“Classifying” Margarine: The Early Class-Based Marketing of a Butter Substitute in Sweden (1923-1933)

How to cite:

© 2022 The Author

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/20549547.2022.2136876

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
“Classifying” Margarine: The Early Class-Based Marketing of a Butter Substitute in Sweden (1923-1933)

Lauren Alex O’Hagan

To cite this article: Lauren Alex O’Hagan (2023) “Classifying” Margarine: The Early Class-Based Marketing of a Butter Substitute in Sweden (1923-1933), Global Food History, 9:1, 20-46, DOI: 10.1080/20549547.2022.2136876

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20549547.2022.2136876

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 25 Oct 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 390

View related articles

View Crossmark data
“Classifying” Margarine: The Early Class-Based Marketing of a Butter Substitute in Sweden (1923-1933)

Lauren Alex O’Hagan

Department of Media and Communication, Örebro University, Sweden

Abstract
From its inception in 1869, margarine was considered a working-class food, associated with poverty and inferiority. In the early twentieth century, Swedish margarine brands set about to change public perception of the product, investing vast sums of money in extensive marketing campaigns to showcase it as suitable for the middle classes. However, wanting to retain as much market share as possible, they also continued to direct margarine advertisements at the working classes. Thus, a seemingly paradoxical situation emerged where the same brands, often in the same newspapers, published advertisements aimed at two distinct audiences. This paper uses multimodal critical discourse analysis to examine a large body of margarine advertisements produced in Sweden between 1923 and 1933. Specifically, it considers how brands appealed to either working-class or middle-class identities, socialisation, relationships, and rituals in the arguments they put forward about the values of margarine. It finds that middle-class advertisements were focused on promoting margarine as exclusive and luxurious, challenging prejudices and encouraging them to learn from the working classes, while working-class advertisements centred around respectability and keeping up appearances, valuing frugality and thrift and commending traditional ways of life and regional/national customs.

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, newspapers across Europe and North America were filled with advertisements for a new foodstuff: margarine. A typical product of the Second Industrial Revolution, margarine was one of the earliest examples of a nutritionally-engineered food, representing science, modernity, and technological optimism. However, despite its associations with scientific progress and innovation, the status of margarine in the public consciousness was negative, with many people seeing it as a “poor man’s substitute” to butter. Keen to change this unfavorable perception, margarine manufacturers set out on extensive marketing campaigns that extolled its similarities with butter in appearance, taste, and nutritional value. Surprisingly, rather than profit on the reputation of science to do so, many turned instead to class.
This class-based marketing approach was seen particularly in Sweden, a country that was on the cusp of moving from a predominantly rural working-class society into an urban, industrialized, and modern nation with an emerging middle class. Manufacturers sought to cast a net over this broad group of stratified consumers, offering margarine as a solution to potential problems that accorded with their rung on the social ladder. A lack of state regulation around margarine in Sweden aided this approach, since it granted greater freedom to manufacturers to enlarge their market and upgrade the image of margarine. On the one hand, advertisements urged the middle classes to forget their prejudices, framing margarine as a state-of-the-art, luxury food that would delight their families and friends. On the other hand, advertisements targeted the working classes by emphasizing the low cost of margarine and savings to the household budget, giving them the ability to emulate those who could afford butter and regularly cook pastry dishes and desserts. The same margarine brands often communicated these seemingly contradictory messages in the same publications, coexisting unproblematically as they worked as part of a wider dialogue with the social world and appealed directly to the concerns of readers situated in different social classes.

This paper examines the marketing of margarine in Sweden between 1923 and 1933—a period bookended by the establishment of the Milk Propaganda Association and the introduction of strict regulations to clamp down on false advertising. Specifically, it considers how social class was depicted in a large dataset of margarine advertisements collected from the Swedish Historical Newspaper Archive, with brands appealing to either middle-class or working-class identities, socialization, relationships, and rituals in the arguments they put forward about the values of margarine. Scrinis describes margarine as the “chameleon of manufactured food products” as, over the past 120 years, it has transformed its appearance, adapted to changing nutritional fads, and beguiled both nutrition experts and nutrition-conscious consumers alike. However, this paper shows how, in its early years of existence, the social connotations of margarine in terms of respectability and status were valued far above any health or nutritional benefits.

As advertisements are multimodal in nature (i.e. they use a combination of verbal and visual resources to make meaning), this study approaches them through Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), a method that reveals how language and other semiotic resources represent and convey certain ideas and values. Applying MCDA to the context of margarine advertisements shows how marketers recognized a lucrative opportunity with the product, using class connotations and stigmatization to their advantage in a bid to transform general public opinion and turn increasing numbers of the Swedish population into margarine, rather than butter, users. While we cannot be sure of the extent to which these advertisements actually impacted sales of margarine, figures from Statistics Sweden show that between 1923 and 1933, the number of working-class consumers of margarine rose from 22.4 percent to 36.6 percent, while the number of middle-class consumers increased from 22.4 percent to 29.7 percent. Figures on butter during this same period remained steady, with just a 1 percent increase for both classes. Margarine advertisements, thus, stand as important sources for understanding how class can be mobilized to sell products.

Although there is a wealth of existing literature on the history of margarine from an industrial, technological, legal, and nutritional perspective, studies on the marketing of
margarine remain scant.9 Of those that do exist, the majority focus on the period from the 1940s onwards when health started to become increasingly used as a means of creating market segmentation.10 Furthermore, most tend to focus on a British or US context, providing a one-dimensional and Anglocentric understanding of the topic.11 Class connotations of margarine in Great Britain have been explored, most notably within early twentieth-century fiction12 and in a 1938 Mass Observation survey.13 However, when it comes to Sweden, there is a considerable gap in knowledge on the historical development of the commercialization of margarine and its class-based associations, despite the country having a major margarine industry in the early twentieth century, as well as a rich newspaper archive with a large body of evidence on margarine advertisements.

To date, most work on the history of advertising in Sweden has been centered around gender and nationalism, with class being largely ignored.14 This focus is in line with Bengtsson’s belief that the “national myth” of Swedish egalitarianism is so strong that scholars have largely ignored it; only in recent years have they turned their attention to areas that contradict this narrative and uncovered examples of Sweden as a deeply unequal society in the early twentieth century.15 Thus, this paper breaks new ground not only in its focus on the margarine industry in Sweden and a dataset of previously unexplored margarine advertisements, but also on how margarine companies employed advertisements for persuasive purposes, drawing upon the power of language and semiotics to embed margarine in broader class-based societal concerns.

