Milk

Global
Urgent
Trends

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Milk: A Long Overdue Cultural Meltdown

To look at the subject of milk is to map how culture is constantly looking for narratives – desperate for coherence and yet fractured into tribal codes.

Each mammal's life begins with milk. Milk has served as one of humanity's most fundamental yet culturally transformed substances. We need it, and that's why we cannot help but ascribe meaning to it. It carries innate associations with maternal care and survival, yet human cultures consistently recast it into spiritual and social registers.

We want to lay out how — across time and culture — milk has been a substance of power: spiritual, female and symbolic. We want to trace how milk of other mammals was first consumed by humans — fermented in nomadic steppes, offered in ancient rites, or moralized in monastic Europe, milk has always carried more than nutritional value. It's a vehicle for belief systems, narratives and mythologies to enter our daily

The messaging around milk is caught between nostalgia and rejection, purity and performance, nature and control. It tracks shifting moral codes, political anxieties, and the endless search for identity through consumption.

Milk alternatives like oat, almond, soy or rice are each offering a cleaner conscience and a new soft signal about identity: ethical, educated, climate-aware. We have gotten used to the idea that an oat milk flat white isn't just a beverage; it is a subtle alignment with a worldview. By the time your boss and your mom were on board, it had ceased to be subversive. It was just a quiet ubiquity of habit.

And then, predictably, the backlash arrived in the form of raw milk. Unpasteurized, unregulated, and loudly unprocessed, it emerged as a health trend during the COVID-pandemic for everyone that became frustrated by government regulations and industrial systems. An expression of autonomy and resistance against perceived encroachments on individual liberty.

What's interesting isn't the left vs. right framing. It's that everyone seems to have lost interest in the middle. Pasteurized milk once was the fuel that kept Western civilizations running: from the nuclear family to Big Milk. Now anything mainstream reads as highly sus.

This issue explores milk not as a beverage, but as a site where the constant need for new ideologies ultimately fractures society along the most banal elements of life: our day-to-day consumer choices.

What is this paper trying to offer?

In an economy obsessed with speed and novelty, we rarely get the chance to pause and take a deeper look at the narratives that orbit our everyday lives.

Most choices we make daily are run on autopilot. The ideal product offers a frictionless experience to blend into our productive workflow. Our impulses and product availability likely are the most important factors (Kahneman). And yet, every so often, a product manages to act as a stand-in for something deeper. Takeout coffee becomes a political statement. Your oat-milk latte is a form of voting. Your Whole Foods receipt is a Myers-Briggs test. A splash of milk in a cup becomes a miniature manifesto.

But what consumption has increasingly replaced is connection. Remaining divided and alienated from the natural world makes us much better targets for the solutions offered by brands. Overconsumption and societal division seem to be inextricably linked — and have both seemingly grown at the same pace over the past years.

This deep-dive is meant as a reminder that beneath the relentless churn of trend cycles and optimized funnels — there is more. We feel like it is a good time to address a deeper hunger for context and meaning — especially amongst Gen Z, who have only consciously lived through the more recent stages of so-called late capitalism.

We live in the aftermath of two decades of hyper-segmentation, where every quiet longing, every collective impulse, was sorted into airtight ecosystems and turned into a target audience.

But as cracks appear in the cultural consensus, the logic of branding as identity is beginning to fray. Trends like nostalgia feel less like aesthetic choices and more like signs of uncertainty — indicators that the path ahead is increasingly unclear. The rise of AI is flooding us with possible futures, many of them dystopian, and raising real questions about the role and value of human creativity. At the same time, the growing appeal of proto-fascist ideologies is putting pressure on legal foundations we once considered stable: freedom, equality, the separation of powers. It feels like a good moment to zoom out — to take a more macro view of where things are headed, and what meaning lies beneath individual micro trends.

And weirdly, milk seems like the perfect object to trace the outlines of our cultural crisis: it's simultaneously banal and overloaded. An everyday substance, primal in origin but highly politicized. A white liquid refracted through market logic, moral panics, and identity performance.

