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Commercial determinants of health: A new framework for studying relationships between food corporations and food charities in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Relationships between food charities and commercial partners have been extensively critiqued by food charity scholars, particularly those that involve food corporations supporting charitable hunger relief whilst at the same time holding power over key drivers of food insecurity. This has important implications for health-related research on food charity that involves input from corporate donors. This paper argues that there is an opportunity to expand the field of health research on food insecurity and food charity by engaging with the Commercial Determinants of Health (CDoH) framework, to provide a new way of theoretically and analytically framing evidence and critiques on food charity with corporate involvement. The paper puts the CDoH framework into practice through an empirical study of food charity – food corporation relationships in the UK.

Through the CDoH analysis, the findings reveal the different corporate practices that are employed in these relationships, and the disparity between these and the practices corporations could be using to address food insecurity. The framework provides important new avenues for research to further evidence and explore the deep ironies and inequalities embedded in these relationships, and the ways in which corporations leverage charitable efforts to improve their image, whilst holding significant power over key drivers of the very food insecurity that these charities seek to relieve.By applying the CDoH framework, research on food insecurity, food charity and the role of corporations can play an active part in the wider moves in public health towards understanding the impact of corporate entities and interests on health and equity.

1. Introduction

Food charity systems have developed extensively across countries in the Global North, starting first in North America in the 1980s. There is now a vibrant international literature examining systemic, dynamic, and experiential elements of charitable food systems, spanning several disciplines (Arcuri, 2019; Garthwaite, 2016; Loopstra et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2016). This includes research from a public health perspective, which has looked at the role of surplus food in food charity provision (Tinnemann et al., 2012), undertaken nutrition trials based in food bank settings (Seligman et al., 2018), and assessed the nutritional quality of food provided in food banks (Oldroyd et al., 2022).

As national food charity networks and organisations have grown, partnerships between private companies and these national charities have become extensive. The most recent annual reports of the largest UK food charities, namely, the Trussell Trust (2023) and FareShare (2023) highlight donors and partners from financial services, pharmaceuticals, utilities, logistics, manufacturing, agri-food and retail. The same is found in reports from Food Banks Canada (2023) and Feeding America (2022). From the research that is available, these partnerships have become increasingly important to the work of food charity systems and individual organisations within them (Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018; Williams et al., 2016).

Partnerships between food charities and food corporations take different forms and can include one or several types of support. A key aspect is often the donation of surplus food for redistribution through food charities with examples of research on this from Japan (Kimura, 2018), Slovenia (Leskošek and Zidar, 2020), the UK (Caplan, 2017) and USA (Warshawsky, 2016). Food retailers have also given charities funding to buy food (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2020) and given charities a proportion of the profits from particular products (Fisher, 2017). Relationships can also incorporate other types of support and involve for

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example corporate staff working as charity board members (Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018), staff being sent to charities for volunteering days and senior corporate staff providing mentoring to their charitable counterparts (Lambie-Mumford, 2017), as well as making rooms and spaces available to charities (Pulker et al., 2018).

There are longstanding critiques of corporate-food charity relationships, which highlight the inherent power dynamics and inequalities which are both embedded in and reinforced by these relationships (Fisher, 2017; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 2011). It has been argued that corporate – charity relationships can further embed food charity responses, and depoliticise the issue of hunger (Riches, 2018; Warshawsky, 2011). Poppendieck (1998) also highlighted how reliance on corporate donations can also lead to a tempering of advocacy work by charities. However, in the case of the relationships food charities have with food corporations specifically, there is one critique which is especially problematic. This is that food corporations are supporting charitable hunger relief efforts whilst at the same time holding power and influence over key determinants of hunger (Hamann et al., 2011; Fisher, 2017; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2016).

Whilst commercial actors do work within legal and regulatory contexts, they hold significant power in food systems (Clapp, 2020; Parsons, 2020). This includes power over key upstream drivers of food insecurity, notably the availability and accessibility of food. Corporations have influence over each of the four dimensions of food security outlined by the FAO: the supply side dimensions of the physical availability of food, people's economic and physical access to food, food utilization including sufficient nutritional intake, and the stability of these three dimensions over time (FAO, 2008).

Food corporations shape the physical availability and accessibility of food through the structural power they hold over food production and retail infrastructure (Clapp and Scrinis, 2016). This includes determining the location of different kinds of retail outlets, which can result in reliance on smaller stores with more limited choice and poorer quality fresh food, particularly in rural areas (Kaiser et al., 2017; Pollard et al., 2014).

As a determinant of nutritional status, corporate power over food utilization includes not only determining the availability and affordability of healthy food, but also the nutritional content of own-brand supermarket products and the amount of foods that are high in salt, sugar and/or saturated fats (HFSS) on shelves, and their promotion (Remnant and Adams, 2015; Wallis and Moore, 2023). Research has highlighted the necessity for people experiencing food insecurity to take up supermarket promotional offers as part of household budgeting strategies, and that these offers are most often on products that are HFSS (Stone et al., 2024; Bennett et al., 2020).