The Invention of Margarine and Its Commercialization in Sweden

French chemist Hippolyte Mège-Mouriès invented margarine in 1869, following a competition by Emperor Napoleon III to find a cheap alternative to butter for the growing and malnourished urban population.16 Mège-Mouriès took the lard from slaughtered cattle, mixed it with skimmed milk and beef tallow, and churned it in the same way as cream to produce an artificial butter, which he called “oleomargarine” (from the Latin for “olive oil” and the Greek for “pearl”). One year later, he sold the margarine patent to Anton Jurgens, a Dutch butter wholesaler, and the Netherlands quickly became a leading margarine-producing country.17

In Sweden, Carl Rydberg opened the first small-scale margarine factory in Helsingborg in 1881. However, the big breakthrough came with the founding of Arboga Margarine Factory in 1887.18 Initially, Arboga exported all its margarine to Great Britain, but, recognizing a growing demand for margarine among the Swedish public, the company pivoted to the national market instead.19 Throughout the course of the late nineteenth century, increasing numbers of margarine factories opened across Sweden, including Pellerin (1895) and Zenith (1899), each producing up to 15,000 kg of margarine per day.20

At first, margarine was colorless, but as production methods improved, factories added coloring agents and other ingredients so that margarine simulated the appearance, taste, texture, and nutrient profile of butter, obtaining what Scrinis calls “nutritional equivalence.”21 Consequently, margarine became a highly contentious issue among dairy farmers and politicians in countries with a powerful dairy industry, such as Sweden.22 The expansion of railway networks in the United States and Russia
threatened Swedish farmers, who faced stiff competition and lost much of their lucrative grain exports.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, farmers saw dairy products, particularly butter, as the last products they had left to live on and viewed margarine as a threat to their market share.

Throughout the 1880s, Swedish dairy farmers and politicians made use of the popular press to launch smear campaigns, claiming that margarine was useless, dirty, and even potentially poisonous because it was made from dying animals or the waste in slaughterhouses.\textsuperscript{24} Other elaborate claims included margarine causing night blindness, lowering work performance, and making people angrier.\textsuperscript{25} As public concern over the safety of margarine increased, the topic reached the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) and, in October 1885, the Riksdag issued a Royal Ordinance requiring all margarine to be kept in receptacles with special labeling to prevent fraud.\textsuperscript{26} However, margarine opponents were not satisfied that the Royal Ordinance went far enough and, in 1889, the Lantmanna Party (which largely represented farmers) submitted a motion to the Riksdag to ban margarine, arguing that it was a synthetic substitute product that unknowingly deceived consumers.\textsuperscript{27}

The Party never succeeded in winning a majority for its proposal. Margarine opponents in other countries, however, managed to introduce strict rules regarding the sale of margarine that were in line with (or even stricter than) corresponding regulations for alcohol and tobacco.\textsuperscript{28} Several states in the United States, for example, passed laws requiring margarine to be colored pink to avoid consumers mistaking it for butter, while Canada imposed an outright ban on the product until 1948.\textsuperscript{29}

In a bid to protect itself, margarine producers created the Swedish Margarine Manufacturers’ Association in 1905. Almost all margarine producers became affiliated with this cartel, which sought to control the market supply of margarine to maintain prices at a high level and restrict competition.\textsuperscript{30} The cartel was particularly worried about the growing power of the Swedish Cooperative Union (Kooperativa Förbundet), established in 1899 as a democratically managed consumer and retail group, which the cartel believed posed a threat to individual traders. Tensions between the two organizations reached fever pitch in the autumn of 1908, leading to the outbreak of the so-called “Margarine War” when the Swedish Retail Traders’ National Association persuaded margarine manufacturers to stop supplying margarine to cooperative shops in order to leave them without goods. The Cooperative Union struck back, however, by buying their own factory to produce margarine and encouraging their members to boycott the cartel’s products.\textsuperscript{31} In 1911, after just six years, the cartel disbanded.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition to the strained relationship with the Cooperative Union, margarine producers were still at loggerheads with farmers throughout the 1910s and 1920s. In 1923, farmers came together with politicians, medical experts, and home economics teachers to form the Milk Propaganda Association. Its dual aim: to protect farming and increase sales of dairy products.\textsuperscript{33} With economic support from the state and an endorsement from the King, the Association launched a journal that highlighted the benefits of eating, cooking, and baking with butter and encouraged dairy producers to eat as much butter as possible in what they called a “taking back system.”\textsuperscript{34}

Sensing that they were stronger together than apart, Swedish margarine producers made another attempt to join forces and formed the Margarinfabrikernas Försäljning AB in 1927. The organization was made up of the seven largest non-co-operative companies
in Sweden – Arboga, Pellerin, Mustad, Agra, Svea, Vandenbergh, and Zenith – and accounted for 50 percent of Sweden’s margarine production. The individual factories retained independence but coordinated their sales and distribution. At the time, a half kilogram of margarine cost between 1 and 2 SEK (roughly $1.80 to $3.60 in modern money). At the top end of the scale was Svea, while at the bottom was Agra, with the other brands falling somewhere in between around 1.25–1.5 SEK. However, there was little to distinguish them in terms of quality.

Margarine sales continued to grow throughout the early 1930s. Sweden now had twenty-one factories spread across the country with a total production of almost 60 million kilos per year. However, controversies around the product continued. Caving into pressure from the farmers, the Riksdag introduced a margarine excise tax in 1933 in order to protect Swedish butter production. The Social Democrats passed the tax as purely a political move in order to receive support from the Farmers’ League for their economic policy and, thus, be able to form a government. At the same time, the Riksdag imposed a ban on margarine advertisements that made comparisons with butter. Consequently, the ‘Tre Ess’ brand was forced to change its slogan “tastes like butter” to “taste that wins,” while Runa had to modify its name to Rona to avoid being mistaken for the butter brand Run. These clampdowns were, however, relatively light compared to legislation in other countries.

The heavy opposition and critique faced by the margarine industry, as well as the mild regulation introduced, had an unlikely side effect, with Swedish producers becoming pioneers in the country’s emerging marketing industry. Few other industries at the time invested as much money into marketing, thereby rooting margarine into consumers’ everyday lives. In his study of margarine marketing in Finland, Pantzar notes three key stages in its early development: from 1900 to 1925, advertisements were concerned with winning over a skeptical audience full of prejudices around the product; from 1920 to 1930, advertisements focused on margarine being a perfect substitute for butter; and from 1930 to 1950, advertisements promoted margarine as a healthy alternative to butter. While Swedish margarine marketing generally followed a similar trajectory, central to all of these stages was the topic of class, as we shall see below.

### Data and Methodology

This study uses a sample of 200 advertisements for margarine published in Swedish newspapers between 1923 and 1933, the former being the year that the Milk Propaganda Association was established and the latter being when the Riksdag introduced strict regulations to clamp down on false advertising. The advertisements are representative of the seven leading non-co-operative margarine brands during this period: Agra, Arboga, Mustad, Pellerin, Svea, Vandenbergh, and Zenith. The advertisements were collected through a manual search of the Swedish Historical Newspaper Archive (https://tidningar.kb.se/) using the keyword “margarin.” As was common practice in Sweden at this time, advertising agencies authorized by the Association of Swedish Newspaper Publishers created the advertisements for each brand. These agencies worked on a commission of roughly 15–25 percent from the newspapers where they sold the advertising space. This meant that, even after the work of creating an advertisement was done, they still earned a small percentage on all advertisements
that they brought to newspapers. Because of this, they often published the same advertisement as many times as possible in different newspapers.\textsuperscript{42} Therefore, although newspapers published thousands of margarine advertisements between 1923 and 1933, there was very little variation in their content and style. On the whole, each margarine brand produced one to three advertisements that were repeated every day over a period of several months in all major Swedish national and local newspapers. The 200 examples in the dataset have, thus, been chosen because they represent the different varieties in use during the ten-year period of study.

