

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Latin American Stereotypes in Finnish Social Media

Jussi Pakkasvirta

Communication has always been a prominent part to produce national stereotypes. The familiar patterns of collective and communicative action are associated with nation-building processes, which acquired great amounts of organizational resources in modern political communities beginning in the nineteenth century. These “modern” processes created strong collective national identities. Since the Internet era, we have encountered new and less familiar logics of connective action based on personalized content sharing across various media networks. Introducing digital media does not dramatically change the core dynamics of traditional community-building processes, but the logic of connective action does. This article analyzes one case of our era: how Latin American stereotypes are present in Finnish social media, and what new insights the method – the analysis of social media big data – would bring. Likewise, the article studies Finnish nationalism – how Finnish people see themselves when explaining other national cultures. The central questions stem from media discussions about Latin American countries: How are concepts and words referring to Latin America used in Finnish social media, and how does this kind of interaction is built on and further strengthen national or “continental” historical stereotypes, repeated again in new media forums? Latin American stereotypes serve also as social media representations to reflect Finnish national self-portrait.¹

Keywords: social media; nationalism; stereotypes

Introduction

Currently, many societal-emergent, network-related phenomena come as a surprise to both academics and the nation’s leadership. One by-now familiar Nordic “surprise” was the rise of nationalist movement in Finland, leading to the rapid rise in popularity of the Finns Party (Ylä-Anttila 2017; Palonen & Saesma 2017; Niemi 2013; Borg 2012). Other examples include the riots in London, the Occupy Wall Street movement, Arab Spring, and the crisis in Ukraine. The latest surprises have been “Brexit” and Donald J. Trump’s victory in the U.S. presidential elections as well as the use of Facebook data by Cambridge Analytica. Social media plays an important role in shaping opinions and values and in politics. Accordingly, discussion forums – where people express emotions, exchange ideas and chat about whatever is on their minds – provide clues about what is going on and what has been going on in terms of people’s changing attitudes and in societies in general. Social media forums and big data both reflect what moves people, what excites or irritates them, and what their mental landscape is on such emerging matters.

Social scientists have recently become more interested in new sources of data, digital methods, and algorithms. Recent debates about “the social life of methods” (Savage 2013) offer a reference point for this article by questioning

existing research conventions, including the strict distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. While there are examples of analyzing the rise of international conflicts using such social media as Twitter (Magdy et al. 2015), and various studies of Facebook and Youtube (e.g., Bouvier 2015), more forums and platforms need to be studied and with a variety of methods, in a variety of languages. This will open up possibilities to challenge many established theories in the social sciences and cultural studies. For instance, the discussions on the theories of nationalism urgently need more analysis of social media and use of big data. The notion of nation-ness is changing and being reproduced at a speed never experienced previously in history. The world of plurals, or simultaneous social acts in the Andersonian sense (Anderson 1991; Pakkasvirta & Saukkonen 2005; Pakkasvirta 2014), has created different nation-building processes and ways of understanding nation-ness and worldmaking (Billig 1995; Goodman 1978).

In short, the *style* used to create a political community in the media has changed in a way that is not recognized thoroughly. We encounter ‘Trumps’ and ‘Brexit’s’ and do not have an exact clue as to what is happening. New social media politics constitute also a new media culture – a culture in which debates are framed largely by their appeals to emotions and disconnected from “truth” and facts. Social media sites are especially efficient at producing repeated assertions and ignoring factual rebuttals – and falsifying facts by interpreting them as of secondary

importance (Ylä-Anttila 2018). All this can be, and has been, strategically used to create political realities that benefit particular political or economic gains. As much as it is important to understand the mechanisms of these actions, it is perhaps even more important to put our attention on the power of lay people's community to collectively reflect upon and reproduce the social and political reality.

The era of the Internet and the availability of social media big data offer opportunities to explore the collective formation of political realities, and to question traditional explanations concerning modern identities and the ways in which diverse life-worlds are constructed. This especially concerns citizens' perceptions of their own nations and "others." Taking into account the recently heated discussions on migration and new forms of national populism, citizens' mindsets and accounts of human responsibility related to new uncertainties are being reconfigured and hybridized at a speed and level of complexity not experienced previously.

This article analyzes one case of our Internet and social media era: how Latin American stereotypes are present in Finnish social media, and what new insights the method – the analysis of social media big data – would bring. Likewise, the article studies Finnish nationalism – how Finnish people see themselves when "othering" the other nations and national cultures.

Nationalism and stereotypes

I argue here that new media platforms are creating new kinds of identities and perceptions of nationalism. This requires more sophisticated analysis of social media and other digital material not originally created for research purposes. This is especially relevant because a significant transformation is taking place from collective and communicative actions to *connective* actions, in terms of the ways in which people engage with national issues (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). Through an analysis of social big data, it is even possible to search for the latest threshold of modernity, where a range of new concepts related to nation-ness are being forged, and old ones are being redefined. The ways in which changing perceptions and actions are helping redefine new political communities is one of the fundamental questions of our time. Through an analysis of social big data, it might even be possible to search for the latest "Sattelzeit," a concept used by Reinhardt Koselleck (2002) to describe how concepts change in time. There are also regional post-national processes taking place that challenge our concept of the national political community. For example, Sassen (2003) has suggested that "glocalist" urban trends and urban networks will dissolve nationalist identity and create new transnational norms.

On the other hand, traditional nation-building nationalism has seemingly survived with success in the Internet era. Nationalism can be defined as a human strategy and successful socio-cultural recipe for constructing the surrounding world, affected by various political and cultural modernization processes (Pakkasvirta 2014: 89). There is lot of evidence that social media discussions can also maintain and even strengthen nationalism and national stereotypes with new intensity. The transnational virtual net has made new kinds of communication possible for

different groups and social movements. For example, many neo-nationalist movements, which have reacted specifically to the globalization of capital, have also been openly racist or at least very negative towards immigrants, refugees, and immigration in general. In social media, it is relatively easy to construct erroneous self-images and to create new bases for stereotypical enemy images. So, there are still many reasons to argue that Janus-faced nationalism (Nairn 2005) is still the strongest recipe for our identity and political community, a type of nationalism which has been able to react as a chameleon to the speed of globalization.

Managing new forms of data is a substantial challenge for theorists of nationalism. Social media services in particular have become a crucial part of the everyday conversational landscape in the past fifteen years. The combination of social scientists' research questions, language technology, and advanced data analysis methodologies offer thought-provoking possibilities for the study of social media sites. In this article, I will analyze how this kind of digital data can be integrated to conceptualize the grand global challenges related to the formation of new kinds of nationalisms, attitudes, and human interactions.