For economic and physical access to food, corporations hold the power to determine the wages of their staff, as well as the terms of food supply contracts (and therefore labour elsewhere in the supply chain). The UK Living Wage Foundation (2021) found that 42% of supermarket workers in the UK earn below the real living wage. In February 2023, 25.8% of food sector workers were experiencing household food insecurity (Food Foundation, n.dFood Foundation). Trade Union data published in 2022 found that 8% of Asda workers had used a food bank in the last year, substantially higher than the rate for the general population, which was 3% in 2022 (Food Standards Agency, 2023; GMB Union, 2022). Similar results were found from a survey of other food sector workers by the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAW) (2023) which found that 7.5% of the respondents reported at least once having had to rely on a food bank to feed their household during the pandemic, jumping to 17% in their latest survey during the cost of living crisis.

Food companies also determine food availability and prices in outlets. The UK has seen food price rises in recent years, reaching a high of 19.2% in March 2023 from March 2022 (ONS, 2023). In March 2023 35% of consumers surveyed by the Food Standards Agency (2023) reported they were feeling worried about affording food in the next month. Across these three areas of availability, access and nutrition, corporations also play a role in shaping the stability of food security (FAO, 2008). This includes their roles in controlling food price rises, maintaining stock availability, and the levels of pay and working conditions they provide as employers and that they influence through contracts.

Despite the importance of these practices for shaping access to food, and clear opportunities for corporations to improve food security outcomes by adapting their practices, instead what we have seen over the last few decades is food corporations investing increasing amounts in food charity partnerships as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) work. CSR and cause marketing have become industry standard practice by Big Food groups including Nestlé and Coca-Cola (Dorfman et al., 2012; Schmidt et al., 2020). CSR has evolved to include companies' economic, ethical, legal, philanthropic responsibilities, and fiduciary responsibilities to stakeholders (Dorfman et al., 2012, p1 - p2). CSR tactics since the 2000s have been used repeatedly to cover the health and environmental harms that companies contribute to. For example, CSR activity has worked to shift narratives around food consumption and obesity to be framed around personal choice and responsibility (Nixon et al., 2015). In parallel, companies have been coordinating and funding nonprofit groups and industrial lobby groups to attack governmental action and regulation, and pushing for self-regulation (Nixon et al., 2015). Corporate self-regulatory programmes and actions on obesity, as Nixon et al. explains, further fuels corporate framing that companies are 'a part of the solution' but solely on their terms, used as part of brand-promoting marketing strategies (2015, p2233). The influence corporations have over the framing of environmental and public health challenges, and the CSR activity underpinning it, allows companies to remain in control, to approach these issues from their preferred, profitable mechanisms, and gain positive accolades for engaging with issues which their business practices exacerbate (Dorfman et al., 2005; Schmidt et al., 2020).

This literature on other types of CSR work undertaken by food companies provides important insights for research on relationships between food charities and food companies. CSR research suggests that such relationships can be used to obfuscate the harms caused by corporate practices (in this case food insecurity), and that it is important to study them with corporations as the unit of analysis. A number of frameworks have been developed to understand and examine the role of corporations in policy and health outcomes, including the Policy Dystopia and Corporate Political Activity models (Ulucanlar et al., 2016, 2023). However, as this paper demonstrates, the Commercial Determinants of Health (CDoH) approach provides a particularly helpful framework for exploring relationships between food companies and food charities, with a focus on the role of corporations, and an emphasis on exploring the disparity between the role food corporations have in driving food insecurity and their high-profile role in supporting charitable food aid.

The paper puts the CDoH framework into practice through an empirical study of food charity – food corporation relationships in the UK context. This study contributes to public health research by expanding the reach of the CDoH framework to new topics and disciplines. It moves the field beyond a traditional focus on specific products and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs); for example, obesity, soft drinks and other products containing high amounts of salt, sugar and fat (Barnett-Naghshineh et al., 2023; Moodie et al., 2013; Zwierczyk et al., 2023). Employing the CDoH framework in studies of food insecurity and food charity also answers recent calls to broaden CDoH research to new disciplinary perspectives (Hagenaars et al., 2024). The paper also develops the growing field of social determinants of health research on food charity, by expanding it to engage with commercial determinants (Smith and Thompson, 2022).

