# "NOBODY WOULD SAY HI TO SOMEONE THEY DON'T KNOW": DEPICTIONS OF FINNISHNESS BY AMERICAN TIKTOK CREATORS

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Abstract

TikTok on Covid-pandemian aikana suosituksi noussut sosiaalisen median kanava, jossa käyttäjät voivat jakaa lyhyitä, korkeintaan muutaman minuutin pituisia videoita. Alustaa on tutkittu vasta vähän, erityisesti suomalaisessa tutkimuksen kentässä. Myös suomalaisuudesta ja sen esittämisestä on vain vähän tuoretta tutkimustietoa. Tässä tutkielmassa yhdistyvät nämä kaksi tutkimusaukkoa. Tutkielmassa käsitellään, kuinka suomalaisuutta kuvataan kahden amerikkalaisen sisällöntuottajan TikTok-videoissa, sekä millä tavoin stereotypiat ja TikTok-alustan käyttömahdollisuudet tukevat videoiden humoristisia piirteitä. Tutkielma auttaa paremmin ymmärtämään paitsi modernia sosiaalisessa mediassa esitettyä suomi-kuvaa, myös TikTokia alustana. Analyysin viitekehyksenä toimii kokoelma laadullisia ja kuvailevia menetelmiä. Metodeissa näkyy niin multimodaalinen diskurssianalyysi ja sosiosemioottinen teoria, kuin sisällön analyysikin.

Lyhyissä TikTok-videoissa suomalaisuutta kuvataan pääasiassa positiivisella tavalla. Esille tuodaan kevyitä ja hauskoja stereotypioita sekä kulttuurieroja suomalaisten ja amerikkalaisten välillä. Tämä eroaa osittain muista nykyaikaisista sosiaalisen median ilmiöistä, kuten meemeistä, joissa kuvataan suomalaisuutta välillä hieman negatiivisessakin valossa. Yksittäisinä suomalaisuuden piirteinä esiin nostetaan ujous, hiljaisuus, synkkämielisyys, isänmaallisuus, pihiys, sekä jääkiekkoinnostus. Huumorin keinoina käytetään muun muassa tunteiden ylitulkitsemista, toisaalta ilmeettömyyttä, dramaattista taustamusiikkia, voimasanoja, stereotypioita, sekä absurdiutta. Videoissa ei välttämättä hyödynnetä TikTokin uniikkeja piirteitä, jotka erottaisivat videot selkeästi alustalle kuuluviksi. Näkyvin piirre on viraalien TikTok-ilmiöiden toisintaminen ja suosittujen taustamusiikkien käyttäminen.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

When the Covid pandemic hit in 2020 and people had to practice social distancing, many people filled their sudden addition of free time with a new trendy social media application, TikTok. I was one of the people who were quite skeptical about the app. I thought it is mainly used by children, and I had heard about dangerous challenges circulating around the platform, which caused trouble and accidents for young kids. Then, my friends started sending funny videos, and by September 2020, I was curious enough to download the application myself.

Soon enough, I was hooked in the continuous stream of short videos that were almost perfectly adapted to my interests and sense of humor. I could entertain myself for hours by scrolling through endless videos. I also bothered my friends and family by sending them videos that I thought they would like, to the point where they probably did not even open my messages anymore.

When it came time to decide what I should write a thesis about, TikTok was one of the first ideas I had. I was already spending hours on the app, so why not connect this time-consuming hobby with the biggest job of the academic year. While I was scrolling on the app, I tried to think of suitable angle for the thesis. I watched the videos and tried to find a specific topic or trend that I could dig into. And I did eventually find an interesting topic for the analysis.

In this thesis, I look into how two American content creators depict Finnishness in their TikTok videos, how humor is used in the videos, and how stereotypes and the affordances of the TikTok platform support the humoristic effect. As a methodological framework for the analysis, I use a collection of qualitative and descriptive methods, drawing on multimodal discourse analysis, social semiotic theory, and content analysis. I have also conducted an interview on both content creators about their insights regarding the content, intentions, perceived target audience and source of inspiration.

Since TikTok is quite a recent phenomenon, there is not large amount of research done on it. Moreover, the features of the short-video app keep changing rapidly, and

what has been stated in previous research about the app's properties, might have already changed. By the time this thesis is finished, TikTok might have undergone major changes once again. For that reason, I have to use other than academic sources for explaining the functions of the app. I also rely on my own experience and observations as a TikTok user.

Internationally, TikTok has been especially researched in the context of health care, including dermatology, Covid-19 and doctors' and health care workers' visibility on TikTok (see e.g. Li et al. 2021, Zheng et al. 2021, Russell et al 2021 and Consuelo Mendoza 2020). Another popular topic seems to be social media marketing (Haenlain et al. 2020, Su et al. 2020). However, only few analyses have been made in the "Finnish side" of TikTok. Anderson and Hautamaa (2021) looked into Finnish media companies' presence on TikTok and Kaipainen (2021) analyzed gendered hate speech in TikTok comments.

The fact that TikTok is a fairly new platform and has not been researched much yet makes this analysis meaningful and already fills a gap in research. I have yet to find another study about stereotypes or humor in TikTok videos, let alone depictions of Finnishness in TikTok videos.

However, humor in other video creation platforms has been analyzed. For example, the now closed micro-video platform Vine, that gained popularity between 2013-2017, has been looked into from the perspective of humor. Asukas (2020) analyzed the different structural elements that make Vine videos funny, and Calhoun (2019) discussed racial humor in Vine. In my own research, I can draw on these findings as well, as the concept of TikTok is quite similar to Vine, as both of them feature(d) short videos as the main content medium, unlike most other social media platforms.

Finnishness and Finnish stereotypes is by no means a new subject of research. There are numerous studies that look into e.g. Finnish characteristics in literary works (such as Taramaa 2007) or foreigners' stereotyped images of Finland (see Varamäki 2004). Noting that these sources, while being recent compared to many other sources that cover this topic, are over 15 years old, it is time for a fresh peek into how Finnish culture is depicted in a more contemporary context.

## 2   BACKGROUND

In this chapter, I first look into the concept of stereotype and how it is connected to humor as per previous research. I also reflect on previous research about humor on social media platform Vine. Secondly, I discuss the notion of Finnishness and its relationship to the concept of national culture. I will also briefly discuss the concept of banal nationalism, as it is a useful tool for understanding how I have found depictions of Finnishness in the data.

Thirdly, I will look into what kind of depictions of Finnishness have been found in previous research. This will act as good baseline for comparison later on in the thesis. Lastly, I give an overview of TikTok as a platform. I discuss how it is used, who use it, what kind of content one can find on the platform, and how users are "fed" content based on previous behavior.

### 2.1   Stereotypes and humor

Stereotypes and their connection to humor are one aspect that I examine in the TikTok videos. The concept of stereotype is commonly realized as a generalization of a particular group of people. Stereotypes can be negative, but also positive or neutral. Some examples of stereotypes could be that girls like the color pink, people living in big cities are ruder and busier that those living in the countryside, or that Finnish people are silent and shy.

Hall (1997: 257) states that "stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature". He also argues that the purpose of stereotyping is to "divide the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and unacceptable" as well as to maintain "social and symbolic order" (1997: 258). Hall's notion of stereotyping includes the idea of Us and Them, which leads to one

group being considered as the normal and the other deviant from normal. According to him, this kind of dynamic is often used against a subordinate group (1997: 258), implying that there is always one group that has more power in the society than the other.

Hall is talking about stereotypes in relation to power, Othering and racism, which makes the whole concept sound very malicious and inegalitarian. However, while surely stemming from certain inequalities and power imbalances, stereotyping can also be done jokingly and "tongue-in-cheek". Especially in situations where there seem not to be significant differences in power, stereotypes could be used merely as banter. Especially in the present study, where stereotypes are analyzed in relation to humor, the precondition already is that the stereotypes are funny and not presented with malicious intent.

The question of power and othering in the present study is quite interesting. Westinen (2018) states in her research that migrants are usually seen as "Other" (2018: 8) and thus are the ones being stereotyped. However, in the present study, migrants are those making the videos about the country they live in. How does that change the dynamics of stereotyping? Are there even unequal power relations in this case? I will revisit this idea later.

Varamäki (2004) discusses stereotype through Jalagin's (2004) notion. Jalagin states:

> "--- the strength of stereotypes lies in their ability to appeal both to the knowledge, but also to the emotions of the holder of the stereotype. Stereotypes, which are based on emotional appeal, are difficult to change even if there is new information available. Stereotypes based on emotional appeal are often exoticised and tell more about the holders of the stereotype rather than about the object" (Jalagin 2004: 80 as cited by Varamäki 2004: 13).

Based on Jalagin's statement, one could argue that even if one notices that a particular stereotype is not necessarily true, the stereotype might still continue to affect one's perception of the world.

Leyens et al. (1994, as cited by Varamäki 2004: 12) argue that "when people decide how they categorise people, the situation and the goals in interaction will determine what kind of data will be selected and perceived of the particular person, and how it will be used." I have asked the TikTokers in question about their intentions behind making the videos. This helps me investigate the reasons why some particular stereotypes are chosen to be depicted in the videos, and which characterizations are made.

