

# Images of Finland

University of Tampere

2004 - 2006

Class: Investigating Aspects of Culture

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation

Our motivation for doing this study arose from our international background. One of us was an exchange student by himself, and the other one had been working abroad and then with exchange students for several years. Both of us had also been travelling a lot.

We had become very curious about the stereotypes that exist about Finland, and so we decided to investigate what do the exchange students in Tampere think about Finland before and after their arrival to here. Our purpose was also to try to understand the process and the development of the *image* that people have when they, as a foreigner, think about another culture.

To have a good approach we presented the students with a questionnaire and evaluated the results according to our studies of intercultural communication. We also compared the results to the information and image given by the tourist guidebooks that were used as information channels by the students.

## 1.2 Images and stereotypes

It is clear that *cultural values*, *stereotypes* and *images* are related together, but in our research we focused more on this last concept. Just to distinguish one from other one we can say that a *stereotype* is a tendency for a fixed impression about a group that influences one's perception about the individual members of the group.

*Images*, according to Vilém Flusser, "are meant to render the world accessible and imaginable to man. But, even as they do so, they interpose themselves between man and the world. They are meant to be maps, and they become screens. Instead of presenting the world to man, they are representing it, put themselves in place of the world, to the extent that man lives as a function of the images he has produced." (Flusser 1984, 7)

The difference to stereotypes is that images are affecting to the whole perception of us whereas stereotypes are more often affecting to only certain parts of it. Furthermore, they are both affected by and affecting to our cultural values, as our judgement is influenced by the opinions of the information sources (media, people, history...) that we are accessing.

Therefore, to sum it up, images have the power to influence on what we are seeing, and we all produce and use images to find our way in the world.

## 2 Research

### 2.1 Study method

As a study method we used a questionnaire of 10 questions, most of them were open ones. The questionnaire was both in Internet as a web form and as a normal print that was delivered straight hand-to-hand. The results were in both cases gathered anonymously.

The questions were designed to gather information about backgrounds of the people (nationality, gender, ...), their information sources and expectations before arrival, and their experiences after arrival to Finland. Then we asked plus and cons people found about Finland, and left space for any other thoughts people wanted to share with us. The actual questions were as follows:

**Background information:**

1. Nationality:
2. Sex: (Male / Female)
3. How long have you stayed in Finland?
4. Which places have you visited in Finland?

**Before Arrival:**

5. What did you think about Finland?
6. Which sources did you use to get information about Finland?  
Friends/ Family and relatives/ Guide book(s). Which one(s)?/ Internet. Which site(s)?/ Other source(s). What source(s)? If you did not use any sources, why?

**After Arrival:**

7. Now, when you are here, have your thoughts changed? How?
8. What things in Finland do you like (2 things)? Why?
9. What things would you like to change (2 things)? Why?
10. Anything else troubling you? =)

The questionnaire took place between late October and early November 2004.

### 2.2 Target group

As mentioned before, our target group consisted of exchange students in Tampere. Practically we covered the exchange students of University of Tampere and Tampere University of Technology, as we advertised our questionnaire in the email lists of these both universities.

Most of the people who answered were from 20 to 30 years old, were going to stay for one or two semesters, and only few had lived in Finland more than a year. Thus our study cannot be generalized to cover all the foreigners visiting to Finland, but nevertheless we got important points of view about the process that make people look to a certain culture in a certain way.

