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The empty body: exploring the destabilised brand of a racialised space

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we understand cities today as commodified spaces which must struggle at the intersection of cultural, ideological and historical tensions. In order to explore and problematise a contested city brand's marketing effort, we engage in multiple rounds of *in-situ* introspective reflections about a racialised city's place branding material. Based on the two authors' separate analyses of the same marketing material deriving from two separate theoretical starting points, we engage in agonistic conversation about how visible and invisible racialised tensions are represented. We highlight how absences and (in)visibilities can be predominantly understood as either colour-blindness or ideological fantasy. We find, despite our contrasting theoretical orientations, that a city brand is inevitably fractured and ruptured into 'a' non-identity or – to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari – *an empty body*. We argue how achieving inclusive branding becomes an oxymoron as narratives surrounding a city are themselves more or less diverse, contested and polarised.

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commodified space;
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Introduction

Malmö today is a natural hub for people and cultures from all over the world. The city's inhabitants come from around 180 countries. This diversity is one of Malmö's key assets and creates the basis for a rich cultural life. It also equips Malmö to perform well in an ever-more globalised world. (*Malmö Town* website, 7 May 2022)

Malmö in Sweden is the rape capital of Europe due to EU migrant policies. Anyone who says there isn't a problem is lying to you. (Nigel Farage, 20 February 2017, Twitter)

In this article we explore how the complex network of contradicting narratives (like the two above) surrounding an ethnically diverse city dovetails with the idea of cities as marketable unities with one uniform identity. While many late-capitalist cities during the last two decades have seen an increase of migrants from different parts of the world, they have simultaneously been subjected to a typically homogenising place-branding logic (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Eshuis & Edwards, 2012; Hankinson, 2004). In order to survive in what is

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framed as any other competitive branding environment (Kornberger et al., 2010), public organisations such as cities have transformed into commercial rather than predominantly societal bodies (Zavattaro, 2014) where the city's networked places and cultural particularities have been reduced into *one* communicated brand (Pasquinelli, 2011). As a response, the academic field of place-branding research has increasingly taken inspiration from contemporary critical urban sociology, where the societally destructive consequences of city branding are highlighted (e.g. Harvey, 2019; Sassen, 2018). This dynamic view assumes place-branding to be a socio-political construct, composed of multi-levelled interactions between legal, political and aesthetic actors and processes and consisting of multi-contextual, spatial and temporal dimensions. Furthermore, using Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) 'rhizome' lens – where cities are seen as networks of multiplicity establishing non-binary connections without apparent hierarchy, order or coherency – city brands are increasingly understood as 'stabilised moments in a process of continual becoming' made up of vastly heterogeneous manifestations of people, material and concepts (Lucarelli, 2019, p. 229). It is such stabilised moments within the continual 'becoming' of a city which we are exploring in this article as a case of marketised (Firat, 2020; Tadajewski, 2020) and racialised space (Lipsitz, 2007), in other words a city brand defined by socially constructed notions about race. Paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari's body-without-organs idea where unity ('identity') is an impossibility, we will through our analysis come to understand the branded, racialised space as an *empty body* where the only unifying organ is skin, which we can be more or less blind to, or conscious of.

Although cities in Europe have become more ethnically and racially diverse, the field of marketing is relatively shy about critical theorisations on marketised, racialised places. Surely, socioculturally oriented and critical marketing – which we adhere to here – is not void of reviews and research in the adjacent research areas. For example, in regard to the dynamic relationship between place brand and identity, researchers have shown how it consists of interactive dialogues between stakeholders (e.g. Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), co-creational, multi-modal and multifaceted dimensions (e.g. Lucarelli, 2019), changing and competing narratives together with material elements (e.g. Warnaby & Medway, 2013) and magical qualities of transition (e.g. Cassinger & Eksell, 2017). In terms of race, too, scholars have highlighted many different aspects. In addition to looking at the history of racism (Tadajewski, 2012) and the non-White accommodation of Whiteness (Burton, 2002, 2009a, 2009b; Grier et al., 2019) in marketing research itself, scholars have explored the commodification of skin (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2018; Crockett, 2008; Davis, 2018; Davis & Mitchell, 2022; Ulver, 2021), discriminatory representations (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002; Hu et al., 2013; Olivotti, 2016; Peñaloza, 2018; Stern, 1999; Taylor & Stern, 1997) and the mythologisation of mixed-raced bodies in advertising (Harrison et al., 2015) as well as the use of advertising as an alibi to express racism in social media (Ulver & Laurell, 2020). Yet there is more to learn about similar processes of racialisation related to the branding of place, especially as the critical place branding literature is strong at problematising the 'unified identity' trope for various aims, but not so much in relation to ethnic or racialised multiplicity. This is important because, if the brand-as-unifier norm is said to circumscribe the dynamics within social relations, then what does it (not) do when these social relations are largely racialised?

The idea of branding places of multiplicity

In the managerial place branding literature, it is largely taken for granted that ‘identity’, as something unified or unifying especially of heterogeneities, is something that essentially exists (Anholt, 2007), albeit as a participatory, dynamic and social process (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Merz et al., 2009), and needs to be considered as an interwoven loading star for any place branding work (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008). With place brand managers in mind, this uni-identity approach has indeed been criticised for not acknowledging the opportunities that an understanding of a place as entailing multiple identities would give for cities as tourist destinations (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). In a less managerial, and more critical body of place branding literature (e.g. Clegg & Kornberger, 2010; Relph, 1976) the unifying identity narrative is not necessarily considered problematic because it assumes an identity *per se* – ‘a particular narrative, the essence of a place, its unique identity that distinguishes it from other places’ (Warnaby & Medway, 2013, p. 358) – but because the authentic ‘essence of a place’ is situated among people with strong attachment to the place and whose narratives become marginalised in the name of mass-mediated place branding. This problematisation dovetails with the overlapping literature on ‘participatory’ (e.g. Insch, 2021; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015) and ‘co-creative’ place branding (e.g. Lucarelli, 2018; Warnaby, 2009) where place identity must be considered to be deeply complex, dynamic and multimodal. It is the unidimensional top-down management perspective that is highlighted as the most serious problem, where inhabitants and other stakeholders have little or no say in what kind of identity is being crafted and communicated. In contrast, in the more overtly critical place branding literature, this notion of unity and unification embedded in the very assumption of a ‘brand identity’ has been criticised more on the very premise that the reduction of heterogeneities renders problematic because the objects to unify are socio-material, human and political (e.g. Eisenschitz, 2021). Furthermore, it recognises that the social process of place branding itself generates and *performs*, rather than reflects, a socially imagined identity (e.g. Andhén et al., 2020; Mayes, 2008; Osanami Törngren & Ooi, 2022), which on its own produces structural constrictions immanently dictated by market interest.