Social media sources are extremely useful especially when we try to analyze nationalist stereotypes or extreme neo-nationalist movements of our time. Neo-nationalism is a reaction to crisis, and global crises are being experienced collectively on the Internet in a new way (economic crisis, refugee crisis, etc.). At least many kinds of crisis are felt "more strongly" when repeatedly announced and discussed in social media. Also, "banal nationalism," a concept introduced by Michael Billig (1995), is a kindred spirit for social media neo-nationalism. Many elites in established nations – "at the center of things" – often see nationalism as the property of others, not of "us." The popular masses are being underestimated once again (Helbling & Reeskens 2016).

As Billig suggests, nationhood provides a continual background for mainstream or elite political discourses, for cultural products, and even for the structuring of media. Citizens are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations in various and continuous little ways. The "metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (Billig 1995: 8).

To understand the logic and relations of collective, communicative, and new connective action, different methods and novel quantitative data are valuable. Who are carrying the flags, who is waving them, who posts them on the walls of the Internet and social media sites? How does this change our concepts of nation-ness, our attitudes and opinions? I try to approach these processes through an analysis of simplified national stereotypes.

Nationalism is always loaded with stereotypical concepts, opinions, and beliefs. Nations need an "other," and stereotypes serve in the construction of this other. Stereotypes can be defined as the "social classification of particular groups and people as often highly simplified and generalized signs, which implicitly or explicitly represent a set of values, judgements and assumptions concerning their behavior, characteristics or history" (O'Sullivan

et al. 1994: 299–300). Stereotyping is built on a cognitive process of categorization that requires simplification to help people make sense of world events, objects, and experiences as well as craft a seemingly commonsensical discourse about others. Hence, stereotypes produce simplified images of ethnic groups, different cultures, or behavioral models in different contexts together with the positive or negative valence related to these images.²

The term stereotype often implies antipathy towards a social group (Allport 1954). Thus, stereotypes can also give rise to prejudices or to other negative cognitive and social tendencies in intergroup relations (McCage 2009). However, according to the stereotype content model (SCM) used by Fiske and colleagues (Fiske et al. 2007), out-groups can be also liked (even if not respected) or respected (even if not liked). Stereotypes are also cultural attitudes and representations, maintained through social interaction, and they reflect the positions of different groups and communities (Sammut 2015). Real-world persons and phenomena are identified with certain kinds of beliefs, or else their thoughts are classified through opinions or common-sense interpretations (Madon et al. 2001; Bar-Tal 1997; Phalet & Poppe 1997). Obviously, stereotypes also tell us a great deal about their presenters and the contexts in which they have been reproduced, with one of the most common expressions of a stereotype being a joke about a neighboring country.

Stereotypes allow us to simplify and systematize ambiguous information in general, working in and through various media. Producing stereotypes is thus also, recognizably, one element of the above-mentioned “post-truth” era. National stereotypes are a strong element in both (social) media and politics. Surprisingly, however, there is a lack of research on stereotypes in social media, particularly using big data.

Research on national stereotypes

Recently, Cuddy et al. (2014) tested the stereotype content model (SCM) in a comparative study of ten non-U.S. nations. Their results revealed theoretically grounded, cross-cultural, and cross-groups similarities: perceived warmth and competence reliably differentiated societal group stereotypes; many out-groups received ambivalent stereotypes (high in one dimension, low in another); and high status groups stereotypically were competent, whereas competitive groups stereotypically lacked warmth.

One of the most critical tenets of SCM is that stereotype construction is built into social structures. In other words, stereotypes reflect a society’s level of inequality and conflict, providing a diagnostic map of intergroup relations. Durante et al. (2017) compared 49 samples in 38 nations and investigated whether national peace and conflict reflect ambivalent warmth and competence stereotypes. Their results showed that unambivalent stereotypes work better in both high-conflict and high-harmony societies. If clear-cut, unambivalent group images distinguish friends from foes in high-conflict societies, less ambivalence in peaceful countries is due to greater social cohesion and shared national identity. According to the findings of the study, nations with intermediate levels of conflict may need ambivalence to justify more complex intergroup-system stability.

When it comes to stereotypes about Latin American nations in particular, the research is quite scarce, excluding various consumer and business studies. In the Nordic case, some research has been done on Finnish attitudes towards Latin American nations. Especially, the conflict between Argentina and Uruguay in 2005–2012, caused by the construction of a Finnish pulp mill in the city of Fray Bentos, has been analyzed by focusing on the Finnish media (Pakkasvirta 2008, 2010).

Based on the studies referred to above, in this article, my assumption is that many “Western”³ perceptions of Latin American people are clear-cut stereotypical, and negative. With respect to national stereotypes, various studies have assessed and emphasized how these kinds of negative attitudes play out in a global context (Rosenthal 1999; Drewelow 2011; Willnat & Xiaoming 1997; Stephan et al. 1993; Capozza et al. 2009; Glick et al. 2006).

I will next analyze the use of and changes in Latin American stereotypes through the progressions/time series of Finnish social media. Internet discussions help us identify the deep structures and attitudes that repeatedly reproduce national stereotypes – they also construct Finnish nationalism. Our linguistic “big data” also complements the information gathered by more traditional online polls, surveys, and Gallup opinion polls. The social media data is useful also from another perspective: the researcher does not have to limit his/her sociological imagination based on the research done or poll questions asked by others – which often can incorporate strong opinions or prejudices.

Social media “big data,” Suomi24

To analyze stereotypes of Latin America in Finnish social media, I chose to use Suomi24 (Suomi24 site), which is Finland’s largest social media site and also one of the largest non-English online discussion forums in the world. Until 2015, every month 86% of Finns using the Internet visit the site (source: TNS metric) – at the very least to find an answer to a question they have googled.⁴ Due to the policy of anonymity, the discussions are topic-oriented and do not openly promote the identity formation efforts of the author. The material offers unique perspectives for studying the qualitative and quantitative aspects of conversations and the dynamics of interaction, be it emotionally supportive, everyday problem-solving, or conflict-oriented types of interaction.

Together with a network of collaborators, including Fin-Clarín researchers, CSC-Finland, the Methods Centre of the University of Helsinki, and the data owner Aller, we have assessed the Suomi24 chat forum data from the beginning of 2001 to May 14, 2015. The data is available through the Language Bank and completely downloadable in JSON format. Thanks to Fin-CLARIN, searches on the dataset (at first a subset, and later the full data) can be performed using Korp search. Access to the data is managed by the Language Bank and granted for research use.⁵

Overall, the JSON dataset contains about 53 million comments in 6.8 million threads, totaling 2.2 billion words (after removing duplicate entries). The dataset can be divided into 21 thematic sub-forums and several levels of sub-sub-forums. The three most active sub-forums are

“society,” with 26% of the comments and 30% of the total word count, “relationships,” with 13% of the comments and 10% of the total word count, and “local communities,” with 9% of the comments and 7% of the total word count.