This report makes no claim to totality. Instead, it offers a multi-perspective exploration of a single object that holds more cultural charge than it first appears. This is a forensic unboxing of a single, over-indexed commodity. Through that lens, we hope to create a space for deeper insight — not just into milk, but into the current condition itself.

These are the angles we want to explore in this report:

From Body to Morals

Milk, Market, Meaning

Milk and Gender

From Body to Morals

Milk predates civilization. Milk is older than language, older than cultivation. It wasn't invented by humans – if anything, it helped invent us.

For all mammals, it's the first thing we taste, connecting us to our mothers' bodies once we have left the womb. Milk is our first experience of care.

Neolithical Revolution and Ancient Societies

Humans first began domesticating animals for milk production around 9,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent, starting with goats and sheep, followed by cattle in regions of modern-day Turkey, Iran, and Iraq.

In most early agrarian and pastoral societies, fresh milk was often avoided. Without refrigeration, raw milk spoiled rapidly in warm climates, making fermentation a practical necessity. In the earliest human societies, milk was rarely consumed fresh. Instead, it was cultured and transformed — usually into yogurt, kefir, butter, or cheese. Fermentation was more than preservation. It reflected a worldview in which food was alive, responsive, and part of a wider ecological rhythm.

In Egypt, milk featured in rites to Hathor, a cow goddess associated with fertility, motherhood, and care. In the Indus Valley and early Vedic culture, dairy was tied to ritual offerings and cosmological order. Nomadic tribes fermented mare's milk into kumis, believing it could strengthen the body and restore balance. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, dairy had a subtle place — cautiously used, never central, always considered in relation to the body's inner climate.

Milk was regarded as something nourishing, healing, and powerful. But power, in these systems, required intention. It wasn't a neutral food. It had properties that were to be consumed with agency. Drinking milk was to engage with something sacred — something to be enjoyed in moderation.

Middle Ages

Medieval Christian Europe is where milk's meaning shifts into something we still recognize today. In monastic traditions, it became associated with asceticism. Unlike the ferments more commonly consumed around this time, raw milk was plain, unseasoned and untreated. It fit well within a theology that emphasized bodily restraint, where simplicity wasn't just a virtue, but also a form of spiritual alignment.

To consume milk was to submit to a life of discipline. Not indulgent, not worldly — but humble, clean, and close to God. The chastity of medieval monks is where milk's attributions of purity originate.

This framework influenced folk medicine too. Milk was prescribed for illness and emotional disturbance. It was seen as softening, healing, tempering. Less a food, more a medium of purification.

Puritanism

The monastic ideal of purity and restraint didn't disappear with the Middle Ages. Instead it evolved and became the heart of a new ideology. Ascetic Christian values merged with the emerging ethos of Protestantism and early capitalism, milk retained its symbolic charge. What began as a spiritual discipline was re-coded into a secular morality of purity and self-control.

In this way, milk became not just a food, but a moral substance that quietly carried an ideology that would be exported out into the world: through colonialism, industrialization, and the expanding capitalist world order.

Those Protestant belief systems are at the heart of North American culture. Much like in medieval monasteries, milk was embedded in a worldview that saw bodily control as an expression of divine order.

The less contaminated something was, the closer it came to moral perfection. Much of our system's integral narratives are built around this logic. Family, education, public health, and eventually industrial food systems represent those ideological structures.

By the late 19th century, this moral coding had filtered into the thriving American consumer economy. Cereal was invented as a functional, almost medicinal food. Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, a Seventh-day Adventist and health reformer, believed that a bland, plant-based diet could suppress impure desires (masturbation). The product he created is a brilliant example of how products, narratives, and religious beliefs can blend together: corn flakes are not just about nutrition, but restraint. Milk had been well established as a chaste and pure liquid and fit perfectly with this ideological product. Poured cold over a bowl of cornflakes, this image is very representative of the vision America has painted of itself.

It's remarkable how long this framing has lasted. Even as public attitudes around food have shifted, milk has remained morally coded. Campaigns like "Got Milk?" in the 1990s leaned heavily on wholesomeness, tradition, and family values. Images of white mustaches and suburban kitchens reinforced the idea of milk as both nourishing and norm-preserving.