In relation to this, there is a burgeoning interest in racialised space in critical marketing research. For example, marketing scholars have demonstrated how discriminatory marketing practices at the real-estate market reproduce residential segregation (Branchik & Davis, 2009; Francis & Robertson, 2021) and reinforce social segregation in physical consumption spaces (Ainscough & Motley, 2000; Crockett, 2017; Crockett et al., 2003), called ‘consumer racial profiling’ (Harris et al., 2005). On a more positive note, they have also demonstrated how selling ‘Black tours’ to Black tourists in Paris can – if done right – be an empowering way to utilise racial capitalism for a good cause (Davis & Mitchell, 2022), and how the socio-material capacities (human bodies, skin, surfaces, things etc.) of consumption spaces, can have political affects in terms of ethnic inclusion or exclusion (Kurooğlu & Woodward, 2021). While such racialised operations of power within consumption spaces indeed are important and need more research (Grier et al., 2019; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999; Visconti, 2015), we wonder about similar political affects but related to the mass-mediated practice of obscuring racialised multiplicity – and its tensions – into one ‘sellable’ (place brand) identity.

Raising one's sights, in order to contribute to a broader understanding of the political and social processes that drive inequalities in European cities and beyond today, we will explore in this article the branded expressive representations of a contested and racialised city at a moment in time when its (imagined) brand 'identity' is destabilised. We use Malmö in Sweden as a case of contested city images and discourses because its burgeoning image as a city in successful transformation has simultaneously been exposed to transnational media assaults with racist connotations. We also study our exploration itself through the lens of our own juxtaposing theoretical positions, this in order to give justice to alternative interpretations – important not least when exploring politically sensitive discourse – but also to contribute with an alternative and pluralistic reading of the same material as a much-needed agonistic method in increasingly antagonistic times. In what follows we account for our partly contrasting, partly intersecting theoretical positions.

Two distinct and intersecting theoretical positions

In this section we first reflect on our two differing positionalities and the theoretical perspectives that drive our research. Our positions should be seen as unique and separate but not as dichotomous and antagonistic. Combining our theoretical positionality contributes to a constructive dialogue and intersectional view on branding material that reflects the hope for a unified city brand.

1st author's reflections on own positionality

The first author is a 51-year-old associate professor, White, born and raised in Sweden close to the region under analysis but with many years spent abroad in Europe and the US. Her broad research areas are sociologically informed critical marketing and consumer culture. During the interactive introspection with the second author, it became (again) very clear to her that she nurtures a more historical materialist perspective on social relations – for example, Žižek's (2008b) radicalised psychoanalysis on the ideological functioning of the market – rather than a postmarxist, 'identity political' perspective where, for example, race, gender, or intersections of such identities, make out the dominant lens. This is because she assumes that driving politics through identities *distracts* from larger, socio-economic and structural changes of redistribution that cannot necessarily, at the same time, maintain a sufficient focus on identities. In addition, Žižek's perspective is particularly interesting for this analysis, firstly because brands are emblematic as fetishes in ideologically neoliberal societies, and secondly because his materialist account can be accused of being 'colour-blind' (see the 2nd author's reflections below) which turns out to be interesting in the context of apparent 'racialisation'.

The fantasmatic desire of unity

Critical marketing studies have, over the last 15 years, found the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's (2008b) radicalised Lacanian psychoanalysis very useful, because it explores the relationship between ideology, global capitalism, the (consumer) subject, and desire. Here, Lacan's concept of *fantasmatic desire* is among the most influential. The fantasmatic desire comes out of an 'unfathomable X' (Žižek, 2009, p. 19), which is a 'lack' that the small infant experiences for the first time whereby the dyadic relationship with the mother is

under threat by the one with the *fallos*, the father. To overcome this lack becomes an inherent force of desire in every human's life project. The Lacanian subject will always continue to strive to reinstall the dyadic relationship with the mother and, in turn, always experience an insatiable desire. This fantasmatic aspiration to feel *unity* despite incompatible elements is what, more than anything else, drives human relationships into ethically problematic consequences (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Hyrén, 2015). Furthermore, for Žižek, the displacements of *fantasies* – collectively constructed to disguise the unfathomable lack (the subject's lack of an imagined unified whole) – come out as fetishes.

In this way one could say that the radical psychoanalysis of Žižek conceptually marries Lacan with Marx's sociology on class in that the fantasmatic desire to fill the 'lack' with a unified totality is (imagined to be) remedied by the 'commodity fetish', where the social relations of (capitalist) production are obscured (Žižek, 2008a). For example, while the economic inequalities between the social classes are, in fact, embedded in the networked production of the brand, as a unified commodity fetish this brand distracts us from seeing those horrific inequalities. Critical marketing studies have treated this displacement of desire as fetishistic processes, in particular by highlighting companies' imperative to consumers to be 'ethical' (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016; Cronin & Fitchett, 2021) but also to celebrate 'multicultural' diversity (Ulver, 2021). From the perspective of Žižek's concept of ideological deadlock (2007), as fetishes these marketing messages of goodness not only distract from socio-economic and socio-political inequalities forged and reproduced by global capitalism and neoliberal ideology but also exacerbate them when we try to cure the disease with the same medicine that made us sick in the first place.

2nd author's reflections on own positionality

The second author is a 41-year-old cis-female associate professor who self-identifies as a non-White person of colour (POC), Asian and Japanese. Her research revolves around the question of race, racialisation, representation and racism. She agrees with the academic tradition whereby identity politics is treated as being particularistic, competitive and divisive but elevates one's voice and does not exclude – and has an intersectional approach in addressing social inequality and injustice (Eisenstein, 1978). Centering race and countering racial colour-blindness therefore becomes an effective means by which to address racism, redress structural inequities and build pride in the Black, Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC) communities (Crenshaw, 1991; Lin, 2020; Osanami Törngren & Suyemoto, 2022; Suyemoto et al., 2015; Walters, 2018). Next, we briefly account for our two theoretical perspectives.

