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PULSAR*GROUP

Sugar & health:

A PR guide to
healthy FMCG &
HFSS comms

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How Vuelio – and Pulsar Group – can help with your PR strategy and comms

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Introduction and methodology

HFSS – High Fat, Sugar, and Salt – isn't just a tricky acronym to type, it's also a field filled with complexity for associated brands in today's landscape of accountability and transparency.

Making things even more complicated for those tasked with comms in the sector – the upcoming Government [ban on TV junk food adverts](#) before 9pm is due to be in force on 1 October 2025.

How has the conversation around sugar and HFSS evolved since the [2022 announcement](#) of increased legislation in the press, in public conversation across social media, and in UK politics? And what can PRs facing these extra rules learn from brands already navigating the challenges successfully?

Using [Vuelio Insights](#), [Political Monitoring](#), the [Journalist Enquiry Service](#), and [Pulsar TRAC and TRENDS](#), this report unpacks:

- How the sugar conversation has grown in UK politics, the press, and across social media
- What PRs in the FMCG and HFSS space need to know for gaining positive coverage in the UK media
- Which brands have been successful in their comms campaigns in times of changing regulation and fluctuating audience expectations

Approach

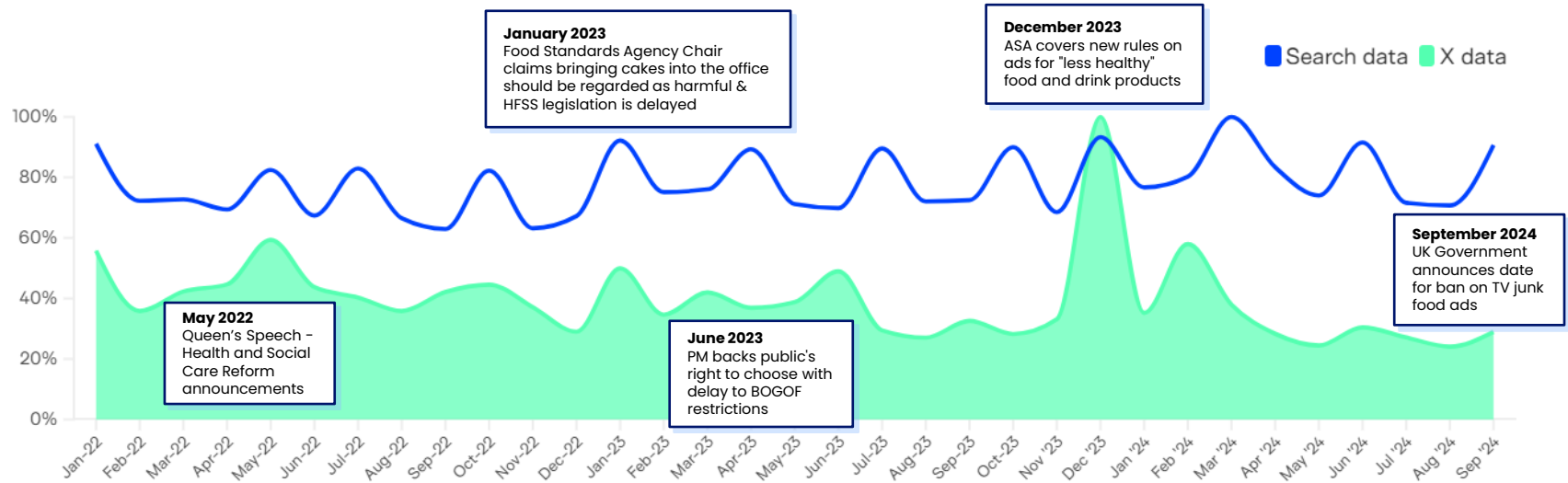
Data Collection Period: 1 Jan 2017 – 24 Sept 2024



Channels: Markets/Languages: Global data collection Analysis in English language

Chapter 1: Public, press, and political interest in sugar and HFSS is spiking...

Tracking the public interest around sugar across social media and overlaying related HFSS announcements in UK politics highlights the direct link between legislation and public perspectives. Google Searches peak and fall, and while interest in sugar on socials has fallen from its December 2023 spike, it is rising once more as the UK Government's October '25 deadline for change in HFSS advertising draws closer.