Stereotypes are widely used in order to create humor. McIntyre (2014) discusses the way how popular British Monty Python sketches used stereotypes in depicting intercultural communication. She states that stereotypes can be constructive or destructive depending on the intention and chosen tactic of the joke-maker. One must

be careful not to be too demeaning or even racist when joking about different cultures (McIntyre 2014).

Winkler Reid (2013) suggests that humor is sometimes used to connect with people across boundaries that might otherwise separate them. Said boundaries could be e.g. cultural differences that school kids perceive to have with their peers. This could also be the case in my data. Migrants moving to Finland might like to make jokes about Finnish people, foods, and customs to break the ice with locals and to connect with them.

Of course, there is a fine line between what is good-willed, playful joking and what is derogatory criticism towards another culture. McIntyre as well as Krefting (2014) raise the argument that people often try to downplay their demeaning and hurtful words by saying "It's only a joke." This kind of behavior is especially problematic when "there is an asymmetrical relationship between the culture of the joke-teller and the culture of the group joked about" (McIntyre 2014: The Dark Side of Stereotypes, para. 5).

In my data, the TikTokers are migrants living in Finland, so they are in a way in a less powerful position compared to Finnish people. They are not as proficient in the Finnish language, do not necessarily know the culture and customs very well, and do not probably have close family in Finland that they could rely on. One could argue, though, that since both creators are White and speak English, which is also widely spoken and understood in Finland, they are not in a marginalized position, at least not to the extent to which some other ethnic groups are.

As migrants can be viewed as a marginalized group in Finland, it would be interesting to discuss whether they use humor as a tool for pointing out power relations in the Finnish society. However, I would have to choose another dataset to examine this particular question, as the present data, or at least the chosen data examples, do not discuss the Finnish society in detail. There are many other TikTok comedians who do use charged humor (Krefting 2014) and criticize prejudices in their content (see eg. @princess-aishah, @mkokat and @viktorioangelov). These creators take stereotypes or even racist and xenophobic remarks that people often make and use them in jokes.

Rebecca Krefting defines charged humor as "challenging social inequality and cultural exclusion" (2014: 2). Charged humor can be used to unmask social norms that contribute to marginalization of certain groups, and it is intentional. It is a way for oppressed people to have an outlet for societal criticism through laughter.

As opposed to charged humor, noncharged "safe" humor is politically neutral. The noncharged humor is funny and is not done on anyone's expense. Krefting's discussion considers American stand-up comedy, but the concepts of charged and noncharged humor can be adapted to other contexts.

In my chosen data samples, while stereotypes are being used, charged humor is not present. Rather, the creators use noncharged humor, even though it is possible that someone could see the jokes made about Finnish people as somewhat insulting and done "on the expense" of Finns. Some other videos by the two creators might include charged humor, but the four samples included in the analysis do not.

### 2.1.1 Stereotypes and humor on Vine

The micro-video platform Vine gained popularity almost ten years ago, and its success lasted for a few years. The idea of Vine-videos ("vines") was that they were extremely short – only a few seconds. Even though TikTok also specializes in short videos, the tight time limit of Vine required different approaches to humor than TikTok does. However, the analysis done on vines' humor is also helpful for the background of the present study.

Calhoun (2019) analyzes racial comedy on Vine. She examines the videos of a Black comedian who used the name King Bach. Calhoun states that the comedian was the most followed person on Vine and the creator of the genre of anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy (2019: 27). She states that King Bach draws from African American stand-up as well as existing genres of online discourse. She also pays attention to how the platform and its audiovisual affordances affect how the genre is constructed.

Calhoun finds that King Bach uses ethnicity and racial stereotypes as reverse humor that points out the unfair social expectations. He makes intertextual references to everyday situations that include racism and discrimination, and presents them as mundane things by making them into "reaction GIFs" with a title "When X happens". King Bach uses stylistic language to signal Blackness, and on top of linguistic material, things like facial expressions, body movement, gestures and costumes are a central part of indexing stereotypes (Calhoun 2019: 36-37).

Asukas (2020) looks into how humor is constructed in Vines. She examines the visual narrative structure of the videos and the humor from the point of view of four functions of humor by John Meyer. She found that because of the shortness of the videos, the classic five-stage visual narrative structure does not always take place, but the videos combine different narrative categories, of which Initial and Peak were the most frequent ones. She also found that depending on the viewer's sociocultural knowledge of the references that are made, the videos have identification or clarification functions for the audience. Furthermore, the videos present incongruity or absurdity by breaking the expectations that the audience would have. For example, when a trivial argument escalates to one character shooting the other, absurdity is created (Asukas 2020: 13-14).

A similarity between Vine and TikTok videos is their ability to spread and become popular culture references of their own. Some trends and popular videos can become lines that are used as jokes in other contexts. Asukas mentions in her paper how one of the vines that she analyzed was referenced to online in general:

> "The vine's line ''I'm Jared, I'm 19'' is also something that is still used as a reaction when something unpleasant is encountered in social media. The quote indicates that the social media user would have rather never seen the content that they were presented with, indicating that they wish they could not read." (Asukas 2020: 19).

She also states in the conclusion that "despite the very similar concept, TikTok videos have not had the same kind of popularity and quotability that vines seemed to have. TikTok relies more on recreating already existing trends or video concepts rather than creating something new" (Asukas 2020: 26).

That is an interesting statement, and to some extent maybe true. It is characteristic for TikTok that people recreate existing video ideas and even use the same elements as other users before. However, my observations regarding the quotability of TikTok videos differ from that of Asukas' statement. I find TikTok videos extremely quotable, and I would attribute this to the circulating trends. Thanks to them, some lines become very recognizable and iconic, even.

To add an anecdotal example, I use certain TikTok quotes "in real life" when talking to other people who understand the references. One joke that my coworker and I use at work is "I like it, Picasso", which comes from a trending TikTok sound. I will discuss TikTok trends later in the section 4.2.

## 2.2 Finnishness: what is it and how has it been described in previous contexts?

There is no comprehensive definition of "Finnishness", nor will I try to form one. However, for the sake of this study, I have selected Finnishness as a term to refer to the entity that consists of Finnish character, culture, language, interests, events, history, and other aspects that the TikTokers raise in their content. In this section, I explain which concepts and ideas I draw on when discussing "Finnishness" in my analysis.

First, I briefly discuss the concept of national culture and whether it is a meaningful concept for the analysis. I look into definitions of nation and their limitations in relation to the cultural, linguistic and historical landscape of Finland. I also introduce Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism, which helps me with defining what kind of aspects can be regarded as depictions of Finnishness.

### 2.2.1 Nation and its culture

The concept of national culture has been defined and debated by numerous researchers. Hofstede defined culture as "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from other" (Hofstede et al. 2010: 16). He also states that culture is separate from human nature as well as personality of an individual (ibid: 16-17). When applied to national culture, the members of the group are members of a certain nation.

Another prominent scholar who spoke about nations and nationalism was Benedict Anderson. Anderson (1991) defines nations as imagined communities, a concept in which people imagine they are all part of a community (nation) based on a common discourse that the media and governments impose on them. The community is imagined since it is not realistically possible to meet every person who belongs in the community, yet people perceive themselves as belonging to the same group (Anderson 1991). Even though Anderson was originally referring to the traditional print media, I think similar concept can be applied to the digital era.

Hofstede's and Anderson's notions are very similar, yet different in the regard that Hofstede seems to consider national culture as something innate and does not really discuss where the "collective programming of the mind" comes from, whereas Anderson argues that there is a source for the imagined communities: media and authorities.

The question of what forms a nation could probably be debated indefinitely. Generally speaking, a nation is often characterized by group of people who share the same history, culture, descent and language. On the other hand, a group of people who simply live inside the borders of one country are considered a nation. This thinking is prevalent, for example, in sports; no matter where an athlete comes from or what language they speak, they are celebrated as a part of the national sports team.

We can see that the notion of nation is not an easy one to define, and in the everyday language it could mean many different things. These different ideas can even contradict each other. I will briefly explore in context of Finland, why shared language, history, and traditions are perhaps not the most accurate way to define national culture.

If a nation must have a shared history, traditions and culture, we can question how far the shared history must go. Finland has been independent for a little over 100 years. Before that the country was under the rule of Russia, and before that it was part of Sweden. During some periods of time, the land was shared between these two. Additionally, the culture and traditions vary between Eastern and Western, Southern and Northern parts of the country.

Regarding the language question, Finland has two official languages: Finnish and Swedish. Let's not forget about the different Sámi languages. Even English has

been considered to be added as a third official language in the capital city Helsinki (Kuokkanen 2022). And how about sign languages and other minority languages? It is clear that the definition of nation (and by proxy, national culture) is not a simple matter.

All above facts considered, Anderson's imagined communities seem to be quite an apt concept to describe "Finnishness". It is almost like a mythical attribute that connects a group of people, and its definition can vary depending on who we ask. It is reinforced, produced and reproduced through discourse; how we talk about Finnishness and what kind of characteristics we assign to it.

Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism illustrates the processes that contribute to the existence of imagined communities. Banal nationalism refers to the different ways in which we reproduce the idea of our nation in everyday life without even realizing it. Banal nationalism is visible in habits, ways of thinking, and language use.