Centering race and challenging racial colour-blindness

In the analysis of this article, race should be understood as a mechanism which creates, maintains and upholds power hierarchies in society (Lentin, 2020). Racial perceptions are often – but not always – based on the categorisation of visible and physical characteristics which can be arbitrary, differing over time and context (Song, 2018). Being perceived and categorised as belonging to a certain racial group may have nothing to do with how the individuals racially identify themselves. However, due to race's visibility, which racial group individuals are perceived to belong to and identify with have direct consequences

on individuals' lives through their experiences (or no experiences) of racism, racialisation and discrimination (Osanami Törngren & Suyemoto, 2022) leading to racial inequity.

Different understandings of how to redress this racial inequity are well-researched and debated. On the one hand, there are advocates of racially conscious policies such as affirmative actions (e.g. Lee, 2021) and, on the other, there are people who believe that to be racially colour-blind is the way to achieve racial harmony (e.g. Babbitt et al., 2016). Colour-blindness is understood as an ideology, 'a set of race-neutral ideals, views and norms with which people identify' (Hartmann et al., 2017, p. 868). Within the US context, racial colour-blindness is often criticised as a belief that race should not and no longer matters (Doane, 2017). It is a belief, grounded in ideas of political and economic liberalism, that individual efforts and choices are more important than race in determining socio-economic outcomes; this diminishes the significance of racial-group membership and identification and its influence on individuals' life outcomes (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Daughtry et al., 2020; Plaut et al., 2018). Research predominantly conducted in the US context, in fact, shows how colour-blind ideology is more prominent among the White majority population and strongly connected to the ideas of White privilege (McIntosh, 2018), White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), White innocence (Wekker, 2016) and White habitus (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006). Therefore, some theorise racial colour-blindness further – as racially explicit attitudes which enable and perpetuate negative attitudes and racism or as a strategy to appear non-racist and to avoid addressing race-based inequalities and privileges (e.g. Neville et al., 2013, 2016). Racial colour-blindness can then be understood as a mechanism which maintains, blinds and benefits those who belong to the majority and which makes invisible a sense of Whiteness and privilege (Goldberg, 2015; Hartmann et al., 2017; Lentin, 2020). To have a post-racial approach as erasing and denying any racial categorisation or reference to race will only enable people to 'conceive of ourselves no longer in racial terms' and falsely believe in 'transcending racial categorisation' (Goldberg, 2015, p. 69), even as the effects of the hierarchy of race remain.

Setting the context: Malmö, a contested city

Brand identity is always embedded in a context. In order to understand the images of Malmö curated through branding materials, we need to understand how Malmö is a city of multiplicity and a contested site. Malmö prides itself on being a city representing 183 different nationalities of whom 35% of the approximately 350,000 inhabitants are foreign-born. The largest foreign-born populations are from Iraq (around 12,000), Syria (8,700) and Denmark (7,500).¹ The diversity of the population becomes even more vivid when looking at those today who are under 25. Of the population aged under 25 in Malmö, 31% were born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents – i.e. second generation immigrants – and 16% were born in Sweden to one foreign-born and one Swedish-born parent. Among those aged under 25 in Malmö, Swedes with two parents born in Sweden – a proxy for being ethnically Swedish and racially White – are a numerical minority. As much as the city proudly showcases its diversity, there are struggles that come with it. Even though this is not a situation unique to Malmö, the city's foreign-born population experiences higher unemployment and there is about a SEK 100,000 median income difference between the foreign- and the native-born. The income gap is particularly wide between those who were born in Sweden and those born in Asia (including the Middle East) which is at SEK

170,000 (approximately 120,000 GBP).² Farage's (2017) tweet is just one example of how Malmö has been highlighted on the map in the social and traditional media since 2015 and how Malmö is failing because of its racial and ethnic diversity.

How, then, is Malmö, with its diversity and inequality, represented in academic texts? In our literature review we identify three main themes: (1) the future city, (2) the counter-cultural creative city and (3) the (failed) multicultural city. Malmö as *the future city* is presented as an industrial society morphing into a post-industrial knowledge and consumer society (Kärrholm, 2017) where the critical events and moral take-away differ along one clear dimension – the move towards neoliberal governance and urban planning (Gustafsson, 2021; Listerborn, 2017; Pries, 2017). The 1990s' industrial crisis led to a huge proportion of the White working-class population being laid-off (Stigendal, 1996); the town tried to solve this crisis (and the later financial crisis of 2008) with huge investments in ideas of a 'smart', 'green', 'knowledge' city in the form of privileged middle-class housing sectors, place-making through large arenas, monumental buildings like Turning Torso, a transnational bridge, entrepreneurial lingo, innovation hubs and place-branding within the larger Copenhagen and Öresund region (Bulkeley & Stripple, 2020; Leonette et al., 2021). Some researchers try to demonstrate that initiatives have been good for the city of Malmö as a whole (Leonette et al., 2021; McCormick & Kiss, 2015), whereas others debunk them as neoliberal *spectacularisation* (Lefebvre, 1991) or, more specifically, as an 'Örespectacle' (Sandberg, 2014) and mere 'green fixes' concealing crucial contradictions as a sort of 'spatial myopia' (Holgersen & Hult, 2021). In terms of social relations, the initiatives have been criticised as a Keynesianism for the wealthy rather than for the poor (Baeten, 2012) widening the economic divides and inequality between social classes (Stigendal, 2016). In an ideological sense contradictory to the future-city discourse, Malmö as a *counter-cultural creative city* is described as an underdog – an artistic, young, culturally progressive and left-radical city (Hansen, 2019). Art collectives, indie music labels, underground clubs, sound zones, political manifestations and graffiti are all depicted as important parts of this city's imaginary (Hannerz & Kimvall, 2019). The area in and around Möllevången Square and Folkets Park, in particular, makes up a symbolic opposition to the Turning Torso spectacular. Povrazanovic Frykman (2016, p. 35) describes Möllevången as 'a neighbourhood defined by a local history of immigration and activism as well as by the globe-spanning processes of urban restructuring', conjoining commitments towards environmental issues, human rights, equality and social justice. Clearly, this clashes with the 'apolitical' neoliberal future-city discourse but both are frequently referred to as reference points whereby the counter-cultural creative city is typically used as an endorsement for the future city, whereas the future city is typically referred to in malign terms in the counter-cultural discourse.

