

“Where not two places are the same”: Representations
of the USA as a destination country for high school
exchange students

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Essi Tanskanen

University of Jyväskylä
Department of Language and Communication Studies
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoitus on tutkia, millaisia representaatioita Yhdysvalloista vaihtokohdemaana rakennetaan lukioikäisille vaihto-oppilaille. Aikaisempi tutkimus on keskittynyt tutkimaan diskursseja vaihto-opiskelun promootiossa yliopistotasolla, joten tämä tutkimus keskittyy selvittämään, miten vaihto-opiskelua kuvataan lukioikäisille.</p> <p>Aineistona tässä tutkielmassa oli neljä nettisivua eri vaihto-opiskeluorganisaatioilta. Analysointiin valittiin ne osat nettisivuista, jotka esittelivät Yhdysvaltoja vaihtokohdemaana. Tutkimuksessa käytettiin diskurssianalyysin keinoja ja aineistosta pyrittiin selvittämään, millaisilla sanavalinnoilla, ilmauksilla ja teemoilla Yhdysvaltoja vaihtokohdemaana kuvattiin.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa nousi esille neljä representaatiota Yhdysvalloista. Ensimmäinen representaatio oli, että Yhdysvallat on monimuotoinen vaihtokohdemaana, joka tarjoaa jokaiselle uniikkeja kokemuksia. Toinen representaatio oli, että Yhdysvallat on maa, josta löytyy tunnettuja nähtävyyksiä, kaupunkeja ja brändejä, ja täten se toimii myös turistikohteena. Kolmannen representaation mukaan Yhdysvalloissa ihmiset osallistuvat laajalti erilaisiin aktiviteetteihin ja neljännen representaation mukaan Yhdysvallat on maa, josta löytyy suuria arvoja.</p> <p>Tutkielman tulokset kertovat siitä, minkä ajatellaan houkuttelevan lukio-opiskelijoita lähtemään vaihtoon juuri Yhdysvaltoihin. Tutkielman tuloksia voisi verrata vaihtoon lähteneiden ajatuksiin siitä, mikä heidät sai valitsemaan Yhdysvallat kohdemaakseen ja selvittämään, vastaako tutkielmassa löydettyt representaatiot vaihto-oppilaiden näkemyksiä. Tutkielman aineisto oli suppea, joten vastaavan tutkimuksen voisi tehdä suuremmalla aineistomäärällä.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Making a decision to study abroad is not easy. Firstly, it means leaving one's own comfort zone and trying something new. Secondly, one has to decide where exactly to study abroad. Nowadays, there are many different study abroad destinations, each one with its own attributes and attractions. The promotion of studying abroad, and especially the promotion of the study abroad destinations, play a big role when choosing where to study. The task of the study abroad promotion is to make the destination eye-catching, unique and tempting. Even if the decision to study abroad is more influenced by the desire to have a new experience, the destination matters. Living in a new and strange country can be overwhelming and that is why the destination should seem like a comfortable place. Therefore, it is important that the promotion of the destinations is successful. For that reason, it could be interesting to look at how study abroad destinations are pictured and what kind of image of them is given.

The aim of this paper is to explore what kind of representations of the USA as a destination country for high school exchange students are given on the websites of exchange student organizations. The focus is specifically on promotion meant for high school students since the earlier research on the discourse used on exchange program websites focuses on university level programs (cf. Bishop 2013; Michelson and Aldemar Álvarez 2016; Mukherjee and Chowdhury 2012). Studying abroad in high school and in university are different from each other. For example, high school exchange students usually live with a local family whereas university exchange students live on their own. Academic aspects are also usually more important for university students since the study abroad period should be useful for their degree whereas the high school students do not have the same academic pressure. Due to these differences, it is interesting to look at how studying abroad is promoted for high school students. The focus is on representations of the USA because in the promotion of studying abroad it is important that the destination is attractive. Looking at how the USA is described can tell us what attracts students to choose it as their destination.