The paper addresses a key empirical gap in the international evidence base on food corporation – food charity relationships. The last decade has seen a range of research on these relationships in Canada, Japan, Slovenia, South Africa and the USA (Fisher, 2017; Kimura, 2018;

Leskošek and Zidar, 2020; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Riches, 2011; Warshawsky, 2016). Whilst important studies have charted key developments and trends in the UK context, there remains a lack of detailed research on these relationships in the UK (Fisher, 2017; Lambie-Mumford, 2017). Williams and May (2022) have called for more work in the UK specifically on the entanglements between food charities and corporate power.

2. Methods

To understand the involvement of key UK food corporations in food charity work, a document analysis of corporate, foundation and charity reports was undertaken. The CDoH framework was used as an analytical tool for exploring the corporate practices involved in these relationships. The broad consensus definition of Commercial Determinants of Health refers to the '*the systems, practices, and pathways through which commercial actors drive health and equity*' (Gilmore et al., 2023, p1195). Seven key corporate practices are identified that influence health: Political, Scientific, Marketing, Supply chain and waste, Labour and employment, Financial, and Reputational Management. This definition is specifically designed to encompass the complexity of the links between the commercial sector and health, and the social, political, and economic systems involved (Gilmore et al., 2023).

2.1. Data

Data was collected from the 10 leading grocery stores and 10 leading dining brands based on Kantar Worldpanel (2023) and YouGov (2023) data. These were Aldi, Asda, Co-op, Iceland, Lidl, Morrisons, Ocado, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose, Burger King, Costa Coffee, Domino's, Greggs, KFC, Krispy Kreme, McDonald's, Pizza Express, Pizza Hut and Subway. Details of the document selection process are outlined in Fig. 1.

The reports included corporate end of financial year and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reports, as well as reports from corporate foundations. To triangulate the data collected from the corporate and foundation sources, annual reports of key charities (see Fig. 1) were also analysed. For further triangulation, we gathered supplementary data for key activities that we identified in the reports, including Asda's "Fight Hunger, Create Change" campaign report and website and press release data related to Marcus Rashford's Child Food Poverty Taskforce and its associated #EndChildFoodPoverty coalition.

The final dataset comprised 57 corporate reports, seven foundation and programme reports, and three charity reports, for a total of 67 annual reports, and 37 press releases. It is important to note that some of the reports covered the COVID-19 response period, which would have had an impact on the level of donations within the timeframe covered by our dataset.

2.2. Analysis

The reports were analysed thematically. The key themes explored through the analysis, in line with the aims of the study, were: the format of the relationship (including outputs and outcomes); motivation and rationale; terminology and framing used to describe the activity; and charity partner details. A pilot analysis of one corporate case was undertaken to test and refine the analysis framework. Additional sub-codes within these themes were developed inductively throughout the analysis. The analysis was conducted on cloud-based collaboration software, and both researchers were involved in the analysis of the reports. The reports were divided between the researchers, with one leading on coding and the other checking and reviewing the analysis.