Given their similar content, the advertisements collected for this study and analyzed in this paper all come from 	extit{Svenska Dagbladet}—Sweden’s largest newspaper. Founded in 1884, 	extit{Svenska Dagbladet} is a Stockholm-based newspaper that covers national and international news, while providing local coverage of the Greater Stockholm region. It began as a right-wing publication, although it has been “unbound moderate” since 1977, promoting liberal-conservative ideas in terms of the market economy. During the time that the margarine advertisements under study were published, the newspaper attracted a largely middle-class audience, although some of its readers came from the skilled working classes. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the collected advertisements by year. It shows that there were considerably more advertisements in the early years following the establishment of the Milk Propaganda Association.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Advertisements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis seeks to understand how Swedish marketers drew upon social class in their margarine advertisements, appealing to either middle-class or working-class consumers with the arguments that they upheld. Specifically, it asks the following questions:

1. How did Swedish marketers frame margarine advertisements to appeal to both middle-class and working-class consumers?
2. How were these appeals enacted in the linguistic and semiotic choices of advertisements?
3. How were these linguistic and semiotic choices embedded in broader societal discourses around class to make them appear persuasive?

To address these questions, the advertisements are analyzed through a qualitative approach that uses multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA).\textsuperscript{43} MCDA provides
a systematic way to study the co-deployment of language and other semiotic resources in texts and how they shape what we do, how we think, and how we experience the world. In the context of this study, the analytical tools of MCDA can help uncover how marketers embedded margarine in class-based discourses and how these discourses were made to appear true and convince consumers that margarine was essential to their everyday lives. My approach to MCDA draws particularly on the work of Ledin and Machin and concerns the following key elements:

1. language (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, use of metaphor, and rhetoric);
2. image (e.g. people, actions, perspectives, angles, distance);
3. color, and how color choice conveys emotions, attitudes, and values;
4. typography, especially the cultural connotations of certain typefaces;
5. texture and materiality in terms of their physical and symbolic meanings;
6. layout and composition, made up of salience, framing, coordination, and hierarchies.

In the first stage of MCDA, the collected advertisements were split into two broad groups – middle class and working class – based on recurring patterns in their arguments and their use of language and other semiotic resources. Then, a series of themes were identified across each class group that marketers repeatedly drew upon to sell margarine. For the middle classes, these themes centered predominantly around promoting exclusivity and luxury, challenging prejudices and learning from the working classes, while for the working classes, themes concerned keeping up appearances, valuing frugality and thrift, and commending traditional ways of life and regional/national customs. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the collected advertisements by theme.

This paper presents the results of this second stage of analysis, using a selection of prototypical advertisements to demonstrate how margarine companies and advertising agencies used linguistic and visual strategies to construct class-based arguments around margarine. The strategies and arguments are reflective of those used across all advertisements and are supported by supplementary evidence from the broader dataset. Overall, the study reveals how marketers sought to transform public opinions around margarine by focusing on its social connotations, rather than its health or nutritional properties, in order to appeal to all strata of society and, therefore, increase its market share.

**Margarine and the Middle Classes**

One of the first nutritionally engineered foods, margarine represented the “pinnacle of culinary modernity.” However, right from the get-go, it carried deeply entrenched

---

**Table 2.** Breakdown of collected margarine advertisements by theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aimed at Middle Classes</th>
<th>Total no. of advertisements: 114</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Themes:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting exclusivity and luxury</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging prejudices</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from the working classes</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aimed at Working Classes</th>
<th>Total no. of advertisements: 86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Themes:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping up appearances</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing frugality and thrift</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commending traditional ways of life and regional/national customs</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
working-class connotations because of its use as a butter substitute to feed the masses. While butter was seen as fancy and delicious, margarine was viewed as second-rate and ill-tasting. Consequently, the image of margarine in the popular consciousness became one of inferiority and poverty, thereby turning the product into a “vehicle for class racism.” For most households, margarine was something only to be used when times were hard; if income and food prices allowed, it would swiftly be jettisoned by butter. As one housewife concisely summarized in a 1937 British Mass Observation interview, if a person purchases margarine, it is “either because they cannot afford butter or are too mean to pay the price.” These thoughts were echoed in Sweden with Svenska Dagbladet describing margarine as a “masked surrogate” only suitable to the “poorest worker in the cities, indeed a beggar there.” Thus, we see how it was important for early margarine producers to change these views, launching advertisements squarely aimed at the middle classes that reframed margarine as a high-class product.

Promoting Exclusivity and Luxury

According to Runefelt, the “democratization of luxury” was a common and successful feature of early twentieth-century advertisements in Sweden. He notes how brands promoted products as exclusive, despite the fact that they were widely manufactured, and consumers anxious to distinguish themselves from others bought into these marketing messages. It is unsurprising, then, that notions of exclusivity and luxury are central themes across the advertisements of all seven margarine brands, representing 21 percent of the collected dataset and often channeled subtly through visual cues.

We see this clearly in the fact that, rather than depict a rectangular block of margarine in its protective wrapper, all brands instead predominantly display the product in tiny balls stacked into a pyramid formation and presented on plates on top of dining room tables (a case in point being the Vandenbergh advertisement in Figure 1a). The balls are reminiscent of truffles – a distinct luxury food – while the pyramid carries historical associations with Ancient Egypt where it served as a symbol of the wealth and power of the Pharoah. This display, thus, fetishizes margarine as its perfect shapes act as symbols of the work required to perform privilege with any evidence of the actual work removed. This fetishization is further accentuated by the accoutrements that typically accompany the plate of margarine – wine glasses, silver cutlery, and flowers – and are arranged in a deliberate way that carries symbolic meanings of affluence. The white tablecloth used in most images also works symbolically to convey purity, cleanliness, and respectability – the marks of a middle-class family. Accompanying straplines typically use Swedish proverbs (e.g. “honor the one who should be honored,” Runa) or friendly, value-laden language (e.g. “let’s give a private cheer for the table’s first and foremost attribute,” Runa). When viewed together, the words and images signal orderliness and staging, capturing a mood that encourages desire and emulation in viewers. In other words, it reassures middle-class families that margarine is not only a suitable food for them, but that it is worthy of much praise and adulation.

In other advertisements, brands convey exclusivity and luxury by drawing upon the etymology of margarine (from the Greek word for pearl) and describing the product in headlines as “pearl glistening,” as exemplified by the Arboga advertisement in Figure 1b. Its association with the precious jewel is emphasized by images of delicate female fingers
wrapped around pearl necklaces. Often, advertisements place these images next to pyramid formations of margarine, thereby drawing attention to the visual similarities between the two and creating a “rhyme” to transmit the idea that, like pearls, margarine is valuable and exquisite. 54 Another common symbol across margarine advertisements is a crown, typically shown with sunrays beaming off its surface. Crowns serve as representations of royalty, wealth, and power, while sunrays carry associations of health, happiness, and warmth. 55 Thus, together, they depict margarine as a positive, health-giving food, yet one that is only accessible to those “in the know.” These subtle meanings are captured more overtly by accompanying straplines that praise the “perfection and nobility” of margarine’s production process (Arboga) and claim that it matches “the highest class butter” (Arboga) and helps create “a cake you can invite the king for” (Agra). Although no details are provided about what this process entails or what makes the margarine high class, the words are highly convincing, acting as prestige markers that suggest families who eat margarine have a considerable advantage over others. Loeb sees this marketing strategy as a form of “consumerist natural selection” because it advises consumers on how to behave to ensure the health of their families. 56 Thus, margarine becomes equated to a way of life, thereby selling an experience to consumers, not just a product. 57

