The image shows the interior of the UK House of Commons, a grand hall with high ceilings, wooden paneling, and green upholstered benches. A large, ornate skylight is visible at the top, and two large pendant lamps hang from the ceiling. The room is empty, with a red carpet running down the center aisle.

BRANDS POLITICS & ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

Insights from
the UK Parliament

Date: May 2024

SPQR

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INTRODUCTION

Ultra-processed what?

There's no mention of ultra-processed food in Parliament before 2018. Until recently, policy makers focused on salt, fat and sugar (HFSS) as the problem on the plate. But on 21 February 2018, Kerry McCarthy, Labour MP for Bristol East, referenced a study that linked UPF to cancer and obesity and asked the government what more it could do to encourage healthy eating. That's the first reference of UPF on the official Hansard; it has been **mentioned 110 times** since.

Now, everywhere you look – in the media, online, the bookshop window – people are confronted with warnings about ultra-processed foods. It was only a matter of time before UPFs became part of the political discourse as well.

Our objective with this research was to track the trajectory of political debate; to understand how attitudes have changed over the current parliament and address a blind spot in the broader UPF conversation. Namely, what do politicians think, and what does that mean for brands?

The analysis is split into four sections:

- + Political interest in UPF, and how that's changed over time
- + Engagement with the topic, segmented by House and political party
- + Sentiment towards ultra-processed food
- + Sources of influence – those shaping the debate