In understanding Malmö as a (failed) *multicultural city*, some research evaluates Malmö municipality's 'diversity management' and integration policies (Rönqvist, 2008) as well as other EU, national and local welfare systems as fairly satisfactory, at least from an internationally comparative perspective (Dekker et al., 2015; McGlenn, 2018). At the same time, other researchers point to how segregation and polarisation have increased during recessions, in which the poorer neighbourhoods have fared worse (Listerborn, 2021; Scarpa, 2015), with a substantial share of children (Köhler, 2012) and undocumented street-homeless migrants (Nordling et al., 2017; Persdotter, 2019) living in poverty. Increased segregation and increasing organised violent crime (Gerell & Kronkvist, 2017;

Stjernborg et al., 2015) have also paved the way for Malmö to become the embodiment of failed social, racial and ethnic integration and to be used as a 'revenge fantasy' by right-wing xenophobic parties and neo-Nazis, both nationally and internationally (Sager & Mulinari, 2018; Titley, 2019). Hence, it is in the light of these starkly conflicting Malmö narratives that we must view the way in which the city and the region choose to embody it as a brand.

Method

In order to explore a city deemed unstable and to problematise its marketing efforts in the light of its heterotopian accumulation of time 'juxtaposing in a single real place several sites, that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 25), we have engaged in an interactive, *introspection* analysis. Most importantly, this analysis is made through the authors' partly different theoretical positionalities, in order to unpack some of the potential contested meanings destabilising an imagined brand.

Introspection

Aiming to explore branding representations through an *in situ* introspective interaction, we have taken a multi-theoretical perspective and reflexive approach to analyse visual and textual marketing material. 'Introspection' (Gould, 1995, 2007, 2008, 2012) could be seen as an overarching *introspectionesque* (Brown, 2012) paradigm embracing 'all work that researchers do with autobiographic, autoethnographic and or self-experimentalesque approaches drawing on their own experiences to derive ideas and theories, either explicitly or implicitly' (Gould, 2012, p. 455). While that paradigm includes for example 'collaborative autoethnography' (Pradhan & Drake, 2023) and 'autobiography' (Brown, 2006), the introspection *per se* refers to the actual self-interrogating and phenomenological process (Thomasson, 2003) and serves to generate rich, contextual data where the researcher is both the subject and object. According to Minowa et al. (2012) introspection becomes extra relevant as a 'xenoheteroglossic' method when a research project consists of researchers with diverse cultural backgrounds. Similar to Brown et al.'s (1999) introspective and juxtaposing approach where they used themselves and their different experiences and backgrounds to do parallel gendered readings upon which they then reflected, we first intended to read the branding material based on race – White and non-White readings (Burton, 2002, 2009a, 2009b). However, this reading was, as given by the theoretical positions emerging from our meta-reflection (see below), later complemented with other theoretical perspectives.

We identified three websites constructed to promote Malmö as well as its wider geographical context of the Skåne region: the brand platform *Sharing Skåne* <https://sharingskane.se>, the tourist sight *Visit Skåne*, <https://visitskane.com/sv> and the tourist section of the *Malmö Town* website, <https://malmo.se/Uppleva-och-gora/Besoka-Malmo.html>. These three websites contain information for marketers and tourism actors to use to promote Malmö and its surrounding region of Skåne – for example, to potential habitants and incoming tourists. We then reflected upon each of these sites – with no directives on what or how to scroll, click or select what to focus on – and wrote down our reflections in a transcript. After this we began our next round of second-phase analysis in which we

read each other's reflections and, in turn, began to reflect upon these reflections, focusing on analytical codes, although this time in concert. In the third round of reflection, we began a phase of thematisation by hermeneutically (Thompson et al., 1989) going back and forth between transcripts, theory and reflections, while together formulating patterns as themes and writing these down.

Meta-reflection procedure

At the same time, we reflected upon our own interpretations according to the intersections of our above-mentioned theoretical positions. This discussion, in turn, evolved into new analyses every time we met and discussed this analysis, both before and during revisions of this paper. By referring to this as *meta-reflection*, we mean that we interactively analysed our introspective interpretations, then analysed this very analysis before analysing that analysis, and so on. It was not a pre-planned, systematic approach but a messy yet eye-opening process. The planned and systematic introspective approach was what led us to understand the tensions between us and our positions. We then felt these tensions were urgent to integrate into our analysis as such. In turn, the meta-reflection approach was what filled this with content.

Hence, during our work on this article, we began to observe varying theoretical tensions emerging during our introspective analysis and when theorising what we saw. Our theoretical differences in how we academically see social inequality visibly affected the way we read material and drew conclusions. Whereas one author would lean more upon a theoretical understanding which deals with material redistribution based on socio-economic dimensions, the second author would centralise race, together with intersecting social categories. This is inevitably connected to the positionality of the two researchers, which is crucial in addressing and reflecting upon issues when conducting research. Despite the importance of reflectivity, it is rare that researchers with varying theoretical positionalities conduct simultaneous analysis through explicit engagement with the differing theoretical understandings (see, for example, the gender positionalities of Brown et al. (1999)). Thus, by pinpointing this analytical procedure, we believe that we not only contribute to further understanding about branded, contested and racialised space but also provide an alternative method of theoretical analysis and interpretation of marketing material which, we argue, is needed in eras and contexts of growing ideological and political antagonism.

Analysis

We, the authors, both looked at the websites from the first page and further into the stories that were shared; however, because we freely browsed the web pages, we did not see the same pages all the time and each paid more or less attention to different things. Nevertheless, some of the reference points were the same and came up more often than others. To facilitate navigation and provide context, in [Table 1](#) we provide brief descriptions of four parts of the material that we both highlighted a little more frequently and read as being central in the branding material of Skåne and Malmö, and which therefore only needed one content presentation. The names that appear here are presented in the same way as in the publicly available material, and we do not have information about

Table 1. Description of commonly highlighted data material.

