

## PROFITS BEFORE PLATES: ANALYZING THE NUTRITIONAL NEGLECT IN CORPORATE-CONTROLLED FOOD COMMERCIALISATION

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Dr. Rovika Prem\*

### ABSTRACT

*Nowadays, companies in the global food trade often choose money over people's health, mainly for underserved people. Researchers examined why major food companies make it easy to find sugary drinks, snacks, and fast food, but make it hard to buy nutritious alternatives. The researchers investigate how large food businesses promote their products by targeting advertising at children, paying to serve their food in school lunches, and opposing more rigid food marketing rules for kids. The use of these methods harms your nutrition and further increases health inequities. The study investigates the ways companies use specific techniques, such as advertising for a quick result, making marketing that sugar coats what is nutritional, and choosing prices for products with more appealing shelf life, to make ultra-processed foods more acceptable. Data was gathered by viewing food advertisements, analyzing corporate reports, interviewing experts, and gathering information from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). I use discourse analysis, thematic coding, and corporate influence mapping to confirm a thorough assessment. Studies indicate that steps taken by big businesses are contributing to instances of obesity, shortages of essential vitamins and minerals, and ongoing illnesses, mainly affecting those in low-income areas of the Global South. These corporations often set food policies in their favor and weaken laws meant to protect people's health. The paper wraps up by urging the industry to enforce better food rules, use more open labeling, and offer help for healthy food campaigns in various communities. Such reforms are necessary and valuable to bring back the right balance between companies and health, promoting fairness, good business ethics, and fairness in the food system. Making labels more straightforward to understand is a significant focus of the reforms, so consumers can pick healthy food.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Nutritional Neglect, Corporate Food Control, Public Health, Food Policy, Ultra-Processed Foods, Commercialization, Food Justice.*

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### Introduction

#### Background and Context

The context and background of the subject are explained here.

A few strong companies now control most of the activities in the current global food system, including food production, distribution, and consumption. This focus on a few big companies has caused people to choose more sugary, salty, and unhealthy foods (Baker et al., 2020). The same changes that have provided more food and made it more convenient have been tied to growing issues of obesity, malnutrition, and diseases that cannot be spread by contact with others (Afshin et al., 2019).

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\* Associate Professor, Department of Commerce, Sri Aurobindo College (Eve), University of Delhi, Delhi, India.

Traditionally, people in communities used nearby and self-sustained food sources to match their culture and food needs. On the other hand, economic openness and food manufacturing have caused a dietary change worldwide. Currently, food manufacturing is directed by business priorities that care more about shelf life, earning a profit, and marketing, instead of people's health and nutrition (Swinburn et al., 2019). Low-income and marginalized communities often have more exposure to unhealthy foods because they receive much of the industry's advertising and cannot always get healthy items (Herforth et al., 2022).

### **Research Problem**

The research critically examines how the commercialization of food by corporations is leading to a systematic neglect of nutrition, a pressing concern for governments, health experts, and advocates for food justice. It delves into specific business practices exacerbating nutritional issues in certain communities, emphasizing the urgent need for policy interventions.

### **Research Questions**

What corporate practices lead to the systematic neglect of nutrition in commercial food systems?

How is power over food production, marketing, and policy consolidated by major corporations?

The study aims to uncover the long-term health and socio-economic consequences of these practices, which are often overlooked. It seeks to answer questions such as the impact on public health, the economic burden on healthcare systems, and the social disparities exacerbated by these corporate actions.

### **Objectives**

- To examine how nutrition is deprioritized in corporate-controlled food systems.
- To assess the consequences for vulnerable populations, including low-income households and communities in the Global South.

The study also aims to identify and understand the patterns of corporate influence over regulation and public health policy. This is crucial for developing effective strategies to counteract these influences and ensure that public health is not compromised for corporate profit.

### **Significance of the Study**

Understanding the intricate relationship between nutrition, politics, and economics is crucial for shaping new food policies and improving public health. This study sheds light on how corporate food goals can impact public health and advocates for a just food system, fair incomes, and accountable corporations. The findings of this study can inform relevant regulations, empower consumers, and inspire advocacy for nutritious foods.