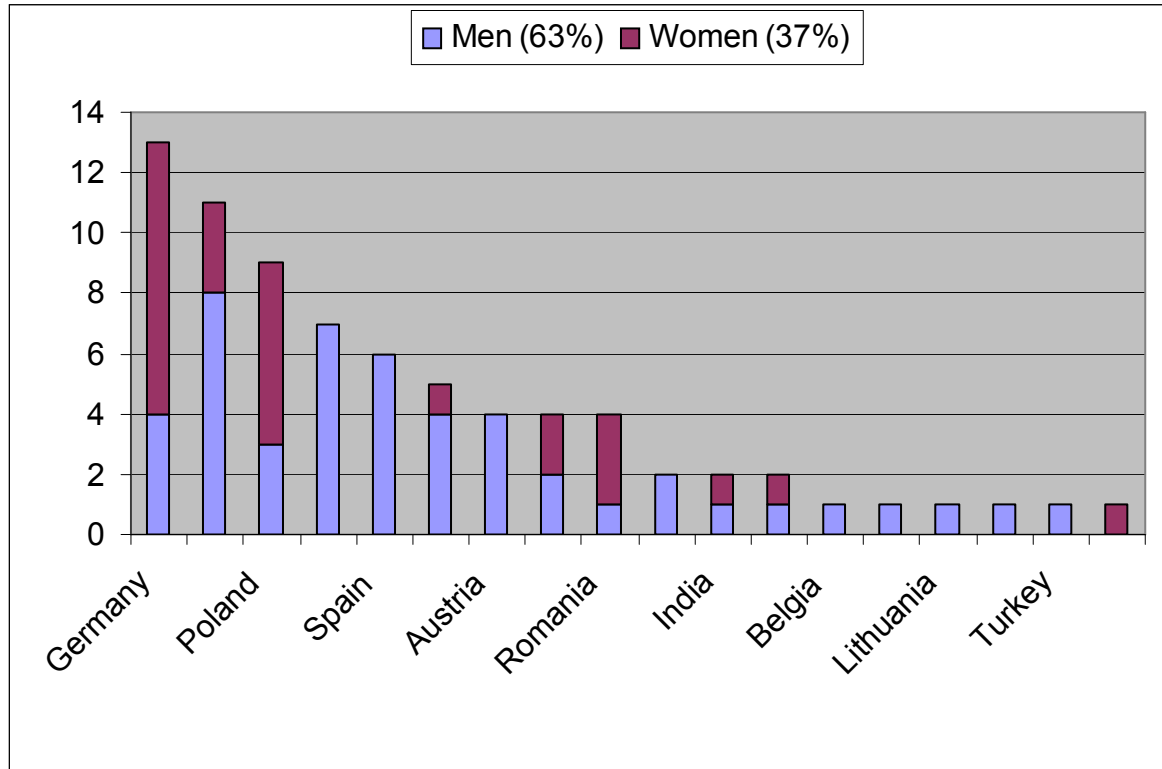
### 2.3 Hypothesis

Though the meaning of this study was not to set expectations on the images emerging from the results, we have to admit that there were some that we could foresee. These would be the most common stereotypes about Finland that would cover Finland being cold, Nordic country with high technology and clean nature, and Finns being honest and somewhat shy people that tend to drink a lot of alcohol. In general, we expected the opinions and expectations to follow the information given in the guidebooks, and to change after people had arrived to Finland.

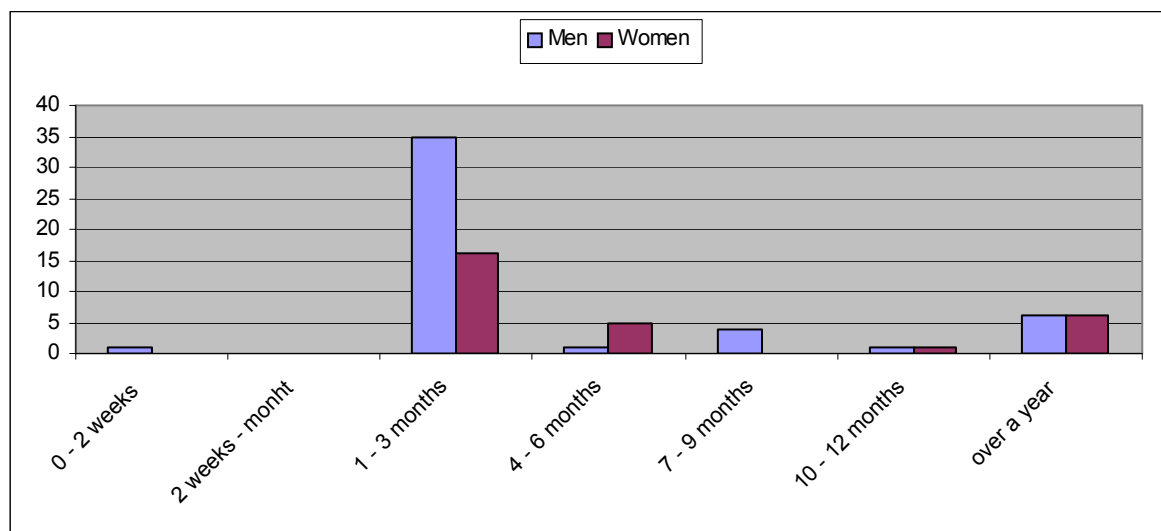
### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Background information

We got 76 answers to our questionnaire. According to results, the majority of the exchange students were from Germany, Italy and Poland. This fits well to the yearly statistics about exchange students provided by UTA and TUT.