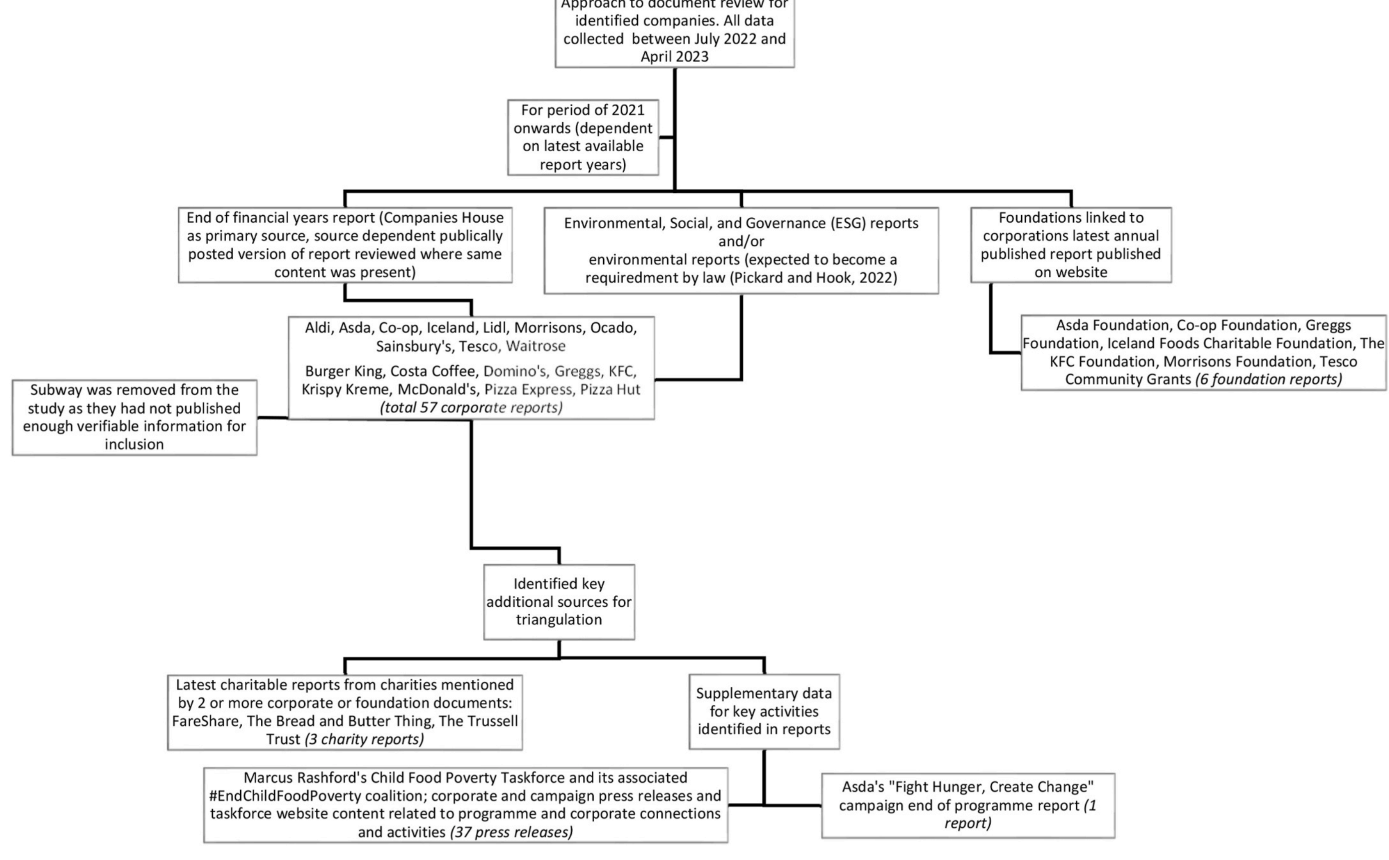

Fig. 1. Data selection process.

Table 1
'Big Four' supermarkets charitable and community contribution.

Supermarket and 2021 market share	Food Charity Funding (£)	Infrastructure and meals	Overall Charity Funding (£)
Asda *14.4% market share 12 weeks ending 03.01.21 (Kantar Worldpanel, 2024)*	Asda's Fight Hunger CreateChange programme involved £25 m of funding and was launched in 2018 (Asda, 2021a, 2021b). It had a variety of components and was funded by the Walmart Foundation (Walmart Foundation, n.d). Asda's £5 m Covid-19 donation to FareShare and the Trussell Trust (provided in the context of the Fight Hunger programme) was used by FareShare to remove their charity fee so 3,000 charities could receive free food for three months, and increased the amount of food FareShare could buy through the Surplus with Purpose fund (Asda, 2021b). The Trussell Trust used the Covid-19 Asda funding to create an online and phone referral system for parcels to be delivered directly to people's doors, recruit and train volunteers, improve digital referral services, and open a new grants fund of £1 m to rebuild services and respond to an increased number of people facing hardship through a helpline (Asda, 2021b).	From the Fight Hunger, Create Change programme: FareShare received 27 big chillers, 13 freezers and 9 forklifts (FareShare, n.d); FareShare received investment in volunteering, employability and technology (FareShare, n.d); The programme enabled FareShare to give fresh food to projects in the Trussell Trust network (FareShare, n.d); Asda gave £5.7 m for Trussell Trust food banks to improve their accessibility, infrastructure (such as storage space) and services (like creating support services) since 2018 (Asda, 2021b); Asda donated meals through its operations and from stores and depots, adding up to over 100 m meals donated since 2018 (Asda, 2021b); Asda installed food bank collection trolleys at Asda stores and held two annual drives run by Asda Community Champions (Asda, 2021a, 2021b).	Total value of community contributions stated for 2020: £28.5 m (inclusive of food charity support) (Asda, 2021a).
Morrisons *10.4% market share 12 weeks ending 03.01.21 (Kantar Worldpanel, 2024)*		Reported £10 m worth of food donations to 'restock Britain's food banks' in March 2020, with 2.1 m meals redistributed to FareShare in 2021 (Wm Morrison Supermarket Plc, 2021a, 2021b).	Customers and colleagues donated £8.7 m in cash, and £7.9 m in Community Champion time, and £10 m in kind in 2020/21 (inclusive of food charity support) (Wm Morrison Supermarket Plc, 2021b).
Sainsbury's *15.9% market share 12 weeks ending 03.01.21 (Kantar Worldpanel, 2024)*	£3 m donation to FareShare for pandemic support (J Sainsbury Plc, 2021); Facilitation of financial support through pandemic and customer donations (J Sainsbury's Plc, 2021; 2022).	Creation of a digital donation programme through Groceries Online and community and charity partnerships (J Sainsbury's Plc, 2021; 2022); In 2021 funded and supported distribution of over 23 m meals via 3,945 unique charities (J Sainsbury's Plc, 2021).	£35 m raised for charities and good causes in 2020/21 (inclusive of food charity support) (J Sainsbury Plc, 2021).
Tesco *27.3% market share 12 weeks ending 03.01.21 (Kantar Worldpanel, 2024)*	Reported Covid-19 related funding to the Trussell Trust (Tesco Plc, 2021a, 2021b).	Donated £60 m worth of meals in 2020 and £15 m of food donated across partnerships with FareShare and the Trussell Trust (Tesco Plc, 2021a, 2021b; The Trussell Trust's relationship with Tesco included National Food Collection events (Tesco Plc, 2021a, 2021b).	£129 m donated via corporate giving and fundraising in 2020/21 (inclusive of food charity support) (Tesco Plc, 2021a).

