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Letter to the Editor

Ultra-processed foods: a concept in need of revision to avoid targeting healthful and sustainable plant-based foods

We read with interest the invited commentary by Dr Mark Lawrence supporting the utility of the NOVA food classification system[1]. However, we take issue with his perspective on our recently published article in which we make two fundamental points[2]. First, the common criticisms of ultra-processed foods (UPF) do not apply to soya-based meat and dairy alternatives more so than they do to their animal-based counterparts, meat and cows' milk, despite the former being classified as UPF and the latter as unprocessed/minimally processed foods. Second, NOVA is overly simplistic and does not adequately evaluate the nutritional attributes of meat and dairy alternatives based on soya. Simply put, soya burgers are not Twinkies, even though NOVA similarly classifies these products. Rather than focusing on the crux of our argument, Dr Lawrence notes the association of several authors with the soyafood industry, that is, classic ad hominem reasoning. Dr Lawrence also criticises us for not considering the '… broader public health, environmental and social implications of such innovations (e.g., soy burgers) relative to food processing innovations to promote existing non-UPF nutritious plant-source protein foods such as minimally processed legumes and nuts'. We fully support greater consumption of legumes and nuts and efforts to promote their intake. However, the products in question are designed to replace meat and dairy products not legumes and nuts. Therefore, the critical comparisons are between hamburgers and soya burgers and cows' milk and soyamilk. We therefore standby our opinion that NOVA does a disservice to the public by suggesting that because soya burgers and soyamilk are NOVA-classified as UPF, they should be avoided. These foods can aid in the transition to and maintenance of plant-based diets.

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Mark Messina is employed by the Soy Nutrition Institute Global, an organisation that receives funding from the United Soybean Board and industry members who are involved in the manufacture and/or sale of soyafoods and/or soyabean components.

All authors participated in the writing of this letter, and read and approved the final submitted version.

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