Advertisements also depict exclusivity and luxury through images of department store windows with crowds of people gathered around dressed in distinctly middle-class clothing (e.g. suits, bowler hats, canes). However, on display are not the typical items that one might expect in a department store window, but rather breads, cakes, and
pastries made from margarine. Similarly, we see images of middle-class women in furs and leather gloves entering their local shop and selecting margarine from a counter display as if they were in a jewelry store. Agra came up with a particular shrewd idea of teaming up with Svenska Dagbladet who displayed a repertoire of margarine-based desserts in their office window to promote the product. Advertisements provide the address of the newspaper and encourage customers to come down and witness for themselves the “good evidence” that Agra “gives better results than butter” (Figure 1c). This strategy served to create a buzz around margarine, as well as imbue it with trust because it was endorsed by a respectable Swedish authority.58

Challenging Prejudices

Linked to the idea of margarine as an exclusive and luxurious product, brands also used their advertisements to persuade middle-class consumers to discard any past prejudices that they might have had about margarine and to give it a try (20 percent of the collected sample). Advertisements are replete with snappy headlines telling readers to “get over [their] prejudices!” (Mustad) and that “prejudice disputes but experience knows” (Agra). The strong emphasis on experience in many headlines serves to suggest that the purchase and use of margarine is a repeated action and plays upon the traditional role of the housewife as a wise authority figure in her local community, thereby encouraging consumers to gain confidence in margarine because of the collective experience around it.59

A case in point is the Arboga advertisement in Figure 2a. Entitled “Slave of Old Prejudices,” it shows an image of three women sitting around a dining room table eating sandwiches and drinking tea. Their elegant hats, patterned dresses, jewelry, and hairstyles clearly mark them out as middle class, as do the refined furnishings and decor around them. The contrast between the dark outside the window and the lit candles and display of flowers within the room give the image an air of coziness in line with the Swedish concept of myska (i.e. being relaxed at home and enjoying the moment with all your senses). Through perspective and framing, we are offered an illusion of exclusive access as if we are eavesdropping and intruding into a space that is not our own.60 This feeling is accentuated by the fact that the woman who is speaking (note the gesticulating left hand) has her back turned, thus turning her into an object of “offer” as we contemplate her and make connections between her figure and the text beneath.61 The text is written in the first person stating: “I thought it was beneath me to use margarine. It had to be the finest dairy butter whatever it cost. I have another perception now since experience has taught me that cooking, my family and – not least – my cash book are splendid thanks to Arboga.” The woman in the image, thus, is granted “role model authority,”62 standing in for the typical everyday contacts who would have provided word-of-mouth reputations when towns were smaller and populations were less diverse.63

The fact that the women are having afternoon tea is also significant. Then as now, Sweden was predominantly a nation of coffee drinkers,64 while afternoon tea was a British tradition typically associated with the middle classes.65 However, for early-twentieth century Swedes, Britain was regarded as a paragon of civility and, thus, to emulate this tradition (and its broader social connotations) was highly desirable. The importance of afternoon tea runs across margarine advertisements, with brands
emphasizing that tea and sandwiches are “almost obligatory” in Britain and are “more delicious than the usual cakes,” yet have “strangely enough not yet gained the prevalence that they deserve” in Sweden (Agra). In these advertisements, “sandwiches” is always written in English, even though there are Swedish equivalents (e.g. smörgås, macka), thereby making the practice sound more exclusive. Thus, the advertisements read like statements of intent, urging Swedish women to be trendsetters by taking afternoon tea; and, of course, the path to becoming a trendsetter starts by buying margarine.

Other advertisements take a more aggressive approach in encouraging middle-class consumers to drop their prejudices toward margarine. Agra, for example, shows close-ups of middle-aged women with furrowed brows and stern expressions (Figure 2b), creating a visual form of direct address by staring at viewers in an act of “demand.” These images are accompanied by first-person text blocks with strong value-laden language that creates a dichotomy between responsible and irresponsible housewives: “I see with horror how, thanks to idleness and old stupid prejudices, [margarine] has been wasted in many places in the country. If all housewives really wanted to bother finding out how extraordinarily good natural butter can be replaced with Melange, then much would have been gained.”

The advertisements further emphasize their point by acknowledging that some margarines are better than others, but that one must not reject all margarines when this particular brand (i.e. Agra) is superior to butter. No reason is given for Agra’s superiority, yet its emotive language is persuasive, suggesting that mothers who truly care about their families will replace butter with margarine. Agra makes similarly forceful statements in other advertisements, describing people who think margarine is not “good enough for a well-to-do home” as “wastrels.” Other brands are less threatening in tone, simply

Figure 2. Challenging prejudices. (a) Arboga, Svenska Dagbladet, April 28, 1923, p. 1. (b) Agra, Svenska Dagbladet, November 28, 1924, p. 5. (c) Mustad, Svenska Dagbladet, February 20, 1925, p. 7.
explaining to housewives that margarine is not a marker of “necessity,” “inferiority,” or “thrift” and praising its “nutritional value” and “fat content” (Runa, Tre Ess). Mustad, on the other hand, acknowledges that “there was a time when a housewife would slip down the social scale if she used margarine,” but claim that “if she was smart, she did it anyway in secret,” before stating that now “she can do it openly and with well-deserved pride.” Thus, through these advertisements, margarine is constructed as an essential middle-class product, although few details are provided as to why.

Advertisements did not just target housewives, however; some depict businessmen dressed in smart suits and hats having fika (i.e. the custom of eating/drinking and socializing together) or in tuxedos eating dinner at a fancy restaurant, with margarine being central to both occasions. The Mustad advertisement in Figure 2c, for example, shows the Mustad mascot holding up a “slice-of-life” image from a workplace staff room. Slice-of-life presentations were a common feature of advertisements from this period, used to show potential consumers how well a product fit into the needs of each family member. Here, the two men are drinking coffee and eating sandwiches, a look of contentment on their faces. The accompanying poem (which rhymes in Swedish and is a dialogue between the two men) states: “I have never tasted a better bun, what butter did you use? Farmer’s butter? No, better still! Read below and find out.” The text below then describes Mustad as having “opened the eyes of many” who had a “dumb prejudice” about margarine. Again, the language is highly emotive, suggesting a lack of intelligence among non-margarine users and, therefore, playing into class-fueled arguments around education and literacy. Similar strategies are at work in other advertisements, which tell consumers to “stop living in the past” (Agra), thereby appealing to the middle-class desire to remain fashionable and modern.