Many researchers have questioned the meaningfulness of national culture as a concept altogether, such as Baskerville (2003) and McSweeney (2002). Personally, I also think that the idea of national borders defining entire cultures, ways of thinking, values and beliefs is quite simplistic, even though it can be a handy way of roughly organizing the world. However, I am not going to look any deeper into the concept of national culture and its different definitions. For the purpose of my analysis, I think it is sufficient to say that depictions of Finnishness include indices to the Finnish habits, language, culture, and other features that can be seen as part of Finnish "national culture".

## 2.3   Depictions of Finnishness in other contexts

Finnishness has been depicted in many fictional works. In this section I will briefly review some examples of how Finnishness has been described in fairly recent academic literature and fictional works.

Taramaa (2007) examined in her dissertation which indices of Finnishness were visible in Finnish-American authors' work. The most prevailing personality and behavioral indices, that she used as subsections for her analysis, were 'Sisu', diligence, cleanliness, helpfulness and honesty, reticence and drinking habits. In the theoretical framework section of the dissertation, Taramaa discusses some characteristics of Finnishness that have been reported by "outsiders", non-Finnish people. These are work ethic, group-orientation, stubbornness, reliability and having guts, 'sisu' (2007: 102-103).

Sorvisto-Santoro (2019) looked into the stereotypes that German press communicated about Finland between 2010 and 2017. She found that big themes that were

connected to Finland were especially nature, school system and technology. Altogether, Finland was depicted in a positive light in the newspapers.

A popular online comic Finnish Nightmares is known for making funny strips about daily struggles of a Finnish character, Matti. He is introduced in the website as follows: "Meet Matti, a stereotypical Finn who appreciates peace, quiet and personal space. Matti tries his best to do unto others as he wishes to be done unto him: to give space, be polite and not bother with unnecessary chit chat. As you might've guessed, it can't always go that way." (Finnish Nightmares n.d.).

One example of Finnish Nightmares' comic strips is a piece called "The Worst 20 Seconds in Your Life". In this picture, Matti and another character are in an elevator, facing opposite walls and looking very awkward. The subtitle under the picture says "sharing an elevator with a stranger".

The Finnish Nightmares comics often depict Matti as a shy person who is easily flustered when in the center of attention and does not usually smile. He does not want to speak his mind or be a burden to other people. He likes alone time and often tries to avoid meeting people. Other characters, especially foreign ones, are depicted as the polar opposite: very talkative and cheerful.

Another example of Finnishness in the internet culture is related to the meme Countryballs. In a nutshell, countryballs are an art style used in online comics, where countries are drawn as balls that look like the country's flag (Wikipedia). For example, the Finlandball is a white ball with a blue cross on it. When looking at countryballs online comics that feature Finland, a frequently occurring theme is Finland drinking vodka, being drunk, carrying a knife or a gun, and not showing any happy facial expressions (see e.g. Countryballs.net).

As we can notice, silence and shyness are assigned to Finnish people in many contexts. This happens not only in fictional works, but also in academic literature. Olbertz-Siitonen and Siitonen (2015) discuss academic myths and suggest that e.g. the stereotypical silence of Finnish people is repeated in the academic literature without much actual empirical evidence.

Reflecting on this information, it is no wonder that also my data samples include examples of silence and shyness of the Finnish characters.

## 2.4 TikTok

In this section I introduce TikTok as a platform. I describe its history, user demographics, user experience and features. I will describe the chosen data later on in section 4.

TikTok is a social media platform based on short-video content. It is owned by Chinese company ByteDance. TikTok was launched in September 2016, and in September 2021 it had over 1 billion active users (Iqbal 2021). Compared to many other popular social media platforms, TikTok stands out as being especially used among young generations: in the beginning of 2022, 25 percent of the active TikTok users in the U.S. were aged 10-19, and 22.4 percent were aged 20-29 (Dean 2022).

A very stereotypical perception of TikTok by someone who has not personally used it, is that it is mostly about teenage girls making dance videos. That is true, to an extent. For example, a teen dance start Charli D'Amelio gained popularity on TikTok by doing mostly dancing and now has almost 140 million fans worldwide. A Finnish girl named Jennifer Käld (@jennifererica) also has millions of likes on her dance videos. However, TikTok is gaining more diverse audience as the older generations have been joining the platform: over 50% of the U.S. users are older than 30 years old (Dean 2022). More importantly, the user experience of each individual user is different, as the algorithm adapts the content to one's interests based on one's behavior in the application.

TikTok videos are highly multimodal. Users can create videos with voice, text, background music and different filters. Users can "stitch" each other's videos, which means that they can, in a way, connect their own video with a previous video made by someone else, thus commenting on and adding to the previous video's content. Characteristic for TikTok videos is that there are prevalent trends which usually follow a certain voice or background music. For example, a certain song is used to tell a story, or certain voice made by one user can be adopted by other users, who then recreate their own version of the previous video using the same audio. The trends become memes that keep spreading and evolving, until one trend is forgotten, and another is born.

To further illustrate how trending sounds work, I use the reference which I mentioned earlier in the background section. Someone uploaded a video on TikTok which had the following dialogue between two people:

1: "What's this?"

2: "It's an art project."

1: "Okay… I like it, Picasso."

In the original piece, a man walked past a group of people who had costumes and had decorated their car as well. Other people started to use the same audio or even lip sync to it in their videos, but replaced the video material with their own video. The core idea of the videos is always the same, just slightly modified. For example, someone could use the sound to ironically show off their own work, or someone else could use it to add humor to a tough situation, like a dog destroying a sofa or a child drawing with markers all over the walls. Personally, my coworker and I use the phrase in real life to comment on each other's creative work.

As I mentioned before, algorithm plays a great role in what kind of content the user sees in the application. Merriam-Webster defines the technical term of algorithm as "a set of steps that are followed in order to solve a mathematical problem or to complete a computer process". In the context of TikTok, and social media and many online services in general, algorithm means a recommendation system in which the computer makes predictions about user's future behavior based on past behavior. In a nutshell, if user has interacted with, i.e. liked, commented, shared, or followed teenage girls' dance videos, the algorithm will most likely show more teenage girls' dance videos in the future as well. The more precise way of how the TikTok algorithm works is explained on TikTok's website (TikTok Newsroom 2020).

The TikTok application can be used on a smartphone, but also a website is available for those who want to use it on a computer. I will proceed to describe how TikTok looks like from the perspective of a mobile phone user.

The "front page" of the app is called For You page. This is where the algorithm's suggestions are seen. There is also another feed that only shows videos made by creators that the user is following. In my experience, many or most people seem to watch the For You feed more than the other feed.

The video takes up the whole screen. User can swipe up to see the next video. Bottom of the screen includes the username of the content creator, possible captions, hashtags, and user tags. In some videos, below the text there is a bar that shows the duration of the video clip. The video can only be up to 3 minutes long, but many of them are much shorter. On the right side of the screen, user can click on symbols that allow them to follow, like, see and write comments, or share the video. The comment section allows only short comments, and lengthy texts must be divided into many individual comments in order to fit them in.

Every user can create their own videos on TikTok. The platform itself includes many filters and sounds and gadgets that can be utilized in the video-making. However, I have not created any videos myself and am not familiar with all possibilities of the application.

The features described here represent the situation in December 2021. As mentioned earlier, the platform is constantly changing and, in a few months, the application might already have different features.

# 3   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the present analysis, I draw on the methodology of multimodal discourse analysis. Multimodal discourse analysis gives me the tools to analyze multiple components of the videos, such as music, text, spoken language, gestures, colors, and other audio-visual aspects. In addition to multimodal discourse analysis, I make use of the social semiotic theory. It offers insight regarding the different metafunctions that the audio-visual material entails. I also draw on content analysis, which is especially visible in the discussion section.

In this chapter, I briefly discuss the concepts of discourse, multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotic theory in relation to the present analysis. The focus is on the theoretical level of the methodology, whereas the more concrete steps are laid out in the section 4.3. In that section, I will also explain how content analysis has affected my methods.

## 3.1   Discourse, Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Social Semiotic Theory

Michael Foucault's take on discourse includes the idea that discourse is "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972: 42 as cited in Mills 2004: 15). When the TikTok content creators create their Finnish characters, they take attributes that they see as related to Finnishness and Finland, and by presenting those attributes, they contribute to building and modifying the discourse around Finnishness. Moreover, they build a specific kind of discourse around Finnishness, which might be in line with the previous ones or in contradiction with them, as we see in the data samples.

Mills also discusses Foucault's ideas about "truth": there are many different discourses around the same topics, but some are given more credit by the society and

authorities, in which case it becomes dominant and perceived as truth, while other discourses are met with suspicion (2004: 17).

Even when I am not discussing "serious topics" such as medicine or politics, which Mills refers to, I think this idea of truth applies to my present study. For some reason, certain stereotypes and ideas gain popularity and are reproduced over and over again, even if opposing ideas arise. When talking about Finland, I find it odd how the stereotypical depictions often include things like depression, drinking, shyness and boorish behavior, when at the same time Finland has been selected as the happiest country of the world several times, is very advanced in equality, popularity of drinking seems to be diminishing, and the country is technologically advanced. These things rarely come up in discussions when Finnish people talk about themselves as a nation: it seems like there is a very established discourse that is difficult to change, even if the "outside world" is seeing the other perspective.

