**Headline:** Weight Loss Drugs Go Hand-in-Hand With Junk Food Industry

**Teaser:** Capitalism has built systems of inequality in food, health, and wealth and convinced us that the cause is individual failure, not systemic predation.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

**Author Bio:** Sonali Kolhatkar is an award-winning multimedia journalist. She is the founder, host, and executive producer of “[Rising Up With Sonali](https://risingupwithsonali.com/),” a weekly television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her most recent book is [*Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice*](https://citylights.com/city-lights-published/rise-up-the-power-of-narrative-in-pursu/) (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/) project at the Independent Media Institute and the racial justice and civil liberties editor at [Yes! Magazine](https://www.yesmagazine.org/authors/sonali-kolhatkar). She serves as the co-director of the nonprofit solidarity organization the [Afghan Women’s Mission](https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/) and is a co-author of [*Bleeding Afghanistan*](https://www.sevenstories.com/books/2947-bleeding-afghanistan). She also sits on the board of directors of [Justice Action Center](https://justiceactioncenter.org/), an immigrant rights organization.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Economy for All*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Economy, Media, Politics, North America/United States of America, Opinion, News, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

Manufacturers of the new weight-loss drugs that have taken the nation by storm are salivating at the prospect of how best to extract profits from people. What Americans eat, how they diet and exercise, what nutritional supplements they take, the sugar content of their sodas, the high fructose corn syrup in their processed foods, and the price of their diabetes medication have long been objects of endless gambling on Wall Street. Now, with drugs like Mounjaro, Wegovy, and Ozempic in the mix, new vistas of corporate exploitation have opened up. Companies are eager to figure out how best to milk people who might be losing their taste for the plentiful calories that food producers got them hooked on in the first place.

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](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2023/09/19/addiction-foods-hyperpalatable-tobacco/), “In America, the steepest increase in the prevalence of hyper-palatable foods [occurred](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35581172/) between 1988 and 2001—the era when Philip Morris and R.J. 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](https://www.cspinet.org/advocacy/nutrition/food-marketing-kids) to children, which in turn can [change their brain chemistry](https://www.wsj.com/health/wellness/ultra-processed-food-brain-health-7a3f9827) to desire those foods for life. According to a paper published in [Science Daily](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/09/210913135729.htm), “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](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2023/09/19/addiction-foods-hyperpalatable-tobacco/) 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](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/11/junk-food-marketing-children-of-color) 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 U.S., 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](https://www.webmd.com/obesity/doctor-weight-loss-advice) 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](https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/01/the-retrograde-shame-of-the-biggest-loser/605713/) 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](https://www.vice.com/en/article/epz7vp/thin-is-in-cult-making-comeback) 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](https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2023/july/ultra-processed-foods-policy.html) on unhealthy foods in the U.S.

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](https://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/14/millennials-arent-as-smart-about-money-as-they-think.html) for simply not being good managers of money and where [well-meaning budgeting guides](https://www.cnbc.com/guide/personal-finance-101-the-complete-guide-to-managing-your-money/#create-a-budget) 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](https://abcnews.go.com/Health/100-million-dieters-20-billion-weight-loss-industry/story?id=16297197) that preys upon individual shame to the tune of [more than $60 billion a year](https://www.statista.com/statistics/625673/total-weight-loss-market-size-in-us/). In fact, some of the [same companies](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/aug/07/fat-profits-food-industry-obesity) 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](https://www.wsj.com/finance/stocks/glp-1-weight-loss-drugs-investor-impact-cc2e3312), “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](https://www.wsj.com/articles/ozempic-wegovy-mounjaro-weight-loss-industry-89419ecb) 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](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/why-new-weight-loss-drugs-are-out-of-reach-for-millions-of-older-americans) 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](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/22/well/ozempic-diabetes-weight-loss.html) 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](https://www.barrons.com/articles/ozempic-wegovy-novo-nordisk-c5659256) and 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.

Eventually, however, the prices will come down once the elite market for the drugs saturates. And drug manufacturers are already busy ensuring their future market share by pushing doctors to prescribe the drugs widely. One obesity expert named Dr. Lee Kaplan, who received $1.4 million from Novo Nordisk, [told](https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/health-obesity-novonordisk-doctors/) his fellow physicians, “We are going to have to use these medications…for as long as the body wants to have obesity.” What he didn’t say out loud was that there will be obesity for as long as food manufacturers market and sell junk foods.

Ultimately, our individual appetites and waistlines are pawns in the highly lucrative game of profit extraction that private companies and industries play. It is in the interest of drug manufacturers that Americans remain hooked on hyper-palatable high-calorie foods so that a market exists for their weight-loss drugs. The ultra-processed food industry is becoming symbiotic with the weight-loss drug industry. The former ensures we eat poorly and the latter is there to feed off our shame.