

# Modernity, beauty and the Swedish “way of life”: lifestyle marketing in Stomatol toothpaste advertisements, 1910–1940

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to challenge the assumption that brands of everyday products have only used lifestyle marketing in the past 30 years by conducting the first case study of the marketing practices of the Swedish toothpaste brand Stomatol (1910–1940). Through visual social semiotic analysis, it explores how the brand was a pioneer in lifestyle marketing, using discourses of modernity, beauty and the Swedish “way of life” to sell its toothpaste.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Two hundred Stomatol advertisements were collected from the Swedish Historical Newspaper Archive and analysed using visual social semiotics. The analysis considers how the idea of a cultural Swedishness centred around modernity and beauty developed between 1910 and 1940, and how both linguistic and semiotic resources were used to make these claims seem credible.

**Findings** – At a time when its main adversaries were capitalising upon science in their advertisements to construct authority and credibility, Stomatol instead targeted lifestyle. Modernity, beauty and the Swedish “way of life” were central themes of their marketing campaigns, yet the way these themes were articulated varied between 1910 and 1940 in accordance with changing popular discourse. This made Stomatol more competitive than other toothpaste brands because it was able to sell an experience rather than a product, turning it into Sweden’s most popular toothpaste.

**Originality/value** – This paper demonstrates the importance of case studies to challenge the assumption that toothpaste brands have only used lifestyle marketing in the past 30 years (a claim based on Anglocentrism). It also showcases the need to further investigate non-Anglo countries when conducting research into lifestyle marketing to build a more nuanced perspective on its origins and the supposed novelty of (largely) US practices. Thus, Stomatol makes an important case for Sweden as a trailblazer in lifestyle marketing.

**Keywords** Sweden, Advertisements, Modernity, Beauty, Lifestyle marketing, Toothpaste

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Lifestyle marketing – an approach where a brand associates itself with the values, interests and desires of a specific target audience – is often framed as a postmodern phenomenon that emerged in response to transformations in consumer culture, cultural identities and the growing aestheticisation of our everyday lives (Saviolo and Marazza, 2013). For many



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scholars, a “big bang” moment occurred in the 1980s when consumers began to display their individuality through products and goods, thereby turning lifestyle into a “life project” (Featherstone, 1987; Chaney, 2001; Warde, 2002; Bocoock, 2003; Trentmann, 2004). This was considered to mark a radical break with the mass consumption practices of the 1950s. However, this preoccupation with the novelty of lifestyle marketing has tended to obscure its broader historical trajectory and overlooked the fact that this practice actually emerged in the late 19th century in response to rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, which led to the formation of a new middle class and the birth of modern advertising and consumerism (Richards, 1990; Mort, 2000; Bell and Hollows, 2006).

In recent years, both historians and media and communication scholars have attempted to reappraise the concept of lifestyle marketing by placing the phenomenon within a broader history of patterned practices and uses. Studies have been conducted on the use of the lifestyle marketing to sell everything from chocolate (French, 2017), protein-enhanced foods (O’Hagan, 2021) and newspapers (Piggott, 2021) to pianos (Carnevali and Newton, 2013), dip pens (O’Hagan, 2018) and cosmetics (Schweitzer, 2004), to name but a few examples. Obtaining a greater appreciation of the historical development of lifestyle marketing is important because it challenges the assumption that brands of everyday products have only used lifestyle marketing in the past 30 years (Michman *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, it enhances our understanding of modern approaches to marketing and the potential problems surrounding it, as well as offering consumers a space to reflect more critically on lifestyle claims put forward today in ways that they may struggle to do so when being too temporarily close to them. To date, however, the vast majority of historical studies into lifestyle marketing (such as those cited above) have focused on a British or US context, thereby providing a one-dimensional and Anglocentric understanding of the topic that risks overstating the novelty of certain practices.

To redress this imbalance in our knowledge of how lifestyle marketing has been used historically, the current paper conducts a case study of Stomatol – the best-selling brand of toothpaste in early 20th century Sweden – using a data set of 200 advertisements from 1910 to 1940, collected from the Swedish Historical Newspaper Archive. 1910 to 1940 have been chosen as the years under study because they cover the period when Stomatol significantly ramped up its marketing campaigns (before decreasing following the outbreak of Second World War) and when cultural nationalism gradually became consolidated in Swedish society following the Social Democrats’ 1932 election victory. The study focuses on historical Swedish toothpaste advertisements because toothpaste marketing is frequently described as having only turned to “lifestyle, cultural trends and consumer attitudes” in the past three decades (Michman *et al.*, 2003, p. 1) – a bold assumption based largely on studies of the USA, the UK and Australian toothpaste marketing practices (Miskell, 2004; Segrave, 2010; Basch *et al.*, 2013). Attention to European contexts, thus, has the potential to reveal that lifestyle marketing was used much earlier in toothpaste advertisements than commonly assumed (Torell, 2005; Jones and Lubinski, 2012; Reckendrees, 2018).

Given their combination of visual and verbal modes, the advertisements are approached through the theoretical framework and methodological toolkit of visual social semiotics – a way of uncovering how social meaning-making practices are created and conveyed in texts (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Ledin and Machin, 2018, 2020). The analysis reveals how, at a time when its main adversaries in Sweden were largely capitalising upon science in their advertisements to construct authority and credibility (Torell, 2005; Lundmark, 2020), Stomatol instead targeted lifestyle, using discourses of modernity, beauty and the Swedish “way of life” to sell its toothpaste. These three themes emerged as historically situated layers that built on top of each other over the 30-year period under study, constantly shifting in accordance with sociocultural trends and norms to develop the idea of a cultural Swedishness centred around

modernity and beauty. Overall, I argue that not only was Stomatol an early pioneer in lifestyle marketing, but that this marketing practice made it more competitive than other toothpaste brands because it was able to balance the buzz around modernity in Sweden with the maintenance of traditional Swedish values to convince women that their bodies could be disciplined and reshaped through their toothpaste.

The findings of this study will serve as an important reference point for those researching historical and contemporary examples of lifestyle marketing, demonstrating that the ways in which linguistic and semiotic resources can be mobilised to associate a product with the promise of an enhanced lifestyle have much deeper historical origins than commonly thought. Additionally, they will demonstrate how, through a greater appreciation of non-Anglo contexts, case studies can help foster a reappraisal on the purported novelty of (largely) US advertising practices and offer a more nuanced interpretation of the history of marketing. Finally, they will show how visual social semiotic analysis is a useful methodology for historians because it places advertisements in a broader societal context, uncovers how they are shaped by and shape discourses that circulate in a society at a given time and fosters a critical reflection on how semiotic resources can be exploited to construct certain discourses of truth (O'Hagan, 2021).

### **The commercialisation and marketing of toothpaste: its origins and development in Sweden**

Forms of toothpaste have existed since as early as 5000 BC when the Ancient Egyptians created a powder of oxen hooves, crushed eggshells, pumice and myrrh to clean their teeth (Lippert, 2013). However, it was not until the early 19th century that toothpaste, as we understand it today, was developed by doctors and chemists experimenting with sodium bicarbonate, glycerine, chalk, soap and betel nut (Segrave, 2010). The first mass-produced toothpaste was launched by the US brand Colgate in 1873, sold in glass jars into which entire families dipped their damp toothbrushes, but it was met with limited success due to consumer concerns over the unhygienic practice of sharing one pot (Segrave, 2010, p. 10). It was in 1887 that the world's first tube of toothpaste – Kalodont – was produced by the Viennese company F.A. Sarg. This was followed five years later by Florisol and then Pebecco, products of the German company Beiersdorf (Sandgruber, 2013 cited in Reckendrees, 2018). These inventions predate the so-called “watershed moment” in 1892 when US dental surgeon Dr Washington Sheffield “invented” the collapsible tube.

From this date onwards, multiple toothpaste brands emerged onto the market and invested vast amounts of money into advertising to distinguish their tubes from their competitors. Up until then, most people had relied on homemade preparations to brush their teeth (Segrave, 2010). They, thus, had to be convinced of the necessity of commercial toothpaste. Such was the novelty of toothpaste in a tube that articles in Swedish newspapers stated that “everybody is talking about tubes” [*SvD*, 8 December 1922], while advertisements came with annotations, informing readers of the neologism *kvarsittaren* to describe the tube's flip cap (“it's the Swedish people's own name for the lid that can never fall off”) [12 September 1923]. Over the next 50 years, through powerful marketing, the advertising industry successfully built a consumer market around a product for which there was actually little need, thereby fostering a modern era of oral hygiene and turning entire nations into commercial toothpaste users (Segrave, 2010, p. 205).

