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From Fatigue Fighter to Heartburn Healer: The Evolving Marketing of a Functional Beverage in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
This paper historicizes our understanding of the contemporary functional beverage trend by focusing on the marketing practices of the biggest-selling “health drink” in early twentieth-century Sweden: Samarín. Drawing upon a large dataset of Samarín advertisements, it uses multimodal critical discourse analysis to track the evolution of Samarín over a 48-year period, from its launch in 1923 to the introduction of the Market Practices Act in 1971, which clamped down on false advertising. The analysis demonstrates how Samarín advertisements were continuously reshaped to capitalize upon new scientific/medical discoveries, societal changes, and public interests, tapping into evolving ideas on health and diet to remain popular with consumers. Through these constantly shifting discourses, Samarín became mythologized and framed as a “good” food choice, essential to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The findings reveal that many of these strategies are still used today, despite legislation in place that is supposed to protect consumers.

KEYWORDS
Functional beverages; advertisements; Samarín; Sweden; marketing; science; medicine

Introduction

Whether it is green tea, charcoal lattes, kefir shots, or smoothies, functional beverages have become the “new” one-size-fits-all buzzword in food marketing, used to claim that a beverage offers health benefits above and beyond a standard cup of coffee or glass of orange juice. The global functional beverages market is now estimated at $478.10 billion and is expected to expand to $700 billion by 2026 as anxious consumers buy into their promises of boosting natural energy, offering better-looking skin, and relieving indigestion (Infinium Global Research, 2020). However, functional beverages are not a modern phenomenon. In fact, they date back to the late nineteenth century – a time of growing public interest in science and nutrition, which was quickly capitalized upon by canny food manufacturers and marketers.

During this period, dozens of new brands emerged onto the market describing their drinks as essential for good health, while old brands remarketed their drinks as healthy options. By the early twentieth century, the term “health drink” had been introduced into advertisements, firmly establishing a new food trend. In many cases, there was no scientific or medical evidence to support health claims, but they sounded impressive to the fashion-conscious middle-class public, particularly when coupled with flashy images, bold typography, and bright colors (O’Hagan, 2021a). Thus, functional beverages stand not only as a powerful example of the long historical relationship between science and food marketing – much longer than often assumed – but also of the constant evolution of the science behind such products and how it can be used fraudulently or to overstate a product’s benefits.
With this in mind, the current paper sets out to historicize our understanding of the contemporary functional beverage trend by focusing on the marketing practices of the biggest-selling functional beverage in early twentieth-century Sweden: Samarin. Specifically, it uses a dataset of 500 advertisements held in the Svenska Dagbladet archive to track the evolution of Samarin over a 48-year period, from its launch in 1923 to the introduction of the Market Practices Act in 1971, which clamped down on false advertising. As these advertisements draw upon a combination of verbal and visual cues to make their claims, they will be approached through the theoretical framework of social semiotics and methodological toolkit of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), which is a method to reveal how semiotic resources are used to shape the representation of discourses and how we understand the world (Ledin & Machin, 2018, 2020). Through the analysis, I aim to demonstrate how Samarin was continuously remarked in accordance with changing trends and scientific/medical knowledge, starting as a magical elixir that cured fatigue, eased constipation, promoted youthfulness and weight loss, and relieved bad moods before later establishing itself as a natural heartburn remedy. In doing so, Samarin became mythologized and framed as a “good” food choice, essential to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Samarin, therefore, represents an important example of how references to science have long been used as marketing tools to shape discourses, beliefs, and behaviors around food and health.

To date, most academic research on functional beverages has been carried out from a present-day perspective only. Studies have explored the marketing of certain types of functional beverages, such as nootropic drinks, oat milk and vitamin water (e.g., Chen & Eriksson, 2021; Garcia & Proffitt, 2021; Roberson, 2005), as well as their health effects, consumption patterns (particularly amongst adolescents), and economic and political impacts (Finnegan, 2003; Gunja & Brown, 2012; Jacob et al., 2013; Miller, 2007; Sprackley, 2020), to name but a few examples. While some research has been conducted on specific brands of historical functional beverages, such as Virol, Sanatogen, and Wincarnis (e.g., Hands, 2018; O’Hagan, 2020, 2021b), it has an overwhelming Anglocentric focus (with the exceptions of Emery, 2017; Eriksson & O’Hagan, 2021; Hobart & Maroney, 2019; Pohl-Valero, 2020; Smith, 2008). Furthermore, these studies tend to explore the general ideas and controversies around functional beverages rather than focus on the way in which “science” is manipulated in advertisements for persuasive purposes. This lack of attention to scientific discourse is reflective of a more general dearth of literature on the historical link between science and food marketing. On the scant occasions that the use of science in advertisements is researched from a historical perspective, the focus is predominantly on patent medicines, vitamins and baby food (e.g., Apple, 1996, 2006; Curth, 2001; Hansen, 1999; Loeb, 2001), meaning that our understandings of how it has been historically employed in food marketing is limited (for exceptions, see, Nelson et al., 2020; O’Hagan, 2021a, 2021b).

Thus, investigating a bestselling early twentieth-century Swedish functional beverage has the potential to reveal new findings on how a seemingly contemporary buzzword, in fact, has a long history of being mobilized – both linguistically and semiotically – to associate a product with the promise of enhanced health. Establishing a greater appreciation of the historical marketing of functional beverages will reveal that many of the strategies employed decades ago are still used today, despite legislation in place that is supposed to protect consumers. The study will, therefore, highlight shortcomings in current directives on false advertising – particularly in a Swedish context – and encourage consumers to take a more critical stance toward their experiences of contemporary marketing practices, reflect on fuzzy references to science, and make informed choices about products that are framed as indispensable for their health (Smith & Phillips, 2002).

A brief history of functional beverages in Europe

Whether offering comfort, forming part of a ritual, being a source of indulgence, or contributing to social activities and festivities, drinking has always been about so much more than quenching one’s thirst (Burnett, 1999). At some point in history, most beverages have also been associated with health and promoted for their therapeutic benefits (e.g., beer in the Tudor era, coffee in the Georgian era). This relationship between drinking and health can be traced to the medieval period, when illnesses
caused by iron deficiency were treated with Chalybeate spring water (Licht, 1963). This idea was consolidated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the Ancient Roman practice of medicinal bathing was revived across Europe in such towns as Bath (UK), Spa (Belgium), and Baden Baden (Germany) and, on the advice of Enlightened physicians, visitors began to drink the medicinal water (Eddy, 2010). From this date onwards, drinking halls became an established feature of spas.

As spas increased in popularity in the early nineteenth century, manufacturers recognized a lucrative opportunity in “taking the spa experience home” and began attempting to replicate the salt mixtures found in naturally occurring mineral waters using off-the-shelf ingredients (Campbell, 1966). By blending carbonates and tartrates with citric acid, they came up with a new product – fruit salts – which was met with immediate success amongst the middle classes. Throughout the 1850s, a range of fruit salts emerged onto the European commercial market, the most popular being Eno’s Fruit Salts, produced by the British pharmacist James Crossley Eno (ibid). Keen to persuade – and reassure – consumers that this new drink was good for them, fruit salts brands invested in elaborate marketing campaigns, putting science at the center of their advertisements through the inclusion of technical descriptions, infographics, and testimonials from doctors and scientists.

