

New Food Narrative Trends 2026

WELLNESS TRENDS

How Ultra Processed, Clean Label and Sweetener Scrutiny are Impacting Consumer Behavior

Clean Label Conversations Explode

Across the snack aisle, the “no-go” list continues to grow. Artificial dyes and sweeteners, preservatives, seed oils, heavy metals, and microplastics are increasingly viewed as long-term health risks rather than acceptable tradeoffs for convenience. As a result, consumers are balancing protein, satiety, and transparency with a broader sense of health impact.

Clean-label positioning is no longer a niche wellness signal, it is increasingly aligned with mainstream nutrition guidance and public policy narratives, leading all label claims in social listening growth over the course of 2025, up +371%. “Hormone friendly” and “seed-oil free” talk also grew by triple digits, highlighting how simple formulations, reduced processing, and trusted ingredients are clearly gaining momentum.

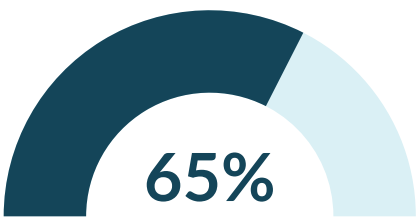
Top Growing Claims - Social Listening:

+371% Clean Label

+161% Hormone Friendly

+103% Free from Seed Oils

over the past year



Support Increased Scrutiny of Ultra-Processed Foods

Skepticism Goes Mainstream: Processed Foods Widely Seen as Requiring Increased Scrutiny

Processed foods and sugars are now widely viewed by consumers as moderately to very harmful, placing them on par with widely debated substances like cannabis, zero-calorie sweeteners, and caffeine. Notably, nearly two-thirds of consumers support increased scrutiny of ultra-processed foods, signaling that concerns extend beyond general nutrition to the industrial methods and additives used in modern food manufacturing.

This heightened skepticism reflects increased scrutiny of ingredient complexity and long-term health risks, driving demand for “free from” products that avoid artificial additives and highly processed components.

Consumer Insights: Ultra-Processed Avoider

26.3% of Q4 2025 respondents stated that they are looking for “Not Ultra-Processed” food products when making a purchase.

- **Higher Income and Education Skew:** Ultra-Processed Avoiders are more likely than the general population to be upper income and to hold a Bachelor's or graduate degree, while lower-income and lower-education groups are underrepresented.
- **Older Generational Profile:** Baby Boomers and Gen X account for a larger share of Ultra-Processed Avoiders compared to the total population, while Gen Z represents a smaller share.
- **Suburban and Child-Free Households:** Ultra-Processed Avoiders are more likely to live in suburban areas and in households without children, compared with the overall respondent base.

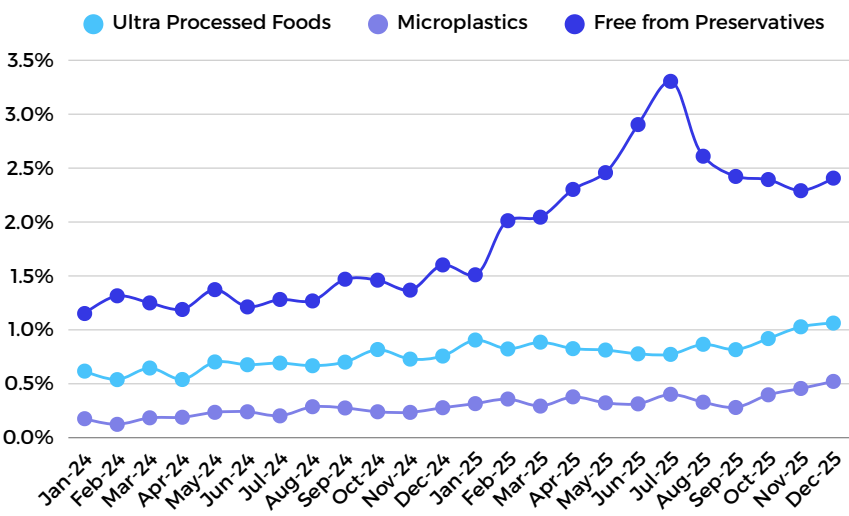
Consumers Avoiding Ultra-Processed Food:

35% High Income

41% Bachelors Degree+

58% Gen X / Baby Boomer

Social Listening Claims



Social Listening: Conversations about Ultra Processed Doubled

Since the start of 2024, ultra-processed food share of voice has nearly doubled, from 0.6% to 1.1%, reflecting +72% growth. This puts it on a fast convergence path with more established narratives like Free from Preservatives, which has also seen rapid growth. Meanwhile, Microplastics is one of the fastest growing claims, increasing by +196% over the past two years.

Growth across these claims reflects a growing skepticism of artificial ingredients in foodstuffs, with focus more on additives than specific health ingredient claims (i.e. low sodium).

Conversations: Dig into Actual Posts & Influencers with Brightfield’s Social Listening Tracker



Dr. Chris van Tulleken
British physician and author of Ultra-Processed People, Dr. van Tulleken has been vocal about the health risks associated with UPFs. He emphasizes that reducing UPF consumption can significantly lower the risk of various diseases.



Dr. Casey Means - A Stanford-trained physician and co-founder of Levels Health, Dr. Means is a vocal advocate for metabolic health. As a bestselling author and frequent podcast guest, she has raised concerns about the role of seed oils in chronic inflammation and disease.

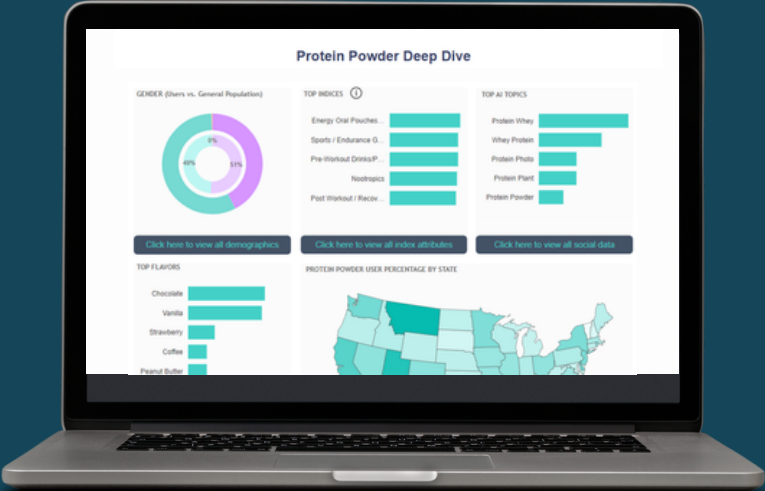


Vani Hari ("The Food Babe")
is a well-known food activist and author, Vani Hari has built a significant following by campaigning against harmful food additives.

Brightfield Group’s AI-driven consumer insights and social listening help marketing and innovation teams see the person behind the trend.

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