Three key stages in the early development of the toothpaste market have been identified in research in the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia (Fischman, 1997; Segrave, 2010; Lippert, 2013; Coleman, 2016; Simmonds, 2019; Prescott, 2021). Nonetheless, their marketing practices bear striking similarities to those found in other European countries, including

France (Fournier, 2011), Spain (Rodríguez Martín, 2007; Fernández-Poyatos, 2011), Germany (Jones and Lubinski, 2012; Reckendrees, 2018) and Sweden (Torell, 2005; Lundmark, 2020).

The early 20th-century Swedish toothpaste market featured big US brands like Colgate, Kolynos and Pepsodent, as well as its own national brands like Vademecum, Amykos, Oxygenol, Carmitol and, of course, Stomatol. Like in other Western countries, most Swedish toothpaste advertisements from the 1900 to 1920 period were highly medical in nature. Frequently reoccurring features included scientific tables and diagrams, microscopic images of bacteria and photos of gums, teeth and doctors/scientists in white coats looking through microscopes. “Slice-of-life” stories were also presented of people smoking or eating sweets with the clear message that consumers could continue to enjoy such activities because modern science – in the form of toothpaste – had found a way to combat the bad odours and tooth damage associated with them. Advertisements were replete with buzzwords like “antiseptic” and “bacteria” and consumers were laden with bamboozling advice, such as to “follow the Plexel rule” (Oxygenol, 24 November 1915) to stave off illnesses. Accompanying slogans were also used to build product credibility, with Kolynos describing its toothpaste as a “scientific dental cream” (23 October 1913) and Pepsodent framed as “the new epoch-making toothpaste” (7 March 1918).

These scientific messages were largely influenced by the fact that mouthwash – toothpaste’s contemporary – was originally used as a germicide and surgical antiseptic to sterilise wounds and wash floors. Therefore, toothpaste immediately became embedded in the same discourse of science and endorsed by professors of bacteriology and hygiene who testified to its bacteria-killing properties (Torell, 2005; Segrave, 2010). In this early stage of its development, toothpaste was still not officially approved by Swedish dentists (despite some Swedish toothpastes like Stomatol having been developed by dentists). In fact, as late as 1920, the *Nordic Family* book featured the article “Tooth Diseases and Care”, in which the dentist writer recommended that people use salt water to keep their teeth clean because most powders and pastes on the market were “harmful”. Thus, the objective of these early toothpaste advertisements was to promote the product as a means of cultivating good health habits for the entire body, not just the mouth.

In the 1920s, a marked shift in the nature of most Swedish toothpaste advertisements occurred, with brands moving more towards social intimidation tactics aimed particularly at women. Similar changes took place in the marketing of toothpaste in the USA and across Europe at this time and can be linked directly to the popularity of cinema and its Hollywood starlettes, which had increased insecurities around ageing and made women more interested in the maintenance of beauty (Santos, 2020). They were also influenced by the popular notion of an “inferiority complex”, developed by psychotherapist Alfred Adler to describe a personal feeling of inadequacy based on not appearing “normal” (Prescott, 2021). Toothpaste brands convinced anxious consumers that toothpaste was necessary to maintain a perfect smile and that physical appearance, popularity and success in life went hand in hand (Torell, 2005). Many of the scientific arguments from earlier toothpaste advertisements were carried over, providing a layer of evidence to support the claims around beauty and hygiene. Thus, it became common to see images of smiling women juxtaposed with a scientist in a lab coat or a microscopic image of bacteria. Vademecum, for example, produced advertisements showing women dancing with handsome men alongside the medical symbol of a red cross, while Kolynos depicted women with gags on their mouths alongside the slogan “Don’t kiss her!” (18 February 1931) and scientific diagrams indicating how teeth became whiter within just three days of Kolynos being used.

On the subject of US toothpaste advertisements, editor C.B. Larrabee wrote in 1935 that no single industry had “allowed its advertising to fall to such a low level” as the toothpaste industry (cited in Segrave, 2010, p. 63). According to Larrabee, consumers bought toothpaste

with illusory hopes engendered by propaganda based on fallacies and superstitions. Similar concerns were raised in Sweden at the time, particularly around advertisements that convinced women that a certain brand of toothpaste would guarantee “a better you” through enhanced beauty and success (Torell, 2005). Although these claims were often false and became increasingly exaggerated over time, by placing science and beauty side by side, consumers were given little room to reflect on the veracity of the information presented.

By the late 1940s, most Swedish toothpaste advertisements experienced yet another transformation, moving back towards scientific rationale and away from scaremongering techniques. Dentistry had now become established as a science, and, for the first time, Swedish dentists officially recognised the health benefits of using toothpaste. This change in attitude was the result of new research into fluoride that had discovered its effectivity in preventing tooth decay. Unsurprisingly, “fluoride” quickly became a key buzzword in advertisements, and the image of the dentist became incorporated, acting as a symbol of authenticity and approval. In line with the Swedish value of civic responsibility propagated by the Social Democrats who were now running the country, advertisements also had an increased focus on family life and the importance of staying healthy. Colgate, Kolynos and Carmitol, for example, all showed images of smiling mothers, fathers and children brushing their teeth together, serving to promote healthy teeth as the key to a happy family. These images were often placed next to those of the dentist, visually implying that families should follow the dentist’s advice to ensure that their teeth are protected, therefore imbuing toothpaste with an expert opinion that was difficult to contest (Loeb, 1994, p. 78).

While these three stages offer a useful general overview of historical toothpaste marketing in Europe, North America and Oceania, there were, of course, exceptions to these rules. Stomatol – the focus of this paper – was one such brand that did not follow this pattern, choosing instead to focus always on lifestyle marketing. Stomatol first emerged in 1895 as a mouthwash, developed by dentist Albin Lenhardtson for antiseptic dental and oral care, followed three years later by a collapsible tube toothpaste. The idea for the toothpaste was inspired by the fact that people who chewed spruce resin (e.g. in Dalarna’s forest areas) usually had beautiful and well-preserved teeth (So-Rummet, 2009). Stomatol was manufactured and marketed by Sâpasjudiet Grumme and Son, its brand name combining the Greek for mouth (stoma) and turpinol, one of its chief ingredients.

Stomatol had a large marketing budget and made extensive use of the press, film and signs (both enamel and neon) to promote its toothpaste. In 1909, it produced the first animated advertising sign in Sweden – still present in the Stockholm skyline today – and developed animated film commercials and live action advertisements with the popular comic actor Thor Modéen. Their marketing campaigns were so popular that Stomatol swiftly developed into Sweden’s leading toothpaste brand and “Stomatol smile” (*Stomatol leende*) became a common expression in Swedish, accepted officially by the Swedish Academy in 1935. Until 1992, advertisements were banned from radio and television in Sweden. Newspapers, therefore, represented the most important part of the advertising market for Stomatol and a crucial means of conveying their marketing messages to the public (Aléx and Söderberg, 2001).

Given Stomatol’s scientific origins and brand name, it is surprising that it did not play this up in its advertisements. Instead, it chose instead to focus on lifestyle aspirations of modernity, beauty and the Swedish “way of life” to create a buzz around its toothpaste. Although some of its practices overlap with those of other toothpaste brands, such as Pebecco and Colgate, I argue that Stomatol stood out because of the unique set-up of Sweden’s advertising industry, which facilitated and encouraged widespread lifestyle marketing [1].

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 (Åström Rudberg, 2019). Although the cartel played an active role in creating, shaping, propagating and debating regulatory regimes of advertising, it did little to clamp down on false or misleading advertising (Funke, 2015). Thus, at a time when so many national and international brands were competing to prove their toothpaste was best, this lack of general clause to regulate marketing in Sweden offered a fruitful opportunity for Stomatol. Rather than rely on scientific facts which risked confusing or boring consumers, Stomatol associated their toothpaste with attitudes and feelings, thereby selling an *experience* rather than a product to consumers. In doing so, they not only shaped public attitudes towards personal cleanliness, hygiene, beauty and success but also framed them as uniquely Swedish traits that gave citizens a certain physical and moral superiority over other nations.