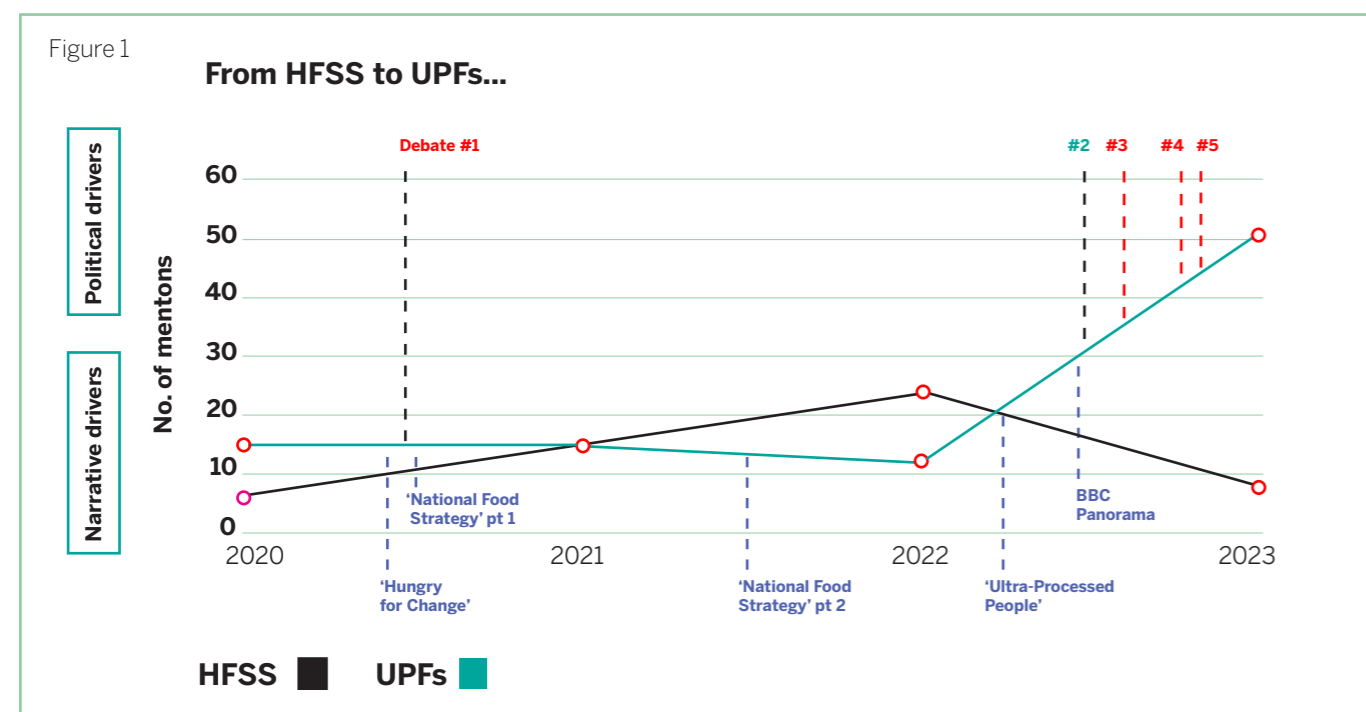
Methodology

- + Our analysis is based on every mention of "ultra-processed food" in the current Parliament, from December 2019 to our cut off point in April 2024. It covers spoken and written contributions in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.
- + Each reference was sourced directly from the official Hansard and scored for sentiment (positive, neutral, negative) and the results were then segmented by stakeholder, political party, and House.
- + We also recorded direct mentions of third-party briefing material where a specific report, organisation or individual is referenced.
- + For clarity, the tables correspond with full year totals for mentions of UPF in 2020, '21, '22, and '23.

INTEREST

Our analysis focuses on the current parliament, from December 2019 through to April 2024. The data shows that political interest in UPF rocketed last year, with **a fourfold increase in parliamentary mentions. References to HFSS halved in the same period.** This novel term – “ultra-processed” – has supplanted old acronyms and mental shortcuts (HFSS, junk food, etc.) and potentially altered the trajectory of future regulation.

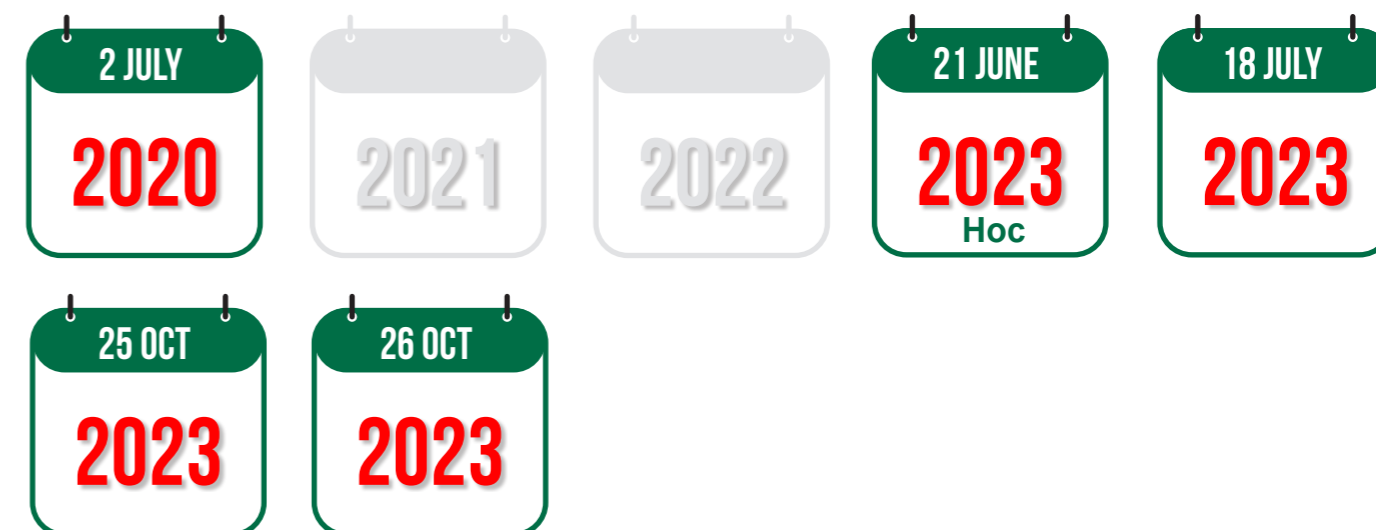
The first formal debate on UPF was in the House of Lords on 2 July 2020. It was introduced by Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (Natalie Bennett) a few days before the Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment published its report, 'Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food'. But it was almost three years until parliamentarians addressed the topic again in a structured manner, during a Westminster Hall debate on 21 June 2023. In the intervening period, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the risks of obesity into sharp focus and Henry Dimbleby published his National Food Strategy. None of this did much to catalyse interest in UPF.



