

Why are people clashing over their choice of milk?

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From product labelling debates to brazen ads that shame the other side, the dairy and plant-based industries are at loggerheads – causing conflict among consumers. So what are the pros and cons of both? And how can brands rise above the feuds and innovate in an increasingly saturated market?

AUTHORS



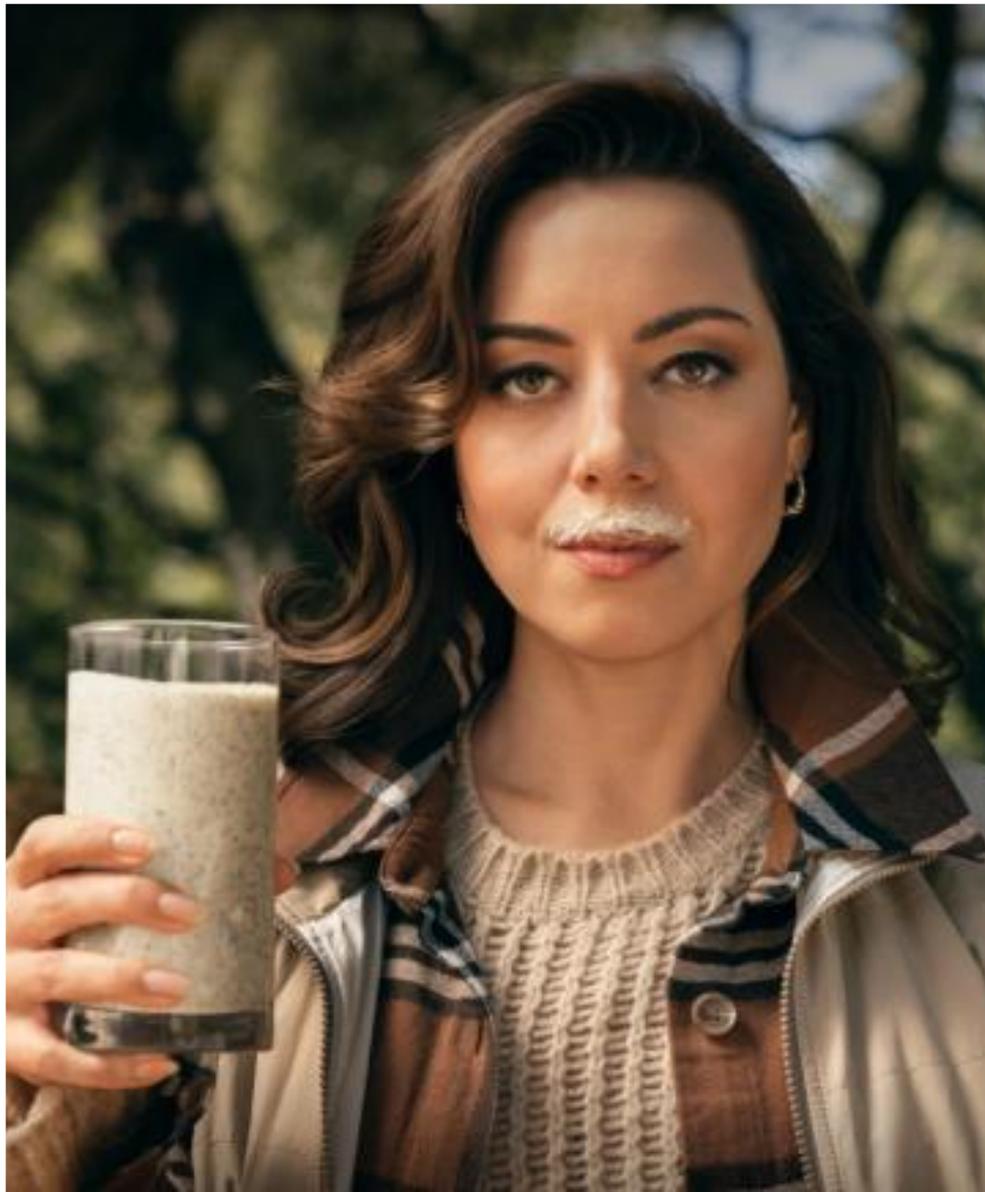
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LOCATIONS:

UNITED KINGDOM
UNITED STATES

SECTORS:

