Crying over Spilt Milk is not Enough:

An Exploration of Dairy Industry Offences and Impactful Consumer Responses

Americans are consuming more dairy-derived products in 2014 than they have ever consumed before. The United States Department of Agriculture reports that on average, a single American adult consumes a staggering 593 pounds of dairy products per year ("Profiling Food Consumption in America"). Despite dairy-related health consequences, such as weight gain and the early onset of puberty in children, milk is glorified to be a key source of calcium. It is also a key source of animal cruelty. The dairy industry is misleading and brutal, which is why dairy should be eliminated from the American diet to the fullest extent possible. Combating cruelty by participating in Milkless Monday, by boycotting milk entirely, or by purchasing organic and certified-humane milk will not only advance animal welfare, but will positively impact consumer’s health.

Although many consumers may have mixed feelings about the ethics of the meat industry, most consumers believe that the dairy industry is humane. In reality, dairy production is physically and psychologically taxing on cows, and they are treated as units of production rather than as living beings. The first example of animal mistreatment is the process by which cows become pregnant and begin lactation. Before cows can produce milk, they must become pregnant. To achieve this, long rods are inserted into animals’ bodies without any lubricants or
pain killers (Troxil 1). Because of its invasive nature, farmers commonly refer to the insemination rods as “rape racks” (“Feminism Must Stop Ignoring Animals”). Although this horrific process is routine and common, most consumers are not aware of this practice, and instead believe that cows are simply put out to pasture with bulls. The sick reality of the species’ forced pregnancy is likely to come as a shock to mothers and feminists who have happily poured cow’s milk into their own child’s bottles without a second thought as to how the milk was produced.

Another secret that the dairy industry hides from consumers is its treatment, or lack thereof, of the mother and her calf after birth. After nine months, the calf is birthed and separated from its mother within 24 hours. Separation ensures that it will not nurse, which would contaminate or possibly damage the cow’s utters (“Utilization of Foreign Technology”). The abrupt separation is devastating to the postpartum mother and her barely-able to stand calf, and the mother’s instinct is to search for and protect her baby. Such an assertion is not anthropomorphic; it is usual for a mother to display “distressed” behavior, such as uttering cries towards the last place she saw her calf, bucking her head, and eating less food over the sequential weeks (Turk 1). A calf, like all other mammals including humans, needs its mother for nourishment, comfort, and warmth. While it will receive “nourishment” from a man-made milk substitute dispensed from a metal tube, it will not receive warm comfort from its mother, nor will it receive any immunities that are naturally found in milk, making the calf vulnerable to sickness and disease. Consequently, a 10% mortality rate among young cows is common (“The Destructive Dairy Industry”). Meanwhile, its mother will only lactate for an average of eight months. After this period, the hormone that cues lactation dissipates, and the artificial insemination process begins again.
Mistreatment of cows on dairy farms sadly does not end with the milk initiation process or the separation of mother and calf; cows also must endure their bodily appendages being chopped off. Once a calf grows horns, it poses a potential threat to the farmers handling that cow. To combat this, calves undergo an excruciatingly painful process called debudding, in which the farmer sears their horns off with a hot iron. Even if a local anesthetic is used, it does not fully relieve the pain, and does not last long enough to provide adequate relief after the procedure (Keyserlingk et al 5). A similarly painful process that is performed on 39% of farms is tail clipping, which is called “docking.” Some farmers assert that docking makes insemination more expedient. Still others believe that it keeps the udders cleaner and the cow healthier, although no studies proving these theories have supported this assertion (Keyserlingk et al 6).

The third and final mistreatment of dairy cows is not outwardly pain-inducing like the prior two offences. Instead, it is an ever-present half-life, in which a cow is never able to engage in natural behaviors. For most of the year, cows on large dairies “never leave their stall,” where they eat, sleep, and are milked twice a day (Friend 211). They rarely see sunlight, feel fresh air, or taste grass, which is their natural diet. Because they are kept in their stall on cement or dirt floors, their feet are susceptible to lameness, arthritis, inflammation, and sores. Though cows are social animals and have best friends in the wild, they are never given the opportunity to socialize on dairy farms (Friend 213). Although the average lifespan of a cow in the wild is roughly twenty years, 25% of dairy calves are spent and shipped to become meat by age three. Only a quarter of cows in the dairy industry live to reach 7 years of age, though perhaps it is these cows who are the least fortunate, as their miserable existence is drawn out (Keyserlingk et al 5).