The data of this study consists of four websites from different exchange student organizations. For the analysis, discourse analysis is used. The data is studied from the point of view what kind of lexical structures and themes can be found from the data and what kind of representations they construct. In this paper, I will first start with introducing the definitions of discourse and representation before

moving on to earlier research on the discourse of study abroad. After that, I will provide a closer look at my research questions, data and methods of analysis. Then I will provide my analysis of the data divided into the categories of “diversity”, “tourism”, “activities” and “values”, and lastly, I will conclude the findings and answer my research questions.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Discourse analysis

Discourse can be defined as “language in use as social activity” (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009: 27) since, even though the term is used in various ways, language is always seen as social activity (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009). Language is used for completing things and therefore, it can be called “activity. Johnstone (2017: 2) brings up a definition of discourse as “actual instances of communicative action”. What she means is that discourse is the way people use language: what they say and for what purposes. In this paper, discourse refers to language in use.

Discourse analysis is based on the idea of social constructivism. That approach is interested in looking at how social reality and meanings are constructed (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009). Therefore, “the central thought in discourse analysis is that reality is constructed in social interaction” (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009: 12). Since language in use is social activity, language is seen as a tool that can be used to achieve different outcomes. In other words, realities can be constructed with language. Therefore, the interest of discourse analysis is to study how realities are given meaning and what consequences this meaning-making has (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009).

In discourse analysis, the interest is not only in language but also in social action. Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2009) state that discourse analysis is used in order to get more knowledge of society and culture. That is possible because language is organized according to social norms and values, and, therefore, language is an integral part of human action. Reality also has an effect on language in use since “social reality creates language in use and influences it how language is used” (Pynnönen 2013: 5). Social reality consists of various rules, norms and values which can define how to use language in specific situations. How language is used can reveal those norms and values that prevail in the context. Thus, it is important that the role of the context is considered because it can offer explanations of why language is used differently in different situations. Therefore, language is studied in its real

environment (Pynnönen 2013). Studying language in the real context where it occurs gives insights into how people actually construct meanings and how the context guides people to express themselves. This can reveal a lot of the prevailing society and culture since norms are relevant in the context.

Discourse analysis is used for this research because the focus is on finding out how the USA is represented as a destination country. Representation is a process of meaning making and this research focuses on what meanings are given to the USA as a destination country. Therefore, discourse analysis is relevant because it is used to study how meanings are constructed. Discourse analysis can help to understand why language is used in the way that it is and how that language in use constructs reality.

2.2 Representation

Representation, according to Hall (1997), is a process of making meaning and it is produced by language in use. In other words, people talk about things in different ways which means that they represent them in different ways and at the same time, they create meaning. Without representation, things would not have meaning. Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2009) define representation as the image that is created with language in use. They also support the view Hall (1997) has on representation: it makes meaning. In this research, representation is defined as a meaning-making tool. Language in use builds different images - different representations of things - which, in turn, give and construct meanings.

Hall (1997) describes two systems of representation. The first system is about mental representations, in other words “the system of concepts and images formed in our thoughts which can stand for or ‘represent’ the world” (Hall 1997: 17). It is a system “because it consists [...] of different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts” (Hall 1997: 17). These mental representations are integral since they enable the world to be interpreted. The second system of representation is language. With different signs, the mental representations are represented. Thus, language enables people to “express meanings and communicate thoughts to other people” (Hall 1997: 18). It is important to understand these two systems since they are essential for meaning-making and above all, these two systems make it possible to communicate. If people could not imagine concepts, there would not be things to be interpreted. If people could not communicate these mentally imagined concepts with means of language, realities and meanings could not be constructed.

Representation has a big role in constructing social realities: with representations, people can form their thoughts and construct the surrounding world.

Hall (1997) also introduces different approaches to representation. In this research, representation is approached from the constructivist point of view. According to this approach, meaning does not exist on its own but that it is constructed “using representational systems - concepts and signs” (Hall 1997: 25). Meaning has to be created by people and it is created by using representations. For example, a cat can be represented as a cute kitten playing with kids or as a pet suitable for single women. People can represent the same things differently. In other words, they construct different meanings. Therefore, meanings do not exist on their own but rather they are constructed with means of language.

In this research, the aim is to study what kind of representations are formed of the USA on the websites of exchange student organizations. In other words, the interest lies in looking at what kind of meanings of the USA as a study abroad destination are produced. With these representations, a specific image of the USA is communicated to potential exchange students.