Modern language technology offers methods that let us inspect vast quantities of textual data and discover the prevailing topics and sentiments that accompany them. These methods are fast, can be scaled in the range of a billion word text corpus, and do not rely on any pre-defined topic and sentiment-related vocabulary. Further, current language technology is increasingly cross-lingual in nature, i.e. the methods are able to handle data in several languages at once, bind these languages together, and extract topics and trends jointly across several languages.

Recently, the entire history of Suomi24 discussions has been released for research purposes (Lagus et al. 2016). The dataset consists of over 2 billion words spanning 15 years of Finnish online discussions. This dataset is a treasure trove for researchers interested in the development of societal topics over the last decade, since the data is in discussion format and every post is time-stamped. Additionally, the language technology group at the University of Turku has gathered over 9 billion words worth of Finnish text by crawling the Internet.

In a preliminary study, before proceeding to our assessment of Latin American vocabulary, we gathered together “national stereotypes” on the vast majority of the world’s countries using these two datasets. With the help of machine learning and advanced language technology methods, we gathered together the prevailing topics and characteristics assigned by the Finns when discussing particular countries and nations. The preliminary results of this study are quite revealing. First, we can see that indeed the Finns do discuss their neighbors: Russia was mentioned over 600,000 times, Sweden over 400,000 times, and Estonia over 150,000 times. An additional 900,000, 700,000, and 250,000 mentions of the respective countries could be found in the Internet crawl data. We can thus say that for the neighboring countries, we are able to gather and analyze a dataset consisting of *millions* of mentions.⁶

Users of Suomi24

Before proceeding to our analysis, it is important to give an estimate of the users of the Suomi24 forum. According to our project’s first online survey of Suomi24 forum users (n = 1,395, Dec. 2016), the majority of users were middle-aged or elderly persons. Forty-seven percent of the respondents were in their 40s or 50s, while 32% were 60 years of age or older. Sixty-three percent of them were male and 36% female. Fifty-five percent of them were either married, in a registered partnership, or cohabiting. Eighty percent of the respondents did not have children in the household. The respondents were well-educated, with 31% of them having a university degree and 15% having a degree from a university of applied science. Thirty-three percent of the respondents had a vocational education (see more, Harju 2018).

The Suomi24 forum has existed for over 15 years and many of the respondents have been loyal to it: 45% of them reported having used the forum for 10 years or

longer. In the survey, they were asked if they define their role as a reader (17%), a reader-commentator (44%), or a random visitor (39%). Those respondents who reported just visiting the forum randomly answered only the demographic and background questions, while the others also answered questions concerning how they used the forum and their experiences and emotions related to such use.

According to the readers and reader-commentators of the survey, the three most important themes in the Suomi24 forum discussions included local issues, politics, and concerns about Finland and Finns. Also, discussions about relationship issues, religion, technology, and consumer electronics were listed as being popular. Asking users about the most important themes in the forum offers one particular viewpoint on the popularity of discussion topics, but not the only one, as Lagus et al. (2016: 33–36) have noted. Studying discussion data itself, such as which discussion threads gather the most comments or which topics are among the most read, offers slightly different views on the significance of the topics for the users.

Many of those respondents who participated in the forum discussions reported that they had actively participated: 36% of the reader-commentators contributed to the forum discussions at least weekly, while 17% contributed on a daily basis. The anonymity of the users in the discussions did not bother most of the respondents, even though they had found the discussions disturbing at least sometimes (50%) or often (34%).

The respondents were also asked to rate their level of contentedness with different aspects of their lives and with society. The level of satisfaction with their lives and their own social position was high. However, they were strongly dissatisfied with Finnish society: 40% of the respondents rated their level of contentedness at two or less on a scale of 0–10.

The case of Latin America — a strong stereotype?

For my case, I selected Latin American vocabulary that reveals a banal sense of nationality and stereotypes through contrasts. From out of 54 million Suomi24 discussion messages, we collected messages from all threads where words referring to Latin American countries (all in their different inflected forms in the Finnish language) were used at least once. The resulting dataset consisted of 104,285 messages, with 9,508 threads (“conversations”) ranging from 1 to 500 messages/comments per thread.

Threads with less than four search hits were filtered out. A preliminary reading of the threads focused on comments containing “stereotypization,” such as “Cubans especially...” or “Brazilians are...” or “All Mexicans...” With these combinations of words, we proceeded to the central question: how old and well-known “global” stereotypical attitudes about Latin Americans are reproduced and used in the Finnish case.

A representative historical example similar to our sample can be found in a widely used Latin American Studies textbook *Modern Latin America* (Skidmore & Smith 2010: 7). It refers to a nationwide U.S. poll from December 1940 in which respondents were given a card with nineteen words

on it and were asked to indicate those words that seemed to describe best the people of Latin America. The results were as follows: dark-skinned 80%, quick-tempered 49%, emotional 47%, religious 45%, backward 44%, lazy 41%, ignorant 34%, suspicious 32%, friendly 30%, [...] honest 13%, brave 12%, generous 12%, progressive 11%, efficient 5%.⁷

Applying the same adjectives used in the 1940 U.S. poll to our Finnish social media data resulted in a quite similar trend of stereotypical attitudes. Of 104,285 hits, we found these stereotyped adjectives used in combination with words referring Latin America and Latin American countries in the following order: dark-skinned 16%, religious 16%, criminal/suspicious 13%, backward/ignorant 9%, friendly 7%, progressive/efficient 0.6% (**Figure 1**).

Many other strong stereotypes about Latin America and Latin Americans, some much more positive, also exist. For example, they include ideas about good music (salsa, samba, son or tango) and a relaxed and happy lifestyle in general. The stereotypes include different myths about the indigenous people and their way of life in the Andes and Amazon. Military coups, revolutions, drugs, and earthquakes are also discussed and presented in a somewhat stereotypical manner. Hence, trying to take a huge, culturally diverse and geographically and politically very heterogeneous continent of 36 countries (with the Caribbean) into this kind of study was a very difficult and challenging task. While understanding the conceptual complexity of the task and material, I will try to test how strongly Latin American stereotypes are present in this kind of social media big data. Obviously, I am also aware of a certain kind of “post-colonial” risk in this exercise – but I will let the data conduct us to the analysis.

The Suomi24 discussion forum is organized into 29 thematic main topics, and each these topics includes various sub-topics. Latin America appears in almost all of the main topics, but the topic of “society” and “what’s going on in the world” (with various sub-categories) was absolutely the most representative, with the next most common topic being “relations” (see **Figure 3**), followed by “health” (mainly “drugs”).

Based on our preliminary evaluation, the Suomi24 topic categories containing relevant threads and comments – to study stereotypes – were “relationships” and “travel.” The most mentioned Latin American nations were Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico. The focus was narrowed to how Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico⁸ are discussed within the two categories (and subcategories) “relationships” and “travel.”