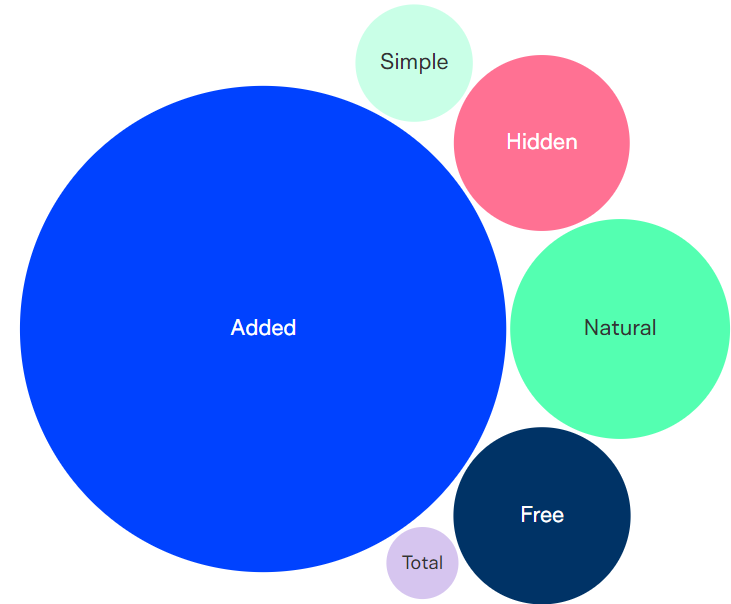
Mentions of sugar associated with health on X Jan 2022 – Sept 2024, set against Google Search interest over the same period, overlaid with moves in UK politics. Source: Pulsar TRENDS, Google Trends, and Vuelio Political Monitoring

...but be careful with your comms – this interest comes with concerns

Sugar is now a subject of intense scrutiny for the public at large, alongside brand and business stakeholders. The myriad of different threads unravelling across social media provide insight into priorities and concerns.

It's not all about politics. Digging deeper into the UK digital discussion shows posts and shares on sugar frequently contain keywords like 'added', 'natural', 'hidden', and 'free' – all claims frequently included in FMCG and HFSS advertising and campaigns, including product packaging.

Alongside increased scrutiny from legislators, the comms industry is now held to account from savvy consumers paying extra attention to their messaging.



UK conversation volume of the most common narratives around sugar consumption across digital platforms including social, April 2023 – Dec 2023. Source: Pulsar TRAC

What are stakeholders talking about, and where, when it comes to HFSS?

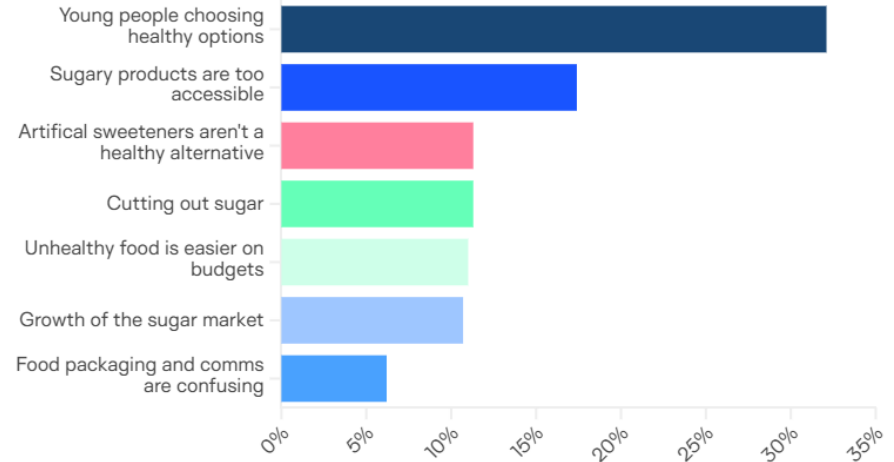
Examining prevailing narratives across social platforms uncovers which specific topics are being shared and debated on each. For example:

On Facebook, groups and businesses exchanged tips and listicles on diets, ingredients, and myths about sugar and sugar alternatives.

X was where users most often highlighted scandals concerning sugar-associated brands.

On Reddit, people managing health issues like diabetes shared personal experiences and advice.

Each platform offers a different way to engage with audiences and stakeholders – to inform, boost reputation, or stop the spread of damaging or incorrect information.