The sudden boom in the use of scientific discourse in advertising was influenced by the huge growth of nutrition science in the 1850s. Although nutrition science has its origins in the late eighteenth century Chemical Revolution of France, it was in the 1850s that it expanded as a result of the emerging modern nation state and governmentality. Concerned about workers’ efficiency and health, states began to increasingly intervene into people’s diets. At the heart of this initiative were the beliefs that citizens had a duty to be fit in order to work, while the state was obliged to provide such conditions to do so (Kamminga & Cunningham, 1995). The importance of science to eat healthy became “sold” to the public through the popular press and public lectures, as well as the 1851 Great Exhibition, which fostered a new fascination with scientific innovation (Richards, 1991). Marketers, such as Eno’s, quickly picked up on this public interest and saw it as a lucrative opportunity to claim that their beverage could act in medicinal ways to bring health, wellness, and longevity. Introducing science into fruit salts advertisements was, thus, a shrewd strategy that created an artificial demand for this new product on the basis that trusting consumers thought that it would improve their lives (Church, 2000).

Over the course of the late nineteenth century, both well-established and new drinks brands took inspiration from the fruit salts trend, using advertisements to frame their beverages as scientifically-formulated options. The German “brain tonic” Sanatogen, for example, described itself as “a never-ending source of strength,” while the British tonic wine Wincarnis was branded as “a wholesome restorative for nervous debility” (Hands, 2018). Therefore, even if the buzzword “functional beverage” was not yet in existence, brands very clearly implied that their drinks were essential for good health.

As these beverages gained increasing recognition for their ability to target and enhance particular bodily functions and overall health, the term “health drink” began to feature prominently in newspapers. In Sweden, the first use of the term (hälsodryck) can be found in a 1902 article in the newspaper Svenska Dagbladet, reporting on the Karolinska Institute’s Nobel Prize medal. According to the article, the medal featured two young women – one looking weak and the other holding out a bowl containing a mystical “health drink,” encouraging her to indulge [8 September 1902]. After this initial usage, “health drink” then starts to be found with increasing frequency, appearing, for example, in 1907 newspaper articles about patent medicine (describing Chinese tea as a “health drink”) and a poem to mark the 200-year anniversary of Ramlösa Hälsobrunn (a mineral spa with Chalybeate spring water, a “health drink that cures sickness and wounds”) [13 May 1907, 21 July 1907]. The popular press also reported enthusiastically on the latest health drinks, including radioactive water, nerve tonics, and kefir sour milk [13 February 1910, 16 October 1910, 10 November 1911]. An article from 3 September 1911 in Svenska Dagbladet even contained a recipe for a mysterious “boisson de santé” (consisting of rice, lemon and licorice root) that offered “good protection against illnesses.”

1See Sanatogen advertisement: https://www.ebay.de/itm/283913279189
As momentum grew around the beneficial properties of certain beverages, “health drink” began to be adopted widely by brands to describe their products. Eno’s Fruit Salts – now of worldwide acclaim – was at the forefront of this process, rebranding itself in a 1919 British advertisement as a “sparkling and refreshing health drink” [6 December 1919, Gentlewoman]. This description was quickly translated and used in Eno’s advertisements across Europe, from Sweden and Germany to France and Spain, sparking a catalyst that led many other drinks brands – both old and new – to follow suit and use the term in their own advertisements to promote their products as healthy. By this period, regulations had been introduced that restricted patent medicines, meaning that these functional beverages were not addictive or dangerous as earlier tonics had been (many had contained arsenic, cocaine, and opium, amongst other ingredients). Instead, they were normal drinks turned into magical elixirs through clever marketing that tapped into the growth of nutrition as a science and psychosomatic medicine, as well as the increasing link in the public consciousness between good health and morality (O’Hagan, 2021a).

Over the next twenty years, countless new “health drinks” appeared on the Swedish market: Lithines (1921), Cloetta (1922), Samarin (1923), Sanitos (1925), Famos (1926), Moor (1927), Mandarin (1927), Ramlösa (1929), Postum (1930), Biomin (1937), and Kresto (1939). These ranged from classic fruit salts preparations, roasted grain coffee substitutes, and vanilla hot chocolate to carbonated water, fruity soft drinks, and vegetable juices. From this eclectic variety, we see how – just as today – there was no common definition of what a functional beverage was. Rather, it became used by brands to construct a halo of health around their products and create an “aura of precision” when it comes to the scientific knowledge underpinning the health claims that they put forward (Scrinis, 2013, p. 197). Of these functional beverages, the biggest and bestselling was Samarin – the focus of this paper.

Data and methodology
The current study seeks to situate the contemporary functional beverage trend within a more extensive lineage of practice by tracking the evolution of the marketing practices of Samarin from its launch in 1923 to the introduction of the Market Practices Act in 1971. Using a dataset of 500 historical advertisements, it explores how Samarin was continuously remarked over this forty-eight-year period as scientific understanding evolved, with marketers drawing upon a range of linguistic and semiotic resources to keep the product relevant to consumers and promote it as essential for good health. The collected advertisements were gathered from a manual search of the digital archive of Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet. Founded in 1884, Svenska Dagbladet is a Stockholm-based newspaper that covers national and international news, as well as local coverage of the Greater Stockholm region. It began as a right-wing publication, although it has promoted liberal-conservative ideas in terms of market economy since 1977.

Unlike most other Western nations, Sweden’s advertising market was controlled and influenced by a cartel agreement between the Association of Swedish Advertising Agencies and the Association of Swedish Newspaper Publishers until 1965 (Äström Rudberg, 2019, p. 53). Thus, in order to market a product, brands tended to employ an advertising agency. The agency was responsible for all contact with the newspapers and worked on a commission of roughly 15–20% per advertising space (Arnberg, 2019). This meant that they earned money every time an advertisement was published, which incentivized them to publish the same advertisement as many times as possible in different newspapers (Äström Rudberg, 2019, p. 53). Given this unique set-up by which there was little or no variation in advertisements across Swedish newspapers, it can be counterintuitive and unnecessarily time-consuming to use several newspaper archives when conducting research in historical marketing. For such reasons, only the archive of Svenska Dagbladet was explored in this study.

The advertisements are approached through multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), which is a systematic way of studying the co-deployment of language and other semiotic modes in texts (Ledin & Machin, 2018, 2020). It draws upon two important methodologies from the field of
sociolinguistics: multimodality and critical discourse analysis. Multimodality is concerned with how information is communicated both verbally and visually. Critical discourse analysis, on the other hand, addresses how certain practices, ideas, and values are transmitted through discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012). MCDA, therefore, provides a way to deconstruct linguistic and semiotic choices in texts and how they shape representations of events and persuade people to think about them in a particular way. Applied to this study, MCDA can help identify the strategies used by marketers to embed Samarin in scientific and medical discourses, therefore making it appear as effective for maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

My approach to MCDA draws particularly on the work of Ledin and Machin (2018, 2020) 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, particularly meaning potentials in terms of 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.

Crucial to MCDA is the concept of “modality,” understood as the truthfulness and reliability of a message (Machin & Mayr, 2012). When exploring Samarin advertisements, modality can be assessed through the presence or absence of modal verbs (e.g., may, will, must) and expressions (possible, probable, likely), the use of adverbial intensifiers (e.g., very, most, remarkably), the causality between graphic elements, the symbolization of specific shapes, and the general orientation of text and image. Modality is, thus, a way to find out how the validity of science is represented in Samarin advertisements and to what extent marketers appear as aligned to the promises they put forward.