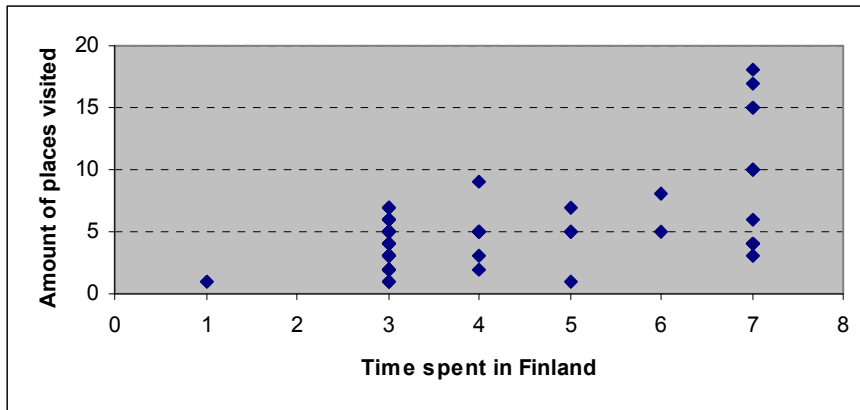
Picture 1 - Target group's nationality and gender distribution.



Picture 2 - Target group's times stayed in Finland.

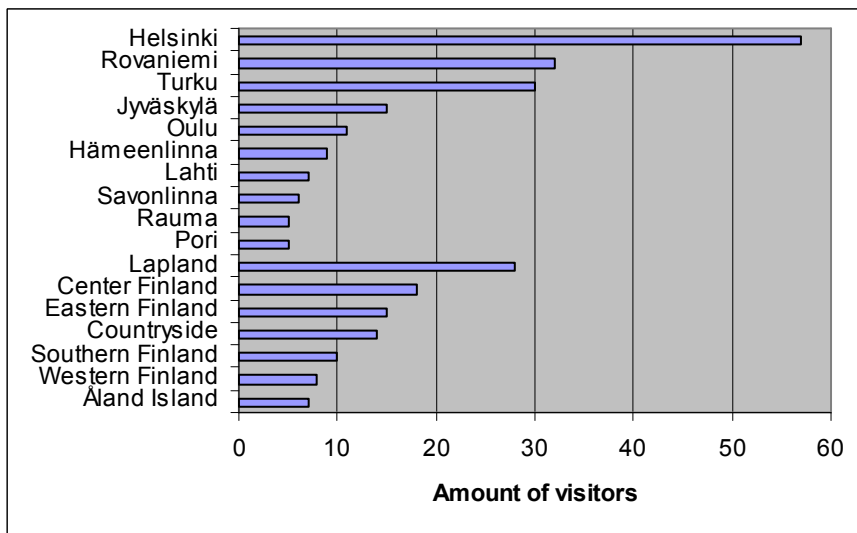
### 3.2 Time stayed and places visited in Finland

One could assume that the longer one stays in a country, the more places one visits. The results showed this assumption to be wrong. There is a dependency between the time spent and the amount of places visited, but it is not that strong at all. There seems to be people that travel a lot, and then there are people that even after a year stay had not visited more than 3 places. Both among women and men there were some very active, and some very passive travellers.



**Picture 3 - Time spent vs. places visited. Classes are: 1: 0-2 weeks, 2: 2 weeks-month, 3: 1-3 months, 4: 4-6 months, 5: 7-9 months, 6: 10-12 months, 7: over a year.**

We also asked what were the places people had visited. Naturally, all had visited Tampere, so it was not counted. Most of the people had been to Helsinki, Rovaniemi & Lapland (usually one visits both at the same time) and Turku. After that, there is more diversity. Nature parks and other cities with lots of exchange students were popular.



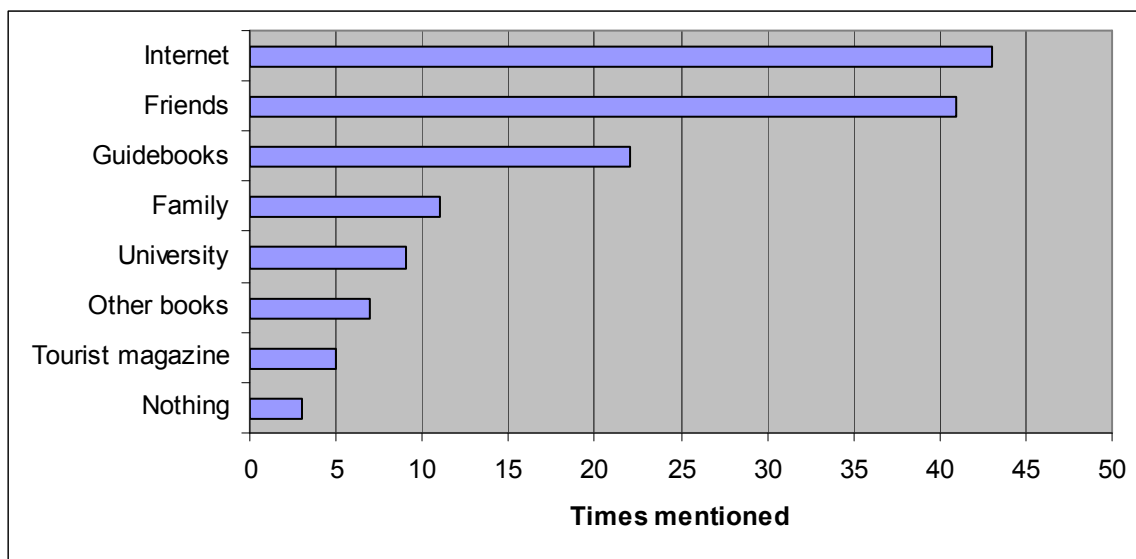
**Picture 4 - Places visited besides Tampere.**

