

Negotiating (plant-based) milk in the media: discourses of sustainability, health, and lifestyle

Abstract for SMID 2024

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In the light of the environmental crisis, food and drinks have become battlefields for societal change amongst consumers, food producers and political actors. While plant-based milk alternatives have surged in popularity amongst some segments of consumers, they have also sparked intense debates in the media about milk, veganism and how to live a healthy and climate responsible life (Muller 2022; Kristensen et al. 2011). Food culture is a field where cultural identity is performed and mediated, and Kristensen et al. (2011) found milk (anti-)consumption to be a highly moral and tension-filled field of consumption. Studies of activist marketing strategies related to plant-based drinks exemplify such tensions (Koch 2020; Ledin & Machin 2020), but the variety of meanings connected to plant-based milk alternatives also show in a study of US news media in which 'trend' (trendiness, new lifestyles), 'taste' and 'health' framing were identified as dominant and 'environment' and 'animal welfare' as the least common framing of plant-based milk alternatives (Regusci et al. 2022). However, rather than focusing solely on traditional news media, Ulver (2022) has pointed to social media as a conflict economy, where consumers, political actors and brands negotiate power and attention, through performing tensions, hostility, and conflicts. Social media, therefore, also provides a scene for the construction, contestation and negotiation of milk and plant-based milk alternatives (Olausson 2017) in combination with traditional news media.

To understand how these debates discursively construct the meaning of sustainable consumption, we focus on the research question: How is the meaning of plant-based milk alternatives negotiated in the media? The analysis will draw on diverse online media (newspapers, social media platforms, corporate-, NGO and other websites) as a relevant context to investigate the negotiation and tensions of milk and plant-based milk alternatives. In the study, we thus adopt an approach that combines a netnographic methodology (Kozinets and Gambetti 2020) with cultural analysis and multimodal discourse analysis (Machin and Mayr 2023) to understand the discursive tensions related to the field.

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