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Representing Sweden: packaging Swedish identity through curators of Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In 2011, the Swedish national tourism organisation, Visit Sweden, together with the Swedish Institute, launched a campaign – Curators of Sweden (CoS) – on Twitter, which ended in 2018. Each week a ‘Swedish’ person was chosen as a curator to tweet whatever they liked through the @Sweden account. All the curators were chosen because they represented ‘values, skills, and ideas’ which, according to the campaign, ‘all combined, makes up Sweden’. In this article, we try to understand the contradiction of CoS offering a cacophony of ‘diverse’ voices from Swedes but, at the same time, speaking with the ‘same’ voice. Through dialogism, we locate the different voices, agendas and diverse contexts in reality, and examine how the values, skills and ideas were managed and engineered through the CoS, in a bid to imagine Sweden and Swedish identity.

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Introduction

A single official voice cannot describe Sweden, and therefore Sweden’s Twitter account is handed over to Swedish guest writers. Through the Curators of Sweden project, a series of people will describe the depth and variation of skills and ideas that exist in Sweden (Visit Sweden 2011).

On the 2011 Nobel Prize day, 10 December, the Swedish national tourism organisation, Visit Sweden, together with the Swedish Institute and in collaboration with a private creative agency – Volontaire – launched a nation branding campaign called Curators of Sweden (CoS) on Twitter. Each week a ‘Swedish’ person was chosen as a curator to tweet whatever they liked through the @Sweden account. At the start of the campaign, Visit Sweden stated that the curators were of different backgrounds, ‘geographically,

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politically and religiously' and were to represent the 'values, skills, and ideas' which 'all combined makes up Sweden'. The project ended in September 2018.

CoS proposed that no single official voice could describe Sweden: The question is whether CoS succeeded in presenting the diverse and rich complexity of Swedish values and identities. Criticisms were raised by scholars while the campaign was running. Christensen (2013) highlighted the conflicting nature of the campaign, which publicly showed itself off as an 'open' campaign but which was, in fact, tightly regulated and restrictive. He argued that CoS managed to present a false ubiquity through the notion of 'everydayness' and 'ordinary Swedes' even though the curators and their tweets were 'far from everyday and random' (Christensen 2013, 43). Hoffmann (2015) echoed Christensen's conclusion: the campaign only constructed a stereotype of the 'national culture' of Sweden and Swedes as 'the modern, enlightened global citizen', ensuring its own brand values through the outward projection of aspiring 'Swedish values'.

In this article we interrogate this supposed contradiction of CoS offering a cacophony of 'diverse' voices from Swedes yet, at the same time, remaining a largely 'singular' voice of a social democratic, progressive and liberal Sweden (Hoffmann 2015). As a heuristic, we will use the dialogic imagination theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). With the goal of accentuating the layered complexity of any society, a dialogic imagination analyses society as multifaceted and seemingly contradictory, where coherence and incoherence, order and disorder coexist. It also highlights the cacophony of voices in any social situation. Through exploring 356 curators' self-introductory texts¹ and any relevant official documents available around CoS, we situate the campaign in the contemporary Swedish context. We identify the different voices and agendas of CoS and examine how 'values, skills and ideas' were communicated through CoS to create what are imagined to be Swedish values and identity. In so doing, we locate the inherent tensions of the Swedish so-called self-imagination of being democratic and egalitarian and compare them with a society that ignores its increasingly multicultural social fabric in its self-presentation. Through this celebrated CoS project, this article then offers a nuanced, layered and deeper understanding of the processes and politics of representation of Swedish identity and of how the supposedly progressive and liberal society paradoxically establishes a national identity in illiberal ways.

A brief description of curators of Sweden

The project was initially administered by the Swedish Institute and Visit Sweden, two Swedish governmental organisations, in collaboration with a private creative agency, Volontaire. Visit Sweden left the collaboration in 2014 followed by Volontaire in 2015. The Swedish Institute was solely responsible for the project from then until it ended in 2018. With CoS, Sweden

became the first nation in the world to hand out a national Twitter account to the citizens and residents of a country. The project has been awarded different prizes globally and has been described as the first example of 'rotation curation' in social media, with different people curating a channel for a certain period. CoS reached readers in more than 120 countries with nearly 150,000 followers. At the end of the project, a total of 356 curators had sent around 200,000 tweets on the @Sweden account.