The dominant UK narratives about sugar across Facebook, Reddit, and X, April 2023 – Dec 2023.
Source: Pulsar TRAC

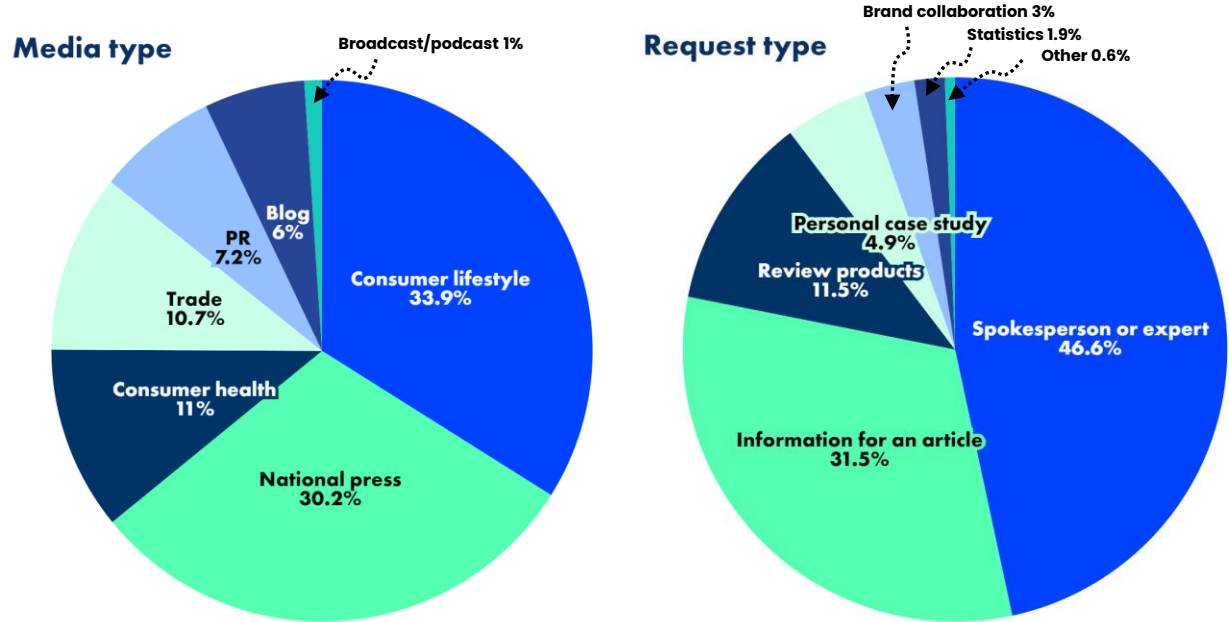
Chapter 2: Sharing the story – HFSS in the UK media and beyond

The influence of politics on the public conversation, as highlighted in Chapter 1, was bolstered by another important player – the UK media.

From the start of 2017 to August 2024, around 700 enquiries mentioning HFSS and sugar* were sent by UK media professionals to UK PRs via the [Journalist Enquiry Service](#).

Experts for comment were particularly sought after by reporters, broadcasters, podcasters, and bloggers. Do you have medical professionals, nutritionists, brand owners, and retailers on your roster? The media want to speak to them.

**including related keywords 'additive', 'artificial sweeteners', 'aspartame', 'sucralose', and 'saccharin'*



Media requests submitted to UK PRs from the start of 2017 to August 2024. Source: Journalist Enquiry Service

What National, Regional, Trade, and Consumer journalists want from PRs

Which media sectors were reporting on sugar and HFSS and how can you work with them?

The majority of requests from UK media users of the Journalist Enquiry Service came from Consumer Lifestyle outlets, including big hitters Cosmopolitan, Good Housekeeping, Expert Reviews, and Wired UK.

“Expert comment on following the sugar tax:

- ***How much sugar is actually in everyday foods & is it easy to give up?***
- ***Effects a sugar free diet can have on the body”***

While a significant number of the enquiries focused on perhaps predictable lifestyle topics of low-sugar recipes,

tips on healthy eating, and requests for sugar-free products for review, ‘sugar tax’ – ‘HFSS rules’ were, and continue to be, of interest to consumer journalists.

The interest of National & Regional Press in reporting on HFSS regulation isn’t surprising. Outlets including Metro, the Mirror, the Mail, and the Telegraph wanted case studies, statistics, and experts to talk about the topic. Much of their interest continues to be on holding HFSS brands to account, highlighting positive initiatives, and advocating for the consumer.

