Nutri-Score and Yuka:

An Analysis of Lobbying Strategies to Undermine Consumer Information

By Julie Chapon, Serge Hercberg and Mathilde Touvier



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Summary

For the first time, Yuka's co-founder and the two scientists behind Nutri-Score bring their experiences together. Two very different tools, an independent app with 85 million users and a public health label adopted by several European countries, yet the same attacks, the same rhetoric, and often the same actors. This article documents seven tactics used by the food industry for more than a decade to weaken these two consumer information tools. Tactics honed by the tobacco industry, then the sugar industry, and now applied to food transparency.

1. Discrediting the Tools and Those Behind Them

The first attack turns a strength into a weakness. Nutri-Score and Yuka share the same strength: turning complex information into a clear indicator, a letter, a score, a color. This clarity is what lobbies target. As early as 2014, ANIA, France's main food industry lobby, called the label "simplistic"; then came "patronizing," "guilt-inducing," and "restrictive." This sidesteps the scientific debate, where the label is strongly supported, and turns it into a moral one. The second target is those behind these tools: internal emails show that ANIA deliberately spoke of the "Hercberg label," even "Professor Hercberg's Smarties," reducing collective scientific work validated by health agencies to one researcher's whim. Yuka, meanwhile, is called "biased": the cosmetics lobby urges people to "question the objectivity" of a user-funded app, when that funding is precisely what makes it independent from brands. Finally, none of this is spontaneous: in 2020, the processed meat lobby FICT, in conflict with Yuka over nitrites, gave members ready-made media responses, instructing them to "relay the messages to amplify" them.

2. Multiplying Alternatives to Create Confusion

Rather than openly rejecting consumer information, manufacturers argue that such a complex issue requires several approaches and multiply alternative tools. The goal: to claim there are other options to compare before deciding, delaying any official decision. In 2017, the year Nutri-Score became official in France, six multinationals (Coca-Cola, Mars, Mondelez, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Unilever) launched the Evolved Nutrition Label: no overall score, but a color per nutrient, calculated per serving, making products look better. Deemed misleading, it was abandoned within two years, but served its purpose: casting doubt on Nutri-Score as the only valid guide, while the "real-world" trial demanded by lobbies delayed its adoption by several months. The same tactic was used against Yuka: Système U launched the "Y'a quoi dedans" app, and the cosmetics lobby launched CLAIRE. Both scan products but give no score: they copy the tool's form without its substance, a clear verdict.

3. Attacking Through Less Visible Intermediaries

The brands consumers know rarely appear on the front line: attacking an information tool would risk their image. Instead, they operate behind neutral-sounding organizations. Professional federations with obscure acronyms step forward: ANIA, FICT, FIAB, etc. Behind them are often the same giants, including Coca-Cola, Ferrero, Lactalis, Herta, and Fleury Michon. The tactic goes further when industry speaks through bodies seen as neutral. For example, the French National Consumer Council's late-2023 opinion calling for "greater transparency" from rating apps was drafted by three rapporteurs, two representing ANIA and MEDEF, the very interests whose products these apps rate.

4. Shifting the Debate to Other Issues

Rather than discuss product composition, opponents change the subject, shifting the debate to more compelling issues: heritage, tradition, jobs, food safety. Against Nutri-Score, the most common argument is the threat to culinary heritage: the label would penalize Roquefort, foie gras, or Parmesan. The figures say otherwise: of over 300 traditional products studied by Que Choisir Ensemble, 62% received an A, B, or C. On nitrites in processed meats, rather than address cancer risk, the industry shifts the debate to food safety, stressing the role of nitrites in preventing botulism, a serious food poisoning. This shifts attention from risk to protection, even though the rare botulism cases recorded in France in recent years involved homemade or artisanal processed meats, not industrial products.

5. Multiplying Legal Proceedings to Wear Down Those Who Raise the Alarm

Some opponents go beyond arguments: they go to court, less to win than to impose overwhelming financial and reputational risk on those raising concerns. This is the principle of a SLAPP. From 2020, Yuka faced three lawsuits coordinated by FICT and two members, represented by the same law firm: €1.4 million was sought from a company then earning around €20,000 a year. Yuka won all three on appeal, but the battle lasted nearly three years and cost €500,000, largely crowdfunded. In October 2025, the Paris Court of Appeal noted an "identical and coordinated strategy." Nutri-Score faces the same tactic: Lactalis, whose products include some rated lower since the 2025 update, challenged it before France's Council of State. Referred to the EU Court of Justice, the case could deprive the label of its legal basis.

6. Manufacturing Doubt About the Science

When science becomes inconvenient, industry funds its own studies, reaching favorable conclusions. Doubt is enough: it leads policymakers to delay and the public to believe that "opinions are divided." A 2023 BMJ Global Health study of 134 publications on Nutri-Score found a study was 21 times more likely to oppose the label when its authors disclosed a conflict of interest or industry funding. Nitrites provide another example. In 2020, the French Academy of Agriculture, a learned society with no expertise in oncology, published a report downplaying the link between nitrites and cancer risk. Written by authors tied to the processed meat industry and based mainly on interviews with that sector, its impartiality was questioned by a parliamentary inquiry. Yet it carried considerable weight with the first judges to hear the cases against Yuka.

7. Turning a Government Into a Lobbying Vehicle

The ultimate level of lobbying is an entire government placing its diplomacy, regulations, and legal system at the service of industrial interests. Italy has become an example, to the point that researchers speak of "state lobbying." With iconic products like Parmesan, Parma ham, and Gorgonzola poorly rated, the government made defending them a national cause and deployed all the previous tactics nationwide. First, discrediting: the agriculture minister circulated a poster claiming Nutri-Score penalizes Italian products, yet seven of eight examples were false, with pasta rated E instead of A and Coca-Cola A instead of E. Then, an alternative: Italy introduced its own label, NutrInform Battery, by decree, even before studies meant to prove its effectiveness. Finally, legal action: in 2021, the competition authority opened proceedings against Yuka and Carrefour, which ultimately removed the label from its Italian products. The battle also moved to Brussels: Italy's diplomatic offensive helped derail plans for a mandatory EU nutrition label. In March 2026, a new political and media campaign targeted Yuka, culminating in a written question to the European Parliament that repeated, word for word, arguments used against Nutri-Score since 2019.

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Nutri-Score, the color-coded nutrition label displayed on food packaging in several European countries, and Yuka, the widely used app that scans and rates food and cosmetic products, serve the same purpose: turning complex information into a simple guide that consumers can understand at a glance. In just a few years, checking them has become second nature for many shoppers. But that transparency comes at a price. It exposes poorly rated products and the economic interests behind them. In response, parts of the food industry have used a variety of means to fight these tools.