The goal of the project was to arouse curiosity about and interest in Sweden and what the country offers, with the hope that it would lead to increased tourism and the economic development of the country. The campaign stated: 'One aim was to let the curators paint a picture of Sweden that was different to that usually obtained through traditional media' (Swedish Institute, archived material). The idea was to let the citizens of Sweden represent the country and thereby give followers of @Sweden a 'multifaceted view of what Sweden is all about' (Visit Sweden 2011). Curators were given a free hand to share and express their own thoughts, stories and information linked to Sweden and were not given instructions on the content of the tweets. The selection process of curators was, however, exclusive. The first handful of curators were hand-picked from among Swedish Twitter users and subsequent curators were recommended by earlier ones. From the pool of recommended curators, representatives from the organisations involved hand-picked the next curators.

Theoretical orientation

Nation branding and identity

Identity is not static, but flexible and fluid, dialectic and relational. Since identities are formed dialectically and relationally, a distinction needs to be made between self-identification (or acquired identity) and what is assigned by others (ascribed identity) and how these two are intertwined and affect each other (Jenkins 2008). Identity can be defined in various ways as a category of practice and analysis, in order to understand the particularities of affinities based on social categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality and sexual orientations just to name a few (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Scholars have highlighted the fact that every society and community is different. This difference has allowed for using such identities as marketing tools to promote a nation as a tourist destination, a place for investment or even an exciting place to work and study. However when national identities are converted into commercial-oriented nation brands, market-friendly identities are forged through a focused selection of icons, stories, heritage, culture and values that can sell (Caprioli et al. 2021; Ren and Thisted 2021; Toettenborg 2020). White (2017) considers this 'commercial nationalism'.

This outward and market-focused identity may be reintroduced back to the local community, resulting in a form of social engineering of society through a nation imagined for tourists and investors (Ooi 2019; Volcic and Andrejevic 2016).

In reality, people may have diverse religions, carry contradicting ideologies of how society should be managed and have different a social economic status and ethnic heritage. Such differences have not stopped scholars, politicians and citizens from imagining the national identities of countries (Anderson 1991). Whether it is for community-building or branding the country, a nation is constructed through various narrative processes (Chang 2012). Kaufmann argues that states and elites are important actors in imagining the national identity but, at the same time, 'the collective representation of the nation cannot be read off official documents or a single individual' (Kaufmann 2017, 22). What is vital in maintaining the national identity, he argues, is the everyday production and the consumption of that imagined national identity. When the national identity is branded, it becomes a reflection, an articulation and a self-realisation of what is expected of the nation (Pamment and Cassinger 2018). As a consequence, Ooi (2007) argues that the line between what is actually happening and what is imagined in a culture and nation is inadvertently unclear. Nation branding and identity construction are predominantly top-down processes and not democratic procedures, which excludes certain aspects of culture and society (Chang 2012; Del Bono 2020; Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016). The gaps between reality and what is imagined are to be expected but CoS wanted to reflect the Swedish reality from the ground up. However, the campaign remained a tightly regulated top-down exercise and the imagined and presented identity of Sweden did not reflect the diverse reality of the country. So did CoS fail in telling the true Swedish story? What choices were made by curators in representing and 'packaging' the core values and identity of the Swedish nation? How did the different curators seem to provide a somewhat coherent image of Sweden? To throw light on these questions, we turn to dialogism.

Concepts of dialogism

According to Bakhtin (1981), any articulation through language is ambiguous and can be interpreted variously depending on context and circumstance. Describing and articulating an identity is also situated. Furthermore, an identity changes as the society changes. A comprehensive and accurate articulation of the Swedish identity is therefore contextual. As a heuristic, Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and genre, polyphony and carnivalesque (Bell and Gardiner 1998) help us to identify, capture and layer the complexity of the packaging, managing and negotiation of values and identity in the CoS

project. They provide a way to organise the complexity and diversity in reading Sweden and point out the reductionist and essentialist tendency of presenting Sweden. Let us explain.

A Bakhtinian dialogical understanding of society aims to organise social complexity by providing frameworks through which to layer voices, contexts and structures. Society is seen as necessarily heterogeneous and diverse. The CoS project not only acknowledged this but also wanted diversity to be highlighted. However, as mentioned, that diversity did not shine through at the time and there seem to be forces of convergence to order the disorder. In this article we address the ordering of the disorderly through dialogism. The unpacking of the dialogical dynamics is done through various concepts and frameworks, two of which are deployed here – heteroglossia and polyphony.