In the second step of the data selection process, the following criteria were therefore used: a) more than three search hits; b) main categories: “relationships” and “travel”; c) Brazil, Cuba, or Mexico mentioned in the category/topic/thread. This left 22 threads under the topic of “travel” out of the original 534 threads (subcategories including, for example, Brazil 7 threads, Cuba 6, Mexico 6) and 23 under the topic of “relationships” out of the original 861 threads (multicultural relationships 7, ideal woman 8). The selected threads were then reread with a focus on the following: 1) which country was mentioned, 2) was the conversation overwhelmingly positive/negative, 3) what was the context in which the Latin American country was mentioned.

During the second analysis of the selected threads, comments that would constitute the final material were selected; comments containing “stereotyping,” generalizing, and comparative language use, such as adjectives or descriptions, were copied into a separate document. This resulted in the final data selection process, which ended up being approximately 60 pages long for the “travel” category and 40 pages long for the “relationship” category.

Selected texts were thereafter entered into the ATLAS.ti computer program and are coded into categories, in an effort to identify recurring stereotypes and patterns. Since the data is quite large, the analysis is mostly focused on comments that included such statements as, “Brazilians are...” or “Cubans are...”, since analyzing all of the data would have taken too long. Including the entire threads for analysis – often done in discourse analysis to provide “context” – would not either have been feasible. On the Again, this prevents the researcher from choosing citations or texts that fit a preconceived

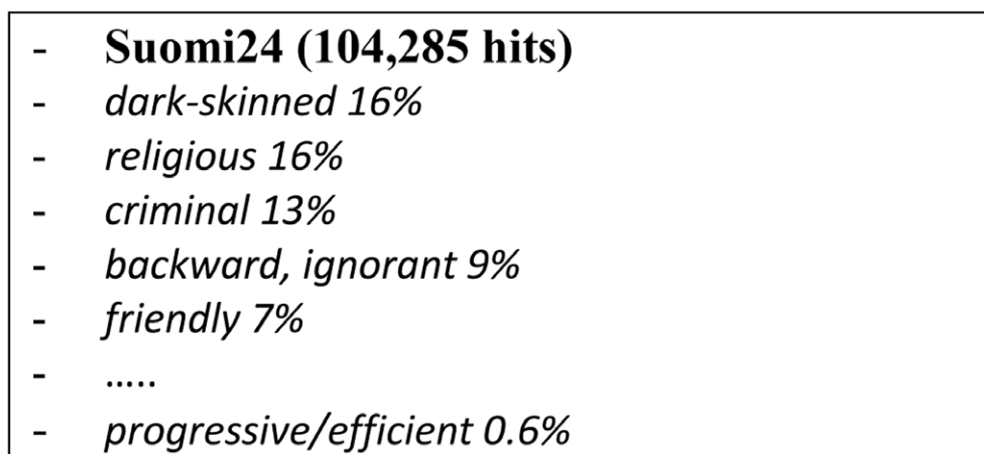


Figure 1: Latin American hits with stereotypical adjectives.

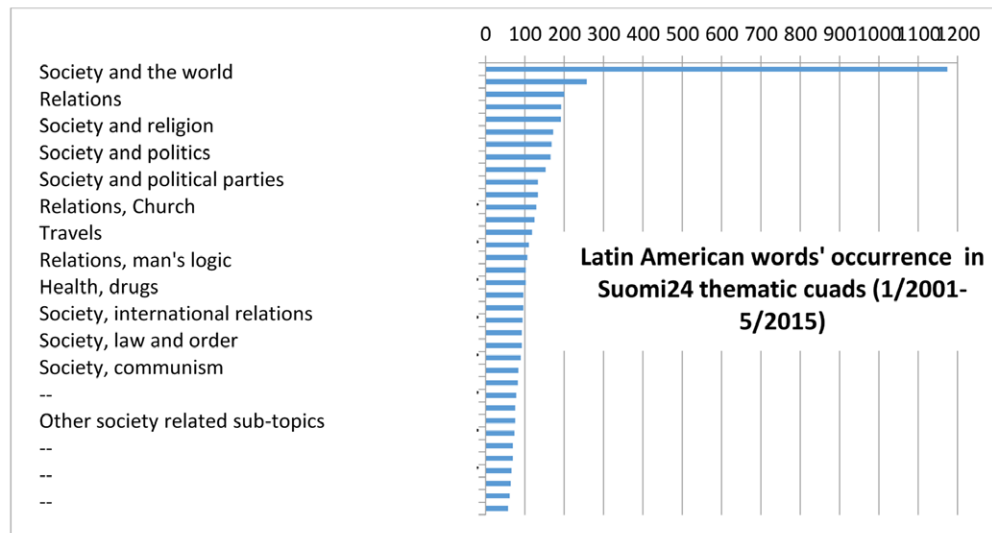


Figure 2: Latin American words used in the different thematic topics of Suomi24.

hypothesis, since the data was too large and “random” in nature. Focusing for the most part on quantity enabled us to identify recurring descriptions that constitute shared stereotypes.

However, not including the entire textual context is also a limitation of the study. For example, the unwritten (self-evident) ideologies/stereotypes of people may be undiscovered, and irony (and its purpose) may be more difficult to include in the analysis. This method of analysis is, therefore, an experiment to bring corpus research and content analysis together, with big social media data.

The data was first coded freely, and thereafter, the codes were sorted into categories based on the 1940 U.S. poll on stereotypes (see above) that fit the existing codes/text, while the codes that did not fit were given their own categories.

Categories and threads

The numerical occurrence of Latin American words does not necessarily correspond directly to discussion threads in which Latin American nations or people are discussed. The “society” subcategory *maailman menoa* (loosely translated: “the way of the world” or “current and global events”) had by far the most hits, as can be seen in **Figure 2**, but when checking all topics for discussion threads in the “society” subcategories (such as “law” and “crime, history”) only 109 topics included words related to Latin American. The discussion threads that did seem to directly discuss Latin American countries/people mostly circled around Cuba and Castro, Venezuela and Chavez, and drugs. Examples of these topics include:

Freedom for Cuba!; Fidel's pleasures; Hugo Chavez's UN speech raised concerns; Mexico's drug cartels and Finland's butchers; Brazil's war on drugs: Police chopper shot down; Satu Hassi [Finnish minister] is vacationing in Mexico; Mexico Guerrero 7.2 earthquake on the Richter scale; Polish eggs and brazzmeat [brassiliha, Brazilian meat] – NO THANKS!

Under the subcategory “religion and beliefs,” 15 topics included Latin American references, with four of the threads discussing the rape of a nine year old in Brazil and/or pedophile priests and three the mining accident in Chile. Latin American countries were often mentioned in the context of Catholicism, even if the discussion in no other way centered on Latin American countries/people, which explains why the “religion” subcategory was high up in the number of hits. It also seems clear that Catholicism and Latin American countries often appear together.

These topics suggest that what comes to mind when discussing Latin America is communism/socialism and drugs (cartels, illegal, danger, and so forth) as well as Catholicism. These discussions could possibly perpetuate stereotypes of *Latinos* as rebels, violent, religious, or backwards.