Interest in UPF is now six time higher than HFSS

The turning point came in April 2023 when Dr Chris van Tulleken published his heavily promoted book, 'Ultra Processed People'. A BBC Panorama special followed, then months of media engagement. Professor Tim Spector also had a tilt at UPF in 'Food For Life', published in paperback earlier this year.

What followed was an explosion of content online, in the mainstream media and academic literature. The result? **Four specific debates on UPF between June and October last year**, peppered with references to van Tulleken's book.



Five key debates on UPF since December 2019

The shift in focus, from the abundance of salt, fat and sugar in modern diets to the way food is produced at scale, is stark. Whether it becomes a vehicle for new regulation should be the concern for brands.

ENGAGEMENT

Despite the media frenzy, political scrutiny of UPF has been greater in the Lords. MPs are relative latecomers to this debate.

Over the current Parliament, four of the five debates, and 72% of all mentions, occurred in the upper house. Even in 2023, when UPF really took off as a concept, there were twice as many mentions in the Lords.

That's because a small but committed group of Peers are engaged and informed. A fifth of mentions in the Lords are by a single member, Baroness Bennett. 51% are by five Peers.

Despite lower levels of overall engagement, MPs account for 40% of the relevant stakeholders – that's individual parliamentarians who've mentioned UPF in the period under review. It translates into 28% of mentions overall, but there was a 1,600% increase in interest between 2022 and '23 (albeit off a low base). UPF is certainly on their agenda now.

On a party basis, the data also shows that **Conservatives are more engaged than others**, accounting for 45% of all mentions. They have more sitting MPs and Peers, plus ministerial responsibility for responding to questions, but the Tories were still twice as active as Labour overall, which clocked-up 19% of mentions.

Figure 2.1

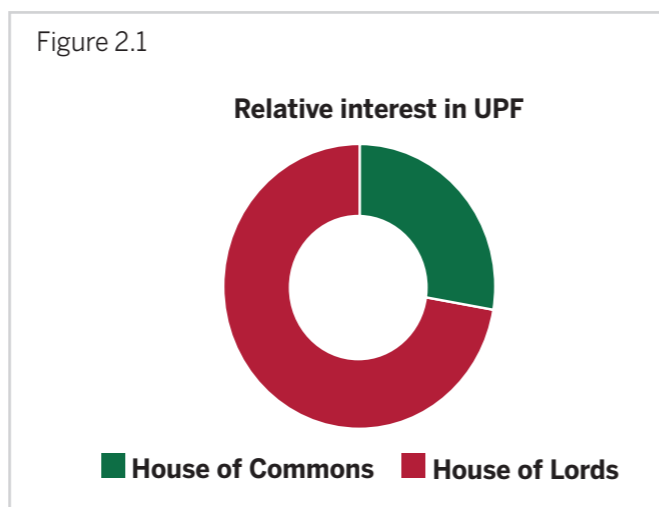
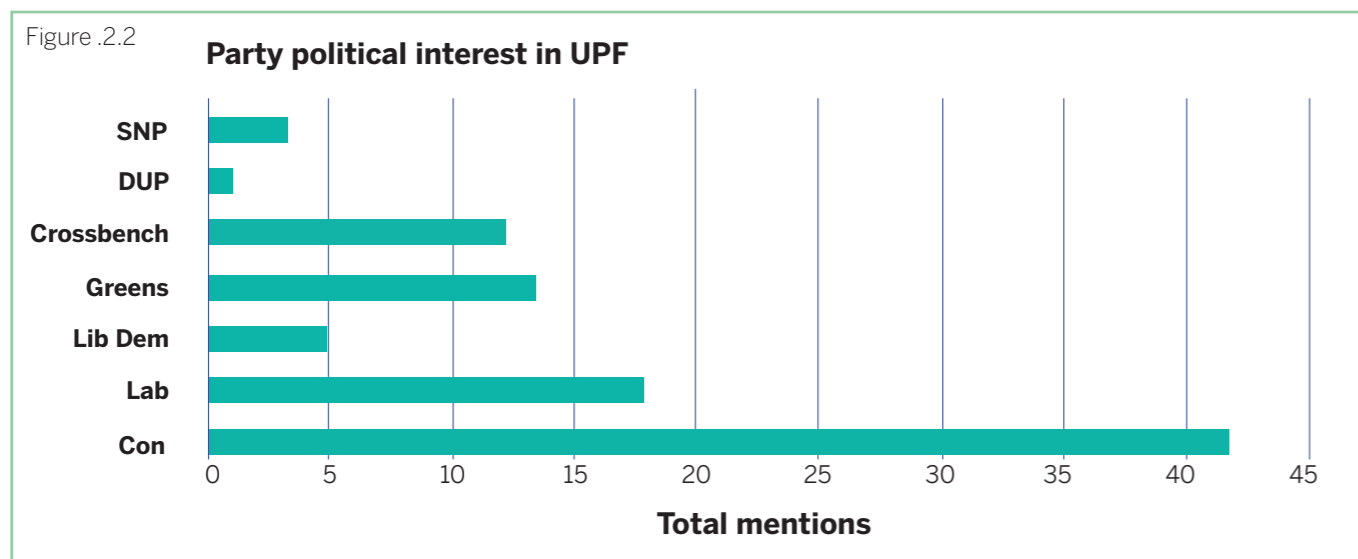


