

# “Welcome to pure food city”: tracing discourses of health in the promotional publications of the Postum Cereal Company, 1920-1925

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to investigate three promotional publications produced by the Postum Cereal Company – *A Trip Through Postunville (1920)*, *How I Make Postum (1924)* and *The Wonderful Lunch Boxes (1925)* – with the aim of understanding how language and other semiotic resources are used to promote its products as good and healthy choices.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The three publications were collected from the HathiTrust Digital Library and University of South Florida Tampa Special Collections. They were subjected to multimodal critical discourse analysis to tease out their subtle characteristics and how a combination of language, image, colour, typography and composition are used to represent certain ideas and values related to health and well-being.

**Findings** – The publications subscribe to three distinct genres – “inside the factory”, “friendly spokesperson” and “fictional world” – each of which are aimed at different target audiences. The first seeks to promote Postum as an open and transparent company; the second to promote Postum as a company that cares about its consumers; and the third to promote the health benefits of Postum in a fun and accessible manner. Nonetheless, they are united in their overall objective to link the regular consumption of Postum as essential for good health.

**Originality/value** – To date, few studies have been conducted on the Postum Cereal Company, while the limited research conducted on promotional publications has tended to overlook discourses of health and well-being. The three genres outlined in this study, thus, have the potential to foster a reappraisal of promotional publications and showcase their ability to offer new understandings on historical approaches to marketing, particularly the link with health and science.

**Keywords** Postum, Promotional pamphlets, Health, Well-being, Science, Marketing, Advertisements, Cereal, Wheat, Multimodal critical discourse analysis

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Throughout the early 20th century, public understanding of the relationship between food, bodies and health began to change as a result of rapidly developing scientific and medical



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discoveries (Madsen, 2017). In the USA, the bacteriological revolution, coupled with the revelation of high rates of child malnutrition, sparked a burgeoning health reform movement centred around strengthening resistance to disease through a combination of good diet, regular physical exercise, better hygiene and healthy sleep patterns (Lovett, 2005; Ruis, 2013). Out of this movement came a new health food industry that targeted the emerging middle classes and promoted care for the body as essential to both personal and national well-being. Central to the promotion of this message was advertising, which took on a “new scope and maturity” (Marchand, 1985, p. xxi) during this time due to the wide range of new products on the market, growing media channels and the increased literacy of the US population.

By the 1920s, advertisers had become “missionaries of modernity” (ibid), tapping into anxieties around health and well-being to produce food marketing campaigns informed by contemporary science and medicine. The messages in these advertisements were in line with those in the broader popular print culture of the period disseminated through cookbooks, magazines and health treatises and were, therefore, familiar to consumers. As chief caregivers, mothers were a particular focus, seen as requiring expert advice to keep their families healthy (Apple, 2006). Baby food (Apple, 1987; Cesiri, 2022), breakfast cereals (Kideckel, 2018), fruit and vegetables (Nelson *et al.*, 2020), “pure” foods (Toulin, 2014) and – following the discovery of vitamins – fortified foods (Apple, 1996) were all widely promoted as essential for good health. Even well-known brands like Coca-Cola and Heinz capitalised upon this interest, reframing their products as “good choices” for health-conscious consumers (Koehn, 1999; Lonier, 2010). At a time when the dangers of tobacco were not widely known, Lucky, Camel and a whole host of other cigarette brands also stepped into the debate, with advertisements featuring doctor endorsements and scientific jargon, as well as beautiful women in a bid to portray them as key to female emancipation (Beard and Klyueva, 2010; Topić, 2021).

While food companies tended to advertise their products in newspapers and on billboards, those with a large marketing budget also relied on promotional publications, such as pamphlets and books. These were typically distributed through letterboxes but could also be given away as freebies when purchasing a particular product and, in some cases, even adopted by schools to use in Home Economics classes. Promotional publications drew upon earlier traditions of trade cards and handbills and came in a wide range of formats and lengths with content tailored to their target audience. However, they all served one clear goal: to promote and create a good impression of the food company and win over (new) consumers. By the 1920s, this goal was often achieved through references to health and well-being (Petty, 2019).

One particular company that excelled in the use of promotional publications was the Postum Cereal Company. Founded in 1895 in Battle Creek, Michigan, Postum specialised in the manufacture of breakfast cereals and was one of the first food companies to invest a considerable amount of its annual income into marketing. By the 1920s, Postum was one of the biggest and well-known food companies in the USA, making annual profits of \$101m, producing 6–7 million packages a month and expanding beyond North America to launch its products in Europe (Zimmerman, 1945). Despite decreasing popularity over the past 100 years, Postum is still in existence today, now owned by Eliza’s Quest Food and focused solely on the production of a roasted grain coffee substitute (Postum, 2023).

This paper investigates three of the promotional publications produced by Postum – *A Trip Through Postumville* (1920), *How I Make Postum* (1924) and *The Wonderful Lunch Boxes* (1925) – with the aim of understanding how discourses of health and well-being are created and linked directly to the regular consumption of a Postum product. Drawing upon a

social semiotic perspective, it asks specifically *how are language and other semiotic resources (e.g. image, colour, typography, layout and composition) used in Postum's promotional publications to promote its products as good and healthy choices?* The publications are approached through multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), which is a method to reveal how certain ideas and values are represented and conveyed in texts (Ledin and Machin, 2018, 2020). Applied to this study, MCDA is able to tease out the subtle characteristics of the publications, identifying their individual aims and target audiences, as well as the linguistic and other semiotic strategies used to convey healthiness and fitness. It finds that each has a different focus, subscribing to three distinct genres: “inside the factory”, “friendly spokesperson” and “fictional world”. The first seeks to promote Postum as an open and transparent company; the second to promote Postum as a company that cares about its consumers; and the third to promote the health benefits of Postum in a fun and accessible manner. Nonetheless, they are all united in their overall objective to link the regular consumption of Postum to good health.

To date, much research on historical promotional pamphlets and books has been focused on their early use in the context of patent medicines (Young, 2015; Mackintosh, 2017; Petty, 2019; Segal, 2020) and their uptake by travel companies in the 19th century (Adams, 2014; Symes, 2016). This is in marked contrast to their trade card and handbill predecessors, where much academic work has been carried out on food products in relation to circulation and exchange (Wigston Smith, 2011; Hubbard, 2012), patterns of consumption (Black, 2009; Sims, 2012), rhetorical functions (Petegree and der Weduwen, 2020) and multimodal content (Mullini, 2015). While some work has been carried out on the use of promotional pamphlets and books by branded foods (Apple, 1995, 2006 on Mellin's and Smith, Kline and French; Asquith, 2011 on Heinz), to date, no study has looked at the Postum Cereal Company, despite being one of the major US food companies of the early 20th century (Prendergast, 2010 for exceptions). Furthermore, the majority of previous work has only paid cursory attention to the link between health and science, particularly in terms of how the verbal and visual work together to promote products as essential for well-being. The findings of this study, thus, have the potential to foster a reappraisal of promotional publications and showcase their ability to provide new understandings of discourses of health and well-being in both historical and contemporary marketing. In doing so, they will also highlight Postum as an innovator in the area of food marketing.

Specifically, the three types of promotional publications identified and the linguistic/semiotic strategies they use can serve as categorisation criteria for future marketing studies into the promotional publications of other food brands, as well as a starting point to track their evolution over the past 100 years. On a theoretical level, the historical application of MCDA is also important for the development of social semiotics as, too often, the theory is applied only to contemporary forms of advertising, which risks overstating the novelty of certain marketing practices (Makoni, 2012; Edwards and Milani, 2014; Brookes *et al.*, 2016; Rodgers, 2020; Bouvier and Chen, 2021; Fernández-Vázquez, 2021; Chen and Eriksson, 2022). Now in the internet age, promotional pamphlets/books have taken a new form online on product websites and social media pages, yet many of the same strategies as those in the 1920s are used to convey openness and transparency, social consciousness and health. Using MCDA to situate these texts in a broader historical trajectory, thus, demonstrates a deeper awareness of the ongoing link between socially-situated media and the wider visual environment by which readers learn and live, the role of earlier historical conventions of meaning-making in certain linguistic/semiotic choices and understandings of health discourses, as well as how these may change in response to scientific, medical and technological innovation (O'Hagan, 2022a, 2022b). On a practical level, the findings will be

of importance to brands and advertisers in understanding the value of tried-and-tested marketing strategies around health and well-being. They will also be of particular relevance for consumers, providing them with critical distance from their current experiences of marketing and, therefore, enabling them to reflect on the veracity of information presented to them and make more informed choices about products that are framed as indispensable for their health.