Given the study’s aim of understanding how Samarin’s marketing strategies were shaped by shifting scientific and medical knowledge, the analysis is organized chronologically into five sections: 1923–1930, 1931–1936, 1937–1950, 1950–1959, and 1960–1971. While I recognize that standard approaches to MCDA tend to organize findings around themes, my decision to use years is guided by my own methodological perspective that blends MCDA with historical insights. Organizing the collected advertisements chronologically enabled five core themes to emerge holistically that clearly linked particular lexical and semiotic choices to a set period in time, reflective of the-understanding of science and medicine and sociocultural concerns.

In what follows, a selection of prototypical advertisements representative of the five years/themes will be analyzed. Their use of language and semiotics, as well as the arguments made, are reflective of the marketing strategies that frequently reoccur across the collected advertisements and are supported by supplementary evidence from the broader dataset.

**Samarin: “the key to health”**

Samarin was an effervescent fruit salt, made of sodium bicarbonate and calcium carbonate and produced by Cederoths Tekniska Fabriksbod in Stockholm. Its name was adapted from the Parable of the Good Samaritan, implying that the drink was helpful, trustworthy, and efficient. Although Samarin was officially born in 1923, the product, in fact, has a much longer history. Company founder Christian Cederoth had set up his own manufacturing company in 1895, its most popular product being the malt coffee St Bravo. However, in 1901, the company ran into financial difficulties and Cederoth was declared bankrupt, leading him to rethink his business strategy (Cederoth, 1985). Having come across a liquid iron product manufactured by the American company Pfeiffer & Co. Bros at a trade fair, he decided to import it from New York and, in 1902, he launched it in Sweden under the name “American Iron Extract Samarin” (Amerikanskt Järnextrakt Samarín). The product retailed for
SEK 2.8 and was advertised with the catchy slogan “Health and strength for all.” However, its high price tag meant that it attracted little consumer interest.

In 1907, Cederroth relaunched the product in a smaller bottle, adding a US flag (a sign of prestige) and selling it instead for 75 öre. Sales quickly increased and, just one year later, he opened a shop on Västerlånggatan in Stockholm, where American Iron Extract Samarin was traded alongside a range of other products from Cederroths Tekniska Fabriksbod, including soap, shoe polish, and ink (ibid). In a bid to keep up with demand for the iron extract, Cederroth relocated his factory from Gävle to Stockholm in 1909. Throughout the 1910s and early 1920s, the factory expanded its product lines to include perfume, beard balm, liniments, and disinfectants. Cederroth also began experimenting with a fruit salt compound. Building on the momentum generated by American Iron Extract Samarin, he decided to call this new product Samarin (ibid).

Samarin was released onto the Swedish market in 1923. Seeing potential in the product, Cederroth invested vast sums of money in advertising. In Samarin’s first year, daily advertisements featured in almost every newspaper and magazine in the country, while it quickly fostered associations with health and wellbeing by sponsoring Sweden’s first “all-star” hiking race in 1924. Advertisements described Samarin as a new “health drink” that was guaranteed to cure a range of health conditions. The reality was that it could only cure indigestion, its compounds having the ability to neutralize stomach acid. Nonetheless, the public quickly bought into Samarin’s promises and, by 1945, it became so popular that Cederroth made a bold decision: to drop all 163 other product lines and focus exclusively on Samarin (ibid).

Over the next forty-eight years, the marketing practices of Samarin were continuously adapted to remain relevant to Swedish consumers, responding to changing trends and scientific/medical knowledge. It was only after the 1971 Market Practice Acts, which clamped down on false advertising, that Samarin settled on indigestion as its primary focus. This focus has remained central to Samarin advertisements ever since. Today, Samarin is recognized not as a food, but as a natural health product regulated by the Swedish Medical Products Agency. It is currently Sweden’s most purchased herbal medicine.

1923-1930: fighting fatigue and nursing neurasthenia

Following the launch of Samarin in 1923, it very swiftly established itself as a tonic that helped stave off tiredness and mental exhaustion. It did so by tapping into two hot topics of the period in Sweden: the Physical Culture Movement (PCM) and neurasthenia as a functional mental disorder. For the next eight years, Samarin advertisements centered around these two themes, using a clever combination of words and images to promote the product as essential for those afflicted with such conditions. The reality was, however, that there was no scientific or medical evidence to suggest that Samarin had any fatigue-fighting abilities. Nonetheless, the brand was able to establish a name for itself very early on as a nutritious functional beverage.

The PCM emerged across Europe in the late nineteenth century and advocated eating well and keeping fit to combat the pressures of daily life in the modern world (Steinitz, 2017). Drawing on self-help ideology, it emphasized that a fit body was an “obligation of citizenship” and was essential for a country’s military prowess, economic success, and social harmony (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2006). Thus, by consuming “health foods,” consumers were able to showcase themselves as good citizens who led an active and healthy lifestyle – something that bears striking parallels with contemporary neoliberalist rhetoric. By the 1920s, the Swedish PCM was in full swing and sports had become a major pastime thanks to the country’s successful performance at the 1920 Summer Olympics, the creation of the Allsvenskan, Tre Kronor, and Vasaloppet, and the rise of internationally-renowned sports stars, such as boxer Harry Persson and swimmer Arne Borg (O’Hagan, 2022a). Samarin was

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2Allsvenskan is the Swedish men’s national football league; Tre Kronor is the Swedish men’s national ice hockey team; and Vasaloppet is an annual long distance cross-country ski race.
quick to capitalize upon this public interest, seeking out famous sports figures to endorse its product in exchange for free samples – much in the same way that influencers are used today.

As Schweitzer (2003) notes in her study of actress cosmetics testimonials, associating a product with a familiar face increased its appeal because consumers were more likely to trust someone they knew and respected than accept “the claims of a faceless corporate entity.” For its marketing campaign, Samarin recruited a wide repertoire of leading Swedish sports figures, from cyclist Henrik Morén and long-distance runner Gustaf Törnros to boxer Johnny Widd and weightlifter Erik Pettersson, to name but a few examples. All Samarin advertisements follow the same format: they have a professional photograph of the sports star at their top and a testimony in italics at the bottom, with a paragraph of “scientific” prose in between. A case in point is Figure 1a, which shows an image of the European wrestling champion Rudolf Svensson. He is dressed in a leotard that reveals his muscular body and

Figure 1. 1923–1930 fighting fatigue and nursing neurasthenia, (a) Endorsement by Rudolf Svensson, (b) Endorsement by Victoria Hockey Club, (c) “You look so tired and down,” (d) “Do you feel behind?,” (e) “10,080 minutes in a week,” (f) “Energy and strength.”
stands with his arms behind his back, looking straight at the camera in a rather intimidating manner. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 122) describe this type of image as an act of “demand” because it acts as a visual form of direct address that urges consumers to heed his words. The headline reads: “Look at those who use Samarín Fruit Salts and notice how fresh and vigorous they are.” Its close proximity to the image of Svensson encourages readers to make a link between the two, implying that to drink Samarín is to obtain a body like his (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 60). Svensson’s accompanying testimony states:

To keep myself in good health and condition, I have a few glasses of Samarín Fruit Salts a day. This drink is clearly beneficial, which, in addition, cleans the blood of dangerous elements and gives people a new willpower. For headaches and lethargy, Samarín Fruit Salts is a brilliant remedy. I think that this drink should be in every household. For me, it is a huge pleasure to endorse and recommend this drink to you.