Data Material		
Source	Description	Discursive Examples
Visit Skåne https://visitskane.com/sv	Copy: modified from Malmö Town's copy (see below).	'Ideas and momentum flow in Malmö and you'll feel it when you visit. You feel it in art, music, food. You feel it in diversity and people. Malmö is a place where people come to fulfil their dreams. It's a city with room for ambition and talent – that invites you to join in'.
Malmö Town https://malmo.se/Uppleva-och-gora/Besoka-Malmo.html	Copy: the original text shared by <i>Malmö Town</i> for branding and promoting Malmö but in the <i>Malmö Town</i> version of the text, the perspective is not only 'Malmö' but the more inclusive 'we/our/'us'.	'Ideas and momentum flow in Malmö. You feel it when you visit us . You feel it in our art, our music, our food. You feel it in our diversity and people. Malmö is a place where people come to fulfil their dreams. A city with room for ambition and talent – and you're invited '.
Malmö Town https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wln2PSn_S0	The 'diversity' of Malmö is exhibited in a film on the first page of <i>Malmö Town</i> – a 4-minute-long video clip entitled 'Welcome to Malmö'. The video shows a young, White, professional female skater who glides through Malmö and stops at strategic places. At just 12 seconds into the video clip, a scene in which many women wearing white hijabs is shown. This place is introduced as <i>Yalla Trappan</i> , a women's cooperative where we see six women in white hijabs working in a kitchen together. For those who speak Swedish, it is clear that they speak it fluently but with accents typical of immigrants from the Middle East. Besides <i>Yalla Trappan</i> , the video includes stories of other young adults, children and retirees.	A female voiceover; 'I am proud to be living in Malmö. Malmö is the best city'. Fatme Ibrahim, with the caption 'social entrepreneur', says: 'It is our goal to get all women jobs and get them out of the house . . . We are a great mix of Swedes and immigrants from many different countries. A lot of joy in Malmö. Malmö is 'action' In the YouTube video, the first comment is from a user called 'Shiva Forest Meditation' saying: 'The video apparently forgot that Malmö is a war zone'.
Sharing Skåne https://sharingskane.se	At Sharing Skåne the idea of 'diversity' is central in describing Malmö from a corporate perspective. The locally celebrated CEO (at that time) of the internationally successful video gaming company <i>Massive</i> , David Polfelt, is interviewed. The people with whom Polfelt works are 'from 35 countries and a little more than one third of them were born outside of Sweden'. He describes how ethnic diversity has become so normal at <i>Massive</i> that prejudices have collapsed and have no meaning. This, he believes, will also happen in Malmö at large.	David Polfelt: 'The whole world is in Malmö. [We have] two soccer teams, a hockey team, the opera, the art museum, the small companies and the large companies. I also think Copenhagen Airport is more important to us than we often say. You have access to the world from here. If you are to squeeze in that many things in a city's offering you generally have to look for much larger cities. This has proven to be quite important to us, especially in terms of recruitment. [I] see it like this; the brain uses prejudices and stereotypes to save time. However, when you then suddenly sit in a meeting with a person who is a Sikh, one who was born in Pakistan but grew up in Arlöv, one from Spain, one from Hollywood, one who was born to ordinary middle-class Swedes, a person from Iceland and one from Uzbekistan, it suddenly becomes clear that the prejudices you have no longer help you. So, the best thing from a purely rational perspective is to throw them [the prejudices] away – that's how <i>Massive</i> has evolved'.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Data Material	
Skåne 'enthusiasts' have been selected to tell their life stories. Yan Yao, for example, who 'moved to' Sweden three years ago because she met 'Martin' on a taxi ride in Shanghai, where she is originally from.	Yao thinks Sweden is 'fantastic' and full of 'opportunities' as long as one puts some effort into it and 'learns the language' and 'cultural history'. One of the subtitles in her story is 'Like coming home', highlighting Möllevångstorget as a place of 'openness' where she can find Chinese groceries. 'Möllevångstorget is really an experience with its large representation of people from so many different countries'.

whether pseudonyms were used or not. The contents of the analysis are solely based on the two authors' interpretations of the materials and have nothing to do with the political and social positions of the individual persons.

In the next sections, we present our separate readings of this material, while also capturing the differences in any additional material that the two authors' attention was drawn to.

First author's readings

I look at the video on *Yalla Trappan* and am immediately struck by the implicit assumption that we, as spectators, are aware that Malmö has problems and that these problems are related to the theme of the failed multicultural city. We are also invited to *understand that problems are worked with. Problems are being solved*. Both *Yalla Trappan* and *Polfelt's Massive* are presented as solutions to the problem of ethnic segregation. *Yalla Trappan* actively works towards getting 'women to participate and not just sit at home', women who must get 'out of their homes' – but which women? It is not White, Swedish, middle-class women we are talking about here I assume? *Yalla Trappan's* connection to global corporations, 'major Swedish companies' such as H&M and IKEA, introduces a feeling of integration. It is 'our' Malmö where anyone who chooses to be a part of it can be. Companies like *Massive* can make bold statements like 'The fact is that we do nothing' because they believe that their high-skilled, global, mobile, cosmopolitan employees are 'rational'. This blindness to middle-class privilege may be (beyond) provocative but is an apt illustration of a fantasmatic universe where the rational market is thought to solve societal problems that were created by, and in, that very 'world interior of capital' (Sloterdijk, 2014) itself; hence, an ideological deadlock (Žižek, 2008b). This fantasy serves to conceal and symbolically replace the impossible kernel which is too traumatic to be symbolised (2008b, p. xxviii) – namely, the ethnic and racial segregation in Malmö.

I open the *Sharing Skåne* website and the first thing that 'greet me' is the text 'Skåne' on top and then an image of what I understand, judging by its style and context, to be a middle-class mum and her daughter outside, with a blue sky as the background. They are smiling happily, the girl looking past the spectator (the photographer) while the mother, dressed in an elegant, colourful 'ethnic' patterned top and minimalistic earrings, caresses her daughter's (dressed in a white hoodie) shoulders while looking (down) at her; the Future. The daughter's hair blows in the

wind. Both the mother and daughter are Black and I notice myself wondering whether this means that the Skåne region sees these models as representatives of Skåne or whether it has been a strategic choice to signal 'diversity'. The third alternative, that the editors simply just selected photographs from an image bank and found this great picture of a beautiful mother and daughter, comes to my mind only after I have already thought of the other two alternatives. This irritates me (that I am so cynical and apparently racist) because why do I even think about skin colour/race when I see this picture? I tell myself that it is because of the context – that we are studying the construction of a branded, racialised place. Right below the image is the text 'Sharing Skåne – For you who want to use the brand Skåne'; in other words, these models *are* the brand Skåne. I read this not as a coincidence – because there are no coincidences, only glimpses of real desire mocked by the superego (Žižek, 2008a) – but as a choice of *strategic essentialism* (Spivak, 1999), a sort of humanitarian affirmative action to force representations of persons of colour into all spheres of life in order to squeeze out ontological essentialism (race biology). However, like Žižek (2009, p. 177), I see this as a market fetishisation of difference and tokenism and a 'prettification of the Other', which, indeed, causes irritation (as it did above) at the price of desired normalisation of racial multiplicity, because it is so apparently forced – and worse so through the forces of a market logic. As poster models for Skåne, the fantasy of 'diversity' is reduced to race. The scary question is: Would I have made the same interpretation had the models been White?