2.3 Discourse of study abroad

There are different texts on studying abroad but this research focuses on the promotional texts provided by exchange student organizations. The function of these texts being promotional is important because it already tells one what to expect. The purpose of these texts is to sell the experience of studying abroad. Therefore, it can be assumed that these texts contain word choices, expressions and visual aspects that make the destination seem like a good and attractive place where to study abroad. These texts are designed to attract students and get them interested in studying abroad. It is important to keep this function in mind since it can help to assume what kind of discourses can be found in these texts and what kind of meanings can be constructed.

The discourse of study abroad has not received a lot of attention in research but there has been previous research done on the matter. For example, Bishop (2013) looks at rhetoric of study abroad found on university websites. She states that it is typical to “provide some verbal and visual imagery that encourage a potential sojourner to mentally envision him/herself abroad” (Bishop 2013: 400). After all, the decision to “purchase” study abroad experience requires more commitment than buying

a one single product that can be easily discarded. Therefore, it is important to provide opportunities for those who are planning to study abroad to actually see what it could be like.

One typical part of discourse of study abroad is using landmarks or other prominent sites to attract potential exchange students. That is done with the use of language, either by visual or verbal imagery. Language can be used to describe these landmarks and other sites in order to make the destination interesting. In Bishop's (2013) data, the imagery was heavily focused on landmarks and cityscapes. Michelson and Aldemar Álvarez (2016) also found that tourism aspects are most featured in the imagery. Mukherjee and Chowdhury (2012) report similar findings as well: historical landmarks were used to draw attention. This use of landmarks and other tourism aspects is a part of a larger phenomenon in the discourse of studying abroad. It is typical to emphasize the tourism aspect of studying abroad over the academic aspect (cf. Mukherjee and Chowdhury 2012; Michelson and Aldemar Álvarez 2016).

Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004) shed some light on why landmarks and other prominent sites are used to promote studying abroad. First of all, promoting studying abroad also promotes a destination, a country. Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004) look at destination branding and they have noticed that in order to stand out, the image of the destination has to be unique. This can be achieved for example by using famous sites in promotions. According to them, the use of "industries, personalities, natural landmarks and historical events" (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride 2004: 52) is needed for distinctive branding. The promotion of studying abroad is also trying to sell the experience in a specific country and those destinations have to be unique from each other. Using specific imagery for specific destinations can help potential exchange students separate the destinations from each other and see what is unique in those destinations.

Stereotypes can also be a part of the discourse of study abroad. Mukherjee and Chowdhury (2012) report that stereotypes can be used for promoting and if they are used, it is for attracting the potential exchange students. Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004: 42) support this claim of the use of stereotypes by saying that country images in fact are "stereotypes, extreme simplifications of the reality that are not necessarily accurate." Stereotypes, according to them, are used because people prefer information that fits their prior knowledge. The information has to confirm their expectations in order to make promoting successful. Stereotypes that can be used in discourse of study abroad are for example

“welcoming, ‘exotic’ others” (Bishop 2013: 403) and historical imageries that may not have anything to do with the study abroad program (Mukherjee and Chowdhury 2012).

As said above, one of the major aspects in the discourse of study abroad is “the conscious pandering to the tourism component of the study abroad program over the academic component” (Mukherjee and Chowdhury 2012: 584). The discourse of study abroad consists of language use that emphasizes the tourism aspects since they make the destinations unique and that lures the students to choose the specific destination.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to explore how the USA is represented on the websites of different exchange student organizations as a destination country for high school exchange students. The research questions are the following:

1. What kind of lexical structures and themes can be found in the data?
2. What kind of representations of the USA as a destination country do these lexical structures and themes construct?

Here, the lexical structures refer to word choices and expressions, and themes refer to the different categories that the findings can be divided into. This study focuses on word choices and expressions because language is used for constructing reality and the aim is to find out what kind of reality of the USA is being pictured on these websites.

3.2 Data of the study

In this study, the data consists of websites from four different exchange student organizations that send high school students to study abroad. Only those parts of websites that introduce the USA as a destination country were chosen. These four websites were chosen based on the fact that they have the most content for analysis compared to other available websites and that they clearly have their own sections for introducing destination countries.

