

**“Nut Milk is Not Milk”: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of
Plant-Based Dairy Alternatives Advertising in Europe and North America**

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges humanity currently faces is global food security and sustainable agricultural production. The worldwide production and consumption of livestock for meat and dairy in particular are of critical concern, as this causes one of the largest environmental impacts on the planet. Following concerns for biodiversity loss, deforestation, deterioration of water quality and climate change by governments, activist groups, non-partisan organisations, and consumers alike, the demand for plant-based alternatives for meat and dairy has drastically increased. The dairy alternatives segment specifically is experiencing a boom. This study aims to determine how plant-based dairy alternatives are advertised to consumers in Europe and North America, the two largest milk-consuming and producing regions. The main research question guiding this study is thus: How have plant-based milk alternatives been portrayed in advertising images in Europe and North America in the past half decade? In this context, plant-based milk alternatives are defined as fluids that are subtracted from plants, nuts, legumes, cereals, or seeds, that seek to imitate dairy milk's sensory aspects. To answer the research question, an in-depth qualitative investigation was performed by means of a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) of visual image advertisements ($N = 153$). The results indicate four key plant-based dairy alternatives (PBDA) discourses which were identified across both regions in the same order. These discourses are *health*, *dairy*, *sustainability*, and *animal welfare*. Many of the PBDA advertisements investigated in this study communicate the more positive aspects of plant-based dairy alternatives such as their health and nutritional benefits and ingredients, and how much more environmentally friendly these products are in comparison to fluid dairy products. Moreover, through the communication of these discourses, plant-based milk brands aid in raising awareness of socio-political issues in the dairy industry and promote transformations to more sustainable food systems. When comparing the advertisements in North America with those in Europe, the former still employs shock advertising to convey their message and promote plant milk. Ultimately, brands making use of ads such as these attempt to instil behaviour change among the audience by acting as the messengers of truth who unveil the unethical treatment of dairy cows to gain authenticity. This was one of the key and few differences found between European and North American advertisements of plant-based dairy alternatives. Results also suggest that plant-based milk brand advertisers tap into the underlying traditional messages of established dairy marketing initiatives to market their products, which may contribute to the reinforcement of a milk-centred culture. Moreover, the trend of PBDA advertisers tapping into the dairy discourse and utilizing messaging and already established fluid dairy promotion campaigns to market PBDAs is identified as a method to move from a niche to the mainstream. Future research should consider investigating this further.

Keywords: *Plant-based dairy alternatives, advertising discourses, fluid dairy milk, sustainability transitions, niche marketing*

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List of Abbreviations

CAQDAS:	Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CO2:	Carbon Dioxide Emissions
EU:	European Union
FDA:	Food and Drug Administration
GHG:	Greenhouse Gas
IPCC:	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
MCDA:	Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis
MLP:	Multi-Level Perspective
PBDA:	Plant-Based Dairy Alternative
SDG:	Sustainable Development Goal
UN:	United Nations
US:	United States

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

“Milk is deadly”, states an advertising campaign by BE Vegan, a Belgian vegan association aiming to promote veganism and unite and assist vegans (Johnston, 2019). The campaign ran in the cities Ghent and Antwerp in 2019 and featured large posters on trams, which stated that milk is responsible for the death of 150,000 calves every year in Belgium alone (Johnston, 2019). The campaign posters also showed a glass of milk with blood trickling down the rim and a message stating that dairy contributes to animal suffering (BE Vegan, 2019a, 2019b). The campaign was heavily criticized by the Belgian dairy industry (*De Belgische Confederatie van de Zuivelindustrie*) and the General Farmers Syndicate (*Het Algemeen Boerensyndicaat*), who fought to have the advertisements removed, claiming that the campaign was misleading. Ultimately, they succeeded in pressuring the transportation company to take them down after running for only two days (Goodman, 2020; Johnston, 2019).

This is just one of the many examples of attention-grabbing campaigns involving dairy that have recently increased in popularity, especially in the major dairy producing Western countries. Although in this case the campaign focused solely on instilling shock and awe by highlighting animal welfare concerns in the dairy industry, other advertising campaigns instead adopt a slightly less activist and more constructive approach by proposing and promoting the consumption of vegan or plant-based alternatives to dairy. Regardless, even less confrontational advertisements for plant-based dairy alternatives (PBDAs) receive considerable backlash from the milk and dairy industry which contests the insinuations that dairy farming is unsustainable and leads to environmental degradation (Evans, 2021; Park, 2021; Runhaar et al., 2020; The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2020). Even so, disclosure and reports of environmental issues in the dairy and meat industry have not originated from anti-dairy activist organizations and plant-based alternatives manufacturers. High consumption of livestock products is regarded by various non-partisan organisations including the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), as having one of the largest impacts on the planet with serious concerns regarding prolonged and persistent environmental and social degradation (IPCC, 2019; Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan, 2015).

1.1.1. The Meat and Dairy Industry and Sustainability

Global food security and sustainable food and agricultural production are one of the 21st century's greatest challenges, according to the United Nations (United Nations, 2021). As a result, a core goal on the list of the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for world development by 2030 revolves around food and aims to “end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” (United Nations, 2021). Of the various contributing factors to environmental degradation, the worldwide production and consumption of livestock for meat and dairy is often considered highly significant (Lazarus et al., 2021; Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan, 2015). Ensuring sustainable food production systems is thus a key concern on the global agenda.

Livestock farming to produce meat and dairy is viewed as “a major source of greenhouse gas emissions due to land clearing for pasture, feed production, manure, and the methane emitted by the animals” (Lazarus et al., 2021, p. 2). Specifically, worldwide meat and dairy production has tripled over the last four decades and the demand for meat and dairy is expected to accelerate (Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan, 2015). This raises serious concerns for biodiversity loss, deforestation, deterioration of water quality and climate change, all of which are connected to raising cattle (Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan, 2015). Global estimates suggest that cattle farming produces 150 times more greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions than plant-based foods (Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan, 2015). Subsequently, switching to plant-based alternatives for meat and dairy is becoming increasingly common among environmentally conscious consumers (Sethi et al., 2016). The market for plant-based meat alternatives has been growing steadily over the past years and is rather well-researched. On the other hand, the dairy alternatives segment is currently experiencing a boom and staggering growth, which has not yet been investigated thoroughly by previous research (Schiano et al., 2020). This is noteworthy, because alongside cattle farming for meat, dairy farms are a major contributor to the GHG emissions in the world and have a significant impact on the global climate (Business Insider, 2020; Rotz, 2018; Schiano et al., 2020; Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan, 2015).

1.1.2. Dairy Alternatives

The past decade witnessed increasing consumer interest in plant-based dairy alternatives (PBDAs), which led the global plant milk market to reach an estimated revenue of \$16 billion in 2018 (Franklin-Wallis, 2019; Schiano et al., 2020). Furthermore, 7.4% of the total milk market share consisted of plant-based dairy alternatives in 2020, which is expected to reach 18.5% by 2023.

Simultaneously, research found that more than half of dairy consumers also purchase plant-based dairy alternatives (Wolf et al., 2020) and that sales of plant-based milk products increased by 131% since 2018 (Schiano et al., 2020).

Dairy alternatives come in the form of plant-based drinks, also called *plant-based liquids*, *plant-based milk*, *non-dairy milk*, *plant milk*, or *vegan milk*, and refer to fluids that are subtracted from plants, nuts, legumes, cereals, or seeds, “which imitate cow’s milk in appearance and consistency” (Sethi et al., 2016, p. 3409). There are various types of non-dairy milk, of which soy, oat, rice, almond, coconut, flax, and quinoa milk are a few examples (Sethi et al., 2016).

The surging interest in plant-based milk alternatives is due to several factors, including perceived health benefits, and growing environmental, climate, ethical and animal welfare concerns regarding traditional bovine milk production (Zhang et al., 2020). Cow’s milk has been an important pillar and part of food cultures worldwide for centuries. However, growing research on the detrimental effects and negative environmental impact of the cattle industry to produce beef and dairy has caused a ripple effect and increasing demand for less harmful alternatives, thus explaining the boom in plant-based milk sales (Schiano et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). As a result, more and more plant-based milk alternatives producers have begun to emerge in this niche, often promoting messages of sustainability, commitment to the environment, and all-natural ingredients (Mylan et al., 2019; Schiano et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, with a large part of society relying on pastoral systems, meaning the utilization of livestock for production of food and drink for consumption, there has been extensive criticism of non-dairy milk alternatives (Phillipov & Loyer, 2019). Firstly, cow’s milk has long been one of the common foods promoted by governments in dietary and nutritional guidelines, for its calcium properties and the development of strong bones (Zhang et al., 2020). Second, dairy production is heavily subsidised by governments in most countries and a great number of farmers rely on livestock (Phillipov & Loyer, 2019). Therefore, plant-milk producers who are promoting the substitution of dairy with plant-based alternatives are viewed as a threat coming in direct conflict with millions of farmers’ livelihoods worldwide (Phillipov & Loyer, 2019). Consequently, the dairy industry and milk producers have collectively attempted to create obstacles for and thwart plant-based dairy alternatives from becoming as mainstream as conventional dairy (Mikkola & Norja, 2014; Phillipov & Loyer, 2019).

1.1.3. Milk Wars in Europe and North America

In Europe, the first largest milk-producing continent and the second largest milk-consuming continent (Shahbandeh, 2021a; Shahbandeh, 2021b), the European Union (EU) ruled in 2013 that the terms ‘milk’, ‘cream’, and ‘yoghurt’ are only allowed to be used for marketing and advertising of dairy products that are derived from animal milk, thus proclaiming that plant-based products are prohibited from being called milk (BBC, 2017; Janner, 2019; Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020). Following the ruling in 2013, stricter regulations have now been proposed by The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, a legislative part of the European Parliament. The newly proposed regulation, known by its legal name *Amendment 171*, seeks to prohibit “imitation or evocation” of dairy products, which could even go so far as to result in bans on plant-based foods with packaging that looks visually similar to dairy products (Waldersee, 2021). Similarly, in the United States, the second-largest milk consumer after Europe (Shahbandeh, 2021a), the plant-based labelling debate is still ongoing since 2017 (Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020). The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the dairy industry are still in the process of deciding whether plant-based dairy alternatives should be prohibited from being labeled as “milk”. This labelling debate has been dubbed the *Milk Wars*, referring to the war that the dairy industry is waging against plant-based dairy alternatives (Gantt, 2020).

The plant-based milk alternatives producers have responded to the *Milk Wars* and *Amendment 171* by actively campaigning against and increasingly calling out the dairy industry in their marketing and advertising. In a recent campaign, the plant-based brand Alpro promoted the slogan “Are you stupid? The milk lobby thinks you are”, attempting to make consumers aware of the ongoing debate and the milk lobby's argument that consumers are being misled and are unable to distinguish milk from plant-based alternatives (Gantt, 2020; Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020). Contrary to this, previous studies (Ledin & Machin, 2020a; Mylan et al., 2019) have found that plant-based dairy alternatives are marketed by differentiating themselves from dairy rather than imitating it such as the milk lobby suggests (Gantt, 2020; Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020). In their investigation into the plant-based dairy alternative giant Oatly, Ledin and Machin (2020a) concluded that the brand aims to tackle socio-political issues through its advertising by communicating that purchasing its products is a form of social activism against the environmental and animal welfare issues in the dairy sector. Thus, this would be considered the opposite of imitating dairy communication (Mikkola & Norja, 2014). Instead of communicating that plant-based dairy alternatives are similar to dairy, Mikkola and Norja (2014) and Ledin and Machin (2020a) observed that PBDA marketing communicates and

encourages transformations towards more sustainable food systems and boycotting dairy in all its forms.

Nevertheless, not much research has been conducted on how plant-based dairy alternatives are being marketed to consumers and studies such as the one conducted by Ledin and Machin (2020a) focus only on a single or a limited selection of brands. Therefore, it is crucial to add substance to this field of inquiry, which is especially relevant now that PBDA producers are being accused of imitating dairy in all aspects, including how they are being communicated to consumers.

Furthermore, it is still under-studied how PBDAs have so rapidly succeeded in expanding the PBDAs niche and are quickly embedding plant-based milk alternatives into mainstream society, especially in Europe and North America, where they are experiencing the most backlash and obstacles from the dairy industry (Mikkola & Norja, 2014; Mylan et al., 2019; Schiano et al., 2020).