In contrast, when I look at images on *Visit Skåne* I find them refreshingly authentic. I see fantastic, inspiring milieus, images of nature and historic buildings, flowers, restaurants, forests, beaches, tipi tents, cool hipster environments (no people) and cliffs. House colours and historic monuments and picturesque streets in small cities (mostly Lund) – but no animals and only occasionally people (Grinell, 2004; Lindström, 2011). When there *are* people in the images, they look spontaneously diverse, not tokenistically cast. What is it that makes me think or see that? I think it is the focus on material space rather than on casted models. The people who appear (which is more the exception than the rule) play a seemingly minor role in that, most of the time, they are shot from a far distance. We can barely racialise them but we can draw conclusions about their socio-economic situation. What economically strained family would prioritise spending money on a kayak trip at Immeln or spending a fortune at the Svaneholm Castle Museum café on a Sunday for that matter? Apart from this middle-classification, the visual distance creates a benign equivalence between the characters and the physical milieus thus become entry points for *any* fantasised identifications (Cowie, 1990). The same goes for the unlikely image of Möllevångstorget void of people. As *Malmö Town's* brand text claims that diversity is something that you 'feel' in Malmö, I find the absence of people as somewhat refreshing as it does not distort the material reality with people. Nevertheless, these visual absences can, of course, not only be read as equivalencies between characters – a sort of free identification, 'I can be whoever I want!' – but can also represent a gap, the traumatic core around which alternative versions of 'truth' hover (Žižek, 2009). A capitulation to the Real kernel, that the brutality of social divisions cannot be symbolised or solved unless more radical actions are taken, which requires too much work to even fantasise about.

In Yao's story, I literally sigh reading her comment on Möllevångstorget because of its framing as the local cliché of 'diversity'. I notice that my thoughts have spontaneously visualised the sunburnt politician, Ilmar Reepalu, and his crew, so vividly representing the future city discourse of Malmö around the turn of the millennium. I see them in the wealthy neighbourhoods around the Turning Torso with blue skies, the ocean and sun, making grand plans about the way that Malmö will prosper from attracting the creative classes to Möllevångstorget and Västra Hamnen at the same time as boastful buildings and arenas are built. My thoughts also go to Polfelt's taken-for-grantedness of mobility and diversity apparent in his 'halleluja story' about the 'end-of-prejudices', thanks to a techtopian free market. The social-class dimension of racial and ethnic diversity is nowhere to be seen.

Yao's Möllevångstorget functions as a metonym for 'exciting' multiculturalism, with its unresolved political tensions associated with the exotic Other versus the familiar. The documented economic gulf between the implied poor non-White others and the White middle-class works, for me, as a fetish merely 'tickling' the subject (Ulver, 2021), rather than as a warning sign. Presented as the 'home for all' and a 'haven for diversity', Möllevångstorget is a tickling fetish obstructing, more than anything else, the view of serious problems stemming from socio-economic divides. Is this not, in reality, a *disruption* – Lacan's *objet petit a* – as Žižek (2009) would perhaps have it, a gap right in the centre of the symbolic order? Because traumatic social divisions can't be symbolised according to Žižek (2008b). I read the naïve consecration of Möllevången as a neoliberal fantasy filling the gap (the unfathomable lack) of harmonically equal social relations and unifying the diversities of the brutal city. As long as Möllevången is there, we can keep our fantasy of unification intact.

Finally, just as Polfelt lifted Malmö's excellence as very much leaning upon what is around it (Copenhagen Airport), *Visit Skåne* applies this technique to lure attraction to the white, sandy beaches reachable from Malmö that 'offer everything you can get on the Riviera, but without the people'. This copy leaves me, as a spectator, with an impression of absurdity, because what is the mythologised 'Riviera' without its people? The beautiful models, the movie actresses, princes and princesses, kings and drug lords? Again, this makes us think of the positioning as something which cannot carry itself. Whereas, for example, Lund, on the *Visit Skåne* site, is defined by its own historic high-cultural-capital legacy, Malmö's stories conceal a lower-working-class complex through its disorientating traces of desire for 'elsewhere' and, in the end, through a non-coincidental *non-identity*.

Second author's readings

As a person of colour, I am conscious about my racial identity and belonging, and therefore I am race conscious in whatever interaction I have with my surroundings. I open the site '*Sharing Skåne*'. I see a Black 'family' (a mother and daughter). The Black father not being there is another dimension of stereotyping (interpreting from the US-influenced knowledge of Black representation). The image strikes you but there is no connection to the content of 'Skåne'. There is nothing on the website that connects concretely to their presence on the beach. You should notice them but you don't have to hear them. If it was a White mother and child, they would not need a story because they are automatically assumed to 'belong'. If it is a People of Colour (POC) mother and her

child, I feel that they need a story because representation is scarce; they need a story so that they do not become just a copy-and-paste token, if everything else is White. They need to be heard. This is a contrast to what I see in other parts of the website: 'WHITE, WHITE, WHITE'. I am overwhelmed by the White way of selling nature in *Sharing Skåne*. This is a stereotypical 'authentic' White Swedish space. I found a video clip, 'Nature in Skåne', representing exactly the feeling of uneasiness and exclusion I feel in the whole representation of the Skåne website for tourists. The video clip eloquently shows how White upper-middle-class people can just get out into 'nature' and forget all their problems. It reflects a language of mobility and privileges. One of the White males in the video says 'You can have everything here ... in nature there's no big problems as in the cities ... you feel that the problems in the city are not so big and they will pass'. His comment highlights the choices and the mobility that he possesses, that he can always go into nature and forget about his 'problems' and that these 'problems' will then just disappear. These images depict ideas of colour-blindness based on abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) the Black mother can be there without stories because it is her choice; you can get out in the nature, and can have everything there, because with your individual choices and efforts, you can enter any space.

Representation of diversity through colour-blind discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) is everywhere in the material that we analyse. There is no negative discourse or representation, however it is clear that representation of place and peoples are segregated and creates White habitus (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006). I read Yao's narrative and wonder about the invisibility of Shanghai, China and how her story clearly deploys the model minority image. Sweden, through Yao, is portrayed as open, tolerant and full of opportunities; this leaves her story open to interpretation, with a salient message that China is not. Yao fits the model minority image; she chooses to be in Sweden and strives to be part of Swedish society. Mention of 'a certain Martin', Yao's potential partner who brought her to Sweden. We do not even know if Martin is a White Swedish person, but I cannot do away with my prejudice based on statistical facts. Martin is invincible from negative effects of racialisation because he is the norm (Goldberg, 2015). The framing of her having had a great career at home but leaving for Sweden to find something 'better', how she has learned the language and culture in her goal of participating in the labour market and how she stresses the importance of Swedish values and liberalism, all materialise in Yao as a favourable immigrant. 'I really think that Sweden is fantastic, you get the opportunity to do many different things and making choices is very much up to you'.