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### **The Postum Cereal Company: “There’s a reason”**

The Postum Cereal Company was founded in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1895 by C.W. Post. Post was originally a farm implement manufacturer, but he became interested in the chemistry of digestion and the relationship between foods and health as a result of his long history of mental and physical illness [1]. In 1891, Post became a patient at the Battle Creek Sanatorium operated by Dr John Harvey Kellogg, where his interest in dietetics further developed. One year later, Post established his own small sanatorium called La Vita Inn. During this time, he continued studying dietetics, which led to the creation of Postum in 1894: a powdered roasted grain coffee substitute. Convinced that he had discovered a lucrative product, Post used his last resources to purchase a barn, where he began the manufacture of Postum one year later. He convinced the local grocer E.J. Herrick to purchase a case of the product and then advertised it in the local newspaper with the slogan “there’s a reason”. Postum sold out instantly, leading other grocers to follow suit and purchase their own cases. Through these sales, Post earned enough to construct a new building and take on more employees.

After several years of experiments to find a nourishing food that was crisp enough to encourage chewing and, thus, aid digestion, Post created Grape Nuts in 1897. Grape Nuts was a dry cereal made of wheat and barley and quickly became a bestselling product for the Postum Cereal Company. The success of Grape Nuts led to further experiments by Post into cereals, resulting in Elijah’s Manna (later Post Toasties) in 1904. Post also continued perfecting Postum, producing an instant version of the beverage in 1911.

Post was a shrewd businessman with a flare for marketing. Initially, he took out advertisements with the C.H. Fuller Advertising Agency in Chicago, all of which he wrote himself, but in 1903, he decided to set up his own in-house advertising agency. Within ten years, Postum had more than \$10 million in capital, which was in no small part down to the \$400,000 it spent on advertising per year. The huge success of Postum in the USA led Post to expand the business into Britain and other European countries over the first decade of the early 20th century. Keen to be transparent with consumers, in 1905, Post decided to open up the Postum factory (now a power plant with steam and electricity) to the general public and offer tours, which furthered the company’s popularity. By this time, the company employed 600 people and produced 6–7 million packages a month. As part of the tour, visitors could also explore the model town – Post City – that had developed around the factory and where workers lived in houses offered at competitive rates by Post. During tours, it was emphasised that Postum workers were the highest paid in the industry and had exemplary working conditions. However, this was largely because Post was a staunch opponent of the trade union movement and strongly opposed any form of boycott, strike or lockout.

Still plagued by poor health, in 1914, Post died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Postum – now worth \$20m – was taken over by his daughter Marjorie Merriweather Post and, later, her husband Edward F. Hutton. Further innovations took place under their management, such as the replacement of wooden buildings with brick, steel and concrete (1918), the company becoming incorporated (1922) and the introduction of direct sale to wholesale grocers instead of brokers (1923). They also began to make corporate acquisitions of such companies as Jell-O

(1925), Maxwell House (1928) and the General Foods Company (1929). By the end of the 1920s, Postum was making annual profits of \$101m.

Essential to the ever-increasing growth of Postum was the continued focus on marketing, in keeping with Post's own vision. While newspaper advertisements were still a major platform for such purposes, an equally important format became promotional pamphlets and books.

### Promotional pamphlets and books as marketing tools

Pamphlets can be defined as "a complete publication of generally less than 80 pages, stitched or stapled together and usually having a paper cover" ([Dictionary.com, 2023](#)). They have a long association with politics and religion and, in the pre-magazine era, were often used to present partisan views on topical issues, such as slavery, temperance and Chartism. They were also adopted by members of parliament to publish speeches, promote election manifestos or deliver reports on political meetings. Pamphlets grew in popularity in the 19th century as a response to densely populated industrial cities, the increasing importance of travel and communications and the rise of working-class literacy ([Humphries, 2011](#)). With their focus on satire, cartoons and rhymes, they offered a quick and cheap way of disseminating information.

Promotional pamphlets, which are used by companies to advertise their products, also became widespread in the mid-19th century. By the early 20th century, promotional books (hardback equivalents) were also being widely disseminated as a result of the introduction of halftone block printing, chromolithography, stereotyping and a monotype print system, which had led to dramatic decreases in book production costs ([McKitterick, 2006](#)). However, both promotional pamphlets and books have their origins in two earlier forms of marketing: the trade card and the handbill.

Trade cards were small rectangular cards featuring a company address, which merchants and traders distributed to their customers. They were exchanged in social circles in major European cities from as early as the 17th century, but their use became extensive in the USA following the American Civil War ([Hale, 2000](#)). Early trade cards were textual, but illustrations were frequently used following the advent of commercial engraving and lithography in the 18th century. They later evolved into what we term business cards today. Handbills, on the other hand, were small printed notices used to advertise a particular company. Like trade cards, they also have their origins in the 17th century. They were often distributed by hand in city or town centres but could also be sewn within the pages of journals ([Mullini, 2015](#)).

Promotional pamphlets were first used for patent medicines, which gave them a somewhat dubious reputation ([Young, 2015](#); [Mackintosh, 2017](#); [Petty, 2019](#); [Segal, 2020](#)). However, this reputation improved following the establishment of branded foods in the mid-19th century. Promotional pamphlets (and later, promotional books) were quickly adopted by these food companies to offer assurance of consistent high standards from a trusted source. They were also subsequently taken up by travel companies ([Adams, 2014](#); [Symes, 2016](#)). These publications were often produced in-house by companies, which gave them complete creative freedom when it came to content, length and design. No one format existed; pamphlets and books were created and adapted based on the target audience and the company's overarching goal. Some had a catalogue function featuring images of product lines and prices, while others simply outlined the company's history. Others still included the voices of notable spokespeople, such as doctors or scientists, to create an aura of trust and respectability. The pamphlets and books were not only typically sent by mail or posted through letterboxes but were also given away free upon the purchase of a particular

product. In this way, they could be self-perpetuating, advocating an ideal that consumers latched onto, which encouraged brand loyalty (Asquith, 2011, p. 68).

Many leading brands of the period produced promotional pamphlets and books, such as Heinz (Asquith, 2011), Smith, Kline and French (Apple, 2006) and Mellin's (Apple, 1995). However, as a marketing innovator, Postum was one of the very first, adopting them as early as 1906. Their promotional book *This Journey Through the Pure Food Factories That Make Postum and Grape Nuts* (1906) offered a first look behind the doors of the Postum factory. It tied in with the introduction of physical tours around the Postum factory, thereby offering consumers a chance to experience this from the comfort of their own homes. The book was updated in 1920 under the name *A Trip Through Postumville*. In 1914, Postum took their first foray into the world of children's marketing with the work of fiction *The Tale of the Toastie Elfs*, which came free with packs of cereal. It told the story of a boy who falls asleep in a field, and a rabbit shows him how elves make Post Toasties. The success of the storybook saw other similar releases throughout the 1920s, including *Hidden Treasure* (1925), *The Wonderful Lunch Boxes* (1925) and *The Postum Story Book* (1929). Postum also released a recipe book *Good Things to Eat from Wellville* in 1916 and a pamphlet from company spokesperson Carrie Blanchard *How I Make Postum* in 1924. Postum continued to produce promotional pamphlets and books up until the 1950s, although not on the same prolific level as during the height of its popularity in the 1920s. After this date, its marketing department decided to shift its attention towards radio and television advertisements instead.

#### Data sources and methodology

The material under investigation in this paper consists of three promotional publications produced by the Postum Cereal Company between 1920 and 1925. They are part of a larger study into the marketing practices of Postum in the early 20th century. At this time, Postum was one of the leading food companies in the USA and was well known for its extensive and innovative marketing campaigns (Prendergast, 2010). By the 1920s, promotional publications were a major way in which it disseminated information to consumers. Although other companies in the period also relied on promotional publications as a form of marketing (e.g. Heinz and Hershey in the USA; Cadbury and Rowntree in the UK), Postum stands out in the way that it rapidly developed different types of publications, adapting both content and format to appeal to a broad range of audiences.

As part of this study, the WorldCat library database was searched to identify all promotional publications released by Postum between 1900 and 1930. This yielded 18 results in total. The relatively low number is due to the fact that Postum constantly updated and rereleased the same publications over this 30-year period rather than continually producing new ones. At this point, it is necessary to state that pamphlets and books were included in the study because they both serve the same purpose: as non-commercial texts produced cheaply to promote Postum. Their only difference lies in the fact that pamphlets have paper covers, while books have hardboard covers. All 18 publications are in the public domain, but only 11 of the 18 were available digitally – either through the Hathi Trust (a website that hosts public domain materials digitised by Google, the Internet Archive or library-in house operations) or by contacting libraries directly. Using these 11, three major genres were identified into which the publications can be split:

- (1) “inside the factory”, which offers a sneak peek into how Postum is made;
- (2) “friendly spokesperson”, which provides helpful advice to consumers; and
- (3) “fictional world”, which uses storytelling to promote Postum as a healthy product.

One publication representative of each genre (see [Table 1](#) for details) was then chosen and subjected to a detailed MCDA. These publications were selected based on their recurring linguistic and semiotic features, which fulfilled the overarching aim of promoting health and well-being, as well as the specific individual concept of each genre (transparency, benevolence and playfulness, respectively). The results are outlined in the remaining sections of this paper.