1.2. Research Purpose

First, the present study aims to investigate how plant-based dairy alternatives are collectively advertised to consumers. Second, the study seeks to examine how plant-based dairy alternatives are marketed to transform from being a niche product to becoming increasingly embedded in mainstream society. The final purpose of this research is to explore how plant-based milk brands help shape or raise awareness for societal issues in the dairy industry and promote transformation to more sustainable food systems.

1.2.1 Research Relevance

Although there is significant scientific research on perceptions, motivations for purchasing and consumption of plant-based milk (Clay et al., 2020; Gambert, 2019; Jeske et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2017; Yang & Dharmasena, 2021), as well as the nutritional benefits and differences between cow's milk and plant-based milk (Auclair et al., 2019; Paul et al., 2019; Schuster et al., 2018), there is limited knowledge of the portrayal and communication of these milk alternatives to consumers.

Moreover, dairy has long enjoyed a strong position in Western food (Mikkola & Norja, 2014). Dairy milk has traditionally been a staple in European and American cuisines, and is associated with being a “pure, healthy and natural food” (Mikkola & Norja, 2014, p. 63). In addition, the US and the EU combined are the top producers and consumers of dairy in the world (Shahbandeh, 2021a; Shahbandeh, 2021b). Even so, Europe and North America are also the two spaces where consumption of commercial plant-based milk has taken off drastically even with the

raging *Milk Wars*, and where it has experienced widespread adoption in recent years (Franklin-Wallis, 2019; Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020; Schiano et al., 2020). Thus, it is societally and scientifically relevant to investigate the context of plant-based milk alternatives in these two geographical areas.

This study aims to fill the gaps in knowledge on how plant-based milk alternatives producers have succeeded in making their products mainstream and how they are convincing dairy drinkers to switch to plant-based alternatives through advertising (Schiano et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2020). Furthermore, the study contributes to the limited body of research about marketing plant-based milk and adds additional value by being the first to conduct a comparative analysis between two geographical areas to explore how plant-based milk is being embedded in the world's largest dairy consuming societies (Mikkola & Norja, 2014).

1.2.2. Research Questions

The main research question that guides this study is: *How have plant-based milk alternatives been portrayed in advertising images in Europe and North America in the past half decade?* Additionally, the sub-research questions are: (a) how are plant-based milk alternatives advertised to consumers in Europe to promote their consumption and encourage their embedding into mainstream society?, (b) how are plant-based milk alternatives advertised to consumers in North America to promote their consumption and encourage their embedding into mainstream society? and (c) how do Europe and North America compare in the advertising of plant-based dairy alternatives to consumers?

The research questions were answered following a qualitative approach by means of the multimodal critical discourse analysis framework introduced by Machin & Mayr (2012).

1.2.3. Outline of Chapters

The next chapter presents the theoretical framework on the role of sustainability transitions and highlights how niche products shift to being embedded into the mainstream and provides an overview of previous research on plant-based food and dairy advertising. Chapter three details the methodological choices made while conducting this study, including how data was collected and analysed. In chapter four, the findings are discussed in addition to the identified discourses around which plant-based dairy alternatives are advertised. Finally, chapter five concludes the paper and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

Plant-based dairy alternatives are not a novel phenomenon as they have been traditional staple foods in various cultures around the world for several centuries. Traditional plant-based beverages include the Spanish and Latin American *horchata*, and soya milk originating in East Asia, both dating as far back as the 13th century (Jeske et al., 2018). However, the use of plant-based dairy alternatives has grown steadily in the decades that followed, with consumer demand for commercial versions reaching all-time highs in the 20th and 21st century, particularly in the Western world.

Although plant-based milk alternatives were initially considered niche products, catering to small consumer segments consisting of vegans, vegetarians, and those with lactose intolerance, they are now attempting to move further into the mainstream supported by an increasing demand. The main contributors for this are an increase in consumer interest in health and wellness alongside negative perceptions associated with cow's milk, and increasing concern for environmental degradation, causing a shift towards more plant-based foods and diets (Clay et al., 2020; Gambert, 2019; Jeske et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2017; Yang & Dharmasena, 2021). While manufacturers of plant-based dairy alternatives were once exclusively utilizing niche marketing as a promotion strategy, they are now attempting to mainstream their products to reach a broader audience.

There are various empirical models that provide a basis for understanding and analysing this transition from niche to mainstream, of which this paper highlights those that are concerned with transitions towards more sustainable food and the societal embedding of plant-based alternatives (Mylan et al., 2019). Sustainability transitions literature provides the theoretical basis to support this study and aids in making sense of the findings. Therefore, it is important to examine these theories further to serve as an analytical foundation for subsequent chapters within this paper.

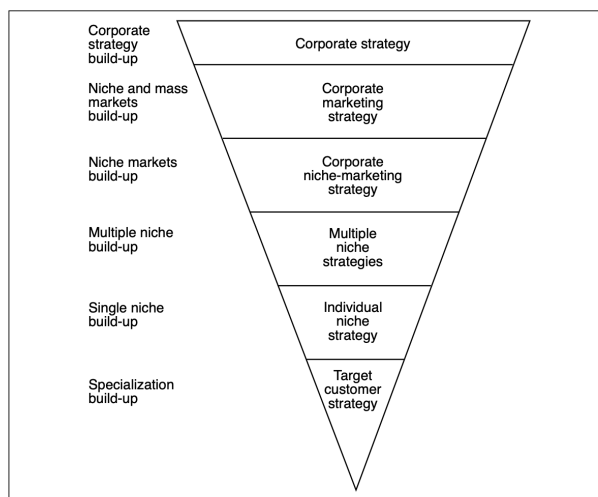
This research aims to draw on these previous studies to provide insight into the communication of plant-based dairy alternatives in Europe and North America. In this chapter, the current state of literature and previous research on the communication of plant-based dairy alternatives is presented, and various approaches proposed by scholars are compared and critically evaluated. First, the shift of plant-based dairy alternatives from niche products to the mainstream are discussed, followed by an overview of sustainability transitions theory (Geels, 2002). In chapter 2.2, literature on plant-based food and non-dairy milk advertising is presented including prevalent narratives. Then, in chapter 2.3, the liquid dairy milk market is examined, followed by a brief overview of predominant food advertising discourses. Finally, the gap in knowledge will be addressed, focusing on current marketing narratives surrounding plant-based milk alternatives.

2.1. Shifting from Niche to Mainstream

Niche marketing, also referred to as “target marketing”, “focused marketing”, “concentrated marketing” and “micro-marketing” (Dalgic & Leeuw, 1994, p. 40) is defined as a marketing strategy that caters to “a small market consisting of an individual customer or a small group of customers with similar characteristics or needs” (Dalgic & Leeuw, 1994, p. 40). Though Keegan et al. (1992) define a niche as “a small market that is not served by competing products” (p. 269), Dalgic and Leeuw (1994) slightly contest this definition and emphasize that it involves product differentiation within a market rather than only catering to a market that lacks competitors. Specifically, the authors (Dalgic & Leeuw, 1994) state that niche marketing is “a method to meet customer needs through tailoring goods and services for small markets” (p. 41) and the “positioning into small, profitable homogeneous market segments which have been ignored or neglected by others” (p. 42). In their paper, the authors (Dalgic & Leeuw, 1994) continue to argue that niche marketing is a bottom-up approach, whereby the marketer “starts from the needs of a few customers and gradually builds up a larger customer base” (p. 42). Figure 1 presents this bottom-up approach of how niche marketers position themselves within a market based on distinctive characteristics and eventually build up and expand their target audience.

Figure 1

The Bottom-up Approach for Niche Marketing



Note. This figure was produced by Shani and Chalasani in 1992, and it presents the concept of niche marketing from a bottom-up approach (as reprinted in Dalgic & Leeuw, 1994). From “Niche

marketing revisited: Concept, applications and some European cases” by T. Dalgic and M. Leeuw, 1994, *European Journal of Marketing*, 28(4), p. 41. Copyright 1994 by Tefvik Dalgic and Maarten Leeuw.

Although the theories by Dalgic and Leeuw were proposed in 1994, they are still very much relevant in today’s marketing landscapes. Niche marketing is increasingly being employed by smaller companies as well as larger corporations and among newly established and growing industries as well as in mature industries (Akbar et al., 2017; Hamlin et al., 2015; Toften & Hammervoll, 2013). A recent review of the literature on this subject (Akbar et al., 2017) found that the appeal of niche marketing lies in its numerous benefits, including increased profits, growth and high market share for businesses. An important factor attributing to these benefits of niche marketing is its highly competitive nature, causing the rapid disruption of markets (Akbar et al., 2017).

It is worth noting that Dalgic and Leeuw’s (1994) bottom-up approach for niche marketing has not escaped criticism. In particular, the scholars’ approach is critiqued for relying too heavily on and primarily emphasizing the benefits of niche marketing while not going further into detail on other negative or less desirable outcomes of the strategy (Toften & Hammervoll, 2013). Examples of such negative outcomes associated with niche marketing are competitor attacks and aggressive responses from established products in the market (Toften & Hammervoll, 2013).

Toften and Hammervoll (2013) also highlighted that the promoted benefits of niche marketing in the literature are rather vague. Specifically, there have not been any quantitative studies to provide evidence for these benefits, which include growth possibilities, increased market share, increased sales, and higher profits. Most of the literature on niche marketing (Dalgic, 1998; Dalgic and Leeuw, 1994; McKenna 1988) involves qualitative techniques and fails to clarify practical implications (Toften & Hammervoll, 2013). Moreover, the authors argue that the benefits are not easily verifiable as they are perceived benefits rather than having been proven or tested in practise. Nonetheless, Dalgic and Leeuw (1994) are regarded as an authority on niche marketing theory, and provide convincing recommendations employed by numerous other studies (Akbar et al., 2017; Boukid, 2020; Hamlin et al., 2015; Hoskins et al., 2021; Latacz-Lohmann & Foster, 1997; Mylan et al., 2019). Therefore, this approach provides a valuable foundation for understanding niche products and their embedding into society.

An important aspect of niche marketing that scholars are in complete agreement on is relationship marketing (Dalgic and Leeuw, 1994; Shani & Chalasani, 1992; Toften & Hammervoll,

2013). Relationship marketing is regarded as a key to niche marketing to develop strong and long-term relationships with consumers. The main aim is to create a bond with every individual consumer for mutual benefit rather than stimulating a purchase (Shani & Chalasani, 1992).

Nowadays, niche marketing forms a crucial tool in marketers' toolkit of marketing techniques and is applied in various industries (Hoskins et al., 2021; Toften & Hammervoll, 2013). In the context of plant-based food and dairy alternatives, traditional dairy and meat producers have recognized that former niche-only plant-based substitutes manufacturers are moving into their territory or market. This has caused a disruption in the dairy and meat industry as more consumers shift towards a plant-based diet, causing meat and dairy giants to identify these alternative products as a threat. This might explain why they are using their influence in politics through lobbying and working actively to create obstacles for the plant-based food industry, such as fuelling the plant-based labelling battle (Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020; Tziva et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, corporations have recognized the economic benefits of engaging in niche marketing as more consumers desire products that are tailored to their specific individual needs and prefer personalized marketing over undifferentiated mass marketing (Dalgic, 1998; McKenna 1988; Toften & Hammervoll, 2013). By creating new products or adapting existing ones to meet consumer needs, these large corporations benefit from niche marketing by connecting with consumers on a more personal level, similar to the business model of niche companies. Dalgic (1998) coined the marketing concept of "guerrillas versus gorillas", the former referring to small niche enterprises and the latter to large corporations.

According to Kotler et al. (2019), guerrilla warfare "consists of waging small, intermittent attacks to harass and demoralise the opponent and eventually secure permanent footholds (section Attack Strategies, para. 6). Both guerrilla and gorilla marketers engage in niche marketing nowadays and many of the plant-based dairy alternatives companies today are considered guerrillas. Others, however, are segments of gorilla corporations who employ niche marketing in the plant-based food substitutes domain (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2017; Tziva et al., 2020). Some examples are the Swiss multinational food giant Nestlé, who added the brand Garden Gourmet to their portfolio of brands to strengthen their presence in the plant-based market, and the American dairy company Elmhurst, who completely transitioned from producing liquid dairy milk to solely manufacturing plant-based milk alternatives (Apostolidis, 2018).