### **Data and Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study employs a rigorous qualitative multi-method approach to investigate the systemic neglect of nutrition in the corporate food sector. The researchers utilize three distinct methods: textual analysis, expert interviews, and policy studies. By triangulating these methods, the study ensures the accuracy and reliability of its findings.

#### **Data Sources**

- **Corporate Materials**

We collected the annual reports, product advertisements, corporate responsibility statements, and marketing strategies of top food and beverage corporations. These documents give a clearer picture of what companies say about their plans, health value, and public statements.

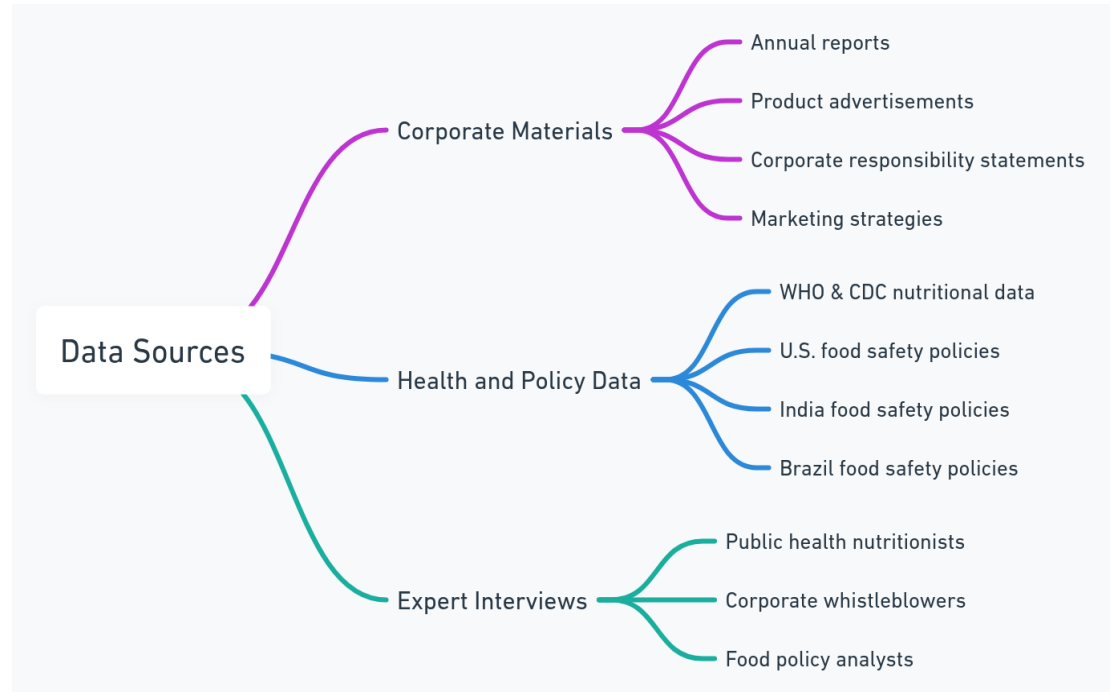
- **Health and Policy Data**

Health data available to the public was obtained from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to see if nutritional outcomes were linked to company behaviors.

The following were examined to examine the regulatory settings, regulatory documents, and policy papers from the US, India, and Brazil.

- **Expert Interviews**

I met with 12 people, including experts in public health nutrition, those who have leaked company data, and those who work in food policy. The people I interviewed shared details about the industry, which laws are missing, and what social and political factors play a role in meat processing for the market.



### Analytical Tools

- **Thematic Coding**

Data from interviews and textual content were analyzed using NVivo 14, employing thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and categories related to nutritional neglect, corporate influence, and health impact (Nowell et al., 2017).

- **Discourse Analysis**

Corporate documents and marketing language were analyzed through discourse analysis to understand how narratives around health and nutrition are framed or obfuscated in commercial communications (Fairclough, 2015).