Figure .2.2



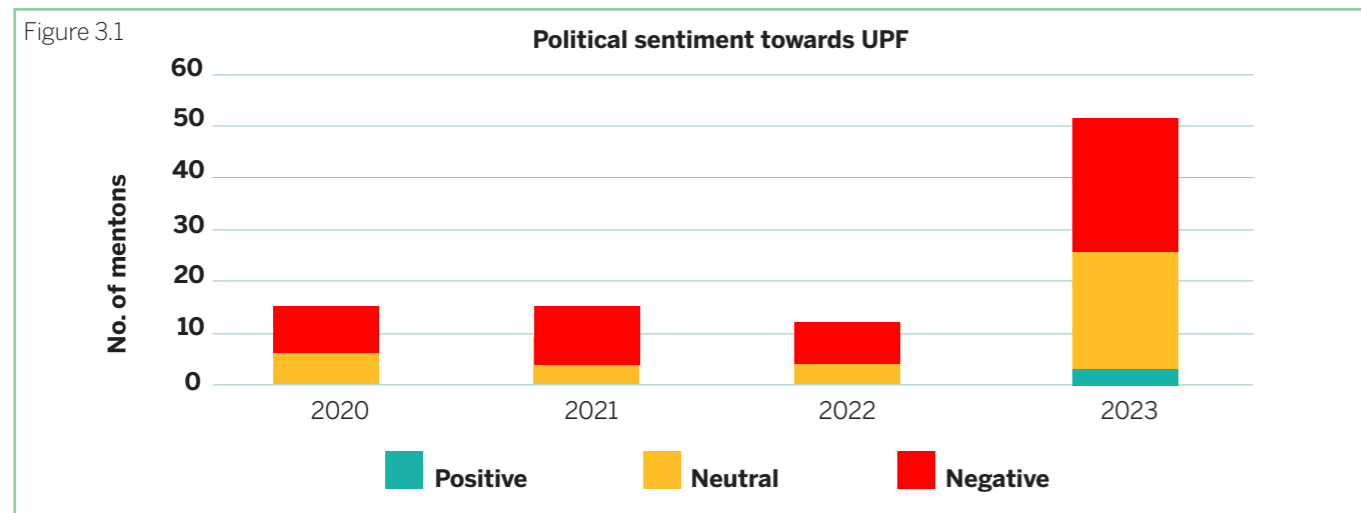
Conservatives are twice as active as their Labour counterparts

Despite Wes Streeting's threat to "steamroll" junk food firms, he's never mentioned UPF in Parliament. Not once, and he's been shadow health secretary since November 2021. What Labour has pledged to do, however, is restrict junk food advertising on television and ban paid-for advertising of less healthy foods on online media aimed at children. As UPF is considerably more engaging than HFSS, it seem likely that it'll become part of Labour's health rhetoric going forwards.