MCDA is aligned with the theoretical perspective of social semiotics and provides a set of analytical tools to critically interrogate how language and other semiotic resources, such as images, colour and typography, shape what we do, how we think and how we experience the world. The approach to MCDA used in this paper draws particularly on the work of [Ledin and Machin \(2018, 2020\)](#) and concerns the following key elements:

- language (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, use of metaphor and rhetoric);
- image (e.g. people, actions, perspectives, angles and distance);
- colour (e.g. the emotions, attitudes and values conveyed by certain colours);
- typography (e.g. the cultural connotations of certain typefaces); and
- layout and composition (e.g. salience, framing, coordination and hierarchies)

Applying MCDA to each publication facilitated an understanding of how the different modes work together to create meaning and for what purposes, as well as how to identify any buried discourses and their functions, particularly in the context of health and well-being. While MCDA has been used in previous studies to explore pamphlets ([Makoni, 2012](#) on family planning pamphlets; [Edwards and Milani, 2014](#) on herbalist pamphlets; [Brookes et al., 2016](#); [Rodgers, 2020](#) on infant feeding pamphlets), their focus was on contemporary medical informational materials. This study is, thus, the first to apply MCDA to historical food pamphlets.

### ***A Trip Through Postumville (1920): Inside the Factory***

*A Trip Through Postumville* is a 48-page promotional book that was published in 1920 by the Postum Cereal Company with the aim of offering consumers an inside look into the Postum factory. The book came free with packets of Postum cereal, but it could also be picked up as a souvenir for all those who underwent tours of the Postum factory – a practice which had started in 1905. Factory tours – and the supporting promotional book – were particularly important for Postum in its bid to be transparent with consumers, following a series of scandals that had marred its reputation. In 1907, C.W. Post was made to change the name of his cereal Elijah's Manna to Post Toasties because of its blasphemous biblical reference, while in 1910, *Collier's Weekly* sued Post for libel after he questioned the author's mental

Name	Genre	Source	How accessed
<i>A Trip Through Postumville</i> (1920)	Inside the factory	University of Michigan	Hathi Trust website
<i>How I Make Postum</i> (1924)	The friendly spokesperson	McGill University	Hathi Trust website
<i>The Wonderful Lunch Boxes</i> (1925)	The fictional world	University of Tampa	Digitised and sent to me electronically

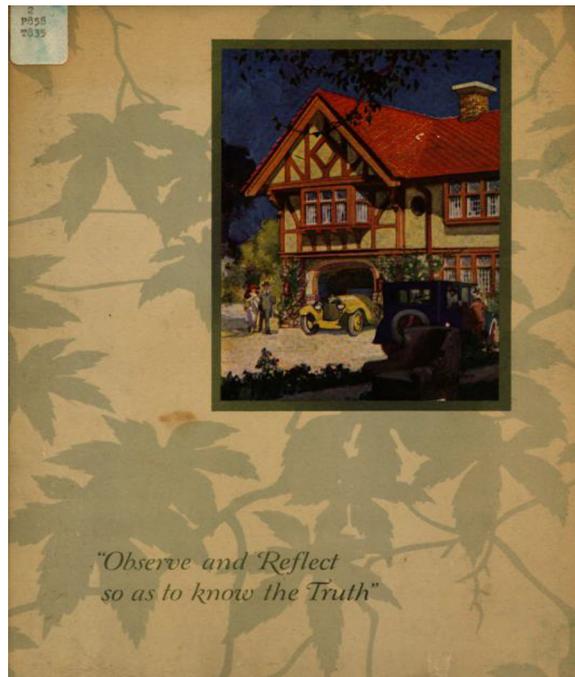
Source: Author's own work

**Table 1.**  
Postum publications under study

capacity following the criticism of Postum's claim that Grape Nuts cured appendicitis (Collier, 1911) [2]. Post had also been accused of stealing Kellogg's recipes for Caramel Coffee, Corn Flakes and Malted Nuts, which he vehemently denied (Markel, 2017). Over its 48 pages, Postum, thus, aimed to take potential consumers on a "spiritual journey" through its factory, emphasising its innovative processes along the way, which made it trustworthy and honest.

The front cover of *A Trip Through Postumville* gives no indication of the book's contents whatsoever. It shows the image of a gabled Tudor-style cottage amid landscaped gardens, with two lavish cars parked outside and several middle-class figures (Figure 1) – images more synonymous with a work of fiction than a factual account of a factory, therefore pushing genre boundaries and encouraging "schema refreshment" (Semino, 1995) (i.e. shaking up conventional ways of seeing the world). This schema refreshment is furthered by the biblical-sounding quote on the front cover in place of a title – "Observe and reflect so as to know the truth" – which asks readers to put aside any prejudices and open their minds to what Postum is about to show them. At this stage, the only subtle indications of the book's theme are the pale wheat colour of its boards and the grey leaf patterns, which provide a symbolic representation of the natural world and are linked to health discourses (Ledin and Machin, 2018, p. 130).

The book's front matter does little to clarify the content: the epigraph states "here let art be used to soften commerce; to rest the soul from the tire of the day," while the foreword from C.W. Post claims that his "mission will have been fulfilled" if the book "serves to



**Figure 1.**  
*A Trip Through  
Postumville* (1920)

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**Source:** Public Domain book held in University of Michigan and digitised on HathiTrust

arouse happy remembrance of a one-time visit” or “inspires the wish to see the place for the first time”. Although the Postum factory is yet to be introduced, this value-laden language presents it as some form of paradise or utopia that will have a transformational effect on a person’s life. Page 7’s title page finally offers more clarity, introducing *A Trip Through Postumville where Postum Cereal Instant Postum Grape-Nuts Post Toasties, etc., are made*. Giving the factory its own town name (Postumville) turns each product into a stop on a train ride, therefore setting up a “route along which the spectator is guided” (Verhoeff, 2012, p. 420). This framing has a *mise-en-scène* function, relying on various semiotic resources (e.g. photographs, arrows, maps and verbal commands) to encourage movement and mobile visual experiences without one even having to leave the comfort of their own home.

Finally, on page 9, the book begins, telling the story of C.M. Post in an account that is packed with religious undertones and makes him sound like a saviour. Chapp (2012) notes a long history of religious rhetoric in civil contexts, such as politics and advertising. He argues that it is effective because it draws on a familiar setting to resonate with emotions and create a sense of attachment, belonging and empathy. We see this here in the typical redemption story of Post who faced many challenges and setbacks but kept pushing forward because “destiny had given him the will for achievement” and he “conceived an ideal” of a better future for everyone. “‘This shall be my beginning’, he said and so he went resolutely forward”, continues the text, almost mimicking the words of the Lord to Moses in Exodus 12:2 [3]. Continuing the religious parallels, the book then goes on to describe the humble origins of Postum through the image of a simple white timber frame building (Figure 2a) and accompanying text explaining that this “Little White Barn” is where it all started. Both the building and its name carry suggestions of a simple Methodist or Pentecostal chapel,



**A** LITTLE white frame building on a farm hillside was the nucleus of the vast industrial establishment of the Postum Cereal Company of today. This little white building was the place. A demand, an idea, a purpose; and faith and courage and energy, were the reasons.

The place of beginning is still marked by the “Little White Barn,” and its inscription, “Started here January 1, 1895,” smiling out upon its vast surroundings, tells with justifiable pride how far and fast the beginning has grown into strength, scope and beauty.

The charm of the hillside orchard has been preserved, the grace of the hillside slopes has been perfected, and into this setting has been built the great city of industry, where, in an atmosphere of business sunshine and under conditions of sanitary purity, are produced the Postum Company’s pure food products for all the world.

Day and night the great factories run. Day and night a continuous stream of grain from America’s rich fields is fed into the hungry machines. Carloads of grain are placed on one of the sidings and in a few minutes the contents are whisked away into elevators and storage tanks of enormous capacity. We will soon see how this

(a)



(b)

**Notes:** (a) The origins of Postum; (b) The administration building

**Source:** Public Domain book held in University of Michigan and digitised on HathiTrust

**Figure 2.**  
*A Trip Through Postumville* (1920)

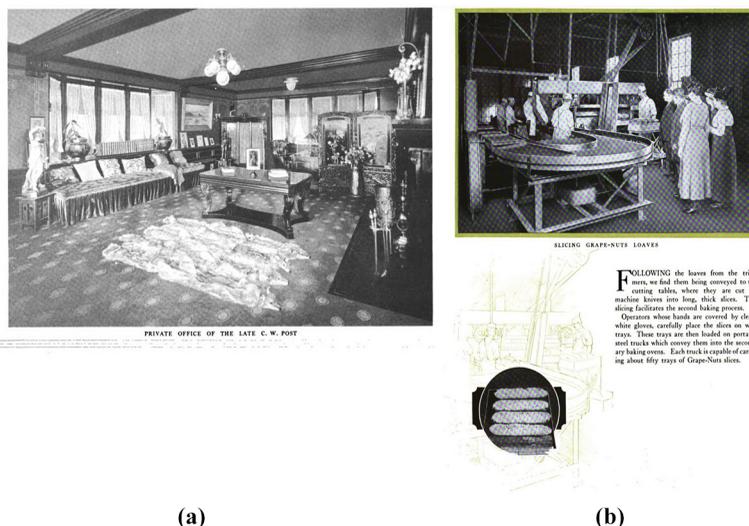
adding to the religious rhetoric of Postum, which is further accentuated by the claim that “a demand, an idea, a purpose, faith and courage and energy” are the reasons behind its success. These humble origins are contrasted with the “great city of industry” that has developed around the barn. However, Postum is keen to stress that the “charm of the hillside orchard” and the “grace of the hillside slopes” have been preserved. The choice of nouns and adjectives serves to create a harmony between traditional/natural and modern/manmade ways of life (O’Hagan and Eriksson, 2022). Detailed descriptions of the panoramas across Postumville connote a “scripting of performance” (Verhoeff, 2012, p. 42), their spatial composition informing how readers are expected to look, move and understand what is seen (i.e. from a bird’s eye view, taking in the factories below before coming down to land in front of the first building). Mikkola (2020) believes that such perspectives create alternative interpretations of familiar landscapes, thereby transforming a seemingly mundane view into a spectacular sight.