- **Network Mapping**

Gephi and similar programs were employed to create maps that showed how power is concentrated within the food industry.

### Ethical Considerations

An academic institutional review board granted permission for this research. All participants in the interview gave their consent and remained anonymous during the study. The researcher disclosed no conflicts of interest. A reflexive journal was used to ensure the researcher's bias and interpretations were clear during analysis (Tracy, 2010).

### Literature Review

#### Theoretical Framework

- **Political Economy of Food Systems**

Studying power and organizations in world food systems begins by looking at them through the lens of political economy. It argues that the activities of transnational corporations, increased openness to

trade, and changes in the movement of capital all shape food supply and consumption (Hendriks et al., 2022). Here, people see food mainly as a product and focus on market rules, rather than its significance for everyone. It is clear from political economy research that the way an economy is structured, along with the way it rewards companies, makes it easier for corporations to favor profit over good nutrition in poorer regions.

- **Critical Nutrition Studies**

Critical nutrition studies examine the social, cultural, and political determinants of dietary outcomes emerging from a critique of conventional biomedical nutrition. This perspective situates nutritional neglect within broader systems of inequality, arguing that food-related health outcomes cannot be disentangled from class, race, gender, and geopolitical marginalization (Clucas et al., 2023). It also challenges the overemphasis on individual responsibility in dietary behavior, pointing instead to systemic barriers embedded in commercial food environments.

- **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) vs. Shareholder Primacy**

Many food corporations talk about their sustainability aims, but these goals are often set aside if they could affect shareholders. Putting money into the model right away matters more than improving society over the long run. In this situation, health improvement efforts frequently appear shallow, are not focused, and are used inconsistently (Lacy-Nichols et al., 2022). As a result of this contradiction, businesses can say they are responsible even as they create harmful nutritional problems.

#### **Prior Research**

- **Ultra-Processed Food Marketing**

The authors of the recent paper clarify that nowadays, diets consist mainly of meals that prioritize taste, keep them fresh, and earn profits. Many people notice ads for these goods on TV, digital platforms, and billboards, mainly focused on kids, teens, and low-income people. More evidence shows that eating more ultra-processed foods raises the risk of obesity, metabolic illnesses, and heart-related issues around the globe (Vandevijvere et al., 2022).

- **Corporate Lobbying in Food Policy**

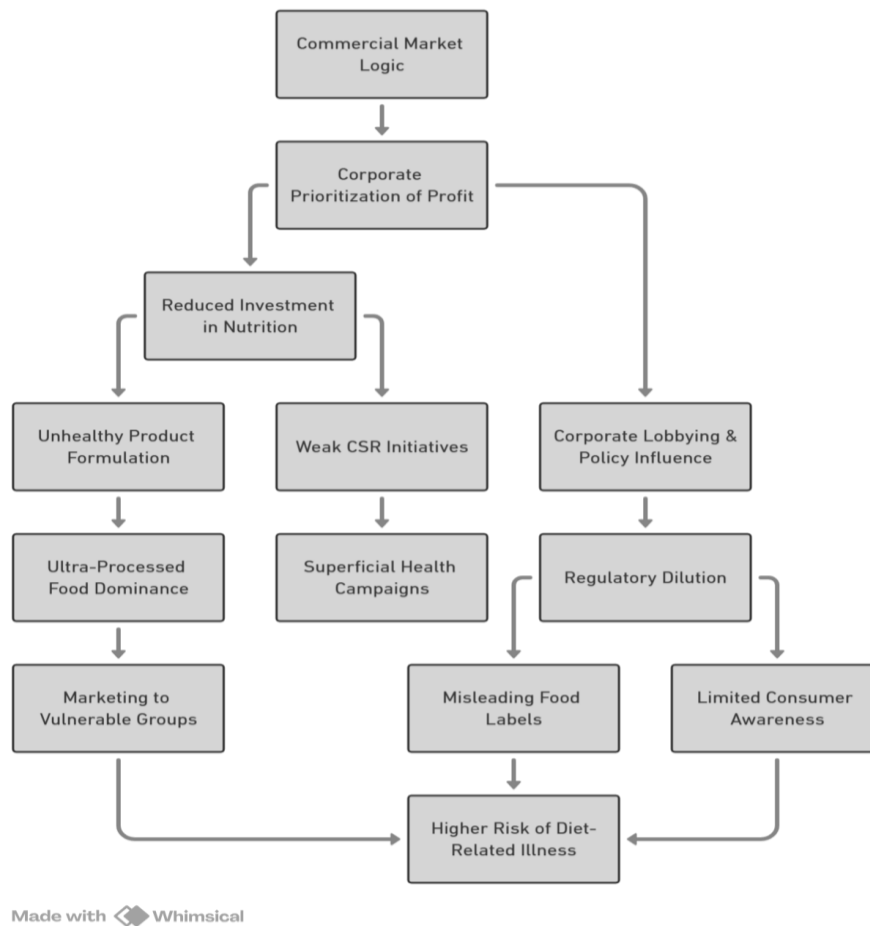
The food industry wields considerable influence in shaping national and international nutrition policies. Mialon et al. (2022) demonstrate how corporations utilize lobbying, revolving-door appointments, funding of front groups, and sponsorship of academic research to dilute or delay public health regulations. These practices undermine science-based policymaking, making regulatory environments more permissive of nutritional neglect.