3. Findings: Food charity – food corporation relationships in the UK

Through our analysis we identified that five of the seven key corporate practices identified in the CDoH framework were used by corporations in their food charity work. These were: reputational practices, supply chain and waste management practices, marketing practices, labour and employment practices and political practices. Overall, ten of the companies worked with multiple food charity organisations in a range of ways. These were Aldi, Asda, Co-op, Greggs, Iceland, Lidl, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose. Only one of these companies (Greggs) is a dining brand; the rest are supermarkets. Burger King, Krispy Kreme, Pizza Express and Pizza Hut made no - or unclear - references to working with food charities. Domino's (2022) referenced one surplus food redistribution charity (FareShare), but did not provide any information on the nature of the relationship. The ways in which companies were involved in food charity work fell into four categories: funding, food donations, support for food charity infrastructure and support building capacity.

The UK's so called 'big four' supermarkets, Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco, all reported large scale initiatives with food charities, involving several millions of pounds worth of donations, and/or meals worth of food. Table 1 above highlights the four supermarkets' involvement, as found in our data.

These Big Four supermarkets appear to be doing more and have more longstanding initiatives with food charities compared to other supermarkets. However, in the year of the reporting, Lidl and Ocado also donated significant amounts of funding (£4 m from Ocado in 2020) and/or meals worth of food (Lidl committing to 25 m meals over next 5 years, reported in 2019/2020 financial year) (Lidl, 2021; Ocado Retail Ltd, 2021). Waitrose report donating food, and that FareShare was a beneficiary of financial donations through their Community Matters programme as well as food donations through their Farms to Family programme (FareShare, n.d, John Lewis Partnership plc, 2022a).

Of the dining brands, Greggs has a long standing commitment (since the 1990s) to supporting breakfast club provision, funding the Greggs Foundation and providing bread for toast (Greggs, 2021; Greggs Foundation, 2022). McDonald's (2021) partnered with FareShare in October 2020 making a 1 m meal equivalent donation.

3.1. Reputational management practices

The analysis revealed examples of the ways in which companies frame their CSR work and how they present themselves and their engagement with food charity and food insecurity as a social issue. Corporate reports are an important tool for understanding this presentation, and the analysis revealed that corporations used varying terminology in relation to their work with food charities and to describe the issue of food insecurity. Some used terms such as food poverty (Asda, Co-op, Domino's, Greggs, Lidl, Morrisons, McDonald's, Sainsbury's, Tesco) and/or food insecurity (Asda, Co-op, Greggs, Lidl, Morrisons, Sainsbury's). Some reports reflected that their activity working with food charities did not address the root causes of poverty or food insecurity, with Asda stating:

'Donating over £25 million since 2018 to these two leading charities, together we'll fight poverty and create long-term, positive change. As a retailer, the greatest contribution we can make is alleviating the symptoms of poverty by providing more meals and putting edible surplus food to good use. However, the issue of poverty is highly complex, and there shouldn't be a need for food banks, so whilst we do what we can to provide people with food, we're also on a mission to tackle the root causes of poverty' (Asda, 2021a, p63).

Notably, the 'root causes of poverty' are not linked in these reports to employment practices, or other structural drivers of poverty over which Asda has direct influence. Others flagged their work with the Marcus Rashford #EndChildFoodPoverty campaign (discussed below), highlighting that policy lobbying work was a key way in which they were working to address the root causes of hunger (Co-op, McDonald's, Waitrose):

'In addition, Waitrose is a member of the Child Food Poverty Task Force which calls for an end to child hunger, and we promoted the Full Time campaign, led by Marcus Rashford and Tom Kerridge, to inspire families on low incomes to cook healthy meals with few ingredients and minimal equipment' (John Lewis Partnership plc, 2022a, p53).