Niches may initially be relatively small, but may eventually transition into large markets

through guerilla marketing. As McKenna (1988) states, “most large markets evolve from niche markets . . . because niche marketing teaches many important lessons about customers—in particular, to think of customers as individuals and to respond to their special needs” (section Niche Marketing: Selling Big by Selling Small, para. 3). Furthermore, in their analysis of sustainable agriculture production, Hamlin et al. (2015) emphasize that there is a strong connection between “successful sustainable agricultural practice and niche marketing, largely because sustainable systems are frequently pioneered by individual and small enterprises which address an equally small initial market” (p. 87). The authors argue that niche products, such as plant-based alternatives to dairy, are necessary for agricultural systems to transition towards more sustainable practises. Adding to this, Toften and Hammervoll (2013) point out that there could be another possible outcome of successful niche products apart from growing with the market and becoming mainstream. Niche firms can also expand to form their own market (Toften & Hammervoll, 2013). Nevertheless, this is more likely when the niche product is highly unique and does not seek to replace or imitate an already established product such as dairy milk (Toften & Hammervoll, 2013). The transition from plant-based food and dairy alternatives into the mainstream is further discussed in the context of sustainability transitions theory (Geels, 2002; Geels, 2004; Markard et al., 2012; Mylan et al., 2019; Vinnari & Vinnari, 2013) in the next section.

2.1.1. Sustainability Transitions Theory

In their seminal paper on plant-based milk moving from being a niche product to the mainstream, Mylan et al. (2019) describe the relationship between plant-based dairy alternatives and liquid milk producers as a ‘niche-regime’ interaction. They argue that on the subject of plant-based milk substitutes, the niche in this interaction is the plant-based milk market, while the regime consists of the dairy industry (Mylan et al., 2019). The concept of a niche market has been discussed in the previous section. A regime, however, is a socio-technical system that entails “the multiple social, political and cultural domains through which established routines, interests and investments are reproduced, working to maintain stability and constrain innovation” (Mylan et al., 2019, p. 234).

Socio-technical regimes are long-established institutions that have gained widespread acceptance in society over time, of which the agri-food industry is a prime example. Some of the key characteristics of regimes are their resistance to innovation and social transitions (Geels, 2004; Mylan et al., 2019). Despite dairy producers viewing plant-based milk as a threat and resisting its embedding into society, plant-based milk producers are continuing to innovate and market

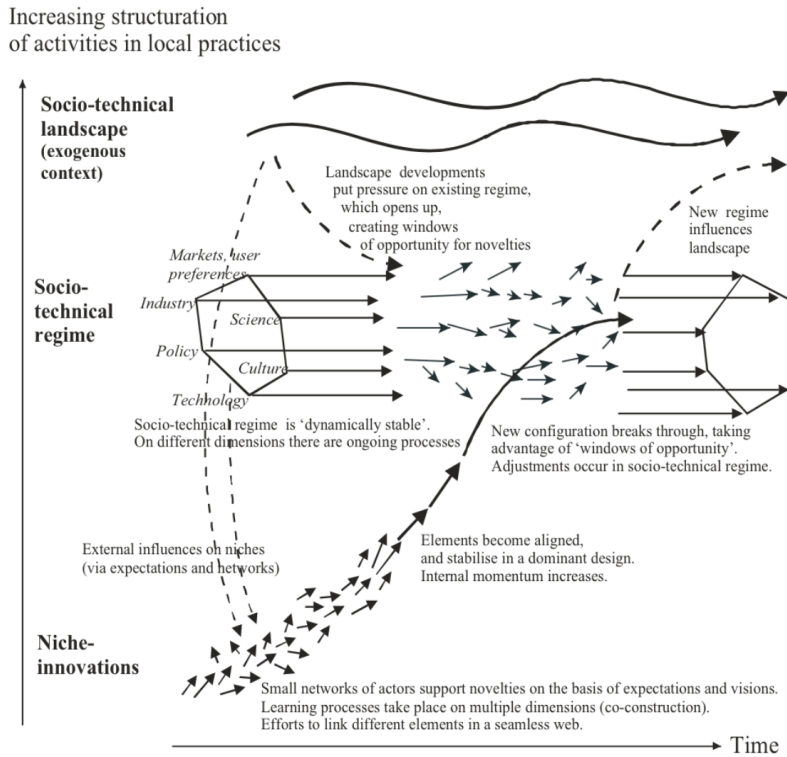
themselves to become mainstream by positioning themselves as a more sustainable option to dairy milk (Mylan et al., 2019; Nobari, 2021). Laying at the foundation of this process are transitions and sustainability transitions theories (Geels, 2002).

Transitions are “non-linear processes of social change, in which societal systems are structurally transformed” (Avelino & Grin, 2017). In addition, sustainability transitions are defined as “long-term, multidimensional and fundamental transformation processes through which established socio-technical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption” (Markard et al. 2012, p. 956). Geels in 2004 was among one of the first to propose the concept of socio-technical regimes in relation to food sustainability transitions. Previous work in this field focused primarily on technological aspects of sustainability transitions theory such as case studies related to the energy and transportation industries rather than on sustainability transitions in food and food consumption (Geels, 2002; Mylan et al., 2019). However, Geels (2004), presented ground-breaking theories in the field of socio-technical systems on which Mylan et al. (2019), among others (Markard et al. 2012; Nobari, 2021), based their theses regarding niche and regime interactions.

There are several theoretical and conceptual frameworks in understanding and promoting the transition to sustainability, of which the multi-level perspective (MLP) is the most prominent one in research on agri-food sustainability transitions (Geels, 2002; Geels, 2004; Geels 2011; El Bilali, 2018). The multi-level perspective suggests that sustainability transitions occur through non-linear interaction processes within and among three analytical levels: (1) niches, (2) socio-technical regimes and (3) a socio-technical landscape (Geels, 2002; Geels, 2004; Geels, 2011). It is argued that within the regime level, transitions are in essence “shifts from one regime to another regime” (Geels, 2011, p. 26). Moreover, the niche level is identified as a critical component of the MLP regarding sustainability transitions, as it is the driving force behind systemic change (Geels, 2011). In their paper, Mylan et al. (2019) apply the sustainability transitions theory in the plant-based milk niche. Their findings suggest that for niche products such as plant-based milk alternatives to become mainstream alongside the dairy regime or eventually even replace it altogether, niche innovators must gain momentum as well as widespread acceptance in society and within the market to ultimately gain legitimacy (Geels, 2011; Mylan et al., 2019). Figure 2 visualizes the multi-level framework as described above.

Figure 2

The Multi-Level Perspective on Transitions



Note. This figure was produced by Geels in 2002, and it shows the multi-level perspective on transitions (as reprinted in Geels, 2011). From “Technological transitions as evolutionary reconfiguration processes: A multi-level perspective and a case-study” by F. Geels, 2002, *Research Policy*, 31(8–9), p. 1263. Copyright 2002 by Frank Geels.

2.2. Advertising Plant-Based Food and Non-Dairy Milk

When investigating previous research on plant-based food alternatives advertising, it becomes apparent that most of the literature concentrates on advertising for plant-based meat and protein alternatives (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2020; Boukid, 2020; Broad, 2020; Lang, 2020; Rödl, 2018). In addition, due to the recency of plant-based food alternatives transitioning into the mainstream in society, most of the prior studies conducted in this field are relatively new, only spanning the last two decades.

First, Lang and Barling (2012) emphasize that since the scientific community raised concerns over the world’s food systems being one of the key contributors to environmental and climate

change issues, governments and policymakers have started incorporating these concerns when formulating dietary advice for the population. After footprint analyses demonstrated that consumption rates far exceed natural resources, governments, mostly in Western developed countries, have encouraged their citizens to opt for more sustainable food choices (Lang & Barling, 2012). In North America, food consumption follows a trend as though it inhabits five planets, while Europeans consume as much as inhabiting three planets (Lang & Barling, 2012). This prompted governments in these areas to be among the first to promote sustainable food consumption (Lang & Barling, 2012). Nonetheless, these government-led campaigns focused primarily on food waste reduction, eating seasonally and locally, choosing more sustainable versions of food products including those that are labelled as fair trade and organic, or grocery shopping without the use of a car (Beverland, 2014; Lang & Barling, 2012). Thus, even though livestock has been proven to have the largest ecological and environmental impact, food policy has scarcely included the encouragement of choosing plant-based meat and dairy alternatives (Beverland, 2014; Lang & Barling, 2012).

Second, the plant-based alternatives industry has been actively attempting to add plant-based substitutes on the agendas of governments as well as consumers and have been more successful at reaching consumers (Boukid, 2020). To do so, plant-based food alternatives producers have framed their products as being “better for you” and “better for the planet” (Avelino & Grin, 2017; Boukid, 2020). In the case of plant-based meat substitutes, these are often promoted as “healthier sources of proteins compared to meat” (Boukid, 2020, p. 298), though this claim has been widely contested and critics have argued that plant-based meat substitutes are ultra-processed foods which lack long-term evidence of containing more health benefits than meat (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2020; Boukid, 2020; Broad, 2020; Lang, 2020; Sexton et al., 2019). It must be noted, though, that most of these critics are involved in the meat industry and thus their perspective might also not be completely objective (Aschemann- Witzel et al., 2020; Sexton et al., 2019). Even so, there have been significant successful advertising campaigns of plant-based food and dairy substitutes, which are discussed next.

2.2.1. Plant-Based Food Advertising and Narratives

A common marketing strategy employed in advertising plant-based protein substitutes is the use of so-called “meat myths” which are incorporated into plant-based advertisements (Rödl, 2018). Meat myths are “widely-held beliefs about why eating meat is justified” (Rödl, 2018, p. 328). These include that consuming meat is (a) normal, (b) natural, and (c) necessary (Olausson, 2017; Rödl,

2018). By applying these same myths, marketers portray plant-based meat substitutes as normal, for example using traditional dishes in advertisements, and as natural, and finally as necessary, portraying these alternatives as “even more necessary for good health than meat” (Rödl, 2018, p. 327). Nevertheless, the author (Rödl, 2018) also criticizes this approach, arguing that perpetuating meat myths may reinforce a meat-centred culture.

Furthermore, in their seminal paper, Sexton et al. (2019) found that the primary narrative around which plant-based alternative foods are communicated embodies three pillars: people, animals and the planet. These pillars, also referred to in the study (Sexton et al., 2019) as *promises*, are first, that alternative proteins are good for people and contribute to a healthier body. The concept of good health is communicated by pointing towards the negative impacts of consuming conventional livestock products such as meat and dairy (Binnekamp & Ingenbleek, 2008; Sexton et al., 2019). Second, plant-based protein and dairy alternatives are framed as the ideal solution to the world’s food challenges, putting forth the notion that these are the products that will solve the issue of an increasing global population (Sexton et al., 2019). Last, the promise of being good for animals and the environment is communicated to consumers through statements such as being “earth-friendly, eco-friendly, sustainable and creating a smaller footprint” (Sexton et al., 2019, p. 55).

Concerning plant-based milk advertising, the Swedish vegan milk substitute brand Oatly is often taken as an example of a successful non-dairy milk marketing campaign (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2017; Ledin & Machin, 2020a). Oatly, known for its aggressive marketing campaigns, promotes its products using slogans such as “like milk but made for humans” and “no milk, no soy, no badness” (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2017, p. 537), causing major controversy and being accused of discrediting milk and portraying cow’s milk as unsuitable for consumption by humans. Nonetheless, the company is popular among consumers and has been successfully converted from a niche brand to a brand for the masses (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2017). Oatly’s success, according to Ledin and Machin (2020a), lies in the way it implements a form of social activism by communicating the socio-political issues in the dairy industry without directly stating what those issues are. Instead, the company gives consumers the feeling of making a difference in a simple way by purchasing their products (Ledin & Machin, 2020a).

Finally, several scholars such as Haas et al. (2019) and Binnekamp and Ingenbleek (2008), have found that vegan milk brand advertisers are tapping into the underlying traditional messages of dairy marketing initiatives to change consumer perceptions of bovine dairy. An example is that of the plant-based milk brand Alpro who launched a spinoff of the famous “Got Milk?” advertising

campaign where celebrities wearing milk moustaches encourage Americans to drink more fluid milk (Nicholson & Kaiser, 2008). Thus, to understand plant-milk advertising, it is crucial to also investigate dairy advertising discourses and narratives. Therefore, traditional dairy advertising is explored hereinafter.