A little surprising it was to notice, that among the visited places visited there were noticeably many mentions about very small places, visited by only a few people each. Those places do not have many, if any at all, tourists' attractions, nature wonders, important industry, significant cultural background or anything else to directly explain their popularity. Rechecking the results revealed that those places were visited by people that had been staying in Finland at least 6 months already, so it is possible that they had been invited to visit their Finnish friends' parents, or that they had been taking part to some kind of a (cottage) trip.

### 3.3 Information sources used

The most popular information source was expectedly the Internet. Almost as important information source are family and friends, what is quite understandable, as many exchange students know some people that have been to Finland - some of them as exchange students themselves, too. Interesting detail is, that information provided by university was not mentioned more often although both universities do provide lots of information and guidebooks written especially for exchange students.

There were also some people that reported using no information sources before arrival. In most cases, this was simply due the lack of time.



**Picture 5 - Information sources used before arrival.**

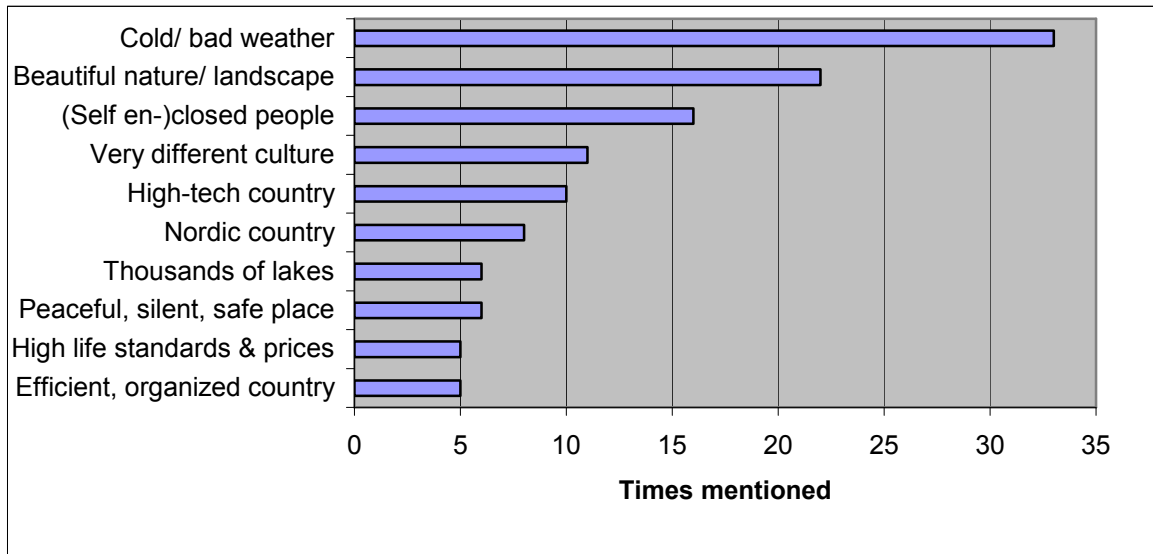
There were several websites that were used, but most often were mentioned the *Virtual Finland*, a website administrated by Ministry for Foreign Affairs (of Finland) and the *Visit Finland*, a website administrated by Finnish Tourism Board (MEK). Right after that were the web pages of *The City of Tampere*, and the websites of both universities.

There were also other websites mentioned, some of them were quite commonly known international sites (CIA World Fact book, Lonely Planet, WikiPedia, World Atlas, ...), and some just national sites about Finland ("Finula"/ Poland, "Info-Finlande"/ France, ...).