“I want to get a consumer expert's perspective on whether these initiatives will go down well with consumers or get their backs up.”

Trade journalists – from outlets including The Grocer, Retail Gazette, and PR & comms magazine Catalyst – wanted specifics on how the regulations will work in practice.

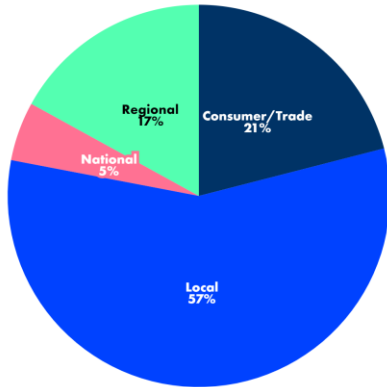
“Following the latest consultation on the potential banning of digital advertising for food & drink high in fat/salt/sugar, we would like to invite marketers in the F&B sector to discuss ways of working alongside any such legislation.”

Want coverage? Offer journalists relevant stories on initiatives and spokespeople who can share their insight:

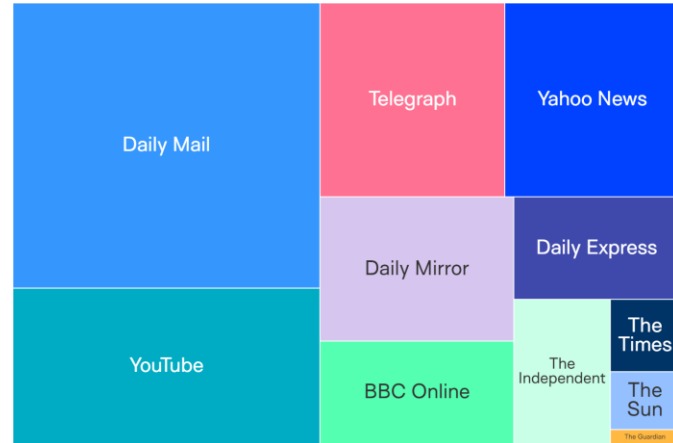
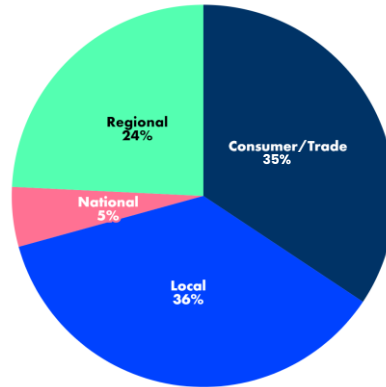
‘Those who communicate what they’re doing clearly, honestly, and carefully, will be those that flourish,’ advises The Grocer’s editor-in-chief Adam Leyland.

UK media outlets covering the sugar story

Media type



Media type without syndicated articles



The most shared media sites in the UK sugar and health conversation across X, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, News, Tumblr, YouTube, Forums, blogs, and more between Jan 2022 – August 2024, UK. Source: Vuelio online archive

