**The weight-loss industry**

Sonali Kolhatkar

Wednesday, May 15, 2024

It’s not a conspiracy theory that food addiction is a tool of corporate profiteering. Consider that tobacco companies, upon being regulated out of the business of addictive smoking, turned their sights onto addictive eating.

The Washington Post’s health columnist, Anahad O’Connor wrote, “In America, the steepest increase in the prevalence of hyper-palatable foods occurred between 1988 and 2001 – the era when Philip Morris and RJ Reynolds owned the world’s leading food companies.” Further, “the foods that they sold were far more likely to be hyper-palatable than similar foods not owned by tobacco companies.”

Many of these ultra-processed foods are specially marketed to children, which in turn can change their brain chemistry to desire those foods for life. According to a paper published in Science Daily, “The current obesity epidemic is due, in part, to hormonal responses to changes in food quality: in particular, high-glycemic load foods, which fundamentally change metabolism.” Today we would be appalled at the idea of marketing tobacco to children, but the same companies pushed addictive foods onto kids, and even though Big Tobacco is no longer in the business of food, its practices remain widespread.

The harmful impacts of unhealthy foods also fall disproportionately along racial lines, with aggressive marketing aimed at communities of color. Black children, in particular, are subjected to significantly greater advertising of high-calorie addictive foods than their white peers.

As obesity rates have risen in the US, there is an all-too-familiar blame game that individualizes the harm being caused by a capitalist system that thrives off of addiction. Doctors warn people struggling to manage their weight that they must simply restrict their intake of calories while expending more calories through rigorous exercise. High-profile reality shows such as The Biggest Loser have cemented the narrative that obesity is the result of individuals not being able to manage their urges to eat.

And American pop culture’s obsession with increasingly unattainable thinness generates shame spirals among individuals and further fuels the idea that people are fat simply because they are too weak to control themselves. Meanwhile, there are few, if any, government regulations on unhealthy foods in the US.

There’s a similar analogy to be found in personal finance. American culture is steeped in the myth of a meritocracy where people struggling to make ends meet are blamed for simply not being good managers of money and where well-meaning budgeting guides are offered without the broader context of rising inequality, suppressed wages, bloated student debt, and inflation.

The causes of both, obesity and wealth inequality, are systemic, while the solutions being offered are individualized, often spawning lucrative industries of their own.

Alongside the aggressive marketing of hyper-palatable foods is a massively profitable weight-loss industry that preys upon individual shame to the tune of more than $60 billion a year. In fact, some of the same companies pushing high-calorie foods are in the business of weight loss.

With the advent of the new revolutionary weight-loss drugs, watching the industry reconfigure itself is fascinating. According to the Wall Street Journal, “Since drugs such as Mounjaro, Wegovy, and Ozempic became sensations last year, Wall Street has rushed to work out just how disruptive the drugs, called GLP-1s, might be.” By “disruptive,” the journal is referring to a discouraging trend in food industry profits. If weight-loss drugs curb appetite, who will buy enough Krispy Kreme donuts to keep the sugar-peddling company in business? That’s a big worry for corporate CEOs and shareholders.

Another story in the Journal lamented the impact of these drugs on the weight-loss industry “which long pushed calorie-counting and willpower,” and are now “grappling with the surging popularity of new drugs.” If weight-loss drugs curb appetite without expensive gym memberships, supplements, and programs like WeightWatchers, will the traditional weight-loss industry go out of business?

Today, the manufacturers of weight-loss drugs are clear winners in the changing landscape of food consumption and weight, charging tens of thousands of dollars for a year’s supply, and ensuring that only the wealthy have access to the thinness that our culture celebrates. Not only do the high price tags keep these drugs out of the hands of low-income people struggling to manage their weight, but also out of the hands of diabetics whom the drugs were originally meant for.

The capitalist maxim of higher demand fueling higher prices is very much at work here. Ozempic for example, could have a price tag of only $57 a year its manufacturer Novo Nordisk would still reap a profit. Instead, it is being sold in the U.S. for a whopping $11,600 a year simply because the company can charge an arm and a leg, ensuring that the drugs remain in the hands of the wealthy while tidying up a nice profit for Novo Nordisk’s shareholders.

Excerpted: ‘Weight Loss Drugs Go Hand-in-Hand With Junk Food Industry’.

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org