### Data and methodology

This paper draws on the theoretical framework and methodological toolkit of visual social semiotics to critically analyse how the toothpaste brand Stomatol used lifestyle marketing in its early advertisements (1910–1940) to convince consumers that its toothpaste was essential for good health, beauty and success. Visual social semiotics sees sign-making as a social process and semiotic resources (e.g. image, colour, typography, texture, layout, composition) as socially shaped over time to become meaning-making resources that articulate specific ideas, values or identities demanded by the requirements of a person or community (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). These resources have meaning potentials – defined as the affordances or constraints of modes – which are deeply embedded in existing sociocultural norms and sociohistorical settings (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 4). For the purposes of this study, visual social semiotic analysis is used to answer the following research question:

*RQ1.* How does Stomatol use lifestyle marketing in advertisements (1910–1940) to appeal to Swedish consumers and convince them to buy its toothpaste?

As the tools of visual social semiotics were designed for contemporary texts and advertisements are socially-situated media that only work effectively by creating identification with the wider visual environment by which readers learn and live (Loxham, 2016:212), my analysis will also be supported by culturally- and historically-specific knowledge central to the advertisements' structure and design choices. This will ensure that the advertisements are anchored in their historical context, and that attention is given to historical norms of communication, cultural references and discourse on modernity, beauty and Swedishness.

The data under investigation consists of 200 advertisements for Stomatol toothpaste published in Swedish newspapers between 1910 and 1940 – the early years of the commercial toothpaste industry when vast sums of money were being invested in marketing campaigns. They came from a larger sample of 500 Swedish toothpaste advertisements and were selected for analysis because of the way that Stomatol's marketing approach varies so dramatically from its competitors who adhere to the three chronological stages outlined in the previous section. The advertisements were collected through a manual search of the Swedish National Library's Historical Newspaper Archive (<https://tidningar.kb.se/>). On the whole, Stomatol published advertisements on a weekly basis in newspapers, with the same advertisement running for roughly four to six weeks. These advertisements tended to be repeated across newspapers, reflecting the way that Swedish advertising agencies gained commission once an advertisement was produced. As Åström Rudberg (2019, p. 53) notes, advertising agencies

earned 15%–20% per advertising space every time an advertisement was published, which incentivised them to publish the same advertisement as many times as possible in all major Swedish national and local newspapers. For this reason, although thousands of Stomatol advertisements were published between 1910 and 1940, there was very little variation in their content and style. The 200 examples in the data set have, thus, been chosen because they represent the main varieties in use during the 30-year period of study. Given that the same advertisement was published across newspapers regardless of their political stance or geographical location, all the advertisements collected for this study come from *Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)* – Sweden’s largest newspaper.

In the first stage of the visual social semiotic analysis, the collected advertisements were grouped into three themes based on recurring patterns in their use of language and semiotics: modernity, beauty and the Swedish “way of life”. Here, modernity is represented by the promotion of scientific and technological innovation, news stories and popular entertainment; beauty refers to the improvement of women’s outward appearance and the broader sociocultural goals that this will supposedly help them achieve; and the Swedish “way of life” describes forms of cultural Swedishness, such as national holidays, traditions and rituals.

In the second stage – which forms the analysis section of this paper – a selection of prototypical advertisements representative of the three themes were subjected to a detailed visual social semiotic analysis. The arguments made regarding their use of linguistic and semiotic cues and how they build credibility around Stomatol are reflective of the practices used across all advertisements and are supported by supplementary evidence from the broader data set. In what follows, I show how the same three themes were used across advertisements from 1910 to 1940; however, they emerged as historically situated layers that built upon one another in response to changing social, economic and cultural processes. Ultimately, through its popular address and humorous approach, Stomatol was able to successfully contribute to the development of a cultural Swedishness based on modernity and beauty, promoting toothpaste as an essential product for the modern Swedish woman that went far beyond its role as a teeth cleaner.

### Analysis

In the late 19th century, products became increasingly tied to impression management, with brands turning into “consumer personal confidantes” (Marchand, 1985, p. 13), essential to helping people deal with the stresses and dangers of modern life. Through advertising, brands showcased their products as shortcuts to happiness and well-being (Crawford, 2006), with frequent references to science and technology used as a means to signal progress. Through these references, brands placed moral and civic responsibility on consumers – particularly women – to look after their own health and that of their families to ensure a healthy nation (French, 2017). As in other Western countries, these themes lie at the heart of Swedish advertisements of the period for everything from margarine (Jonsson, 2009) and coffee (Gardeström, 2018) to radioactive shampoo (Eriksson and O’Hagan, 2021) and cod liver oil (O’Hagan and Eriksson, 2022).

#### *Stomatol is modern and trendy*

From 1910 to 1940, Sweden experienced a dynamic process of modernisation. This began with rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, which led to changes in scientific knowledge, leisure and consumption and developed into broader sociopolitical advancements in terms of increased trade unionism, voting reform and the emancipation of women (Magnusson, 2002). These sociopolitical advancements culminated with the Social Democrats’ election

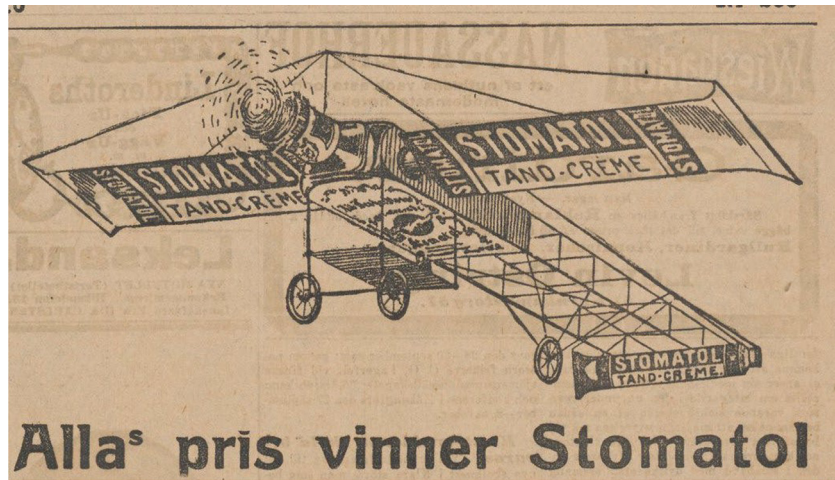
victory in 1932, which paved the way for what came to be known as the “Swedish model”, defined by free market capitalism and a generous welfare system. Thus, modernity was associated with technology, progress, wealth, rationality and optimism – traits that brands were keen to emphasise in their advertisements. As we have seen previously, leading toothpaste brands like Vademecum, Colgate, Kolynos and Pepsodent all drew upon scientific discourse to express modernity, linking their toothpaste to the latest advances in bacteriology and relying on testimonies (albeit not always genuine) from doctors and scientists. The bestseller Stomatol, however, adopted a different approach, keeping a close eye on current affairs or the latest crazes in popular culture and using the power of semiotics to embed their products within them. In this way, modernity remained a constant theme of their advertisements, yet was constantly updated over time in accordance with what was *en vogue*.

Early Stomatol advertisements expressed modernity through mechanisation and the “culture of speed”: large images of modern forms of transportation, such as cars, motorboats and planes, were commonplace. In Sweden, the first car with an internal combustion engine was built in 1898 by Gustaf Eriksson, the first motorboat was registered in 1900 at the Royal Swedish Yacht Club and the first plane was built in 1910 by Oskar Ask and Hjalmar Nyrop. Therefore, by including these modern inventions in its advertisements, Stomatol served to associate itself with innovation and technology. In these advertisements, speed was accentuated through motion lines, clouds of smoke and rippling water (Horn, 1998), as well as races and competitions. Speed, thus, represented a social experience of modern-day life, a symbol of mass society, urbanism and rationalism, of which Stomatol is clearly part (Tomlinson, 2007). Tubes of Stomatol toothpaste were cleverly embedded into these images as props or accoutrements, for example, as finishing posts, lighthouses or signposts. By drawing upon the visual similarity between the shape of the tube and these comforting features of our everyday lives, Stomatol was able to soften the potentially threatening nature of the advertisements and grant their product with an air of authenticity (Richards, 1990, p. 134). There was no clear link between the accompanying slogans and the images (e.g. “You never come across ugly and neglected teeth in people using Stomatol” on an image of tugboats and Stomatol “lighthouses”). However, when viewed together, the message served to offer a contrast between the “ugliness” and “neglect” of non-Stomatol users and the “beauty” and “care” of Stomatol users, as symbolised by the shiny, new vehicles on display. Tubes of toothpaste were also used to comic effect by the German brand Pebecco in its marketing practices: giant inflatable tubes appeared on carnival floats, for example, and were distributed around German seaside resorts, with holidaymakers encouraged to take photographs alongside (Beiersdorf, 2017). However, this was not until the late 1920s, thereby demonstrating that Stomatol was at the vanguard of innovation when it came to novel ways of marketing toothpaste.