2.3. Liquid Dairy Milk Market

2.3.1. Dairy Advertising and Narratives

According to Nicholson and Kaiser (2008), dairy farmers in the United States pay a mandatory fee between \$0.15 and \$0.20 cents to the government for every hundred pounds of milk that is marketed in the country to increase consumer fluid milk demand nation-wide. These generic marketing campaigns raise up to \$370 million each year, constituting one of the largest generic advertising initiatives in the U.S. (Nicholson & Kaiser, 2008). Some examples of these so-called 'generic' marketing campaigns include *Got Milk?* which started in 1993, and the Milk Moustache print media campaign, both of which aim at encouraging the consumption of milk and “reducing the amount of surplus milk purchased by the government under the *Dairy Production and Stabilization Act of 1983*” (Nicholson & Kaiser, 2008, p. 1125). In their study on the effectiveness of these programmes, the scholars confirmed that generic advertising of dairy is highly profitable for dairy farmers and milk processors, as well as for governments who subsidize them (Nicholson & Kaiser, 2008).

Harwood and Drake (2018) add to this and state that a primary reason why such generic or traditional approaches to advertising bovine milk are adopted, is that milk is perceived as being a staple product in American households. In their work, the authors identify various consumer perceptions of milk, of which all are related to positive feelings and beliefs related to milk being a long-time staple food item that is nutritious and necessary for good health (Harwood & Drake, 2018). Though Harwood and Drake (2008) present intriguing findings, it should be noted that the study they completed was funded in part by the National Dairy Council in the state of Illinois, in the United States. Nevertheless, McCarthy et al. (2017) presented similar findings relating to dairy consumers and the utility of milk as a standard part of an everyday diet. Their quantitative study (McCarthy et al., 2017) on consumer motivations for consuming dairy suggests that consumers made positive emotional connections between purchasing and consuming dairy, including feelings of happiness, and positivity. Overall, the consumption of milk is seen as a habit that is continuously

carried out to ensure proper nutrition and ultimately for the maintenance of a balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle which leads to living a long and healthy life (McCarthy et al., 2017).

Moreover, there are some other prominent traditional dairy discourses, particularly the following three: (1) the mothering discourse and the marketing of dairy as a cancer-fighting food (Overend, 2016), (2) dairy farms representing an idyll where cows are willing producers of the milk that is taken from them and the dairy industry being loving, caring, and compassionate (Linné, 2016; Olausson, 2017), and (3) the so-called healthier milk options discourse, including the marketing of organic and bio cow's milk (Stephenson & Nicholson, 2018). Also, there are various values associated with cow's milk consumption. These include the comfort value, the value of family and good parenting, happiness, flavour, and finally, waste reduction (McCarthy et al., 2017).

Next, some common food advertising discourses are explored since this study investigates advertised discourses surrounding the food industry, which is a unique specialism in the field of marketing. This knowledge will help understand findings in the broader context of food marketing and advertising.

2.4. Food Advertising Discourses

In their paper of 2016, Maddock and Hill found that one predominant discourse in food advertising is that advertisements for food products that cause decreased mood, for example processed foods such as pastries and candy, employ messages related to happiness and wellbeing, while healthy foods such as fibre-rich grains and vegetables, which can often have the potential to increase mood are not communicated as such. It is argued that this is significant, because advertising can directly influence which foods consumers purchase and consume (Maddock & Hill, 2016). The authors identified three sub-discourses which are closely related to the predominant one.

First, a scientific discourse of food as “feeding the mind” (Maddock & Hill, 2016, p. 329) is suggested. This discourse entails food being represented as sustenance which directly impacts mood and long-term wellbeing. In this sense, food is communicated along the lines of health and overall wellness. The second sub-discourse identified is that of food as nourishment for body as well as for mind and soul, indicating that food can provide comfort (Maddock & Hill, 2016). An additional finding identified by the authors suggests that there is confusion among consumers regarding which discourses are, in fact, truthful and represent the reality of each of the food products' beneficial and less beneficial characteristics.

While Maddock and Hill (2016) identified food advertising discourses based on emotional appeal, Margariti et al. (2019), in their experimental study on consumer responses to visual metaphors in different countries, found that cultural differences greatly influence the extent to which and the way visual metaphors in advertising images are understood by consumers. Thus, the authors (Margariti et al., 2019) argued that visual metaphors are more, or less, appreciated in different geographical areas as a result of cultural differences and values. Specifically, the research (Margariti et al., 2019) focused on the United States and India, for their notable differences in culture. These findings could potentially be invaluable in the current study, which also investigates two different geographical areas, specifically Europe and North America.

2.5. Knowledge Gaps

In conclusion, the proposed theoretical framework guiding this study consists of niche marketing theory (Dalgic & Leeuw, 1994) and sustainability transitions theory (Geels, 2002) to understand the shift of plant-based dairy beverages as niche products to being embedded in mainstream society. In addition, a literature review was conducted of plant-based food and non-dairy milk advertising narratives, followed by an overview of the liquid dairy milk market and a brief discussion of general food advertising discourses. Though there is significant literature on plant-based meat alternatives (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2020; Boukid, 2020; Broad, 2020; Lang, 2020; Rödl, 2018), research on plant-based dairy alternatives is much more limited and focuses primarily on consumer perceptions, nutritional aspects and health contributions. More specifically, the relationship as well as the differences and similarities between narratives surrounding plant-based milk advertising in the two geographical areas that this study is interested in, Europe and North America, has not yet been clarified. Additionally, the literature that *is* available on the narratives and discourses regarding plant-based milk lacks depth and concentrates on specific brands individually rather than collectively identifying similarities in advertisements. This paper contributes to knowledge by filling these gaps on plant-based milk-alternatives advertising.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

In order to conduct a thorough and in-depth investigation into the topic of this research and ultimately answer the research question, this study employs a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research was deemed most appropriate considering the in-depth, exploratory, inductive, and interpretive nature of the research question (Boeije, 2009). In qualitative research “a social phenomenon is explored in order to find empirical patterns that can function as the beginning of a theory” (Boeije, 2009, p. 5), as is the purpose of this study.

This study is one of the first of its kind to explore and compare discourses on plant-based milk alternatives in two geographical areas, specifically Europe and North America. Simultaneously, it is the first research to investigate a range of plant-based brand advertisements collectively. The limited research available in the context of plant-based dairy alternatives advertising has focused solely on one or two brands individually rather than investigating advertising messaging patterns in the industry (Ledin & Machin, 2020a). The exploratory aspect provides deeper understanding into the phenomenon and the comparative element adds additional depth to the study (Boeije, 2009). In order to answer the research questions, a visual analysis of existing data was conducted, focusing specifically on visual advertisements in the form of still images (Boeije, 2009; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). Image advertisements were chosen because these are regarded as one of the most persuasive forms of advertising for their ability to be understood at a quick glance, unlike video advertisements, for example, which require the audience’s attention for longer before they can be fully comprehended (Covell, 1992; Hussain et al., 2017).

3.2. Methods

This research was performed through a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) of visual image advertisements, which provided the ability to identify “observable dimensions of the images in question, as well as a judgement about how frequently various visual features appear in the periods that one chooses to compare” (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 10). Discourse analysis enabled the identification of the interrelationship between language, power and ideology, revealing the covert or underlying messages behind what the plant-based milk advertising images communicate to consumers (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This was a crucial requirement in deciding on a proper method of analysis, following previous research (Ledin & Machin, 2020a) which found that

plant-based milk alternatives companies often act as social changemakers, attempting to put socio-political issues on the agenda and promote them to consumers. Through discourse analysis, the plant-based milk advertisements' language could be identified and its role in the construction of social reality as well as "point out the power and influence of particular narratives and analyse their potential societal and institutional functions and effects" (Ma & Stahl, 2017, p. 5). Discourse analysis was well-suited for its ability to effectively decode power and ideology in the advertising images (Ma & Stahl, 2017).

Additionally, the advertising images that were collected for analysis did not only include visual features, but also text. As visual and textual elements are combined to communicate discourses, it was of importance within this study to identify a method that enables analysis of both elements in order to interpret and provide wholesome results. Multimodal critical discourse analysis was chosen as the primary method of analysis as it adheres to the criteria. Specifically, the framework for multimodal critical discourse analysis proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012) was selected as it provides the most comprehensive framework for systematically conducting critical discourse analysis of data that incorporates both visual and linguistic elements. Although there are various approaches for critical discourse analysis, such as the ones proposed by Fairclough (1992), Halliday (1985) and Van Leeuwen (2008), most concentrate solely on language and semiotics while ignoring other modes of communication such as images (Han, 2015). Machin and Mayr's (2012) approach is one of the first to integrate the analysis of language with visuals. The authors are also the ones to introduce the first systematic toolkit of its kind to concretely analyse discourses in visual communication (Han, 2015).

Multimodal critical discourse analysis is also identified as the most suitable method in this study involving power structures between the plant-based dairy and dairy industry because the method:

Views . . . modes of communication as a means of social construction. Visual communication, as well as language, both *shapes* and *is shaped by* society. MCDA therefore is not so much interested in the visual semiotic choices in themselves, but also in the way that they play a part in the communication of power relations. (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 10)

In addition to the MCDA framework by Machin and Mayr (2012), it was also deemed necessary to employ a secondary method for the analysis of semiotic intertextuality between the advertising images. Intertextuality refers to the relationship between texts, or in this case between

the multimedia advertising images, and entails that all images or texts that are produced are influenced by the preceding images or text (Alfaro, 1996; Panigrahi, 2013; Rivas, 2017). Julia Kristeva first coined the term in 1966 and Roland Barthes further expanded on the theory of intertextuality in 1977 (Alfaro, 1996). Intertextuality is a widely used technique in advertising, because it provides marketers and advertisers with a method to create connections between their advertisements through repetition of certain elements (Rivas, 2017). The use of intertextuality creates familiarity, stimulates consumers' memory and causes them to easily associate certain advertisements with the brands they belong to (Rivas, 2017). Since this study investigated plant-based milk advertising images, which often communicate environmental sustainability and animal welfare (Ledin & Machin, 2020a; Mylan et al., 2019; Schiano et al., 2020), it was thus of utmost importance to investigate how intertextuality is utilized by plant-based dairy alternatives advertisements. Though MCDA provides a framework to individually analyse discourses in advertising images, it lacked the ability to analyse commonalities between the advertisements. Intertextual analysis filled this gap and provided the required guidelines to comprehensively and rigorously identify intertextual meanings in the data, thus further strengthening the analysis.

3.3. Data Collection

In order to gain insight into the discourses surrounding plant-based milk alternatives communicated to consumers, this study utilized existing data in the form of advertising images, specifically visual material artifacts “that were produced for purposes other than social research” (Flick, 2017, pp. 400–401). Before being able to collect the data, the additional concepts mentioned in the research question “*How have plant-based milk alternatives been portrayed in Europe and North America in the past half decade?*” had to be further operationalized. As such, the concept of *plant-based milk alternatives* refers to fluids that are subtracted from plants, nuts, legumes, cereals, or seeds, “which imitate cow’s milk in appearance and consistency” (Sethi et al., 2016, p. 3409). These dairy alternatives are also called *non-dairy milk*, *plant-based liquids*, *plant-based drinks*, *plant-based milk*, *non-dairy milk*, *plant milk*, or *vegan milk* and there are various types, of which soy, oat, rice, almond, coconut, flax, and quinoa milk are a few examples (Sethi et al., 2016). In addition, *Europe* refers to the countries that are part of the European continent and includes all countries that are part of the European Union, while *North America* refers to the countries that are part of Northern America including the United States and Canada. Finally, *the past half decade* describes the previous five years spanning the time period between May of 2016 and May of 2021.

After the concepts had been operationalized, a list of keywords and search terms was assembled which reflected the data to be collected using the search engine Google, in particular Google Images. Keywords and search terms were combined and alternated to narrow down the search, and Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT and AND NOT) were used to combine or exclude keywords in a search, providing more focused results. Some examples of the searches include “plant milk AND advertisement”, “plant-based milk OR vegan milk AND ads”, and “non-dairy milk AND adverts”. Appendix A provides an overview of the keywords and search terms utilized in the data collection procedure.

