Digital Discourse On Processed Foods: Insights From Consumer & Key Opinion Leader Commentary ↘

International Food Information Council

2026

Abstract

This analysis explores the digital discourse surrounding processed and ultraprocessed foods (UPFs) in the United States, examining more than 135,000 social media posts from January 2024 to May 2025. A mixed-methods approach was employed to investigate how different audience groups—especially millennial parents, credentialed experts, and other key opinion leaders (KOLs)—engage with these topics online. The findings offer insights into prevailing themes, sentiment trajectories, and implications for food, nutrition, and health communication strategies.

Introduction

The public conversation around processed and ultraprocessed foods has increased significantly in recent years, driven by rising interest in food, nutrition and health-related topics and growing concern over food ingredients.[1] The new [2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), released January 7, 2026, bring processed foods further into the spotlight via their recommendations to limit "highly processed foods" in favor of "real foods."[2]

Many online discussions remain emotionally polarized and often lack the nuance found in evidence-based messaging and guidance. Clarifying how consumers, credentialed experts, and other key opinion leaders understand and address issues related to processed food is essential for improving communication strategies and promoting healthy dietary behaviors.

As part of a multi-phase research initiative, the International Food Information Council (IFIC) sought to understand the dialogue around how processed foods intersect with overall diet quality and health via a robust digital and social listening analysis. The analysis, conducted in June 2025, will be used along with other quantitative and qualitative research to help inform effective communication strategies and tools to empower consumers to achieve improved diet quality.

Objectives & Methods

The study conducted a content analysis of approximately 135,000 social media posts across platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter (X), YouTube, and LinkedIn. The analysis included posts from consumers and a subset of KOLs actively engaged and with significant reach in the processed foods dialogue including academics, journalists, health professionals, wellness influencers, and health organizations. Artificial intelligence (AI) was used to collect and analyze large volumes of public posts, first identifying relevant keywords and communities, then extracting patterns through topic and sentiment analysis. The analysis sought to explore:

1 Who is most likely to be developing and sharing content on processed foods?

2 What are the similarities and differences in beliefs, trust, and sentiment across audiences?

3 What feelings and need states are they expressing that are informing their food decisions overall?

4 Where are there opportunities to bridge potential gaps in understanding?

5 How can these insights be translated into effective communication strategies?

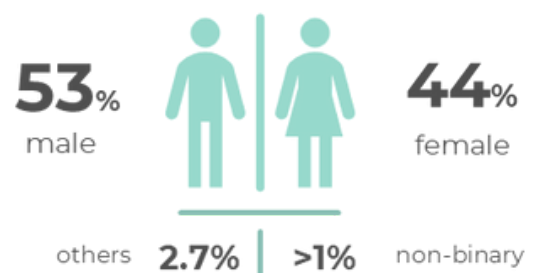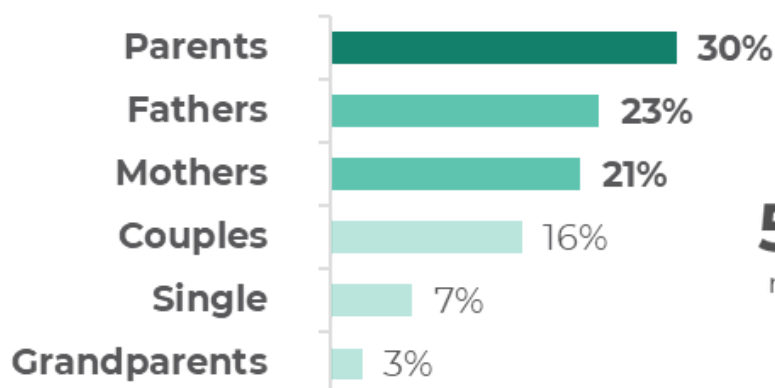| SOCIAL PLATFORMS ANALYZED	
X	**Twitter/X**
Instagram	**Instagram**
YouTube	**YouTube**
reddit	**Reddit**
Mastodon	**Mastodon**
Blue Sky	**Blue Sky**
TikTok	**TikTok**
LinkedIn	**LinkedIn**
Facebook	**Facebook**

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Key Findings

↘ Audience

The most active participants in processed food discussions were millennial parents, a group especially concerned with children's nutrition and the convenience of healthier alternatives. Parents were 74% of the consumer community, with nearly 60% classified as millennials (born between 1980 – 1995).