Heteroglossia means multiple genres. Drawing inspiration from sociolinguistics, a genre refers to a particular form of communication, reflecting the context embedded in the way in which language is used – for instance, academic writing as a genre contrast against writing horror fiction. In this study, the representation of Sweden by the different curators is set in at least two genres of communication. In the CoS project, being authentic and honest should be unbridled by political and marketing concerns. Curators were given the freedom to vocalise their own views and positions through tweets. On the other hand, CoS is also a marketing campaign where the positive and the desirable are both highlighted. As will be alluded to later, because of the contrasting agendas of CoS, authentic marketing is an oxymoron. Instead of seeing one genre as subjugated or appropriated by the other, the dialogic imagination lays out the contrasts and contradictions to reveal the dynamics and tensions that are embedded within the CoS project of presenting Swedish identity.

Polyphony literally means multiple voices. It is closely related to the concept of heteroglossia. Polyphony points to the many explicit and implicit voices embedded in social articulations. Marketing campaigns, such as that of CoS, is one of many sets of voices in society. The multiplicity of curators in CoS would inevitably reflect many voices, as will different members of society. However, a single person may use different genres of speech to speak with different voices – e.g. as a private individual, as a representative in their field of expertise and as an authority. There is an inevitable ‘double-speak’, as individuals have embedded and internalised the logic, knowledge and perspectives of their profession and status in society. In the context of CoS, while each curator is situated in their socio-cultural-political and economic experiences of Sweden, they have internalised imagined visions of Sweden and ways of framing Swedish cultures and values. In polyphony, voices – some loud, some silent – are located and they form a cacophony in the dialogic imagination. Polyphony is crucial in understanding whose voices are invoked,

assumed and controlled (Bell and Gardiner 1998; Ooi 2002, 2014; Shelley, Ooi, and Denny 2020). As we demonstrate later, the different curators seem to be speaking with one voice; we examine why.

A short methodological note

With the concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony in mind, we now explore the different agendas of the organisations involved in CoS, the diverse 'values, skills, and ideas' managed through political conditions, an official nation branding platform, Brand Sweden (a genre of presentation) and the voices of various curators through their self-introductory text. We first start by laying out the Swedish political conditions and the three organisations surrounding CoS that forms the polyphony and cacophony. Then we analyse the centrifugal and centripetal voices that were raised by the 356 curators, through looking at their self-introductory text. Contrary to the actual tweets, introductory texts are not limited in word count and give interesting insights into how the curators self-identify and what they identify and associate themselves with. Therefore, the focus of our analysis is on the broad representation of images of Sweden that was packaged through CoS and is not an analysis of specific tweets made by the 356 curators. The length of the introductory texts varied only from a couple of sentences to a half-page description of the authors and their interests, which amounted to a total of 67,134 words and symbols. The article takes a deductive approach in identifying the themes and we examined the content through qualitative content analysis (Silverman 2015) using Excel. How the words are located, and how the usage of the word is connected to the theme were scrutinised manually. The themes that were recurring and identified for the following analysis were: ethnic diversity; religion; culture; global/international connections; and gender equality. We unpack the tacit agendas, contexts and circumstances embedded in the project, how they converged multiple voices and what they have kept silent. All mentions of personal information such as name or the geographical locations are erased from the quotes from the introductory texts that appear in this article.

Contexts that form the polyphony and cacophony

The Swedish context

Sweden is a country characterised by immigration and its rapidly changing population and with racial and ethnic diversity, with around 20% of the total population of the country today being foreign-born (SCB 2021). It is uncontroversial for Swedes to think that they are progressive. They embrace diversity and treat everyone equally. On 6 September 2015, the Prime Minister of

Sweden, Stefan Löfven, addressed the people in response to the so-called European refugee crisis, stating that it is a responsibility of the country to welcome refugees. This ability to do so is an expression of 'Swedish exceptionalism'. The terms 'Swedish model' and 'Swedish exceptionalism' are ways of framing the particularities that a range of scholars have highlighted in the organisation of the Swedish welfare state, gender policies and innocence regarding racial matters (Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2015; Gondouin 2012; Schierup and Ålund 2011). The view of progressive Sweden is seen to have an unbroken historical trajectory starting in the 1930s. In post-1945, the idea of progressive Sweden became a 'toned-down forms of state-nationalism' identifying Swedishness with 'democracy, neutrality and internationalism' (Glover 2009, 254). Such an imagination has now been entrenched into how Swedes would cursorily talk about themselves and their society. As part of progressive Sweden, individualism and liberalism are embedded in the social economic political structures of the country.