The book then follows a logical order around the factory, almost guiding readers in the style of a click-and-point adventure novel or video (Burn and Parker, 2003; Rowsell, 2014). However, as they enter the first building – the Administration Building – they are met with a rather unexpected sight: an opulent hallway decorated with art nouveau wallpaper and carpeting, as well as fancy artwork and furnishings (Figure 2b). The text explains that:

Here and there are brilliant examples of Venetian carving, bits of carved inscriptions from the ruins of Rome; specimens of Moorish art, and finely wrought suits of armor, together with interesting Indian and prehistoric relics from the Southwest; all of which combine with the paintings to hold the visitor entranced in the unusual atmosphere of the place.

The room is one more akin to a museum than a factory, the elaborate display of wealth showcasing Postum’s success, adding to its utopian image and promoting the product as a way of life rather than simply a consumer good. This utopia is also projected through a photograph of Post’s office, which has supposedly been left untouched in homage to him, thereby acquiring a shrine-like status (Figure 3a). With its fresh flowers, open curtains and carefully arranged cushions, books and photographs, the office is clearly a “styling of the self” (O’Hagan and Spilioti, 2021, p. 7), which serves to create a positive impression of Post. Subverting genre conventions once again, the next six pages of the book feature glossy images of some of the artwork held in the Administration Building, such as *Waterfront in Naples* by W.M Hahn and *Early Summer – Sussex* by Mark Fisher, as well as photographs of the various corridors filled with ancient antiquities. Despite having no direct relevance to Postum, the visuals have a symbolic function: to display the company’s riches.

Readers are then directed towards the manufacturing departments of Postumville. Much more in keeping with expectations, each page offers a step-by-step guide to the creation of a specific product (e.g. Grape Nuts and Postum), taking readers methodically through each process by means of explanatory text and an accompanying photograph before moving them onto the next room with a friendly prompt (e.g. “now let us go to the bakery”; “before going in, stop for a moment and see [...]”). The accompanying explanatory text boasts a conventional, formal script on a sterile white background which serves as a form of “power dressing” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002, p. 348) connoting authority and order. It also tends to be highly scientific and unlikely to be understood by the average consumer (e.g. “the moisture is evaporated and the dextrinization of the cereal starch is completed”). However, as Chen and Eriksson (2022) argue in their study of functional drink advertisements, such language sounds authoritative and, therefore, convincing for readers in framing companies as forward-thinking. The photographs, which depict such processes as flour grinding, dough kneading, loaf moulding, baking, slicing and packing, also help to break down



(a)

(b)

**Notes:** (a) C.W. Post's office; (b) Factory tour

**Source:** Public Domain book held in University of Michigan and digitised on HathiTrust

**Figure 3.**  
*A Trip Through  
Postumville (1920)*

complex meanings. They also have a strong rhetorical function, emphasising Postum's innovation through images of workers in white lab coats, large machinery and metallic vats – a common feature of early 20th-century food advertisements (McClintock, 1995). Some of the photographs also include groups of visitors admiring a specific process in the factory (Figure 3b); such images, according to O'Hagan and Serafinelli (2022), help readers to feel more immersed in the scene as they embody the visitors and construct illusory experiences where they are transferred to the factory setting in their minds.

Throughout the factory tour, there is also a major emphasis on purity and cleanliness, which is described as “the greatest of all virtues in food production”. This emphasis on purity was in reference to the 1906 Pure Foods and Drugs Act in the USA, which prohibited the sale of misbranded or adulterated food and drugs. However, purity also became appropriated by the food industry and acquired more rhetorical meanings tied up with physical, mental and spiritual purity (Amos *et al.*, 2021). We see this through Postum's emphasis on white: “hands covered by clean white gloves”, “girls in clean white aprons and caps. McClintock (1995, p. 211) sees such references in early 20th-century advertisements as an indication that a person had withstood “the fetid effluvia of the slums, the belching smoke of industry, social agitation, economic upheaval and restored the imperial body politic and the race”. In other cases, Postum makes an effort to break down hard science for readers, with constant comparisons between machines and humans (e.g. “machines almost human in their operations”; “machines with almost human intelligence”), as well as links to relevant aspects of everyday life (e.g. “floors as a clean as a kitchen table”; “flakes flying about like snowflakes”). These devices are still commonly used in contemporary food marketing to make complex information more palatable and the product, thus, more relevant to a person's needs (Chen and Eriksson, 2019a). Statistics are also frequently drawn upon to indicate transparency and the impressive extent of Postum's operations (e.g. “25

large ovens with a capacity of 190 loaves each bake approximately 40,000 loaves per day”), while diminutives are used to play down anything potentially unhealthy in the products produced (e.g. “just a pinch of salt”; “sweetened a trifle with sugar”). Again, both strategies still feature heavily in contemporary food marketing (O’Hagan, 2021a).

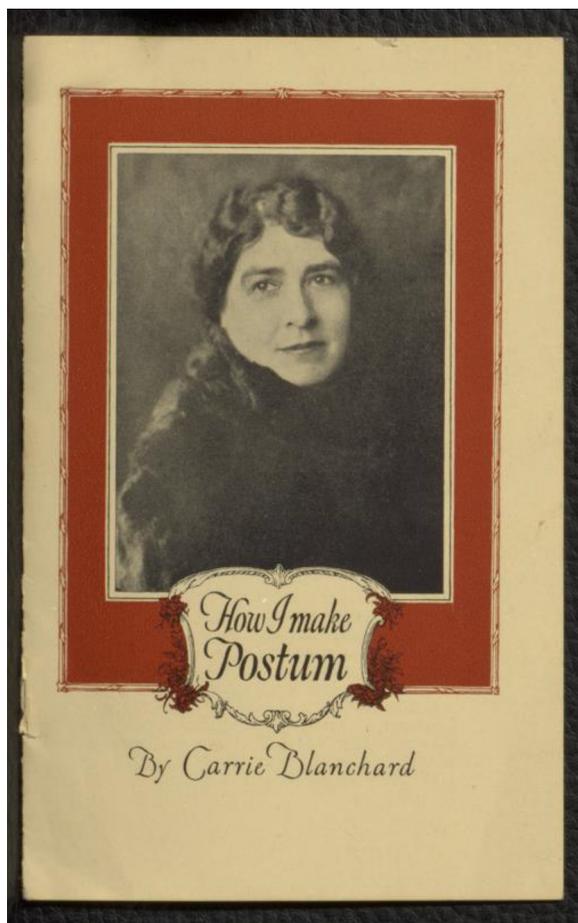
Once the tour is completed, readers are directed to the factory lunchroom. Three framed photographs show rows of visitors sampling products and talking animatedly. The composition prompts readers to immerse themselves in the image and become part of the scene as one more satisfied consumer – a request strengthened by the visual triadic structure. They are then encouraged to explore the landscaped gardens, with accompanying photographs showing beautiful lawns with tree-lined pathways. This shifts reality from the practical factory to a utopic Garden of Eden, going full circle on the spiritual journey that was started when viewing Postumville from above. Readers are asked, “Is there any pleasure like making a new friend or greeting an old one?” which humanises the factory and its products, while the claim “the reward of service is to have won your friendship” cleverly suggests that Postum is more interested in consumer loyalty and trust than financial gain. Similar strategies can be found in the “consumer storytelling” (Chen and Eriksson, 2019b) of modern food brands, which promotes a moral discourse around both conscious capitalism and citizen consumer, simultaneously differentiating the company from others and making consumers feel “good” and responsible. The book then ends with a striking image of the four products produced by Postum in their final packaging, accompanied by an aerial view of Postumville, described as a “Pure Food City”. The original Little White Barn is cleverly overlaid across the image, creating a “bleeding of meaning” (Ledin and Machin, 2020, p. 182), which suggests that Postum has never forgotten its roots – somewhat ironic considering the lavish art displays in the administration building.