After the first round of web search queries, two separate lists were created for European and North American plant-based dairy alternatives brands. Each of the lists were assembled using a combination of the researcher’s existing knowledge of certain brands, the search engine Google, and previous studies conducted on plant-based dairy alternatives brands (Ledin & Machin, 2020a; Mylan et al., 2019). Initially, the European list consisted of ten plant-based dairy alternatives brands, while the North American list included 20 plant-based dairy alternatives brands. The names of each of these brands were added to the master list of keywords and search terms, after which these were combined with the existing keywords to form new search terms. Some examples of such terms used for the second batch of search queries are “Oatly AND advertisements”, “Silk AND ads”, and “Alpro AND marketing OR advertisements”. After having exhausted the search terms and web search queries on the search engine, each brand website and all its social media sites as well as blogs and affiliate websites were scanned thoroughly for additional advertising images. It was decided to collect data from various types of sources (for example Google Images, brand websites, blogs and other affiliate websites) as this has several advantages, of which triangulation is the foremost one, and ultimately enhances the validity of the findings (Flick, 2017).

Finally, ten brand names spanning both the European (removed one brand) and the North American (removed nine brands) markets, including Edensoy and Forager, were removed from the list due to insufficient advertising images being available online. In total, 133 advertising images were collected from European brands and 122 units from North American brands. These were sorted into separate folders on the researcher’s personal desktop by brand and then by region and cleaned for duplicates. After duplicates had been removed, brands with less than three advertising images were also eliminated from the data as these provided less opportunity to properly analyse intertextuality for the brands (Rivas, 2017). In addition, all advertising images containing plant-based chocolate milk or other products made using plant-based milk, for example non-dairy cream cheese

or iced coffee with plant-based milk, were excluded from the data. This was done in order to ensure that the results reflected discourses surrounding plant-based milk alternatives alone. In total, data from nine European brands and 11 from North American brands were collected. After cleaning, filtering and refining, the final amount of advertising images that was compiled is 153 units, of which 77 originate from marketing and advertising campaigns created by plant-milk companies in European and 76 in North American countries. Some examples of European plant-milk companies selected are Alpro (Belgium), Oatly (Sweden), and Rude Health (United Kingdom), while some North American examples are Silk (United States and Canada), Blue Diamond Almond Breeze (United States), and Elmhurst (United States). Data collection took place between March 1–7 of 2021.

Visual images were chosen as the primary units of analysis, because visual perception precedes textual language, meaning that a person can understand a phenomenon through visuals first before understanding it through language (Flick, 2017). In that sense, the images provided the opportunity to be thoroughly analysed for portrayals of power relations and discourses (Flick, 2017; Machin & Mayr, 2012). In addition, advertisement images were chosen to provide additional depth and further exploration into the identified discourses.

3.3.1. Sampling

The final sample that was chosen for analysis in this study through non-probability purposive criterion sampling (Palinkas et al., 2013) consisted of advertising images that adhere to the following criteria: the images (a) were advertised in Europe or North-American countries, specifically the United States and Canada, (b) are all available online on the Internet, (c) originate from an advertising campaign by a plant-milk company and were posted on the Internet or available in print and were later made digitally available online, which includes being posted on the company website, social media platforms, marketing and advertising repositories, search engines, on other websites and blogs, in online magazines, online newspapers, or on billboards and made digitally available online, (d) are from independent brands or subsidiaries or daughter companies of larger organizations that do not include supermarket brands, (e) are not older than five years, meaning that they were created and ran between the years 2016 and 2021, (f) contain at least one visual element and one textual element, and (g) only contain textual elements in the English language. Advertising images in languages other than English were excluded in the initial data collection procedure as the researcher wanted to avoid the likelihood of misinterpreting advertisements that were not in her

native tongues, Dutch or English. However, since the search terms were in English, very few advertisements in other languages appeared from the search queries. Appendix A provides a collection of the advertising images that were included in the sample, while table 1 provides a complete overview of the brands included in the sample.

Although supermarkets are increasingly producing their own generic plant-based milk products, these were excluded from the sample because they are believed to be an entire segment on their own that is largely also advertised generically, thus adding little value to this study seeking to identify unique patterns and discourses in plant-milk communication (Chakravarti & Janiszewski, 2004).

Table 1

Sample and Number of Advertisements by Brand and Region

Brand	Geographic Region		Total
	Europe (<i>n</i> = 77)	North America (<i>n</i> = 76)	
Alpro (Danone)	Belgium		22
Oatly	Sweden		16
Provamel (Danone)	Belgium		13
Innocent (Coca Cola Company)	United Kingdom		8
Plenish M*lk	United Kingdom		5
Rebel Kitchen Mylk	United Kingdom		4
Good Hemp	United Kingdom		3
Rude Health	United Kingdom		3
Wunda (Nestlé)	Switzerland		3
Califia Farms		United States	17
Silk (Danone)		United States	12
Blue Diamond Almond Breeze		United States	7
Earth's Own		Canada	7
Elmhurst		United States	7
Milkadamia		United States	5
Ripple Dairy-Free		United States	5
Tempt (Living Harvest)		United States	5
Dream (Hain Celestial)		United States	4
Not Milk		United States	4
Starbucks (Nestlé)		United States	3
Total			153

3.4. Data Analysis

As previously stated, this study utilized a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The purpose of this analytical approach was to identify the discourses in the communication of plant-based milk alternatives. To specify, according to Flick (2017), the term discourse refers to:

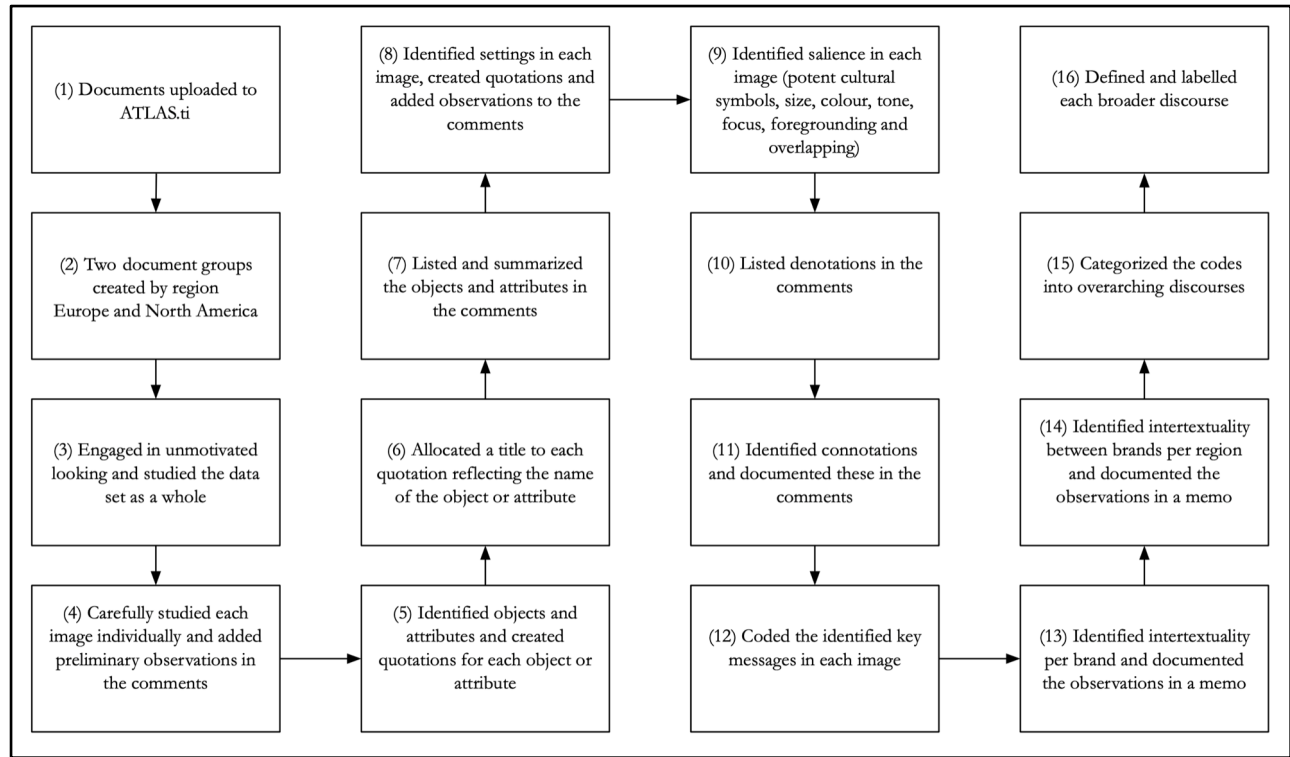
The interrelationship between language, world views, values, and context, and concerns how these interact with one another to (re)produce social structures and to shape the actions of individual and social actors. These (re)production and shaping processes pivot on relations and processes of power. (p. 300)

Therefore, to identify relations of power through MCDA, this research made use of the “set of methods for more precisely analysing visual communication” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 1) as suggested by Machin and Mayr (2012). This toolkit consists of several steps. In the first step of the analysis, the researcher carefully investigated the images. Then, manifest items (denotations) and latent meanings (connotations) were identified through the observation of objects and attributes in the images (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Next, settings in each of the images were analysed and described in-depth. After investigation of the settings, salience was investigated. Salience refers to the way items in the images were “made to stand out” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 54). Last, intertextuality was explored, which suggests that “all texts, whether written or spoken, whether formal or informal, whether artistic or mundane, are in some ways related to each other” (Van Zoonen, 2017, p. 1). Intertextuality was analysed within each brand’s advertisements as well as between the various European brands and between the North American brands.

After having thoroughly examined the images and associated texts within the sample, the findings were compared to previously identified discourses and research on the phenomena of plant-milk. The subsequent results were interpreted, discussed and presented to answer the main research question and the sub-research questions that guided this research. Figure 3 presents the steps taken in the data analysis process in a visual format and appendix C shows the framework for data analysis that guided the researcher in the analysis of the advertising images.

Figure 3

Data Analysis Procedure and Steps



In the primary stages of the data collection, it was decided to consult qualitative data analysis software for use during the analysis. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) provides platforms to efficiently store and organize large amounts of data from various origins and in various formats and offers simplified methods to systematically analyse the data (Antoniadou, 2017). The computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software employed in this study is ATLAS.ti and the version utilized is Desktop Version 9.0.7 (1857) for the operating system macOS. The software ATLAS.ti was chosen for various reasons. First, because the software has proven to be highly valuable to qualitative researchers in documenting “analytical decisions in a transparent, reflexive, rigorous and systematic way” (Paulus & Lester, 2015, p. 405). This was the foremost requirement in choosing a data analysis software programme. Second, previous studies involving discourse analysis (Paulus et al., 2015; Paulus & Lester, 2014, 2015) and multimodal data sets (Antoniadou, 2017; Rossolatos, 2014) similar to the present study, have proven to benefit from the use of ATLAS.ti. In particular, the programme enhanced the data management and data analysis process, especially concerning large quantities of data which could be easily compared side-by-side or above each other, and linked through memos (Antoniadou, 2017; Paulus et al., 2015; Paulus &

Lester, 2014, 2015; Rossolatos, 2014). Last, the researcher had previous experience conducting qualitative research with ATLAS.ti and thus had existing knowledge of the programme functions and features, which aided in fully utilizing the programme. Ultimately, the features provided by ATLAS.ti supplied the researcher with valuable practical support and tools to conduct a rigorous MCDA. To provide a more elaborate overview of the data analysis procedure using ATLAS.ti, each of the phases in the process shall now be discussed further.

Initially, the collected data in the form of advertising images were stored on the researcher's personal computer in two folders separated by the geographical regions Europe and North America. Each of the images was labelled using the name of the brand or company they originated from and a number to create a sequence. The images in each of the folders were then sorted alphabetically by brand and by number, for example 'Alpro_1', 'Alpro_2', 'Alpro_3', 'Good Hemp_1', 'Good Hemp_2', 'Good Hemp_3', and so forth. Then, the documents were uploaded to ATLAS.ti using the 'Document Manager' and two groups were created using the 'Document Group' of which one document group contained the European and the other the North American advertisements.

Next, the researcher engaged in unmotivated looking and explored the data set in its entirety. Unmotivated looking refers to the act of "reading through the data repeatedly, noting its interesting aspects" (Paulus & Lester, 2015, p. 417). After having explored the images, each of the units were investigated individually and preliminary observations were noted in the 'Comments' on the right panel in ATLAS.ti.