Indeed, Swedish exceptionalism was manifested at the beginning of refugee crisis in 2014–2015. However, the aftermath of the refugee crisis and the consequent limiting of the possibilities of immigration to Sweden have also left political debates polarised and question the progressiveness of Swedish values (Emilsson 2018; Ericson 2018). Swedes are aware of the recurring message that the country is 'failing'. The OECD (2016) report urges Sweden to step up its efforts to integrate refugees into the labour market and to improve the declining educational level of Swedish youths. The difficulties faced by migrants of non-white racial background when attempting to integrate into Swedish society and the problems of racial inequality in the different aspects of social life are highlighted in research (e.g. Bevelander and Irastorza 2014; Gardell, Molina, and Wolgast 2018). Swedish Whiteness is ever more problematised (Hübinette and Lundström 2020) as the different racial and ethnic groups in Sweden are made aware of their non-Whiteness in Swedish society (Gokieli 2017; Hübinette and Lundström 2020; Kalonaityte, Kwesa, and Tedros 2007; Khosravi 2009; Mattsson 2005; Runfors 2016). Sweden has seen the political advancement of populist radical right party Swedish Democrats the past decade and how their political discourse became normalised (Ekström, Patrona, and Thornborrow 2020; Schierup and Ålund 2011). These studies point to how the current Swedish approach focusing on openness and equality is not reducing racism and discrimination but, instead, is leaving existing privileges unquestioned, revealing the racial work of the postracial (Goldberg 2015).

Individualism and liberalism are connected to another rallying point for Swedes, which is equality. Gender equality is an explicit value widely held by many Swedes (Rabo 1997). Additionally, the idea that everybody is equal regardless of their racial, ethnic and cultural background is strongly upheld in the Swedish psyche (Borevi 2014; Schierup and Ålund 2010). In Heinö's (2009)

words, Swedes understand themselves as ‘democratic, liberal, equal, tolerant and individualist’, highly valuing ‘anti-racism, universalism, secularism and gender equality’. Racial colour-blindness, in particular – a belief that race should not and does not matter in society (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Neville et al. 2000) – and gender equality are part of Swedish national identity (Hübinette and Lundström 2020; Mulinari 2008; Rabo 1997). Through selective perception, these values are not just ideals but are assumed to have been largely achieved and manifested. These values are achieved through being ‘raceless’ (Goldberg 2015), not registering individuals’ ethnicity or race and erasing the word ‘race’ from legislation, as well as through individually provisioned rights, duties and possibilities for everyone, irrespective of ethnic and cultural background (Borevi 2014; Fernández 2019; Hübinette and Hylten-Cavallius 2014). Political rationales and ambitions for inclusion, mainstreaming cultural diversity are reinforcing ethnic boundaries (Clavier and Kauppinen 2014; Horsti and Hultén 2011).

Three organisations and different purposes embedded in CoS

The brief context of Sweden gave views and positions that are part of the cacophony of voices in Swedish society. It lays out the layered and contrasting social forces that the dialogic concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony seek out and accentuate. The social challenges and explosive sets of views are part of authentic Sweden. However, CoS had a single purpose – to present Sweden and its Swedish values through the diverse voices of its society. That singular context of wanting to brand and market the country to the world, however, was up against other social contexts. As a result, through the dialogic imagination that compels us not to see a statement at face value or to see it merely in a singular context, we situate the presented goal of CoS in relation to other agendas with which the different stakeholders involved must grapple.

Authentic Sweden and marketing contexts

Visit Sweden and the Swedish Institute (SI) are governmental organisations instructed to promote Sweden in different ways. Visit Sweden ‘promotes Sweden in order to attract more visitors from abroad to discover our fantastic country, on behalf of the Swedish state’ (Visit Sweden <https://visitsweden.com/about-sweden/sweden-faq/?msclkid=53e2733fd10611ecaa03cd4cac12a0c0>). Their purpose with CoS is the marketing of Sweden as an attractive destination with its ‘beautiful, vibrant cities, stunning varied countryside and a huge range of experiences and activities, both in nature and culturally: in design, food, history, traditions and lifestyle’ (Visit Sweden, <https://corporate.visitsweden.com/om-oss/en/>). SI’s mission is to promote ‘interest and trust in

Sweden around the world' (Swedish Institute <https://si.se/en/about-si/our-mission/>). The SI not only works towards promoting Sweden and Swedish interests but also aims to promote prosperity, stability, democracy, justice and sustainability in developing countries and countries within Sweden's vicinity (Swedish Institute <https://si.se/en/about-si/our-mission/>). It champions an aspirational vision of the country which may not yet have been realised.