Virtual Finland	<a href="http://virtual.finland.fi/">http://virtual.finland.fi/</a>
Visit Finland	<a href="http://www.visitfinland.com/">http://www.visitfinland.com/</a>
The City of Tampere	<a href="http://www.tampere.fi/">http://www.tampere.fi/</a>
University of Tampere	<a href="http://www.uta.fi/">http://www.uta.fi/</a>
Tampere University of Technology	<a href="http://www.tut.fi/public/">http://www.tut.fi/public/</a>
CIA World Factbook	<a href="http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/">http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/</a>
Lonely Planet	<a href="http://www.lonelyplanet.com/">http://www.lonelyplanet.com/</a>
WikiPedia	<a href="http://wikipedia.org/">http://wikipedia.org/</a>
World Atlas	<a href="http://worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/fin.htm">http://worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/fin.htm</a>
Finula	<a href="http://finula.webpark.pl/">http://finula.webpark.pl/</a>
Info-Finlande	<a href="http://www.info-finlande.fr/">http://www.info-finlande.fr/</a>

### 3.4 Expectations before arrival

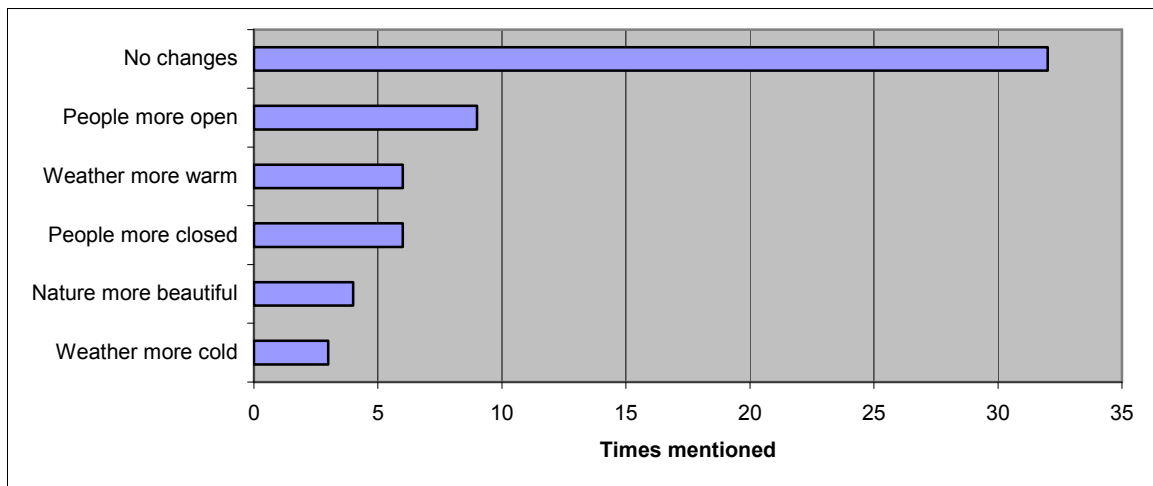
According to our hypothesis, the topmost mentioned expectation was Finland being a cold country. The next common expectations were the Finnish nature to be beautiful and the people to be self-enclosed.



Picture 6 - Expectations before arrival.

### 3.5 Experiences after arrival

The actual question was if one's thoughts had changed after spending some time in Finland, so practically we let people to compare their pre-arrival expectations with their experiences after arrival. The answers varied a lot, but some themes could be found.

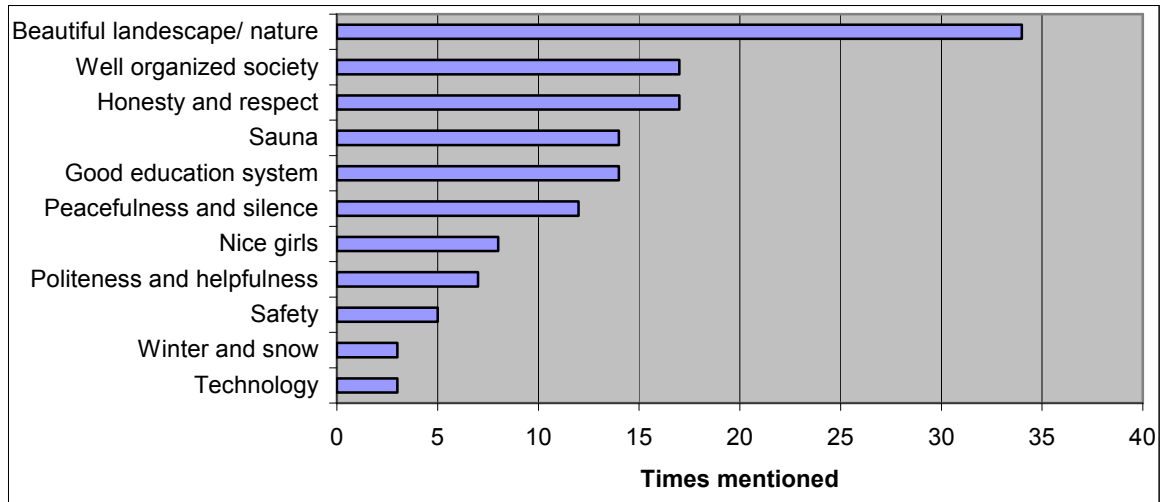


Picture 7 - Changed thoughts

Noteworthy is, that almost half of the people recorded no changes in their thoughts after their arrival. This we found surprising, as it is very unlikely that people with no prior experience would not change *any* of their thoughts about a country after living there for some time. More probable explanation is, that those people hadn't (yet) noticed the changes in their thinking, because the changes have been gradual and have happened in small steps - thus making those people believe to always have thought the way to did now.

