I CONGRESO EUROAMERICANO DE **PROCESOS Y PRODUCTOS ALIMENTARIOS**

# PERCEPTION AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE TERM "ULTRA-PROCESSED"

JULIANA SARMIENTO-SANTOS; MELISSA NASCIMENTO BISPO DE SOUZA; LYDIA SOCORRO ARAUJO; FERNANDA MARIA VANIN

**Introduction:** Different food classifications have been proposed in the literature. Among them, the NOVA classification, which adopted the "processing level" as a classification criterion, has been gaining attention and being used as a basis for definition of food guides from different countries. Currently, according to the Brazilian Ministry of Health, it is recommended that ultra-processed foods (UPF) should be avoided in the first years of life and consumed with restriction throughout life. This restriction is justified by the consideration proposed by NOVA, which mentions that UPFs have high amounts of refined sugars, saturated fats, sodium and additives. However, the NOVA classification has been questioned by several studies due to its inconsistencies, broad and ambiguous definitions. **Objective:** This study aimed to explore the knowledge and perception about the term UPF by Brazilian consumers. **Methodology:** An exploratory research was carried out through an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was previously evaluated by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of São Paulo (USP) for further data collection, and received the Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Appreciation (CAAE) number 36600620.9.0000.5422. Recruitment for data collection was carried out by email and social networks, using convenience sampling (snowball technique) between October 2020 and June 2021. The main questions referred to self-assessment of knowledge about UPF and ability to identify UPF. **Results and Discussion:** Altogether, 1195 participants completed the questionnaire, representing a fixed percentage (0.0005%) of the total population in Brazil. Most participants declared to know the term UPF (82.1%). Regardless of knowing the term, 78.2% of participants indicated that the best definition for UPF should be foods that have gone through several processes in the food industry. Similar results were found in surveys carried out in Argentina, Ecuador and Uruguay. Results showed that consumer's perception about UPF is also related to low nutritional quality, associated with products with many ingredients in their formulation (63,9%) and with high levels of sugar, fat, salt and additives (87,7%). Although participants seem to understand what UPF means, questions that presented examples of foods showed significant divergence, reinforcing the difficulty related to the classification of food as proposed by NOVA. Only obvious foods, fruits (95.0%) and soft drinks (91.9%), presented a clear convergence of classification. The results showed that even the participants who believe to know UPF, actually have median knowledge through the Pearson correlation (0.533 | P-Value = 0.092). In addition, it was also observed that knowledge about UPF is unsatisfactory, regardless of academic background, even for food or health professionals, through Spearman's correlation between the number of correct answers and the profession of the participants, as a very weak correlation was found (0.072 | P-Value = 0.017). **Conclusion:** Food processing is a poorly understood area by the population, and unfortunately the term ultra-processed is still confusing for most participants. Incorrect understanding of this term, as well its definition, can negatively influence food choice. **Acknowledgements:** This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.

**Palavras-chave:** Processing level, Nova classification, Consumer knowledge, Food processing perception.