While the above discussion on discourse mainly considers the written and spoken language, there are other ways to convey meanings and discourses. In order to analyze those other, non-linguistic aspects, I need to broaden my framework to multimodal discourse analysis. Multimodal discourse analysis is essentially discourse analysis that focuses on multiple modes of communication. Whereas discourse analysis examines language in the sense that we most often realize it (words, sentences, pieces of language that carry meaning), multimodal discourse analysis can also look at image, video, music, gestures, clothing, facial expressions, action, and other multimodal resources.

Multimodal discourse analysis is a wide framework that includes numerous different methodologies and methods. O'Halloran (2011: 120) states that "the terminology in MDA is used somewhat loosely at present as concepts and approaches evolve in this relatively new field of study". It seems like this characterization is still valid ten years later, as there are many different ways to use MDA, and it can be challenging to form a thorough picture of what kind of methodology this paradigm truly consists of.

Nevertheless, there are some specific challenges that multimodal material sets for the analyst (O'Halloran 2011: 124). Unlike written language, the multimodal semiotic material needs to be described and transcribed in some way in order for me to present it in the analysis. This process in itself creates an entextualization (Jones 2011: 10) of the original product, the TikTok video.

In the entextualization process (Jones 2011: 11) I first framed my research topic by choosing what kind of phenomenon I want to look at. Next, I selected the data samples from the body of possible data. Thirdly, I summarized it, i.e. determined in how much detail I want to present the data. I tried to describe actions in the briefest possible way that I thought would be comprehensible to most people. For example, I write "Dennis takes one marmalade candy out of the box and puts the box back on

the table" instead of "Dennis raises his hand and straightens his elbow, his fingers pointing to the candy box in front of him. He then stretches his arm forward, his hand getting closer the marmalade. He pinches one candy between his thumb and index finger, and starts to bend his elbow and wrist to return to the starting position, while lowering the other hand that is holding the candy box." A too detailed description like the latter does not serve the purpose of the analysis.

In the next phase, I resemiotized the data from a video to a transcription, which required some "translation", as the audio-visual semiotic resources require some further explaining when turned into a written piece of text (O'Halloran 2011: 124, Jones 2011: 14). Lastly, I positioned myself as a researcher who is using certain kind of language in describing the data. This can reveal my disciplinary background, and of course also reflects the purpose of the analysis. In my case, I am interested in themes and discourses rather than linguistic details, which affects the level of detail (or lack thereof) of my transcription. A conversation analyst, for example, would have a different approach to the process.

What comes to analyzing multimodal data, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) introduce visual 'grammar' that helps interpret visual elements in a similar way to how linguistic elements can be interpreted. They use the terms signifier and signified to refer to different communicational elements, or "forms" and their meanings. In a way, signifiers are metaphors indicating the signified. As an example, Kress and van Leeuwen describe a situation in which a small child draws circles and says he has drawn a car. In the process, he has decided to construct a representation of a car. In his mind, wheels act as a sign for car and circles represent the wheels. Kress and van Leeuwen describe this process as sign-making (2006: 7-8).

Similarly, in TikTok videos some elements or artefacts can act as metaphors for something that the video-maker wishes to express. A frequently occurring example of this kind of sign-making is that male creators play female characters in their videos by placing a towel or a shirt on top of their head (see e.g. @_jesse.t (2021) and @next8level (2021)). Signifier "towel" represents long hair, which in turn represents a female character, the signified. The video creator in these cases has decided, based on his cultural, social, and psychological history (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 7) that long hair is a criterial aspect of or at least an apt way to represent a woman in this scenario.

Similar kind of sign-making is present in my data samples. The creators have used items that they can easily access to signify other items that are not accessible, such as towel as a signifier for formal, extravagant clothing. They also apply this thinking to concepts: a small snippet of an ice hockey game signifies one of the greatest moments in Finnish history. In order for this kind of sign-making to be successful, it is important that the creators have a common "language" with their audience. With language in this context, I mean all the extra-linguistic and intertextual references that

are used in the videos, and which become emphasized in humorous contexts. The audience must have an understanding of the used references to see them as funny and not just irrelevant or incomprehensible.

Kress and van Leeuwen take a social semiotic approach to communication and representation. The social semiotic theory argues that language is produced by certain social actors in a certain social context (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 13). Cultural differences may well play a role in how a message is delivered and how it is received. Because of this, it is important to know where the video creators stand in terms of social status, what their audience is, and what they view as shared representational system with the audience (the "common language" that I discussed above). This is where the interviews I conducted can help with the analysis.

Social semiotic theory of communication developed by Michael Halliday, which Kress and van Leeuwen have adopted in their work, includes three metafunctions of communication: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (2006: 42). These metafunctions can be applied to both verbal and visual modes of communication and are not just limited to images, even though they are mostly explained in terms of various images in the book.

Ideational metafunction describes how aspects in the world relate to each other. Interpersonal metafunction defines the interaction between the producer and the receiver of the message and is the most important aspect amongst the three metafunctions for my analysis. Lastly, textual metafunction describes the signs' relationship to each other and to the context (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 41-43).

Within interpersonal metafunction there is the idea of offer and demand. In an offer image, the participant is something that the viewer is observing. In a demand image, there is a relationship and interaction between the participant and the viewer. These two functions are oftentimes established through gaze. If the participant seems like it is making an eye contact with the viewer, the is most likely a demand in place. The participant invites the viewer to some kind of action. If there is no such connection, the participant in the picture can be seen as an object, or something that has no social relations with the viewer.

Kress and van Leeuwen point out that demand and offer are characteristic for specific genres. For example, demand is often preferred in news or advertisements, while offer is more prominent in feature films and scientific illustrations (2006: 120). This idea is also present in my data. When the video presents a more cinematic or documentary type of scene, the character is not taking eye contact with the viewer. There are scenes where the character does establish eye contact, and they are either inviting the viewer to watch the rest of the video, treating the viewer as an interlocutor, or indicating that the viewer has a mutual understanding of a situation with him.

# 4   PRESENT STUDY

In this chapter, I present the aims, research questions, data and methods of the thesis. First, I discuss the motivation behind the chosen research topic and what kind of research questions I aim to answer. Next, I introduce my chosen data, why I chose it and how I selected the data samples for the analysis. Finally, I present the methods I used in the analysis.

## 4.1   Aim and research questions

When I first started planning the topic of the present analysis, I knew I wanted to fill some of the gap in research regarding the popular social media platform TikTok. The short-video platform offers countless perspectives for new research, as it is not very broadly studied yet. Eventually, I chose depictions of Finnishness as the perspective of my analysis, because I was fascinated by how Finnish people are depicted in the 2020's, and how stereotypes are used in TikTok videos to create humor.

In the analysis, I answer the following research questions:

1.  How is Finland and Finnishness depicted in the videos made by two American TikTok creators?

2.  In what ways is humor present in the videos?

    i.    How are stereotypes used in creating humor?

    ii.   How do the affordances of the platform support the humoristic effects?

What I mean with "depict Finland and Finnishness" is what kind of characteristics, personality traits, interest and habits Finnish people have according to the videos. I

also look into how Finland as a country or culture is described, and what is said or implied about the climate, geography, culture and history. A fraction of the analysis is also dedicated to whether or not Finnish people are presented as something different or "abnormal" compared to the American creators, or are they depicted as having much in common and belonging to the same ingroup with the creators.

The videos that I analyze are funny and aim to entertain people. I want to look deeper into what exactly makes the videos funny, and explore the relationship between humor and stereotypes. That is what the second question explores.

Finally, I want to contribute to the examination of TikTok as a platform as well. It includes features that are not as often seen in other types of social media videos, such as YouTube videos. The use of different features contributes to the humorous effect of the videos, which makes them a valuable addition to the analysis. Moreover, the nature of TikTok is quite different from other popular contemporary social media platforms, which is why I wanted to document how it looks like at this point of time.

## 4.2 My data

In this section I discuss the data that I have used in the analysis. I introduce the two content creators and the reasoning based on which I chose four data samples. I also briefly discuss the interviews that I conducted as secondary or supporting data.

### 4.2.1 Videos

In my research, I focus on two particular content creators. Since TikTok is a public platform, all videos uploaded there can be viewed freely and used for non-commercial purpose by anyone. To be sure that using the data is ethical, I also personally asked for a permission to use these creators' videos in my analysis. They agreed to it and gave me a permission to use their content. All the information that I present about the subjects are based on either their TikTok profile, content, or the conducted interviews.

First of the content creators in question goes by the username @americandream-infinland. I will refer to him by his first name Dennis. He ended up in Finland when his employer sent him to a business trip to Finland. He liked it so much in there that decided to move to Finland permanently. Dennis started his TikTok channel on 1.1.2021 and has now (in February 2022) 21.200 followers and 1.5 million likes. His content especially addresses the cultural differences between USA and Finland and comments on current political and societal affairs.

The second creator is @joshofwestern, to whom I will be from now on referring to as Josh. He first arrived in Finland to work as an au pair. He decided to stay in

Finland and now resides in Tampere. His content is mostly funny videos about Finland, Finnish people, his experiences in Finland and Finnish curiosities. His humorous way of making the videos also includes intertextual references to popular culture phenomena such as Pokémon. His first video was published on 17.9.2019 and as of 21.2.2022, he has around 76.700 followers and his channel has in total 3.6 million likes.