The 1910 advertisement in Figure 1 is a good example of the way that Stomatol used transport to embed its product in modernity. Here, we see the familiar image of a biplane, yet its body consists of a Stomatol mouthwash bottle and its wings and elevator are made of Stomatol toothpaste tubes. The lid of the mouthwash bottle adopts the role of propeller, dotted circular lines around its cap signalling movement through the air. This advertisement was released shortly after Oskar Ask and Hjalmar Nyrop built the Ask Nyrop No. 1 aeroplane (nicknamed the Grasshopper), and the plane bears a striking resemblance to their design, demonstrating how Stomatol kept up-to-date with current affairs and sought every opportunity to capitalise upon them in their advertisements. As newspapers across Sweden reported avidly on the invention of the Grasshopper, the Swedish public would have been highly familiar with its image and the hype surrounding it.



**Figure 1.**  
The Grasshopper  
Biplane, Svenska  
Dagbladet, 25th  
September 1910, p. 6



It was, thus, easy for them to transfer this knowledge to the context of the Stomatol advertisement and associate the product with the same values. The slogan underneath the image states, “Stomatol wins everyone’s prize”. At the time of publication, the Swedish Aeronautical Society was arranging a large air show with competitions and prizes. This slogan, therefore, draws upon this familiar discourse but uses it to imply that anybody who uses Stomatol is automatically a prize winner. In doing so, they take away the exclusivity of aviation (read Stomatol) and put it within the reach of everyone.

Another practice used by Stomatol throughout the 1910s and 1920s to promote modernity was to include references to recent news stories in its advertisements, whether that be Roald Amundsen’s South Pole expedition, the founding of the Boy Scouts or royal weddings. Given the amount of global political unrest at this time, wars were also frequently referenced in advertisements, albeit with a humorous spin. Both the Balkan Wars (1908–1913) and First World War (1914–1918), for example, were depicted in advertisements through groups of soldiers with cannons made from Stomatol toothpaste tubes accompanied by headings updated regularly to reflect the recent happenings (e.g. “The Blockade of Montenegro”). They also included provocative captions like “You are welcome to block our beaches as much as you can, but the protection we have for our teeth is too good”. Just like the plane example, these captions brought together two seemingly unrelated topics to draw attention to the power of Stomatol and its ability to safeguard consumers’ health. Although Pebeco occasionally parodied war in its own advertisements (e.g. the Morocco–Congo crisis in 1912), Stomatol was perhaps the boldest toothpaste brand at this time, regularly satirizing war across the national press. Sweden’s neutrality likely offered Stomatol some leeway to lampoon international conflicts in ways that other countries with rich toothpaste markets, such as the USA, the UK or Germany, could not.

The means by which Stomatol incorporated the topical issue of war into its advertisements can be seen in [Figure 2](#), which was published throughout 1912 and shows a map of the Balkans, with the four military officers of the Balkan League facing off against the Ottoman ruler Mehmed V [2]. Each leader is extending a toothpaste-related item (mouthwash, toothbrush, toothpaste, cup) to Mehmed V as a peace offering, to which he responds by bowing and shaking the hands of General Vasil Kutinchev of Bulgaria and Lieutenant General Konstantinos Sapountzakis of Greece. Above the image is the heading

# Förslag till Balkanfrågans lösning



I gengäld för dina förlorade länder  
vi ge' dig det bästa för dina tänder,

# STOMATOL!

Figure 2.  
The Balkan Question,  
Svenska Dagbladet,  
12th January 1913,  
p. 9

“Suggestion to Resolve the Balkan Question”, while below is the caption “In return for your lost lands we give you the best for your teeth, STOMATOL!” Through wit, Stomatol trivialises the Balkans conflict, making the bold claim that it can be resolved if only the Ottomans try their toothpaste. Despite the ludicrousness of this argument, the advertisement is highly memorable for consumers and succeeds in positioning Stomatol as a forward-thinking and likeable brand, one associated with a new positive future.

Post-WWI Sweden was characterised by ideals of freedom and hope, and this was embodied in the country’s growing entertainment sector, which saw a boom in jazz clubs, dance halls and cinemas. Recognising this cultural shift, from the mid-1920s onwards, Stomatol started to turn away from current affairs and more towards popular entertainment in its advertisements, making references to a wide range of new films, dances and music styles to showcase itself as being on the cutting edge of cultural knowledge. Following the success of the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* in Sweden, for example, Stomatol immediately employed an illustration of actor Al Jolson in its advertisements, holding a tube of toothpaste in his white-gloved hands and featuring the caption “The Jazz Singer with a big tube of Stomatol”. Equally, an advertisement from 1928 shows the French dancer Josephine Baker wiggling her hips in her famous banana skirt as she holds an oversized tube of Stomatol toothpaste under her arm. Although Stomatol was not officially endorsed by these celebrities, their figures lend credibility to the toothpaste, helping increase attention and promote brand recognition, recall and differentiation for consumers. With the exception of Pebecco, none of the other brands are reported to have used celebrities until the late 1960s/early 1970s (e.g. Jodie Foster and Crest, Tom Selleck and Close Up, Farrah Fawcett and Ultra Brite), thereby demonstrating that Stomatol was an unrecognised innovator in this area of marketing.

Figure 3 clearly demonstrates how Stomatol capitalised upon the Swedish public’s interest in the latest fashions. It shows the image of a smartly dressed man and woman interlocking arms and moving in a circle underneath the heading “Lambeth Walk A Matter of Fashion”. Lambeth Walk was a song from 1937 musical *Me and My Girl*, which gave its name to a walking dance made popular by Lupino Lane. The fad reached Sweden in 1938, and soon the song was translated and used in Swedish films and dance halls across the country held Lambeth Walk competitions (Kristenson, 2004). Stomatol, thus, saw an opportunity and made the dance the focus of its 1938 marketing campaign. In the advertisement, Stomatol explains that “Lambeth Walk is this year’s top song, danced all over by everybody”, but then it will soon disappear and be replaced by a new trend. It links this statement directly to toothpaste by saying that, like the Lambeth Walk, toothpaste trends also come and go, but Stomatol is there to stay. Through this clever rhetoric, Stomatol is able to connect itself directly to the popular dance, even though it is completely unrelated and attracts the attention of consumers through its eye-catching title and image.

Thus, we see how, through close attention to current affairs and popular culture, Stomatol ensured that it remained a fashionable brand at the forefront of modernity, even as the meaning and associations of modernity changed across the decades. Many of its practices appear to have predated other toothpaste brands by several decades, demonstrating its position as a pioneer of lifestyle marketing.

#### *Stomatol makes you beautiful and successful*

From the birth of modern advertising, brands had aimed their products specifically at mothers and housewives – the main household shoppers – using “negative appeals” and “reason why” approaches to underscore the importance of good family health and well-being (Apple, 1995). However, as the “New Woman” emerged in the late 19th century, marketing

Lambeth Walk är årets dans-schlager, som dansas överallt och hos alla. Nästan varje säsong har sin nöjes- och modefluga, som tillfredsställer en tillfällig smak, men som sedan åter snabbt försvinner... Så kommer det säkerligen också att gå med Lambeth Walk...

Varje år lanseras det också minst en ny revolutionerande tandkräm med påstadda undergörande egenskaper, men ändå säljs det fortfarande mest Stomatol — och varför? — jo därför att den alltid är lika bra och häst motsvarar fordringarna på ett verkligt gott och effektivt tandvårdsmedel.

STOMATOL  
är en märkesvara och  
endast en märkesvara  
garanterar jämn och  
färskeklassig kvalitet.