Learning from the Working Classes
A final theme, which features on a slightly lesser scale across advertisements (16 percent of the collected sample), is the somewhat contradictory message of learning from the working classes. Specifically, such advertisements do not hide the fact that margarine has working-class connotations and instead seek to convince middle-class consumers to follow the advice of their servants and use margarine instead of butter. Advertisements convey this directive through kitchen scenes of servants teaching their mistresses how to cook with margarine or dining room scenes of servants presenting margarine-based dishes to their mistresses. In both cases, the mistress is pleasantly surprised and vows to use margarine from now on instead of butter. We see this clearly in the Vandenbergh advertisement in Figure 3a, which shows a fancily dressed woman seated at the table and her servant offering her a plate of cakes (note that she is drinking tea – a sign of respectability). With a smile on her face, the woman asks, “Do you really mean that you used margarine in these delightful cakes?” to which the servant replies, “Yes, but it’s also a margarine whose smell, taste, and consistency is unsurpassed.” Height difference is significant across these advertisements, with advertisements often depicting the servant as taller than her mistress or standing when her mistress is seated. This contrast in stature suggests superiority and creates a temporary role reversal between employer and employee, thereby accentuating the value of the servant’s knowledge. Thus, even though this slice-of-life shot is unrealistic (a servant was unlikely to have had free reign
over household purchases or advise her mistress in this way), the combination of language and framing is reliable in showcasing the benefits of margarine.

Other advertisements use consumer stories instead, adopting the perspective of the middle-class housewife and testifying what she has learnt from her servant. “It sounds like a joke,” says one of the city’s most conservative housewives but it’s true,” starts one Svea advertisement (Figure 3b). Despite the dubious impersonalized reference, the fact that the testimony supposedly comes from a woman of high moral standing leaves readers little room to question the veracity of the claim. The testimony goes on to outline how the woman hired a new maid in January, how the maid took over all responsibilities for shopping and food preparation, and how she switched from butter to margarine yet nobody in the household was able to tell the difference. The credibility of this testimony is further strengthened by the headline “A maid for free,” accompanied by the quasi-magical image of a servant surrounded by five stars and standing on an enlarged open hand. Through this framing, she is offered up to the audience as an authority figure with “divine” powers whose housekeeping secrets can improve families’ lives.

Pellerin goes as far as to call their margarine “elite butter,” advertising it with an image of a working-class servant sitting on the wing of an aeroplane and handing out packets to an anxious crowd of middle-class women with outstretched hands (Figure 3c). As in the previous advertisements, the servant is sitting in an elevated position, thereby granting her power over the women below. Her authority is also emphasized by her calmness compared to the frantic gestures of the other women. The image is accompanied by the line “Thousands of housewives have already discovered the new Pellerin Margarine.” Read together, we see that Pellerin is openly acknowledging that margarine has a long

Figure 3. Learning from the working classes. (a) Vandenbergh, Svenska Dagbladet, May 18, 1923, p. 6. (b) Svea, Svenska Dagbladet, 9 February 1925, p. 10. (c) Pellerin, Svenska Dagbladet, October 2, 1924, p. 11.
association with the working classes, but suggesting that the middle classes would do well to follow their example because it has many benefits (although none are stated). By including the image of an aeroplane, Pellerin also serves to associate itself with innovation, technology, and modernity – all aspects to which the middle classes were strongly attracted – thereby representing margarine as the gateway to achieving this.

**Margarine and the Working Classes**

As the previous section has shown, margarine had strong working-class associations. Therefore, brands launched extensive marketing campaigns with the aim of reframing the product as a high-class luxury to appeal to the middle classes. However, keen to maintain their grip on the established working-class market, brands also continued to address them directly with targeted advertisements. At this point, it is important to emphasize that, although the working classes predominantly used margarine, they still felt an element of shame and embarrassment surrounding its use. Levene notes how social stigma with margarine was associated with outward show and that giving margarine to a guest, for example, not only reflected badly on the personal standing of the housewife, but also on her husband and his (lack of) ability to provide over a respectable home. Outward appearances of respectability were essential to working-class homes, as manifested through clean rent books, whitened doorsteps, and shelves of books. Thus, even in households with little money, attempts would be made to use margarine for cooking or baking (where it would not be seen) and keep butter for guests and occasions when it stood as a visible ingredient (e.g. toast). In short, margarine was the “taste of necessity,” while butter was the “taste of luxury.” Margarine brands capitalized upon this knowledge, using their advertisements to show working-class consumers that margarine was not only good for their household economy, but also sophisticated enough to fool others and “keep up appearances.”

**Keeping Up Appearances**

Maintaining an impression of wealth and respectability was a key theme channeled by 20 percent of the collected margarine advertisements. Central to this was the image of the canny housewife – an overweight, jolly, middle-aged woman whose years of experience gave her authority. In most advertisements, she stands with her finger on her lips and is winking. Her gaze is directed at the viewers, encouraging them to enter into an imaginary relationship with her as she warns them not to reveal her secret. In the Agra advertisement in **Figure 4a**, this is emphasized by the accompanying headline: “They haven’t noticed,” making the viewers feel as if they are privy to information that nobody else has. The text below the image states that Agra conducted an experiment, whereby a group of housewives were asked to replace their butter with margarine; they claim that nobody in the family noticed because “their taste is so bafflingly similar.” Across brands, advertisements underline similar experiments, with claims that the majority of participants were unable to distinguish between butter and margarine. Although no precise details are provided of any of these experiments, they imbue margarine with scientific rationale, framing it as a credible alternative to butter that will enable thrifty consumers to fool others successfully. Thus, brands make promises that go far beyond the physical
properties of margarine itself, extending to elevated social status and respectability. The Agra advertisement (and many others) then poses a direct challenge to housewives, telling them to “put [their] families to the same test” by buying a packet of margarine and serving it instead of butter for a week; it guarantees that they will not want to go back. This statement carries a sense of irony because most working-class households only kept butter for special occasions (if they could afford it at all), not everyday life. Nonetheless, it serves to reassure working-class consumers that they will not be thought less of for using margarine and, what is more, most people will not even realize.

Other brands present these notions more explicitly in advertisements that show housewives inviting guests into their home. As both Levene and Turner have found, working-class families were generally ashamed to serve margarine to guests. However, here, they do so willingly, offering up bread with margarine rather than disguising it in cakes. Again, straplines inform anxious consumers that guests will never notice and emphasize that, for the first time, there is a margarine good enough for the table, not just for baking. Images also show anxious housewives presenting margarine to their husbands and families in the hope that they will not notice their trickery or even blindfolding them and getting them to try a piece of bread spread with margarine (Figure 4b, Zenith). These actions turn the purchase and consumption of margarine into a game, thereby injecting the product with a sense of playfulness and enjoyment. Another feature of many of these advertisements is to distinguish between good and bad margarine, implying that good margarine (i.e. the brand being advertised) “is manufactured like butter,” “looks like butter,” and “tastes like butter” (Zenith) and, thus, it will be impossible for anybody to tell the difference. In its emphasis on good and bad margarines, the advertisements stir up intra-class conflict, suggesting that those with more disposable income will be able to access better-quality margarine. This feeds into broader ideas about respectability as
a “fluid and variable idea” that the working classes constantly redefined on their own terms rather than simply a “filtered-down version of bourgeois norm.” In other words, class-based distinctions are made not just at the macro level between butter and margarine (i.e. middle vs. working class), but at the micro level between good and bad margarine (i.e. skilled vs. unskilled working class).