The chosen websites are from American Field Service Intercultural Programs (AFS), American Scandinavian Student Exchange (ASSE), Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) and

Youth For Understanding (YFU), and all of them are international study abroad organizations. They all have sections for introducing the USA as a destination country. All of these sections describe what life would look like if the student decided to study abroad there and they introduce what the students can expect while living and studying in the USA.

3.3 Methods of analysis

The data was analyzed through discourse analysis. Pynnönen (2013) describes various ways how to conduct discourse analysis and one of them is textual analysis. It can be divided into two sections: linguistic and texture analysis. In this study, the analysis started with linguistic analysis. First, the data was studied by looking at the word choices and expressions that were used to describe the USA. The focus of textual analysis is on looking at “how the texts organize and construct different phenomena” (Pynnönen 2013: 26). Therefore, in this study, after searching for word choices and expressions they were categorized into themes. The purpose of this was to see “what is said about the phenomenon and how it is talked about” (Pynnönen 2013: 33).

After dividing the word choices and expressions into themes, I considered how the representations of the USA as a destination country are constructed. The representations were interpreted from lexical structures and themes found in the data and, therefore, it is important that the textual analysis is done first so that there is claiming basis for the representations. During the interpretative analysis it is also crucial to consider the role of the context. For example, in this study the data is promotional and that can explain why there are certain representations. After finding out what kind of representations were constructed, I looked at how they tell high school exchange students about the USA as a destination country.

4 REPRESENTATIONS OF THE USA

I have divided my findings into categories which correspond to the representations of the USA as a destination country. I have found four main themes in the data: “diversity”, “tourism”, “activities” and “values”. All of these representations were presented in each website that I looked at. However, there were some other themes as well, such as “food”, but they are not included in this analysis chapter since the support for making claims was not strong enough due to the fact that not all of the websites had these representations. I have chosen these four themes for a more detailed analysis because they construct clear representations of the USA as a destination country and there is enough support for making claims. These themes were also chosen because they were evident across all of the websites

and therefore, they must be important and attractive when creating an image of the USA as a destination country.

I have chosen to present the theme of diversity first and then continue with tourism, activities and values. This order matches the order of presentation in my data: all of the websites started introducing the USA by using verbal and visual aspects connected to diversity and tourism. Diversity and tourism were also the most noticeable representations on the websites and therefore, I will begin my analysis with them. In the analysis, I will open up the themes and discuss what kind of image of the USA is constructed.

4.1 A country filled with diversity and uniqueness

All the websites emphasize that the USA is a diverse country. The organization AFS describes the USA as a place “where not two places are the same”. This description of the USA summarizes nicely what the other organizations are trying to convey as well. Diversity is conveyed with the word choices and expressions. AFS calls the USA “an immigrant country with great diversity”, ASSE uses expressions like “this diverse and ever-changing country”, CIEE claims the USA is a “wonderfully diverse country” and YFU describes the USA as “a very diverse country”. Diversity is one of the main themes used to describe the USA across all these websites.

This diversity does not only refer to places but also to people. One essential part of studying abroad as a high school exchange student is the host family. YFU says that students should “expect a lot of diversity regarding host families” and that “every host family will be different”. CIEE likewise states that “host families come in all shapes and sizes” and even AFS claims that “there is no ‘typical’ American host family”. The data suggests that exchange students should expect the USA to be a country where people are diverse and different. Having the same nationality does not guarantee similar lifestyles but rather everyone lives according to their own rules and ways of life. This can encourage the students to select the USA as their destination country since they do not know for sure what to expect. It brings excitement while waiting to hear from the future host family.

Diversity is also used to describe nature and geography. YFU states that “the climate varies a lot” and that the USA has a “spectacular biodiversity”. AFS claims that “every climate, landscape and terrain imaginable” can be found in the USA. According to these statements, students can assume that the

USA is a unique destination. Depending where the student is placed, the climate, nature and landscape will be different.

These websites also bring up the concept of uniqueness. AFS states that “the pride of every town, suburb and city is based on its unique attractions, contributions and life style”. This relates strongly to diversity since this diversity makes places in the USA unique. None of the places are the same: instead, every place is unique on its own way. In addition, uniqueness is used in a way that the USA is given different definitions that make it unique. YFU describes the USA as “the world’s largest economy” and “the largest music market of the world”. These are unique to the USA and potentially attractive to the students.