Under the “society” subcategory, the topic of “politics and parties” also generated many hits for words pertaining to Latin America (in descending order: 256 hits for the “Communist Party of Finland,” 152 hits for the “Center Party of Finland” and 127 hits for the “True Finns Party”). However, the number of words having to do with Latin America in the topics were again quite few (one or two) for all categories related to political parties except for the “Communist Party of Finland” subcategory. Out of 46 topics, 35 threads discussed Cuba or Fidel and the “freeing of Cuba” (based on the topic). The rest discussed Venezuela, Chavez, Chile, Haiti, or Nicaragua.

Under the remaining categories and subcategories (excluding the above-mentioned topics and the topics of “travel” and “relationships”), 75 threads used words related to Latin America in the topic. Many of them did not relate directly to Latin American countries or people, but for example, to dogs or martial arts or to the singer Shakira (“entertainment and culture”), Brazilian Terrier puppies (“market”), Latin transculture (“groups”), Mexican greetings (“vehicles and traffic”), Brazilian jiu-jitsu basic course (“locations”) or identifying a Brazilian escort (“vehicles and traffic”).

Words related to Latin America appeared often in conversations about football, especially concerning Brazil. A peak in the number of word hits (Brazil) can be observed whenever

the world football cup is being played (see **Figure 3**). There is obviously a strong positive stereotype about the level of talent and artistry of Brazilian players.

In contrast to the categories and subcategories mentioned above, the “travel” and “relationship” categories contained 382 topics with a word pertaining to Latin America in the title. The categories also contained the most topics directly referring to Latin American people. The “travel” and “relationship” categories contained the most stereotyping and, also, the most direct speech about Latin America. Therefore, it was justifiable to confine the data and further analysis to these two categories only.

Relationship and travel categories

Much of the online discussion can be understood and analyzed as identity management. By focusing on possible crude overgeneralizations regarding Latin Americans made in different discussions on Suomi24, where common characteristics refer to a whole group (constructed as natural/real/essences), an image of the stereotypical Latin American is reproduced online. Studying the stereotypes produced in the Suomi24 forums simultaneously invites an analysis of the identity management of those discussing such issues there: What/who is Finnish? When constructing Latin Americans as the other, the stereotypes become building blocks consisting of dichotomies between “us” and “them,” Finns and Latin Americans.

The common themes repeated in many of the comment threads or in the context of the written comments were quite similar for both the “relationship” and the “travel” categories. The threads found in the “travel” category included slightly more talk about the countries (countries as dangerous/beautiful, etc.), while discussions in the “relationship” category pertained more to looks and people (people or a type of look as dangerous/beautiful). With that said, the most common themes (below) also could be found in various threads under other categories as well. Therefore, these themes can be considered common for the majority of threads on Suomi24 containing words related to Latin America.

Travel advice: beaches or beautiful women?

The context for most of the discussions in the “relationship” and “travel” categories had to do with people seeking or sharing advice on traveling to Latin America (topic examples: “Where [should I go] in Cuba in addition to Havana? Sandos Palayacar Beach. Anyone going to Mexico?”). With the majority of threads, the thread starter was either looking for (or sharing) advice on a vacation destination or looking for (or sharing) advice on where to go to meet beautiful women. In other words, two types of themes regarding travel advice emerged: a focus on the country and a focus on the people (women). The latter discussions could be found in threads under both the “travel” and “relationship” categories, while the former theme could mostly be found under just the “travel” category.

*I will be on my way to Brazil next winter and now I should start to decide where to go.
If possible, you should take a three-week trip – there is so much to see, explore, and experience in Mexico
Where in South America would it be worth traveling to if the reason for traveling is to meet local girls?
[Brazil] Now boys, I've had a proper vacation. You won't believe what chicks the whole country is filled with and for real sex kept spinning in the air.*

Danger: warning, reassuring – and politics

Both of these themes contained discussions of danger, and thus they most possibly display a fear of the unknown/different. Especially when it comes to traveling to Latin American countries, the context for most of the discussions had to do with how dangerous Latin America is (topic examples: “How poor should one look?”; “Playa del Carmen, experiences of safety?”; Oh yeah, GOOD LUCK, make sure to be careful”). The dangers were considered to be theft and scams, possible violence, drugs, cartels, and corruption (especially of the police/politicians). The constant repetition of the aforementioned topics as well as reassuring others that most places are safe (e.g., “Brazil’s biggest cities are safe! There are no drug sales or organ-

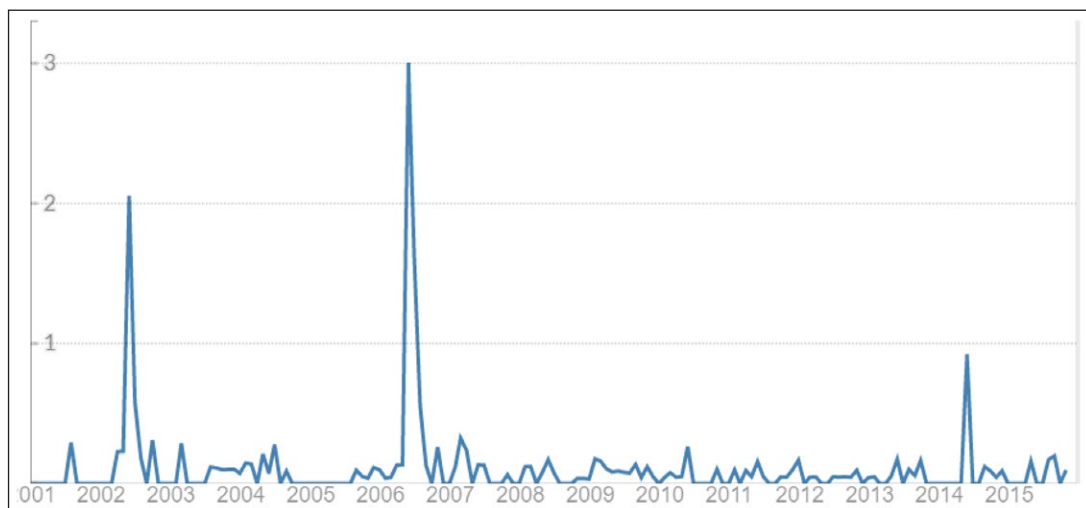


Figure 3: Numerical hits on the word Brazil on Suomi24.

ized crime”) reproduced an image of Latin American on Suomi24 as a very dangerous place (in contrast to Finland, which, in these conversations, is presented as a super-safe country where you can trust others).

How is the safety situation in, for example, Porto de Galinhas? (travel).

Tourists be warned: even if you have been able to walk in peace, the whole truth is different. There is a lot of crime and thieves, prostitutes get in the way of tourists, scams are common.