The reason for choosing these two content creators as the subject of my analysis is that they appeared on my For You page continuously and I enjoyed their videos. When I first started drafting the idea of my thesis, I was under the impression that they were the only users that fall into the category of American migrant in Finland making videos about life in Finland. Afterwards, I have noticed that there are, indeed, more American migrants making videos about Finland. This is probably the doings of the TikTok algorithm that noticed my interest in this particular topic. Of course, there are also numerous users that are migrants from other countries than USA telling stories about their life in Finland.

Since both creators have plenty of material in their TikTok accounts, selecting the data was not an easy task. When selecting individual videos for the analysis, I especially paid attention to a few aspects. Firstly, I wanted to make sure that I understand the references made in the video. If I was not familiar with the idea of a particular trend, or I did not understand a joke, I did not choose that individual video.

Secondly, I wanted to choose videos that depicted Finnishness in some ways, since some of the material was not specifically about Finland or Finnish people. When we look at the descriptions and hashtags of the chosen videos, they include tags such as #finland or #suomi, which explicitly reveal that the video is related to Finland.

The third criterion for the selection was to pick videos that showcase different features of TikTok, such as creative use of the affordances and trending sounds. And lastly, I chose videos that were short enough to be analyzed. I set the maximum length at one minute, and eventually, the chosen data samples are 15–50 seconds long. The longest videos on TikTok can be as long as three minutes, but I find that shorter videos allow me to make more thorough analysis, as I am looking into multiple modes of the videos. This way I was also able to collect more examples than if I had chosen longer videos.

### 4.2.2 Interviews

In addition to the videos, I conducted interviews on the two TikTokers via email. In the interviews, I asked about their viewer demographics, what kind of reaction they have aimed to receive from the audience, and how their video making processes look like. Especially the former two aspects are relevant information for my analysis, as intended target audience and goals of the content creation largely define what is

depicted in the videos, why these topics are chosen, and how the content is presented. The interview questions are listed in appendix 1.

I am not analyzing the interview answers, but using them as supporting background material for my analysis. I chose to conduct an email interview rather than a face-to-face or video conference interview, as I considered it easier schedule-wise, and the interviewees had more time to reflect on the questions and draw viewer data from their TikTok accounts. In a live interview setting, they might have felt more rushed to give an answer and not been able to thoroughly consider their answers.

## 4.3 Methods

The methods of analysis are qualitative and descriptive. I draw on the methodology of multimodal discourse analysis, social semiotic theory and content analysis. Since the amount of previous research done on TikTok is scarce, I also draw on my personal observations and my experience as an TikTok user to explain meanings behind some of the trends that emerge in the data. I have been using TikTok actively since September 2020, which means my ingroup knowledge about the trends is limited to that time and I might not be aware of the nature of the trends before that. Additionally, due to the nature of TikTok algorithm, I might not be aware of all trends that circulate on the platform. This was one of the factors that played a role in the data selection.

After choosing the data, I started going through every video scene by scene. During the first round, I just observed the different camera angles, set-ups, scene transitions and other changes that occur in the video clip. Next, I rewatched the videos and took a screenshot each time the set-up changed. I tried to capture an image that best illustrated what was happening in that part of the video, and sometimes that required multiple screenshots.

To make the audio-visual data analyzable, I transcribed and described the materials. I transcribed the dialogue and wrote a description of each scene and placed them in a table. At first, I was going to include each screenshot to the table as well, but later decided to only feature a few screenshots of each video below the table to help the reader better understand the visual aspects of the scenes.

Placing the scenes in the table was mostly simple, but sometimes I had to decide what determines a "scene change"; is it the camera set-up, a spoken line or something else. In some cases, the rows were easy to determine based on dialogue or music, but sometimes there were longer snippets of narration, in which case I based the division on what felt logical and like a comfortable length for a single row.

I did not include pauses, laughter, change of tone or volume, or any other non-linguistic details in the transcription itself. The focus of the analysis is on content and discourses, after all. I am looking at the overall messages and meanings, and not the linguistic or even non-linguistic details. However, I did not ignore non-linguistic aspects altogether. Rather, I described them in a separate column. The second column illustrates those aspects as well as visual cues, such as background, clothing, facial expressions, set-up changes, music, captions, and other details to the extent that I deem adequate for the analysis. The table format allowed me to align the narration and other modes in terms of timing. Had I included the two transcriptions separately, it would have been difficult if not impossible to follow how the different modes situate to each other.

After describing each video in a detailed manner, I started looking for answers for my research questions. I wrote down all observations and interpretations that I could think of, rewatched the videos several times and reviewed my previous interpretations and the supervisor's comments. Each time I found something new and added it to the analysis. This kind of repeated listening and repeated watching is important for the analysis of audiovisual and interactional data.

To further validate my arguments and interpretations, I reviewed the interviews and what the creators have said about the videos. Finally, I concluded my findings to each research question. I discuss them in chapter 6.

The way in which I decided to present the analysis is, although rather loosely, based on content analysis. Whereas content analysis often includes very close coding of words and categorization of data (e.g. Weber 1990 and Wheeler 2022), I did not have any pre-determined categories nor a specific coding system. I simply interpreted the data connected findings into themes or categories, which I summarized in Findings and Discussion.

# 5   ANALYSIS

In this section I introduce and analyze 4 videos that I chose as my data samples. I examine the video, audio, text and images to find out answers for my research questions.

I have divided each video clip into two table columns. The first column is a transcription of the spoken dialogue and narration, and the second one is a description of the scene as to what other audiovisual material appears on the screen during the dialogue or narration. I have added some illustrative pictures where I found they could be needed.

While doing the analysis, I will also refer to the interview data from both Josh and Dennis. The interview results offer insight into the video production process, why certain choices were made, and what aims the creators had when making the videos. The interviews included questions about two videos, the one presented in section 5.1 and the other presented in section 5.3.

## 5.1   Finnish Independence Day

The first data sample is a video that I call "Finnish Independence Day" from the creator @americandreaminfinland, Dennis. The clip has 25.500 likes and 361 comments (21.2.2022). The short description of the video says: *Explaining Finnish Independence Day to an American #foryou #fyp #foryoupage #finland #suomi.*

In this clip, Dennis plays himself (person A) and an American friend (person B) who have a conversation via video call about Finnish Independence Day and how it differs from the American Fourth of July. While he narrates the Finnish traditions, he also plays them out in the video.

| *Speech/Narration* | Description |
|---|---|
| *A: Yea so I have a 3-day weekend this week for Finnish Independence Day* | Dennis speaks to the camera. He is in his living room. |
| *B: Nice! Is that like the US Fourth of July where you have excessive food, lots of beer and blow shit up?* | The "American friend" character appears on a computer screen, as if they were having a video call. The background is of a city with skyscrapers (image 1). |
| *A: Well… Not exactly…* | Back to Dennis speaking to the camera. |
| *On Finnish Independence Day people mostly stay at home.* | The theme song of Squid Game is playing in the background.<br><br>Finnish character is sitting on the couch, wearing a robe and Finland-themed socks, shirt, and cap.  One foot is on the coffee table along with a teacup. He is watching TV and using the remote control (image 2). |
| *They hang out and watch this old war movie and then they light a candle and put it in the window.* | First shot shows the TV where the movie Tuntematon Sotilas (Unknown Soldier) is playing. The second shot shows how a candle on the coffee table is being lit. |
| *They eat these green pear flavored marmalade balls - -* | Dennis takes one "Vihreä kuula" (Green ball) marmalade candy out of the box and puts the box back on the table. |
| *and then at night they open a bottle of champagne and watch the important people of the country eat dinner - -* | He is sitting on the couch with his cat on the lap and points to the television, smiling. There is a photoshopped picture of a champagne bottle on the table.<br><br>Dennis plays out what happens in the TV. He is imitating the traditional Independence Day reception at the Presidential Palace. Background is an image from the hall of Presidential Palace. The "important person" character is walking towards the camera. He is wearing a suit, a blue and white scarf over the |

| | shoulders and a Moomin towel as a cape. |
|---|---|
| *and then they discuss what the people are wearing.* | Shot back to the couch, where he is still pointing at the TV.<br><br>The last shot shows the "important person" next to the image of the Finnish president. The character is greeting the President (image 3). |



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

Part of the humor in this video comes from the fact that Dennis is describing the very traditional and well-known Finnish traditions in a detailed way which makes them seem quite comical. Instead of saying "They watch a movie and eat marmalade", he describes them as "*this old war movie*" and "*these green pear flavored marmalade balls*". Dennis stated in the interview that he wanted the video to resemble a nature documentary that shows people in their "natural habitat", and his word choices and tone of voice were meant to have a comedic impact. The fact that there is no interaction, such as eye contact, between the Finnish character and the viewer further enhances the effect that the viewer is observing the character, much like observing animals in a nature documentary.

The tradition of watching the Independence Day Reception is depicted in a way that is essentially true but makes the event sound funny and a little bit weird: "*They watch the important people of the country eat dinner and discuss what they are wearing*". This is highlighted by the ridiculous outfit (a cape and a scarf over a formal suit and tie)

that the "important person" character is wearing. At the same time, the clothing is supposed to represent Finland "in a funny way", as Dennis says in the interview. That is why he chose to use the Moomin towel on top of the suit, as Moomin characters originate from Finland.

I feel that this outfit choice could also signify the way in which some celebrities use extravagant clothing as a way to express opinions and start discussions. After all, the Presidential reception could be seen as kind of a red-carpet event where people sometimes wear unique and extravagant pieces.