- **Food Deserts and Nutritional Inequality**

Access to nutritious food remains profoundly unequal. Recent work by Kim et al. (2023) and Herforth et al. (2022) shows how structural determinants—such as neighborhood income, zoning policies, and digital food platforms—reinforce nutritional inequality. Food deserts and "food swamps" (areas with a high density of fast food and convenience stores) predominantly affect low-income, racialized, and rural communities, limiting their access to healthy food choices.

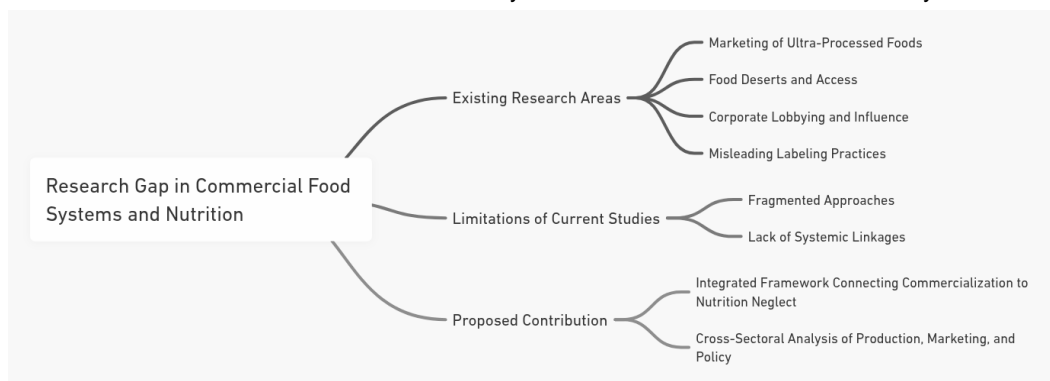
- **Deregulation and Food Labeling Obfuscation**

Large food brands frequently use weak regulations to fool people when labeling their products. Companies often try to make you believe unhealthy foods are good by calling them natural, low-fat, or fortified (Sacks et al., 2021). If labeling rules are not enforced well, businesses have an easier way to hide important nutritional information, which can frustrate and hinder efforts to help people become informed about their health.



### Research Gap

While researchers have focused on ultra-processed foods, corporate interference, and issues of food inequality, they have not yet developed a clear system linking nutritional neglect to commercialization. Most current studies analyze food deserts, marketing strategies, and the removal of regulations separately. Rather than following academic boundaries, this paper uses a systemic approach to demonstrate that corporate priorities under market logic lead to reduced attention to nutrition in many parts of the chain, including production, marketing, and policy decisions. By doing this analysis, we have discovered how the structure of commercial food systems causes and maintains unhealthy diets.