In contrast, key opinion leaders were more likely to scrutinize the broader food environment and raise concerns around potential long-term health implications of consuming ultraprocessed foods. They were more likely to reference scientific studies or regulatory frameworks.

Parents are 74% of the consumer community, with nearly 60% classified as millennials ★

Boomers 2%
Gen X 13%
Gen Z 26%
Millennials 59%

Parents	30%
Fathers	23%
Mothers	21%
Couples	16%
Single	7%
Grandparents	3%

53% male

44% female

others **2.7%** | **>1%** non-binary
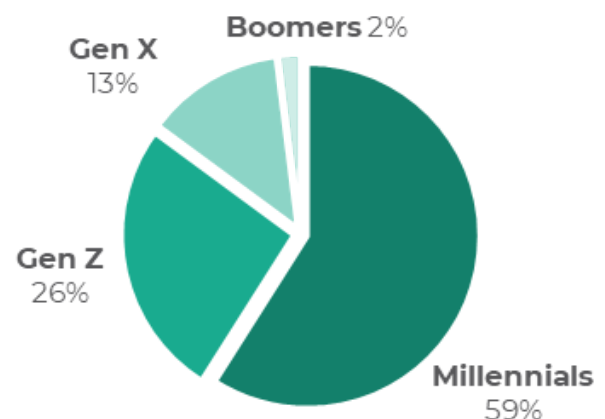
Key Findings

↘ Common Themes

Consumers tend to use processed foods as a proxy for broader, less technical terms like "fast food", "processed food", "junk food", "fake" and "artificial", although the term "ultra-processed" has become part of the conversation. Of note, "highly processed", the term used in the 2025-2030 DGAs, was not among the top 20 terms at the time of the analysis. Both consumers and KOLs expressed concern about additives, particularly added sugars, low- and no-calorie sweeteners, seed oils, and unpronounceable or "synthetic" ingredients.

A shared interest was observed in "clean label" products and ingredient substitutions, suggesting that consumers seek out "improved" processed food choices rather than eliminate them entirely. Convenience remains a priority and reality, especially for millennial parents, who seek and often recommend"better-for-you" processed foods like lower-sugar cereals, "cleaner-label" snacks, or "additive-free" processed meats, that they perceive to be healthier.

Top 20 Keywords
Associated With Conversations About Processed & Ultraprocessed Foods In The USA

1.	Fast Food	11.	Saturated Fat
2.	Processed Food	12.	Artificial Food
3.	Added Sugar	13.	Industrial Food
4.	Junk Food	14.	Overly Sweet
5.	Sweetener	15.	Artificial Coloring
6.	Ultraprocessed Food	16.	Synthetic Food
7.	Sugary	17.	Refined Grains
8.	Seed Oil	18.	Refined Oil
9.	Food Dye	19.	Food Additives
10.	Fake Food	20.	Emulsifier

Key Findings

↘ Divergent Communication Styles

While consumers, credentialed experts, and other key opinion leaders alike are talking about processed foods, the conversation is framed in distinctly different ways.

Consumers typically lead with emotions and values as well as communicate in a personal and anecdotal manner, often using platforms like TikTok to share tensions within making healthy choices in addition to relatable food- or ingredient-swap tips. They want processed alternatives that meet their desire for minimal and "better-for-you" ingredients, yet often express challenges and are not always confident in their choices. They tend to focus on removing unfamiliar ingredients and replacing them with simpler, seemingly "natural" options.

Key opinion leader content diverged in tone, with them adopting a more analytical approach, focused on chronic disease prevention, systemic food policy, and health education. **Credentialed health professionals** (e.g., Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) Medical Doctors (MDs), health associations, and professional societies are often trying to set the record straight, sharing well-intentioned yet complex scientific messaging. Their content on processed foods tends to focus on areas of widespread agreement like the importance of overall healthy eating habits versus focusing on any one food or ingredient, and eating all forms (fresh, frozen, canned, and dried) of fruits and vegetables.

A growing subset of **wellness influencers** (some of whom are also credentialed) adopt a critical and fear-based tone, focusing on what they deem as broader food systems issues particularly regarding seed oils, added sugars, and artificial ingredients.