Postmodern Milk

With the end of the Cold War, capitalism no longer needed to define itself in opposition to another system. Communism had collapsed — and with it, the illusion of ideological duality. In its place, late capitalism began generating endless options within itself. Liberal capitalism succeeded in presenting itself as a system offering a range of ideals and lifestyles under one roof.

Corporations and marketers became adept at targeting every new subversive ideology with its own branded alternative. Identity, once collective and often oppositional, became increasingly individualized, fragmented, and absorbed into consumer choice.

Under the broad umbrella of liberalism, capitalism began offering ideological variation as product diversity — and nowhere is this clearer than in the rise of alternative milks.

By the early 2000s, plant milk had begun to signal more than dietary restriction. Soy milk first carved out space as a niche product for vegans and the lactose intolerant. Then came almond milk, which surged in popularity by 2011, outpacing soy just as wellness culture peaked. Dairy was recast as inflammatory, unnatural, vaguely suspect. Plant milk stepped in as the virtuous alternative.

Oatly’s 2016 U.S. launch marked a turning point: oat milk wasn’t just functional — it was fashionable. Suddenly, plant-based milk was a lifestyle marker, more than a moral or dietary choice.

Raw Wilk and Tradwives

The COVID pandemic accelerated a breakdown of institutional trust and triggered a wave of ideological rifts. What began as a public health debate quickly unraveled into something deeper: a full-spectrum backlash against liberal modernity. Anti-vaxxers, tradwives, wellness influencers, conspiracy theorists, and masculine revivalists have left a lasting mark on contemporary society — including its food systems.

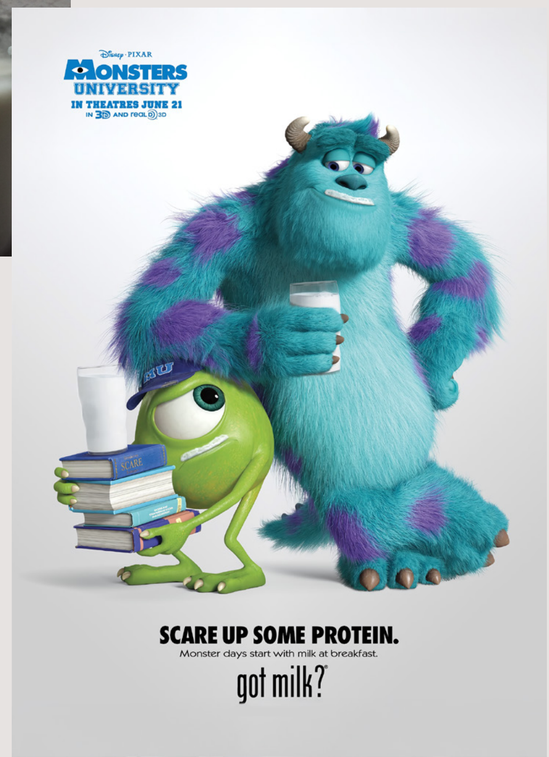
In this climate, raw milk re-emerged as a symbolic trend. Once marginalized as risky or unregulated, it was suddenly framed as real, natural, uncorrupted. Social media algorithms, engineered to amplify radical fragmentation, quickly latched onto these currents.

Consuming raw milk became an act of resistance: not just nostalgic, but regressive. A rebellion against the "woke milk virus."

Alongside its economic aftershocks, inflation and deepening cultural division, plant milk's progressive aesthetics began to look performative, even elitist. Its symbolism no longer held up in a world intent on questioning the status quo. Hipster culture, thoroughly absorbed by corporations, lost its cultural authority under the scrutiny of a fractured society.

Milk, at this point, has completed a full ideological 360: back to medieval values of purity and pre-Enlightenment beliefs.

The only question now is: what the hell will happen next?



Milk Market Meaning

"It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."
— Mark Fisher

Brands offer us direction in a hyper-complex world and act as signals to our surroundings: who we are, or at least, who we'd like to be. Milk, in that sense, is a perfect case study. It's no longer just a liquid from mammalian glands, but a code. Even the so-called neutral "normal milk" isn't really neutral anymore. Depending on your algorithm, it reads as nostalgic, nationalist, or normcore.