These attacks are more than occasional criticism. They have taken many, often complementary forms, aimed at undermining the tools' credibility, slowing their adoption, or limiting their impact. Nor are they new. These strategies draw on a playbook already tested by the tobacco, asbestos, and pesticide industries: manipulating science, sustaining doubt, and shifting the debate to delay unwelcome regulations. Investigative journalist Stéphane Horel documented this mechanism in her book Lobbytomie ("Lobbytomy"), calling it the "manufacturing of doubt."

The food industry is no exception, and the problem extends far beyond France. A series of articles published in The Lancet in 2025 showed how ultraprocessed-food manufacturers around the world obstruct public health policies through a familiar range of tactics, from direct lobbying and funding research that challenges established science to using front groups and pursuing litigation.[1].

> ***Lobbying does not need to win to be effective; it only needs to delay.***

How, in practice, does this machinery operate against Nutri-Score and Yuka? Who are the players involved, and what methods do they use? In this article, we break down seven tactics used to weaken these two tools. Taken individually, they may seem anecdotal. Taken together, they reveal a strategy.

This article documents lobbying tactics used against Yuka and the Nutri-Score based on documented facts. Our interpretations of the underlying intentions and strategies are our own, based on the available evidence and our expertise in the field.

Tactic 1

Discredit Consumer Information Tools and the People Behind Them to Cast Doubt on Their Reliability

Rather than challenge Nutri-Score or Yuka on scientific grounds, which requires data, expertise, and time, opponents take a more direct route: they attack their credibility. They seek to create the impression that the tool is not serious, that it is overly simplistic, and that the people behind it cannot be trusted. This accusation has one decisive advantage: it requires no evidence.

Yet Nutri-Score and Yuka share the same strength: they transform complex information into a clear, intuitive signal that anyone can understand, using a letter or score associated with a color.

Turning a Strength into a Flaw

The Nutri-Score nutrition label, initially known as the 5-Color Logo or 5C label, was developed by French academic researchers in nutritional epidemiology at EREN as part of the Hercberg Report, a set of public health recommendations commissioned by the French government and published in January 2014[2]. The National Association of Food Industries (ANIA), the food industry's main lobbying group in France, quickly set the tone. The headline of its press release was unambiguous: "No to a simplistic nutrition labeling system based on a color code." A balanced diet, it argued, "cannot be reduced to a colored dot[3]." The argument has the advantage of sounding reasonable. After all, who would defend something "simplistic"? But, it criticizes Nutri-Score for precisely what makes it useful. The Nutri-Score is not simplistic. It is simple.

Serge Hercberg, a coauthor of this article, led the research behind Nutri-Score as director of EREN and chair of France's National Nutrition and Health Program (PNNS), coordinated by the Ministry of Health. Mathilde Touvier, also a coauthor, was involved from the outset in studies scientifically validating the label and coordinated research establishing links between Nutri-Score and the risk of chronic diseases. She has since succeeded Serge Hercberg as head of EREN and the PNNS. From the inside, they watched the same arguments surface again and again: the label was supposedly "simplistic, reductive, infantilizing, guilt-inducing," a "directive on what to choose," or even "an attack on freedom.[4-11].

The mechanism is always the same: sidestep the scientific debate, where Nutri-Score has strong support, and replace it with a moral indictment centered on personal freedom, stigma, and guilt rather than science and public health impact.

What the accusation of oversimplification deliberately leaves out is everything behind the score and its graphic design. Its algorithm grew out of nutritional epidemiology research[12], supported by large cohort studies, some following hundreds of thousands of people over many years, and published in international scientific journals[13-19]. The algorithm has been validated by French health bodies: the High Council for Public Health (HCSP), the Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety (ANSES), and Santé publique France (the

French national public health agency). Numerous studies have also shown that consumers understand its graphic format better than the other labels tested or no label at all, and that it steers purchases toward shopping baskets of higher nutritional quality[20].

Almost identical criticisms surface wherever products receive poor ratings. In Switzerland, the dairy industry organization Swissmilk called Nutri-Score "a simplistic answer to a complex question" and faulted it for judging individual nutrients rather than the food "as a whole."[21]. In France, the president of the Roquefort industry organization denounced a "simplistic label" in a radio interview and lamented: "We live in a strange time when there is rarely room for complexity or nuance."[22]. It is a clever formulation: it casts the speaker as nuanced and intelligent, and the label as crude.

When Yuka launched in France, the same vocabulary resurfaced. Manufacturers and retailers recycled the arguments used against Nutri-Score. One retailer attacked its "oversimplification" with an example that has since become familiar: "Cheese will be rated poor, when all you need to do is eat it as part of a balanced diet."[23]. This conflates two things: providing information about a product's composition and telling people what to eat, which the app does not do. The French Federation of Processed Meat Producers (FICT) took the argument a step further: Yuka supposedly did not contribute to a debate of public interest but "impoverished" it by reducing a product to a low score, the color red, and words such as "poor" or "avoid."[24].

In every case, the tactic is the same: portray clarity, a service provided to consumers, as an intellectual failing.

Discrediting the Messengers

Discrediting the tool is not always enough. The second target is the people behind it. Lobbying groups try to portray the researchers who developed Nutri-Score as moralizers intent on controlling what people eat.

Early on, Nutri-Score's opponents also tried to associate the label as closely as possible with one individual. They stopped referring to the "nutrition label" and began talking about "Professor Hercberg's colored dots," or even "Professor Hercberg's Smarties."[25,26]. Attaching a name to the label suggests that it is one isolated researcher's whim rather than the product of collective work validated by the scientific community. This shift was anything but spontaneous. Food industry correspondence deliberately referred to the "Hercberg label" or "Hercberg system."[27].

> ***Whether it's the Nutri-Score or Yuka, the criticism is no longer about the methodology, but about the honesty of those providing the information: researchers portrayed as moralizers, and an app suspected of having a hidden agenda.***

Beyond mockery, the aim was to discredit his authority as a researcher by suggesting that he had a personal stake in promoting Nutri-Score: that he was an activist defending his "baby" rather than a scientist.[28].

Yuka's independence has been targeted in much the same way. One retailer compared it to "Wikipedia versus Encyclopaedia Universalis [France's equivalent to Encyclopaedia Britannica]: necessary, but it can contain errors and be biased."[29]. The cosmetics industry has used the same line of attack. In a 2018 press release, FEBEA, the beauty industry's lobbying organization, explicitly stated that one could "reasonably doubt the objectivity" of

apps such as Yuka “that offer paid premium services.”[30]. The reasoning is disingenuous: it is precisely because Yuka is funded by its users rather than by brands that it is independent. In all these cases, the target is no longer the method but the integrity of those providing the information.