At the time of publication in 1927, Svensson was at the height of popularity. Therefore, his words served several functions: they helped gain consumer trust in Samarín and offered proof of its quality, while also stimulating a desire in consumers to look like Svensson and show that this was attainable if they purchased Samarín. To further convince consumers of Samarín’s worth, the advertisement also contains a series of pseudoscientific descriptions, informing that the product is a “health water” that gives “an inner cleansing,” “refreshes the blood,” and “drives away uric acid” (which tapped into the “dangers” of uric acid, propagated by Dr Alexander Haig). These claims are simply not true, but their use of technical jargon and buzzwords, as well as their placement between the photo and testimony of Svensson, increase their authority (O’Hagan, 2021a).

We see similar claims in Figure 1b, which shows an image of the Victoria Hockey Club and a supposed letter thanking Samarín for giving them a sample, which was so “beneficial” and “refreshing” after a long trip. This advertisement was shrewdly placed next to an article announcing the team’s latest victory, therefore suggesting a cause and effect (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 186): drinking Samarín infused the hockey team with the energy to win. Across all these testimonials, one glass of Samarín per day is advocated to keep tiredness at bay. These instructions are reminiscent of those that come with prescriptions, implying that the product is medically approved (O’Hagan & Eriksson, 2022). This is further accentuated by the polysemy of the Swedish word medel, which can mean drug, remedy, or agent, and, therefore, creates an aura of trust (ibid).

In other Samarín advertisements, tiredness is not framed as a physical consequence of doing sports, but rather as a mental response to the stresses of modernity. In the late nineteenth century, American neurologist George Miller Beard popularized the term “neurasthenia” to describe a condition of nervous exhaustion that gave symptoms of fatigue, neuralgia, headaches, and depression. Beard saw neurasthenia as a “disorder of modernity caused by the fast pace of urban life” (Gijswijt-Hofstra, 2005, p. 1). For this reason, it became quickly associated with overworked middle-class men who led busy lifestyles and had active minds, thereby turning it into a “prestige disease” that was treated predominantly through health spas and home cures (Agnew, 2019, p. 93). This was in sharp contrast to the other diagnostic category of the period – “hysteria” – which was framed as a female affliction that was viewed far more derogatively and often treated in asylums (O’Hagan, 2020). In other words, suffering from neurasthenia was trendy and a mark of high intelligence. Although, by the 1920s, the language of nerves was starting to be replaced with terms like “neurosis” thanks to the growth of psychotherapy and the work of Sigmund Freud, “neurasthenia” was still commonly used in Sweden until at least the mid-1930s (Pietikainen, 2007). It is unsurprising, then, that Samarín took advantage of this in its advertisements.

In line with medical views on who suffered from neurasthenia, middle-class men are the key figures in Samarín advertisements of this period. Images frequently show them dressed in smart suits and sat in their offices or at home looking distressed. We see this clearly in Figure 1c, which shows a typical middle-class household: the man sits in his armchair reading a newspaper, his furrowed eyebrows, sullen expression, and hunched shoulders indicating his anguish, while his wife sits alongside knitting and casts her gaze toward him in concern, her mouth open as if to speak. The position of the headline
“You look so tired and down,” therefore, is interpreted as coming from her, furthered by the next line “are you not healthy?” asks the wife worriedly when the husband comes home from a day’s work tired and upset.” In the text, the wife goes on to advise her husband to buy Samarin because it will make his “feeling of tiredness and malaise disappear within the blink of an eye.” Here, the wife is positioned as the figure of authority, not to be doubted when it comes to the matter of her family’s health, even if the abilities of Samarin are clearly overstated (Apple, 2006). In other cases, it is a fellow businessman giving the tired man advice, often slipping a bottle of Samarin into his hands and telling him far more bluntly to “pull yourself together” and “do like me.”

Across these advertisements, there is a strong use of value-laden language, which serves to play upon the emotions of readers. They are told, for example, that Samarin is a “life elixir” that gives “spiritual vitality,” “nerves of steel,” “fresh cheeks,” and “clear eyes,” and takes away “woeful faces” and “tormented bodies.” These effects are also emphasized metaphorically at times, such as through images of a hunched man pushing a very large, heavy boulder up a hill Figure 1d, a mystical white figure floating down from the sky to offer a glass of Samarin Figure 1e, or a flowing river Figure 1f. In these images, the contrast between white and black is heavily played upon, indicating a struggle between the good of Samarin and the evil of neurasthenia (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002, p. 348), while headlines target consumers with rhetorical questions (“do you feel behind?”; “do you suffer from constant tiredness without knowing why?) that encourage them to read on in the hope of finding a solution. Another recurring claim is that the three important things to keep healthy are “air, sunshine and Samarin.” Here, in placing Samarin in juxtaposition with two legitimate and well-established ways to keep healthy, the product is given equal footing, thereby leading consumers to believe that it possesses the same health-restoring qualities (Ledin & Machin, 2020, p. 208).

1931–1936: the rise of science and gastrointestinal health

While Samarin had always implied that its product was scientifically formulated and able to cure specific ailments (i.e., fatigue), in the early 1930s, it started to introduce scientific and medical evidence explicitly into its advertisements to support these claims. It did so by drawing upon tried-and-tested methods from earlier uses of science in marketing, such as images of the latest technologies, testimonials by scientists and doctors, and the results of pharmacological tests (O’Hagan, 2021; Eriksson & O’Hagan, 2021). Another major change at this time was Samarin’s move away from a focus on fatigue toward gastrointestinal health instead. This decision was influenced by three major factors. First, gastroenterology was starting to become an established subbranch of medicine, with specific university programs and specialized hospital units opening up. This paved the way for increased research in the area, leading to the invention of the semi-flexible gastroscope, which advanced the examination, diagnosis, and treatment of gastrointestinal disorders (Kirsner, 2004). Secondly, the PCM had fallen out of favor with the vast majority of the Swedish public because of its increased association with Nazism; thus, Samarin was keen to distance itself from this far-right rhetoric and ideology (McDonald, 2007). Thirdly, neurosis had now firmly replaced neurasthenia as a diagnostic category. Unlike neurasthenia, which was seen as a somatic condition caused by modern-day life, neurosis was considered to be caused by behavioral, emotional, and psychological problems (O’Hagan, 2020). As public understanding of the term grew thanks to the popular press, claiming Samarin could cure such a disorder seemed too brazen. Its ability to ease gastrointestinal problems (particularly constipation), on the other hand, was far more plausible. Nonetheless, Samarin still found ways to overstate its claims.

A clear example of this is the introduction of X-Ray images in Samarin advertisements. Following the invention of the X-Ray machine in 1895, X-Rays very quickly became used as a fashionable marketing device, whether to show the presence of radioactivity in beauty products, the removal of body hair, or how lozenges acted on sore throats (O’Hagan, 2022b; Santos, 2020). X-Rays were a mark of scientific innovation and medical expertise. Thus, to include them in advertisements served as symbol of a product’s quality and excellence. Figure 2a shows an image of an elderly male dressed in
a white lab coat and intently studying an X-Ray. Already, his age, gender, and clothing imbue him with authority (ibid), while the choice to use a photograph rather than a drawing suggests truthfulness and reliability (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 160). The accompanying headline and caption state “Natural help for the body . . . X-Ray research confirms Samarin’s beneficial effects.” It is somewhat paradoxical to describe Samarin as “natural” when it has been manufactured in a laboratory and subjected to X-Ray testing (O’Hagan & Eriksson, 2022). But perhaps even more disconcerting is the fact that the X-Ray image is most likely a scam: the vertebrae and ribs are too large and misshapen, the colon is too high and shows calcification, the pelvis is absent, and the color contrasts are distorted to accentuate certain areas. However, to a lay person, the X-Ray looks authentic and, therefore, convincing.