The diversity and uniqueness of the USA is emphasized because it makes the USA a fun destination. It is hard to know what to expect from the exchange year in the USA before knowing the placement. Due to the size of the USA, states are different from each other regarding climate, nature and landscape. Host families are also diverse. In addition, uniqueness is emphasized due to the fact that it helps the destination to stand out from the others (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride 2004). The USA is represented as a destination where everything is diverse and different: everyone’s exchange year will be different since everyone will be staying in different places with different families. This can encourage the students to choose the USA as their destination since their exchange year will be their own kind of experience.

4.2 A country that has famous cities, sites and brands

In the background chapter, it was stated that it is typical to emphasize the tourism aspect and therefore, sites and other famous landmarks are used when promoting studying abroad. Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004) also mention that people prefer to see things that they already know. For that reason, the things that people already know about the country are used in descriptions since “people are [...] more likely to attend information that confirms their expectations” (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride 2004: 43). In the data of this study, this use of landmarks, sites and other famous and familiar aspects was evident as well.

ASSE uses a whole paragraph for listing different places in the USA, for example “the ‘Big Apple’, New York City”, “historic Boston”, “Florida’s sub-tropical gentle breezes” and “Texas ranch

country”. California is described as a place “where the stars glitter from the beaches of Malibu, the cable cars of San Francisco or the hills of Hollywood”. These places are used for promoting studying abroad even though there is no guarantee that the student will spend his/her exchange year in any of these places. However, this functions also as a tourism aspect and it can attract the students to choose the USA because if they study abroad there, they might have a chance to visit these places. While listing these potential places of visit, ASSE has also attached some qualities to all of these places. These qualities function as reasons for the possible visits, for example the Midwest should be visited because of “its beautiful lakes, forests and gently rolling hills”. It is important to provide these reasons because they tell more about the places and thus encourage students to choose the USA as their destination. In addition, providing reasons encourages students to visit these places because they know why they should be visited. This constructs a representation that the USA has interesting places to visit since it seems to ensure that these places offer something to the students and other visitors.

YFU likewise uses tourism for promoting studying abroad in the USA. It has even listed “Top 10 things to do in the West Coast” and “Top 10 things to do around the East Coast”. These things include famous landmarks such as the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz, the Statue of Liberty and Lincoln Memorial and the White House, as well as national parks and other nature-related activities such as Yosemite National Park and the Florida Everglades. YFU has not only listed what things to see but also what to do. For example, YFU recommends attending “a baseball game” or having “a breakfast like a local in New York City”. The purpose of using tourism aspects is to show the student all of what studying abroad can include. Seeing what the USA can offer is encouraging and attractive. Since studying abroad is more than just studying it is important that free time possibilities are included in the promotion. After all, in addition to weekends, the students will have holidays from school and during that free time it is possible to explore places outside one’s hometown. Students need to create a whole picture of the destination and if the promotion focuses only on academic aspects, the destination is not promoted in the best way since it leaves out information that can affect the choice that students will make.

In addition to sites, landmarks and famous cities and places, recognizable brands can also be used for promoting studying abroad. ASSE mentions “Levi’s”, “Disneyland” and “McDonald’s”. Using products and brands that everyone knows can intrigue those students who are interested in them. Some might find it interesting to study in a country where McDonald’s was founded or where many of the top brands originate. In addition, these brands are often associated with the American way of

life. For example, Crothers (2012: 148) claims that McDonald's "symbolic golden arches logo is as distinctive as the American flag". Linking McDonald's and the American flag together suggests that they have something in common. In this case, that shared aspect is being something American. Crothers (2012: 1) also argues that "fast-food restaurants like McDonald's, drink companies like Coca-Cola and Pepsi, sports like NBA and major league baseball, and clothing like Levi's jeans are global icons" and that "it is through these artefacts (and many others) that the rest of the world sees American values and lifestyles". Because certain brands and artefacts are strongly linked to American culture, they are used for promotion. However, it is expected that the students are able to make the connection between these brands and American culture and if they are not, the purpose of using brands might go unnoticed.