Yao's story is a contrast to that told by Mark Wilcox, also a 'love migrant', like Yao. Mark is a White Canadian who migrated to Sweden in 1984. Unlike Yao, Mark is an established migrant and a successful entrepreneur who has been in the country since the 1980s. He does not need to tell the reader that he speaks the language and learned the culture as Yao does. He is from Canada, Yao is from China – an implicit racial and ethnic hierarchy. He has nothing to prove. 'Mark does not have to defend himself'. White racialisation is salient (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006). Just as 'Martin' is invisible in Yao's story, the 'wife back then' – who we assume was the reason for him 'moving to Sweden' – is also invisible.

Polfelt's words are a textbook example of a colour-blind discourse and White habitus based on rationality. What he is talking about is not really diversity and inclusion but, rather, globalisation and internationalisation. This links to Malmö city spelling out 'We act locally and think globally'. This is about mobility; however, not everyone shares the

economic middle-class privilege of being able to afford rationality, especially considering that the reality of Malmö is segregation and a high unemployment rate among foreign-born residents. I also react to the comment by Carolina Calheira Diestel, a White female *pétanque* enthusiast: 'I like Malmö because it's a pretty convenient city'. For her, this convenience refers to the cycling distance to the beach, park and her work. The convenience and the mobility are not felt equally in Malmö but only reflect the unspoken and non-reflected White privilege (McIntosh, 2018). Their lifestyle and mobility are normal. The unquestioned White habitus 'creates and conditions their views, cognitions, and even sense of beauty' (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006, p. 247) and a sense of racial solidarity that exist in Malmö city.

The diversity is indeed embraced as a commodity from the White perspective, as something positive, without any mentions of segregation and the reality of the racial minority population. Brand Skåne's description of living and residing in Skåne³ says: 'Diversity and close to everything, in the city as in the countryside'⁴. Skåne is framed as a place where new work opportunities and housing options are available. Here the upper-middle-class Malmö area of Västra Hamnen and the connectivities of Malmö and Lund University with Medicon village, start-up hubs and buzzing entrepreneurship, are the focus. The website says that people move to Skåne and Malmö for different reasons but there is no mention of the people themselves and their different motivations for moving and immigrating to Skåne/Malmö are totally ignored. This description also takes for granted that everyone has a choice of mobility. Here the racial colour-blind ideal becomes vivid.

Yalla Trappan becomes the bridge between 'Swedes' and 'immigrants'. There is an implicit colour-blind way of telling the story in which 'immigrants' wearing the hijab and 'Swedes' do not interact. The immigrant women are quite well integrated and have similar enough values to those of Swedish society although different enough to function as tokens (Gent, 2017). Tokenism flourishes in an environment where diversity is created by only allowing a few minorities to enter the space, while discriminatory practice and White privilege are maintained (Ricucci, 2008). In a similar vein, Polfelt's answer to segregation – 'The fact is that we do nothing' because they, the high-skilled, global, mobile, international-minded people are 'rational' – is a colour-blind discourse based on rationality and liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). It is 'our' Malmö through a raster of colour-blind ideology, which anyone who 'chooses' can be part of. White habitus creates the 'correct and normal' way of doing things and maintains the White racialised attitude that justifies racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006).

The picture of Möllevångstorget is placed right under the text that says that you 'feel' the diversity in the people. The caption of the picture says, 'You can buy fruits and vegetables at Möllevångstorget'. The people that represent diversity, other than racially White people, are not portrayed, and their stories are not heard. Where is the diversity that you are supposed to feel? In the blurry Chinese characters that you see in the corner? In the restaurant sign that says Möllan Curry? Where are the people and what is the story? This makes the representation of Möllevångstorget feel tokenistic and exploited; the representation only leaves the feeling of segregated spaces and the untouchable White habitus.

The noodle master Huy Dang, a young chef who I racially ascribe as Asian, in the video clip of Malmö, is a positive example, where his presence represents the diversity which is

part of Malmö. We hear that he is a native speaker of Swedish and his focus is not on why he is present in Malmö or how he is a symbol of integration but on the city's foodie culture. He interacts with people and is part of Malmö and invites those watching the video 'If you are a food lover you should come to Malmö'. Similar to Davis and Mitchell's (2022) analysis of the selling of Black tours in Paris, here, the representation of the noodle master is benignly capitalising the present and the future of a multiracial Sweden.

Meta-reflections

Once we realised, upon reading each other's initial introspections, that we saw very different things and had made starkly different theoretical interpretations, we began – perhaps in a fantasmatic mode if the first author were to interpret this – to wonder if we could unite or at least understand our readings as one totality. This turned out to be difficult. We kept on falling into almost antagonistic discussions about the destructiveness vs excellence of identity politics. We argued back and forth about why it is the wrong/right route for politics to take in order to solve large societal problems – but reached no consensus. We discussed the danger/importance of reading racial or class relations into every representation and again could not agree. The first author's White reading of Malmö's place Malmö has its own advantages which seemingly must be accentuated by its resource of proximity to the rest of the world. While Doane (1982, p. 81) referred to femininity, this 'elsewhere' seems to function in a similar way to a 'decorative layer which conceals a non-identity' related to the power dynamics of a deterritorialised capital. Moreover, this non-identity strengthens the social-class-blind *and* colour-blind approach and normalises the middle-class and Whiteness. Together, these lenses make visible Malmö's decorative layer as an empty *mask*, a *masquerade* or a *mimesis* (Irigaray, 1985), of worldliness through the world outside. In concert with Malmö as a failed multicultural city and future city, the city brand de-stigmatises and reimagines itself as progressive through distractions of world-class dazzle. Hence, we found consensus in the conviction that the market logic – with its inherent wish for deregulation, competition and profit, in combination with its necessary absorption of obligatory opportunism – cannot be trusted with solving societal issues. That, we both agree, is a capitalist fantasy.

Discussion

As posited at the beginning of this article, critical branding and place-branding studies have, in the last two decades problematised the uni-identity branding of highly diverse places, but less has been said specifically about racialised multiplicity in such marketisation. Through our research, we wanted to understand how the unstable network of contradicting narratives in an ethnically diverse and multicultural city dovetails with the neoliberal idea of the city as one, unified and marketable brand.