Underneath the image is a long, technical explanatory text that outlines the role of the stomach and intestines, as well as what happens to them if they get blocked. While the basis of what Samarin says is correct, it overstretches the truth through sweeping statements (e.g., “bad tastes in the mouth, bad breath, dull skin, and decreased appetite are all caused by sluggish stomachs”) or fails to explain how the product acts (e.g., “Samarin frees you from digestive disturbances”). Furthermore, Samarin is able to channel expertise through the statement that X-Ray examinations were carried out by a “certified doctor,” without actually providing any specific details of who this doctor is. This vagueness makes it challenging to disprove (or indeed prove) that the person is real; however, most readers are likely to accept this “expert legitimization” (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 107) on the basis of perceived expertise without questioning the reasons behind it. A small box alongside the main text shines a spotlight on X-Rays, calling them “one of the most important medical discoveries of our time” and informing readers that not only is it now possible to follow foods down the intestinal tract, but that X-Rays show that Samarin “significantly accelerated” this process “in conformity with nature’s own course of action.” Unsuspecting consumers may believe that the X-Ray visually depicts this, but it, in fact, does not. Other persuasive features of the advertisement include the image of the Samarin bottle and fizzing glass, the claim that Samarin is a “refreshing and beneficial functional beverage with no dangerous consequences,” and the strapline “stomach-regulating, blood-cleansing, diuretic,” all of which evoke trust and are clearly steeped in the language of medicine (Eriksson & O’Hagan, 2021).

Other advertisements use drawings rather than photographs, yet still imply medical discourses. Examples include scientists in white jackets holding up test tubes, looking through microscopes or lecturing students, and even members of the public holding up X-Ray images – a sign of just how widespread and fashionable the technology was. Many of these advertisements describe the pharmacological research that has been conducted on Samarin by Yrjö Airila, a renowned Finnish physician (Figure 2b). Although there is no way of knowing whether Airila did carry out such research, the fact...
that pharmacology is typically associated with drugs and their effect on living systems frames Samarin as a medicine. This is accentuated by the way that the text is organized into three steps that describe how Samarin acts on the body. According to the steps (written in the first person, supposedly by Airila), Samarin dissolves quickly in a glass of water (1), increases the urine’s alkalinity after one hour with maximum effect after five hours (2), and increases uric acid excretion after regular use for one week (3). This ordering connotes a process of logic and science (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 165), even though the link between health salts and uric acid excretion is uncertain, as is the reason why it is necessary to get rid of such acid. Nonetheless, it capitalizes upon the public anxiety with excess uric acid, which was promoted widely in the popular press of the time and led the medical term to be more widely known than any other in the early twentieth century (Barnett, 1995).

Another expert to reoccur frequently in Samarin advertisements is Dr K.A. Fries, described as “our well-known sports doctor” (Figure 2c). The use of our is ambiguous, making it unclear whether the referent is Sweden or Samarin and, therefore, suggesting that Samarin has a whole team of scientific and medical experts behind it. In Fries’ testimony, he outlines the dangers of constipation and that no product on the market was satisfactory until he discovered Samarin, which he has now used “hundreds of times” and is convinced of its “safe effects.” Despite this hyperbole and the lack of information on what makes Samarin “safe,” his testimony sounds credible and is granted further authenticity by the inclusion of his signature at the bottom. In other advertisements, the testimony of Dr Fries is cleverly disguised as an informative article, written with a bold heading and heavily compressed font and placed alongside news articles. This structure makes textual and paratextual information fuse into one, meaning that it can easily be mistaken for factual content and, therefore, increasing the impact of the message (Thornton, 2009).

At times, scientific discourse in advertisements even taps into cultural nationalism and the growing eugenics movement popular in Sweden at the time. Samarin is described as a “Swedish functional beverage” that is specially adapted for the “meat-eating bodies” of Swedes, which are different to foreign bodies (Figure 2d). Accompanying images tend to show a typical Swedish man – a medelsvensson – smiling and holding up a glass of Samarin in a toast as if it were a glass of champagne. This gives the product a feeling of celebration and happiness that can be linked to broader societal feelings of cultural superiority and pride in being Swedish. Other advertisements instead focus on the idea that Samarin can offer a “spa cure at home” by treating the body to “an inner bath.” These bold claims open up the middle-class spa to everybody, thereby democratizing the experience and framing Samarin as a drink of the people.

1937-1950: appearance is everything!

As Sweden moved toward the end of the 1930s, it was marked by two major changes: the emergence of a modern youth culture, strongly influenced by jazz and Hollywood movies, and the growing power of the Social Democratic Party and the development of Folkhem (the Swedish welfare state). Although channeled in different ways, central to both changes was a “new bodily awareness” (Frykman, 1994) as citizens became conscious of the need to keep clean, look good, and be healthy, whether out of a desire to emulate stars or for the sake of the nation. Keen to remain popular, Samarin recognized both this growing public fascination with Hollywood and a sense of collective responsibility to stay fit and updated its advertisements accordingly, moving away from “unglamorous” scientific discourses toward a focus on personal appearance and farfetched promises tied up with youthfulness and beauty. These advertisements became aimed particularly at women, tapping into their vulnerabilities around aging and promoting the body as malleable and in need of constant improvement. However, they

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3In 1922, the State Institute of Racial Biology was founded in Uppsala. In the 1930s, a law was passed introduced compulsory sterilization of people who suffered from insanity, feeblemindedness, and other mental disorders.

4Similar rhetoric can be found in advertisements for radium-based products. See, Eriksson and O’Hagan (2021).
offered narrow aspirational body ideals with one route to achieve them: by purchasing Samarín (Jackson Lears, 2001).

A major focus of advertisements in this period is the supposed link between skin and the stomach. According to Samarín, stomach upsets have a “nasty effect on the skin,” which can be “particularly unpleasant for women.” With this bold (and unsupported) claim, Samarín immediately addresses female insecurities, suggesting the need to discipline and reshape their bodies in accordance with expected norms of beauty (O’Hagan, 2022a). Unsurprisingly, young female figures are the focal point of these advertisements, with images showing them inspecting their appearance in hand mirrors. Runefelt (2019) has found women looking into mirrors to be a recurring feature of early twentieth-century Swedish advertisements and has linked this to a new femininity that emphasized sexual attractiveness rather than maternity. Often, these women are depicted with short blonde hair, made-up eyes and lips, and fashionable clothing, thereby resembling Hollywood starlettes and suggesting that everyday Swedes can achieve such a look through the right consumption practices (in this case by purchasing Samarín). In Figure 3a – a prototypical example – the text underneath the image warns women that “dry skin, pimples and blemishes are just not beautifying . . .” It then offers a solution to this manufactured problem by stating that “Samarin is usually able to help” and does so in two ways: by being “alkalizing and mildly soothing.” Although there is no coherent link between these properties and obtaining clear skin, it works by presenting a clear set of beauty standards to women and suggesting that not to adhere to them is to go against their feminine nature (ibid). The deep social and emotional meanings attached to the female appearance are even more apparent in other Samarín advertisements, which claim that they will now be “sought after” by men because they are “so changed” after drinking Samarín.