EATING AND DRINKING



EXPERTS

Alexandra Hayes

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Social media is having a profound influence on people's viewpoints and feelings of shame surrounding their choices as to whether to consume dairy milk
- 02** Health and environmental issues are fuelling consumer confusion as to whether plant-based milk is 'better' or worse in these contexts
- 03** There's unease within the dairy industry, with some traditional dairy farmers and industry groups contending that the labelling of plant-based products can be elusive

DATA

- 49% of Gen Zers in the UK feel shame about ordering dairy in public
- In the US, 75% of plant-based consumers believe it's very important to eat healthy compared with 46% of dairy-only consumers
- 42% of Americans drink plant-based milk 'for health reasons', while for 70% of dairy consumers, taste is the most important factor given for consuming dairy milk

SCOPE

Milk shaming culture is omnipresent as global society's attitudes towards drinking dairy milk have shifted. A survey by dairy company Arla found almost half of Gen Zers in the UK feel shame about ordering dairy in public. And while 70% of this generation would prefer to continue to drink dairy, 57% plan to give it up in the next year. [1] "Gen Z prioritises different values to say Boomers with sustainability and purpose much higher on the agenda," says Alexandra Hayes, co-founder of global food consultancy [Harris and Hayes](#). "So it's natural that they feel more shame around consuming dairy generally and the environmental footprint that goes with that." [2]

Yet some people are beginning to find milk-shaming culture jarring, coming to a head following a 2021 [advert](#) from plant milk giant Oatly, which depicted cow's milk consumption as 'sinful'. The short, which sees a teenager shaking his head at his dad for buying cow's milk caused widespread indignation, ('Funny turn-around of ageism' reads one YouTube comment, 'distasteful, insensitive and completely lacking in reasoning or logic,' another.), prompting the launch of the 'milk wars'. Since then, people have been taking to TikTok to urge the trend of shaming people that drink cow's milk to stop. Take [this video](#) as a key illustration, which shows a young man willing his viewers to cease ridiculing people for drinking 'red top, blue top, green top'.

In terms of what people are drinking, the average volume per person in the global dairy milk market is expected to amount to 30.27kg in 2023 and 1.05kg in 2023 in the global milk substitutes market. While the global dairy milk market is expected

to show a volume growth of 2.4% in 2024 and the global milk substitutes market is forecast to see a bigger surge of 12.2% in the same year. [3][3] This data shows that while people are drinking more dairy milk, the plant-based milk market is expected to grow at a vastly quicker rate next year, meaning the gap between the two consumers is expected to close to some degree.

Further fuelling the 'milk wars' further is the 2023 '[Wood Milk' ad](#) featuring American actress Aubrey Plaza, which mocked plant-based milk while portraying the message that only dairy milk is 'real milk'. This has frothed up the milk wars further as discussions around what is real and fake milk intensify. "It's impossible to compare plant-based and cow's milk if there isn't a standard nutrient content for cow's milk, which comes in a range of formulations," says future of food journalist Yasmin Tayag. "This awkward moment is the culmination of a decades-long shift in the way the FDA – and consumers – has come to think about and define food in general. At this point, it's unclear what milk is anymore." [4] So what's behind the rise of milk shaming and how can brands effectively advertise to varied milk drinkers?

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PEOPLE'S DIETS

Some 53% of Gen Zers say they find inspiration for new food through TikTok. [5] Social media is increasingly playing a pivotal role in people's eating habits – which is evident through the ongoing food trends that emerge on platforms like TikTok. The most recent theme to trend on there is the [#picklechallenge](#) where 263 million people and counting are making videos of themselves trying sharply flavoured pickles. Social media pile-ons are fuelling the war between plant-based vs cow's milk drinkers, and also making some [feel ashamed to admit](#) they are cow's milk fans. The cow milk vs plant milk discussion has [30.4 million views](#) at the time of writing, while the Instagram account [@umn.milk](#) posts photos of the University of Minnesota students drinking milk in a bid to 'out' students' dairy habits.