### ***How I Make Postum* (1924): The Friendly Spokesperson**

Published in 1924, *How I Make Postum* was an eight-page pamphlet distributed to all consumers who signed up for Postum’s “30-day test”. The 30-day test was promoted widely in Postum advertisements of the period. Each advertisement included a free-post coupon, which customers could exchange for a week’s free supply of Postum. They were then encouraged to consume the beverage for a further three weeks to bring about a change in their physical and mental health.

The pamphlet’s cover (Figure 4) shows an elegant black and white portrait image of a middle-aged woman. It echoes the *cartes de visites* or cabinet cards of the late 19th century, which were early stylisations of self that enabled people to present themselves in a particular way to viewers (O’Hagan and Spilioti, 2021). The book’s title *How I Make Postum*, which overlaps the portrait, and the author’s name below (“by Carrie Blanchard”) leads us to make a connection and infer that the woman in the image must be Carrie Blanchard. The sloping, italicised font mimics handwriting, connoting informality and that a “human touch and care” (Ledin and Machin, 2020, p. 127) has gone into the preparation of the pamphlet. These forms of “confessional narrative” are seen by Rodgers (2020) as a key persuasive strategy in promotional pamphlets. Termed “mythopoesis” by van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), they serve to legitimate the authority of “experts” through a friendly voice.

Although it is unlikely that consumers will know who Carrie is or if indeed she existed, *50 Years at Post Products* (Zimmerman, 1945) reveals that Carrie was a well-loved employee who started working for the company in 1913 and took visitors on guided tours of the Postum plant for 27 years. Here, she stands in as a physical representation of the company, the pronoun “I” personalising the process of making the product and



**Source:** Public Domain book held in McGill University and digitised on HathiTrust

**Figure 4.**  
*How I Make Postum*  
(1924)

playing down the fact that it is, in fact, the result of an industrial process made by large machines and hundreds of people. In this way, it promotes an earlier period of “kitchen physic” when remedies were made at home by family members (Santos, 2020). Thus, in contrast to *A Trip Through Postumville*, this pamphlet advocates an escape from modernity and a return to a simpler time. This also imbues Carrie with power as an authority figure representative of the days when there were “thin” networks of trust made up of friends and family as opposed to “thin” networks based around institutions produced by the industrial age (Putnam, 2000). This authority is further accentuated by the red border around her portrait, which carries qualities of royalty, passion, strength and energy (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002), as well as her off-centre gaze, which softens her demand and suggests that she is letting viewers in on a secret (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 120).

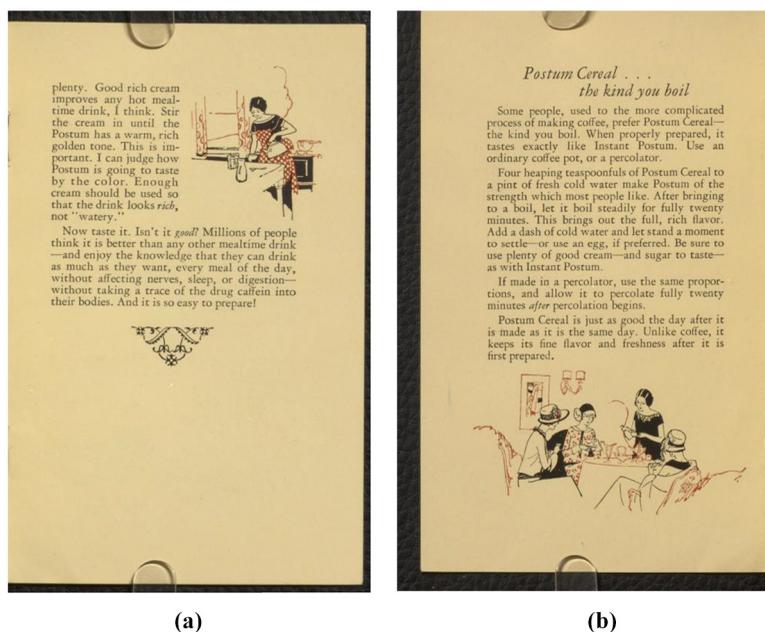
The book begins in an intimate manner, Carrie addressing the readers directly with “Dear Friend” in bold italicised red font, before continuing with “I am so glad you let me send you the first week’s supply of Postum”. This letter-writing format immediately creates a sense of camaraderie between Carrie and potential consumers because she is speaking as an equal rather than on a hierarchical level. The paragraph is full of “high modality” (ibid, 159) as Carrie states that she is “sure” that consumers will notice a difference by consuming Postum and that she “hopes” they will keep up the habit for the whole thirty days. A sense of homeliness and warmth is conveyed by the accompanying and inviting image of a steaming cup of Postum in a fancy cup and saucer, with a sugar bowl and a milk jug. In the next paragraph, Carrie very cleverly acts the role of housewife – the target audience of the pamphlet – who depends on advice from authority figures to help her run the family. She informs that “doctors tell me” the amount of caffeine in a cup of coffee is equivalent to that given as a dose in cases of heart failure. Whether or not this statement is true, it sounds shocking and builds a case for replacing coffee with Postum. This is emphasised by Carrie’s emotional appeal that “it seems terrible” that people take this “poisonous drug” regularly. She then says that people claim caffeine does not hurt them, but she has been “told by physicians” that strychnine can also be taken regularly without apparent ill effects. In calling caffeine a poison and comparing it to strychnine – a highly toxic alkaloid used as a pesticide – she creates an urgent sense of danger around coffee. Such scaremongering tactics can be found across advertisements of the period, which capitalise upon the growing public interest in health and use fear to advise on which products to take up and which ones to avoid (cf. O’Hagan, 2021c). It can also still be found today in promotional pamphlets which, influenced by neoliberal risk culture, draw upon the lexical fields of illness, infection and safety (cf. Brookes *et al.*, 2016; Rodgers, 2020).

The next three pages set out the problems with coffee and the benefits of Postum in a text-heavy format in line with the letter-writing style that the pamphlet advocates. It uses snappy statements and rhetorical questions to draw in readers (e.g. “Avoid stimulants. Do you remember this rule which was repeated too often at school?”), with Carrie arguing that people who want to “live wisely” will listen to her advice. This immediately creates a dichotomy between two types of consumers: those who are willing to give up coffee and are, therefore, sensible and care about their bodies, and those who are unwilling and, therefore, selfish (Apple, 1995). Carrie claims that caffeine might appear to give energy, but it is actually “robbing” from the body’s own energy reserve and when a life emergency comes [...] This sentence ends abruptly with an ellipsis, which “puts the emphasis more properly on the ‘you’” (D’Angelo, 1992, p. 341) and leaves the readers to fill in the blanks with all types of terrible possible scenarios. Carrie portrays caffeine intake as a frightening pandemic in her description of walking the streets and seeing “tired faces [...] men with dark circles beneath their eyes [...] splotchy skins [...] sallow complexions [...] lines of premature age”, which are all physical manifestations of “insufficient sleep, headaches, unwise eating”. She then sets herself out as a “saviour”, asserting that “turning men and women from the use of caffeine to Postum” is a “work worth while in the world”.

Directly addressing concerns in the popular press that Postum tasted foul, Carrie tells readers that “the principal thing” she wants them to remember is that “tastes differ” and that it probably took a long time to find the best way to prepare tea and coffee. To support her claims, she uses statistics, such as Postum is drunk by “2,000,000 American homes” and she has “personally served Postum to 500,000 people”. Although the statistics sound impressive, they have no references or concrete evidence. Nonetheless, the sheer quantities serve to build consumer faith in the product (cf. O’Hagan, 2021b). Consumer faith is also developed by describing the drink as “my Postum”, which makes it sound like Carrie is personally

responsible for the whole industrial process of creating Postum and, therefore, softens its commercial edge. This is underscored by the claim that the drink is made in “our kitchens”, which stretches the general definition of the word and makes the manufacture of Postum sound cosy and domestic. Carrie also gives instructions on how to prepare Postum, her rhetorical “isn't it good?” reflecting her position as the friendly housewife. A small image of a middle-class housewife preparing Postum in her kitchen (Figure 5a) accompanies the statement, which adds to the rhetoric. Her stylish black dress, hairstyle and polka dot apron stand in direct contrast to the clinical white lab coats seen in *A Trip Through Postumville* and work on two levels: creating an idealised view of the Postum factory and Carrie while also representing the kitchen of an average Postum consumer. According to Richards (1991, p. 134), embedding products in the “sanctum sanctorum” of the consumer was a common marketing strategy of the period, which turned them into unthreatening decorative features and created a feeling of authenticity. The gendered space of the kitchen also serves to frame the correct nutrition of children as a responsibility of mothers only – something still common today in promotional pamphlets (Brookes *et al.*, 2016).