When Discrediting Becomes a Campaign

These attacks are not isolated initiatives. They form a coordinated campaign. In his book Mange et tais-toi : un nutritionniste face au lobby agroalimentaire (Eat and Shut Up: A Nutritionist Takes On the Food Lobby), Hercberg describes how it works. Food industry lobbying organizations, led by ANIA, develop talking points in advance. These are then passed along through the trade press, the National Food Council (before its membership changed), certain agricultural sectors, including processed meat, meat, cheese, and dairy, social media, and political figures. The repetition of exactly the same expressions, “simplistic,” “colored dot,” “infantilizing,” “guilt-inducing,” and “stigmatizing,” is not evidence of spontaneous outrage. It is the hallmark of a coordinated campaign.

These expressions quickly found their way into the language of certain political figures, particularly ministers and legislators close to the industries concerned. Several ministers traditionally receptive to the food industry publicly entered the fray, including Stéphane Le Foll, then Minister of Agriculture; Sylvia Pinel, Minister of Commerce and later Minister of Territorial Equality; and Arnaud Montebourg, Minister of the Economy [31]. More recently, the current Minister of Agriculture, Annie Genevard, did the same. The strategy paid off. At key stages, lobbying groups succeeded in influencing political decisions to slow Nutri-Score’s progress. One example came during the recent revision of the algorithm in 2023, when Annie Genevard blocked the corresponding ministerial order for several weeks[32].

For Yuka, the mechanics were laid out in detail in the minutes of a November 2020 FICT steering committee meeting. Faced with a “highly unfavorable” parliamentary report on nitrites expected in January, the federation approved a “major media plan”: one-on-one interviews, rights of reply, and a social media presence, all “with the support of numerous specialists (doctors, scientists, oncologists).[33]. The same document devoted a specific section to Yuka. FICT distributed a “response kit” to its members to help them answer questions from the media and customers following Yuka’s press release, instructing them to “relay the messages in order to amplify their importance.”The campaign to discredit Yuka was therefore neither spontaneous nor improvised. It was equipped with tools, carefully orchestrated, and designed to be amplified. What happened next illustrates the method perfectly.

Before the commercial court, FICT lost a large share of its claims, including the one that would have had the greatest impact on Yuka: forcing the app to change how it rated processed meat products containing nitrites.Yuka was nevertheless ordered to pay the FICT €20,000 in damages for warning about the carcinogenic and genotoxic risks of nitrites and displaying a petition in the app calling for their prohibition. That ruling was later overturned in its entirety on appeal[34]. FICT nonetheless issued a triumphant statement declaring “FICT prevails against Yuka.” This turned a partial setback into what appeared to be an overall defeat for the app. Numerous media outlets repeated the headline, reinforcing the perception that Yuka had been found at fault[36-43].

Tactic 2

Multiply the Alternatives to Create Confusion

In addition to directly attacking Nutri-Score, opponents also seek to muddy the waters to delay or even prevent its adoption. They claim not to oppose the principle of informing consumers. Instead, they argue that such a complex issue calls for multiple approaches, offering competing labels and tools. Presented as pluralism, this proliferation is intended to blur the reference points available to consumers and delay a decision. And these alternatives all have one thing in common: they claim to promote transparency by displaying nutritional information while removing or minimizing anything that could cast the product in an unfavorable light.

In 2017, the year Nutri-Score became official in France, six of the world's largest food and beverage multinationals, Coca-Cola, Mars, Mondelez, Nestlé, PepsiCo and Unilever, launched their own nutrition label: the Evolved Nutrition Label (ENL)[44].

Unlike Nutri-Score, which summarizes a food's overall nutritional quality with a single letter and color, the Evolved Nutrition Label displays a separate color for each nutrient, making it much harder to understand. More importantly, it presents nutritional composition per serving rather than per 100 grams of product. Because there is no standard serving size, which can vary according to age, sex, or physical activity, manufacturers set themselves, choosing small portions that make the display appear greener.



The Evolved Nutrition Label applied to Nutella: calculated using a 15-gram (half-ounce) serving, it substantially downplays the product's sugar and fat content.

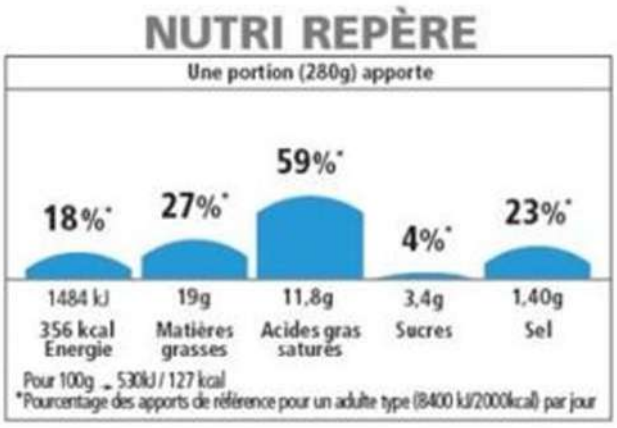
Judged in small quantities, a square of chocolate or a serving of cheese loses most of its red warning signals. Scientific research indicates that the ENL appears to have an unfavorable effect on the portions consumers choose. Its more flattering colors encourage larger servings, including of foods whose consumption should instead be limited[45,46].

The European Heart Network, an alliance of heart foundations and associations, denounced a system liable to mislead consumers[47]. The label was abandoned in less than two years[44]. But it had served its purpose: occupying the field and raising doubts about whether Nutri-Score was the only reliable guide.

The ENL was not the only alternative. Carrefour introduced its own label, "À quelle fréquencef" ("How Often"), as early as 2017, while ANIA revived NutriRepère, a system that had first appeared in the mid-2000s[48]. Whether

these systems were easy to understand was beside the point. The objective was not to provide better information, but to be able to argue that several options existed and that they should all be compared and tested before a decision was made.

These alternative labels were then used as an argument for demanding a comparative study of all the systems before any decision was made. Eventually, under repeated pressure from ANIA and major retailers, the government gave in.



NutriRepère, the alternative label promoted by ANIA.
With no score or color, it displays a series of percentages per serving and leaves consumers to interpret them for themselves.

Against the advice of scientists, consumer associations, and even the Ministry of Health, a large-scale, real-world trial was organized in around 60 supermarkets to compare the labels before making a decision[49].

The process was plagued by controversies reported in the press. The study was entrusted to a foundation funded by industry rather than an academic research team. Several independent researchers resigned from the scientific committee over conflicts of interest, and the president of Inserm, France's National Institute of Health and Medical Research, also left the steering committee[50-52]. But thanks to pressure from independent scientists and the media, the study was ultimately conducted under more rigorous conditions than those initially sought by industry lobbying groups. The protocol was revised according to stricter scientific criteria, independent researchers carried out field verification, and the Ministry of Health commissioned a separate parallel evaluation from a team of economists[53].