A branding platform, *Brand Sweden*, was developed between the government offices of Sweden, Visit Sweden, the Swedish Institute and Business Sweden in the Council for the Promotion of Sweden (NSU). Despite the diverse agendas of the stakeholders involved, a selected set of 'common interests' and the 'right' Swedish identity and values were set in stone (Swedish Institute 2008). In 2016, Brand Sweden was further developed: *2.0 Strategy for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad* (from hereon 2.0 Strategy) (Swedish Institute 2017). The ideas of progressivity and exceptionalism stand out through the defined core values – 'open, innovative, caring and authentic' (Swedish Institute 2017):

The Swedish social model inspires interest around the world. The "Swedish model" is built on a core of economic growth, social responsibility and trust expressed through a universal welfare system and strong institutions. This profile area also includes values such as gender equality, respect for human rights, sustainable development, low corruption and the use of new technologies (7).

Glover (2009) criticised this Brand Sweden platform:

Brand Sweden proudly states that the nation offers the world nothing less than unique progressivity. This confidence with which the Institute today speaks of fundamental Swedishness is remarkable, considering that important buzzwords of the day at least within academia are "multiethnic", "hybridity" and 'globalization' (257).

Indeed, Brand Sweden and the 2.0 Strategy do not spell out the religious, racial and ethnic diversity of the country. The diversity of Sweden is managed and implicitly communicated through the values of liberalism and equality. The value of 'openness' puts forward the idea of accessibility (to education, official records and land), international business and the market being 'sensitive to changing trends' and 'broad-minded people who like to travel' (Swedish Institute 2008, 2017). The idea of 'caring' – safeguarding every individual through the provision of equal opportunities – addresses men and women alike but migrants and non-citizens are absent. 'Life-long learning for everyone' is left without specifically referring to the linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic diversity of the country and what life-long learning means for them. The value 'authentic' is explained as 'being reliable, honest and informal' and stressing the 'living traditions and cultural heritage' of the

country leaves out the fluidity and complexity of Swedish culture and identity. Consequently, a genre of speaking of Sweden has emerged with a focus on a Sweden that is liberal and one that is assumed to provide equal opportunities, thus marginalising those social structures and biases that prevent minority individuals the same access.

Marketing through creative and effective communication

Volontaire, the third key actor in CoS, is a private creative agency. Their mission is 'to embrace curiosity, to challenge the norm and to be a facilitator for change'. Here the distinct values that Visit Sweden and the SI want to convey match with Volontaire's purpose, as can be seen on their website at <https://www.volontaire.com/about>:

We believe equality is essential. We believe everyone's voice is equally important, and we believe equality is not just about women's and men's equal rights at the workplace. It is also about caring for and treating people of different ages, with different backgrounds and different abilities with equal respect and opportunity.

[...]

Being equal means being able to respect and embrace differences – to welcome the unknown, new perspectives and dare to give up old truths. We believe that a variety of people with different perspectives and backgrounds makes us better (Volontaire, <https://www.volontaire.com/about>).

Volontaire, in fact, realises this vision through proposing to Visit Sweden and SI to work with the idea of curator rotation on Twitter, in which 'ordinary Swedes' represent Sweden. While Volontaire realises its vision, CoS itself lacks 'everybody's voices' and 'ordinary Swedes' (Christensen 2013; Hoffmann 2015). The selection of curators does reflect a gender balance; Racial and ethnic diversity that *were* present (294 curators were identified as white Swedish through nativity, locality, racial and ethnic background) but all based on the values of what is imagined as 'ordinary Swedes'. This is not surprising because the curators were recruited through snowballing; a selection process by a group of representatives involved in the campaign. In listening to the polyphony of voices through the dialogic imagination, it was the silences or missing voices of the ethnic minority that was loud. The broad message was still an essentialised presentation of Swedish values and culture in what Del Bono (2020) calls a pursuit of authenticity, without debating the cultural diversity and complexity of the country.