The pamphlet then moves onto a new chapter entitled *Postum Cereal [. . .] the kind you boil*. Postum Cereal was the non-instant version of Postum that required a long period of percolation. Again, Carrie gives instructions on how to prepare it in a cordial manner, while the image alongside works to channel sociocultural meaning (Figure 5b). This time, rather than the kitchen, we see a scene from a dining room with four middle-class women waiting for Postum to brew before serving. This covertly creates a class barrier between Postum products, with original Postum being for “ladies of leisure” who have the time to sit back



**Notes:** (a) Kitchen scene; (b) Dining room scene

**Source:** Public Domain book held in McGill University and digitised on HathiTrust

**Figure 5.**  
*How I Make Postum*  
(1924)

and chat and Instant Postum being for those “on the go” (Levene, 2005; Turner, 2018 for similar discussions on margarine vs butter). The fact that the drink is being consumed in a dining room rather than a kitchen also adds to this stratified marketing. There is also a certain irony in Carrie’s advice for consumers to add “plenty of good cream and sugar to taste”. Not only does this imply that Postum is not particularly appetising (despite previously saying otherwise) but it also ends up making the drink just as unhealthy – if not more – than coffee because it is full of fat.

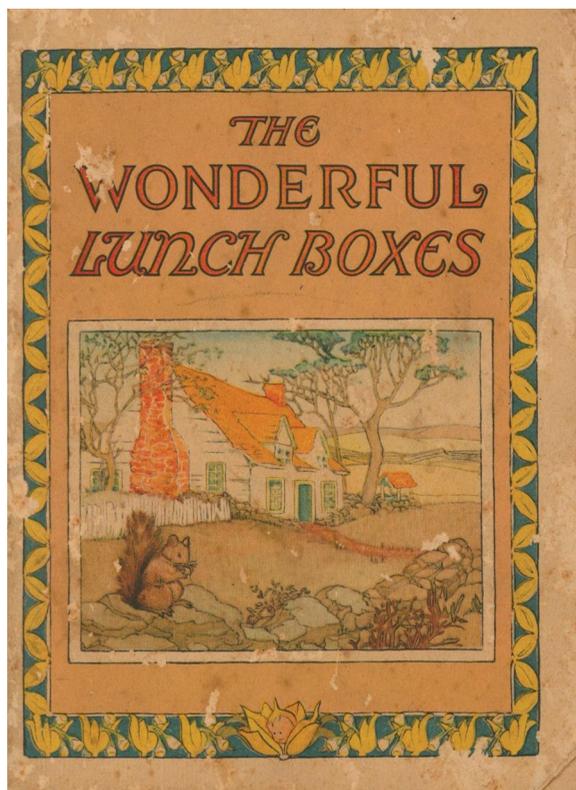
The final pages of the pamphlet shift the focus to children, tapping into the discourse of scientific motherhood. Coined by Apple (1995), “scientific motherhood” positions women as responsible for their families yet incapable of that responsibility without the intervention of experts. “Most people are wise enough to deny coffee to children”, Carrie states, implying that those who give coffee to their children are foolish. Expressions like “you know, of course, how badly coffee disagrees with many” serve a similar function, suggesting that all good mothers should possess this knowledge. Carrie also warns that action must be taken to “counteract drugging”, thereby directly calling upon mothers to buy Postum if they care about their child’s health. The accompanying image of a smiling blonde girl looking directly at the camera stresses the benefits of the product and convinces mothers that not to follow Postum’s advice is to be irresponsible and place their child in danger (O’Hagan, 2021b for similar images in other advertisements of the period). This strategy of addressing mothers directly and using close-up images of children to create a feeling of shared space and intimacy is still found today, most commonly in health pamphlets that promote “good” motherly practices like breastfeeding (c.f. Rodgers, 2020).

As she wraps up her “letter”, Carrie tells consumers once again that she is “glad” that they are making this “one easy step toward health” and that “thousands and thousands” have told her how Postum helped them to overcome headaches, indigestion, nervousness and sleeplessness. She is “confident” that they will have the same experience and “sure” that they will like Postum. These high-modality statements act as “reliable guides to the truth” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 154) and give consumers little room for manoeuvre in their views. In her study of family planning pamphlets, Makoni (2012) found that such statements served to highlight the “power of medicine and the powerlessness of women”. In other words, they devalue everyday women’s own knowledge and experiences regarding their families’ health and displace it with the privilege of “experts”. The pamphlet ends with an official Post Health Products seal featuring C.M. Post’s signature, which was developed in the same year and acts as a marker of authenticity.

### ***The Wonderful Lunch Boxes (1925): The Fictional World***

Published in 1925 by the Education Department of the Postum Cereal Company, *The Wonderful Lunch Boxes* is an 18-page storybook aimed at young children. Unlike the other two promotional publications that have been explored in this study, *The Wonderful Lunch Boxes* is a work of fiction in which Postum is covertly embedded into the story rather than being an overt feature. The book was typically given away with boxes of cereal produced by Postum and was a way of explaining the benefits of wheat to children in a subtle, fun and accessible way. This, in turn, might lead children to tell their parents about the product and encourage them to keep buying it. Upon publication, *The Wonderful Lunch Boxes* was also used in Home Economics classes across the USA (De Golyer, 2009).

With its striking red title, decorative floral border and colourful image of a farmhouse amid surrounding countryside, the front cover of the publication (Figure 6) resembles most other children’s books of the period. Just like *A Journey Through Postumville*, there is no indication at this stage that the book is an advertising tool, which makes its messages more impactful because it provokes subconscious reactions in readers (Elci and Sert, 2015). Across the front



**Source:** Public Domain book held in McGill University and digitised on HathiTrust

**Figure 6.**  
*The Wonderful Lunch  
Boxes* (1925)

matter is the recurring motif of a baby within a sheaf of corn, which bears a resemblance to Cicely Mary Barker's Flower Fairies illustrations. *Flower Fairies of the Spring* was published just two years earlier and enjoyed huge success across Europe and North America, so it is likely that Postum capitalised upon this popularity to gain the attention of young readers.

The story begins in "Farmer Manley's field" where the stalks of wheat are talking to one another. One stalk expresses his fears about growing old and what his children will do when they have to take care of themselves. Another stalk reassures him by pointing out that they have "supplies of food all packed in shape" and there is "enough in each one's lunchbox to last him until he grows large enough to get food for himself". The two stalks then talk about being tired and how they cannot wait to rest as part of a straw stack. Both agree that they can rest easy now that they are "sure that [their] children will grow up strong and healthy". Reading the opening pages as an adult, it is clear that the wheat is a metaphor for the circle of life, with the parents providing their children with the right nutrition so that they have a long and healthy life. The "lunchboxes" represent seeds, while "going to the straw stack" stands in as a euphemism for death. These meanings are likely to go over children's heads, however, and they will see the story instead as a simple discussion between the wheat in the fields about their own nourishment and the

importance of eating healthy. The pretence that this is a simple story about a family of wheat is further emphasised by the accompanying illustration of striking yellow wheat alongside red and green flowers, a snail and planks of wood (Figure 7a). The sheaves of wheat are anthropomorphised as they blow in the wind, their “heads” bowed as if in conversation with one another and their leaves extended like gesturing hands. According to Veer (2013), anthropomorphism is a common and effective way to promote product kinship among young consumers because they encourage attachment and liking.

On the next page, as the story progresses, the illustration pans in on the wheat to reveal babies’ faces in each head. The babies are blonde, smiling and rosy cheeked, their cherub-like appearance being a common feature of early 20th-century marketing to portray social, sexual and psychic innocence (Higonnet, 1998, pp. 23–24). The text now informs readers that Father Manley is talking to a stranger about sending a sample of wheat to the mill to be tested. On hearing these words, the wheat “whispered indignantly to each other” and expressed anger that Farmer Manley did not think they knew how to feed their children properly. Although shrouded in fiction, this statement taps into broader societal discourse at the time around health (cf. Madsen, 2017), implying that “good” parents will feed their children properly (i.e. with wheat) and may even prompt children reading the book to reflect on whether their parents are doing all they can to feed them correctly. However, there is a certain irony in this interaction: the



**Figure 7.**  
*The Wonderful Lunch  
Boxes* (1925)

**Notes:** (a) Opening pages; (b) The babies/grains break free; (c) Postum and health  
**Source:** Public Domain book held in University of Michigan and digitised on HathiTrust

wheat are complaining about being told what to do by a greater authority, but this is precisely what Postum is doing through the story.

In the next part of the book, the various actions taking place around the farm are outlined, including the wheat being cut, tied into bundles and piled into stacks. Readers are told how the wheat was “getting itself fairly settled” in stacks when it was hauled into a huge noisy machine and, “Buzz! Buzz!”, its stalks were turned into a straw stack and its grains transferred to another room. Again, we see parallels with life as the “parents” get old and pass away, perhaps even cremated, while the “children” are left alone to fend for themselves. The story then shifts its focus to the babies who “had never felt such cold before”. As [Hart and Royne \(2017\)](#) note, giving human characteristics to inanimate objects encourages empathy with them and can make consumers feel emotionally invested in their story, which is the case in *The Wonderful Lunch Boxes*. The babies/grains are replanted by Farmer Manley and, as the weather gets warmer, they become “restless” and begin plotting an escape:

“I declare,” said one of them, “I begin to feel as if I could get out of here if I tried. Let’s see if we can push ourselves up through the earth and into the sunshine once more”.