Perhaps somewhat ironically considering the previously explored middle-class advertisements, some brands try to frame margarine as a middle-class product, suggesting that working-class consumers will gain access to a middle-class diet and potentially even a middle-class lifestyle through its purchase and consumption. These notions were channeled predominantly through the inclusion of recipes in advertisements for dishes that were typically associated with higher social status and pecuniary wealth, such as Veal Oscar (named after King Oscar II), Baroness’s Pudding (apricot and pineapple semolina dessert), Savarin (yeast cake cooked in rum), and curry. Essential to all of these dishes was, of course, margarine. Advertisements emphasized the fact that meals once kept only for special occasions could now be eaten everyday thanks to margarine, using witty straplines like “Yet another egg dish!” “Pastry again?” and “Pancakes on a Thursday?” (Mustad). Mustad particularly excelled at this tactic, encouraging readers to write in with their own recipes. Thus, each week, a new recipe would be published with a name alongside (e.g. Miss Hilly E.) and a supposed quote from the person extolling the benefits of margarine (Figure 4c). The use of just a first name and initial kept the identity of the person deliberately vague, making it challenging to know whether they were real or fictitious; nonetheless, it built a sense of comradeship around the product, positioning working-class women as a distinct group who shared common values and goals. The credibility of Mustad is further strengthened by the inclusion of the names Miss Stina Fredrikson and Mrs Anna Bowallius who are “home consultants” for the company who check each submission and choose the best entry for publication. This supposedly lengthy selection process not only frames Mustad as a brand who is serious about giving a voice to working-class consumers, but serves to portray margarine as a middle-class product to which the working classes are being given exclusive access, even though this clearly was not the case. The idea of “home consultants” employed by the company to provide expert advice was, in fact, a common practice in the beauty industry at this time, pioneered by Helena Rubinstein who described herself as a “beauty scientist” and wore a white lab coat in advertisements to showcase her authority.

Valuing Frugality and Thrift

While being part of a lower socioeconomic group carried a certain stigma in early twentieth-century Sweden, margarine brands used advertisements to reframe this poverty in a positive light as frugality and thrift (13 percent of the collected advertisements). Across brands, advertisements state how margarine is so cheap that its purchase will improve the household’s economy; however, they are also keen to emphasize that this does not mean a reduction in quality because margarine is just as tasty and high class as butter. We see this clearly in the advertisement for Agra in Figure 5a, which shows the recurring image of the jolly housewife accompanied by the headline “It’s a real joy.” She looks directly at the viewers, a smile on her face, creating a feeling of warmth as she encourages them to read on and find out what has caused the “real joy.” The text below
completes the phrase—“to see what savings you can make by buying Melange instead of butter”—followed by the claim that it is “so much more fun” because “the saving doesn’t mean any deprivation.” Through this combination of word and image, the act of being thrifty is turned into a fun and rewarding endeavor rather than a sign of hardship. Continuing in the first person, the text describes margarine as “technically perfect” with “all the benefits of butter but none of its disadvantages.” Although we do not know what technically perfect means, nor what the advantages and disadvantages of margarine over butter are, this high-modality sentence sounds very convincing because it comes from an experienced housewife. The advertisement then makes a “footing shift” from this fictional testimonial to Agra’s “expert authority” through the font change from roman to italics, which establishes a new referential point for readers. It explains that everyone who has tried Agra margarine agrees that it is just like butter and that it is “beneficial” for the household economy. Here, the advertisement positions margarine not as a marker of poverty, but as the sign of being a good housekeeper.

The theme of frugality as a sign of good housekeeping is also central to other brands. Mustad, for example, states that “it is a fact” that a “good housewife” must “make significant savings” without “reducing the quality of dishes” in any way, while Agra encourages “all thoughtful housewives” to “improve [their] household economy.” Here, the adjectives “good” and “thoughtful” formulate a sense of guilt by suggesting that mothers who do not switch to margarine do not really care about their families. If this is not enough to convince consumers, they repeat at the end of their advertisement that “this statement is far from an exaggeration.” In other advertisements, Mustad emphasizes that housewives can “save more than 200 crowns” by purchasing margarine, Pellerin claims that Swedish people “throw away 100,000 crowns a day or more” by buying butter,

Figure 5. Valuing frugality and thrift. (a) Agra, Svenska Dagbladet, November 7, 1924, p. 7. (b) Pellerin, Svenska Dagbladet, January 8, 1925, p. 5. (c) Pellerin, Svenska Dagbladet, November 14, 1924, p. 9.
while Agra advises readers to “learn the art of shopping.” Although we as consumers are unaware of the period over which 200 crowns are saved (e.g. one week, one month), whether the figure of 100,000 crowns is correct, or what exactly the “art of shopping” is and how this will affect each individual household, the statements sound impressive and link the purchase of margarine to broader social effects, leading to an overall improvement in quality of life. 88

For some brands, a more scaremongering tactic is adopted to emphasize how margarine can improve quality of life, such as in the Pellerin advertisement in Figure 5b. The advertisement is dominated by an image of a woman kneeling on the floor and buried up to her waist in bills – a visual metaphor of drowning in debt. She has an expression of despair on her face as she clutches one hand to her heart and places the other on her head; she averts our gaze by looking down, positioning us as eavesdroppers into her private moment of anguish. 89 The feelings of anguish are accentuated by the contrast in color between the white bills and her black hair and dress, drawing upon associations of black with evil and fear. 90 The advertisement features the headline “A terrifying new year.” Published at the beginning of January, it, thus, serves to bring an abrupt end to the Christmas festivities and showcase the reality of debt, scaring consumers into taking action (in this case, by purchasing margarine). The strapline underneath the image states “I must lower my expenditures,” with the first person creating an empathy with viewers who may also share the same new year goal. The font is wobbly and snakes across the page, connoting a sense of anxiety. 91 A solution is then immediately provided to this anxiety with the following statement—“By buying Pellerin”—written in straight letters that offer a stark typographical contrast and convey good rationale and clear thinking. 92 This statement implies that one minor change (i.e. buying margarine) has the potential to transform this woman’s entire life.

The scaremongering tactic is also extended in other advertisements, which link the purchase of margarine to a reduction in family arguments and, thus, the restoration of harmony in the home. Advertisements show husbands banging their fists down on tables and demanding margarine, their kids cowering in the corner (Vandenbergh) or couples arguing animatedly over the household economy (Pellerin), again with margarine presented as a solution. We see a clear example of this in the Pellerin advertisement in Figure 5c, which depicts a husband and wife in disagreement with one another. Both are portly and stand with their hands on their hips, leaning forward in heated debate. Their oblique angle, full-body view turns us into passive observers who are unable to intervene, which strengthens the emotional appeal of the advertisement as we are forced to watch the argument unfold. 93 Their black shadows add a sense of danger and doom to the image, 94 while the large packet of margarine in the center acts as a visual representation of the boundary between them (i.e. the disagreement), but also a potential solution within reach. 95 The banner at the top of the advertisement in bold commands “DON’T QUARREL,” completed by the phrase at the bottom “about household expenditures,” before a solution is offered: “Buy Pellerin.” Like the previous advertisement, the purchase of margarine is equated with restoring balance to the family, therefore selling a promise far beyond that of the physical product.