Centripetal and centrifugal forces

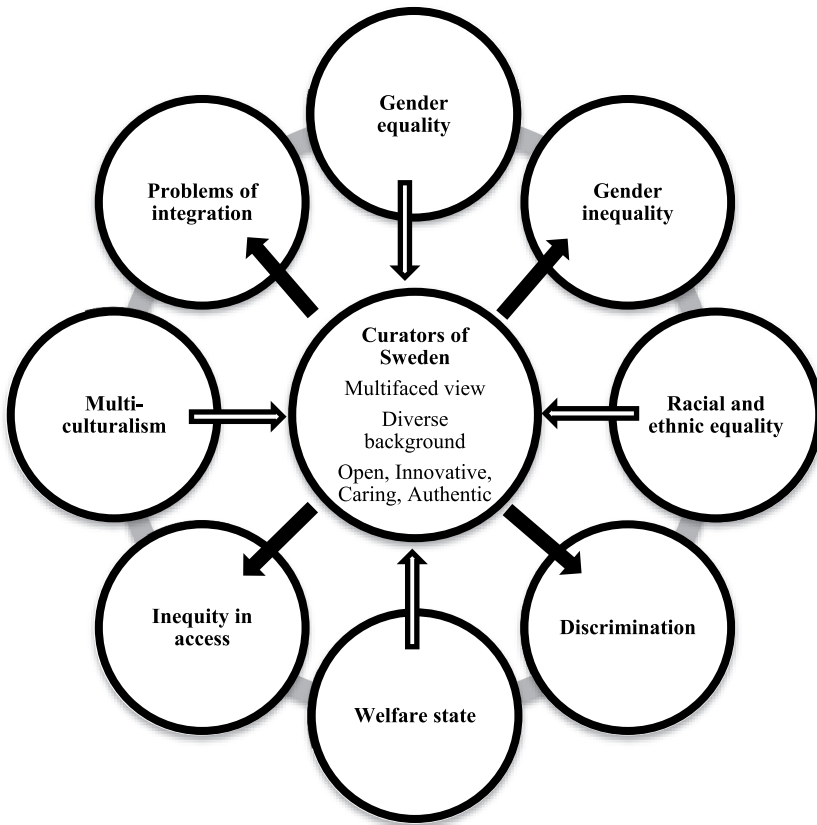
As discussed above, the CoS campaign was a marketing project. Marketing-speak is a genre. While the dialogic imagination reminds of the need to seek out multiple contexts and voices, the core message through the diverse voices of curators is clearly audible – an ‘authentic’ Sweden. The idea of authenticity hinges on a ‘real’ Sweden, which in reality, is heterogeneous and dynamic. Curators could speak as part of the marketing campaign but simultaneously they were supposed to have their own voices. This meant that they could lament what they experienced in their daily lives as if they were talking to friends or they could be formal and present a matter-of-fact statement on Sweden. The curators provided a polyphony of voices and, at the same time, have embraced the marketing genre of being focused, and presenting Sweden as attractive by highlighting laudable values such as prosperity, stability, democracy, justice and sustainability.

In the largely democratic Swedish society, any idea of a core Swedish identity would be expected to be challenged by voices of discontent and alternative framings of Swedish identity. Following Bakhtin, the question is why the message of what constitute the so-imagined authentic Sweden so audible and consistent? And silences of marginalised groups speak too in the dialogic imagination. In the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, order and disorder co-exist in social reality, and similarly there were centripetal and centrifugal forces at work in presenting the Swedish identity in CoS.

The different partners in CoS share the same goal of promoting Sweden in an honest and authentic way. Sweden is popularly acknowledged by Swedes as a diverse and progressive country. In addressing the cultural complexity, differences and tensions that exist in society, there are centrifugal forces, like in a spinning wheel, that draw elements away from the centre or the core – in this case, of a Swedish identity (See [Figure 1](#)). This is paradoxically what the CoS project was about, as it wanted to present an authentic, diverse and progressive view of Sweden. At the same time, there are also centripetal forces – that is, forces that pull towards the centre and core of an essentialist Swedish identity. This is how CoS represented diverse voices which yet also sounded very consistent and similar. The centrifugal and centripetal forces worked as two sides of the same coin in the dialogic imagination, representing the imagined and branded Sweden.

In the polyphony of voices, a focal point, and marginalising aberrations

Swedish exceptionalism and openness are reflected in the curators’ international and mobile lifestyle, a highly privileged one, where the right to Swedish welfare follows across the border. The introductory text, below, of a curator clearly shows how the welfare state (symbolised by legislated parental leave) can travel across the border.



Legend
 Centripetal forces
 Centrifugal forces

Figure 1. Dialogic imagination of Sweden.

I'm [name], a X-year-old Swede who alternates between [city], Sweden and [city, the U.S.]. I'm enjoying the generous Swedish parental leave, spending all my time caring for our son [name], who will soon be five months old (Swedish Institute, Archived material).

The international and mobile lifestyle fosters openness. The curator below shows clearly how the equality is central to her and her Swedish values, stressing the 'correctness' of those values. At the same time the quote shows tolerance and a high moral understanding of others' values by stating that it is impossible to say that others' values are 'wrong'. This argument also reflects the value of individual choice and freedom, which are central to the liberal multicultural policy.