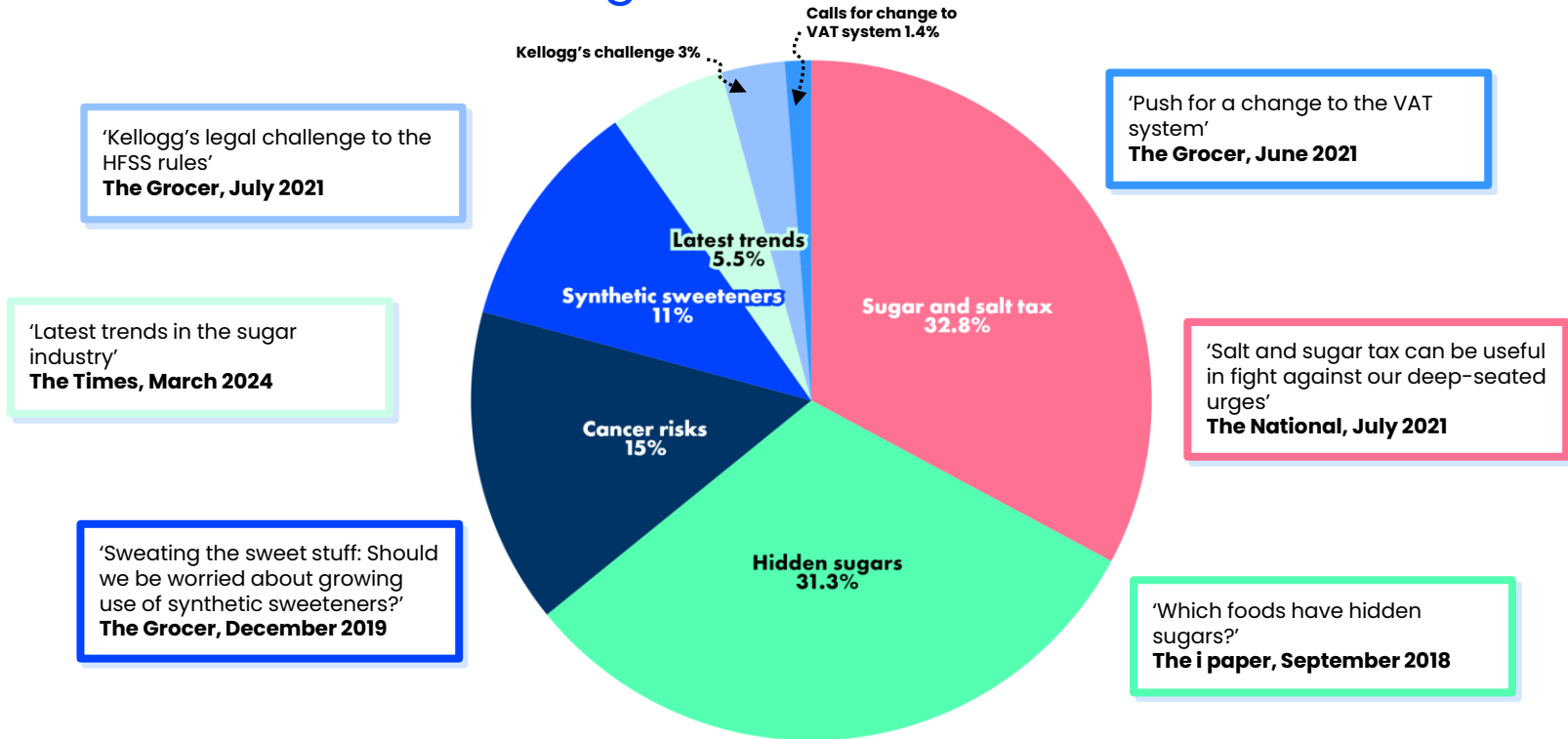
While lower in volume, highly influential national news titles focused on sugar and salt linked with other health conditions such as cancer e.g., 'belly fat linked to serious health issues' (Telegraph, 20 February 2022).

Other topics included conversations on whether the sugar and salt tax could support the NHS, and 'hidden' sugars that we aren't aware of contributing to health issues.

Regional publications also widely discussed hidden sugars and were more likely to syndicate headlines linked with weight loss and the impact of sugar, such as sugary cereals being positioned as healthy.

Trade titles such as The BMJ reported on calls for the industry levy on salt and sugar. Local titles make up a significant portion of coverage, largely due to syndication of headlines from national and regional titles.

Themes in news coverage



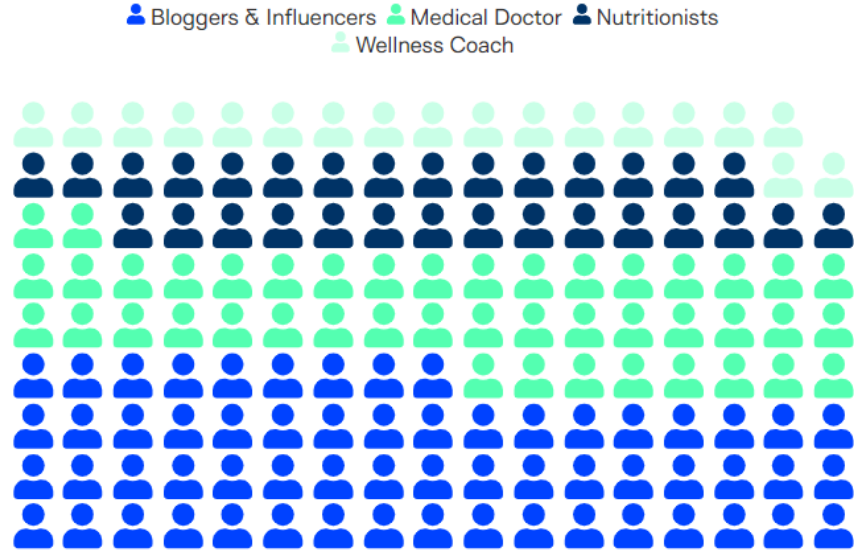
Themes in UK news coverage, Jan 2018 – August 2024, with media requests submitted to PRs that resulted in press coverage overlaid.
Source: Vuelio online archive (with manually analysed themes from the Insights team) and Journalist Enquiry Service.