In both of the above examples, companies are presenting themselves as doing their best to alleviate food insecurity, and presenting this as a social issue outside of their sphere of influence. Lidl provides an example of a retailer conflating food charity work with a solution to food insecurity, and relates this activity to consumer expectations for work in this space:

'As a food retailer we are well placed to tackle food insecurity, through corporate donations or redistribution surplus. Our recent customer research on community impact was clear in highlighting an expectation to see us support local communities, with food poverty as the top priority (cited by 56% of customers)' (Lidl, 2021, p22).

Here, Lidl is presenting themselves as responding to customer expectations and are presenting the corporation as playing an active part in responding to food insecurity through donations to food charities.

3.2. *Supply chain and waste practices*

Our findings suggest that surplus food redistribution continues to be a key and growing aspect of these relationships and corporate waste reduction initiatives. Supermarkets reported their surplus donations in different ways. Asda did not give a figure for the amount of surplus food redistributed, but they note that since 2013 they have worked with FareShare to donate their surplus food, including food that is 'quality rejected' at their chilled depots (2022). Morrisons quantified their surplus donations via their Unsold Food Programme by the number of products, donating 3 million in 2020 (2021b). The most common metric offered by companies was measuring by tonnes, as highlight in Table 2.

Depending on the organisation, most utilised the terminology of 'surplus' food and 'donation' but occasionally it was framed as 'waste'. For example, Morrisons switch between terms depending on the framing, with food waste and food waste reduction as key goals, then switching to 'food surplus' once it begins to talk about redistribution (Wm Morrison Supermarkets Plc, 2021a, p25). Co-op similarly uses multiple terms, stating their long-standing mission of reducing food waste, then pairing it with their Foodshare programme that shares 'surplus food' (Co-op, 2022, p21).Asda detailed in their strategic commitments a goal to reduce food waste by 20% by 2025 (2022). The supermarket comments that total food surplus increased in 2021 due to colleague absences due to Covid-19, which impacted their markdown and donation processes; and supply chain and forecasting difficulties (Asda, 2022, p55).

Other supermarkets also made note of their mission to reduce food waste. Tesco cites their encouragement of their suppliers to publish their food waste data, allowing them to confirm in September 2020 that 155,000 tonnes of food waste were reduced in the supply chain. In a case vignette Tesco's supplier Booker Wholesale donated 2,600 tonnes of unsold food (equivalent of 6.2 m meals) to local communities and charities (Tesco Plc, 2021a). Sainsbury's reported a 13% operational food waste reduction from their 2019/2020 baseline, stating when they cannot donate surplus to charity foods are sent to UK farms for animal feed (J Sainsbury Plc, 2022).

3.3. *Marketing practices*

The analysis identified examples of food charity work by companies which related to the marketing and sale of specific products sold by the company. For example, Aldi ran a campaign selling a Marcus Rashford plush toy 'Radishford', with £10,000 of proceeds going to Magic Breakfast, as reported in press releases (Aldi, 2021a, 2021b). Our data also showed that Greggs ran a campaign donating 25p to Breakfast Clubs for certain items purchased, such as Ribena (Greggs, 2021; Greggs Foundation, 2022). Examples of the use of advertising were also identified. Co-op cancelled its scheduled Easter 2020 TV advertising campaign and donated the airtime (valued at £2.5 m) towards a new charitable advert with FareShare (Co-op, 2020a). The advert launched a new scheme for Co-op customers to support FareShare, allowing them to donate in-store or via a text line (Co-op, 2020a). McDonald's 2020 Christmas advertisement featured a cover of Forever Young by Becky Hill, where 10p from every UK download went to FareShare (McDonald, 2020a).

3.4. *Labour and employment practices*

Within this practice, we identified two companies with financial bonuses or remuneration linked to charitable food initiatives. At Morrisons, in their Directors' remuneration report statement one board member had a personal performance summary to support their awarded bonus, which included facilitating the distribution of the £10 m of food to food banks (Wm Morrison Supermarkets Plc, 2021a). At Greggs, food redistribution was a named bonus goal, with up to 5% of bonus given for achieving targets, with 4.7% awarded for that financial year (Greggs plc, 2022).

3.5. *Political practices*

The analysis revealed examples of political practices in our dataset including support for the Marcus Rashford #EndChildFoodPoverty campaign, and the National Food Strategy recommendations. The England and Manchester United football player Marcus Rashford led a campaign against child food poverty in 2020. It originated in the problems associated with free school meal replacements during the COVID-19 school closures (poor standards of food boxes and lack of

Table 2
Tonnes of surplus food donated.