The experiment took a long time to organize and nevertheless delayed the adoption of Nutri-Score by several months, at a politically sensitive moment as the 2017 presidential election approached. This created the possibility that a future government might abandon the project.

The maneuver ultimately failed. The experiment confirmed Nutri-Score's superiority. It was adopted at the last minute in March 2017 and officially established in October 2017 with the signing of an interministerial order.

The same strategy was used against Yuka. In 2018, a year and a half after the app launched, the French supermarket chain Système U released its own app, "Y'a quoi dedans" ("What's in it")[54]. Unlike Yuka, it assigned neither an overall score nor a clear verdict, and flagged very few controversial substances. The app no longer exists today. In cosmetics, FEBEA launched the app CLAIRE[55]: It allows users to scan a product's INCI list, or ingredient list, but deliberately stops short of assigning any score[56]. In every case, the approach was the same: replicate Yuka's format, an app that scans products and provides information, while stripping away what makes it distinctive, a clear verdict.

Tactic 3

Attack through low-profile intermediaries

Attacks rarely come from the brands consumers have in mind. These brands have no interest in being on the front lines against consumer information tools, as doing so could damage their image, a risk they are unwilling to take. Instead, they generally prefer to operate behind the scenes through organizations with more neutral-sounding names: trade associations, industry groups, advisory bodies, foundations, and so on.

Hiding Behind Industry Associations

When it comes to Nutri-Score, the opposition is led by ANIA, the FCD (the French retail and distribution federation), FoodDrinkEurope at the European level, and certain industry sectors such as cheese and processed meats, but rarely by the brands themselves[57-63]. Yet behind associations like ANIA are the same industry giants that refuse to display the logo: Coca-Cola, Mars, Ferrero, Mondelez, Lactalis and Unilever.

The pattern is the same with Yuka, which was targeted by the FICT, an acronym almost unknown to the general public. The French Federation of Processed Meats nevertheless represents some very familiar French brands: Herta, Fleury Michon, Aoste, Madrange[64]. The federation takes the lead in the fight, while the brands remain in the background.

In Spain, where Yuka also operates, the offensive likewise came from a trade association: FIAB, ANIA's Spanish counterpart, representing 5,000 companies[65]. Like ANIA, FIAB is a member of FoodDrinkEurope, the federation representing the food and beverage industry at the European level.

In 2020, FIAB filed a complaint with Autocontrol, Spain's advertising self-regulatory body, arguing that the way Yuka presented itself on its website constituted "advertising"[66]. Another noteworthy fact is that Javier López Zafra had served as vice president of Autocontrol since 2018. At the same time, he was Secretary General and Secretary to the Board of Directors of L'Oréal España[67], a group whose products were directly subject to Yuka's ratings. Unsurprisingly, the body sided with FIAB, finding Yuka's communication misleading. Although the opinion was nonbinding, it gave the federation something that carried the appearance of official endorsement to point to.

Borrowing Institutional Authority

Public institutions are another favored intermediary. Their authority can make a private interest appear to serve the public good. France's National Food Council (CNA) illustrates this well. This advisory body, responsible for issuing opinions on food policy, is hardly a neutral referee: food manufacturers and retailers sit alongside consumer organizations and researchers.

The Institut Rousseau, a French think-tank, lists it among the forums most regularly frequented by food industry lobbyists[68]. It was from there that an offensive against the Nutri-Score was launched in 2015: its president, Bernard Vallat, a former deputy director general in charge of food at the Ministry of Agriculture, sent the ministers and the President's office a letter hostile to the Nutri-Score, on CNA letterhead[69]. Yet he had written it on his own behalf without consulting the council's members, including consumer organizations and researchers, as he was supposed to do[70]. An individual opinion had been presented as the position of an independent advisory body.

The industry does not stop at advisory bodies. It also speaks through elected officials. In 2015–2016, Parliament debated the health system modernization law that would pave the way for the future nutrition label. ANIA prepared several ready-made amendments, which legislators introduced unchanged[71].

> ***The brands consumers know rarely lead the attacks themselves. Instead, little-known industry associations take the lead, backed by companies like Coca-Cola, Ferrero, Lactalis, Herta, and Fleury Michon.***

One, for example, would have required consultation with the CNA before any decision on the label. Another sought to require the real-world trial to buy time. The television program Cash Investigation exposed the maneuver in 2016. Comparing legislators' amendments with ANIA's texts, it found that several reproduced the lobby's proposals word for word. An open microphone even caught Senator Michel Raison, a prominent Nutri-Score opponent and a cheese producer himself, openly colluding with ANIA[72].

For Yuka, another official body served as an intermediary: the French National Consumer Council (CNC). Its opinion on rating apps, adopted in late 2023, called for "greater transparency" and "a more scientific approach"[73]. Yet two of its three rapporteurs represented interests directly affected by Yuka: Sandrine Blanchemanche for ANIA and Xavier Guéant for FEBEA. In other words, the associations representing many poorly rated products played a major role in drafting the opinion intended to govern those who rate them. That opinion is regularly invoked as official backing for the claim that "Yuka lacks transparency," even though the app's rating methodology, its criteria for evaluating controversial substances, and even its financial statements are public.

Tactic 4

Shift the Debate to Other Ground

Rather than discuss product composition and its effects on health, opponents seek to change the subject. They shift the discussion toward more emotionally resonant issues: local heritage, tradition, jobs, and food safety. These issues are not illegitimate in themselves, but here they are used to sidestep the only question that matters: do consumers have the right to clear information about what they are buying?