Who is influencing the ongoing conversation and coverage?

The public, the press, and politicians all influence each other (and effective PR and comms can influence each, in turn). But who else has a say in the portrayal and perception of HFSS-associated organisations and brands? Actual influencers.

When breaking down social activity in the sugar conversation during the 2023 period by profession and qualification, influencers were particularly prominent, alongside medical doctors, wellness coaches, and nutritionists.

92% of brands intended to [increase](#) their influencer PR and marketing spend at the start of 2024, according to reporting from Forbes, and this trend is set to continue. Want to influence the HFSS conversation in a positive way with your PR? Connect with the right people on the right platforms.

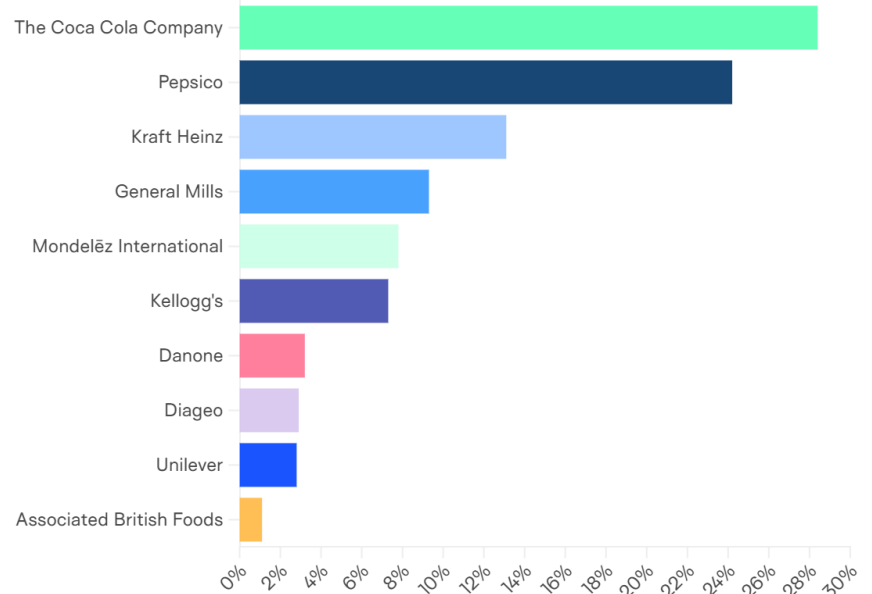


Social activity compared by self-described profession/qualifications. April 2023 – Dec 2023.
Source: Pulsar TRAC.

Chapter 3: Brands shaping their reputation in the press and public eye

Certain FMCG brands are unavoidably linked to sugar and HFSS topics. How they shape their reputation and press coverage provides a useful guide for other brands and organisations wishing to keep on the right side of reporters...

Coca-Cola: Coverage for this brand was most visible in June 2023, as sweetener was added to the WHO's list of possible carcinogens, in which Diet Coke was commonly mentioned. This spurred conversations on the sweetener vs sugar debate. More recently, other themes in coverage included the effects of drinking soda every day, in which Coca-Cola products were mentioned in passing alongside others, as well as comparisons of sugars in Coca-Cola compared to plant-based milks, such as oat milk.



Brand analysis of UK sugar conversation across X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, News, Tumblr, YouTube, Forums, blogs, and more. Time period: Jan 2022 - August 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Pepsico: Much like its fizzy drink competitor, Pepsico coverage peaked in June 2023, often mentioned in passing in relation to aspartame being labelled as a 'potential cancer risk'.

This conversation has continued into recent months, with a 'sugar free soft drink warning issued by a dentist', in which PepsiCo and competitor fizzy drinks were tested for their pH levels.