STOMATOL

**Figure 3.**  
Lambeth Walk,  
Svenska Dagbladet,  
16th October 1938,  
p. 28

practices turned increasingly towards women's bodies and the idea that they were a site on which social rules of conduct could be inscribed (Mandziuk, 2010). Women's bodies became framed as malleable and in need of constant improvement, yet advertisements only offered narrow aspirational body ideals with one route to achieve them: by purchasing a certain product (Jackson Lears, 2000). Deep social and emotional meanings, thus, became attached to the female appearance as brands promised that their products could provide beauty, success and popularity (Walker, 2007). Indeed, Runefelt (2019a) describes Swedish advertisements of the period as "magic mirrors" through which women saw their potential if only they reshaped their bodies in accordance with expected norms of beauty and fashion. As the century progressed and psychological theories on inferiority developed, this marketing practice was increasingly exploited by brands who recognised women's desire to emulate Hollywood starlettes (Santos, 2020).

As previously established, most Swedish toothpaste brands began to turn towards women's outward appearance in their advertisements in the 1920s. However, for Stomatol, beauty was a key theme of its marketing campaign from 1900. Early advertisements drew heavily on classical mythology, with images of Venus – the Roman goddess of love and beauty – frequently reoccurring. These images served to promote a type of femininity that was concerned with the “ideological and commercial cultivation” of the body and was strongly influenced by classical revivalist models of body perfection that were dominant at this time (Heffernan, 2019). Yet, they also sought to embed Stomatol in tradition, giving it an air of divinity and mystery that exaggerated its properties and reframed it as an elixir of beauty. While classical mythology was a regular trope of early 20th-century advertisements, often used to convey strength and vigour (O'Hagan, 2021), it does not appear to have been used by any other toothpaste brands in their marketing practices. Stomatol, therefore, stands as a progressive brand who constantly sought new ways to distinguish itself from its competitors and saw traditional figures of beauty as one such way of doing so.

A case in point is Figure 4, which shows an image of the Venus de Milo flanked by a beautiful young woman in a transparent robe that reveals her right breast and left leg. Her right arm points towards the sculpture, while the accompanying heading states “The Modern Venus”, leaving no room for doubt that the woman is a contemporary embodiment of the Greek goddess. In her left hand is an oversized tube of Stomatol, which rests on a pedestal, clearly implying that the toothpaste has the ability to give women all the necessary characteristics associated with Venus: love, beauty, desire, sex, fertility, prosperity and victory. While it was Venus's status as a goddess that imbued her with these qualities, they are now within reach of mere mortals thanks to the power of Stomatol. The woman's hair and robe firmly ground her in Greek mythology, yet the contrast between her dynamicity and the sculpture's stasis frame her as a version of Venus in line with the modern world. This is emphasised by the accompanying caption, which claims that “An imperative condition for a modern Venus is healthy, strong, pearly white teeth and she should therefore use Stomatol daily”. Through word and image, Stomatol suggests that it is a nice outward appearance (e.g. sparkling teeth) that is valued as a gateway to modernity rather than intangible qualities like intelligence, self-confidence or independence.

As Sweden moved into the “Roaring Twenties”, Stomatol dropped its advertisements that framed beauty in reference to classical figures like Venus and connected it instead to “the ideal Swedish woman”. In these advertisements, Stomatol provided lengthy text blocks accompanied by illustrations to outline the life of a typical “girl of today” – a girl who was now part of a modern country where women had the right to vote. They listed activities like driving, ice-skating and playing tennis and golf, but also introduced the notion of “rational bodycare”. According to Stomatol, rational bodycare was not about looking after one's health but rather looking as beautiful as possible. This was emphasised by rhetorical questions like “do you want to make the most of your looks?” or “why disfigure your face with bad teeth?” as well as value-laden statements like “love is blind but not so blind that it does not notice bad teeth”. Stomatol then presented itself as a wonder cure that not only gave women “long-lasting beautiful teeth” but also imbued them with the power to “defeat the most stubborn old curmudgeon” or “stiffest and most demanding aunt or mother-in-law”.

Through such emotive phrases, Stomatol offered new possibilities to female consumers in keeping with their new freedoms and independence in Swedish society: a chance to look beautiful, yet also to maintain healthy relationships with others. Despite sounding positive, Stomatol did not give consumers freedom of choice; rather, it framed the quest for beauty as a personal and national responsibility, with anybody who refused to buy their product being

# Den moderna Venus

Ett oeftergifligt villkor för en modern Venus är friska, starka, pärlhvita tänder och bör hon därför dagligen använda

## STOMATOL.

**Figure 4.**  
The Modern Venus,  
Svenska Dagbladet,  
2nd February 1913,  
p. 10

labelled as lazy and thoughtless. Accompanying these statements were images of stereotypical blonde-haired, blue-eyed Swedes, with pencil thin eyebrows, fancy jewellery, red lipstick and shiny teeth. Often, they wore low-cut dresses or bathrobes and in sexually alluring poses as they held up mirrors in one hand and Stomatol toothpaste in the other.

This autoerotic gaze subverted the traditional “male gaze” and showcased a modern representation of women who have the ability to master themselves (Runefelt, 2019b). While most national and international toothpaste brands turned towards similar social intimidation tactics at this time, they tended instead to use images of glamorous women in the style of Hollywood starlettes rather than “girl next door” figures. Thus, Stomatol stood apart in its canniness to target newly emancipated Swedish women by emphasising everyday women as “living models” of trust (Schweitzer, 2004). In doing so, they showed women that beauty was attainable for all if only they used their toothpaste.

We see a clear example of this in a 1933 Stomatol advertisement (Figure 5), which, at first glance, could be mistaken for an informative article. In the centre of the advertisement is a large black and white photograph of “Miss Britta Jakobsson, the Ideal Swedish Girl”, as the accompanying headings tell us. Britta has short curly blonde hair, a glowing complexion and pearly white teeth and is dressed in a fashionable beret, blazer and pearl necklace. Although she faces the viewer, her eyes look to the side, turning her into an object of “offer” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124) as we contemplate her and make connections between her appearance and Stomatol. In giving the woman a name, consumers are more likely to form an emotional attachment, thereby granting her “role model authority” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 187). The text explains that a competition was organised by the magazine *Filmjournalen* to find the most Swedish looking girl and Britta won with “an overwhelming majority” because of her “two rows of pearly white teeth”. Alongside the text is a small photo of Britta holding a bouquet of flowers, implying that this was the moment that she was awarded the prize, while a testimony from Britta, highlighted in a text block on the right, states that Stomatol is the reason why she has such nice teeth. The quote is marked with her signature in cursive, adding authenticity to the claim (Ledin and Machin, 2020, p. 129), while the box overlaps the photo, making it clear it was Britta who said it. Here, beauty is reduced to one single trait – nice teeth – with Stomatol framed as the sole factor responsible for this. The advertisement ends by calling directly on “all you other Swedish girls!” to “follow Miss Jakobsson’s example, value your teeth and use Stomatol daily”. Here, Stomatol creates a responsible-irresponsible dichotomy, framing girls who do not purchase the toothpaste as unwilling to adhere to Swedish standards of beauty. Although we have no way of knowing if the competition is legitimate, if the girl in the photo is called Britta Jakobsson (a very Swedish name) or if the quote can actually be assigned to her, the

DEN SVENSKA  
IDEALFLICKAN

Fröken Britta Jakobsson, som vid den av Filmjournalen arrangerade tävlingen på grund av sitt äktsvenska, öppna utseende, källa uppträdande och tjugande leende, som blottade tvänne rader pärlvita tänder med överväldigande majoritet korades till den svenska idealflickan, har, så länge hon kunnat minnas använt Stomatol och lettyr, att detta till största delen är orsaken till att hon har så vita, friska tänder.

Fröken Britta Jakobsson skriver:  
Jag har så länge jag minns använt Stomatol och detta är nog till största delen orsaken till att jag har så friska tänder.  
*Britta Jakobsson*

Alla Ni andra svenska flickor!  
Följ Fröken Jakobssons exempel, värda Era tänder och använd dagligen STOMATOL. Svenska tandläkare rekommendera Stomatol som ett idealmedel för den dagliga tandvården och att det är ett idealmedel bestycker också den SVENSKA IDEALFLICKAN.