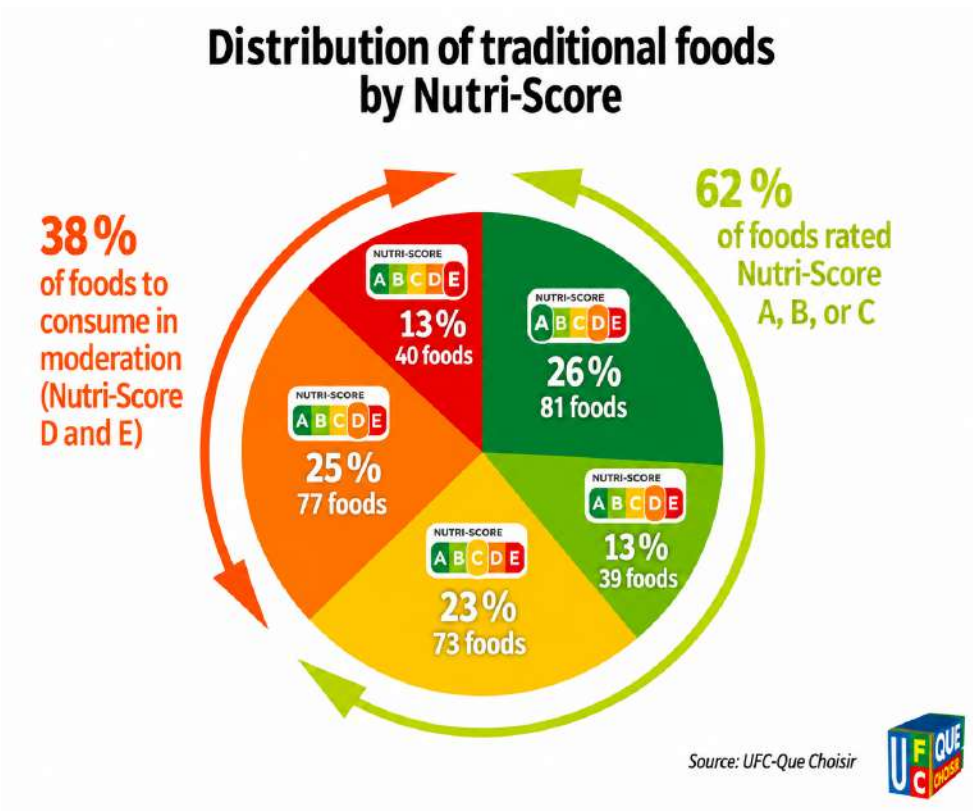
Invoking Local Heritage and Tradition

One argument against Nutri-Score comes up repeatedly: the label supposedly threatens French culinary treasures such as Roquefort, foie gras, rillettes, Maroilles cheese, and Parmesan by devaluing them.

This argument has even taken the form of proposed legislation. In December 2022, Vincent Descoeur, a member of the National Assembly from Les Républicains representing the cheese-producing Cantal area, and 46 cosponsors sought to exempt products with protected designation of origin (PDO) or protected geographical indication (PGI) status from Nutri-Score. They called the system "unsuitable" and "extremely penalizing" for cheeses, "more than 90%" of which would be rated D or E[74]. In April 2025, Senators Jean-Claude Anglars of Aveyron, where Roquefort is produced, and Jean-François Longeot of Doubs, home to numerous PDO and PGI cheeses and processed meats, introduced a similar bill. It sought exemptions for PDO, PGI, and Label Rouge products (a French quality label), as well as for farm-produced, unprocessed, and traditional foods[75].

The figures contradict these fears. Of the 310 traditional products analyzed by Que Choisir Ensemble, a French consumer organization similar to Consumer Reports, 62% received an A, B, or C. Products rated D or E were primarily cheeses and processed meats high in saturated fat and salt[76].

The General Confederation of Roquefort has gone so far as to call Nutri-Score a "deceptive tool."[77]. Yet a product's traditional status and place in culinary heritage are no reason to withhold information about its nutritional composition.



Nutri-Score ratings for traditional foods, including Roquefort, foie gras, and rillettes, analyzed by Que Choisir Ensemble, formerly UFC-Que Choisir. Nearly two-thirds received an A, B, or C.

Behind this professed defense of small producers stand three large industrial groups: Lactalis, Savencia, and Sodiaal. Together, they control more than 95% of Roquefort production. Lactalis, the world's largest dairy company, alone produces nearly 80%[78]. Moreover, Hugues Meaudre, president of the General Confederation of Sheep's Milk Producers and Roquefort Manufacturers (CGPLBIR), which launched the anti-Nutri-Score campaign, is also managing director of Lactalis AOP & Terroirs[79,80]. Beyond Roquefort, these groups sell many other cheeses and dairy desserts that often receive poor ratings.

This defense of culinary heritage, described as "gastronationalist" or "gastropopulist," has even been taken up by ministers. Asked in the Senate about Nutri-Score's "unsuitability" for traditional foods, Agriculture Minister Annie Genevard defended Roquefort, Comté, and France's "magnificent cured meats," praising their "remarkable" qualities[81]. A plea that blurs the line between gastronomic or heritage quality and nutritional quality.

The same argument is used against Yuka over nitrites. The processed meat industry invokes not only local heritage but also jobs, arguing that eliminating nitrites would jeopardize small producers that could not afford the cost of reformulation[82]. But here too, the image of the artisan does not hold up well to the facts. In 2023, 4% of the companies in the sector generated 45% of its revenue. And in supermarkets, store brands Herta and Fleury Michon alone represented nearly three-quarters of sales[83].

Stoking Fears of Botulism

The processed meat industry does not stop at heritage and jobs. On nitrites, it also raises the specter of botulism. Yuka flags these additives because of their associated cancer risk: ingested nitrites are classified as probably carcinogenic (Group 2A) by the International Agency for Research on Cancer[84]. Rather than address that issue, the processed meat lobby emphasizes a different, microbiological danger, highlighting nitrites' protective role against botulism and salmonellosis. The conversation shifts from danger to protection. FICT has made this a central message, with a dedicated website, info-nitrites.fr, that gives botulism a prominent place[85,86]. Its president, Bernard Vallat, summed up the position in the press: "There is a health issue that the app does not take into account."[87]. Yet most foodborne botulism cases recorded in France in recent years have been linked to homemade or artisanal processed meats rather than industrial products with controlled levels[88]. By invoking botulism, a serious but very rare disease, the industry sidesteps the cancer risk associated with the nitrites it adds to its products.

Tactic 5

Multiply Legal Proceedings to Exhaust Those Who Raise the Alarm

Some opponents go beyond arguments and sue. The aim is not simply to win. It is to impose financial, legal, and reputational risks heavy enough to exhaust those raising the alarm and divert them from their mission. This is the principle behind a strategic lawsuit against public participation, or SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation).

A Legal Guerrilla Campaign Against Yuka

This was one of the most significant and grueling episodes in Yuka's history. Starting in 2020, the app faced a wave of lawsuits orchestrated by FICT, the processed meat industry's lobbying organization, which represents nearly 300 companies, including Herta, Fleury Michon, Aoste, and Madrange[89].

FICT opened fire on behalf of the entire industry. The trigger was Yuka's very low ratings for processed meats containing nitrites and its link to a petition, launched with Foodwatch and the French League Against Cancer, calling for these additives to be banned[90]. The federation sent Yuka a formal demand letter in October 2020, then sued it in the Paris Commercial Court in January 2021 for unfair and misleading commercial practices and disparagement[91].