In the next step, the 'Quotation' function was employed to select parts of the images to be analysed. Each quotation was labelled to reflect the selection in the image that it reflected: a beverage carton thus was labelled as 'Beverage carton'. Using the quotation labels and quotation comments, the objects and attributes in the image were listed and investigated for any covert meanings which were then documented as comments. After this step, the settings in the image were identified through quotations and notes in the 'Comments'. Settings refer to the place or type of surroundings in which the image is positioned (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

In addition to settings, salience was investigated in each image. Salience was examined by identifying potent cultural symbols and their connotative meanings, size of objects, colour and connotation of colours, tone, focus of the image and which elements were foregrounded and overlapping (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In the following step, the denotations were listed in the image 'Comments', followed by a summary of connotations of the objects and elements identified in previous steps. The next phase involved identifying the key message communicated by the image,

which was then coded using a few words to reflect this message, for example ‘ethical production’. If an advertising image communicated more than one key message or discourse, this was also coded as such. As a result, many units were allocated multiple codes. This formed the basis for the preliminary discourses identified.

After coding the image, all the steps were repeated for each image per brand and concluded with the analysis of intertextuality using the ‘Memo’ function in ATLAS.ti. The process was then repeated for each of the brands, and intertextuality was explored between brands in each region, also using the ‘Memo’ function. It must be noted that the advertising images were analysed alphabetically by brand (Alpro, then Good Hemp) and by region (Europe, then North America) rather than by date. Although this would have enhanced the intertextual analysis, which assumes that all advertising images are influenced by preceding advertisements (Alfaro, 1996; Panigrahi, 2013; Rivas, 2017), the researcher was unable to sort the advertisements by date as this was not known for many of the images. However, the analysis of intertextuality was still valuable, as it provided insights on key recurring discourses regardless of their sequence.

After having analysed all 77 European advertising images and 51 of the 76 North American advertising images, data saturation was observed. Saturation refers to “the point when no new information is obtained from additional qualitative data” (Kerr et al., 2010, p. 271). However, data analysis was continued for the remaining 25 North American advertisements to confirm that no new discourses were identified and to maintain a relatively equal sample of European ($n = 77$) and North American ($n = 76$) advertisements.

In the final stage of the analysis, the codes representing the preliminary discourses were categorized into broader, overarching discourses which were defined and provided with a title representative of their content. To identify which discourses were most prominent, the researcher made use of the ‘Code Frequencies’ function in the ‘Code-Document Table’. The code-document function analyses the codes, code groups, documents and document groups to construct tables that show the frequencies of the codes and code groups which represented the discourses in this study. Appendix D provides an overview of the analysis procedure with ATLAS.ti using a sample of an analysed advertising image. In Appendix E, the code list and code groups are provided, and Appendix F presents the code-document frequency tables. Additionally, Appendix G shows a concept map which depicts the relationship between discourses, while Appendix H contains a link to the complete analytical report with the data analysis of all images in ATLAS.ti. Finally, by

presenting a detailed description of the analysis process, the researcher aimed to reflexively report the analysis that helped shape the findings presented in the next chapter.

4. Results

The results shall now be presented, focusing first on the prevalent discourses that were found in Europe, then on the discourses identified in North America and concluding with the findings on how Europe and North America compare in communicating plant-based dairy alternatives. The results indicate four key recurring plant-based dairy alternatives discourses which were identified across both regions in the same order.

First, the discourse of *health* was identified as the most prominent one in both Europe and North America. Second, the *dairy* discourse, whereby plant-milk is compared to dairy in all its forms including consistency and nutritional aspects, was almost equally and strongly present in both regions. Third, the discourse of *sustainability*, in particular environmental sustainability, was identified as a relevant one, though much less prevalent than the first two discourses previously mentioned. Last, *animal welfare* was a key topic communicated by advertising images in Europe and North America.

4.1. European Plant-Based Dairy Alternatives Advertising Discourses

4.1.1. *The Discourse of Health: Promoting a Healthy Lifestyle*

The health discourse was identified as a predominant one in the European plant-based dairy advertisements investigated. Of the nine European dairy alternatives brands and companies analysed, nearly all directly or indirectly communicated about the health benefits of their products to consumers in their advertisements. One of the plant-based dairy alternatives brands that overtly and consistently communicated that its products are “good for one’s health” is the Belgium-based Alpro. In their advertisements, Alpro commonly states the phrase or key message of being “Good for you”. This slogan is a characteristic feature of most of its advertising campaigns, where it is either used as a supplemental message or as the key message of the ad. Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7 provide examples of this.

To specify, in Figure 7, the text “You know what’s good for you” and “Make yours oat” connotes that the viewer can judge what is healthy and what is not, implying that oat milk is healthy while cow’s milk is the unhealthy option. The text leaves it up to the audience to choose what is good for their health, but also strongly suggests that oat milk is good for one’s health, thus making it the only logical choice for the reader. To further elaborate, the disclaimer text “Source of calcium . . . for the maintenance of normal bones” is a hint towards cow’s milk being communicated as necessary to

obtain the recommended amount of calcium. The disclaimer points this out specifically to clarify that oat milk contains sufficient calcium, making it the healthy option.

Figure 4

Alpro '100% Plant-Based Goodness'



Figure 5

Alpro 'Good For You'



Source of Vitamin B12. Vitamin B12 contributes to the reduction of tiredness and fatigue.
A varied and balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle is recommended for good health.

Figure 6

Alpro 'Great For Coffee'



Figure 7

Alpro 'Make Yours Oat'



In addition, other dairy alternatives brands in Europe also strongly connote the notion of healthiness and promote that their products are well-suited for maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

However, rather than explicitly mentioning health, these brands convey the discourse of health through implicit linkages with the ingredients and nutritional aspects of the plant-based dairy alternatives products. Figures 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 clearly portray these mentions of ingredients and nutritional aspects which allude to being good for one's health. In Figure 8, for example, the text “Definitely contains nuts” and “Definitely doesn't contain any added nonsense” makes an obvious remark about the ingredients. Though the bottle already states that the ingredients are “Almond”, the advertisement makes use of rhetoric to persuade the audience further by stating the obvious. Additionally, “Definitely doesn't contain any added nonsense” connotes that other almond milks or PBDAs do contain unnecessary ingredients, for instance sugar. In combination with the setting in nature, the image connotes that Innocent Almond contains pure and all-natural almond milk that comes straight from nature to your plate and that it is healthier than dairy milk and other plant milk brands.

Figure 8

Innocent 'Definitely Contains Nuts'



Similarly, Figure 9 connotes that Oatly oat milk contains pure oat milk without any unnecessary additives. The ad also suggests that oat milk is healthy and suitable for consumption for all audiences, unlike dairy milk and other plant-based milks that exclude those with dairy intolerance, nut and gluten allergies.

Figure 9

Innocent 'No Nuts.'

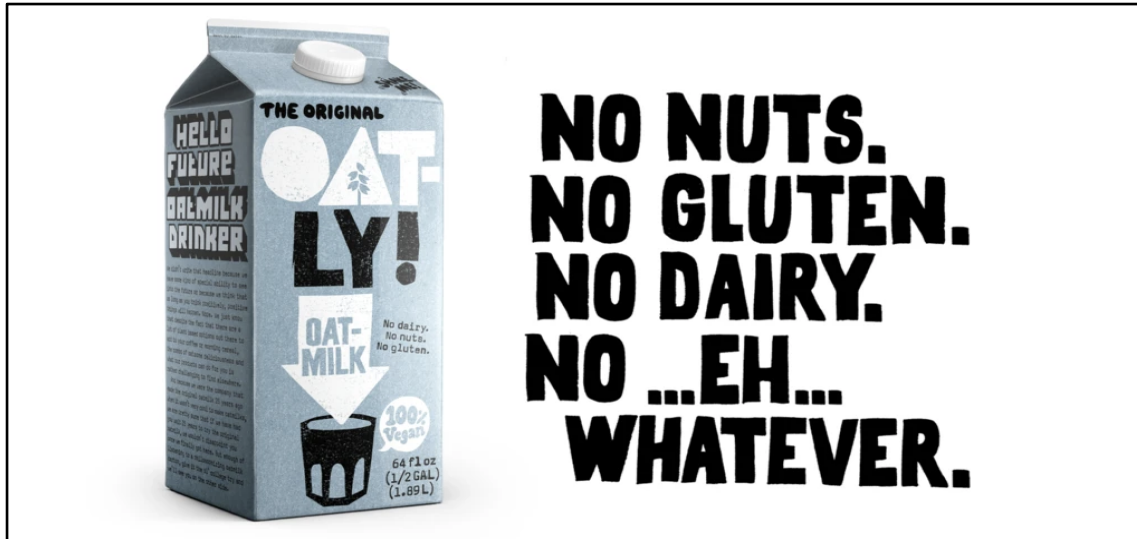


Figure 10

Plenish 'More Nuts. More Nutrition.'



Figure 11 provides another prime example of the reference towards ingredients and healthfulness. The text “it tastes even better when you know exactly what’s inside. #TrustYourFood” connotes that the ingredients are transparent and clear and that the brand is trustworthy. The hashtag also implies that the audience should be able to trust the food they consume and know exactly what they are putting into their bodies. There is a subtle allusion to other companies, suggesting that they should follow Provamel’s transparent way of communicating its ingredients. This further connotes

that other food companies are not transparent and fail to clearly communicate the ingredients in their products to the consumers.

Figure 11

Provamel 'It Tastes Even Better'



Figure 12

Provamel 'Our Best Advertising'



Together, the descriptions of ingredients and nutrition in some ads combined with the more explicit mentions of health in other ads comprise the broader discourse of health and a healthy lifestyle. Other strong connotations of the health discourse can also be identified in the advertisement images. As an example, in Figure 4, the term 'goodness' is used, which connotes the beneficial or nourishing element of the almond milk depicted in the image. In this sense, this refers to the nutritional aspects and nutrients that the plant milk contains to nourish the body.

This connotation is strengthened by the bowl of cereal, nuts and fruit which also connote a healthy lifestyle. The bowl and its contents signify a healthy breakfast, thus circling back to the concept of health and nourishment. An additional element which adds to the connotations of health and promoting a healthy lifestyle is the description on the beverage carton depicted in the image stating that the Alpro almond drink is ‘unsweetened’. This description is made more salient in the image through its colour, which attracts the attention of the audience even though the term ‘unsweetened’ is part of the beverage carton description rather than being part of the main message in the advertisement “100% Plant-Based Goodness. Good for you!”. Mentioning that the beverage is unsweetened is also a hint towards the product being healthy, as one’s immediate mental association with food products that contain no or less sugar, is that they are healthy or healthier than other alternatives.

It is interesting to note that the discourse of health that was discovered among the European plant-based milk alternatives advertisements is consistent with much of the previous findings on health being a key narrative around which plant-based alternatives are communicated to consumers (Avelino & Grin, 2017; Binnekamp & Ingenbleek, 2008; Boukid, 2020; Fuentes & Fuentes, 2017; Jeske et al., 2018; Maddock & Hill, 2016; Mylan et al., 2019; Rödl, 2018; Schiano et al., 2020; Sexton et al., 2019; Tziva et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Respectively, the scholars Jeske et al. (2018) and Zhang et al. (2020) stated that the rise in demand for plant-based dairy and other plant-based food alternatives is due to the increasing consumer interest in health and wellbeing. As plant-based dairy alternatives are mainly associated with perceived health benefits and having all-natural ingredients (Mylan et al., 2019; Schiano et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), this might explain why European PBDA advertisements have chosen to follow this trend of advertising the health properties of their products. This matches with other research conducted by the authors Avelino and Grin (2017), Boukid (2020), and Rödl (2018) who are all in agreement that plant-based food alternatives producers frame their products as being natural, “better for you”, and necessary for maintaining good health. This can be clearly seen in the advertisements analysed, particularly in Figure 4, 5, 6, and 7, all of which refer to being “good for you”.

Nevertheless, the current study slightly opposes Binnekamp and Ingenbleek (2008) and Sexton et al. (2019), who concluded that alternative foods such as plant-based dairy alternatives are portrayed as contributing to a healthier body through the emphasis of the negative effects of consuming conventional livestock products like dairy. In the present research, this connection was not reflected between the communication of health properties of PBDAs through highlighting

negative health effects of fluid dairy milk. Instead, the PBDA advertisements focus solely on the positive health effects.

Finally, it has been established that the discourse of health and wellbeing is a prominent one in food advertising generally (Maddock & Hill, 2016). More specifically, health is linked to wellbeing, both physical and mental, and overall happiness and that healthy foods are marketed as increasing mood and making a person happier (Maddock & Hill, 2016). Although no direct linkage was identified as being present in the European ads, it can be concluded that this underlying and covert association is one that the PBDA advertisers expect that the audience makes automatically. Ultimately, a person that is healthy is more likely to experience increased levels of happiness compared to someone who is not healthy and PBDA marketers consciously count on the audience making this link unconsciously themselves (Maddock & Hill, 2016).