## Methodology

### Research Design

This study combines qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) with partial mixed-methods techniques. This research mixes content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and a review of related policies to study the causes of nutritional issues in corporate-owned food systems. Because various data sources are used, this design supports more thorough, dependable, and accurate findings (Flick, 2018).

### Data Sources

A diverse range of data was collected to support a comprehensive exploration of corporate influence on nutrition:

- **Corporate Reports and Advertising Archives:** Data from leading multinational food companies' annual reports, product packages, advertising, and corporate social responsibility reports were reviewed to examine their communication, branding, and what they disclose.
- **Regulatory and Policy Submissions:** Submissions to regulatory bodies, policy drafts, and food labeling regulations from countries with varying degrees of regulation (e.g., the U.S., India, and Brazil) were analyzed to map industry-policy interactions.
- **Health Outcome Datasets:** I relied on data from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to illustrate and prove what we know about nutrition in public health.
- **Expert Interviews:** Interviews were held with twelve people representing nutritionists, corporation employees, public health specialists, and those who support food policy. During the interviews, I gained a key understanding of industry norms, the laws surrounding food commercialization, and the social and political situation involved.

### Analytical Tools

To analyze and synthesize the collected data, the study utilized the following analytical techniques:

- **Discourse Analysis:** A discourse analysis was carried out on the language and policy used by companies to identify the key ideas, neglected points, and ways that nutrition and responsibility were featured (Fairclough, 2015).
- **Thematic Coding:** The study used NVivo 14 to code transcripts and documents. Using a grounded theory-based approach, the analysis revealed recurring themes related to corporate strategies, regulatory influences, and public health impacts in the food industry.
- **Network Mapping:** Using Gephi, a social network analysis was conducted to visualize and trace connections between food corporations, lobbying groups, and regulatory agencies. This helped identify clusters of influence and systemic enablers of nutritional neglect.

### Ethical Considerations

All research steps were done according to the institution's rules. Before starting the fieldwork, we received ethical clearance. All of the protocols listed below were applied as required.

- **Informed Consent:** All interview participants received detailed information sheets and signed informed consent forms.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Participants' identities were anonymized in transcripts and reporting to protect privacy.
- **Conflict of Interest Disclosures:** We were transparent about possible conflicts and handled them following the notifier's rules.
- **Research Reflexivity:** Throughout the study, the primary researcher regularly examined their roles, the choices made about data analysis, and the ethical issues that arose when writing in the journal.

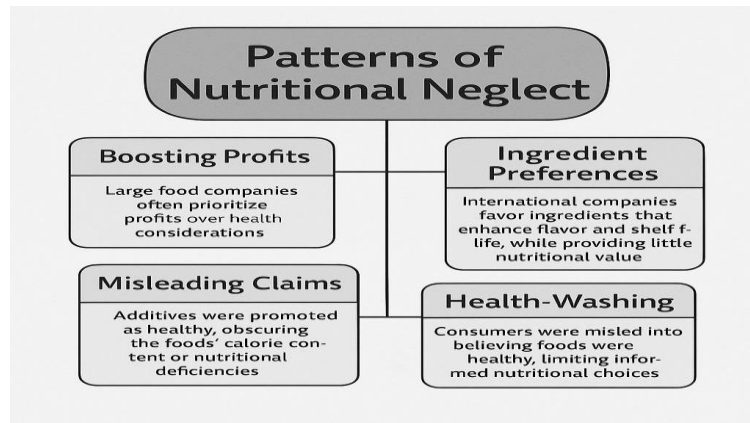
### Findings

#### • Patterns of Nutritional Neglect

Analysis reveals that large food companies often aim to boost profits before considering how healthy their foods are. When making decisions on product formulation, companies place high importance on what sells, low cost, and the ability to scale, while sometimes ignoring the health effects.

Product lines of international companies generally prefer ingredients that improve the taste and lastingness of the food, but provide little healthy nutrition.