"We live increasingly digital lives and each everyday decision that we make (and share) says something about us," says Hayes. "While dairy milk is one of the most produced and valuable commodities worldwide, it's an increasingly fragmented market with a plethora of options to suit every tribe." [2] Revenue in the global milk market is currently calculated at \$0.33 trillion in 2023 and is expected to grow annually by 7.00% between 2023 and 2028. [6] While there are approximately 17 different plant-based milk options, with the market valued at \$15 billion in 2022 and expected to rise to \$30 billion by 2030. [7]

Milk brands are playing in these digital spaces by chiming in on the 'milk wars' debate, aiming to encourage people to veer one way or the other. Plant-based milk brand [Silk](#), for example, created a viral campaign in 2022, which saw a series of portraits of the children of celebrities featured in the infamous original 'Got Milk?' MilkPEP campaign, including Gen Z celebrities like Brooklyn Peltz Beckham, Ella Bleu Travolta, and Sailor Brinkley Cook, all with (dairy-free) milk moustaches. They even created a TikTok milk moustache filter to further the concept's reach. "Gen Z is used to having alternative milks available to them so it feels less of a 'switch' and more of an obvious, 'better' option," says Hayes. [2] A 2023 survey, for example, found only 8% of Gen Zers report purchasing conventional cow's milk. [8]



Plant-based milk brand Plenish offers alternative milks with three ingredients

Plenish (2023)

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTALLY-CONSCIOUS CONSUMERS

When asked why they drink plant-based milk, 42% of people say their main grounds are ‘for health reasons’, while for 70% of dairy consumers, taste is the most important factor given for consuming dairy milk. [9] Research shows cow’s milk generates three times as many greenhouse gas emissions as plant milk; uses around ten times as much land; two to 20 times as much freshwater; and creates much higher levels of eutrophication. [10] It’s this perception that plant-based milk is essentially ‘better’, that is translating into the idea that people who don’t drink it are likely to be perceived as the opposite. This is where milk shaming can ensue due to the view that cow’s milk drinkers are not considerate of the environment and their wellbeing.

So is cow’s milk or plant-based milk better for your health? “It’s not that clear-cut,” says Lindsay Bell, co-founder of private nutrition clinic [studio nourish](#). “If you can tolerate dairy milk, then go for good quality raw dairy milk as it contains various key nutrients such as calcium, protein, and B12 and has great fat content.” [11] Bell says it’s essential to choose a good source though as with conventional dairy milk from supermarkets, the nutrient status varies from farmer to farmer and essentially ends up “processed”. Bell recommends checking the label for plant-based milk, as many brands include fillers, stabilisers and inflammatory oils like rapeseed oil and sunflower oil to preserve freshness, improve mouthfeel and taste and help mimic the natural fat content found in cow’s milk. The fats also make the plant milk froth better for barista editions. [11] [Plenish](#), for example, is a plant-based milk brand that prides itself on offering alternative milks with only three ingredients. The oat or nut, spring water, and a pinch of salt.

“We can’t overlook the environmental impact of plant-based milk,” says Kirsty MacSween, co-founder of private nutrition clinic [studio nourish](#). “While much more ethical, a single glass of almond milk can use as much as 74 litres of water to produce.” [12] A brand hoping to blend health and environmental benefits is alcohol and now plant-based milk producer Molson Coors. Its ‘[Golden Wings](#)’, functional milk product uses unused grain growths from the company’s beer production process, which is not only more eco-friendly but provides more minerals, protein, and soluble fibres, all great for physical health.

THE 'REAL' VERSUS 'FAKE' DEBATE

The rise in popularity of plant-based milk alternatives has been linked to the surge in global veganism. Search data from Google Trends [shows](#) a worldwide increase in interest in veganism from 2004 to 2022 while in 2020, sales of plant-based milk in Europe were valued at almost \$3.9 billion. By 2026, this figure is expected to reach \$6.8 billion. [13] This passion for dairy alternatives has created some tensions within the dairy industry, with some traditional dairy farmers and industry groups arguing that the labelling and marketing of these plant-based products can be deceptive. [The National Milk Producers Federation](#), for instance, [says](#), “The use of dairy terms on non-dairy products misleads consumers into believing that these imitations are equivalent to real dairy products and is a violation of long-standing federal standards”.