The conversations regarding women or men from Latin American countries included many warnings, especially when it came to Cuban men. The danger element in these conversations was that you (women) will be cheated on, lied to, tricked/scammed, that you will get an STD and that you will be used for your money and/or for the person to get to Europe (Finns, on the other hand, are described as honest, loyal, gullible and naïve and as victims).

I'm warning you about Cubans.

As someone who has spent a lot of time in Latin America, I would like to give you one piece of advice: be careful. Latino men are extremely good liars.

So be careful! Our cultures are different, be careful when it comes to Latin men.

Good luck in the wife search, as disgusting as it sounds. And remember to be careful.

Under the category of “relationships,” a fourth theme also emerged in the threads having to do with Latin America: that of comparing those with fair/blond features to those with darker features. For example, in some of the threads people asked what men find attractive in blonds and whether the men prefer blondes or brunettes and they discussed what the ideal woman should look like.

A third context for conversations was communism and U.S.-Cuba relations. They included questions like, does Cuba need to be liberated from communism by the U.S. or is Cuba a beacon of hope for those opposed to consumerism and the global domination of the U.S.? This theme was reproduced in almost every thread where Cuba was mentioned, regardless of whether the conversation had started out discussing women in Cuba or the best beaches near Havana.

Other stereotypes

Within the themes or context of conversations listed above, specific adjectives, traits, or characteristics were almost without exception always ascribed to “all Cubans/Latin Americans/Mexicans/Brazilian men” and so forth, and not to specific people. This was done by the use of such expressions as “Brazilians are like this,” “They are like that” or “In Mexico, people...” Essentialism is often evident in the stereotyped statements, such as ascribing behavior to “their culture” (instead of to a person or the situation), as can be clearly seen in the examples below.

I'm warning you about Cubans. Wheedling and hot feelings are overflowing at the beginning, but when things don't go as the man wants, unbridled rage, aggression, and violent behavior are revealed.

From my experience, even if a Cuban man has a long history in Finland, he will never become Nordic. They are prisoners of their hypersensitive emotional life, far from uniformity/balance/neutrality!

Commenters described Cuban men as distinctively different from “Nordic/Finnish” men and suggested that their “Cuban-ness” dictates their behavior/character, even if they are half-Finnish or have lived in Finland for a long time. Some stereotypes appeared under more than one theme, while others were contradictory and still others can be seen as more or less variations on the same topics.

Latin Americans are friendly

Despite a great deal of the context for the discussions in the “travel” category being based either on worry or warnings of how dangerous it is or is not in particular Latin American countries, when commenters mentioned “locals” directly it was to say how friendly, wonderful, lovely, helpful, and so forth, everyone is in such and such a place. Below are some typical examples:

People were wonderful, so friendly and happy and helpful.

Now the trip to Cuba is done. Everything went quite well, the people are very friendly, the food good.

People there are real and wonderful, different than here in Europe.

Brazilians are helpful and pleasant.

Mexican people are friendly and hospitable and for sure good looking and beautiful, so eye candy is also available (for an old person).

Since most of the threads under the “travel” category either had to do with planning trips to Latin American countries or having returned from such trips, it is not surprising that adjectives such as “hospitable,” “friendly,” and “helpful” appeared quite often. Commenters typically expressed the viewpoint that you want to look for and make contact with “locals” when traveling in Latin American countries. They compared Latin Americans to both Asians and Europeans and viewed them as generally being “different” in a positive way, perhaps especially when it comes to not being overly “pushy” and being relaxed, happy, and “genuine.” The comments generally treated Latin Americans as “others,” having something that other tourist/Finns/Europeans lack, something more “authentic.”

But do you realize that Brazil is located at the Equator; people are dancing samba in the streets and are lively [...] most Cubans can't stand the Finnish winter and long darkness, as social street people they suffer from it, that people don't party on the streets and aren't more open.

Latin Americans are dark

As mentioned above, 16% of the word hits pertaining to Latin America on Suomi24 contained the adjective “black/dark.” Based on our readings of the Suomi24 comments, it is safe to conclude that “dark” does seem to be an important part of defining Latin Americans for those posting comments in the Suomi24 forum. However, this probably says more about how Finns view themselves; as a homogeneously white-skinned group with fair features: blonde, blue-eyed. The “other” for Finns would therefore always be dark (compared to Finns), and hence the mention of “darkness” is always part of a process of “othering.”

When discussing Latin Americans in a negative sense, and usually men, the issue of “darkness” is less precise, that is to say, dark/black can simply be used as a descriptive aspect, as seen here:

Those dark southern men [...] If you want to bring a black man from another culture to provide for and to warm your bed, then why not.

However, most of the discussions that mentioned Latin Americans being “dark” were more specific in defining skin color or else pinpointed them as having dark features, such as brown eyes and/or black hair (see examples below). The discussions of Latino “darkness” often take place in threads comparing blondes with brunettes or dark features with fair features, such as the following thread topics: Men: dark or blond?; Blondes; “Dark-bloods” triumph in international arenas.

Various comments discussed “dark” or *mestizo* Latin Americans. Different stereotypes accompanied “darkness” in such discussions (in short, the right shade of darkness, not too dark), such as being beautiful:

*Such wonderful latte-colored skin.
Skin is olive colored, or peachy yellow, rarely pink-white.
Latinos (half dark) are the most beautiful on earth.
Maybe the dark skin color makes people more beautiful and healthier looking.
No wonder that in the Miss Universe competitions, the top three consist of dark women every year, especially Latinas.*

The theme of women of Latin descendant being the standard of beauty was discussed quite often, comparing the pale Finnish women to the darkness of Latin celebrities to, such as Selma Hayek, Gisele Bündchen, Adriana Lima, Shakira, Eva Longoria, or Jennifer Lopez:

In Finland at least, the beauty ideal is going towards a sort of fakelatinowhateverwhore-style: meter-long messy hairpieces, the same shade as the hair that's been colored raven-black, ludicrously fake eyelash extensions in the drag-queen style, and an orange-shaded tan acquired from a jar.

Latin lovers, hot “senoritas,” hyper-sexuality

As mentioned above, the context for much of the conversation had to do with asking for advice/sharing experiences of Latin women/men. This in itself already refers to the fact that many view Latin men and women as desirable partners. One recurring topic of conversation involved where to travel for the-best looking girls in Latin America (“Where in South America should one travel if the reason for the trip is to meet local girls?”), and questions as to how easy it is for a (white, rich) Finnish man to find (willing, beautiful) women (“A man's country, at least if you have a fair look that differs from the locals; Yes a western-looking man is really in demand/is really tough currency there”). Other threads simply asked for people to share their experiences with Latin men (“Cuban men!!!!!!!; Latino men”).