Key Findings

⬂ Content Clusters

Processed food discussions were categorized into five primary clusters: **health concerns** (36%), **indulgence and sensory appeal** (34%), **alternative choices** (16%), **affordability** (8%), and **convenience** (6%). Posts reveal the complexity of the dialogue, and the desire to balance health aspirations with convenience, emotional motivators, and food affordability.
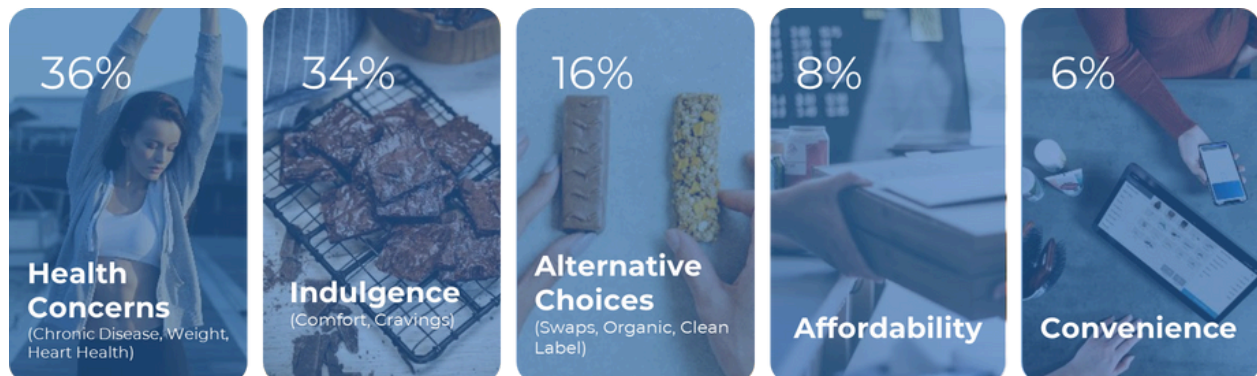
1. Health-related posts frequently link UPFs to chronic and health concerns, particularly in children. The top three keywords–cancer (5.3%), obesity (4.1%), and diabetes (1.8%)–reveal public concern about possible long-term effects associated with processed food consumption.
2. Posts about indulgence were driven by sensory gratification, associating processed foods with keywords including sweet (12%), delicious (3%), and tasty (1.4%). These discussions reflect comfort and joy that consumers associate with moments of treat or escape, which are not always aligned with health goals yet are still viewed as an important part of a balanced, long-term eating approach.

Key Findings

⬎ Content Clusters

3. Alternative choices content emphasized the desire for substitution over elimination. The use of terms like healthier (15.5%), alternatives (11.1%), swap (3.1%) ,and substitute (2.6%) reveals today's consumer mindset – not necessarily cutting out processed foods entirely but rather replacing them with "better/cleaner" options.

4. When it comes to affordability conversations, inflationary pressures have made consumers increasingly conscious of food costs. Terms such as cheap (2.3%), discount (0.4%), low cost (0.1%), and stock up (0.1%) reflect interest in practical strategies to maximize value. The frequent appearance of terms like essential (1.3%) and staple (0.4%) indicates that many consumers consider processed foods to be part of their routines.

5. Conversations about convenience are largely shaped by broad terms like convenient (7.6%) and packaged (0.8%). However, more in-depth analysis reveals key differences across audiences: consumers prioritize practical aspects such as ease of preparation and storage; professionals take a functional and nutritional approach, emphasizing portion control and lifestyle benefits like portability and efficiency.

Key Findings

↘ Sentiment & Trajectory

Sentiment analysis revealed a rise in negativity toward ultraprocessed foods, particularly since 2022. While general discussions of processed foods remained comparatively stable in tone, commentary specifically mentioning ultraprocessed foods became increasingly critical, often using emotionally charged and accusatory language. Still, for context, overall ultraprocessed foods posts remain relatively low, especially when compared to the more immediate topics such food prices.

Processed food sentiment
in the U.S. (general topic)

