

Ultra-Processed Life

By Charles Hugh Smith

Introduction

Ultra-Processed Life is my term for everything that is analogous to ultra-processed snacks: attractively marketed, instantly alluring, easy to consume, addictive by design, tasty in the moment but harmful over time, its origins a *black box* of unknown processes, the brightly colored product bearing no resemblance to the real-world ingredients, an idealized form of what is inherently imperfect, untethered from the natural world or the future, disconnected not just from the consequences of our consuming the snack but disconnected from the consequences unleashed by those consequences.

This book recounts my journey of discovery of how our everyday realm has drifted away from the foundations of human life and happiness without our noticing: the everyday realm is the river and we're the fish oblivious of the water. This book charts my exploration of what's so normal we don't even see it for what it is.

Here's an analogy. Some years ago, my wife and I camped in the Rockefeller Grove redwood forest, the largest contiguous stand of old-growth coast redwoods in the world, located in Humboldt Redwoods State Park in California. This native forest bears no resemblance to the typical forests one drives through on interstate highways, which are artificial forests planted after the native forest was clearcut.

The native forest is an awe-inspiring, unforgettable experience. The artificial forest is superficially natural but devoid of the magic, grandeur and diverse life of the native forest. If we've never experienced the native forest, we're not even aware of the artificiality of the tree-farm forest.

A tropical forest offers another analogy. The visitor who drives through a jungle in Hawaii is thrilled by the towering trees and climbing vines. But what the visitor doesn't know is this forest is composed of introduced species that were so successfully invasive that they replaced most of the native species. Little remains of the native jungle.

Since I've lived in Hawaii off and on since the age of fifteen, I've slowly learned about the native flora. Though visitors don't realize this, it's rare to spot a native tree along island highways.

Ultra-Processed Life is an extremely successful invasive, and it's replaced the native ecosystem of human life so completely that we're no longer even aware of the change.

If we're healthy and happy, who cares if the forest is a tree farm? That's a good question. But are we happy and healthy? No objective observer would say that a society in which half the people are at risk of metabolic disorders is healthy. And if we're so happy, then why is the happiness and wellness industry—a sector that didn't exist 25 years ago-- booming? If we were actually happy and healthy, we'd have no need for a wellness industry.

What we observe is dissatisfaction, stress, depression, anxiety, burnout and financial precarity. These are not signs of a happy, healthy high quality of life.

If we're not happy and fulfilled, the problem is us: this is the assumption. But what if the source of our unhappiness and dis-ease is the river we're swimming in?

The starting point of any solution is to correctly diagnose the problem, and that's the purpose of this book.

As with many others, the catalyst for my exploration was a life-threatening medical crisis that did not have a specific cause. But it was clear that diet and stress were risk factors. When my wife and I starting tugging on the diet string, we found it was connected to everything else in our lives. As in an ecosystem, there are no isolated factors: everything's connected to everything else, and every element is vital to the whole.

This led me to wonder if our entire way of life is like an ultra-processed snack: tasty but not healthy, edible but stripped of the nutrients we need to be healthy, addictive by design.

For what's disturbingly obvious is the addictive nature of *Ultra-Processed Life*: it's captivating by design. Once we taste the snack, pick up the phone, or start scrolling on social media, we're hooked.

More subtly, the many downsides of *Ultra-Processed Life* drive us to seek the comfort, relief and escape of *Ultra-Processed Life*'s perverse circle of mal-adaptation: pressured and drained, we seek the comforts of addictive-by-design distractions.

Even a cursory search reveals a long list of things people report as addictive: not just alcohol, tobacco and drugs, but food, gaming, pornography, dating apps, social media, smartphones, work, the approval of others, working out and even sleeping.

What's striking is how these are all escapes from intolerable situations or pressures. Equally striking is how *Ultra-Processed Life* transforms natural activities such as eating, sleeping and romance into profitable addictions—not profitable for the addict, but profitable for the purveyor of the products and services.

Addiction is not happiness, and this raises questions about the nature of *Ultra-Processed Life* that we must answer.

My second observation was that *Ultra-Processed Life* and the tangible world (what I call the *Real World* and *Real Life*) are not either/or. *Ultra-Processed Life* seeps into the stitching of our

lives so incrementally and so effortlessly that we don't notice the transformation, just as an aggressive invasive vine takes over a native forest.

Our everyday life continues on seemingly unchanged, but the spaces between our real-world interactions are now filled by *Ultra-Processed Life*.

We go to the supermarket the same way we've done for years, but the aisles and our carts are now filled with ultra-processed foods. We wait in line the same way, but now we're engrossed in our phone. We get a notification that someone "liked" the photo we posted on social media and feel gratified, for this affirms that we're worthy of attention in the virtual realm.

The *everywhere we go* ubiquity of this personal applause and engagement is the source of social media's overwhelming success, for it activates a profound emotional response—in effect, giving us permission to "like" ourselves.

Our everyday lives are still cycles of the same activities—we go to class or work, eat lunch, go shopping and drive home—but many of our experiences of these activities and the spaces between them are now extraordinarily different in ways we no longer notice because they're now *normal life*.

This *Ultra-Processed Life* has been normalized to the point that many of us have little experience or memory of the pre-processed world. We know of it only as the bits we're replacing with the conveniences of an *Ultra-Processed Life* without realizing what's being traded away.

Why expend all that effort and time making dinner with real ingredients when we can pop an ultra-processed meal in the microwave and be eating dinner in from of a screen in a few minutes?

This constant replacement of real-world tasks with novel conveniences and tedium with stimulating distractions is not just normalized, it's *hyper-normalized*: we've not just habituated to the *feel good now* bewitchment of *Ultra-Processed Life*, we've lost our taste for unprocessed life.