**Figure 5.**  
The Ideal Swedish  
Girl, Svenska  
Dagbladet, 22nd July  
1933, p. 16

combination of language and semiotics are highly convincing and leave little opportunity to question the claims.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, another common characteristic of Stomatol advertisements was their “slice-of-life” depictions of real-life problems for women but presented in a dramatic manner whereby only the toothpaste provided the solution. These emotional appeals fed into a broader historical tradition found across cosmetics marketing from as early as 1850 and served to make women feel guilty and shame them into purchasing certain products (Loeb, 1994). Typically, Stomatol focused on affairs of the heart, informing girls that they can be kissed, make somebody fall in love with them or obtain a fiancé if they start brushing their teeth with Stomatol. These statements were often accompanied by images of young girls in corsets standing in a bathroom. Here, the corset stood as a symbol of sexualisation and glamourisation, suggesting a “story of success by makeover” in terms of a corrected figure but also a better life (Runefelt, 2019b). In the case of Stomatol, this better life is defined by finding a husband and is only achievable by looking more attractive. Being a tried-and-tested marketing method, these “slice-of-life” advertisements can also be found across most national and international toothpaste brands at this time. Colgate, for example, used a comic strip entitled “I want a man” to show how its toothpaste could help obtain this goal, while Pebecco asked, “Do you want your teeth to get ugly?” warning women that this would prevent them from finding love.

The 1937 advertisement in [Figure 6](#) offers a clear example of how Stomatol draws upon the themes outlined above. It shows a large image of a man in a suit bent over pleading with interlocked hands before a woman who is sitting casually on the floor with her legs spread, eyes closed and hands in her hair. The heading and subheading inform us that “Filip fell for Frida, captivated by her fresh smile”. Read together, we interpret the image as a marriage proposal, directly triggered by Frida’s use of Stomatol. Furthermore, her nonchalant expression suggests that Filip’s proposal is one of many she has received, again signalling the transformative effect of Stomatol. Their depiction from an oblique angle gives the advertisement a voyeuristic nature as we take the position of intruding observer, eavesdropping on a private moment between the couple (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006:124). Their bodies form a natural frame for the text block in the centre, which states that “All men do like Filip. They admire and cannot resist a series of glittering, pearly white teeth”. Then, clearly aimed at women, it informs that only Stomatol can make teeth this way. The implication is clear: men will be falling at your feet if you use Stomatol toothpaste. Thus, here, Stomatol is positioned as an emancipatory product rather than a toothpaste, promising a life-changing experience for women that will guarantee them love and marriage.

Overall, we see that, while beauty remained a key theme of Stomatol advertisements from 1910 to 1940, how beauty was defined regularly shifted, transforming from classical representations at the beginning of the period into more down-to-earth Swedish portrayals as women achieved political emancipation and became increasingly independent. Ironically, however, this independence remained linked to patriarchy and the need to be attractive to men.

#### *Stomatol promotes the Swedish “way of life”*

In the late 19th century, there was a wave of nationalism across Europe, which “helped to constitute a global discourse about national identity, sovereignty and legitimacy” (Calhoun, 1998, p. 1). As citizens became increasingly concerned with what made their nation unique, canny marketers saw a new opportunity, drawing upon nationalist rhetoric in advertisements to emphasise a product’s origins or make references to local traditions with the aim of instilling national pride in citizens (Kühschelm, 2020). In Sweden, the concept of



**FILIP FÖLL FÖR FRIDA**  
Föll till föga för hennes friska leende

Alla andra män göra som Filip. De beundra och kunna inte motstå ett leende, som blottar en rad glittrande, pärlvita tänder... Men friska tänder äro icke blott av stor betydelse för utseendet utan även för hälsan. Sköt dem därför noggrant och med Stomatol, som håller dem vita och har en angenäm, uppfriskande smak.

Stomatol är fullkomligt oskadligt.  
En ytterligare garanti har Ni i att framstående och opartiska tandläkare rekommendera

**STOMATOL**  
MUNVATTEN — TANDCRÈME

STOMATOL är en märkesvara och endast en märkesvara garanterar jämn och förstklassig kvalitet.

**Figure 6.**  
Filip Falls for Frida,  
Svenska Dagbladet,  
2nd May 1937, p. 24

“nationalism” was not entirely unproblematic, being, on the one hand, bound in Nordism (i.e. connections with Norwegian and Danish culture) and, on the other, appropriated by the Fascists People’s Party for propagandistic purposes as the century progressed (Berggren, 2002; Elmersjö, 2020). Despite these challenges, frequent attempts were made to promote a form of cultural Swedishness focused uniquely on cultural similarities across social classes and regional identities (Andersson, 2019). This was consolidated under the Social Democrats in the 1930s when a new era of Swedification was developed around the three pillars of democracy, citizenship and modernity. These pillars became reflected in Swedish advertisements, with brands emphasising cultural traditions, family life and the great outdoors as fundamental to the Swedish character and temperament rather than aiming to

assert hegemony over other nations. Examples of this can be found in a range of advertisements of the period from beauty products (Severinsson, 2018) to the Olympic Games (Tolved, 2008) and even agricultural machine catalogues (Alsvold, 2005). Here, tradition was framed as fundamental to modernity, a way of declaring a nation that was forward-thinking yet in touch with its roots.

Stomatol quickly identified the value of promoting the Swedish “way of life” in its toothpaste advertisements. At a time when its competitors used scientific rationale, Stomatol recognised the emotive nature of nationalism, tapping into traditional values to promote its product as safe, trustworthy and of a high standard (O’Hagan, 2019). Early advertisements frequently drew upon cultural festivities and national holidays, featuring images of Tomten (the Swedish version of Father Christmas) and Stjärngossar (“star boys” who dress as the Three Wise Men on the Epiphany) or Christmas and Midsummer celebrations. Typically, smiling families were depicted around the dinner table together, interrupted from their meal and conversation by an unexpected figure at the door (e.g. Tomten, Stjärngossar) holding a large tube of Stomatol toothpaste. The image was usually accompanied by a poem written by the figure, telling the family that they bring the gift of Stomatol, which is guaranteed to keep their teeth fresh, white and strong. The use of family dinner scenes was highly relatable, thereby enabling consumers to feel an immediate connection with the advertisements’ content, while the direct form of address in the poems allowed them to embody the image and imagine themselves in the same position. This, therefore, gave the plea to use Stomatol a humanistic touch and made consumers feel more emotionally invested in its message. Although cultural figures are occasionally featured in the advertisements of other toothpaste brands (particularly Colgate), it appears to have been on a far lesser scale. This tended to take place only at Christmas, with advertisements depicting Father Christmas going down the chimney with a sack full of toothpaste. Thus, in its constant awareness of important dates in the Swedish calendar and how to incorporate them into its advertisements, Stomatol was truly inventive.

Figure 7 is a clear example of how Stomatol integrated national holidays into its advertisements. In Sweden, the Feast of Saint Lucy is celebrated on 13th December to commemorate Lucia of Syracuse, who brought food and aid to Christians hiding in the Roman catacombs under the Diocletianic Persecution, wearing a candle lit wreath on her head so as to carry as much food as possible in her hands. On this day, towns and cities across the country hold processions, where girls dress in white robes and carry cookies and saffron buns. In this 1912 advertisement, Stomatol parodies this important national occasion by showing the familiar figure of Saint Lucy, yet replacing the candles on her head with tubes of Stomatol toothpaste and the cookies and saffron buns with toothpaste and mouthwash. Saint Lucy is depicted from a full-body, oblique angle with an angelic smile on her face, which encourages viewers to observe her and immediately grasp the cultural connotation. Her white gown and blonde hair contrast strongly with the dark of the room she enters, offering a metaphorical depiction of goodness, purity and cleanliness (O’Hagan, 2019), all traits that Stomatol are keen to foreground about its toothpaste. In the background, we see a man, dog and baby awoken from their sleep and sitting up in surprise, their heads directed towards the figure of Saint Lucy. The caption informs, “Lucy’s morning greeting. Refreshing, beneficial, useful”. By associating Saint Lucy with Stomatol, the toothpaste is given magical and quasi-religious properties, imbued with special powers that are emphasised by the triadic structure. However, in its inclusion of Saint Lucy, Stomatol also frames itself as a fun and creative brand that is in touch with the Swedish people and recognises the importance of national rituals and family life.