[...] As a Swede I am culturally conditioned to uphold certain values and, although I consider those values to be “correct”, I also find it impossible to tell someone else that their values—when different from mine—would be wrong. [...] The only value I hold sacrosanct is the fundamental equality of people, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, social or financial standing, religion or any other such feature (Swedish Institute, Archived material).

The ‘exceptionality’ of Sweden and its welfare state is materialised through affirmed, imagined identity and values. Curators with an immigrant background also affirm and confirm this exceptionalism and express appreciation for Sweden.

I was born in [country] in a [ethnic] family but came to Sweden in [year] at the age of six – along with my mother and siblings – as refugees, seeking to find peace and freedom in a democratic country (Swedish Institute, Archived material).

The above articulations paint a compassionate liberal democracy in Sweden. There are also centrifugal forces that seem to challenge the taken-for-granted exceptionality of Sweden. For example, a curator with White Swedish background asserts an undoubted claim, ‘I’m Sweden’.

I’m Sweden. You know, the country. This country loves to talk about [the fact] that all people are equal, that kids/youth are very important, that people with great power are mostly men and selfish bastards and that your own spare time is the most important time of your life!- (Swedish Institute, Archived material)

This confident and forthright proclamation contrasts with another: ‘Hi I’m [name]! Legitimately labelled a Swede; practically, not accepted as one’. This is one of the few, among the 356 curators, who address the feeling of exclusion from Swedish society, implicitly but blatantly. The sentence is a clear message of the gap he as a non-White Swedish person experiences between being labelled a Swede as part of the @Sweden campaign and his lifetime of being questioned about whether he is a ‘Swede’. The two curators claim to Sweden differs in its owning of the genre and critiquing the imagined values. The tension is visible but paradoxically, the seemingly off-message posts affirm a liberal Sweden. The centrifugal and centripetal forces as expressed in the cacophony of voices co-exist in tandem and affirm the message of a progressive Sweden. Sweden affirms the view that it is a country where someone with an immigrant background can officially be labelled as a ‘Swede’; it is ‘the world’s most equal country’. Swedish exceptionalism is the focal point that drew the attention of curators and of Swedes in general in their imagination of their country. It is a vague and ambiguous idea but one that resonates and inspires many, even though different people may have different interpretations. Divergent voices merely get appropriated or an

affirmation of a core message. When presented, the different articulations seem to produce a harmonious chorus of voices singing to the same hymn sheet.

Divergent realities and loud silence

There are clear centrifugal forces that pull away from the images of an exceptional Sweden outside of CoS. Racial and ethnic diversity are rarely addressed but are not completely invisible. 'My family and I came to Sweden in [year]. I was born five years earlier in southern [country]' or 'My story begins with my parents fleeing the raging conflict in 1970s' [country] and finding sanctuary in Sweden, where I was born and raised' – two voices which represent the reality of Sweden. However, critical voices and negative effects on the individuals in the form of experiences of racism, discrimination and inequality are rarely addressed among the 356 curators' self-introductory texts which we explore. There is a loud silence and, when the voices *are* heard, they are selectively represented in the CoS marketing context. When the few curators challenged celebrated Swedish values, they were drowned out by the other views. Here again the centrifugal and centripetal forces are two sides of the same coin. For example, the quote below, while implicitly addressing inequality, acknowledges and proves the exceptionality of Sweden as an open and caring country.

I am both Swedish and [nationality], on paper as well as in life. Expect a few tweets about life as an immigrant in Sweden – I owe a lot to Sweden for the decent life I live – but not everything here is rosy, of course (Swedish Institute, Archived material).

There were two curators who self-identified as practicing Muslims. Their presence stood out and spoke volumes for multicultural Sweden by their limited number. The first is a white Swedish man who converted to Islam before getting married to a Muslim woman; the other is a single mother and a lawyer, who wears a hijab and who introduces herself as a 'very typical Swede'. Of the 356 curators, she is the only one who has a profile picture wearing a hijab. These two Muslim images are in stark contrast to the common Swedish media stereotypes of the dominant Muslim man and the oppressed Muslim woman (Ahmed and Matthes 2017). These 'different' pictures of Muslim Swedes, instead of working as a centrifugal force, draw attention back to the core, maintaining the packaged idea of an equal and progressive Sweden. It is the absence of representation ethno-religious minorities in the CoS project that became loud.