These exchange student organizations use tourism aspects in their visual imagery, too. Both AFS and ASSE have a picture of New York on top of their pages, suggesting that these pictures are also the first thing a viewer will see. YFU as well has as their first picture a student standing in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. In addition, YFU has included other pictures as well that emphasize the tourism aspects: the Statue of Liberty and the Washington Monument, for instance. CIEE includes a picture of a student standing in front of a city skyline. These visual imageries are not only used for tourism purposes but also because the students are able to recognize these places. These places and sites might be something that the students associate with the USA. For example, New York and California are familiar from popular culture. As Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004) say, people want to see something familiar. Seeing a picture of Times Square might make it easier for the students to envision themselves there: they know for sure that it is in the USA.

The tourism component is integral when promoting studying abroad. Since students will have free time and vacations, it is important to introduce different places. The tourism component can make the destination more interesting as well and that helps it to stand out. If there is not anything eye-catching or unique, the student might choose a different country.

4.3 A country where people are active

Promotion of studying abroad also includes telling the students what they can do in the destination country. In order for the student to choose the country, it has to be interesting. It is important that the student has some knowledge of what their potential life could look like in the destination. As Bishop (2013: 400) states, the studying abroad websites usually "provide [...] imagery that encourage a

potential sojourner to mentally envision him/herself abroad”. In this data, the websites described and brought up different activities and things to do which can help the student to envision their exchange year. In addition, it implies that the USA is a destination that can offer a lot.

The most essential part of studying abroad in the USA is the high school. In addition to studying and learning, high schools in the USA offer much more as well. ASSE, for example, describes high school as a place “where there are a million and one activities in which to get involved”. According to ASSE, these activities are for instance “playing in a band”, “writing for the school newspaper” and “playing a wide variety of school sports”. AFS likewise mentions “team sports” and how “high school games attract crowds of all ages”. CIEE and YFU mention high school and its extracurricular activities as well, both verbally and visually. CIEE includes a picture of students wearing a football uniform and a cheerleading uniform, and YFU has as well a picture of a student in his football uniform. Due to popular culture, high school sports teams are easily associated with the American way of life. Often it might also be something that the exchange students expect to experience in the high school. As AFS states, “high school is the center of teen life in most places in America”. CIEE supports the statement by reporting that “American students love to get involved”. Thus, it is natural that students are encouraged to join after-school activities.

High school is not the only place that can offer activities. AFS mentions that “community and religious organizations also offer clubs (from drama to chess), volunteer activities and programs”. Many activities can also be done with the host family or friends. YFU suggests for example “going to the movies, fishing, bowling and biking” and CIEE lists “attending festivals and local sporting events; [...] grocery shopping and barbecuing in the park”. It is important to show the student as many options as possible since while someone might be enjoying being a part of a high school sports team, someone else would rather participate in a church group or spend time with the host family. Having a vast variety of possible activities and things to do can encourage the student to choose the USA as their destination since it is visible that there is something for everyone. If the destination seems to offer only academic aspects and not being capable of enriching life in any other way, this could lead to the student choosing a different destination.

The USA is represented as a country where people are active and where there are many possibilities and things in which to get involved. In addition to studying, the students have a great variety of things

to do in their free time. After all, for many students the exchange year is a once-in-a-lifetime experience and free time activities help to make it more memorable. Free time activities make it possible to meet new people, to create friendships and to experience the culture from different points of view. At their best, free time activities can offer something that academic life cannot. Therefore, it is not a surprise that participation in activities is emphasized on the studying abroad websites.

4.4 A country with great values

In addition to being diverse, full of places to visit and a country that can offer many activities, the USA is also represented as a country with different values. Introducing some of the values for the students help them to get an idea what the destination is like and what the people there appreciate and value.

ASSE describes the USA as “the country always on the move” which can be tied to the theme of Movement. The USA is known for its many movements, such as civil rights movement, that have had effects in American culture. The USA is pictured as an “ever-changing country” with a “‘can-do’ attitude”. ASSE also calls the USA a “young country of the West”. AFS names the USA as “an immigrant country” and YFU uses the lyrics of the National Anthem to create an idea of the USA as “the land of the free and home of the brave”. Based on these expressions, Americans are represented as valuing freedom, courage, being able to move forward and change, and fighting instead of quitting. Crothers (2012: 15) supports this interpretation by claiming that American “values, ideas, and expectations [...] are usually couched in norms like democracy, individual rights, tolerance, and so on”. For example, freedom is strongly linked to individual rights and having a notion of it in the lyrics of the National Anthem indicates that it plays a large role in American values. Roots also carry deep meaning based on the expression “an immigrant country”. Americans are represented as people who value where they come from and are proud of it.