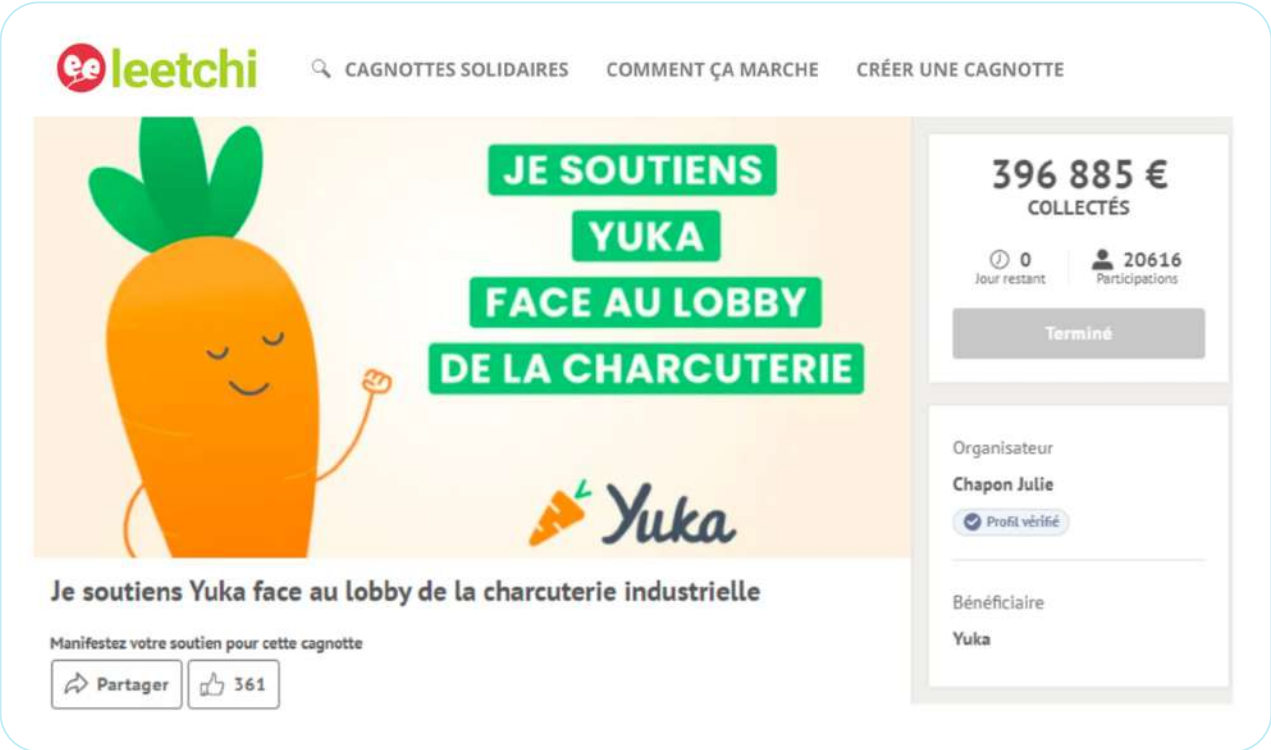
> *Taking legal action isn't just about winning a case. It's also about putting enough financial and reputational pressure on those raising concerns to wear them down and distract them from their mission. This is the principle behind a SLAPP*

Two additional member companies, ABC Industrie and Le Mont de la Coste, then brought their own cases. Both were controlled by Antoine d'Espous, FICT's vice president, and the same law firm handled all three cases[92]. These were therefore not independent disputes but a common strategy presented in court as the defense of "small local businesses."

The courts themselves identified this coordination. In November 2020, FICT's steering committee provided members with a template for a formal demand letter to send to Yuka. Thirteen companies sent identical letters, and three went on to sue. In an October 8, 2025, ruling, the Paris Court of Appeal noted this series of nearly identical letters and court filings. It described an "identical and coordinated strategy" intended to endanger Yuka and "put an end to any information campaign about the possible risks associated with the use of nitrites in processed meat."[93].

The financial stakes threatened the company's survival. Across the three proceedings, the damages sought alone

exceeded €1.4 million, while Yuka's annual net profit was then around €20,000. The app ultimately won all three cases on appeal, but the battle had lasted nearly three years and cost the company close to €500,000. Yuka held on thanks in particular to its users, who contributed to a crowdfunding campaign to finance its defense[94].



The support campaign Yuka launched on the crowdfunding site Leetchi after the 2021 judgments raised nearly €400,000 from some 20,000 contributors, helping pay for its defense.

Nutri-Score Under Pressure

Nutri-Score is not a company that can be sued, but it faces the same logic of intimidation. In June 2016, while Hercberg's research team was evaluating the label's effectiveness, ANIA and major retailers wrote to Agriculture Minister Stéphane Le Foll asking him to "put an end" to work by Professor Hercberg's laboratory. Mediapart, the investigative news site, revealed the letter, dated June 22, 2016[95,96]. The intimidation sometimes took a more direct form. During a public debate, Hercberg, then chair of the PNNS, disclosed a threat from ANIA's president at the time: "If you keep talking about these things, I'll call the minister and you'll be out immediately."

More recently, one manufacturer took the label itself to court. In March 2025, France adopted an updated version of the Nutri-Score by ministerial order, based on an algorithm revised by a European scientific committee. This resulted in stricter ratings of several products, including certain dairy drinks. Lactalis, the world's largest dairy company and a longtime Nutri-Score opponent, challenged the order and the very principle of Nutri-Score before the Council of State, France's highest administrative court, in September 2025[97]. The Council of State rejected Lactalis's argument challenging Nutri-Score's scientific validity, finding no evidence that Nutri-Score "would be likely to mislead consumers, that it would not be objective, or that it would be discriminatory." However, on a question of law, it referred the case to the Court of Justice of the European Union to rule on whether the label is compatible with certain provisions of the 2011 EU regulation known as the Food Information to Consumers Regulation (FIC)[98].

The stakes extend far beyond Lactalis. The Court of Justice will have to decide whether a state may even recommend simplified, color-coded nutrition labeling. If it says no, Nutri-Score would then lose its legal foundation.

A Weapon Used Around the World

This use of litigation is not uniquely French. It is part of an international playbook documented, among other sources, in a review published in The Lancet in 2025. After Mexico adopted warning labels in 2020, with black symbols indicating excess sugar, salt, or saturated fat, the industry filed dozens of constitutional challenges, brought by groups including Coca-Cola and Bimbo[99]. In 2024, Mexico's Supreme Court rejected these challenges and upheld the labeling system[100].

Bernard Vallat: The Same Man Behind the Campaigns Against Nutri-Score and Yuka



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Bernard Vallat's career illustrates how the opposition to Nutri-Score and Yuka has emerged from the same industry circles. A former senior official at the French Ministry of Agriculture, Vallat chaired the National Food Council (CNA) from 2009 to 2016. In 2015, he signed a letter opposing Nutri-Score on behalf of the public advisory body without consulting its members. He then became president of FICT (2017–2023), which sued Yuka over nitrites in 2020. At a March 2020 National Assembly hearing, he acknowledged that nitrites were responsible for at least 1,200 colorectal cancer cases a year in France[101].