Company	Description of donations described by weight in tonnes
Co-op	Co-op broke up their donation in 2021 specifying their donation of 5,775 tonnes of food and 1,177 tonnes of surplus (2022)
Greggs	Greggs donated over 1,000 tonnes to their charity partners including FareShare (2021)
Iceland	Iceland donated 264 tonnes of surplus food from their depots (2020/21) (Iceland Foods Limited, 2021)
McDonald's	McDonalds donated 400 tonnes of food to a range of charities in 2020, mentioning FareShare, framed as distributing surplus stock (McDonald's Restaurants Limited, 2021)
Sainsbury's	Sainsbury's reported donating 4,072 tonnes of surplus food to local communities (2021/22) (2022)
Tesco	Tesco 70,000 tonnes of surplus food to charities (2020/21) (2021a)
Waitrose	Waitrose donated 1,841 tonnes of surplus food via FareShare (2021/22) (John Lewis Partnership Plc, 2022b)

forthcoming commitment to providing support over school holidays) (#EndChildFoodPoverty, n.d). In the autumn of 2020 the campaign led a parliamentary petition to end child food poverty, a writing campaign encouraging people to write to their MP and lobbying for the government to implement key recommendations that were published in the National Food Strategy (#EndChildFoodPoverty, n.d). The three key asks of the campaign were to first extend the Holiday Activity and Food Programme to all areas of England and to all children entitled to Free School Meals (which was supported by the government at the campaign's conclusion). Second, to increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 (which was supported) and third expand free school meals to all children under age 16 where a guardian or parent is a recipient of Universal Credit or an equivalent benefit (not supported by the government) (#EndChildFoodPoverty, n.d, p1). Several companies in our sample got involved to support the campaign and provide additional support to customers in partnership with the campaign including Tesco, Co-op, Sainsbury's, Lidl, Iceland, Morrisons and McDonald's (Co-op, 2020b; Lidl, 2020; Iceland Foods Limited, 2021; McDonald's, 2020b; Morrisons, 2021b; Sainsbury's., 2021; Tesco, 2021).

This campaign focused on policy asks that did not impact corporate interests, instead focusing heavily on school food and social security. When the Rashford campaign evolved into the 2021 'Full Time' programme with Tom Kerridge, the focus moved on to combatting child hunger by increasing parent, carer, and children's cooking skills and confidence (Co-op, 2021; Morrisons, 2021a). In this form, the activity became another example of marketing practice with Morrisons suggesting customers pick up the programme recipe cards in stores and use it in their weekly shops (Morrisons, 2021a).

4. Discussion: Commercial determinants of food insecurity and the food charity activity of UK food corporations

Our findings reveal the extensive work being done by UK food corporations in the food charity sector. The levels of investment and involvement in these initiatives have clearly grown in scale and scope in the UK over the last decade. Through employing Commercial Determinants of Health as a theoretical and empirical lens, it is possible to explore the disparity between the practices UK corporations could be using to address food insecurity, and the practices they employ in their food charity work which, previous research has highlighted, has a very limited impact on food security (Loopstra and Lambie-Mumford, 2023).

Instead of facilitating change towards fairer food systems and socio-economic structures, our findings suggest that the food charity-related activity food corporations are undertaking in the UK leverages key commercial practices (marketing, reputational management, political, supply chain and waste management) in a way that does not challenge existing drivers of food insecurity (Gilmore et al., 2023). In terms of reputational commercial practices, our findings revealed the ways in which UK food companies are involved in brand image building activity, by aligning their company with respected charitable food organisations and food poverty campaigns (Richards et al., 2015). Findings around how the issue of hunger is presented, particularly as an issue for social (rather than economic) policy or something to be 'fought' illustrate how companies are contributing to the framing of the problem of food insecurity at a distance from their own practices. The language used by Lidl was a different example, stating that they were tackling food insecurity through corporate donations, thereby distancing and re-framing the issue of food insecurity as something that companies can help with, obscuring their role in the drivers of food insecurity. We did not find evidence of corporations linking their reputational work to company practices that could promote food security as a determinant of health, for example increasing the general accessibility of healthy food or the wages and working conditions of employed and contracted staff.

In terms of supply chain and waste management practices, ensuring healthy food is affordable and accessible to people in communities across the UK, for example through food pricing and retail, are further ways in which food companies can impact on food security. However instead, this analysis found evidence of extensive practices of donating surplus food to food charity to divert current levels of surplus and avoid food loss. This research suggests that the redistribution of surplus food continues to expand and become embedded in UK food charity systems, contributing insight from across different food sectors in the early 2020s. This is consistent with findings from research in other country contexts, including those where corporations receive tax reductions for donating their surplus (Lohnes, 2020; Papargyropoulou et al., 2022; Silvasti and Riches, 2014).

Findings from our analysis relating to marketing practices of advertising and cause marketing approaches as part of food charity relationships, add UK evidence to existing examples of these practices in the US and elsewhere (Fisher, 2017; Piao et al., 2024). Given the levels of donations given in the examples that were identified, including a £10, 000 donation from a nationwide sale of a toy themed on an England and Manchester United footballer, it is highly likely that these are examples of an imbalance where the corporation gains more from this marketing exercise than the charitable partner (Berglind and Nakata, 2005).