Firstly, we contribute with an additional understanding of the place-branding literature stream where the slippery and porous nature of 'place' as concept is central (e.g. Cassinger & Eksell, 2017; Lucarelli, 2019; Medway et al., 2021). In that literature, a paradox of 'placelessness' has been emphasised – that is, places that have been commodified strongly with one dominant narrative and have thereby marginalised other narratives, have then overlooked many peoples' strong (alternative) attachments

(Warnaby & Medway, 2013). The idea of placelessness resembles the *non-identity* we see here as a result, precisely, of the effort of identity-making for something too slippery to define by one or even many narratives. Understood through Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, p. 4) notion of the idea of unity as:

signifying totality [yet] a *body without organs*, which is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity.

The brand is then merely a name and nothing more than a trace of what is already gone.

Secondly, paraphrasing the body-without-organs idea with our focus on race and the marketplace, the city – in our study – evolves as a body with many organs but without the organ skin. Metaphorically, the skin as a shell would hold the entity together as one; however, when the skin/shell breaks, the body bleeds and its organs are diffused. Then, as a racialised entity, colour-blindness both emphasises and de-emphasises the city brand's skin(s), on the one hand by tabooifying the dimensions of race and skin and, on the other, by distracting from other structural explanations such as social class, depending on who is reading it. This insight adds to previous critical-marketing research that has focused on the commodification of skin (e.g. Borgerson & Schroeder, 2018; Davis, 2018), in that it inverts the treatment of racialised skin from commodified to *commodifier* due to its identity-political role in the marketplace. From a Lacanian perspective, through the co-constitution of visual images and subjectivities, our encounters with certain kinds of image tutor us into specific subjectivities (Rose, 2016), in this case the *racial consumer subject*, in contrast to Veresiu and Giesler's (2018) *ethnic consumer subject*, where skin is taboo. In the era of identity politics' entanglement with the marketplace, skin is no longer only commodified but also the other way around.

Thirdly, our study adds to the quantitatively thin (but qualitatively thick) literature on racialised space and the marketplace. By focusing on the branding efforts of a city that has been partly demolished in the transnational social mediascape, we see strategies that try to navigate through the complex network of political tensions between polarised trenches – colour-blind copy in combination with strategic essentialist visual images. As racism works very differently from one context to another, in our Nordic-European context, where the Black – White dichotomy, for historical reasons, is less central than non-White – White racism, the branding of space as 'diverse' is, for example, less concentrated on Blackness – as is Davis and Mitchell's (2022) study of 'Black tours' in Paris – than on other racialised categories. Malmö tries to present itself as a space of 'ethnic diversity' – as do neighbourhoods in Copenhagen (Kuruoğlu & Woodward, 2021) just across the Öresund bridge; however, depending on who is 'reading', this can be read as 'racism in disguise' (Davis, 2018) due to its colour-blind copy, despite this presumed effort to break with norms of Whiteness. Alternatively, it is as if the non-White – White dichotomy paradoxically blurs the view of racism precisely because it is not Black – White and makes everything or nothing racist. In contrast, Francis and Robertson's (2021) findings on the blatantly racist strategies used by American real-estate agents to blockbust Black consumers from moving to White neighbourhoods through their (non-) communication and advertising targeted at White home-owners, there is certainly no room for interpretation. However, when it is

diversity that is branded, what should be read as racism or not becomes ambiguous, as we have demonstrated here.

Fourthly, our meta-reflection taught us to see the city brand Malmö in different ways. In one way it tried to encourage us to see Malmö as it seems to wish us to do – that is, as worldly, cosmopolitan and colourful. However, it paradoxically also tutors (some of) us to think of ourselves as racist and shameful, punishing us by making us aware of how what is visible, through phenotypes, names or stories dictate our view and interpretations. Hence, the very same material teaches us not solely in one way but in many ways, contextually interpretable in relation to historical and ideological prescribed subjectifications. In this way, the various discursive and visual storylines reveal no coherent and continuous ontology, no fantasmatically unified ‘identity’, but disparate storylines balancing at the intersections of tensions in Whiteness and colour-blindness without touching side. The brand image that solves no contradictions assumes a *non*-identity which, in itself, comes to define what is ‘normal’. This adds to the critical-marketing stream about the ideological functioning of the market (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016; Coffin, 2022; Cronin & Fitchett, 2021; Ulver, 2021). It helps us to understand how the non-identity branding fetishises cultural contradictions into a tickling tension which does not solve the contradiction but, instead, works as and upholds a gravity to the suspense in the form of a *fetishistic tickling* (Ulver, 2021). Here the unbearable Whiteness and the maintenance of it through colour-blind narratives become striking. In the literature about contested place brands, Cassinger et al. (2018) found that imagined terror destabilised the city brand more than did actually occurred terror. Similarly, here, in contrast, the clear invisibilities come to haunt the identity-political reader as much as, or more than, the visibilities. There is no solution, but the city brand works as an assemblage of tickling sprouts, upholding the fantasy of a unified, yet horrifyingly empty, Whole.

Penultimately, at the level of empirical practice, we could understand the non-identity branding of cities as a sort of institutionalised mandatoryness at the office, no longer only in the commercial domains but just as much in the public domain (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). The branding logic is so pervasive that intentionally escaping it would be close to hermetic. Alas – and in line with Bradshaw and Zwick’s (2016) and Cronin and Fitchett’s (2021) Žižekian explorations of fetishistic operations – people go on as if the complete opposite were true (*inversion*) or because they do not care even if they know (*disavowal*) and thereby continue in a collective self-delusion which says that ‘the brand’ (capitalism) will solve the conflicts in the end. With this said, many – or probably most – place-branding practitioners work with both self-reflection and a genuine urge for their place to be respectfully treated and represented. It is not them but the commodification process *per se* that inevitably morphs the slippery place into a skinless mess of organs.

Finally – and related to our meta-reflective approach in this article – in a post-truth social media age where expert systems are increasingly delegitimised, we suggest a more transparent and far more reflective (even introspective) orientation in future marketing studies – or as a pedagogical tool in education for that matter – something we have begun to experiment with here. This because, there should now be no doubt, perspectives always exclude other perspectives; however, reflecting upon this may open up for reconciliating agonism, a rare species in our antagonistic times.

Notes

1. <https://malmo.se/Fakta-och-statistik/Befolkning.html>.
2. Calculated by the second author. Source: SCB Income and tax statistics (SCB, 2022b) and population statistics (SCB, 2022a).
3. <https://sharingskane.se/temaartiklar/leva-bo-i-skane/>.
4. Translated by the second author. Original text: 'Mångfald och nära till allt, i stan som på landet'.

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