Tactic 6

Manufacturing Doubt to Discredit Science That Threatens Economic Interests

Another tactic when science becomes inconvenient is to drown it out with counter-science. Rather than simply refuting inconvenient research, the strategy is to produce other studies that reach conclusions favorable to industry, creating the impression that the debate is still open. Doubt alone is enough: it leads policymakers to delay action and makes the public believe that "opinions are divided."

Industry-Funded Science Against the Nutri-Score

A study published in BMJ Global Health in 2023 reviewed 134 publications on Nutri-Score. The result: a study was 21 times more likely to be unfavorable to Nutri-Score when its authors declared a conflict of interest or when the research was funded by the food industry[102]. Moreover, several of these unfavorable publications provide no new data at all: they are simply opinion pieces that reinterpret existing studies from a critical perspective. They prove nothing, but they swell the ranks of the opposition.

When science challenges its interests, the industry funds its own studies that support its position. Creating doubt is enough: it leads policymakers to delay action and makes the public believe that "experts disagree."

The same study identifies three organizations as being particularly involved in this funding: the Dutch Dairy Association, which represents Dutch dairy manufacturers (including Lactalis through its Leerdammer subsidiary); Federalimentare, the federation of the Italian food industry (to which Ferrero, among others, is affiliated); and the Italian Nutrition Foundation, which is supported by eighteen manufacturers. This is far from a spontaneous scientific debate: it is counter-science backed by economic interests.

As we saw in Tactic 2, the official experiment designed to compare the different labels allowed industry to buy time. It also illustrates its grip on the science: oversight of the experiment was entrusted not to independent researchers, but to a committee largely controlled by industry itself. It was co-chaired by the head of the French Fund for Food and Health, an organization funded by major food companies, and included representatives from ANIA and major retailers. Serge Hercberg, the creator of Nutri-Score, had been excluded. Several researchers criticized the committee's lack of impartiality[103]. Following press revelations in 2016, the protocol was partially revised before the experiment began. The experiment subsequently confirmed that Nutri-Score was the most effective label.

A Favorable Report on Nitrites

Manufacturing doubt does not always require strength in numbers. In the case of nitrites, a single report was enough. In November 2020, the French Academy of Agriculture published a report concluding that the link between nitrites and cancer had not been formally established, while emphasizing their protective role against botulism[104]. However, the French Academy of Agriculture is a learned society devoted to agriculture and food, with no particular expertise in oncology: its name may inspire confidence, but that does not make it a health authority. The report's content has also been challenged. A parliamentary inquiry into nitrite salts questioned its impartiality: several of its authors had ties to the processed meat industry, most of the people interviewed belonged to the processed meat and pork sectors (such as IFIP and FICT), and no oncologist was involved in the work[105].

It was in court that this report carried the most weight. Before the first judges hearing the case brought in Aix-en-Provence by processed meat company ABC Industrie, some of the numerous international studies cited by Yuka were disregarded because they were in English and highly technical. By contrast, the French Academy of Agriculture report, written in French, short, and official-looking, was considered a source with the same level of scientific evidence as reports from ANSES or EFSA[106]. Manufacturing doubt therefore also means producing counter-studies that are easy to invoke, both in the media and before a judge.

Funding Doubt: A Global Strategy

This manufacturing of doubt extends far beyond Nutri-Score and Yuka: it is a global food industry strategy, largely inspired by the tobacco and alcohol lobbies. A review published in The Lancet in 2025 confirms this: scientific reviews examining sugar-sweetened beverages and obesity were five times more likely to conclude that there was no association when they were funded by industry[107].

The practice is nothing new. In the 1960s, the sugar industry secretly paid Harvard researchers to downplay the link between sugar and heart disease and shift attention toward fat. Their review, published in 1967 without disclosing the funding, influenced decades of nutritional recommendations; the industry's role was not revealed until 2016[108].

More recently, around 2015, Coca-Cola funded the Global Energy Balance Network, a network of researchers tasked with shifting responsibility for obesity away from diet and toward lack of exercise[109]. When The New York Times revealed in 2015 that Coca-Cola was behind the network, the Global Energy Balance Network was dissolved shortly afterward.

Funding research to manufacture convenient doubt is therefore a well-established strategy for the industry.

Tactic 7

Turning a Government into a Lobbying Vehicle

There is an ultimate level of lobbying: an entire government placing its diplomacy, regulation, and judicial system at the service of industrial interests. Italy has become an illustration of this phenomenon, to the point that researchers refer to it as "state lobbying"[110]. With iconic products such as Parmesan, Parma ham, and Gorgonzola receiving poor ratings, the government has made defending them a national cause. Italy has thus deployed, on a countrywide scale, all the tactics described so far.

Campaigning with Lobbying Arguments

The first front is domestic, where the debate is anything but spontaneous. The research team behind Nutri-Score analyzed 93 articles published in the Italian press at the height of the controversy in 2019 and 2020. The actors most frequently cited in these articles were neither doctors, researchers, nor health agencies. They were two economic organizations: Coldiretti, the country's largest agricultural union, and Federalimentare, the federation of the Italian food industry. Their arguments were consistently the same three: Made in Italy products would be penalized; diets should be assessed as a whole rather than individual products; and educating consumers would be preferable to rating products. Politicians and the media repeated these arguments almost word for word[111].

Matteo Salvini was one of the first to turn Nutri-Score into an election issue. In December 2019, the leader of the far-right League party was campaigning for elections in Emilia-Romagna, a region known for its cheeses and cured meats. He portrayed the label as a Brussels-led attack on the Mediterranean diet and Made in Italy products[112].

The rhetoric then reached the highest levels of government, accompanied by glaring errors. Agriculture Minister Francesco Lollobrigida circulated a poster intended to show that Nutri-Score penalizes Italian products while favoring ultra-processed foods. Seven of the eight examples shown were incorrect: pasta was rated E when it is actually rated A, Coca-Cola was rated A when it is actually E, and wine was presented as being penalized even though Nutri-Score does not apply to alcoholic beverages[113].

In 2024, Giorgia Meloni's government went even further by proposing an amendment to the Italian Constitution. The text would commit the government to protecting "products that symbolize national identity," such as Parmesan and Parma ham. The agriculture minister himself presented the constitutional amendment as a safeguard against Nutri-Score[114].

Behind the defense of traditional foods, one manufacturer occupies a special position: Ferrero, the maker of Nutella, which is rated E. An expert interviewed in the study cited above describes the company as the real

driving force behind the anti-Nutri-Score coalition formed with Federalimentare and Coldiretti. This alliance left a tangible trace: a document published in Brussels opposing the very idea of rating foods, written by the research institute Nomisma and funded by Ferrero[115].