In this hyper-normalized state, we know it's bad for us but we're still drawn to *Ultra-Processed Life* like moths to a flame. Our awareness of the downsides doesn't lessen its bewitchment. Rather, everyone knows it's not healthy—those keeping the flame glowing brightly and everyone circling it--and this awareness has been normalized, too: we all accept this bewitchment as *normal life*.

How did *Ultra-Processed Life* bewitch humanity with such stealth without us noticing? How did it become not just normalized, but hyper-normalized, so we accept it even though we know it's not healthy for us?

If we step back and observe, one point stands out: human nature hasn't changed. What changed was technology's power to exploit the very hard-wired traits that served our survival so successfully for millennia.

The first step in understanding what's changed is to observe *Ultra-Processed Life's* complex machinery of bewitchment.

Chapter One: The Machinery of Bewitchment

One of the first things we notice is how *Ultra-Processed Life* works for us by making us feel better, and feel better about ourselves. We also notice that it works for whomever is selling the products and services. On the surface, *Ultra-Processed Life* is a classic win-win: those making and marketing the products are making money—a *feel-good* outcome as increasing wealth is the core goal of our economy—and the products make consumers feel good.

No wonder *Ultra-Processed Life* has seeped into every nook and cranny of human life so successfully.

But this superficial assessment misses what's happening beneath the surface.

The mechanisms of *Ultra-Processed Life* disconnect us from long-term consequences in favor of gratification in the moment, a process that replaces the foundations of our humanity and happiness with commoditized facsimiles that are reliably profitable due to their exploitation of our hard-wired reward circuitry: *bet you can't have just one*.

These facsimiles replace the complex interconnectedness of *Real-World Life* with a simplified, easy to digest *eternal now* of temptations that can be indulged: *Ultra-Processed Life* is like living in a candy store without any adults to stop us from eating as much as we want.

This is the tragic irony of an *Ultra-Processed Life*: it delivers all the things we instinctively want in life—tasty snacks, comfort and convenience, novelty, higher status, feeling good about ourselves—but only in the moment. The longer-term consequences are perversely negative: our physical and mental health are diminished, our anxieties and insecurities are stimulated into overdrive, our sense of self is unmoored, and our ability to recognize our declining quality of life is effectively buried beneath an avalanche of *feel-good* distractions.

The second irony is that the more *Ultra-Processed Life* we experience, the more fragmented we become and this increases our desire for more distractions. We immerse ourselves in the immediate rewards of *Ultra-Processed Life* to sooth the over-stimulation that is the consequence of living an *Ultra-Processed Life*. This self-reinforcing feedback loop makes it difficult to escape the grip of whatever is giving us a *feels good right now* sensations of comfort, relief and escape.

What we don't fully grasp when we're busy consuming something that makes us *feel good right now* is the machinery that manufactures this bewitchment.

I think I have a healthy amount of self-discipline, but the moment I crunch into a salty, sweetly oily snack, every shred of self-discipline dissolves, and I'm reaching into the cheery bright package for another one, and then another one until there's none left.

This is how *Ultra-Processed Life* works: it activates our built-in desire for whatever makes us feel good in the moment, captivating both our taste buds and our emotions, for this warm glow makes us feel good about ourselves.

The snack's ingredients trigger an instinctual response because they're scarce in Nature and are advantageous in the struggle to survive. Concentrations of sugar, salt and fat are scarce in Nature, and so as hunter-gatherers we respond with intensely positive sensations when we happen upon them.

These instinctual responses make us feel good because finding calorie-dense foods is a key survival trait: those who can get these in hand have a much better chance to survive, mate and nurture children, and so their genes are more likely to be passed on to future generations.

Rather than leave this up to our rational cognitive functions which came late to the developmental game, natural selection favored rewarding these key survival traits with instinctive processes that don't require any cognition. These cascades of *feel-good* dopamine are released regardless of our conscious thoughts.

I can think, "eating this entire package of unhealthy snacks is not good for me," but this rational filter doesn't stop the sensation of pleasure, the comfort I feel, the sense of leaving my cares behind, or my desire to keep experiencing these good feelings by eating more. The rational mind is no match for cascading dopamine.

These hard-wired reward circuits are not that hard to identify, and so purveyors of products have a straightforward way to increase sales and profits: engineer products and services to activate these instinctive cascades of stimulus, comfort and pleasure. That these ingredients are no longer scarce doesn't change our attraction because our genetic coding doesn't change as fast as technology. The scarcities of the past 200,000 years are hard-wired in each of us.

The concentrations of salt, sweetness and oil in snacks that far exceed anything found in Nature are firecrackers that ignite our reward circuitry. Biochemically, our rational mind is outside the candy store, telling us not to eat too much, and we tell ourselves *just one more*, but it's so good that we continue eating *just one more*.

What works to sell snacks works on everything else that's hard-wired in human nature.

The key to understanding the irresistible attraction of *Ultra-Processed Life* is this exploitation of the traits that have been selected for their survival benefits over the past 200,000 years.

We experience the physical sensations of hunger, thirst and sexual attraction, but *Ultra-Processed Life* engages other equally hard-wired traits that were advantageous not just for basic survival but for thriving in groups, which is our core advantage as a highly social species.

These innate traits can be divided into four types: 1) our drive for material security in an insecure world; 2) our drive for status in the group's pecking order, as this is a key determinant of our security; 3) our attraction to what is scarce in nature, and 4) our mechanisms for coping with the physical, emotional and psychological stresses of disruptive change.

Without this framework, we cannot possibly understand our vulnerabilities to *Ultra-Processed Life* and its power to not just engage our hard-wired traits but hijack them for profit.

What's changed isn't our hard-wiring. What's changed is our industrial and communications technologies' powers to activate and exploit our hard-wiring.

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