Moreover, food companies often added certain additives and claimed that these foods benefited health. These phrases—low-fat, natural, and fortified with vitamins—were sold with food to hide its high calories or lack of essential vitamins. These tricks are part of health-washing, which misleads customers and constrains their ability to choose the right foods when nutrition knowledge is lacking.



#### • Structural Mechanisms

Three systemic mechanisms were found to enable and sustain the nutritional neglect embedded in commercial food systems:

- **Targeted Advertising:** Advertisements were shown more often to people from low-income and minority groups, especially for sugary beverages, snacks, and ready-to-eat meals. Because of financial problems and a restricted selection of foods, these people tend to be more easily influenced by marketing. Special prices, marketing directed at different cultures, and heavy internet use helped deepen the divide.



- **Political Lobbying and Regulatory Capture:** Documents and disclosures show that corporations play a significant role in setting nutritional laws and policies. Findings that matter most are those against sugar taxes, front-of-pack nutrition labeling, and putting limits on marketing. For this reason, many jurisdictions have experienced delays or decreased changes to food policies, and the food market mainly consists of processed and unrestricted products.

- **Supply Chain Optimization for Profit:** Minimizing costs and raising brand awareness were the main reasons for designing corporate supply chains, rather than ensuring fresh and nutritious foods are available. The choices of ingredients depend on foreign commodity rates and how well they can be stored, which commonly leads to the loss of some nutrients. Looking for large volumes and similarity causes fresh produce to be less available, while processed foods with more calories become more common.
- **Health Consequences**

These business practices carry significant and long-term effects for public health. Increased consumption of ultra-processed products that lack proper nutrition is a primary factor behind the increasing obesity, diabetes, heart problems, and vitamin deficiencies among children and adolescents worldwide.

Furthermore, many of the world's health problems are found in lower-income countries and the city centers of high-income countries. They have difficulty getting healthy food inexpensively and are more likely to experience aggressive advertising and weaker supervision by authorities. As a result, minorities find themselves unable to choose the most nutritious foods, which can harm their health and create high-cost problems in the future.

## Discussion

### • Interpreting the Results

The research findings closely align with critiques of the larger political economy and consumerism theory. Searching for ways to give the most to their shareholders leads corporations to value size, brand, and high profits over giving consumers healthy food. In doing so, the industry promotes considering food as a commodity, valuing it more by its ability to last on shelves, look nice, and be addictive, rather than by its contribution to health. Following David Harvey, we can understand this pattern as capital expansion funded by reducing and selling off our resources for nutrition and health. Social and ecological systems once used food as a commons, but today, it has become chiefly a manufactured and marketed product that no longer fulfills its role as a right people should have. The apparent conflict between food as a common resource and a fundamental human entitlement is evident in how manipulation happens through special marketing and corporate attempts to lower public regulation. In addition to impacting balanced nutrition, these methods increase existing injustices between social and economic groups and locations. When basic nutritious foods are inaccessible and only beautiful, nutrient-poor foods can be purchased nearby, the idea of personal choice in food is worthless.

Using health-washing and CSR stories to guide conversations proves that capitalism can use the language of doing good to keep earning profits. This matches what Zygmunt Bauman believes, as he says that ethical values get covered up by attention to how a company is marketed, losing their actual meaning. According to the study, the capitalist food system deliberately chooses not to meet nutritional needs in America. Removing market barriers and giving more power to a few allows food to become a source of nutritional harm. So, to deal with this crisis, a shift needs to occur from models based on markets to models that rely on rights and justice for food governance, see Table 1.

**Table 1: Interpreting the Results**

Corporate priorities	Corporations prioritize shareholder profit over public health, promoting products based on profitability rather than nutrition
Food as Commodity vs. Common	Shift from food as a right and commons to a market commodity emphasizing shelf-life, appearance, and addictiveness.
Marketing and Manipulation	Use of targeted marketing and lobbying reduces public regulation and consumer autonomy, distorting personal choice.
Health-Washing and CSR	CSR and health-oriented campaigns are often superficial and used to mask harmful practices, echoing Bauman's critique of ethical dilution.
Socioeconomic Inequality	Nutritional inequalities worsen along socioeconomic and geographic lines, limiting access to healthy foods in marginalized communities.
Theoretical Alignment	Findings align with David Harvey's critique of capital expansion and resource commodification, and Bauman's view on ethical façades.
Call for Transformation	Suggests moving from market-based governance to justice- and rights-based approaches to ensure equitable nutrition access.