*I have a wonderful memory of two vacation weeks in Cuba, and a Cuban lover; -) I was there in my twenties and we had fun, every night. An amazing lover.
Oh yeah, this started with [the question] if Cuban men are lovely and I still am of the opinion that they are. Handsome, polite and with flexible/limber hips. I myself have a Latin American boyfriend and he is awesome. He is such a gentleman and kind; he always remembers me with little gifts and whispers beautiful words in my ear and in bed he is wow. He is unique... Finnish men can't do it.
[Cuban men] ... good lovers ... even if they have a women of their own, they have several lovers. Good at dancing and having fun.*

Contributors to the conversations often objectified the men and women as nothing more than lovers and saw them as hypersexual. These seems to be a fine line when it comes to the stereotype. Either the man is a sexy Latin lover or he cannot control himself and there is cheating and jealousy. Women are considered ideal partners because of their sexual activity and often take the initiative. Other issues demonstrate that many Suomi24 discussants do not exactly understand various ways of taking action with respect to prostitution or the complexity of sexual power relations.⁹

*Women are sexually active. Sometimes it feels like not much else matters as long as the man is sexually satisfied. They days are filled with a nice program and the man has a good life.
Women take care of their man and most have a principle that the man doesn't leave the house on an empty stomach and with filled balls.
You get sex and the women don't ask for money. Makes you feel like you don't know if the girls in the bars are prostitutes or not. Women who are sexually active, enjoying the bars, but they don't ask for money, strange.
Female company is certainly available, and I don't mean prostitutes, but completely normal women.*

Brazzies [Brazilians] live like there would be free sex here, for men as well as women.

The other side — Latin American women are virginal, passive, Catholic and Latin men are chauvinistic and macho

The stereotype above about the promiscuous *Latina* is by far the most common one regarding Latin women on Suomi24. However, a contradictory theme can also be found, even if much more rarely and not as explicit, that of the Catholic, virgin Latin woman.

In Catholic countries, women don't take the initiative, unless they are prostitutes... In which case, they may well be trans(sexuals). Local women are very passive and submissive compared to European women, as they have grown up surrounded by macho culture. South America is a very Catholic area, so at least that influences the girls' behavior there. The aim of a good girl is to find herself a man who provides for her. It is difficult for women to take part in working life because it often means that to keep your job, you have to sleep with some boss. For this reason, girls aren't independent like in Europe.

Even if this stereotype appeared less often, it seems to be an important part of the stereotype of Latin women, as many of the comments on Suomi24 were about the embarrassment of how easy Finnish women are — Latin women are not sluts like Finnish women. While a Finnish woman cheats on Finnish men by “spreading her legs” for all foreigners, Latin women do not engage in one night stands (despite being sexually active and taking the initiative) and they put their family first (“Finnish women think of nothing but their own crotch”), the only worry is that she may cheat on you with another man. Selective sexual abstinence and family values seem to be important for many of the commentators on Suomi24, considering the extent to which they seemingly value these traits in Latin women. A combination of the two contradictory stereotypes mentioned above seems to give rise to the idea of a Latin American woman as an ideal wife: sexually active yet submissive to her husband (“Brazilian women are absolutely fantastic spouses, at least compared to Finnish women”). Part of the “ideal wife” stereotype surely stems from the multiple conversations on the femininity and “curviness” of Latin American women.

Latin men are seen as stereotypical representatives of *macho* culture; if a *Latino* woman is the ideal wife, then a *Latino* man is the worst possible husband. There is also an underlying Finnish stereotype: both Finnish men and women appreciate equality.

The man is the head of the family, even though the wife actually takes care of and runs things; the wife takes care of the children and the home. The man can spend his time as he likes. A woman must be feminine and beautiful and outgoing. Should we learn from Latin American countries, “how to treat women” — as property?

Someone explain how it is possible for a feminist to admire South American macho men, whose habits include, among other things, to swat some obedience into the woman when there is a dispute. In many Latin American countries, it is totally normal that the man gives his wife a beating if the wife does not understand to obey.

Also, Finnish calmness and honesty is a new experience for many, when one compares [Finns] to the cheating men of a macho culture.

Latin Americans are jealous and quick-tempered

Comments on temperament and jealousy were abundant in many discussions. The jealousy of Latin American men and women was mentioned repeatedly, and considered a negative trait, since, as Latin Americans, they can never be “sensible,” which was clearly a valued trait in the conversations. In particular, comments suggested that Latin men express their sexist view on relationships through jealousy. This could be seen with respect to how *machismo* was discussed on Suomi24.

Somebody mentioned jealousy, which they do have. I know several and they are all the same, so it is accurate. Both [men and women] are shockingly jealous. [...] And the temperament of a five-year-old... At first, one is happy and then soon there is no reason to live. If you want easy sex, drama, and headaches, then go for it. Extraordinarily difficult people, whose culture differs from... well, every sensible culture.

The female stereotype included a “fiery temperament,” which commentators mostly saw as a positive trait on Suomi24, even if there were exceptions as well:

A Latin woman, dark and feisty. Women there are fiery, but at the same time also strong. Bazzwomen=drama queens. Hell of a show and excessive reactions [...]. Teenage princesses forever when it comes to development.

Latin Americans cheat

The jealousy of both Latin American men and women was seen as having to do with the fact that they do cheat on each other, with especially men cheating on women, leaving both men and women feeling jealous.

Jealousy is on a level of its own, but when you prove that you don't run after single skirted person and show trust in the woman, it will even out too. Lying is indeed so pathological that the man himself doesn't notice it. Because of cheating, my husband's sister never wants to date a Latino again, but rather a European.

The hypersexuality discussed above was strongly evident in comments regarding Latin American men, yet again possibly with the purpose of making a distinction between the

calm and collected Finnish man and the Latin American man, who is out of control (animal references are few, but they exist). STDs are also often mentioned in passing both when discussing Latin men and women (as opposed to Finns being “clean?”).

As you probably understood from the previous messages, a Cuban man is good for nothing except as a lover.

Don't listen to their smooth talk; they love so much, but so many, at the same time.

Stupid Finnish wife kindly waits at home. Are apparently, good lovers these guys, but based on the stories I would recommend that all wives take STD tests regularly (monthly).

In Cuba, every man has a wife and/or five lovers, a faithful Cuban man is a mythical creature

It depends completely on how you define “lovely.”

My opinion is that they are constantly running from flower to flower

Latin Americans are lazy — or just looking for someone to support them or an advantage

Finally, the themes of *Latinos* as lazy and seeking a quick economic advantage were observed in many different comments, especially in comments about the “kept men” that Finnish women “bring over” to Finland with them. Many commenters also warned Finnish men against getting involved with women who “are just after their money.” Various comments also contained anti-immigrant attitudes, more common in Europe, obviously, after 2015, with commenters explaining that love and relations are used only to look for better economic conditions, to take advantage of “our” welfare societies.

The invasion of Finland has started already years ago. Those [who come] to Finland as tourist lovers, which can produce husbands and boyfriends, rarely remain in the first marriage. A Finnish woman, however she looks, whatever age or size, works as a ticket out of Cuba [for the man].