SENTIMENT

There's clearly a perception problem in parliament. Between 2020-'23, **56% of UPF mentions were negative in sentiment. Only 3% were positive.**

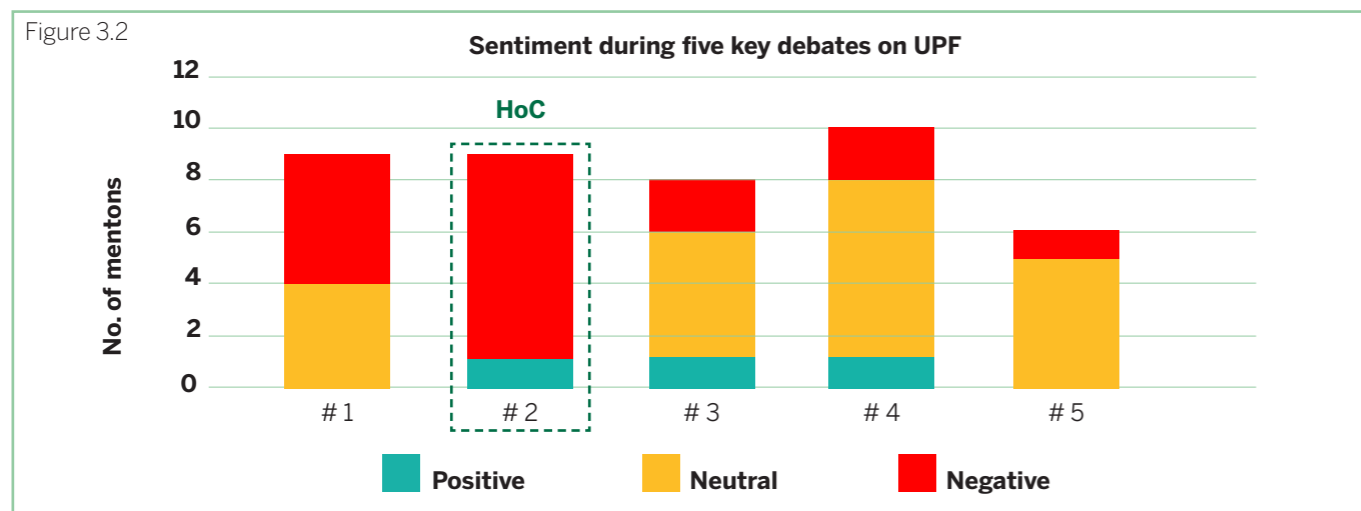


56% of political engagement is negative in sentiment

From the beginning, this has been a lopsided debate. There are virtually no references to the benefits of processing – safe, convenient, affordable food – and the problem is getting worse, quickly. Between 2022 and '23, negative mentions increased threefold.