Labour and employment practices that ensure the payment and protection of adequate wages across the supply chain would be a key lever for corporations to promote food security. Relationships between food charity organisations and food companies, for example Food Banks Canada's partnership with Walmart Canada, have long been criticized in relation to the low wages and insufficient benefits companies provide as an employer (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021). We did not find evidence in our analysis of UK corporations linking food insecurity work to their work as employers. Instead, the analysis revealed novel insights around how pay and renumeration for senior staff was used by corporations to incentivize food charity work.

Political practices supporting national policy on employment practices that promote adequate pay and working conditions would be another way for corporations to impact on food security. However, the political activity identified in our analysis provides new examples from the UK of commercial entities shaping public policies to further corporate interests, in this case by supporting calls for policy changes in other sectors, notably social security (Gilmore et al., 2023, p12021). The Child Food Poverty Task Force did not reflect on or call for changes to corporate practices, instead focusing on changes to social welfare provision (food vouchers and school meal replacements) and then, later, the cooking skills of low income families.

The findings of this research therefore highlight the range of ways in which relationships with food charities are used by corporations to promote reputations, market products, encourage debate on policy responses that is focused away from corporate interests, and use food charity systems to avoid food loss in established supply chains. These findings are consistent with, and contribute new insights for, CSR literature in other public health areas which has highlighted how corporations work to control how they engage with issues, to ensure they are able to do so in a way that protects profits and promotes corporate reputations (Dorfman et al., 2005; Schmidt et al., 2020).

5. Implications

The findings of this research have both practical and theoretical implications for policy, practice, advocacy and research on food charity and food insecurity. Proponents of the CDoH framework have argued that it can be used as a tool to identify actions that corporations could take to promote better health outcomes (De Lacy-Vawdon and Livingstone, 2020; Gilmore et al., 2023). In relation to food insecurity, this would involve improving pay, working conditions and food environments, using their influence to ensure adequate incomes, and wider availability of healthy food at affordable prices. As several critical studies have highlighted, the chances of corporations making these shifts in behaviour on their own are minimal given the

political-economic context in which they are working, and our findings would support this (Harvey, 2021; Mendly-Zambo and Raphael, 2025; Livingstone, 2017). However, the CDoH approach does provide important insights for shaping future research, advocacy and public health policy in ways that could pave the way for such a shift and moves towards more systemic change.

By providing a tool for focusing on individual commercial practices (as well as how these fit into the wider economic system), a CDoH-based approach could provide advocacy organisations with an effective way of communicating about, and campaigning against, the role commercial actors have in the drivers of food insecurity. For example, A CDoH-based approach could be helpful to advocates of more stringent policies on pay and working conditions throughout food supply chains (including subcontractors) such as trade unions (BFAWU, 2024). As well as those campaigning for rigorous government oversight of promotions and pricing (Food Foundation, 2024). The CDoH framework could also be helpful to advocacy organisations, policy makers and practitioners focused on economic development and planning policies (including local food strategies) by highlighting the role of commercial entities in healthy and accessible food economies in local areas (Sustainable Food Places, 2024).

The findings of this research have important implications for any health-related research on food charities that have corporate involvement. Given the influence of corporations over social determinants of health, any research from a social determinants of health perspective that is engaged with topics of food charity (that has corporate involvement) should take account of this wider structural context. The Commercial Determinants of Health framework provides a way of doing this both theoretically and analytically. As demonstrated through this paper, the CDoH approach can be used to frame and further existing critiques of food charity – food corporation relationships, in the context of (and in relation to) the structural power these companies also hold. The lens of 'corporate practices' also provides food charity researchers generally with an analytical framework for future analysis and further interrogation of the specific ways in which food corporations impact on food charity and food insecurity, across different scales and in different ways. Bringing together and furthering the depth of analysis across different areas of corporate activity (for example CSR work and surplus food redistribution) into one analytical framework enables a more structured and over-arching analysis of the work of corporations.

By applying the CDoH framework, research on food insecurity, food charity and the role of corporations from across disciplines can be part of wider moves in public health towards understanding the impact of corporate entities and interests on health and equity. As this paper has demonstrated, it is a vital tool for unpacking the ironies and inequalities embedded in these corporate practices. The CDoH analysis presented here has revealed the different ways in which corporations leverage charitable efforts to improve their image and consumer perceptions, whilst at the same time playing a key role in the drivers of the food insecurity that these charities are seeking to relieve.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Hannah Lambie-Mumford: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Kelli Kennedy:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Formal analysis, Data curation.

EA statement

This research involved the analysis of publicly available documents and sources.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no financial or non-financial interests to disclose and no conflicts of interest.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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