Family is an important value for Americans, too. ASSE, for example, suggests that “chatting with your ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters’” or “helping your host parents” will lead to enjoying “a daily life filled with laughter, love and learning”. Spending time with the family is considered important and it is thought that families bring happiness. Since host families are an important part of the exchange year for high school exchange students, it is also thought that family is an important value for the student, too. CIEE states that “living with your host family” results in “becoming a member of the family”. YFU also introduces a testimonial from a former exchange student who felt like she “was a ‘daughter’

and a ‘sister’ in the family”. Based on these expressions, family can be considered an essential value for Americans and it is likewise something that is thought to attract the students. CIEE has included a picture of a student with his host family and that emphasizes the meaning of the family as well. It is important to emphasize the meaning of the family since for high school exchange students, the host family is their safety net. Seeing what families mean for Americans can help the students to choose the USA as their destination since they know family life is valued. After all, the students will spend a lot of time with their host families.

To conclude, in the data the USA is represented as a country that has great values. Family is one of the biggest values and it is realized through the student spending time with his/her host family and eventually becoming a family member. In addition, based on the data, Americans value qualities which they have attached to their country. Those are for example freedom and bravery. Attaching values to their country shows how important the USA is to its people. Even the exchange students are, according to ASSE, expected to “deepen [...] appreciation of the history and society” of the USA while on exchange. These representations suggest that values mean a lot for Americans and that the exchange students are likewise expected to respect and learn more of them.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore how the USA is represented as a destination country for high school exchange students. The data consisted of websites from four different exchange student organizations and the study was conducted with the means of discourse analysis. The aim was to look at what kind of lexical structures and themes can be found in the data and what kind of representations they form of the USA.

The websites all constructed a similar image of the USA. The most emphasized representation of the USA in all of the websites was the USA being a diverse country. The USA was described as a place “where not two places are the same” (AFS) and that diversity referred not only to places but also to people. The diversity of host families was mentioned since they are an integral part for the students during the exchange. Being diverse makes the USA also a unique destination since every place will be different from each other. This factor of uniqueness and being different makes the USA stand out from the other possible destinations. Being unique tells the students that they can expect an experience where they will get to try new things and see something different than they usually do.

Other prominent representation of the USA was it being a tourist country. As it was noted in the background chapter, it is typical to emphasize the tourism aspect of studying abroad (cf. Mukherjee and Chowdhury 2012; Michelson and Aldemar Álvarez 2016). In this study, the exchange student organizations used landmarks, sites and famous cities for promoting the USA as a destination. They also mentioned possible tourist activities and introduced different places worthy of visits. For a high school exchange student, it might be interesting to see what the country can offer because it also means that he/she might have a chance to experience those things and see something new. Emphasizing the tourism aspect also leaves the study aspect in the background and it might make studying abroad to seem more appealing when it is not just about studying.

The USA was also represented as a country where people get involved and have great values. The USA was represented as a country that can offer many activities for the students, both in the high school and outside of it. Getting involved is important for the students because it makes it possible to get to know new people and learn about American teen life. What comes to values, family was an especially important one. Spending time with the host family was considered important and one of the expected outcomes of the exchange period was that the student would feel like a part of the family. Other emphasized value was the country itself. The USA was given different definitions and qualities, for example freedom and “the country always on the move” (ASSE), which suggest how much Americans care for their country and what it means to them.

Limitations of this study include the amount of data. This study was conducted with a small sample and for more reliable findings, more websites should be studied. There was also only little previous research on the topic which is why the topic should still be looked at. For further studies, it could be possible to study why exchange students chose to go to the USA and are those reasons the same as the representations in this study. Other possibility could be to interview the exchange students who have studied abroad in the USA to find out if those representations match the reality.

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