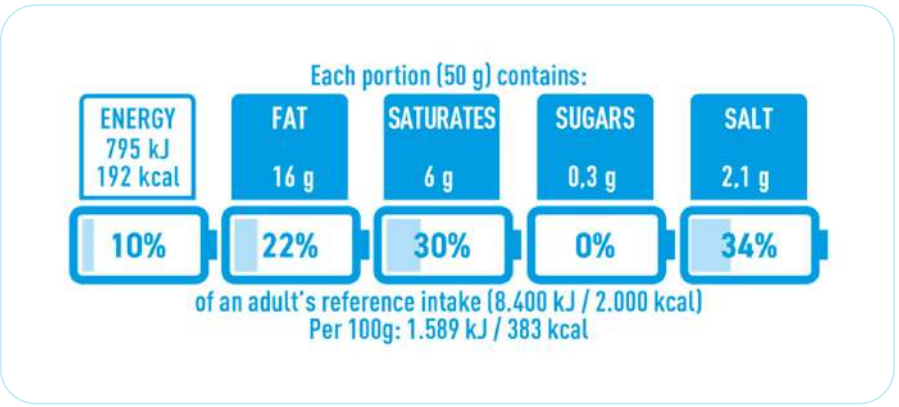
Burying the European Label in Brussels

The battle then shifted to Brussels. In 2020, the European Commission announced planned to introduce a single mandatory nutrition label throughout the European Union. Nutri-Score, already adopted by several countries, appeared to be the front-runner. Italy quickly pushed back: in September 2020, Italy and six other countries submitted a document to European agriculture ministers opposing color-coded labels[116]. Italian Agriculture Minister Teresa Bellanova argued in favor of a future system that would exempt protected-designation products and olive oil.

What happened next took place behind the scenes in Brussels. Foodwatch and the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) obtained and published internal European Commission documents. They reveal that in 2022, Italian diplomats held a series of meetings with the European Commission accompanied by Federalimentare, the Italian food industry lobby[117]. They argued that Nutri-Score "has no scientific basis." Some of their arguments bordered on the absurd: poor ratings for cocoa-based products, they claimed, would cause exports from producing countries to fall, which would "increase immigration to Europe"[118]. The result is clear: the proposal for a European label, expected by the end of 2022, never materialized. And the plan for a mandatory EU-wide label is now at a standstill[119].

Imposing an Alternative Label by Decree

To oppose Nutri-Score in Brussels, Italy could not simply say no: it needed to offer an alternative. The country therefore adopted a tactic already used by industry (see Tactic 2): creating an alternative label, but with a tool no industry federation has at its disposal: a government decree. In late 2020, four ministries made NutrInform Battery the country's official nutrition label, even before the publication of the studies intended to demonstrate its effectiveness[120].



NutrInform Battery, the nutrition label introduced by decree by the Italian government in late 2020. Designed in the form of batteries, it displays the percentage of daily nutritional requirements provided by a serving, with serving sizes determined by the manufacturers themselves.

The label resembles a phone battery. It displays neither a score nor a color: it simply indicates the amount of calories, fat, sugar, and salt in one serving of the product as a percentage of daily requirements. There are two problems: these figures are difficult to interpret, and serving sizes are determined by manufacturers themselves, who have an incentive to reduce them to display more favorable values. Studies confirm that this label is less easily understood than Nutri-Score, including by Italian consumers[121]. But its effectiveness matters little. NutrInform primarily serves as an argument for Italy in European negotiations: it allows the country to claim that

an alternative to Nutri-Score exists. On store shelves, it has remained virtually invisible, adopted mainly by Ferrero.

Mobilizing the Competition Authority

Even Italy's competition authority, the AGCM, has been mobilized by lobbying groups in the fight against Nutri-Score. On November 5, 2021, it opened six proceedings on the same day: five against retailers, including Carrefour, that displayed Nutri-Score on products sold in Italy, and one against Yuka, which had launched in the country a year earlier[122]. The proceedings against the app originated with a complaint from Confagricoltura, one of Italy's main agricultural unions, which notably represents the cheese and cured meat sectors[123].

For Yuka, the proceedings were closed in July 2022: no violation was found, and the app simply agreed to explain its methodology more clearly[124]. For Nutri-Score, the outcome was more significant: Carrefour agreed to remove the label from its Italian protected-designation products and traditional specialties sold in the country[125]. Confagricoltura celebrated its victory in a press release with an unequivocal title: "How We Defeated Nutri-Score."[126].

A Political and Media Campaign Against Yuka

In March 2026, the app once again came under attack. Mirco Carloni, a member of Parliament from Matteo Salvini's far-right League party and chair of the Chamber of Deputies' Agriculture Committee, publicly called on the government to take action against an "unscientific" app that he claimed threatened Made in Italy products[127].

The press followed suit. Within ten days, three major national newspapers (Il Giornale, Il Sole 24 Ore, and Libero) echoed Carloni's initiative, publishing exactly the same criticisms of Yuka and using the same examples[128-130]. Parmesan, Parma ham, mortadella, and Modena vinegar, they argued, received poor ratings despite their protected status. They also argued that rating foods per 100 grams was misleading for products consumed in small quantities. In Il Sole 24 Ore, Italy's leading financial newspaper, the agriculture minister went further, calling Yuka's algorithm "completely flawed."

The campaign finally reached the European Parliament. On March 30, 2026, MEP Silvia Sardone, also a member of the League and already highly active for years in opposing Nutri-Score, submitted a written question to the European Commission, which is generally required to provide an official response. She asked whether the scientific basis of rating apps had been assessed, whether their effects on competition had been measured, and what action had been taken to "protect" traditional products that such apps allegedly penalize. The objective is clear: to push the European Union itself to take action against these apps[131]. The arguments are, word for word, the same ones used against Nutri-Score since 2019.

Conclusion

From the first attack on the “five-color label” in 2014 to the written question submitted to the European Parliament in 2026, the lobbying playbook has remained unchanged: discredit, confuse, conceal one’s involvement, shift the debate, litigate, manufacture doubt, and ultimately mobilize an entire government. These tactics, honed by the tobacco industry and later the sugar industry, carry a cost even when they fail: three years of legal proceedings and nearly €500,000 for Yuka, months of delays for Nutri-Score, and a European nutrition label brought to a standstill. Lobbying does not need to win to be effective; it only needs to delay.

On the substance, however, these strategies have failed, thanks to the strength of the scientific evidence and public support. That is the purpose of this article: to describe these tactics so that people can learn to recognize them. Because recognizing them already takes away some of their power.

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