The blue and white clothing on the Finnish character can be seen as a sign of patriotism, as the Finnish flag is blue and white. Maybe Dennis wants to highlight the patriotic feelings of Finnish people on the Independence Day with this color choice. Another thing signaling patriotism is the cap with Finnish coat of arms on it. These are also signs of banal nationalism (Billig 1995).

Various affordances of TikTok are used in this video. On top of the audio-visual video material, Dennis uses text as captions, green screen technology with background images, and also incorporates background music to the part where he narrates the events of Independence Day.

I was first not sure why he had chosen the particular background music, which is the theme song of popular Korean Netflix series Squid Game. The music is ominous and intense, and the show itself is very violent and dark. I did not quite understand how the music matches the context. I asked Dennis about this particular video in his interview, and he shed light on the music choice. He chose the song as it was popular on TikTok at the time and using popular sounds can help with getting more views. He also thought that the song fit the "cadence of the speech" in the video.

Maybe the music choice could also act as contrast to an American independence celebration. While American 4th of July is all about "*excessive food, lots of beer and blowing shit up*", the Finnish celebration aims to remember and honor those who fought in wars and sacrificed themselves for the country's independence. That is why the atmosphere of the celebration is very different from the American Independence Day.

Overall, the viewer must possess sociocultural knowledge in order to fully grasp the idea and the humorous effect of the video. For example, if the viewer does not know anything about the President's reception or recognize the picture of the President, they are not able to understand the reference "*they --- watch the important people of the country eat dinner and then they discuss what the people are wearing*", nor see the relevance of the scene.

## 5.2 Finland basically

The second video, "Finland basically" has 2686 likes and 21 comments (21.2.2022). Description of the TikTok video is short: *Finland basically #foryou #fyp #foryoupage #finland #suomi.*

This video features Dennis showing how different months look like in Finland. He has attached videoclips of himself on changing images and videos that showcase different times of the year. The structure of the video is built around a song called The Months of the Year, which was originally made by a children's music group The Kiboomers to teach months to children. The song was trending on TikTok, and it has this far been used in over 1.5 million videos. The idea of the trend seems to be that people showcase moments from their life during the past year, but Dennis has taken another approach to the trend that fits his account's theme.

The background image or video is different for each month, as well as Dennis' clothing. He is slightly swaying left and right throughout the whole video. The clip is 15 seconds long, which leaves around one second for showing each month.

The Finnish word for each month is also featured in the video as a text that appears below the video title "Finland basically". The video does not include any speech beside the song lyrics. For that reason, the first column features the song lyrics rather than narration or dialogue.

| *Speech/Narration* | *Description* |
| --- | --- |
| January | The background is pitch black except for a light coming from the building behind Dennis. He is dressed in warm winter clothes: a black jacket, black hat, grey scarf and mittens, black jeans, and brown winter shoes. He also has a reflector swinging from the jacket (image 4). |
| February | The background features a snowy yard between block houses. It is dusky and cloudy, but there are city lights that give some light to the scene. The outfit it same as in January. |
| March | The background picture shows a snowy view to a lake. One can see that while there is still snow in the ground, the lake is no more frozen. The sun seems to be setting: the sky is blue and orange. There are no buildings in the picture, just a windmill. Dennis' outfit is still the same, but he has lost the scarf and maybe also the mittens, but his hands are in his pockets. |

| | |
|---|---|
| April | Now there is a short video clip in the background, that seems to be shot in a park judging by the (leafless) trees and wooden outside tables. It still snowing, but there are no more significant amounts of snow on the ground, just what is snowing at the moment before it melts away.<br><br>Dennis has switched his winter hat to a baseball cap and is carrying an umbrella. |
| May | Dennis is once again somewhere that looks like a park in a suburban area. The ground is already looking a bit greener and there is no more snow or ice, but the sky is grey, and the trees have no leaves. The outfit is same as in April. |
| June | A view from a window shows block houses and trees. Rain is hitting the window. The sky is grey, but the trees have become green. He is wearing the same outfit, but no umbrella. |
| July | The weather is nice and summery. The sun is shining, the sky is only slightly cloudy, and everything looks green. Dennis is "standing" on rocks by a lake or sea. In the background there are people bathing in the sun. Dennis is also wearing shorts, a sleeveless shirt, and flipflop sandals. His outfit is quite colorful compared to the all-black look before (image 5). |
| August | The background video is from a wooden pathway going through what I assume being a swampy area with long green grass. The sky is blue, and it seems like an overall good and warm weather. Dennis is wearing beige shorts, a red T-shirt, and a black hoodie. |
| September | He is once again standing on a rock at a lake. The sun is setting, it is cloudy and dim. He is wearing a lighter black jacket, black jeans, and the black cap. |
| October | Dennis' picture is on a footbath. The concrete looks wet, trees are becoming yellow and losing leaves. It is still bright outside. He is wearing the previous outfit and carrying an umbrella (image 6). |
| November | It is snowy again, and the sky is grey again. Trees are bare and it is becoming dimmer. Outfit is the same as in March: winter jacket, jeans, hat, winter shoes. |
| December | Dennis is standing in front of the Oulu City Hall. It is Christmas season: there are lots of lights and even a |

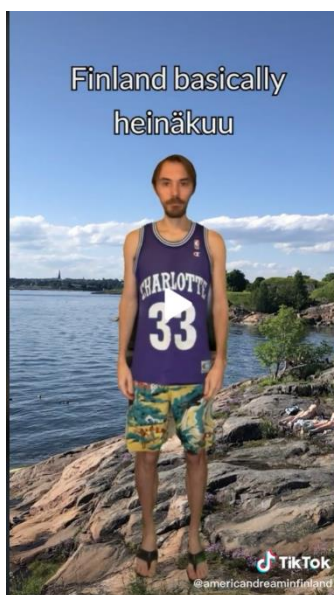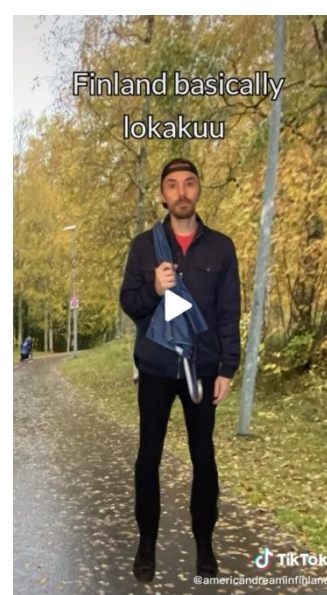| | Christmas tree whose lights glow in the dark. Same outfit as in November, plus a scarf and mittens. |
|---|---|



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

Unlike in the first video, here Dennis looks into the camera and establishes interaction with the viewer. Thus, his character is not merely an object to observe, but he is inviting the viewer to some kind of social relation with him. Maybe it is to share a mutual understanding of how the year proceeds.

During the first scenes the background images and videos are becoming gradually lighter and Dennis is losing some layers of clothing, which indicate that the weather is becoming warmer and brighter; the spring and summer are coming. After the summer, the weather starts to get rainier and darker once again.

The depictions of the Finnish seasons seem very honest and accurate: nothing is too exaggerated, even though it might look like that at first. For example, the blackness of January and February can seem comical, but it is essentially still true. Another funny aspect is how it is almost constantly either snowing or raining, and Dennis is carrying umbrella with him in many settings. When he shows how rain pours against the window in June, the viewers get the idea that Finnish summer is very rainy and cold.

The clothing is almost completely black during every other month except for July and August. It is almost like suggesting that only in July and August people are happy and enjoying the weather, while at other times they wear black and are depressed.

None of the clips showcase any social activities. Rather, Dennis is always alone with the same emotionless expression on his face. This could be due to the short time

that is available for the scenes, or it could be to highlight the Finnish quietness and type of gloominess, along with the black clothing.

The background photos and videos feature a variety of views and landscapes. Most of them are taken in the city or park areas, while others showcase beautiful scenes in the nature. Thus, while the video shows Finnish weather as somewhat bad and depressing (dark, rainy, windy, grey, snowy), the beauty of the nature (sunsets, lakes, forests) is still present.

Various TikTok affordances are once again used: video, background image and video, music and captions. When thinking about the technical execution, I wonder why Dennis chose to include video of him swaying from side to side instead of just adding photos of himself in the suitable clothing. On the other hand, maybe that would have made the video quite static. Additionally, the swaying motion fits the song well, and based on his interview response regarding the previous video, he does put thought into how video and audio complement each other.