Lucia's morgonhälsning  
*Uppfriskande, välgörande, nyttig,*  
STOMATOL

Figure 7.  
Saint Lucia, Svenska  
Dagbladet, 13th  
December 1912, p. 3

Moving into the 1920s and particularly the 1930s, Stomatol advertisements began to increase their focus on the concepts of the home as sanctuary and family life as sacred. While these concepts had emerged during the reign of Oskar II (1872–1907), they became cemented following the 1932 election victory of the Social Democrats. The Social Democrats portrayed themselves as defenders of *folkhemmet* (the people's home), arguing that the entire nation should be like one family where everybody contributes but also looks after one another (Götz, 2004). These societal values became transferred by marketers into the family environment, used in advertisements to emphasise a “good home” as a powerful symbol of family security and essential to the safeguarding of Sweden's future.

Stomatol calls attention to this through its depiction of teeth brushing as a family activity. In their advertisements, mothers, fathers and children are gathered around the bathroom sink brushing their teeth or sit in their gardens dressed in bedclothes and drinking tea as their dog plays fetch with a tube of Stomatol toothpaste. While images of family members brushing their teeth together were fairly common in the advertisements of other toothpaste brands at this time, here, they are given a uniquely Swedish edge through accompanying images of red wooden cabins, snow and coffee. Through these images, Stomatol serves to create an atmosphere or a mood rather than a specific narrative, adhering to what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 106) call a “symbolic suggestive process”. In other words, they put forward the belief that Stomatol is the key to a happy, healthy *Swedish* family, which is fundamental to the preservation of Swedish life as we know it. These ideas are also accentuated in other advertisements, which show maps of Sweden with a line of toothpaste running from the top to the bottom of the country. Accompanying captions state that everyone from Ystad (in the south) to Haparanda (in the north) uses Stomatol, thereby visually and verbally connecting the country and creating a harmony that is only possible by continuing to use Stomatol (Ledin and Machin, 2020, p. 182). Another common feature of these advertisements is traditional proverbs, used to accentuate Swedishness. Thus, set phrases like “you don't miss the cow until the stall is empty”, “while the grass grows, the cow dies” or “the old shall be honoured, the young shall be taught” [3] are all used to directly emphasise the importance of family life in Sweden and the long tradition of caring (read teeth-brushing) as a collaborative and mutually beneficial activity for the future of the nation.

These themes are apparent in the 1937 advertisement in Figure 8, which depicts “morning with the Björk family”, as the caption informs us. The image shows the mother brushing her teeth at the bathroom sink while the other family members (father and three children) form a queue as they brush their teeth, waiting patiently to enter the bathroom and rinse their mouths. Queuing is deemed a core aspect of Swedish etiquette, steeped in the country's agricultural past where rationality, order and structure were highly valued to survive the harsh winters (Arnstberg, 2014). Thus, here, the advertisement brings together the tradition of queuing with the sanctity of family life, framing Stomatol as the sole component essential to achieving this familial, cultural and national harmony. This is further emphasised by the heading “Nothing quite like waiting times”, which not only makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to this typical Swedish mentality but also links to the popular 1900 poem of the same name by Erik Axel Karlfeldt, which emphasised peasant culture and the necessity of maintaining traditions in the face of modernity (Britannica, 2021). The text goes on to state how “so many other families” in Sweden do like the Björks and “wait in line eagerly to brush their teeth with Stomatol”. Although the family queue can be found in other toothpaste advertisements of the period (e.g. Pebecco), here, it is firmly Swedified through the use of a common surname and a popular poem

MORGON HOS FAMILJEN BJÖRK — eller

## Inlet är som väntans tider

Inlet är som väntans tider — när man väntar på något gott och därför står man hos familjen Björk, liksom i så många andra familjer, gärna i kö för att få borsta sina tänder med Stomatol tandcrème, ty Stomatol är gott och härligt uppfriskande samt håller tänderna rena och glänsande vita.



STOMATOL  
är en märkesvara och endast en märkesvara garanterar jämn och förstklassig kvalitet.



**Figure 8.**  
Family Life and  
Queuing, Svenska  
Dagbladet, 14th  
November 1937, p. 32

recontextualised humorously. Thus, it directly appeals to Swedish consumers, leaving little space for them to argue against the advice and message given.

Another typical feature of Stomatol advertisements from the 1920s onwards is references to popular Swedish sports and hobbies. While the Swedish sports movement can be traced back to the early 19th century, it grew as a major pastime in this period following the country's successful performance at the 1920 Summer Olympics, the creation of the Allsvenskan, Tre Kronor and Vasaloppet [4] and the rise of internationally-renowned sports stars, such as boxer Harry Persson and swimmer Arne Borg. Consequently, skiing, ice hockey, football, gymnastics, tennis and javelin throwing all frequently reoccur in Stomatol advertisements, with images of sportsmen and women engaged in the activities. These figures are depicted with their gaze directed away from viewers, thereby turning them into objects of contemplation and encouraging viewers to make a connection with them

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(Ledin and Machin, 2018, p. 57). In doing so, they not only claim the discourses of health, fitness and an active lifestyle as their own but also recognise that this is only made possible through the use of Stomatol toothpaste. Accompanying these images are short text blocks or bullet points that make very loose connections between traditional sports and Stomatol, for example:

- “We are one of the world’s best in tennis, but also in toothcare thanks to Stomatol”;
- “Just as Ling’s system revolutionised gymnastics, so Stomatol did modern dentistry”;
- “Football is very popular among sporty people and so is Stomatol for all Swedes”; and
- “Swedes have always been best at javelin throwing. They should be best at taking care of their teeth”.

Although the connections are shaky, the use of bullet points connotes a matter-of-fact logic and associates Stomatol with having more control over one’s life (Ledin and Machin, 2018, p. 165). Moreover, by embedding itself firmly in sporting disciplines in which Sweden has excelled for many years, Stomatol frames itself as the sole factor behind this success. Thus, continuing to embrace and perform well at traditional sports goes hand in hand with consuming Stomatol and is essential to the health and fitness of the nation. While some references to sports have been found in French advertisements for Pebecco during this period (e.g. hiking, mountaineering), they seem to focus more on the benefits of being outdoor and link this “freshness” with the freshness of toothpaste, thereby serving different ideological goals to those of Stomatol.

The way in which Stomatol uses sport as a form of cultural Swedishness can be seen in the 1936 advertisement shown in Figure 9, which shows two images of the same woman. In the first image, she is standing decisively with her hands on her hips and legs wide apart, while in the second, she is crouching down and stretching her arms and legs as she listens to instructions coming from the radio. The accompanying heading tells us “7.20 a.m., morning gymnastics call”. In early 20th-century Sweden, what was known as Swedish Gymnastics (or Ling’s Gymnastics after its founder) was a compulsory part of everyday schooling and practised commonly by the general public who tuned in daily to Bertil Uggla’s radio gymnastics programme (Dahlén, 2016). By depicting this everyday familiar scene in their advertisement (even quoting lines from Uggla such as “Stretch until you’re as straight as a fire iron” [5]), Stomatol is able to connect directly with consumers and form a bond around an inherently Swedish ritual. This is accentuated by the accompanying text block, which states that “our resilient young and old people prepare themselves for a new day of strenuous work through strengthening exercises”, before warning that “gymnastics is not enough” and that Stomatol should be added to their daily routine. Swedish Gymnastics was believed to provide a holistic harmony between the mind and body in keeping with the broader philosophy of the physical culture movement (PCM) and its aim of creating a stronger, healthier race (Wanneberg, 2018). Thus, here, Stomatol aligns itself squarely with the PCM, claiming that its toothpaste is also as essential for good health and that it should be incorporated into one’s daily routine in the same way as gymnastics has. Only then will the Swedish nation be truly strong, fit and healthy.

Thus, through these examples, we see how Stomatol drew upon national holidays, the importance of family, cultural quirks and sporting traditions to promote a form of cultural Swedishness that was far removed from any potential associations with Nordism or fascism.

Klockan 7.20  
kallar  
*morgongymnastiken*

våra spänstiga ungdomar av yngre eller äldre årgång för att genom stärkande motion trimma dem för en ny dags påfrestande arbete... Men enbart gymnastik är ej tillräckligt, ty endast den kan känna sig verkligen uppfriskad och i fin form, som också givit tänder och mun dess morgonbehandling med STOMATOL.

GOMORRON METT FRISK! UPP MED FÖNSTEN O. PUMPA IN FRISK LUFT I LUNGENA...