The babies/grains then begin to push themselves upwards and, as they become hungry, they remember their “lunch boxes” in which there are “all kinds of foods” and eat them for nourishment. The word “lunch box” is a calculated choice by Postum because children would have been very familiar with the concept from school. Therefore, they are able to better understand and interpret the broader benefits of eating from different food groups to become healthy and strong.

These pages in the story are accompanied by an intriguing illustration that depicts life above and below ground ([Figure 7b](#)). On a subterranean level, we see murky brown soil with entwined roots connected to the heads of smiling babies. The babies are compressed together and somewhat floating towards the surface in an attempt to break free. The roots flow from the top of their heads, suggesting that it is correct nourishment that helps their brains function properly. The roots break through the ground and connect to a contrasting view above ground, which shows a bright yellow field with green shoots, a robin and a clear blue sky. The colour contrast indicates good versus bad ([Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002](#), p. 348) and suggests the prospect of a better life ahead if hard work is put in. In this way, Postum draws upon broader issues of morality, where eating well and working hard were seen as having a positive impact on a person’s virtue and, consequently, were essential to the future development of the human race ([Haydu and Skotnicki, 2016](#), p. 11). Similar uses of colour can be found in contemporary promotional pamphlets, whereby the symbolisation of reds and greens are drawn upon to underscore risk, regulation, control and vulnerability ([Makoni, 2012](#)).

Now, the babies/grains think back to advice their mothers have given them: “Mother told me once that when a plant has the help of the sunshine, it can draw food from the earth”. However, they quickly get tired as they push to the surface. The babies/grains are intelligent, nonetheless, and “knew their lessons without having to study them”. Therefore, they recognise that they need energy and look in their lunch boxes for more calories. It is unlikely that most young readers would understand what “calories” are, let alone “starch”, which is mentioned in the subsequent line (“there is plenty of starch, but we cannot use starch”). Nonetheless, the narrator suggests that all “good” children should be aware of this: “They knew without having to learn it that this starch would turn to sugar as fast as it was needed”. In using such high-modality language, the story puts the onus on children to understand what it means to eat healthy in the hope that they will consequently report back to the parents who will continue to buy Postum as a result. As the babies/grains eat from their lunch boxes, they find the strength to push through into the sunlight.

Once above ground again, the plants look around and question where they are. Suddenly, they are addressed by the wheat from Farmer Carter's field on the other side of the fence. This wheat explains that the babies were given "special plant food last autumn called fertilizer". They lament the fact that they have not moved from this spot for many years and that their family has been "growing poorer and poorer". They also express sadness that they are "shabby" and "yellowish" and "cannot find enough of the right kind of food to grow green clothes". When the babies suggest that sunshine can help, the other wheat reflects that "even the sunshine cannot get food from an empty cupboard" and that "our children will be weak and underweight". Once again, this dialogue serves as a metaphor for broader life circumstances, making links to poverty and malnutrition in US society at the time and even introducing a social class element into healthy eating (Madsen, 2017). Ultimately, the story – wrapped in the thin guise of wheat – is implying that those who are not given proper food from a young age will grow up sickly and frail.

The story then takes a twist back to reality as Farmer Carter and Farmer Manley enter the scene and begin discussing their crops. Here, we get to the crux of the story and the first overt reference to Postum. Carter tells Manley that his wheat is "rather sickly" to which Manley replies that he has to be "careful" about his wheat because he has "bargained to sell the crop to the Postum Cereal Company" if it is of a certain grade. He continues:

They took my last year's crop. I sell my corn and barley to them when they grade high enough. They use only the best quality in making their cereals. I suppose you know all about the Post Health Products.

Carter says that he does not know about Postum and that he tends to eat pancakes and syrup for breakfast. This is followed by the statement that he must go now to take his son to the dentist because his teeth are "in such bad shape". The mention of dentists immediately after pancakes encourages readers to make a connection between the two elements and see a "causality" (Ledín and Machin, 2020, p. 210), i.e. if you eat unhealthy foods, your health will suffer. Edwards and Milani (2014) see this strategy as shaming consumers, in this case framing an unhealthy breakfast as the *sine qua non* for bad health. Now turning into an authority figure, Manley offers to give Carter a lift because he wants to "have a little talk with him". Readers are left to fill in the blanks about what Manley will say, but from the context of the story, they are likely to know that it is to do with good health and wheat (Postum). There is, thus, a "normative assumption" (Edwards and Milani, 2014) that all parents who care about their children should give them Postum. To remove any doubt, this is clarified by the story's final lines:

Now all children who are good at guessing riddles have already guessed that Farmer Manley told Farmer Carter why he had poor crops; and why his cows did not give much milk; and why his boy's teeth were decaying. But I wonder if you can guess what was in the nice looking packages Farmer Carter took home from the store that afternoon, and what the Carters had for breakfast next morning.

Up until now, family health has been implied through the crops as a metaphor, but here, we see a clear interconnection between the two through Carter. In other words, Carter did not look after his crops well enough, which led to the poor health of his family. However, now he has discovered Postum, his family are healthier than ever before. This is emphasised by the image (Figure 7c) of the happy, rosy-cheeked boy walking through the fields holding a box of cereal. His father alongside is also laden with boxes. It is no coincidence that the boy has the appearance of the babies in the wheat, which strengthens the link between the product and his health. This is an image far removed from the mechanical processes of the factory seen in *A Journey Through Postumville* and emphasises wholesomeness and naturalness. The image is somewhat paradoxical in that the child looks so healthy, but he has not yet consumed the product and has only walked back from the shops with it.

Nonetheless, it is a powerful point on which to end the book and merge together all its overt and covert themes in one illustration. Overall, the pamphlet acts as a “moral tale” (van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999), whereby the characters follow socially legitimate practices and are rewarded for this with a happy ending.

### Concluding discussion

Through a case study of the Postum Cereal Company, this paper has explored a particular type of marketing practice that has its roots in the mid-19th century: the promotional publication. Specifically, it has found that Postum produced three types of promotional publication throughout the 1920s, each of which had differing target audiences, aims and formats, both linguistically and semiotically. A summary of the three types can be seen in Table 2 below. Nonetheless, despite their differences, all three pamphlets shared a common overarching goal of promoting health and well-being and linking this directly to the regular consumption of Postum products.

The first type of promotional publication can be termed “Inside the Factory”. This pamphlet or book – as seen through the example of *A Trip Through Postumville* – aims to present a company as open and transparent by opening up its factory doors to the public and showing them what is going on inside. Through textual prompts and accompanying photographs, readers are guided physically around the factory and bamboozled with scientific explanations

	Inside the factory	The friendly spokesperson	The fictional world
Overarching aim	To promote health and well-being and link this directly to the regular consumption of a specific product		
Concept	Transparency	Benevolence	Playfulness
Target audience	All potential adult consumers of the product	Mainly middle-class women	Predominantly children but also mothers
Linguistic features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Scientific jargon</li> <li>– Buzzwords</li> <li>– Statistics</li> <li>– Prompts to encourage motility</li> <li>– Contrast between modernity and tradition</li> <li>– Diminutives to play down potential unhealthiness</li> </ul> <i>In some cases:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Biblical/philosophical style quotes</li> <li>– Religious undertones</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– First person pronouns</li> <li>– Rhetorical questions</li> <li>– Direct address</li> <li>– High-modality statements</li> <li>– References to doctors</li> <li>– Ellipsis</li> <li>– Unreferenced statistics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Metaphor</li> <li>– Euphemisms</li> <li>– Double entendre</li> <li>– Dialogue</li> <li>– Narration</li> <li>– Insertion of facts</li> <li>– Subliminal advertising</li> <li>– Causality</li> </ul>
Semiotic features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Black and white photographs of factory, workers in white lab coats</li> <li>– Colour scheme matching product manufactured</li> </ul> <i>In some cases:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Displays of wealth through art, model villages, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Portrait of the spokesperson</li> <li>– Domestic scenes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Colourful illustrations focused on natural world</li> <li>– Anthropomorphised foods and plants</li> <li>– Black vs white/good vs bad colour schemes</li> <li>– Product placement</li> </ul>

Source: Author’s own work

**Table 2.**  
Types of promotional publications

along the way. However, in the case of Postum, the factory tour is not just a practical visit and instead turns into a somewhat utopic spiritual journey, with company founder C.W. Post portrayed as a saviour and Postum emphasised as an innovator through vast displays of its wealth that have nothing to do with the products it manufactures (e.g. art, landscaped gardens). “Inside the factory” images can be found across other promotional pamphlets and advertisements of the period and were proven to be effective in capitalising upon the public’s fascination with new technologies (Apple, 1995, 2006; Asquith, 2011; O’Hagan, 2021b, 2022a). However, Postum go one step further here in their creation of a paradise and selling of a dream.