Although Samarín particularly targets young women in its advertisements, attention is also directed toward elderly women, with specific importance given to “vigor.” Here, vigor is linked to “youthfulness,” or what might be considered today as “successful aging,” with elderly women advised to take Samarín to “keep their appearance healthy.” According to Kenalemang-Palm (2022), successful aging places a strong emphasis on individual choice. Here, aging is problematized as something to be managed continually, and this management extends from preserving the youthful appearance of the face to maintaining physical fitness of the body. Not to do is to be considered a “failure” (Loos & Ivan, 2018). We see this type of negative discourse in Figure 3b, for example, which shows a headshot of an average elderly woman alongside the headline “at full vigor” and the claim that she drinks a glass of

Figure 3. 1937–1950: appearance is everything!, (a) “Skin and the stomach,” (b) “At full vigor,” (c) “Mrs Svensson is never scared to weigh – now!,” (d) “Is the hammock your ‘summer fun’?.”
Samarin every morning, which helps her “maintain her youth and vigor.” No information is provided on how Samarin does this; nonetheless, readers are told that they should try this “pleasant health cure” because it helps the body “retain its resilience.” Thus, here, a sense of anxiety is created around not just growing old, but also looking old, thereby encouraging anybody who cares about keeping well to purchase Samarin.

In addition to youthfulness, Samarin also connects beauty with weight, suggesting that those who are slimmer are happier and more attractive. We see this in advertisements with bold headlines, such as “Watch out for obesity!” and “Don’t let it go on for too long!” the use of imperatives acting as warnings to take some form of action. Of course, this action is purchasing Samarin, which is a “counterweight” that “counteracts fat building.” As one might expect, women are the predominant focus of such advertisements, again capitalizing upon their beauty aspirations and eagerness to look like Hollywood actresses. A case in point is Figure 3c, which shows a very thin and elegant young woman standing on a set of scales beneath the headline “Mrs Svensson is never scared to weigh – now!” The fact that she is depicted walking her dog and using a public set of scales accentuates this message, equating thinness with new body confidence. The choice of name – Svensson – is also significant, being a synonym for the “average Swede” and, therefore, framing her as a “living model” (Schweitzer, 2003).

The accompanying text offers a consumer story, explaining that Mrs Svensson “had always worried about her weight before,” but now she weighs “just the right amount” because she has found “a simple and pleasant way to stave off obesity” by thinking more about her “inner person.” This reads like a tale of transformation, a miraculous makeover, even though no details are provided of what the “right amount” is nor of her “inner person.” Although there is some mention of Samarin working by removing surplus acid from the stomach and kidneys, it is unclear how this relates to weight loss. Thus, the narrative centers less on the health dangers of being fat and more on how being fat goes against traditional beauty standards. Similar messages can be found in other Samarin advertisements that instead show images of obese women looking into mirrors with the statement that “being fat is troublesome and obstructive.” These images tend to resemble caricatures, thereby poking fun at fatness and turning it into something humorous (Farrell, 2011).

Another major theme of Samarin advertisements in this period is summer holidays and the need to keep cool and fresh. This focus was strongly influenced by the introduction of the first Swedish Annual Leave Act in 1938, which granted all employees twelve days of paid leave per year (Larsson, 2020). The Social Democrats problematized leisure time, telling the public not to waste their holidays by being idle and encouraging them to partake in outdoor leisure activities (ibid). Samarin quickly saw this as an opportunity and started promoting similar messages in their advertisements. We see this in Figure 3d, which shows a man sleeping in a hammock, the heading underneath stating, “Is the hammock your ‘summer fun’?” This is then followed up with another rhetorical question: “Do you usually let this lovely time disappear as you just lie there and take it easy?” Both questions use personal pronouns and strong value-laden language to directly target consumers, framing rest as something bad (further accentuated by the quotation marks around “summer fun”). Then, Samarin is put forward as a “cure” that “creates energy” for the summer holidays and helps people “get more out of [their] free time.” Although it is unclear how Samarin is able to achieve this goal, the advertisement works by creating a dichotomy between “responsible” and “lazy” Swedes; in other words, those who “waste” their summer holidays and do not drink Samarin are going against norms of healthiness and the Swedish value of collective responsibility (O’Hagan, 2021a). Samarin also employs buzzwords in their advertisements to emphasize this point, warning consumers to stay “Samarin fresh” (Samarin-pigg) or drink Samarin to avoid “holiday sickness” (semesterkjukan) and best enjoy the summer. These buzzwords are often accompanied by images of smiling parents and children playing darts or tennis, swimming in the sea, or sunbathing on the beach. These images not only suggest that Samarin is essential to enjoy holidays, but also that it is key to a harmonious family life and, consequently, the safeguarding of Sweden’s future (O’Hagan, 2022b).

Similarly, in other advertisements, Samarin claims that it can cool people down who suffer in the summer heat, therefore enabling them to enjoy outdoors activities. No information is provided on
how Samarin achieves this, but the accompanying images are persuasive in their depictions of men and women looking distressed and wiping their faces with towels, hiding under umbrellas, or sitting in cold baths. The intensity of the heat is highlighted by colored shading on faces, clouds of smoke, and unbuttoned ties, as well as wobbly typefaces with “sweat” dripping off (Ledin & Machin, 2020, p. 125). Headings ask, “Do you long for the North Pole?” or proclaim, “It’s so hot!” and are frequently supported by the supposed testimony of Jack Gellar, an editor who visited Africa and “survived the deadly heat” by drinking Samarin. In one case, Samarin even tells the story of Mr Lund, who “just the other day” treated 50 people in the square of Skråköping to a glass of Samarin. While there is no way of testing the veracity of this story, it is attention-grabbing and offers a potential solution for Swedes who are unaccustomed to heat and looking for ways to stay active in the summer.

1950-1959: the food-mood-body connection

The 1950s began with a new discovery in the world of scientific research that had a major effect on the marketing practices of Samarin. American psychologist Dr John Watson conducted research into the pH of a person’s blood and discovered a link between mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, paranoia, and schizophrenia, and a pH imbalance. This led him to theorize that a proper diet was essential in bringing pH levels back to normal and, therefore, removing symptoms (Null, 2000). Although since proven to be false, Watson’s theory was revolutionary at the time. Consequently, the food-mood-body connection was swiftly adopted by Samarin (albeit overstretched) and dominated its advertisements for the entire decade.

The headlines of early advertisements ask, “Do you have the right pH?” – something that the average Swede was unlikely to know or understand? – or claim, “People perform better with the right pH.” These high-modality statements leave little room for lay readers to negotiate their opinion, thereby leading them to believe that pH is a major factor in personal wellbeing (O’Hagan, 2021a). The fact that these advertisements were launched under a series entitled “Science for Everyday Use” and make heavy use of text as opposed to images further strengthens their credibility, turning them into explainer articles. Consumers are told that the body and mind can only function correctly with a constant pH, described here in simple terms as “degree of acidity” (surhetsgraden). The text also succinctly explains the pH scale (“if a liquid is acid, it has a low pH and if it is alkaline, it has a high pH”) and puts forward Samarin as “a way of balancing pH.” While this claim sounds impressive, no details are provided as to how Samarin actually does this.