4.1.2. The Dairy Discourse: Comparing Milk and Non-Dairy Milk

The findings also indicate that the second most prominent discourse surrounding plant-based milk alternatives is the dairy discourse. Within this discourse, plant-based dairy alternatives are compared to conventional dairy milk in their sensory aspects and usage. This is consistent with statements by several scholars including Haas et al. (2019) and Binnekamp and Ingenbleek (2008), who have found that plant-based milk brand advertisers tap into the underlying traditional messages of dairy marketing initiatives to market PBDAs to consumers. Although plant-based milk alternatives are prohibited from being called “milk”, “cream” or “dairy” (Janner, 2019; Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020), PBDA advertisements have creatively been utilizing other words, term, and iconography associated with dairy and milk to create an association in consumers’ minds between non-dairy milk and dairy milk. To exemplify, in Figure 13, the brand Alpro makes use of almonds to create the shape of a cow and portrays a glass with white contents, both of which allude to cow’s milk. Even though the advertisement does not explicitly mention “cow’s milk” or “bovine dairy”, the iconography of the cow and the glass of milk alone already elicits an association between the brand Alpro and its products being like or equal to fluid milk. Interestingly, this advertisement has no mention of its products being plant-based, apart from the nuts depicted in the image. Instead, the focal point of the ad is the cow and the glass of milk which signify dairy milk. Here, the brand counts on the audience’s preexisting knowledge of the plant-based origins of its products and expects that the message “goodness is now gorgeous”, implying that almond milk is as nutritious as dairy milk, is grasped automatically.

Similarly, in Figure 14, the brand Oatly refers to its oat drinks as “the new milk”, while Alpro in Figure 15 describes the consistency of its oat drink as “thin or fluffy”, connoting that oat milk can be poured in coffee both un-foamed as well as foamed and that the taste remains the same. These are all examples of sensory aspects of milk and expressions associated with how dairy milk is communicated to consumers.

Figure 13

Alpro ‘Goodness Is Now Gorgeous’



Figure 14

Innocent 'The New Milk'



Figure 15

Alpro 'Thin Or Fluffy'



In addition to the terms “thin and fluffy” used in the advertisement in Figure 15, Good Hemp’s advertisements for oat and hemp “mòlk” in Figure 16 shows how some brands are still using the term “milk” on their product labels, though they attempt to embellish it using icons such as the depiction of a drop in the terms “hemp mòlk” which substitutes the “l” in “milk”. As a result,

companies like Good Hemp are employing ingenuity to creatively utilize loopholes in the rules and regulations set forth by the EU concerning plant-based beverage labels to still create a direct association between their products and dairy milk (Janner, 2019; Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020). Supplemental examples of this tactic can be found in Figure 19, which presents an ad by the brand Rebel Kitchen Mylk, whose product name involves the term “Mylk” instead of “milk”, though the meaning is the same.

Furthermore, the advertisement in Figure 16 mentions the term “creamy” to describe the product being advertised, which is one of the commonly used sensory aspects of milk that is promoted in generic milk and dairy advertising campaigns (Nicholson & Kaiser, 2008).

Figure 16

Good Hemp ‘Creamy And Delicious’



Moreover, besides comparing non-dairy milk to dairy milk’s sensory aspects, the dairy discourse also includes considerate reference to the use of non-dairy milk in recipes or foods that are strongly linked to milk. Dairy milk is often associated with being a staple food during breakfast, as well as being poured into coffee (Harwood & Drake, 2018; Mikkola & Norja, 2014; Rashidinejad et al., 2021). In the European advertisements studied, there was a significant number of ads that communicate the many ways in which plant-based dairy alternatives can be used in recipes that would traditionally call for dairy, such as cereal during breakfast and cream in coffee. Figure 17

portrays the use of Innocent’s dairy free beverages in a breakfast setting accompanied by the key message “Innocent dairy free tastes great on everything except baked beans”, which connotes that the products can be used in all breakfast recipes just as dairy milk would have been used, without sacrificing flavour. The items on the kitchen counter (fruit, cereal, milk, and tea or coffee mugs) in the ad represent breakfast. In many European countries, milk has much cultural meaning and is often associated with breakfast and vice versa. The key message “Innocent dairy free tastes great on EVERYTHING except baked beans” is a type of persuasive rhetoric using logos. Here, the text “except baked beans” is used to convince the audience of the genuineness of the ad and subsequently the brand. By stating that innocent dairy free tastes great on everything, referring to breakfast foods since breakfast items are portrayed, except baked beans, which is usually part of a traditional British breakfast, the advertisers show that they are not being overly promotional and that they are truthful and genuine. Had the message simply been “Tastes great on everything”, it would have less impact and be regarded as conventional and just another promotion.

The advertising images in Figures 18, 20 and 21 portray the usage of plant-based dairy alternatives in coffee, while Figure 22 shows the many ways (“gulp it, foam it, pour it, bake it”) in which plant-based dairy alternatives equal milk in their use. Also, Alpro’s ‘Make Yours Oat’ ad in Figure 18 mentions that its oat milk is “good for you” and “a source of calcium [which] is needed for the maintenance of normal bones”. Of all its nutritional properties, calcium is emphasized specifically, being one of the nutrients that dairy milk contains which is most promoted. Thus, this example presents another resemblance between how non-dairy and dairy milk are marketed, confirmed by Zhang et al. (2020) who have stated that cow’s milk is promoted for its calcium properties and the development of strong bones.

Figure 17

Innocent ‘Tastes Great On Everything’



Figure 18

Alpro 'Make Yours Oat'



Figure 19

Rebel Kitchen Mylk 'It's Milk. Just Not.'



Figure 20

Oatly 'Finally Something Worth Putting In Your Coffee'



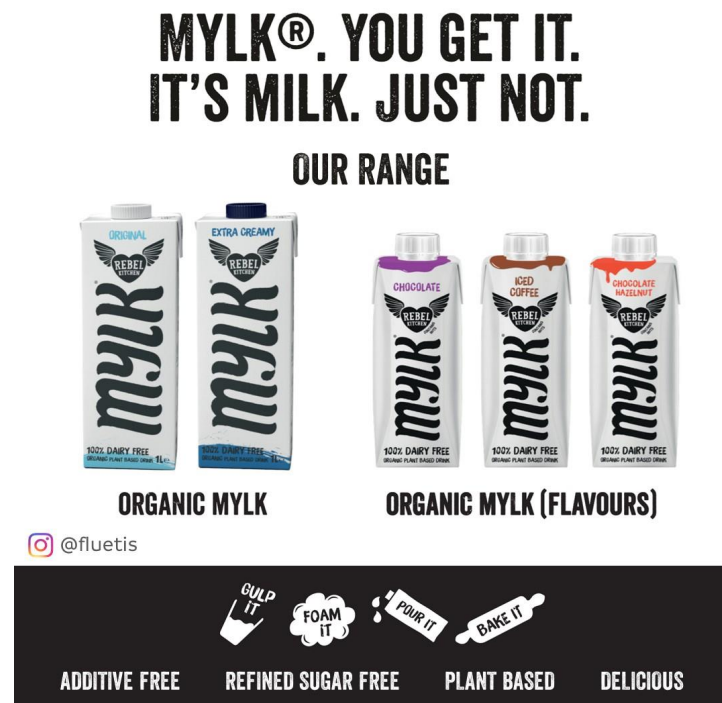
Figure 21

Alpro 'Your Coffee Deserves More'



Figure 22

Rebel Kitchen Mylk 'Mylk. You Get It.'



This study established that the dairy discourse is notably present in European advertising of PBDAs. Plant-based milk alternatives are repeatedly compared to cow's milk in taste, texture, use and other sensory aspects. These results are in contrast with previous studies (Ledin & Machin, 2020a; Mikkola & Norja, 2014; Mylan et al., 2019) stating that plant-based dairy alternatives do not imitate dairy marketing. Consequently, it is understandable why the milk lobby argues that PBDAs are marketed in such a way that consumers are unable to distinguish non-dairy milk from dairy milk (Gantt, 2020; Leialohilani & de Boer, 2020). Nevertheless, for plant-based dairy alternatives to become as mainstream as dairy milk, they are being marketed by emphasizing that they are similar enough to dairy milk to provide the experience consumers expect from a direct replacement for a food product (Fuentes and Fuentes, 2017; Schiano et al., 2020). Therefore, this explains the direct associations made between non-dairy and dairy milk in PBDA advertisements.

4.1.3. The Sustainability Discourse: Environment, Sustainability and the Planet

The third discourse revealed among the European advertisements of PBDAs is the sustainability discourse, which represents environmental sustainability and the planet. In Figure 23,

for example, the advertisement explicitly states that “oats are good for the planet”, clearly connecting the act of consuming oat drinks with being a more environmentally responsible consumer. Instances such as this were very common in how PBDAs are advertised in Europe. In Figure 24, the link between Alpro’s oat drinks and the planet is made yet again, and others have followed this trend of highlighting the environmental benefits of their products. The brand Oatly, in Figure 25, 26, and 27, takes this one step further and quantifies the environmental sustainability rates of its products by communicating their climate footprint numbers to demonstrate how much better its products are for the environment. Moreover, what makes Oatly unique in its approach is that in addition to providing consumers with exact numbers to measure environmental sustainability rates, the brand also challenges the dairy industry in a very direct manner (Figure 25) and compares its oat drinks with dairy through clear and simplified depictions of how much less greenhouse gases oat drink creates compared to regular dairy milk (Figure 25). The key message in Figure 25 “Hey food industry, show us your numbers”, refers to carbon footprint numbers and CO₂ emissions. With this message, the company has the upper hand by showing their numbers and implying that the food industry is not; regardless of whether the dairy industry now does share their numbers, Oatly is confident that their greenhouse gas production numbers are much lower and thus making their products much more climate friendly. Oatly’s marketing approach also characterises itself by consistently communicating to consumers what it believes in when it comes to maintaining the environment and the planet and strongly expresses its opinion of the dairy industry’s practises as can be seen in Figure 28. The key message in the ad in Figure 28 showcases the company's values. The primary connotation is that the meat and dairy industry is not ethical nor environmentally friendly. This presents a form of brand activism and environmental activism. The Bigfoot character in the image has much cultural symbolism. Folklorists trace the figure of Bigfoot to a combination of factors and sources, including folklore surrounding the European wild man figure, folk belief among Native Americans and loggers, wishful thinking, and a cultural increase in environmental concerns (Howard & Kern, 2018; Telega, 2011). Most mainstream scientists have historically discounted the existence of Bigfoot, considering it to be the result of a combination of folklore, misidentification, and hoax, rather than a living animal (Howard & Kern, 2018; Telega, 2011). In this context, the illustration of the so-called Bigfoot character is related to the cultural increase in environmental concerns which the accompanying text refers to (Telega, 2011).

Figure 23

Alpro 'Good For The Planet Oats'



Figure 24

Alpro 'Good For The Planet. Good For You!'



Source of Calcium. Calcium is needed for the maintenance of normal bones.
A varied, balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle is recommended for good health.

Figure 25

Oatly 'Hey Food Industry'

HEY FOOD INDUSTRY, SHOW US YOUR NUMBERS.

THE ORIGINAL OATLY! OAT DRINK SKINNY 1L 0.36

THE ORIGINAL OATLY! OAT DRINK SEMI 1L 0.38

THE ORIGINAL OATLY! OAT DRINK WHOLE 1L 0.41

CLIMATE FOOTPRINT 0.41 KG CO₂E/KG

Isn't it strange that when we want to fly somewhere warm for a week of vacation, we can find out exactly how many tons of carbon dioxide it will take to get us and our luggage into that sun chair, yet it's almost impossible for us to know what impact different foods have on the climate?

It's double strange considering that the food industry generates nearly twice as many greenhouse gas emissions as all transportation combined – cars, buses, planes, trains, even personal jetpacks.*

So from now on, our products will be labelled with a number defining their climate impact. Our calculations are performed by a company called CarbonCloud and cover the product journey from grain field to store, including transportation, and are expressed in carbon dioxide equivalents (CO₂e).