LITE BAKARE — STRÄCK PÅ ER SÅ NI BLIR RAK SOM EN BILDGAFFEL

FRAM MED ARMAENA LITE RÄTT — SÅ JA — O. TÄPPA INTE HUVUET MELLAN AXLARNÄ

**STOMATOL**  
är en märkesvara och endast en märkesvara garanterar en jämn och förstklassig kvalitet.

STOMATOL munvatten och tandcrème betyda för tänderna detsamma som gymnastik och motion för kroppen i övrigt — de bibehålla dem friska och starka.

**STOMATOL**  
Munvatten och Tandcrème

LIKA NÖDVÄNDIGA FÖR MUN OCH TÄNDER SOM TVÅL FÖR ANSIKTE OCH HÄNDER

**Figure 9.**  
Morning Gymnastics,  
Svenska Dagbladet,  
19th April 1936, p. 26

In doing so, it convinced consumers that it was a proud and trustworthy Swedish brand that was dedicated to upholding the many customs that made Sweden a great nation.

### Discussion

From the above analysis, we can see that, while its main competitors tended to draw upon scientific discourse to make claims about the effectivity of toothpaste, Stomatol adopted a different, more innovative approach of lifestyle marketing, associating itself with modernity, beauty and the Swedish “way of life” to convince consumers of its worth. Although the way in which these three themes were articulated varied between 1910 and 1940 in accordance with changing popular discourse, they remained central to Stomatol’s marketing

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campaigns. Thus, Stomatol bucked the trend in toothpaste advertising found across other countries, and indeed within Sweden, at the time.

Keen to demonstrate that it was a modern, forward-thinking brand, Stomatol incorporated images associated with the “culture of speed” into its early advertisements, as well as popular current affairs (often delivered in humorous ways). As the decades progressed, it increasingly favoured references to popular films, dances and music styles, thereby constantly adapting to changing meanings of modernity as fads came and went. As women were the main household shoppers at the time, Stomatol advertisements were aimed particularly at this consumer group, with a strong focus on the importance of outward appearance to a successful life. Early advertisements drew upon classicist rhetoric, depicting women as “modern Venuses”. Following women’s political emancipation in 1919, advertisements instead encouraged them to be the “ideal Swedish girl” and warned that only Stomatol could help them fall in love and find a husband. Capitalising upon the growing wave of cultural nationalism in early 20th-century Sweden, Stomatol also emphasised the importance of tradition in its advertisements, incorporating national holidays and figures, as well as inherently Swedish quirks like queuing. As social democracy became the leading political ideology in the 1930s, attention turned instead to the sacredness of family life. At the same time, traditional sports became a major focus of marketing campaigns, influenced by Sweden’s major sporting international successes in the 1920s.

While it may seem contradictory to emphasise both modernity and tradition in advertisements, this was, in fact, relatively common in the marketing of beauty products and cosmetics at the time, with brands frequently drawing upon both science and mysticism (Santos, 2020; Eriksson and O’Hagan, 2021). As beauty was originally a kitchen physic, where preparations were made at home using plants, flowers and herbs, companies often exploited this tradition to invoke feelings of homeliness and safety, yet also added supporting scientific evidence to modernise and validate these traditions. Thus, we see a similar practice at work with Stomatol in its incorporation of technological inventions and new fashions, on the one hand, and Swedish values and traditions, on the other. Together, they achieve a balance, investing the toothpaste with a moral authority and legitimacy that entices consumers to buy into the lifestyle and desires that it promises (O’Hagan, 2021).

Another important factor to consider is the key aspect that unite all three themes: humour. In the early 20th century, humour in advertisements was deemed inappropriate and generally admonished, with brands advised to conform to the “reason why” approach. On the scant occasions that humour was used, it centred around wordplay, and it was not until the advent of radio and television that brands became more daring in their playfulness (Weinberger *et al.*, 2015). However, this case study of Stomatol shows that not only was humour central to its marketing practice from as early as 1900 but that this humour capitalised largely on the power of semiotics over language, using images that required a strong level of cultural knowledge to interpret successfully. We see this in the way that tubes of toothpaste are creatively embedded in advertisements as planes, cannons and Saint Lucy’s crown or how they form part of familiar “slice-of-life” scenes like queuing, morning gymnastics and Christmas. This was a daring practice that appears to have paid off as Stomatol rapidly grew to become Sweden’s biggest toothpaste brand in the country, outselling all its competitors (Jändel, 2008). Thus, Stomatol stands as a good example of how lifestyle marketing can be used effectively to sell an experience, successfully converting a country of non-commercial toothpaste users into avid toothpaste consumers and helping the brand to dominate the toothpaste market for the first half of the 20th century.



## Conclusion

Overall, this case study of Stomatol makes several important contributions to the study of historical marketing, both theoretically and practically.

On a general level, it demonstrates the importance of conducting research into historical advertisements to challenge the novelty of seemingly contemporary marketing practices, while more specifically, its focus on lifestyle marketing calls into question previous studies that have framed the strategy as something that emerged in the postmodern period in response to new consumption practices (Featherstone, 1987; Saviolo and Marazza, 2013). While its findings are in line with claims about lifestyle marketing made in other historical papers (Carnevali and Newton, 2013; French, 2017; Piggott, 2021), its Swedish focus adds a new dimension that redresses the overwhelmingly Anglocentric perspective in studies of the phenomenon and even suggests that Sweden was a particular trailblazer in the area (previous studies have all stated that toothpaste only turned to lifestyle marketing in the 1990s).

The visual social semiotic approach used to explore the Stomatol advertisements has brought to the fore the range of strategies that were mobilised by marketers to generate public interest in the toothpaste as a positive lifestyle choice. Focusing on the ways in which language, image, colour, typography, texture, layout and composition are used together in advertisements offers a new way for historians to explore how certain ideologies are depicted and used to persuade people to think about products in a particular way. Visual social semiotics helps draw out the types of ideas and beliefs that are foregrounded, abstracted or concealed through specific visual and verbal devices. Furthermore, it also points to their broader sociocultural consequences and how they work as part of a wider dialogue with the social world and appeal directly to the concerns of typical readers. Given these advantages, the current study posits visual social semiotics as an important methodology to be introduced to historical research on food marketing.

While many of Stomatol's marketing practices may seem commonplace today, they were both bold and revolutionary at the time. In their advertisements, Stomatol dared to do things that most other toothpaste brands did not or at least until decades later. Moreover, they did so with a uniquely Swedish twist, which was aided by the flexibilities of the country's cartel agreement around false advertising claims. Thus, this study makes clear that lifestyle marketing in contemporary advertisements as a whole – and toothpaste ads particularly – does not mark a radical break with older marketing practices. Rather, it represents the latest in a longer trajectory of patterned practices and uses reflective of the ongoing interest in appealing to consumer behaviours and values, as well as keeping abreast of broader sociocultural developments. The knowledge gained through such findings can offer a critical space for consumers to reflect on contemporary examples of lifestyle marketing and, thus, empower them to be more aware of the claims made. Additionally, through its sustained focus on Stomatol, this study also suggests that Sweden was, in fact, one of the early pioneers of this marketing strategy. Further investigations into non-Anglo countries when conducting research into lifestyle marketing can, therefore, help build a more nuanced perspective on its origins and have the potential to reveal new insights that destabilise the “novelty” of (largely) US practices.

## Notes

1. The structure of Sweden's advertising industry was also influential in the lifestyle marketing approach used to sell other items, including radium-based products (Eriksson and O'Hagan, 2021),

- cod liver oil (O'Hagan and Eriksson, forthcoming) and chlorophyll-based products (O'Hagan, forthcoming).
2. In the early 20th century, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia had gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, but large parts of their ethnic populations remained under Ottoman rule. Consequently, in 1912, the four countries formed the Balkan League and attacked the Ottoman Empire. Although the conflict was resolved eight months later with the Treaty of London, a Second War broke out in June 1913 when Bulgaria, displeased with the loss of Macedonia, attacked its formed Balkan League allies (Glenny, 2017).
  3. "Man saknar ej kon förrän båset är tomt", "medan gräset växer dör kon" and "de gamla skall man ära, de unga skall man lära" in Swedish.
  4. Allsvenskan 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.
  5. "Sträck på er så ni blir rak som en eldgaffel" in Swedish.

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### Further reading

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