But the debate about what plant-based drinks can be called seems to have been cleared up as the FDA signalled an end to the question of what dairy alternative drinks can name their products, (plant-based milk, the agency [say](#), can be called ‘milk’ if its plant origin is clearly identified (for example, ‘pistachio milk’). But the stigma around both dairy milk and plant-based milk drinkers still exists. It even goes as far as some people viewing plant-based milk drinkers as more ‘feminine’, and even ‘boring’, ‘irritating’ ‘modern’, and ‘pretentious’, relative to cow’s milk. [14] Bell understands why dairy institutions struggle with the labelling debate, and agrees to an extent, you’d expect consumers to understand the difference between ‘animal-based milk’ and ‘plant-based milk’, however it should never be assumed. “I think coining a similar word such as ‘mylk’ for the use of all plant-based milks would perhaps keep the peace and be a little bit more fair game,” says Bell. [11] Look to Rebel Kitchen, which has an organic dairy-free milk product simply named ‘[Mylk](#),’ with blends that include oat and coconut and coconut and cashew.



The a2 Milk Company supplies premium cow’s milk from high-quality cows

a2 Milk Company (2023)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

USE SOCIAL MEDIA AS A LEARNING TOOL

The rise of milk shaming and ongoing milk wars highlights that there is a keen interest in different milk options but also a desire to explore these options free from shame. Brands can tap into the virality of this topic as a marketing tool that aims to provide information and clarity as opposed to pitting the two against one another. Crop up in the 629.3 billion views-strong [#learnonTikTok](#) hashtag, where users congregate to absorb and share educational videos. And note that 49% of TikTok users say they've purchased a product or service that they've seen on the platform. [15] "Collaboration is key," says Hayes. "Dairy brands and plant-based milk brands coming together to encourage better choices all-round would be a refreshing and more positive spin on the milk wars topic." [2] There's also the option to partner up as part of a cross-category strategy as clean and conscious personal care brand [The Switch Fix](#) (TSF) and plant-based milk company [Goodmylk](#) have done with their range of skincare products that includes a deep pore cleansing mylk using Goodmylk's Oat and Cashew mylk.

FOCUS ON THE TASTE, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

Some 75% of plant-based consumers believe it is very important to eat healthy, and 63% claim to try to lead very healthy lifestyles, compared with 46% and 35% of dairy-only consumers. [9] Dairy farmers and plant-based milk brands must focus on highlighting and communicating the pros of drinking their drinks. Dairy-free brand [Eclipse Foods](#) takes a product and marketing approach that focuses on the flavour of their dairy-free milk which has been designed to taste even better than original dairy milk. It doesn't use common allergens like gluten and soy, instead opting for more nutrient-rich, eco-friendly ingredients such as oats and corn and even cassava and potato. "The two options can co-exist," says MacSween. "From a nutritionist's perspective, both still have a job, as choice isn't only dependent on taste preference, but also a person's ability to break down lactose. So plant-based milks serve those with sensitivities and allergies, and allow everyone to still enjoy milk, in some sort of form." [12]

INNOVATE TO STAY ONE STEP AHEAD OF WELL-RESEARCHED CONSUMERS

Consumers are increasingly more conscious of what they are putting into their bodies, with 71% of global consumers checking food labels every time they shop. [16] It's imperative that brands create products that align with this new hyper-aware consumer base. "Innovate with risk-innovation that's affordable, relevant and sustainable," says Hayes. [2] "Brands that supply own-label (or can compete with own-label prices) will continue to do well as cost of living and inflation pressures continue." It's important to acknowledge that 35% of shoppers are buying into both parts of the market (both dairy and non-dairy milk) so there's opportunity within both. [17] Aussie-based [The a2 Milk Company](#) is innovating within the dairy milk market by providing people with 'a2: premium', their premium cow's milk product that boasts a specific protein from high-quality cows that minimises adverse effects in the dairy intolerant. This makes it drinkable to more consumers at a higher price point of \$4 as opposed to \$1.

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SOURCES

1. Arla (April 2022)
2. Interview with Alexandra Hayes conducted by the author
3. Statista (May 2023)
4. The Atlantic (March 2023)
5. Cassandra (2022)
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7. CMI (January 2023)
8. Brightfield Group (February 2023)
9. McKinsey & Company (March 2023)
10. Our World in Data (January 2022)
11. Interview with Lindsay Bell conducted by the author
12. Interview with Kirsty MacSween conducted by the author
13. Statista (February 2022)
14. Food Quality and Preference (September 2022)
15. AdWeek (May 2021)
16. The Food Institute (February 2021)
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