UK, these foods typically contribute well over 50% of total energy intake. Variation in consumption of UPFs within the population is associated with various factors, including age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

While there is a high level of awareness of the term UPFs, many consumers are not able to define the term and lack clear understanding of the available classifications of UPFs. It is important to recognise here, however, that there is no official and generally agreed definition of UPFs. Dominant themes in the literature on consumer understanding of UPFs are linked to industrial food processing, the existence of artificial ingredients and the nutritional composition of foods, and especially higher levels of substances perceived to be unhealthy, such as sugar, salt and sodium.

Whilst recognising the potentially less desirable attributes of UPFs, consumers do appreciate the benefits that these products bring, for example in terms of price, convenience and shelf-life. At the same time, however, there is evidence that many consumers desire to reduce their consumption of these foods, but that they often struggle to do so.

There is also evidence that consumers struggle reliably to distinguish foods that could be classified as ultra-processed from those that are not. Whilst some foods are consistently and correctly identified as UPFs, for example soft drinks and processed meats, others are quite frequently mis-classified, for example, some dairy products such as flavoured yoghurts. The existence of certain ingredients, such as those that are plant-based, is often the cause of consumers erroneously classifying highly processed foods as non-UPF.

A major theme in the literature, related to processed foods in general and UPFs specifically, is the notion of 'naturalness'. As a result, foods that undergo industrial processing – particularly those that involve chemical changes and contain artificial ingredients – are often viewed as 'unnatural' and, consequently, 'unhealthy'. At the same time, however, the existence of ingredients that are seen to be more natural (for example, plant-based or organic ingredients) can have a halo effect in that highly processed foods are, by implication, not interpreted as UPFs.

Overall, while it is possible to discern broad themes from the existing literature, there is a general paucity of studies on the nature and level of consumer beliefs and concerns about UPFs, both globally and in the UK. The implication is that

communication with consumers about UPFs and designing and implementing efforts to address consumer concerns about UPFs, and to provide guidance to consumers when making choices about UPFs, will be challenging. Accordingly, we suggest areas for further research at the end of the paper.