The idea that buying margarine can have a broader impact on family wellbeing is also clearly outlined in an Agra advertisement, which states how margarine affects each family member in turn: “The housewife naturally has her distinct opinion in front of others and
knows why she uses Agra, the father, of course, knows why Agra appeals to his taste, the young bachelor has certainly also formed an opinion about Agra’s value, as has the young lady. Of course, boys and girls can also tell why they like Agra.” Through this paragraph, Agra points out that margarine makes the whole family happy. However, no reasons for this are actually outlined, nor are there any clear connections or ranking of priority between each phrase, which makes it challenging to interpret or find connections. Nonetheless, the sequence of family members and repetitive structure build credibility, formulating margarine as a sensible lifestyle choice, not just a necessity for those with little disposable income.

Commending Traditional Ways of Life and Regional/National Customs

Although appearing in lesser quantities than the other two categories (10 percent of the collected advertisements), another theme that can be found across advertisements is praise of traditional ways of life and regional/national customs. This is framed in the context of margarine by brands emphasizing how certain jobs require much strength and vigor, and that these qualities can only be provided by consuming margarine. Alternatively, they accentuate attitudes specific to certain regions in Sweden and outline these as the reason why margarine is so popular there. These arguments present margarine as something to be proud of because it provides the life blood of the workers of Sweden, which is essential to the proper functioning of the country. These nationalistic undertones serve to break the stigma around margarine, cleverly building trust among working-class consumers by publicly displaying appreciation for both their jobs and their beliefs and practices. In contrast to the previous advertisements, these types are squarely aimed at male consumers, serving to bring together discourses of masculinity, labor, and nationalism. In doing so, they seek to demonstrate that margarine is not just something for housewives to use in cooking or for high tea with friends; rather, it is something hardy that will give men the strength to carry out their day-to-day work more effectively.

A case in point is the advertisement for Zenith in Figure 6a, which shows a lumberjack taking a momentary pause from his work to sit down on a chopped log and eat a sandwich spread with margarine. He looks up at viewers with a coy smile on face, seemingly interrupted from his moment of peace. The style of image has strong similarities with early twentieth-century “real photo” postcards, whereby itinerant photographers took “romanticized” photos of working-class people who they considered to be the repository of a bygone societal ideal. The advertisement begins by stating that “A lumberjack is in need of nourishing and long-lasting food,” before explaining why: “in the deep forests of Norrland and elsewhere . . . it is important to stock up for a longer period of time.” It then presents Zenith margarine as, therefore, being “a necessary part of the equipment.” Describing margarine as “equipment” grants it higher status as an essential item. Its necessity is further emphasized by the image of an oversize packet of margarine on the lumberjack’s right and his trusty ax on the left, creating a visual symmetry with him as the connecting part in the center that links the two items together. By namechecking Norrland – the coldest and most sparsely populated area of Sweden – it singles out the hardiness of the region’s workers, framing them as the “last of their kind” and, thus, contributing to the “spectacle of the other.”

We see a similar strategy at work in the Tre Ess advertisement in Figure 6b. The advertisement is dominated by the large image of an elderly fisherman sitting on a wooden trunk and tying a net to a wooden frame. His head is bowed as he is engaged
in the action, making him an object of contemplation. Accompanying him is a small sketch of a boat and the headline “The sea is the field for people from Bohuslän.” Here, viewers are encouraged to make a connection between word and image, recognizing the fisherman as a representative of this province in the northernmost part of Sweden’s west coast and his age and profession giving him role model authority. The text block below continues to overtly praise the province of Bohuslän and its people:

It is the sea that has made Bohuslän one of the most densely populated landscapes in Sweden. It is the sea that has developed the tight line of diligent fishing villages and communities. It is from the sea that the people of Bohuslän have earned their living. But the sea has also brought up Bohuslän’s people. The whimsical sea, the whimsical fish have been a strange upbringer. This uncertainty, this unpredictability in the lives of the people from Bohuslän has made them thoughtful and careful. That is what people from Bohuslän are like — that is what housewives in Uddevalla and Lysekil … in Gräbbestad and Nössund … in the city and the countryside are like. Her foresight and consideration for the future is what has made Tre Ess so popular in Bohuslän.

Through this text, Tre Ess cleverly plays upon readers’ emotions, implying that the people of Bohuslän are smart and have the upper hand over other Swedish people because they know that fishing (essential to the national diet and economy) cannot be wholly relied upon and, thus, purchase margarine. This emphasis on regionalism develops non-existent rivalries between different groups with the aim of increasing product sales. Although no evidence is provided to support the claims about Bohuslän, they are made convincing by the use of a triadic structure (“it is the sea …”), value-laden language (“diligent,” “thoughtful,” “careful”), and direct praise of housewives across the province. The repetition of “sea” and the emphasis on its “whimsicality” and “unpredictability” frames it as omnipotent, with margarine thus put forward as the only way to regain control over one’s life. Other Tre Ess advertisements follow a comparable format, praising the “hardworking” people of Småland, Blekinge’s “strong traditions,” Sörmland’s “bright and happy outlook on life,” and the “intelligent and lively people” of Värmland, to name but a few.
Other advertisements instead emphasize the shrewdness of working-class people by showcasing how they use both butter and margarine to their advantage. The Zenith advertisement in Figure 6c, for example, shows the image of a groundskeeper on a country estate with the headline “A smart groundskeeper.” He carries a packet of margarine under his left arm and looks directly at the viewer, thereby immediately showcasing a link between cleverness and eating margarine. The text informs that smart groundskeepers “easily realize the benefit of selling their butter” and keeping “cheaper and just as tasty” margarine for themselves. Thus, similar to the Tre Ess advertisement, Zenith singles out groundskeepers as a unique group, suggesting that they have an advantage over others because they are able to “trick” the public into buying their butter, while keeping back margarine for themselves, which is supposedly better. In doing so, they achieve the broader goal of protecting the dairy industry (thereby appealing to the concerns of farmers), as well as protecting themselves from both a financial and health perspective.

Conclusion

From its inception in 1869, margarine was considered a working-class food, associated with poverty and inferiority. In the early twentieth century, capitalizing on the relatively lightweight legislation in place on the sale of margarine, Swedish brands set about to change public perception of the product, investing vast sums of money in extensive marketing campaigns to showcase it as suitable for the middle classes. However, wanting to retain as much market share as possible, they also continued to direct margarine advertisements at the working classes. Thus, a seemingly paradoxical situation emerged where the same brands, often in the same newspapers, published advertisements aimed at two distinct audiences. This class-based focus would remain the central theme of margarine advertisements until the Riksdag introduced strict regulations on false advertising in 1933.

For the middle classes, advertisements focused on promoting margarine as exclusive or luxurious through visual cues, such as truffle-shaped balls arranged in pyramids, pearls, crowns, and sunrays, as well as displays on dining room tables and department store windows. Accompanying language referred to perfection and nobility, associating margarine with superiority and tapping into ideas of “consumerist natural selection.” Other advertisements sought to challenge prejudices by depicting slice-of-life images of middle-class women having a fika of English sandwiches and tea or middle-class businessmen in fancy restaurants eating bread spread with margarine. Equally, others advocated learning from the working classes, with images of servants showing their mistresses the value of margarine for both cooking and eating. Across all themes, first-person testimonies were favored, with characters directly addressing the audience through consumer stories that served to build role model authority.