As the decade progressed, advertisements began to make greater use of images to emphasize the connection between pH and mood. The “You feel like your pH” series, for example, features sketches of men and women singing happily alongside the claim that “many people are unnecessarily sour and grumpy because their pH is too low.” Consumers are, thus, encouraged to “take control” over their pH and “improve [their] mood” by trying Samarin. Again, no explanation is given on how Samarin functions, thereby framing it as a mysterious elixir to which consumers can attach special or even magical meaning (Eriksson & O’Hagan, 2021). Somewhat curiously, “a pH advertisement” is written in small print underneath such images, almost suggesting that they are advertisements for pH rather than for Samarin and, thereby, emphasizing the growing public fascination with pH levels at this time. Equally, other advertisements show photographs of smiling men and women looking directly at viewers and claiming, “I have pH-insured myself” (see, Figure 4a). By drawing upon the language of insurance, the advertisements remove pH from the realm of elite science and make it more accessible to consumers. In doing so, they allow interpretative flexibility, enabling consumers to develop their own understanding of Samarin and see it as something that is guaranteed to provide protection against a possible eventuality (in this case, bad mood). Samarin is also described as a “mood-turning pH pick-me-up,” another clever buzzword that serves to present the product as stimulating and curative, therefore generating consumer interest without fully understanding its properties or benefits (Vincent, 2014).
Conversely, other Samarin advertisements show images of grumpy men and women, accompanied by headlines that warn of foods that are “pH dangerous” and put people in a bad mood.” A case in point is Figure 4b, which features a close-up image of a man, his knitted brows and stern expression indicating anger (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 130). Above him is the headline “Bad mood? Can be due to imbalanced pH,” as well as a small section explaining what pH is and why readers should be worried about it. Samarin simplifies the explanation by drawing on an everyday example that most readers would understand: “plants that require alkaline environments die if the earth becomes too acidic. This can be prevented by whitewashing the earth. People also need ‘to be whitewashed’ sometimes […] And a glass of Samarin is the savior, quickly restoring the right pH.” This explanation breaks down complex science into an easy-to-read format, convincingly demonstrating why Samarin is necessary for personal wellbeing. Next to the man’s face is the heading “pay attention to the stomach’s warning signs,” its bold typeface and use of the imperative having a scaremongering effect. The accompanying text explains how the food we eat can cause stomach problems (which is, of course, true), but links these stomach problems directly to bad mood (which is more dubitable). Samarin is then presented as an “old proven corrective remedy,” its safety and reliability emphasized by the image.

Figure 4. 1950–1959: the food-mood-body connection, (a) “I have pH insured myself,” (b) Bad mood? Can be due to imbalanced pH”, (c) Uncle Erik’s anger.
of two scientists looking into microscopes who, according to the caption, control raw materials, manufacture, and finished products daily at Samarin’s factory.

Another recurring feature of Samarin advertisements in this period is the use of humorous vignettes with such titles as “Sour Sonia” and “The Accountant’s Surplus” that showcase the transformational effect that Samarin has on a person’s mood. One such example – ”Uncle Erik’s Anger” – can be seen in Figure 4c, which is split into four parts that tell a story. In the first part, Uncle Erik is depicted walking in the street, the passersby ignoring him or staring at him over their shoulders. The caption states that he is often in “such a bad mood” that “people refuse to talk to him.” We see examples of this bad mood in part two, where he “is irritated at the dinner table” even though his wife Eva “cooks such good food” (“brown beans with meat make him even more grumpy”), before part three offers an explanation for this: the stomach’s pH becomes unbalanced when too much acid-building food is eaten, which makes people “easily touchy.” Finally, in part four, Uncle Erik is happy again because he has discovered Samarin, which neutralized his stomach acid and “brought back his good mood.” By simplifying dense information and injecting a jocular touch, this vignette makes science more accessible to consumers and effectively persuades them that the right pH is crucial to mood (O’Hagan, 2021a).

1960-1971: The dangers of overindulgence

While the stomach had always been the underlying focus of Samarin advertisements from the product’s initial launch in 1923, it was in the 1960s that it started to evolve into the primary focus. Furthermore, for the first time, the claims made by Samarin became more scientifically accurate and less reliant on false promises related to lifestyle aspirations or pseudoscientific knowledge. This shift occurred due to various reasons. First, there was a major development in the field of gastroenterology in 1958, when American scientists L.M. Bernstein and L.A. Baker successfully distinguished chest pain due to esophagitis from cardiac pain. They called this “new” condition gastroesophageal reflux disease, defining it as a digestive disorder where stomach acid leaks into the esophagus and that is particularly aggravated by overeating (Rameau & Mudry, 2020). Second, there was mounting criticism on false advertising in Sweden amongst politicians, consumer activists, and public intellectuals (Funke, 2015). While Sweden had introduced regulations for the advertising of pharmaceutical products and pesticides (in 1941 and 1948, respectively), unlike other European nations, there was no legislation in place to regulate food. Throughout the 1960s, several proposals were put forward to clamp down on the false advertising of such products. Despite being rebutted by the Advertising Federation, they had growing public support (ibid) – something of which Samarin was likely aware. Now an established brand with forty years’ experience on the market, Samarin no longer needed to advertise so extensively. Therefore, aware of changing medical knowledge and public opinion, it started to produce advertisements only at certain times of year associated with overindulgence, now framing its drink as something only to be consumed when feeling heartburn or indigestion rather than every day. These arguments remain central to Samarin’s advertisements more than sixty years later.

As one might expect, Samarin significantly increased its marketing campaigns during Christmas and the New Year – a classic period of overindulgence. The weeks preceding August’s traditional crayfish festival (kräftskiva) also saw a notable growth in Samarin advertisements, as did the summer months in general when people went on holiday. A typical example of this can be seen in Figure 5a, which shows a smiling man raising a glass of Samarin. His eyes are directed away from the viewer, encouraging us to contemplate him and make a connection between his happiness and the drink in his hand (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 57). The question “Crayfish party yesterday?” is written above, while the statement below reads, “Party mood today thanks to the right pH!” implying that Samarin has successfully helped him stave off indigestion. Here, although pH is still a major feature of advertisements, it is now linked more clearly with stomach health rather than presented as a miraculous mood-improving element. This is apparent in the accompanying text, which states that “crayfish are so good that you can’t help but overindulge,” before explaining that this disrupts the stomach’s pH and causes heartburn and then
offering Samarín as a cure to restore balance to the stomach. Thus, it is the stomach pain itself causing the bad mood rather than simply a pH imbalance, as posited throughout the 1950s. Also of note is the fact that no longer are definitions and explanations about pH provided – a clear sign that it was now widely understood by the Swedish public. The advertisement also introduces the new sachet format of Samarín, which further accentuates its changing role as a product to be used on-the-go when at parties or celebrations. Throughout the decade, this same advertisement occurs, with only minor adjustments to its title to reflect a particular occasion (“Christmas party yesterday?” “30th birthday party yesterday?” “New Year’s party yesterday?”), thereby indicating that Samarín was less invested in marketing now that it was a well-established brand.

Other advertisements show familiar “slice-of-life” scenes from the family home, which serve to show potential consumers how well Samarín fits into the needs of each family member (Nelson et al., 2020). In Figure 5b, for example, we see the photograph of a man dishing out meatballs onto his plate. He looks up toward his wife and asks “Do you think my stomach can handle seconds . . .” to which she replies “I think your stomach needs a glass of Samarín . . .” Their gazes are directed toward one another, therefore turning them into objects of contemplation and encouraging viewers to make a connection with them. In this case, the advertisement suggests that it is possible to keep indulging in nice foods and remain well thanks to Samarín. As another clear sign of Samarín’s decreasing interest in the content of advertisements, the text itself is exactly the same as in the previous advertisements for Christmas, crayfish parties, etc. Even in advertisements that focus on the day after a big weekend and feature smiling figures stating how they “feel great thanks to Samarín,” the accompanying text remains unchanged.