The startling truth about the lives of dairy cows is drastically different from the picturesque fields on milk carton labels. It is easy to feel betrayed and defeated. From a
consumer’s perspective, the vastness of the dairy industry and the problems within it may seem too difficult to combat or change. American author Edward Everett Hale once said, “I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do” (“Edward Everett Hale”). The idea of individual participation is vital to making an impact in any cause, great or small, though it is often times difficult to know where to begin. Fortunately, you, as an American consumer, have three options to choose from that will reduce your participation in dairy-farm cruelty: you can participate in “Milkless Monday” and flirt with veganism, you can vote with your dollar by boycotting “typical” milk and supporting “humane” milk, and finally, you can spread awareness among your social circle using word of mouth and social media.

As the name suggests, Milkless Monday is a designated week day when consumers abstain from all dairy–derived products. This day would serve as an extension of Meatless Monday, which was initiated by John Hopkins school of Public Health with the intention of reducing saturated fat in the American diet (“Meatless Monday Project”). Beginning to adhere to Milkless Monday is not as daunting as it first seems. If Starbucks lattés are the only way you drag yourself out of bed at the beginning of the week, so be it. Simply ask the barista to make a Carmel-flan latté with soy instead of two-percent: by doing so, you shave off 120 calories and twelve grams of fat, yet you will still enjoy nine grams of protein (“Explore our Menu”). Instead of rendezvousing with 360 calorie Ben & Jerry’s Peanut Butter Cup ice cream, sample Berry Berry Extraordinary sorbet. It is only ninety calories and, unlike the peanut butter ice cream which has twenty-six grams of fat per serving, is fat free (“Ben & Jerry’s Nutrition”). These little changes, in addition to supporting an important cause, may also help to loosen your belt. Giving up dairy for one day a week may initially seem like a small impact, but if everyone gave up dairy
products for just one day out of seven, tons of dairy products and resources such as labor, processing, and production would be reduced. After adhering to Milkless Monday, you might find that you are less hesitant to expanding these swaps and dishes to other days of the week. In time, you may even come to realize that you do not care for dairy as much as you used to, and your diet may look similar to that of a lactose-intolerant person. In psychology, this is known as the “foot in the door effect” (Scott 1).

You, like many consumers, may be willing to test out plant-based milks and dairy alternatives, but are not ready to forgo dairy altogether. For someone who has been drinking milk their whole life, a palate adjustment may be extremely difficult. Such consumers are encouraged to “vote with their dollar.” Just as you participate in democracy by casing your vote, you can align your money with your values and support a business with ethical practices. The price of a “typical” gallon of milk is $3.50, where a cost of a half-gallon of organic milk such as the brand “Organic Horizon” is $4.20. There is no denying such a significant price difference. However, a price of a product is usually a reflection of quality. One would never seek out the cheapest heart surgeon, or the cheapest car on the lot. The price of organic and humanely certified milk is greater because consumers are paying for better treatment of mother cows. Humane-certified and organic cows, while still subjected to insemination and separation from their baby, are given time to pasture, socialize, and rest. Animal welfare aside, when you buy organic milk, both your health and your palate benefit. Organic cows are never injected with the bovine growth hormone, rBGH. This hormone, which is banned in European countries, enlarges the cows utters so that it produces more milk ("FDA allows Genetically-Modified rBGH to Endanger Milk"). Unfortunately, it also induces “rapid division of normal human breast epithelial cells,” which has been linked to the early onset of puberty in young girls and a heightened risk of developing
breast cancer in later life ("FDA allows Genetically-Modified rBGH to Endanger Milk"). Because cows are subjected to fewer chemicals and less stress, organic milk tastes more flavorful than regular milk, and its viscosity is thicker, resulting in a “creamier” feel.

The final step a consumer can take to combat the broken dairy system is to help spread awareness about this issue. The dairy industry has been building its peaceful image for years, and it has done so extremely effectively. Tell immediate and closest friends and family first about this issue. If you live with roommates, consider offering them a taste of your new plant milk or organic milk to see how they like it. Social networking cites, though primarily used as lighthearted forums, may also prove to be places for non-aggressive education and persuasion, when done so with tact. Following sites such as “Free from Harm” and “The Humane Society of the United States” on Facebook and Twitter can not only help you debunk the dairy myth, but keep you informed on legal happenings about the issue.

Cows are rarely considered to be intelligent creatures, and perhaps they are not. Yet, their capacity to feel pain, fear, and distress is just as acute as any other being. When observed, they are gentle, maternal, and surprisingly graceful creatures. The suggestion to abandon dairy altogether may be a drastic one, but the continuation of the current rape, ravage, steal and kill cycle is even more extreme.

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MLA Works Cited


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