## 5.3 How to ruin a Finnish person's day

The third sample video is from @joshofwestern, who I call Josh in the present study. The video that is labeled "How to ruin a Finnish person's day" has 45.700 likes and 785 comments (21.2.2022). The description says: *WHO WAS HE?!?!* 😫 *#fyp #foryou #foryoupage #suomi #tiktoksuomi #finland #tiktokfinland #finnishproblems #perkele #hauska #vitsi #nordic #nordichumor.*

In this video, a Finnish character gets greeted outside by a stranger, and he slowly spirals to a mental breakdown because of it.

| Speech/Narration | Description |
|---|---|
| *How to ruin a Finnish person's day* | Introduction to the video. Josh reads aloud the title, looking into the camera. |
| *Person A: Moi! (Hello)*<br><br>*Person B: Moi.* | Person A walks towards the camera, waves at person B and greets him with a hello. B walks to past him and answers to the greeting, but then stops and stares after A when he walks away, looking confused. |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Who was that guy? Do I know him from somewhere?* | Close-up shot of B who has inner monologue going on about the interaction. The facial expressions show that he is frantically trying to remember who A is (image 7). Background music starts. |
| *Nobody would say hi to someone they don't know. But how do I know him?* | Background music: Mad World by Michael Andrews *"All around me are familiar faces / Worn out places, worn out faces / Bright and early for the daily races ... "* B contemplates the question in different places: under a barbeque canopy, in a swing (image 8), in the elevator. When he finally gets home, he closes the front door and starts crying. He leans to the wall and slowly slides down to sitting on the floor and crying (image 9). The music fades away. |
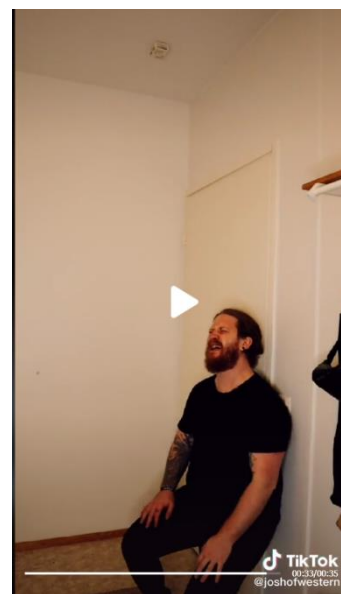
Image 7          Image 8          Image 9

In this video, Josh makes use of the Silent Finn stereotype: why would a Finn speak to someone he does not know?

Josh stated in the interview that he wanted to highlight a small cultural difference between Finland and USA that he found funny. He says that in the USA it is common and even expected to greet people you pass outside, while in Finland people do not do it unless they know each other. This might cause a Finnish person to think that they must know the person who greeted them, and they try to frantically figure how they know each other.

The video is quite cinematic and exaggerated, which contributes to the humoristic effect. The character makes a big deal out of a small unnoteworthy event, which is pictured in several different settings and camera angles. The dramatic music also has a great effect to the humor of the video. The final scene of Josh falling to the floor crying is the ultimate punchline of the joke.

In the interview, Josh says that the hardest part of making the video was to get the right shots that portrayed "the slow but casual spiral into depressed confusion". The shots in different everyday places highlight the confused thought process: it seems like the character needed to interrupt whatever he was going to do and instead sit in a swing and other locations to really contemplate the question that is bothering him.

Josh often uses some Finnish words in his videos, and so he does here. In the beginning, the two characters greet each other with "moi", a casual Finnish greeting that is often said to friends and family. Maybe this is one of the reasons why the Finnish character is so taken aback by it: if the stranger had chosen some other, more neutral and formal greeting, such as "Hei" or "Päivää (Good day)", maybe the situation would have been different.

What comes to TikTok affordances, Josh uses video, narration, and background music. In the scene where the two characters pass each other, he has edited the clip so that he can appear on the screen as both characters at the same for a brief moment. To my knowledge, the chosen background music is not particularly widely used on Tik-Tok, and it is not part of a well-known trend. In my opinion, nothing about the video, except maybe the fact that it is short, suggests that it is specifically a TikTok video: it could have been filmed for YouTube or any other platform.

## 5.4   Finnish VR

The final data sample is a video called "Finnish VR". It has 9375 likes and 83 comments (21.2.2022). The description invites the viewers to join the discussion: *What is YOUR favorite Finnish moment?*  😆 *#fyp #foryou #foryoupage #suomi #tiktoksuomi #finland #tik-tokfinland #finnishproblems #perkele #suomiperkele*

In this video, Josh plays two characters that I call A and B. The plot is based on imaginary VR glasses that show and let the user live important moments in Finnish history.

| Speech/Narration | Description |
|---|---|
| *A: Oh my god! This is so awesome!* | A is alone in a room and wearing the VR glasses that say "Perkele-nator 3000 *Finnish flag*" He seems excited, moving his head to different directions (image 10). |
| *B: Hey man, what are you doing?* | B steps into the room and looks puzzled while asking A what he is doing. |
| *A: WOW!*<br><br>*B: Hey!*<br><br>*A: Huh?*<br><br>*B: What is that?* | A does not notice B at first and keeps feeling the moment.<br>B shouts to get A's attention.<br><br>A takes off the glasses and answers, looking confused.<br>B asks the question, slightly amused. |
| *A: I'm using the new…!*<br><br>*A: I'm using the new Finnish VR headset. It lets you relive all the greatest moments in Finnish history. It's incredible!* | A starts speaking very loudly, as if he was still in the VR world. B flinches at the loud voice.<br>A explains more calmly what he is doing. |
| *B: Wait a minute… That exists?*<br><br>*A: Yeah, it's 2021. Everything exists. Here, try it out.* | B is suspicious and does not seem to believe at first.<br>The way A makes the statement looks like he thinks B is a bit dumb. He offers the VR glasses to B. |
| *B: Okay, I guess I'll give it a shot.*<br><br>*B: Woah!* | B laughs but agrees to try them on (image 11). As soon as he gets them on, his attitude changes. The camera zooms in to his face when he lets out an impressed exclamation and starts looking around as if he is trying to see what is happening around him. |

| | The scene changes: a short clip from a legendary 1995 ice hockey game between Finland and Sweden is shown. Finland makes a goal and the team and commentator cheer. |
|---|---|
| *A: It's amazing, right?* <br><br> *B: This is incredible, dude!* <br><br> *B: It's like I'm really there! I'm ready to torilla tavataan (meeting at the market-place)!* | A nods in approval. <br><br><br> B is excited. <br> A nods and smiles. <br> B raises the VR glasses to his fore-head and laughs at his joke (image 12). |
| *A: Ooh, ooh! Try the level with the free buckets next!* <br><br> *B: There's a what!* | A remembers something and says it excitedly to B. <br><br><br> B gets also excited and pulls the VR glasses back on. |
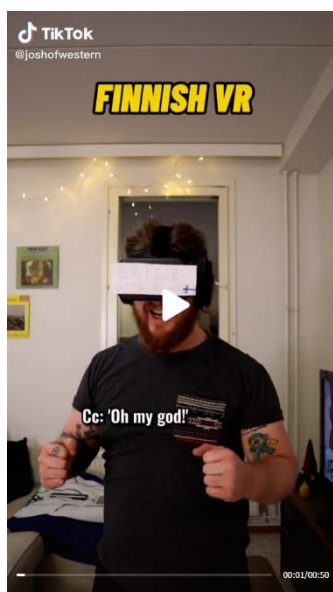


Image 10



Image 11



Image 12

This video features some Finnish stereotypes and well-known jokes. The ice hockey game in the men's ice hockey World Championships against Sweden in 1995 was the first time ever that Finland won the ice hockey world championship, and it is even today reminisced about. Thus, it must be included in the VR that shows the great-est moments of Finnish history. The reaction that B has to the ice hockey scene ("*I'm ready to torilla tavataan*") refers to the party that Finnish people often have after a major

win in sports: they gather to public places such as marketplace in the city center to celebrate together.

Winning a sports game might seem like a mundane thing compared to other great moments in history that could instead have been included in the VR. This scene implies that, for example, notable inventions or progressive societal changes are not as important to Finns as winning an ice hockey championship.

Another joke or cliché that is included in the video is that Finnish people love free stuff so much that they would stand in line for hours to get a free bucket. This is of course also included in the Finnish VR, instead of important historical people or events. If possible, the free buckets are an even bigger deal than the ice hockey, based on the reaction that character B has to hearing that the VR includes free buckets.

The fact that the video does not provide any additional or explicit explanation for the chosen "greatest moments" reveals something about the relationship between Josh and his audience. Josh knows that his audience knows these references, which is why he does not need to over-explain the joke.

Implying that the love of ice hockey and free buckets are the two most important things for Finns is a big part of what makes the video funny. They are absurd details that add humor to the plot. The acting itself also includes some humorous features, such as when A is so excited that he must shout, and it hurts B's ears. Much like the previous video, this one also features big and even exaggerated emotions.

The name of the VR glasses is also humorous: using the famous swear word *perkele* goes well with the ice hockey theme and great Finnish moments. After all, that is often a word that is first taught to foreigners as a joke. Connecting "perkele" with "-nator 3000" makes it sound like a spectacular piece of technology (compare to e.g. Terminator).

The video depicts Finnish people as patriotic and loving their own culture – which could probably be said about any country and nation. Another characteristic that is assigned to Finnishness is frugality, according to the cliché that people would queue to get free buckets. Overall, the stereotypes presented in this video are quite nice and funny, and depict Finnish people in a positive light.

There are not too many special effects in this video, either. On top of the audio-visual video material that Josh has filmed himself, he has included captions and a video clip from the ice hockey game. Unlike other data samples, this video does not have any background music.

# 6   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section I categorize the findings and discuss them in more detail. I have divided the section into two subsections according to my research questions, and I will answer each question separately.

## 6.1   Depictions of Finnishness

This section answers the research question 1: How is Finland and Finnishness depicted in the videos made by two American TikTok creators?

In the four data samples I noticed that following characteristics about Finnish people and Finland were raised: patriotism, quietness, shyness, gloominess, beauty of the nature, frugality, and love of ice hockey.