One final feature of advertisements during this period is caricatures of overindulgence. These are represented in a variety of ways, from a 100 kg weight on top of the head and a large sausage to a pig-faced man and a flock of geese (a common Christmas food). However, the most common caricature
can be seen in Figure 5c and depicts a balloon-shaped man, supporting his swollen tummy with his hands. The shape of his body symbolically connotes bloating, excess, and gluttony (Ledín & Machin, 2018, p. 212), while the black X over his belly button marks the specific spot from whence the pain is emanating. The headline “Imbalanced pH from all that good but fatty food” also features a black X, its repetition, color, and symbolism emphasizing the notion of wrongness and imbalance (ibid, 105). As above, the accompanying text draws attention to “coming out of your usual daily routine,” which causes “heartburn, acid reflux, and other stomach troubles,” and offers Samarin as a “mild but effective” solution.

**Beyond the 1971 Marketing Practices Act: what can we learn**

Functional beverages are often seen as a product of the modern age, having emerged in the 1990s and marketed as actively improving one’s health or reducing one’s risk of certain illness. According to Scrinis (2013), it is through such products as functional beverages that food companies have now become the primary disseminators of simplified and reductive understandings of food and nutrients, which are embraced and internalized by “nutricentric” consumers. However, this paper demonstrates that such practices and attitudes were already commonplace over one hundred years ago. When Samarin appeared on the market in 1923, it immediately framed itself as a “health drink.” Until the implementation of the 1971 Marketing Practices Act, it continuously shifted the exact medicinal benefits that the beverage could offer in response to evolving ideas on health and diet, new scientific and medical discoveries, societal changes, and public interests, thereby demonstrating the fickleness of marketing messages.

Sprackley (2020) notes how functional beverages exist somewhere between food and medicine, this liminality creating “spaces of confusion” for consumers upon which marketers capitalize. Through a focus on the link between beverages and the body, brands create a general sense of anxiety about what to consume and even create new needs as consumers get caught on a “nutrient treadmill” (Scrinis, 2013, p. 43), believing that certain products will transform their lives. Samarin is a prime example of this, its advertisements not just telling consumers about its benefits, but also connoting that its consumption is part of a “good” and healthy way of living. While there was an element of scientific basis to some of Samarin’s claims (e.g., neutralizing stomach acid, relieving heartburn), many made farfetched promises that they could not deliver (e.g., losing weight, improving mood). Nonetheless, by incorporating itself into a daily consumerist lifestyle, Samarin was able to become the bestselling beverage in Sweden.

Since the 1971 Marketing Practices Act, the Swedish government has regularly introduced new legislation in response to changes in modes of advertising and evolving knowledge on the link between food, science, and health. Currently, the Marketing Law (Riksdagen, 2008) (Marknadsföringslagen) governs false advertising in Sweden and aims to “promote the interests of consumers and businesses in connection with the marketing of products and to counter marketing that is unfair to consumers and businesses.” This Law is based on a European Union (EU) directive adopted in 2005 on unfair business practices (2005/29/EC). Sweden also follows EU directives 2006/114/EC, 1169/2011, and 1249/2006 on misleading advertisements, the provision of food information to consumers, and nutrition and health claims made on foods, respectively. Under these directives, health claims on (functional) foods must be scientifically substantiated, clear, and accurate in order to help consumers make informed decisions.

A major flaw of these directives, however, is their overt focus on the use of written language and the need for evidence-based factual claims in advertisements, thereby neglecting how other semiotic resources, such as choices of image, color, font, and texture, can all be used to imply what cannot be overtly claimed in the text. Layout and composition are also overlooked in such directives, meaning that healthiness can be subtly conveyed through such techniques as salience, framing, and visual hierarchies. Even brand names and logos are discounted from such directives, leading to potential for devious messages around certain food products and their supposed health benefits (see, Chen &
Eriksson, 2019, 2021 who explore these issues within the context of protein-enhanced foods and nootropic drink packaging). These shortcomings highlight how many of the strategies historically adopted by Samarin and outlined in this paper are, in fact, still being carried out today, continuing to put consumers at risk of misinformation. Although the EU decided in late 2022 to resolve some of the issues in its directives, the proposed changes are linked to the setting of “nutrient profiles” to restrict health claims around foods high in saturated fat, sugar, or salt, as well as health claims around “botanicals,” particularly in reference to food supplements (Collins, 2022). This predominant focus on language continues to leave the door open for consumers to be exploited by the power of semiotics. The findings of this study, therefore, suggest the need for policymakers to engage more with historical insights in order to develop regulations that reconstruct the roots of contemporary problems and learn from the mistakes of the past.

Another major issue today is the impact of social media in transmitting potentially false messages around the health benefits of certain food products. In this largely unregulated context, anybody can upload a post with misinformation, using many of the same strategies that Samarin used: doctored images, fearmongering, exaggerated statistics, buzzwords, misquotes, sweeping statements. The key difference now, however, is that these posts have the potential to go viral and reach large global audiences – often with negative or dangerous consequences, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown (cf., Ferrara et al., 2020). While the EU will shortly introduce a Digital Services Act to protect children from being targeted by advertisements, this does not account for more informal ways of obtaining misinformation, such as through Vloggers or “Instafamous” figures. Just as Samarin employed celebrities in their advertisements to build credibility, these influencers frame themselves as experts and are deemed by their followers to be reliable and authentic information sources, which gives them the ability to shape the beliefs and influence the purchase decisions of large audiences. In addition, like Samarin, these health messages are often framed around aspirational body image and appearance, particularly in terms of weight and youthfulness, meaning that women are disproportionately susceptible (cf., Wu et al., 2022). These similarities between past and present forms and functions of misinformation, despite being transmitted through different media platforms, highlight that current regulations on internet safety are inadequate and that the spread of misinformation online remains one of the biggest challenges facing the modern world. This is a particular concern within the context of food and health, as exemplified by the number of “pro-ana” and “thinspiration” Instagram accounts that promote eating disorders and extreme dieting (cf., Ging & Garvey,).

In November 2021, a study by the consumer watchdog Which revealed that most contemporary functional beverages offer no benefits above what can be obtained from a healthy, varied diet, despite often costing a considerable amount of money. Furthermore, some are even potentially dangerous when mixed with certain medications (e.g., charcoal lattes) or unhealthy, given their high sugar content (e.g., juice shots, kombucha). However, just as with the kale trend of 2014–2015, their widespread promotion on social media has led them to be held up as cure-all elixirs. By tracing the historical origins of these contemporary trends, such as with Samarin, we can disentangle their complex messages and the ways they have been colonized by figures of authority (whether marketers, influencers, supermarkets) for their own commercial or self-promotional purposes. In doing so, this historical framing offers us distance from our current experiences of marketing, thereby facilitating more critical assessments of the contemporary health claims to which we are exposed and empowering us to recognize that, like Samarin, some products may be promising far more than they are capable of delivering. Such transhistorical approaches have already been used to explore protein (O’Hagan, 2021a), cod liver oil (O’Hagan & Eriksson, 2022), and chlorophyll (O’Hagan, 2022b), but they offer much potential for the study of other popular food trends, such as charcoal-infused beverages, fermented foods and plant-based foods. More studies of this nature are invited because they remind us just how susceptible all of us can be to advertising untruths, particularly when they are made to resonate with specific anxieties and desires, and encourage us to become more critical and conscious consumers.
**Disclosure statement**

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**References**


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