The second type of promotional publication is the “Friendly Spokesperson”. As emphasised by *How I Make Postum*, this pamphlet or book serves to frame the company as one that cares about its consumers and wants the best for their health, using a friendly figure (either fictional or non-fictional) to promote such messages. Postum used the figure of Carrie Blanchard, a real-life factory worker, which enabled it to appeal directly to their target audience of middle-class housewives and draw upon a clever blend of traditional networks of trust and scientific motherhood to put forward its arguments. In stark contrast to *A Trip Through Postumville*, here, Postum is depicted as a traditional, lowkey company that relies on back-to-basics manufacturing processes, while great attention is given to the effects of the drink on the body, which was completely absent from the previous publication. This approach builds upon tried-and-tested marketing practices dating back to the mid-19th century, which have proven to be effective in capitalising upon women’s insecurities about being good mothers (albeit through the guise of caring) and shame/scare them into purchasing a particular product (Loeb, 1994; Apple, 1995).

Finally, “The Fictional World” is the third type of promotional publication that has been identified. This pamphlet or book uses a story format to encourage children surreptitiously to think about their health and encourage their parents to keep buying a certain product if they truly care about their family’s well-being. In *The Wonderful Lunch Boxes*, there is a strong use of metaphor, although in subtle ways that children are not likely to understand, drawing parallels between the top/bottom of the wheat and adults/children, replanting/straw stacks and life/death and seeds and lunchboxes to suggest the importance of nutrition and lay the groundwork for the health of future generations. These ideas are emphasised through the supporting illustrations, which show anthropomorphised wheat that evokes sympathy and concern from readers. This type of marketing tool was used as early as the 1850s because companies recognised that children were the quickest way to a parent’s purse. Whether the child read to themselves or their parent read to them, the book served as a form of “education”, which emphasised the quality standards of a particular brand. The free book also served as an incentive to encourage brand loyalty amongst mothers because of the “value-added offer to foster goodwill” (Asquith, 2011, p. 68).

When comparing the three Postum publications with similar publications by other branded goods in the same period – and indeed contemporary equivalents – it is perhaps surprising to see that they all have far more in common with the genre of medical informational pamphlets than the genre of food marketing in terms of their aims and strategies used. Looking at medical informational pamphlets for such diverse topics as family planning, influenza, breastfeeding, AIDS and cancer (cf.; Gagnon and Jacob, 2012; Makoni, 2012; Adibu, 2015; Farren Gibson *et al.*, 2015; Brookes *et al.*, 2016; Rodgers, 2020), for example, we see the use of moral tales and confessional narratives, high-modality statements, lexical choices around risk, illness and protection, direct address, imperatives, personal pronouns, symbolic colours and step-by-step instructions. While medical informational pamphlets are not selling a product *per se*, they are selling the idea of good health and serve to propagate a series of beliefs and assumptions around the link between

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health, illness and risk to promote positive health behaviours and outcomes. These behaviours and outcomes are inherently linked to personal responsibility to make informed health-related choices for the individual (usually a woman) and their family. Postum's promotional publications are vastly similar, thereby clearly highlighting how the boundaries between advertising and health promotion can become blurred. Such blurriness can be potentially dangerous for consumers who risk conflating commercial and public health messages, believing that certain products may offer a protective "halo" against illness (O'Hagan, 2021c).

### **Theoretical and practical implications**

Across the world, large collections of promotional pamphlets and books can be found in institutional archives, which offer vast scope for research. While some studies have been carried out on such pamphlets in the context of patent medicines, travel and health, limited research has been conducted on food products. Of the scant research conducted, discourses of health and well-being in such publications have been widely overlooked. The current study addresses this deficiency by offering a detailed analysis of how health and well-being are promoted in three publications, produced by the Postum Cereal Company in the 1920s, and developing three core categories to understand their aims, target audience and linguistic/semiotic features through the application of MCDA.

The three identified categories offer a useful way of formalising the study of promotional publications and recognising their significance not only as windows into long-forgotten historical brands and marketing strategies but also as windows into long-forgotten social lives, practices, processes and people. Specifically, the three genres outlined in [Table 1](#) – "inside the factory", "friendly spokesperson" and "fictional world" – both showcase the role of Postum as a marketing innovator and provide important categorisation criteria for historians of advertising and marketing who may be interested in carrying out further studies into this underresearched area. As they were developed to describe Postum's marketing strategies in the 1920s, they serve as a useful starting point for research into other company pamphlets from the same time period and can be adapted or expanded upon accordingly as similar (or different) strategies are identified. Equally, the specific lexical and semiotic features that pertain to each category can be refined as more research is conducted into promotional publications immediately preceding or following the 1920s, thereby providing a clear visual timeline of the ways in which certain genres and/or linguistic and semiotic strategies have increased and/or decreased in usage over time. Comparisons could also be made across countries to see if similar patterns occur.

The application of MCDA in the current study – a tool typically used to analyse contemporary texts – also offers a new way for historians to approach marketing materials. MCDA has helped bring to the fore the range of linguistic and semiotic strategies that were mobilised by Postum to promote its products as essential for a healthy lifestyle, while also uncovering contradictions or misinformation that existed across the promotional publications based on buried discourses. The robust set of theorised analytical tools with established terminology provided by MCDA enables historical findings that result from archival research to be described less anecdotally, thus revealing how marketing is shaped by and shapes discourses that circulate in a society at a given time and is played out through semiotic and material resources. This, in turn, can move historical research beyond analyses that reduce texts to a system rather than a social practice. With MCDA, materiality is put on a level footing with language and context, emphasising the equal importance of all modes in meaning-making, as well as the meaning potentials of specific images, colours,

typography and compositional choices. In doing so, essences not depicted by the written word, such as feelings, emotions and values, are captured (cf. O'Hagan, 2022b).

Applying MCDA to a historical context is also significant to the field of multimodality because most studies tend to limit its use to contemporary texts. This means that there is a tendency to overstate the novelty of certain linguistic and semiotic strategies and not place them in a broader historical context of patterned practices. Using MCDA in this study emphasises the antecedents of seemingly contemporary marketing techniques and provides a detailed and contextual examination of how culture and knowledge are (re)produced over time, how societies operate and are organised, how institutions communicate with the public and how individuals and social groups organise their lives and make sense of their experiences. Given these continuities, an important avenue of future research is an exploration of the parallels between these past and present marketing practices, which is in line with growing transhistorical approaches in media and communication studies (Tagg and Evans, 2020). This transhistorical perspective is particularly important, seeing as promotional publications themselves can also be placed in an earlier communicative history of trade cards and handbills, thereby enabling an understanding of how texts always draw upon earlier historical conventions of meaning making.

Given this link between past and present marketing practices, the findings of this study also have important implications for contemporary understandings of food marketing. Promotional pamphlets and books have evolved over the past century, and while they may no longer exist in the same format as the 1920s, companies still release brochures (either in physical or electronic formats) or use their websites and social media to offer “behind-the-scenes” peeks, promote health-conscious messages embedded in science or even display socially conscious values around such topics as the environment or gender equality. Elements of their formats have also been carried over into other genres. “Inside the factory”, for example, has become a popular format of fly-on-the-wall television (e.g. *How It's Made*, *Modern Marvels*, *Inside the Factory*), offering viewers an inside look into factory processes. Similarly, spokespeople and testimonials remain popular features of advertisements and have even been given a new lease of life in recent years thanks to social media influencers. Symbolic advertising in works of fiction is harder to encounter nowadays due to stringent laws on marketing to children. Nonetheless, many advertisements continue to target children through features that appeared in earlier promotional publications, such as anthropomorphised creatures, bright colours and metaphors (cf. Story and French, 2004). Equally, many of the strategies identified in this paper remain widely used in the context of medical informational pamphlets. Thus, contemporary marketers and food companies can gain important insights from this study into proven marketing strategies, while legislators may identify new areas that require monitoring or improved regulations to clamp down on the risk of misleading messages.

Related to this point, from a consumer perspective, the study raises questions on how effective current legislation on responsible advertising is and whether it enables loopholes on semiotics to be exploited. Often, directives do not apply to choices of colour, font and texture, and can even be circumvented by images to imply what cannot be overtly claimed in the text. Directives also tend to ignore layout and composition, which can subtly convey health discourse through such techniques as salience, framing and visual hierarchies. Greater efforts are also needed to protect children from new subliminal forms of advertising that have emerged with social media, such as humorous filters on Snapchat, product placement in YouTuber videos or sponsored competitions (cf. Murphy *et al.*, 2020). Awareness of current regulatory limitations and new forms of exposure may, on the one hand, provide a wake-up call to food legislators and policymakers to toughen up legislation,

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while on the other hand, build consumer awareness of persuasive marketing strategies and help them from being misled by visual cues and purchasing products that offer limited or no real additional benefits to their health.

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### Notes

1. As there are limited contemporary publications on the Postum Cereal Company, the information in this section has been gathered predominantly from archival materials at the University of Michigan and the University of Illinois, digitised by the Hathi Trust. Full details can be found in the references section of this paper.

2. Collier was initially awarded \$50,000, but the decision was overturned on appeal. Postum was warned, however, to stop making such false claims in its advertisements.
3. In Exodus 12:2, God gives the Israelites the Passover (12:1-13) to signify their readiness for change. It represented day one of a new start – a new life – of trusting in and following the Lord. The parallels in *A Journey Through Postumville* suggest that trying Postum will bring about similar effects.

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