### 3.6 Positive things

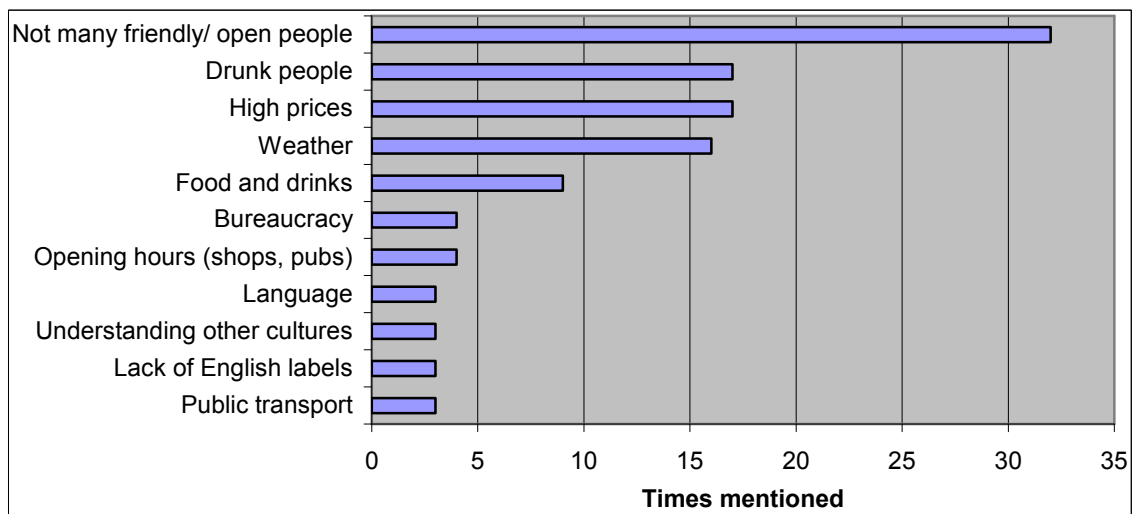
For positive feedback, we asked people to mention two things they liked about Finland. The most liked feature of Finland seemed to be its beautiful nature and landscape. People also appreciated the way (efficiency) society and education is organized in Finland, and the honesty of the people, that made it safe for example to leave jackets to unguarded coat-rack.



Picture 8 - Positive things in Finland.

### 3.7 Criticized things

As an opposite of positive things, we did not ask for negative things, but things that one would change in Finland. This way people did not feel being offensive while telling about things, they disliked.



Picture 9 - Negative things in Finland.

As it can be seen, the biggest critic was addressed to Finns themselves. Though the helpfulness of Finns was appreciated (see the previous section), at the same time Finns were considered hard to approach. The certain kind of politeness, that Finns are grown up to (by teaching them to only concentrate on their own things, and not to *bother* others), is working perfectly against itself. The story about an exchange student, who had a Finnish flatmate, who during the whole half a year stay of that exchange student never opened his door to say even "hello", is not just an urban legend, but tragicomic reality for many exchange students, still.

On the other hand, after some drinks Finns' behaviour changes drastically: they become talkative and loud, and eager to talk to foreigners. Unfortunately, the drinking does not end after reaching this, more sociable level, and that naturally leads to other problems.

In addition, the few opening hours of the shops, restaurants, cafeterias and bars were commented. Mentions about the high price level and not that cheerful weather were actually more like wishes, as most of the people quite naturally accepted them as practically unchangeable parameters of a country.

### **3.8 Open word**

At the end of the questionnaire, we left some space for additional thoughts and comments people wanted to share with us. This way we hoped to get information about any relating issues we did not notice to ask about. Mostly there were no common factors within the replies, as they were often used to provide more information on previous answers. Some comments got our attention:

*"Where is the sun?" (male, Spain, had stayed 7-9 months)*

*"Most courses in university are only for exchange-students. it is very hard to get in kontakt with finish students:(" (female, Germany, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"Were does all my money go?" (female, Germany, had stayed 10-12 months)*