Working-class advertisements, on the other hand, emphasized respectability and the importance of keeping up appearances. They featured testimonies from shrewd housewives explaining how they tricked their families by replacing butter with margarine and encouraging readers to take up the same test; the success of the “trick” was often accentuated through pictures of blindfolded husbands, children, and guests unaware of what they were eating. Advertisements also stirred up intra-class conflict by outlining the existence of good or bad margarines on the market, thereby creating an internal hierarchy based on disposable income. Equally (and somewhat ironically), they also framed margarine as a middle-class product that granted access to a middle-class diet through the publication of recipes and advice from
“home consultants.” The value of being frugal and thrifty was also a central theme, with advertisements stressing how saving money could improve quality of life by reducing debts and, therefore, restoring family harmony. Advertisements also commended traditions and promoted regionalism, describing servants, fishermen, lumberjacks, and groundskeepers as “smart” for using margarine and emphasizing certain “regional” characteristics that pitted one set of people as superior to others.

Despite their contradictory nature, these two sets of advertisements (and themes) co-existed for some ten years and even appeared to have worked successfully, given that sales of margarine increased by 14.2 percent among the working classes and 7.3 percent among the middle classes during this time. Sales of butter, on the other hand, only experienced a growth of 1 percent between 1923 and 1933, suggesting that margarine largely attracted new groups of consumers rather than shifting previous butter consumers to the product. Through targeted marketing, margarine brands were, thus, able to develop two distinct customer bases framed around personal class-based concerns, creating an artificial demand for the product among the middle classes, while retaining (and even increasing) demand from the working classes.

After 1933, the number of margarine advertisements in newspapers dramatically decreased, with brands investing less money in marketing now that the market for their products was somewhat consolidated. Of the advertisements published in the succeeding twenty-year period, there was a growing focus on health and wellbeing, with margarine framed as a nutritious product for the whole family. Attention turned particularly to the presence of vitamins A and D and, later, to “good” and “bad” fats, cementing margarine’s reputation as a healthy alternative to butter. This marketing strategy and public perception have remained largely the same ever since. Thus, over its 120-year history, margarine has transformed from a cheap, inferior butter substitute to a superior product with distinct health benefits over butter, thereby demonstrating its ability as a “chameleon of manufactured food products.”

Given the health emphasis in margarine advertisements since the early 1930s, it is clear that the years 1923 to 1933 stand as a unique period in the history of margarine in Sweden, demonstrating how class-based marketing can be powerful in changing public perceptions of a product and, in this case, having an impact on increasing the number of margarine users in the country.

**Notes on contributor**

Lauren Alex O’Hagan is a researcher in the School of Humanities, Education and Social Science at Örebro University, Sweden, where she works on the “Selling Healthy Lifestyles with Science” project. She specialises in performances of social class and power mediation in the late 19th and early 20th century through visual and material artefacts, using a methodology that blends social semiotic analysis with archival research. She has published extensively on the sociocultural forms and functions of book inscriptions, food advertisements, postcards and writing implements.

**ORCID**

Lauren Alex O’Hagan [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5554-4492](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5554-4492)
Notes

2. Turner, “Margarine, Mystery and Modernity.”
5. Loxham, “Profiting from War.”
22. Martiin, “From Farmer to Dairy Farmer.”
24. Ibid.
27. Rybeck, “Arboga Margarinfabrik.”
29. Dupré, “If It’s Yellow, It Must Be Butter.” The only exception to this ban occurred during the First World War when there was a butter shortage.
32. Nordlund, *Upptäckten av Sverige*.
33. Martiin, “From Farmer to Dairy Farmer.”
34. Ibid. The “taking back system” encouraged consumers to purchase more butter in order to protect Sweden’s farmers and, in turn, the country’s economy.
35. Nordlund, *Upptäckten av Sverige*. Of the seven companies, four were Swedish; of the remaining three, Vandenberghs was Dutch, Pellerin was French, and Agra was Norwegian, although they had been operating in Sweden for many years before the Margarinfabrikernas Försäljning.
36. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Åström Rudberg, *Sound and Loyal Business*, 53.
43. Ledin and Machin, *Doing Visual Analysis*; Ledin and Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*. MCDA is a system of visual analysis that draws upon social semiotic theory. Social semiotics is concerned with the relationship between power, ideology, and discourse, and sees sign-making as a social process made up of semiotic resources (e.g. language, image, color, typography, texture/materiality, layout/composition). These semiotic resources are socially shaped over time to become meaning-making resources that articulate specific ideas and values that underpin how societies operate. They also have meaning potentials (i.e. communicative affordances or constraints), which are deeply embedded in existing socio-cultural norms and sociohistorical contexts.
47. Quote from *Svenska Dagbladet*, March 22, 1889. These perceptions remain strong today. The novel *Fattigfällan* by Charlotta von Zweigbergk (2016), for example, showcases the protagonist’s fall in poverty by the fact that she is forced to eat margarine, while *Brist* by Anna Schulze (2021) features the lines, “Mother would rather die than buy margarine. Margarine is for gipsies and people who live in barracks.”
49. Author, “Fleshformers or Fads?”
51. Holmbärg et al. ‘Adolescents’ Presentation of Food in Social Media,” 126.
52. Author, “Pure in Body, Pure in Mind.”
53. Author, “‘Foodstagramming’ in Early 20th-Century Postcards.”
55. Eriksson and Author, “Selling ‘Healthy’ Radium Products with Science.”
56. Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 55.
57. Author, “Fleshformers or Fads?”
58. Author, “Pure in Body, Pure in Mind . . .”
59. Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 143.
63. Barker, “Medical Advertising.”
64. Weinberg and Beate, *The World of Caffeine*, 93.
67. Author, “Fleshformers or Fads?”
70. van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 46.
73. Levene, “The Meanings of Margarine in England.”
74. Author, *The Sociocultural Functions*.
77. Author, “Blinded by Science?”
81. Ibid.
82. Author, “Blinded by Science?”
84. Kress and van Leeuwen, Reading Images, 124.
85. Goffman, Forms of Talk, 128.
86. van Leeuwen, Discourse and Practice, 46.
87. Apple, “Constructing Mothers.”
88. Author, “Fleshformers or Fads?”
89. Kress and van Leeuwen, Reading Images, 124.
90. Kress and van Leeuwen, “Colour as a Semiotic Mode.”
92. Ibid.
93. Ledin and Machin, Introduction to Multimodal Analysis, 82.
95. Ledin and Machin, Doing Visual Analysis, 182.
96. Ibid, 165.
97. Author, “Fleshformers or Fads?”
98. Madden, Being Ethnographic, 96.
100. Hall, Representation, 223.
102. Van Leeuwen, Discourse and Practice, 187.
103. Author, “Fleshformers or Fads?”
104. Kress and van Leeuwen, Reading Images, 122.
105. Loeb, Consuming Angels, 55.
107. Scrinis, Nutritionism.
108. For more data on margarine and butter consumers, as well as relative prices and consumption per capita, see Hellström, Jordbrukspolitik i Industriomhåll; the Statistisk Årsbok för Sverige 1914–2014 and Socialstyrelsen, Detaljpriser och Indexberäkning Åren 1913–1930.

Bibliography


Statistikmyndigheten, SCB. “Statistisk Årsbok För Sverige 1914–2014.” https://www.google.com/search?q=scb+sverige&oq=scb+sverige&aq=chrome.69i57j0i512j0i22i3013j69i60l3.2750j0j7&sourceld=chrome&ie=UTF-8.