The brand economy is built on novelty. So how do you re-introduce a product that has been around since the dawn of human evolution? What new need or problem do you solve — one that the system itself has likely created?

It's no coincidence that the Boston Consulting Group coined the term "cash cow" — meaning a product that generates large, consistent profits. Milk has proven to be a canvas for reimagining brand narratives again and again.

But this reveals a deeper truth: while raw milk might pose as a radical rejection of modernity, and plant milk might be the "woke" choice, both operate within the same logic — a rejection of the status quo that's already been anticipated, framed, and sold back to us. Marketing strategies don't just meet needs; they create feedback loops that productize even the backlash. There is no outside. There is no escape.

Even good old supermarket milk is attempting a rebranding — as normcore prop, as silent protest:
In early July, Bon Appétit Magazine (part of Condé Nast, and famously "cancelled" in 2020 for racially unjust wage politics) posted an Instagram carousel declaring "normal milk" the next big trend, citing pop culture references. But today's audiences are too ideologically versed, too media-trained to fall for such an obvious trick. The assumption that the post had been sponsored by Big Dairy seemed entirely plausible.

In a culture that no longer believes in the center, Big Milk is losing narrative traction. And even though parts of society are regressing, most people don't actually want to go back.

What we crave is a future worth living for. But the question remains: is our current system truly capable of transformation — or are we just constantly shifting the goalposts?

Milk and Gender

“Species interdependence is the name of the worldling game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention.”

— Donna J. Haraway, When Species Meet

As gender norms continue to evolve and fracture, the notion that women are just vessels for reproduction and caretaking is crumbling. The rise of raw milk and the ‘trad wife’ movement might look like a return to patriarchal ideals, but it’s also an overcompensation — an attempt to reclaim control over women’s bodies in response to changing gender dynamics and the slow collapse of old power

It’s fascinating how control over female bodies mirrors the way non-human female bodies are treated. The exploitation of both human women and cows is central to the engine of capitalism.

It might sound obvious, but it’s worth saying: without female bodies, civilization wouldn’t exist. And yet, in a world built on patriarchal norms, this truth is often ignored. Female bodies are the center of life, but our culture, politics, and economies do everything they can to make sure we don’t fully see or honor that.

Milk is one of the ways this plays out. For centuries, it has been a symbol of family-centered morality: the idea that women exist to bear children and nurture them, and the ideal of the “perfect mother.” This concept was marketed and sold to women — that their bodies were meant solely for the needs of others. Somehow, this idea does not seem to sit well with modern women.

Yet, the connection between these two struggles is rarely talked about. The idea that the oppression of women and cows is linked maybe a though that could unravel the the foundations of capitalism itself. It's a perspective Donna Haraway explores deeply in her work on human and animal relationships, but this concept of solidarity remains largely on the fringe.

It seems our current system thrives on dividing us — not just dividing people but also separating us from our shared experiences, from our collective understanding of life and labor. The link between milk and gender, and the exploitation of female bodies, human and animal, reminds us of an uncomfortable truth: that postmodern life is far from being a natural experience.

Milk didn't change. We did.

Once a primal, bodily bond with our mothers, milk was grounding, natural. Now this product of female bodies has become a product — and an ideological battleground. Every version comes loaded and reloaded with subtext. Dietary preference becomes identity. Purchase becomes performance. In the scramble for meaning, milk has become a perfect vessel for narratives, gender politics, purity myths, and class signals.

The more "choice" we're given, the more fractured we become.

This isn't really about milk. It's about how our economies thrive on compartmentalization – on offering moral distinction in product form. Each carton its own flag. Each preference, a proxy war.

And that's the point: there is no neutral consumption.
So maybe the most powerful thing we can do is step back and see the scaffolding for what it is. The ideological divides have become too severe to ignore. Or to simply continue milking that cash cow.

Have we reached the peak of cultural compartmentalization?
Is society ready to be weaned?

When even the most basic substances of life get pulled into the cultural crossfire, the absurdity becomes hard to ignore. And with that, a small shift becomes possible: by understanding how meaning has been manufactured, we can begin to release it.

In a world so invested in keeping us divided, creating shared, embodied experiences might just be the most radical thing left to do.

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