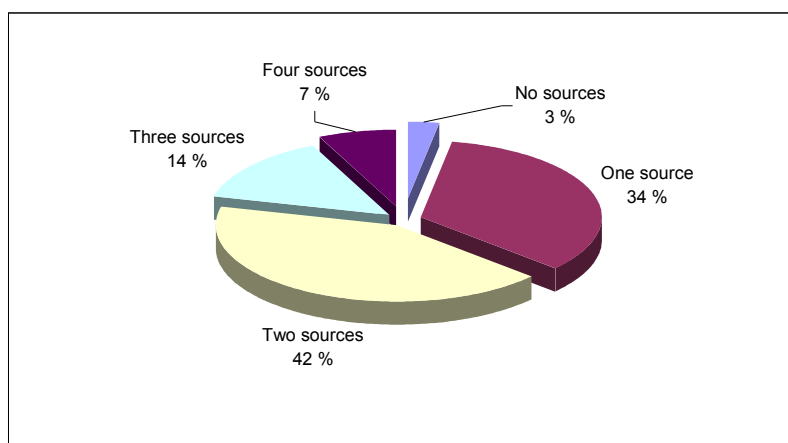
*"The music they play in the disco/club is too old. I feel like 10 years ago when I was a teeny." (female, -, had stayed 4-6 months)*

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Information sources

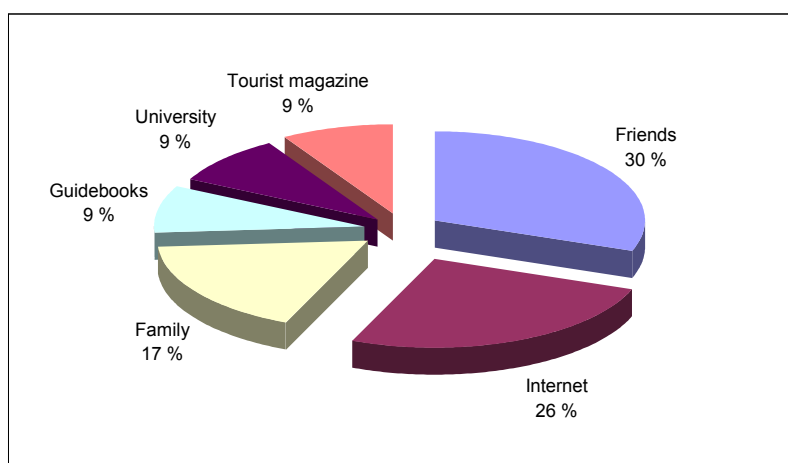
As we noticed in 3.3 *Information sources used*, Internet and friends were in total the most used sources, guidebooks following at the third place. This, however, does not tell the whole truth. As it is, people usually use more than one source to get information, and thus we need to take a closer look on sources.

First, it turns out, that while one-third of people used only one source, it was more common to have two or more sources. In addition, 3% reported using no sources at all, and no one was using more than four sources.



**Picture 10 - Total usage of sources**

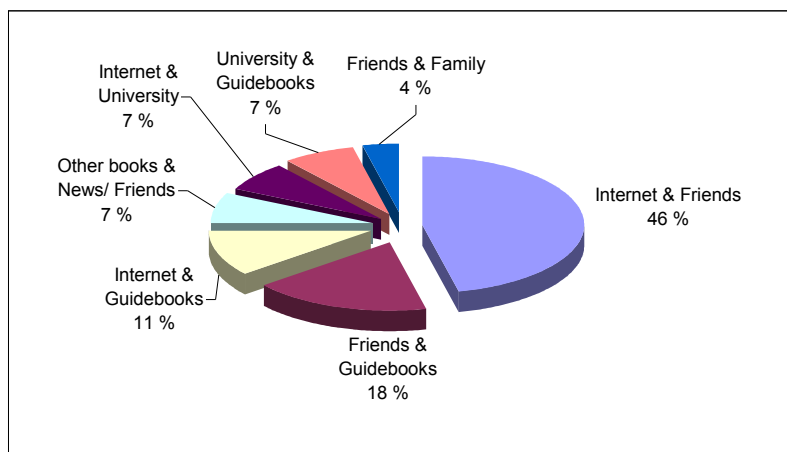
As the next step, we went through the cases of one, two, three and four sources, each one of them separately. First group (second largest group, forming 34% of all) used only one information source, distributed as follows:



**Picture 11 - Popularity of different sources, when only one was used.**

Noteworthy is, that the result differs from what we got in 3.3 *Information sources used*. Internet and friends are still the two most popular sources, and the difference between them is very little, but guidebooks, that used to be on the third place, are here falling far behind family. This is surprising, as in total results guidebooks were twice as popular information source as family.