- **Implications**

- **Regulatory Implications**

According to the evidence, we urgently require improved and implementable laws. One central intervention is ensuring all front-of-pack labels are simple for consumers to understand and choose wisely. Taxing things like sugar, saturated fats, and sodium follows methods proven successful in Mexico and the UK to reduce the intake of refined products. It allows for added funding of health promotion efforts. It is essential to add independent oversight to ensure industry lobbying cannot water down what these measures try to achieve.

- **Social Implications**

According to the study, society needs more local action to support healthier food systems and fight for control of public health agendas away from corporations. Projects where communities take the lead in agriculture, cooperative farming, and selling at local food markets create ways for people to embrace food sovereignty and eat less from industrial food systems. Also, teaching low-income and marginalized groups about nutrition helps them identify and defend against misleading food marketing. They have the power to change the way people think about food as a fundamental right, instead of something they can buy.

- **Corporate Implications**

More people and investors are now ensuring that corporations meet Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria. Many want to ensure that real, nutrition-focused targets are part of corporate ESG reports and sustainability tactics. Failing to address nutritional harm can lead companies to lose reputation and visitors from ethical funds. Meanwhile, firms that care about impact investing, for example by offering healthier versions of their goods, showing clear process information, and helping small farmers, can increase their business status and please their customers.



### Limitations

Despite the study's comprehensive design and triangulated methodology, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Scope Constraints:** The research is limited because it looks only at the United States, India, and Brazil. Although the countries were selected because of their differences in rules and market openness, the results may vary for areas with different food systems or unusual diets.
- **Data Access Issues:** The company kept its internal decision papers and unreleased marketing strategies away from external consumers. Only surface-level understanding of product strategies was found, as detailed reasons for these decisions were hard to come by in sources such as official descriptions and promotional information.
- **Subjectivity in Qualitative Coding:** Like other qualitative studies, doing thematic coding allows researchers' personal beliefs and experiences to influence the process. Even though the researchers used reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to avoid interpretive subjectivity, it is still possible. Some differences in coding may cause tiny variations in the main themes, mostly in discourse and policy studies.

## Conclusion

This study finds that putting profit above nutrition is a common and built-in feature of corporate food systems. As a result of manipulating the supply chain, marketing, and lobbying to avoid rules, leading corporations allow many people to eat foods that can lead to malnutrition, obesity, and chronic illness, mainly in underserved regions (Monteiro et al., 2023; Herforth et al., 2022). Because of deceptive advertising and simple-looking social responsibility efforts, these negative consequences are often hidden, pointing to the fact that putting profit before public health is chosen in the food industry (Lacy-Nichols et al., 2022). Such circumstances show that changes across several sectors are necessary now. Agency work should ensure that companies show clear nutritional information at the front of their packaging and impose taxes on sugar, salt, and fat, as this would lower the temptation to make products less healthy (Sacks et al., 2021). Those who care about food should start and support groups focusing on food justice and encouraging locally grown agriculture. In addition, investors and companies should move beyond lip service on ESG toward showing true responsibility for increasing good nutrition (Kraak, 2021). Future studies could investigate the effects of AI on the way people eat and where food is delivered, thanks to AI's ability to tailor marketing and use advanced forecasting. In addition, working out how food systems can be reorganized after the pandemic, with key priorities of resilience, equity, and health, is essential. Researching the effects of digital platforms, data-based diet customization, and rethinking supply chain responses during emergencies will lead to a world food system that is efficient, fair, and nourishes all (Haddad et al., 2020; Swinburn et al., 2019).

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