I am not saying love is something bad, but these stories usually end quickly in divorce. The Cubano finds another, richer [woman], or moves to another European country, if possible.

I was married to a south American (woman)... their goal is just the same as the Russians: get out of the country.

All these comments are representative of strong stereotypical and quite negative attitudes. Most commenters viewed laziness as typical of Latin Americans, who are looking for an easier and more relaxed life — meanwhile, Finnish tourists traveling in the tropics looking for leisure and pleasure are not described as lazy. These stereotypes also represent combination “warmth but not competent”, and, in this way are consistent with SCM stereotype content model (Cuddy et al. 2009). Even if in crime topics there are threats and dangers described, these risks are seen somewhat harmless — as “lazy Latin Americans” were

not seen very competent. This is quite peculiar, because in all global crime statistics Latin American countries appear very violent. For example, the Mexican drug war and criminal gangs do not get many mentions in our data.

Conclusions

All of the stereotypes, as social representations, are related to culture and language. Various cultural studies theorists have comprehended cultural representation as the production of *meaning* through language (Hall 1997: 16). The role of language — and its new practices of creating stereotypes — is exceptionally interesting when analyzing new kinds of material created and used in the big data sets of social media.

Social media applications, such as blogs, discussion forums, social networking sites and content sharing platforms, have become a commonplace during the last fifteen years. Even citizens, who do not use the social media or the net by themselves, are hardly able to avoid the public discussion around digital technologies, services and platforms. Social media is a catalyst and accelerator of public discussion and citizen movements, producing also controversial consequences. However, social media creates also a plethora of positive effects from large political movements to consumer activities. Moreover, as nationalistic movements shape the course of Europe and of the world even more, research tools and methodologies are needed for their analysis also in the digital space.

The aim of this article was to present findings from a project that work with large social media datasets, with a particular emphasis on Finnish and Latin American stereotypes. The data covers a time period of more than fifteen years and consists of tens of millions online messages in topics such as local affairs, health, food, religion, and celebrity gossip.

The social media, and its networked discussions, create new connective actions, and I have shown — by one specific case — that this kind of phenomena can be analyzed and visualized through the Internet-based big data, by combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

This study was built on the interest to test whether Western stereotypes of the “other” survive in new communication forums. In short, this somewhat obvious, but similarly shocking, material from Finnish social media proves that strong historical stereotypes are also maintained and reproduced in social media in the twenty-first century, by new connective actions. These actions also reproduce nationalisms.

I have analyzed Latin American stereotypes as social media representations. Meanwhile, more generally, social representations are systems of values, ideas, and practices that serve to establish a social order and create worldviews (Goodman 1978; Moscovici 1988). New social systems and connective platforms enable individuals to master their communication with new unknown members of a community, one more extensive than ever. These practices also challenge the Andersonian kind of idea about anonymously imagined political communities (Anderson 1991: 22–26). The new social platforms bind individuals together in a new, more rapid way, permitting

them to share beliefs, values, common practices, knowledge, and common affiliations, thus supporting inclusion and exclusion systems.

Social media offers a quick way to formulate new kinds of expressions and it allows for impulsive, spur-of-the-moment characterizations. Often the language used in Suomi24 forums is like a live oral discussion. This is how we can capture new kinds of material for studying stereotypes or other attitudes and beliefs. Typically, the research material used to analyze values, opinions, and stereotypes is gathered via surveys. When using a survey, the researcher always has to select the material based on the questions asked. In our data, the material comes from word hits. From this perspective, the analysis of social media “bid data” gives valuable new insights for the study of such phenomena.

In the discussions on Suomi24, Latin Americans were mostly discussed through a tourist’s mirror. Even the posts on relationships seem typically to be the result of travelling. Notions of exoticism and cultural difference produced certain kinds of insecure stereotypes, which were then pronounced in quite harsh terms.

The results of the “relationships” and “travel” discussions – used mainly for qualitative analysis in this study – tell about historically established attitudes, and these that can be found in all categories on Suomi24. Latin Americans were described as black/dark, hot-blooded, passionate, criminals, backward, jealous, religious – and beautiful and friendly. The Latin American stereotypes observed in the U.S. poll from 1940 survive strongly in Finnish social media in the twenty-first century. Attitudes and prejudices change slowly, even in our time of speedy Internet connective actions.

Notes

- ¹ The preparation of this article was possible by support from the Academy of Finland Programme Digital Humanities, 2016–2019, <https://www.aka.fi/en/research-and-science-policy/academy-programmes/current-programmes/digihum/>. Pasi Karhu from Studiomind (Finland) prepared the data samples. For the qualitative analysis of the data samples, I thank Mikko Hämäläinen and Hanna Kankkunen, who have worked as my research assistants on the project.
- ² Especially in psychology and social psychology, there are various and more sophisticated theories of stereotyping. These provide, for example, more detailed tools do define the cognitive components for stereotyping. In this article, we take a less ambitious perspective, and use stereotypes merely as a tool for approaching our data. As McCauley et al (1980) suggested already 35 years ago: “Recent research indicating various cognitive biases in the formation and use of stereotypes is reviewed, and it is suggested that what is wrong with stereotyping is no more and no less than what is wrong with human conceptual behavior generally.”
- ³ “Western” is here complicated concept. Latin America is often called “Extreme West” – and the continent is, obviously, more Western than, for example, Finland. Western here refers to Europe and U.S.

⁴ Since 2016, Suomi24 has lost much of its popularity to other more competitive and international social media sites. Check the actual statistics on top Finnish Internet sites at: <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/FI>.

⁵ About our research project, see: http://blogs.helsinki.fi/pakkasvi/files/2010/10/Poster_DigiHum.pdf. See also, Lagus et al. 2016.

⁶ Preliminary results from our national stereotype experiment can be found at: <https://goo.gl/NIFa0D>. I would especially like to thank Filip Ginter and Jenna Kanerva from the University of Turku for preparing this data. They participated in our research consortium, “Citizen Mindscapes.”

⁷ See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_Hispanic_and_Latino_Americans_in_the_United_States. In this example from Wikipedia, there are three basic stereotypes: the “lazy stereotype, job-stealing stereotype, and criminal stereotype.” See also Samuel Huntington’s (1996) ideas about a clash of civilizations, which serves also to strengthen stereotypical ideas of how to define and describe continental cultures.

⁸ We are aware of the risk that these three countries do not represent all of Latin America. This can be seen also in the analysis and textual examples (below) – they refer mostly to Cuba and Brazil. Still, since the data is so large, we decided to select for qualitative analysis the samples with the most hits. Also, other Latin American countries are often mentioned together with these three nations.

⁹ Our data from Suomi24 does not include *Adult sex* (+18) as a thematic main topic, where, obviously, most of the sexually oriented discussions happen.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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