

**Tracking the Trend: Exploring News Coverage about Plant-Based Milk**

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### Introduction/Need for research

The plant-based food market is increasing in popularity demonstrated with a \$4.5 billion market value (Settembre, 2019). One category helping influence this growth is plant-based milk, which had a 9% increase in sales from 2017 to 2018 (Houck, 2018). Customers do pay extra for plant-based milk – almost twice the amount of dairy milk can be seen on price tags of plant-based milks (Settembre, 2019). While these plant-based milk options have increased, there has been a steady decline in fluid dairy milk consumption. In 1976, people in the United States consumed 247 lbs. of fluid milk annually compared to 146 lbs. consumed per person in 2018 (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, n.d.). This decrease in demand combined with rising cost of production and low milk prices has led to many dairy farms exiting the business in the United States (Eller, 2018).

The media have a role in influencing consumers by drawing attention to some topics and shaping how those topics are presented (Happer & Philo, 2013). Therefore, examining news coverage of topics can indicate what information audience members are receiving and how that might influence subsequent opinions and behaviors. As the popularity of plant-based milk increases, it is necessary to explore media coverage to inform communication efforts for those in the traditional dairy industry and those representing these milk alternative options.

### Theoretical Framework

According to the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the mass media play an important role in conveying information to members of a social system (Rogers, 2003). This theory has been applied to many academic fields, including mass communication (Rogers, 2004). The most significant role of mass media during the innovation-adoption process is to increase the audience's awareness of the innovation. Then through two-way communication, opinion leaders in a social system pass information from the mass media on to others in order to influence innovation adoption (Scherer, 1979). The Diffusion of Innovations Theory applies to this study by examining the frequency and scope with which the media has reported on plant-based milk. These insights may indicate the rate at which this innovation is diffusing through a social system as the media are key in presenting information about the world (Happer & Philo, 2013).

### Methodology

To collect the data for this descriptive content analysis of U.S. news content, a monitor was established in the Nexis Uni database with the timeframe of January 1, 2005 to December 31, 2019. Content analysis is an ideal methodology to examine the prevalence of an issue in media coverage over time (Riffe et al., 2014). A Boolean search method was used with keywords chosen after researching plant-based milk options. The search terms were plant-based milk, plant based milk, almond milk, soymilk, oat milk, peanut milk, rice milk, cashew milk, walnut milk, plant milk, coconut milk, and pea milk. We used the "or" function on Nexis Uni to allow for the presence of any of these search terms. Based on the results from the search, states with the most content were selected to represent the Northeast (New York,  $n = 2,626$ ), West (California,  $n =$

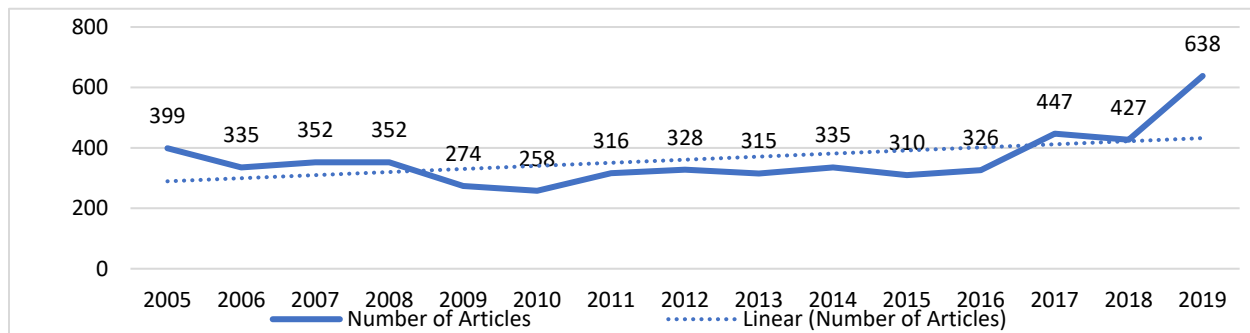
603; Utah,  $n = 330$ ), Midwest (Illinois,  $n = 1,132$ ), and Southeast (Georgia,  $n = 452$ ; Florida,  $n = 620$ ). Articles from multiple states were combined for two regions to achieve a larger sample size comparable to the other two regions in the study. Using the “group duplicates” function in Nexis Uni grouped similar content articles together.

## Findings

During the study’s timeframe, the number of yearly articles about plant-based milk nearly doubled from 399 articles in 2005 to 638 articles in 2019. On average, the number of articles published each year over this 15-year timespan was 361 articles. As Figure 1 demonstrates, there is a slightly increasing trend line in the number of articles published about this topic.

**Figure 1**

*Newspaper Coverage About Plant-Based Milk*



## Conclusions

Plant-based milk has seen an increase in popularity which can be seen in news coverage during the past 15 years. The more exposure people have to a topic, the more likely they are to have information that could influence decision making. As the Diffusions of Innovations Theory posits, information from mass media influences people’s decision making about an innovation (Scherer, 1979; Rogers, 2003). The innovation of plant-based milk has been introduced to people through media coverage. An increase in article numbers could be related to the popularity of plant-based milk. However, many other factors can contribute to an increase in overall popularity of a product and the related media coverage.

## Implications/Recommendations

Agricultural communicators should closely monitor media coverage of issues, which includes the frequency of coverage, scope, and tonality. This would help identify how external trends may influence the adoption of innovations such as plant-based milk. Future research should focus on conversations about plant-based milk on social media. This topic should be monitored continually to see the impact of COVID-19 on 2020 article numbers. Another recommendation is to analyze each keyword used in the Boolean search to see what trends exist with different commodities (e.g. almond, milk, etc.).

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