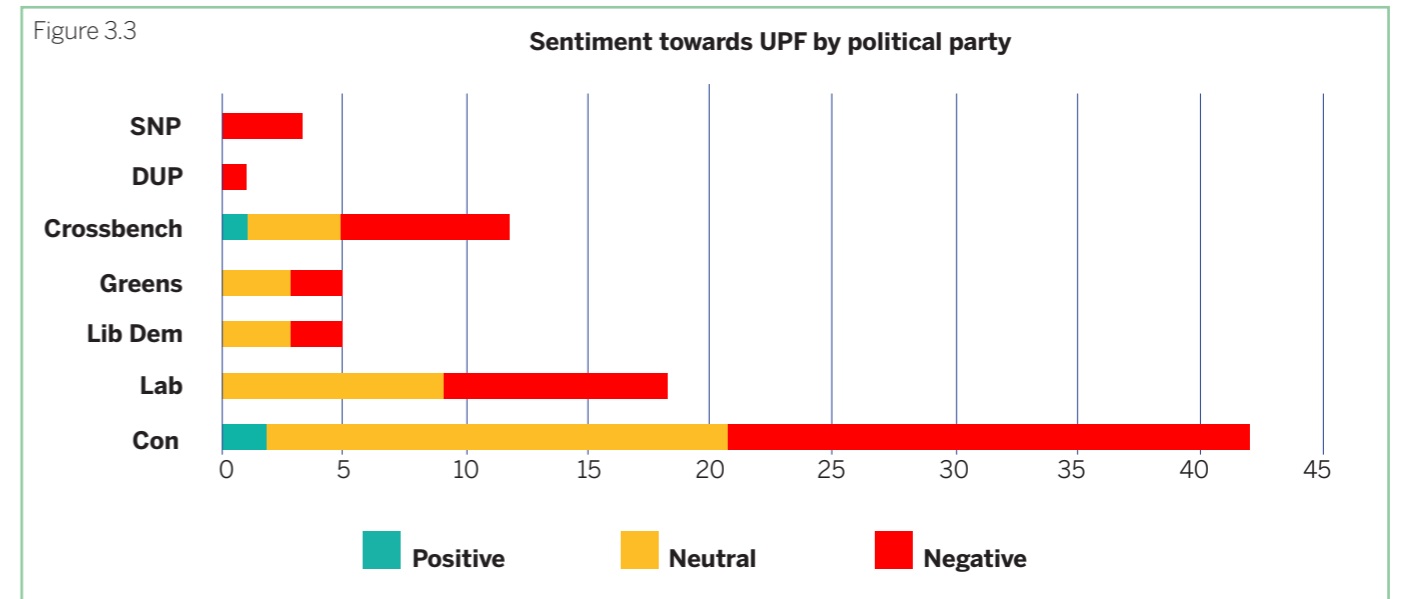
The problem is more acute in the Commons, where 81% of mentions are negative in sentiment vs. 15% neutral. In the Lords, by comparison, 46% of mentions were negative and 51% neutral.

In the upper house, the proportion of neutral mentions actually increase as a percentage of total engagement during the key debates on UPF, in July 2020 and July and October 2023. There's space for reasonable discussion in the Lords (as is traditional), and the main detractors are a vocal minority of Green and Crossbench peers. The opposite is true in the Commons. During a Westminster Hall debate on UPF in June '23, 89% of mentions were negative.



Sentiment towards UPF is overwhelmingly negative in the House of Commons

On a party-by-party basis, **50% of mentions by Labour and Tory parliamentarians are negative in sentiment**, albeit off different volumes. 50% and 45% are neutral, respectively. Conservatives are more engaged in the debate, contributing twice as often as their Labour counterparts, but they're in broad agreement that UPF is bad.



Conservatives are more than twice as engaged as Labour on the topic of UPF

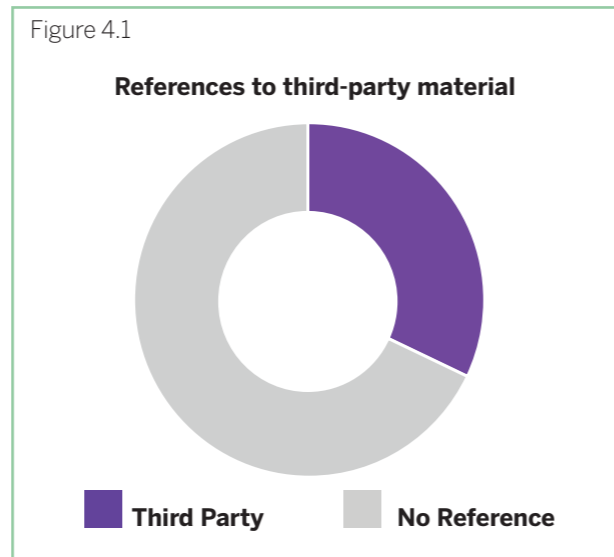
The consensus is starting to settle, but industry arguments aren't part of the narrative.