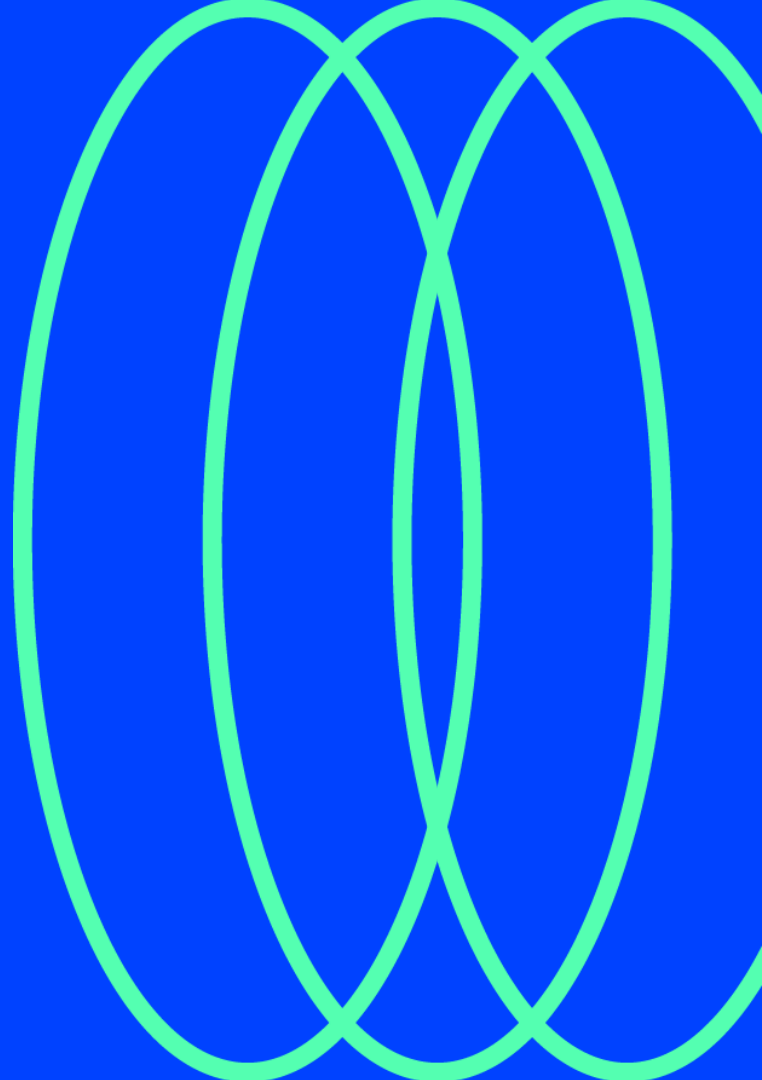
Kellogg's: While less visible than some other brands in the UK, the prominence of Kellogg's was higher. Sentiment of this coverage was mixed, as Kellogg's is often mentioned in conversations about 'misleading foods' containing high sugar, as well as Kellogg's failed legal dispute in 2022.

As the UK gets closer to the October 2025 deadline for increased regulation on HFSS ads, media outlets will be on the hunt for related stories. Get ahead by sharing positive brand stories with journalists - case studies, interviews with key personnel, and news of launching initiatives. Just remember to keep those comms authentic.

'Authenticity is vital, and consumers – and reporters – have a nose for when something is inauthentic.'

'People like people – offer media interviews. Who in your business can tell your story well? Put them forward for articles, and awards.'

– **Retail Week managing editor Stephen Eddie**



How Pulsar Group can help with your PR strategy and comms

[Vuelio Media Monitoring](#): Prove the effectiveness of your PR and comms tactics and provide a base for future planning through multi-channel media coverage categorised by sentiment, Share of Voice, and bespoke tags.

[Vuelio Insights](#): The Vuelio Insights team partners with clients to produce bespoke media analysis reports that identify risks and opportunities, and demonstrate the value of your PR.

[Vuelio Political Monitoring](#): Vuelio gives you full visibility of everything that's happening across Government, Parliament, stakeholder organisations and social media, delivered in a way that works for you.

[Pulsar](#): Apply audience intelligence to your strategy with social listening and audience segmentation. Spot potential crisis ahead with this AI-driven trend detector to plan your strategy.

[Journalist Enquiry Service](#): Get journalist enquiries delivered straight to your inbox so you can connect and secure coverage for your organisation at top UK media outlets.

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