Patriotism is visible in the video about Finnish Independence Day as well as in the Finnish VR. In the Independence Day video, people were depicted as quietly celebrating the event by watching a war movie, lighting candles, watching the President's reception, and eating Finnish candy. In the Finnish VR video, the people were very excited about the ice hockey championship of 1995, which can be seen as a sign of patriotism.

Quietness was depicted in the Independence Day video by highlighting how the people stay at home rather than gathering and partying together. In the "How to ruin a Finnish person's day" -video, the Finnish character was devastated because a stranger greeted him outside, as if it was not normal for Finnish people to talk to each other. Quietness, or certain gloominess, was also present in the "Finland basically" video, as it never featured any social activities nor particularly happy expressions. The character was almost always dressed in black and showed no emotions.

Beauty of the nature is depicted in the video that showcases the months of the year. In the same video, though, the weather, especially the summer weather, was also

depicted as rainy and bad. Some of the scenes were shot in less picturesque locations as well, so overall the nature or landscape was not romanticized too much.

In the background chapter I discussed the concept of stereotype. Some previous academic work (especially Hall 1997) presents stereotypes as a way to separate "normal" and "abnormal", Us and Them, and establish and maintain social order. Interestingly, I found that the videos indeed have some aspects that do just that. They present Finnish people as something curious and different from "us". I think this is done especially clearly in the Finnish Independence Day –video, where the day was pictured through nature documentary type of genre, and the dialogue in the beginning explicitly contrasted American and Finnish celebrations. However, I believe that it was not done with malicious intent or to somehow imply that the creators would be in a more powerful position that Finnish people. Rather, the videos exemplify how humor can be used to build bridges and connect with others (like in Winkler Reid 2013).

The stereotypes and clichés featured in the videos are, overall, quite positive. There are no depictions of e.g. drunks fighting, like in the Countryballs online comics. On the contrary: in the "Finnish Independence Day" it is the American friend who asks the Finnish character if he will be having "lots of beer" to celebrate. Like Leyens et al (1994, as cited by Varamäki 2004) stated, the situation and goals of interaction determine how people categorize others. In this light, it makes sense that the depictions of Finnishness in the videos are mainly positive. The intention and goal of the creators is to entertain the audience and showcase cultural differences in a light-hearted manner. Moreover, their audience mainly consists of Finnish viewers. It wouldnot be in the creator's best interest to present Finns in a negative light, if their goal is to entertain Finnish viewers.

To further compare my findings with previous research: none of the attributes presented by Taramaa (2007) ('Sisu', diligence, cleanliness, helpfulness and honesty, reticence and drinking habits, group-orientation, stubbornness, reliability) were visible in the data samples. However, the samples did have similarities with the Finnish Nightmares comic. The Finnish characters of the videos presented same kind of attributes as Matti in the comic: silence, shyness and avoiding other people.

There were also some parallels to the findings made by Sorvisto-Santoro (2019). Nature was a big part of Finnishness in German newspapers, and nature is also present in Dennis' video about the months of the year. Additionally, in German newspapers Finland was depicted as technologically advanced. I could argue that similar attribute is assigned to Finland in the skit "Finnish VR", although it is not implied that the VR technology itself would be specifically a "Finnish thing".

## 6.2 Humor, stereotypes and TikTok affordances

The second research question considered humor in the videos, and how stereotypes and well as TikTok affordances support the humoristic effects. The humor in the videos is not charged (Krefting 2014). Overall, no politically or otherwise sensitive topics are discussed. Rather, the humor is based on minor cultural differences and "quirks" that Finnish people have compared to Americans. The specific aspects that I identified as creating humor are exaggerated emotions, lack of emotions, use of expletives, dramatic music, use of funny stereotypes and clichés, and use of funny props.

I find it interesting how the creators took different approach to showing emotions. While Josh depicted very exaggerated emotions, such as crying or being very excited, Dennis showed exaggerated lack of emotions. His characters did not smile or have lots of facial expressions whatsoever. Interestingly, both ways added to the humor of the videos.

In the "Finnish VR" clip, the expletive "perkele" is used in the name of the VR glasses. This specific swear word is often seen in jokes about Finland. Perhaps its popularity has to do with the strong alveolar trill that is characteristic for Finnish language pronunciation. I am quite surprised that this was the only time this word was used in the data samples altogether, considering that especially in online memes it is one of the most recognizable ways to characterize Finnish people humorously, at least in my personal experience.

Dramatic background music is used especially in the "How to ruin a Finnish person's day" skit. It enhances the effect to exaggerated emotions. Also, the "Finnish Independence Day" video includes sinister and dramatic music. Additionally, although not specifically dramatic, music plays a great role in the "Finland Basically" piece. In fact, the music is quite cheerful, which makes a contrast with the serious facial expression and all-black clothing.

Funny props are used especially in the Independence Day video. The towel and scarf that Dennis wears signify formal attire and Finnish design. This has a humorous effect not only because it can be seen as a commentary or parody on the crazy red-carpet fashion, but also because it highlights the fact that the video is indeed very home-made and the video maker does not have the "proper" props available but has to use his creativity. Another funny prop that is especially prominent in the data is the VR glasses in the "Finnish VR" skit. While they appear to be actual VR glasses, creativity has been used in making the label "Perkele-nator 3000".

Asukas (2020) found in her analysis on Vine videos that humor is often based on absurdity. This idea is also present in my data. Especially Josh highlighted in the interview that he wanted to make the "How to ruin a Finnish person's day" video absurd rather than a realistic depiction of Finnish people. The absurdity in this piece

comes from the fact that the character gets a mental breakdown because of a very minor inconvenience.

The videos include versatile TikTok affordances, such as video, background images and videos, background music, trending themes, audio narration, and captions. Out of these modes, especially background music, background images, audio narration and of course the video itself contribute to creating humor. However, almost all of these affordances could be seen in any type of video regardless of platform. Some more characteristic and iconic features of TikTok, such as filter and "stitches" were not used. Perhaps the most notable TikTok affordance of them all was the background music of the "Finland Basically" video. While this kids' song does not originate from TikTok, it has become popular on the platform, and a meme has been built around it. The video would probably not have come to existence without TikTok and the trend. The idea would simply not have made sense on any other platform. Additionally, a particular background music or sound was sometimes chosen for a video mainly because of its popularity on TikTok.

# 7  CONCLUSIONS

The present study looked into two American TikTok creators who make content about living in Finland. I examined how they depict Finnishness in the selected videos, and how humor is present in them using a collection of qualitative and descriptive methods.

I found that Finnishness is depicted in quite a positive light, yet Finnish people are seen as somewhat different or curious compared to Americans. Their stereotypical characteristics like quietness, shyness, gloominess, frugality and love of ice hockey are highlighted, but the more dislikable stereotypes that are present in some other types of online popular culture, such as drinking and fighting, were not featured in these samples.

Humor was created with various different means, such as showing or not showing emotions, using funny props, adding background music, using expletives and making references to clichés and stereotypes like wanting to line to get free buckets. What comes to TikTok affordances, some of the most unique features were not utilized. Rather, the videos could exist as such on almost any platform, with the exception of "Finland Basically" video that makes use of a TikTok trend that would not make sense outside the platform.

Maybe in future research, one could use the same research questions but choose different data. For example, a discussion about charged humor and marginalized groups on TikTok would be interesting. There are many TikTok comedians who use charged humor in their content and are more marginalized in the Finnish society (see e.g. users @princess-aishah, @mkokat and @viktorioangelov).

Since the topic seems to be studied only little, it offers many opportunities for further research. If I were to do a larger-scale study on the topic, I would like to make a broader thematic analysis on what kind of things are discussed in the videos. There would be work to do for whole research groups, if one decided to conduct broader analysis on various different creators.

As I mentioned in the introduction, TikTok (and social media platforms in general) changes rapidly, and it might look completely different at the time that this thesis is published. Indeed, TikTok has since introduced new features, such as "Stories", adopting the popular feature that is also seen on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and others. Additionally, TikTok is now exploring longer videos, distancing itself from the original format of short videos – or at least diversifying the uses of the platform.

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# APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please give a name that you would like me to use in the thesis when referring to you (could be your first name or nickname, whatever you feel comfortable with):

2. Why did you start making TikTok videos?

3. How would you describe your content on TikTok?

4. What is the intended target audience of your TikTok videos? I am especially interested in whether you aim it mainly for the Finnish or American (or other) audience.

5. What is your actual audience like, based on data that you have about the viewers (e.g. age, gender, nationality, possible other data)? If you can, please add a description or screenshot of your TikTok viewer data.

6. What kind of reaction(s) do you wish the viewers have to your videos/content?

7. What kind of feedback have you received from the viewers?

8. Do you consciously make use of stereotypes in the videos? Why or why not?

9. How do you decide what elements and affordances (image, video, sound, music, talk etc.) to use in videos?

10. In this last question set, please comment specifically on this video ("Finnish Independence Day" and "How to ruin a Finnish person's day"): How did you get inspiration for this particular video? What kind of preparations did you make for this video? Was it easy to come up with the idea and "script" of the video? How closely did you consider all the details of the video, such as individual word choices, music, background noises and pictures, green screen, props etc.? What kind of reaction did you wish to get from the audience?