One area where critical voices were celebrated were issues related to gender and sexual discrimination. One curator wrote in the self-introduction:

Did you know that 76 per cent of people portrayed in news media all over the world today are men? Eighty per cent when it comes to “experts”? Yes, even in the world’s most equal country Sweden (7 out of 10). Bias in the portrayal of women and men in news content has a detrimental impact on the public’s perception of gender roles in society. This is also a democracy problem, of course (Swedish Institute, Archived material).

Yet again there is a tacit loud silence in the cacophony of voices. This silence is particularly loud when one knows the actual diversity of Sweden. This silence is just as important in the dialogic imagination. Increasing criticism is raised that gender equality is beneficial only for white Swedish women, marginalising and racialising non-white females (Alinia 2020; Osanami Törngren 2019). The question is who are those 3 out of 10 women represented in news media and as experts in Swedish media, while studies show that media representation in Sweden is predominantly White (Osanami Törngren, Farn, and Ulver 2021). The colour-blind ‘democracy problem’ excludes the diversity that exists in Sweden. There are also tensions when gender identities intersect with ‘race-less’ cultural identities. A reflexive curator posed this question:

A white, heterosexual, male in his (very) late thirties ... I try to question the position and the privileges these things give me. Who am I to be the norm? Why should anything/anyone different to me be the exception? [...] I like to talk about, for instance, the fact that I can go without a shirt in places where my female friends cannot. Isn’t that the same kind of culture that prohibits women from showing their faces while the men can in some cultures? (Swedish Institute, Archived material)

To equate a person from a ‘culture that prohibits women from showing their faces’ with a Swedish woman who cannot walk around without a shirt is an expression of colour-blindness equalising all oppressions that might exist based on gender. This also belittles the racial discrimination that racialised women may face in Swedish society. These examples of contrasting views that pull away from a coherent image of Sweden are in dialogue with the views of a progressive and colour-blind Sweden. This dialogue comes together to assert an imagined CoS Swedish identity.

Conclusion

Using the Bakhtinian dialogic imagination as the backdrop in this article, we have tried to understand the contradictory nature of CoS – how the campaign offered a cacophony of ‘diverse’ voices from Swedes but, at the same time, spoke with the ‘same’ voice. Curators spoke differently in an unofficial capacity; within CoS, they were expected to provide the voices of Sweden and in an appropriate manner:

If we want the image of Sweden to continue to develop in a positive direction, all of us who represent the country must continue to do good things. Everything that Sweden and Swedes say and do, and what others say about us, affects the overall image. This is the only way we can contribute to an up-to-date and relevant image of a modern, open and innovative Sweden (Swedish Institute 2017)

Brand Sweden and the political condition of Sweden (Swedish exceptionalism and colour-blindness) embed various genres of presentation. In the pursuit of presenting an honest image of Sweden, the country's diversity and clashes of values should be presented; however, an aspirational vision of Swedish identity is also encouraged. The different agendas of the stakeholders and the different voices of the 356 curators together do, indeed, form a cacophony. They told an overarching story that alludes to a tacit narrator that promotes a Swedish voice, based on the imagined Swedish identity and values. There are order and disorder, agreements, and disagreements – very much like a functioning democratic system. Consensus is forged and negotiated while tensions and fractures are managed. Here the multiplicity of the voices was inevitably lost and the diversity which CoS portrayed was in the ubiquitous voices of 'values, skills and ideas', reflecting the packaged Sweden, a strictly selected and managed diversity of Sweden. Curators' voices only permeated the four core values defined by Brand Sweden, the common point of reference and the 'right' way of 'packaging' and maintaining the image of Sweden. The audible voices are inadvertently confined to the agenda and context of presenting, celebrating, and marketing the 'right' Swedish values and identity. When an equitable representation is lacking, values risk and become, themselves, a part of what creates ethnocentric or national hierarchies.

Pamment and Cassinger (2018) write that media technologies become a tool through which people and organisation enact national identity. As other scholars also suggest (Christensen 2013; Hoffmann 2015), representations within CoS risk the manifestation of commodified nationalism and 'techno-utopianism', solely relying on the accessibility of communication technology. Instead of destabilising the centralised and managerial control over the image of Sweden, enabling spontaneous and temporary communication through tweets (Andéhn et al. 2014), CoS was driven by somewhat rigid and fixed imagined values that are politically and managerially defined. After all, the articulation of values and the identity of a nation are always embedded in a context – imagined and packaged – and the branding of the nation is a process of identity construction through the exclusion of multiplicity.

Note

1. The lead author of this article received access to the archived website through the Swedish Institute. The tweets made by the 356 curators are still available on twitter.

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