INFLUENCE

During our analysis, we recorded references to third-party briefing material in parliamentary mentions – stats, reports, etc. – and used them to determine sources of influence and overall impact on sentiment.

There are four notable trends:

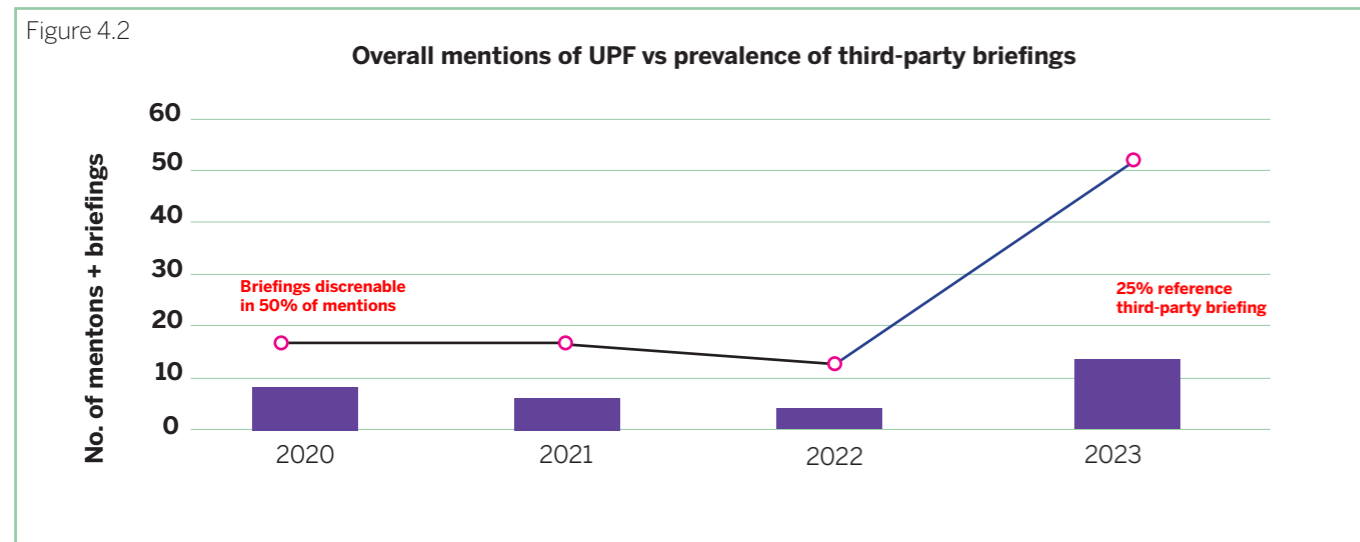
1. There's a scramble to be heard, with a third of all mentions overtly referencing third-party material, and a correlation between briefing activity and overall levels of interest.