Ultra-processed food sentiment
in the U.S. (UPF-specific terms)
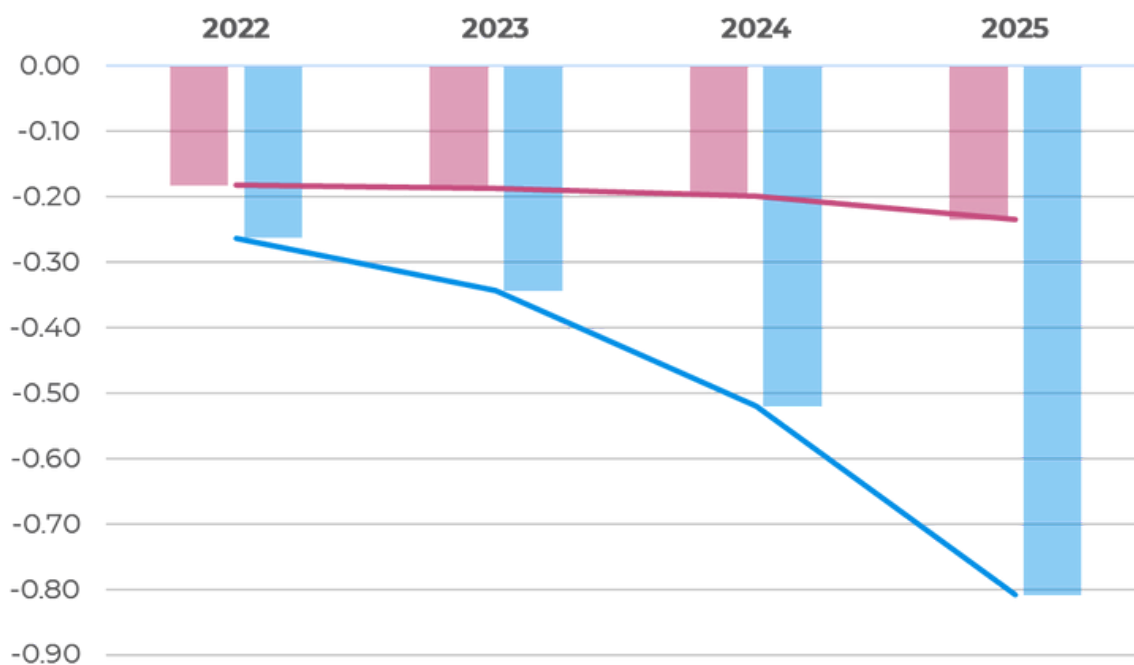
Ultra-processed foods current sentiment is
nearly **4x more negative** than in 2022

Implications

While negative sentiment toward the term ultraprocessed foods is increasing, Americans rely on them as dietary staples. It's estimated that ultraprocessed foods make up more than 50% of typical American diets,[3] representing a wide variety of foods. As the topic becomes more polarized among an increasingly wide range of influential voices, conflicting messages may add to consumer confusion and reduced engagement with evidence-based communication. In addition, consumers may not shift dietary choices and behaviors toward long-lasting habits for improved diet quality. These findings suggest several strategic considerations for improving food, nutrition and health communications regarding processed foods and diet quality:

↘ Communication Recommendations

- Anchor recommendations in consumer-friendly, **values-based language** for connectivity and then bridge to evidence-based concepts for improved understanding.
- Emphasize **incremental improvement** over elimination. Consumers are seeking practical swaps and "better-for-you" options, not rigid avoidance of processed foods. Communications should reflect realistic pathways to pair existing food choices with underconsumed food groups (i.e. fruits, vegetables, dairy, and whole grains) for improved diet quality.
- Include information on food and ingredient **transparency**, meeting consumers' desire for both facts and practical actions.[4]
- **Balance** health with taste, convenience, and affordability, considering various need states, cultural preferences, and economic status. Communication should integrate enjoyment and practicality to support sustainable behavior change and habits over time, not just aspirational dietary goals.

Conclusion

The growing and increasingly negative discourse surrounding processed and ultraprocessed foods highlights the need for more nuanced and accessible public health messaging that balances consumer desires for health, convenience, enjoyment, and affordability. While both consumers and key opinion leaders are communicating about processed foods, differing communication styles may hinder effective dialogue. Polarization and emotionally charged narratives present challenges. Still, this analysis demonstrates an opportunity to deliver evidence-based, accessible, and actionable communication to support incremental improvements in diet quality.

References

[1] International Food Information Council. 2025 Food & Health Survey. January 13, 2026.

[2] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2026). Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030. DietaryGuidelines.gov.

[3] Williams AM, Couch CA, Emmerich SE, Ogburn DF. Ultra-processed food consumption among youth and adults: United States, August 2021–August 2023. NCHS Data Brief. 2025 Aug; (536)1–11. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/ 10.15620/cdc/174612.

[4] International Food Information Council. 2024 IFIC Spotlight Survey: Americans' Trust in Food & Nutrition Science. October 2024.

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