This means you can easily compare our products with others before you decide to buy them, just as soon as the entire food industry follows our lead, which they have to do now that we've officially and indirectly suggested it in a full page ad in The Guardian.

Figure 26

Oatly 'Oat Drink With Carbon Dioxide Equivalents'

NEW! OAT DRINK WITH CARBON DIOXIDE EQUIVALENTS.

THE ORIGINAL OATLY! OAT DRINK WHOLE 0.31

THE ORIGINAL OATLY! OAT DRINK SEMI 0.29

CLIMATE FOOTPRINT 0.29 KG CO₂E/KG

Figure 27

Oatly '80% Greenhouse Gas Emissions'

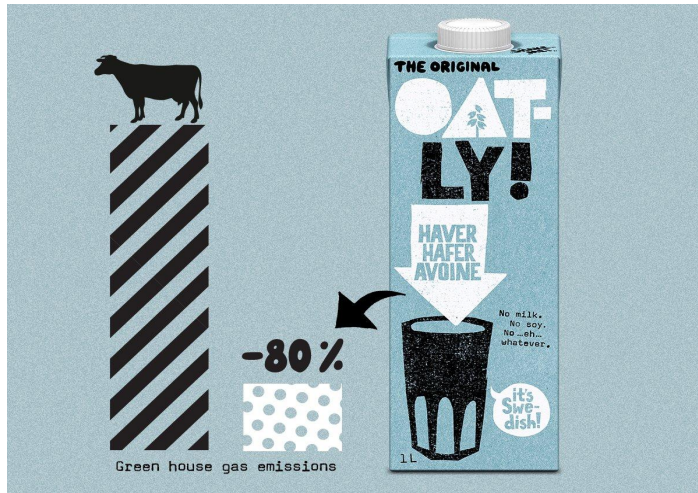


Figure 28

Oatly 'Here's What We Believe'



Likewise, in the series of advertisements by the company Provamel in Figure 29, 30, and 31, there is a strong connotation in the text of being environmentally friendly. The phrases “Pro embracing nature” and “Pro drinking straight from the source” unmistakably refer to nature, the planet and the environment. The paper bag and its contents of green plants in Figure 29 connote naturalness and the natural ingredients in the almond drink. The red background behind the text “Pro embracing nature” could imply the urgency or seriousness of the key message, which is that humans need to embrace nature collectively rather than destroy it. Additionally, the texts accompanying the key messages in Figures 30 and 31 explicitly state that the products are “100% plant-based”, that “the production of plant-based food requires less land, less water, and emits less CO₂”, that the company’s products “are even produced in a CO₂ neutral way”, that the brand is “pro nature”, and its plant-based drinks are produced “ethically” and through “responsible production”. There is thus a strong and explicit connection made by Provamel between its products and environmental sustainability. In Figure 30, the setting is an entryway of a room or a house with a plant on the left side of the door. A woman drinking from a Provamel plant-milk carton is walking into the room, carrying a palm tree plant and a pink mesh bag of Provamel cartons. This suggests that the woman just arrived from grocery shopping in a sustainable way. This is signified using a mesh bag instead of, for example, a plastic bag and the purchase of plant-based milks rather than cow’s milk. Moreover, the plants in the image carry much cultural symbolism. In this case, they connote sustainability, environmentally friendly grocery shopping and consumption, and nature preservation. The green used in all parts of the image, including the plants, the logo, the colour of the woman’s shirt, and the background of the text, connote nature and the environment as well, thus strengthening the connotation. Likewise, Figure 31 connotes that cows should not be the source of milk for human consumption. Instead, juices and milks from plants can be subtracted for human consumption, which is much more ethical and sustainable. This also connotes that plants are the initial source and not cows since cows eat grain, grass, and plants first before they can produce milk, which makes them the middleman rather than the primary source.

Figure 29

Provamel 'Pro Embracing Nature Improved Recipe'



Figure 30

Provamel 'Pro Embracing Nature'



Figure 31

Provamel 'Pro Drinking Straight From The Source'



The results concerning the sustainability discourse match well with earlier findings which implied that the surging interest in plant-based milk alternatives is due to several factors, of which growing environmental and climate concerns among consumers are a considerable one (Schiano et al., 2020; Sethi et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020). This also aligns with studies conducted by Ledin and Machin (2020a) and Mylan et al. (2019) who concluded that plant-based dairy alternatives often communicate environmental sustainability due to the increasing consumer interest in consuming products that are more sustainable, but also in order to call attention to environmental issues in the

dairy sector (Ledin and Machin, 2020a). Thus, the focus on sustainability in PBDA advertisements is twofold. On the one hand, PBDA marketers realize that consumers are becoming more interested in environmentally friendly food alternatives and are eagerly jumping on this bandwagon to maximize marketing efforts and ultimately also increase profits. On the other hand, companies such as Oatly communicate along the discourse of sustainability to increase awareness of environmental sustainability among its audience and encourage consumers to choose food products that promote transitions towards more sustainable food systems, unlike dairy (Ledin and Machin, 2020a).

Another intriguing finding in the environmental sustainability discourse was the sub-discourse of *trust*. That is, brands communicating to consumers the notion of trusting the foods that they consume. Particularly the brand Provamel utilizes this key message with its hashtag “#TrustYourFood” (see Figure 32), with which it implies that unlike other foods, its products are trustworthy and only contain the ingredients advertised. This sub-discourse addresses the declining consumer trust in the food industry in Europe (Macready et al., 2020) and attempts to reassure consumers that not all foods are untrustworthy.

Figure 32

Provamel ‘100% Trustworthy. 0% Fake News.’



In analysing the images that communicate sustainability, the environment, and the planet, there appeared to be additional messages of *change* and of *family, future and role models* that were found to be present in PBDA advertising in Europe. Though these messages were initially regarded as being a part of the umbrella term ‘sustainability’, they are also interesting on their own.

First, the concept of “change” was present in several advertisement images by PBDA European brands. This concept refers to changing towards better alternatives than milk and dairy

and implies that “it is time for change”. The brands Plenish and Alpro portray this concept of change by literally mentioning the word “change” (Figure 34) in their campaigns and stating that “if you want to change the world, change your m*lk” (Figure 33). The latter mentioned phrase is self-explanatory, though its message becomes powerful for being a play on the slogan “If you want to change the world” which has gained popularity in the past century. The phrase is commonly used and implies that social problems can be solved on a large scale if everyone starts with themselves by implementing small changes which can potentially make a large impact (Bornstein, 2007). The message in Figure 33 also connotes that the production of conventional cow’s milk is not sustainable and that almond milk, on the other hand, provides a much better alternative for the planet, environment and ultimately humans. For the world to remain sustainable, the audience is advised to trade dairy for almond milk. The use of the colour green in all parts of the image could connote the naturalness of the ingredients mentioned on the beverage carton, referring to nature, freshness and the environment. All in all, the image connotes that almond milk is much more natural than cow’s milk and much better for the maintenance of the environment.

Figure 33

Plenish ‘Change Your Milk’



Figure 34

Alpro 'A Little Change'



Another campaign by Alpro communicating the concept of “change” is the “milk moustache” advertising campaign. The milk moustache marketing campaign was first introduced in the United States in 1993 under the name “Got Milk?” to encourage the consumption of milk among Americans (Nicholson & Kaiser, 2008). The ad ran for approximately 20 years (Nicholson & Kaiser, 2008). In each of the ads that were promoted in this campaign, an American celebrity sported a milk moustache on their upper lip and a slogan to encourage drinking more fluid milk (Nicholson & Kaiser, 2008). After its notable success, the British Milk Marketing Forum later recreated the famous milk ad in 2010 under the name “Make Mine Milk” to boost consumption of milk among young adults in the United Kingdom (Enjoli, 2020; Littlejohn, 2012). In 2020, plant-based food brand Alpro created a spinoff of the British version of the milk marketing campaign to promote its more environmentally friendly plant-based milk alternatives. In the spinoff ads, some of the celebrities that participated in the original “Make Mine Milk” campaign were now wearing an oat milk moustache instead of a fluid dairy milk moustache as shown in Figure 35 which portrays the British singer Pixie Lott. The message accompanying the image “Lotts can change in 10 years. Make yours oat” strengthens the underlying meaning of the advertisement, which is that “if Pixie Lott can completely change her milk drinking habits to more sustainable options in 10 years, so can you”. In the image, the woman is smiling at the audience and making direct eye contact, which connotes a look of approval of the message of the ad. The white shirt could signify the colour of milk and plant-milk or be a design choice to make the milk moustache stand out. The text on the shirt “la vie en rose” originates from a very common and popular expression “voir la vie en rose”, which literally means “seeing life in pink”. In English, it is often translated as “wearing rose-coloured glasses”, referring to being idealistic or naive, thinking that life is perfect and everything will be fine in the end. In this ad, this connotes that the woman sees life through rose-coloured glasses and that she

has hope for a better future. This could also connote that by drinking plant-based oat milk, life will be able to be viewed more positively again; supported by the words in the key message “Change”, “Good” and “Make your oat”.

Figure 35

Alpro 'Lotts Can Change In 10 Years'



Finally, within the discourse of sustainability, there were references to the next or future generations and maintaining the environment by exchanging fluid dairy milk for plant-based milk alternatives (Figure 36 and 37). In Figure 36, a mother and her child are depicted having just finished breakfast. The child looks up at their mother who is implied to be drinking soya milk from a bowl. In this image, the underlying meaning is that children look up at their parents, in this case their mothers, as role models for how to behave now and in the future. The image also connotes setting the right example for children, so that they make environmentally responsible choices in the future, such as drinking plant-based milk. This example also embodies a traditional dairy discourse involving the maternal influence on children’s food and consumption habits (Overend, 2016). The author refers to this as “the mothering discourse” and argues that mothers have a significant impact on what their children deem as “the right foods”, “healthy food”, and what is “nutritious” as they are largely responsible for feeding their children (Overend, 2016). In the ‘Eco Warrior Breakfast’

example by Alpro, the brand combines both the mothering discourse and the sustainability discourse to appeal to its female audience by tapping into their maternal instincts.

Figure 36

Alpro 'Eco-Warrior Breakfast'



Figure 37

Oatly 'Hello Future Oatmilk Drinker'



4.1.4. The Animal Welfare Discourse: Ethics and Animal Cruelty

The final discourse identified in European plant-based dairy alternatives advertisements is the animal welfare discourse. This discourse focuses on animal rights, animal welfare and ethics in the dairy industry and advertisements communicating this discourse often highlight the inhumane treatment of animals in the production of dairy milk for human consumption. Although many PBDA advertising images conveyed messages that were associated with the animal welfare discourse, this was the least prominent discourse identified. These findings contrast previous studies which found that animal welfare is the most common discourse around which plant-based dairy alternatives are communicated (Ledin & Machin, 2020a; Mylan et al., 2019; Schiano et al., 2020). This was not supported by the current study. Instead, European PBDA advertisements communicate more light-heartedly and significantly more positively about animal welfare. Of the analysed images, there were no instances of PBDA brands explicitly highlighting animal cruelty in their ads through visuals or text. Though this used to be the case in some earlier advertising campaigns involving plant-based dairy or protein alternatives, current brands in Europe have stepped away from this advertising tactic.

This occurrence could be explained as a result of animal welfare and animal cruelty concerns often having been communicated through shock advertising (Matusitz & Forrester, 2013). Shock advertising refers to an advertising method which “instils feelings of ‘shock’ on the target audience in order to get its point across” (Matusitz & Forrester, 2013, p. 85–86). This method was previously associated with quickly getting the audience’s attention and positively impacting behaviour change (Matusitz & Forrester, 2013). However, over the years, it was found that shock advertising tactics have lost their effectiveness, as consumers have been found to feel alienated and disgusted by brands utilizing these tactics to draw attention to animal rights violations (Matusitz & Forrester, 2013; Urwin & Venter, 2014; Yan & Chapa, 2018). Thus, it is not surprising why PBDA advertisers have discontinued overtly communicating animal cruelty in the dairy industry. However, there are some exceptions to this, which will be further elaborated on in the section on the animal welfare discourse in North America later in this chapter.

As mentioned, PBDA brands in Europe are communicating more positively around the discourse of animal welfare. An example can be found in Figure 38 with the caption “Pro animals of all sizes” and an image of a happy-go-lucky woman looking cheerful and casual in a rabbit suit with an actual rabbit on her chest. The text in combination with the image connotes that the brand is vegan-friendly and thus promotes that all animals should be loved rather than only some being