A third of all mentions are influenced by third-parties

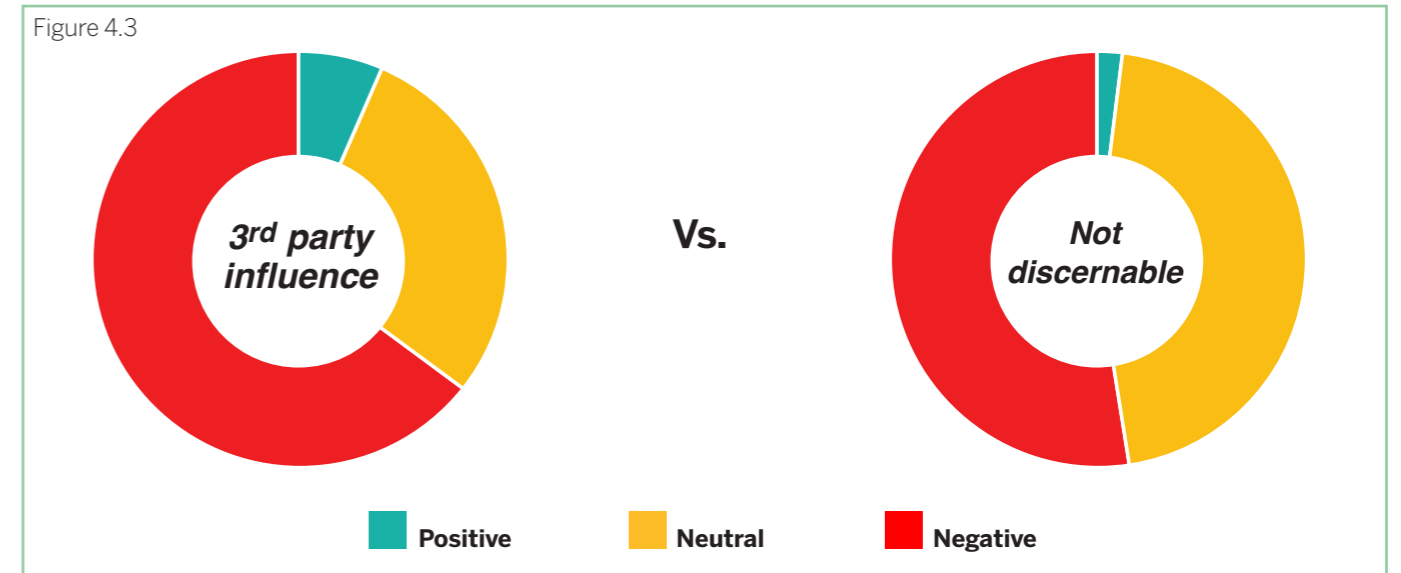
2. However, the gap between political engagement and third-party influence is widening.

Research that tethers political debate to facts and data is starting to fray. Between 2020-'22, for example, c.50% of all mentions referenced third-party research. By 2023, that had fallen to 25%.



A quarter of mentions referenced third-party material in 2023

3. Briefing has a discernible impact on sentiment towards UPF. 65% of mentions that reference third-party materials were negative in sentiment, vs. 52% that don't. Campaigners are skewing perceptions of UPF in a measurable way.



Third-parties negativly influence sentiment

4. And there's no discernible push-back from the sector. The FDF is quoted once in the entire data set. No other industry association or sector research is mentioned in four years of debate.

The food and drink industry is missing in action.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR BRANDS

Interest

There's no sense of jeopardy with HFSS. As an acronym for inspiring and aiding debate, it's a dud. But there's something faintly malevolent about the term "ultra-processed". As Adam Leyland, Editor of The Grocer said, "It's the difference between having too much of a good thing and having something that is unknown and insidious." It explains why parliamentary interest in UPF is now six times higher than HFSS, as figure 1.1 on page 3 shows.

Brands should leverage growing interest and treat it as an opportunity to educate political stakeholders. There are merits to food processing, but knowledge in parliament is patchy and it feeds the negativity we detect in both chambers. In the Lords, there's sufficient neutral sentiment for open, informed debate. The job is much harder in the Commons, where 81% of mentions are negative, rising to 89% during specific debates on UPF. But to correct misconceptions and re-balance the narrative, education needs to be a key focus for brands.

Engagement

Nothing will change if nothing changes. Our data reveals the impact of third-party briefings on sentiment, but there's limited push-back from brands and trade bodies. This has become a totally lopsided debate as a result.

Sentiment is deteriorating quickly - between 2022 and 2023, negative mentions in parliament increased threefold. Only 3% of mentions since December 2019 are positive.

Left unchecked, and UPF could become a narrative vehicle for a new regulation approach, or a catalyst to push through harsher, tobacco-style restrictions on HFSS products.

Influence

The industry needs to supply the proof points for robust intervention. They won't materialise organically. That means funding, engagement, and creative solutions to misconceptions of UPF.

Dr Chris van Tulleken – a one-man army – has trodden all over the food and drink industry and undermined confidence in the very idea of modern production methods. Where's the counter-campaign?!

The sector is now 13 months behind its detractors. It can't afford to wait any longer.

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ABOUT SPQR

SPQR is an independent agency that changes perceptions for its clients in creative and measurable ways.

We leverage the full spectrum of Marketing, Brand, PR & Media to reach and influence audiences at scale, in any market.

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