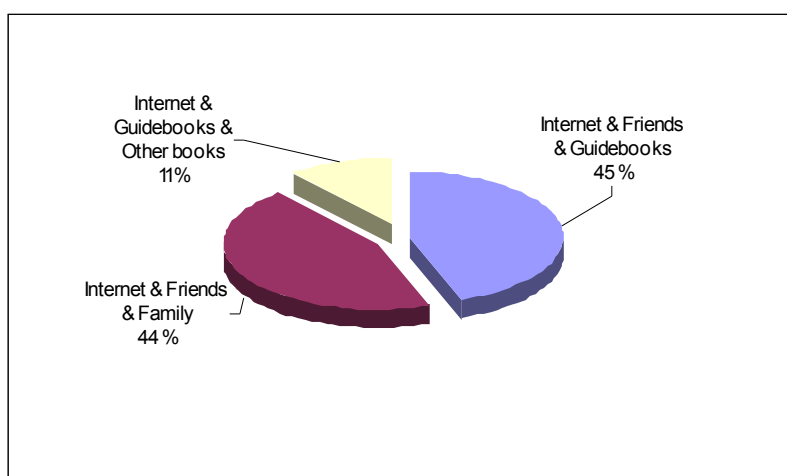
The second group (the largest group, forming 42% of all) used two sources of information. Divided to reported combinations of two, the distribution is as follows:



**Picture 12 - Popularity of different sources, when two was used.**

When two sources were used, the most common combination turned out to be the same as the two most used sources, when only one information source was used. In other words, the combination of Internet and Friends was clearly dominating the popularity distribution. In addition, in many of the other combinations Internet and friends are forming the other part.

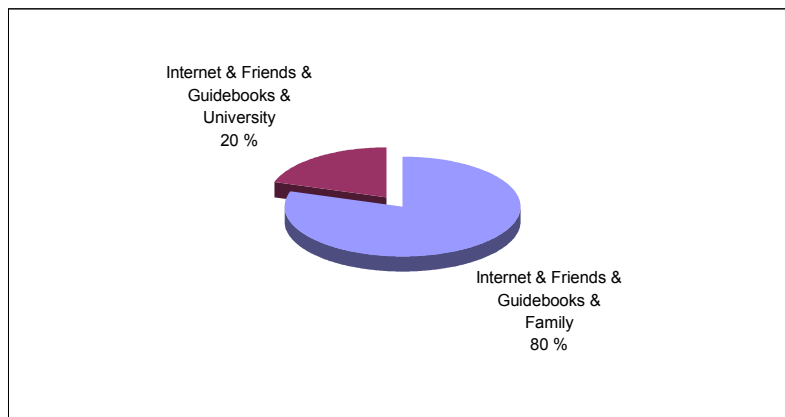
The third group (also the third largest group, forming 14% of all) used three sources. Divided to reported combinations of three, the distribution is as follows:



**Picture 13 - Popularity of different sources, when three was used.**

Not surprisingly, the amount of different combinations decreases as the options covered by the resulting combines increases. Internet is already a part of every combination, friends being part of two-third of them.

The last group (the fourth largest group, forming 7% of all) used three sources. Divided to reported combinations of four, the distribution is as follows:



**Picture 14 - Popularity of different sources, when four was used.**

As it can be seen, the more sources people were using, the more unite the distribution was getting.

Generally speaking, friends, Internet and guidebooks were the three most used sources of information. As the information given by friends (and families) is usually private by its nature, it would have been very hard to try to access it for an analyze. On the other hand, as that information is usually also accessible only for those certain individuals, whose friends/family those people are, analyzing it would not have been reasonable within our study anyway: Our goal was to study the images and the development process on general, not on individual level.

So, if friends would be excluded from the equation, the information given in Internet and guidebooks would be having the biggest effect on people. This is how we then chose the sources for further study.

## 4.2 Most popular sources

We took a closer look at some of the Internet sites and guidebooks people reported using. The amount of reported websites seemed a lot at the first glance, but it soon turned out that only few of them were used more than by one or two persons. Excluding the rarely used ones, we got the list presented below.

What it comes to guidebooks, we found that for some reason people did not often mention, what guidebooks they were using. The only references we got, were "Lonely Planet", three French guidebooks and one provided by Finnish embassy in Mexico. Unfortunately, there was no way for us to get those other guides, so after all we were able to look only at Lonely Planet. Still, Lonely Planet is one of the most well-known and widespread guidebooks in the world, so we believe that our study was not distorted too badly because of this.



*Virtual Finland* (<http://virtual.finland.fi/>) is a huge magazine-like website, administered by Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. The site contains masses of information about Finland and its culture, history, people, customs, etc. Its ambitious goal is to answer all questions one might have about Finland. There is also a big picture book, which contains plenty of photos from Finland.

*The World Factbook* by CIA (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>) has a listing of facts and statistical information about Finland as well as short descriptions of political and economical systems. There are also maps and some military details.



*Visit Finland* (<http://www.visitfinland.com/>) is "the official travel and tourist guide" by the Finnish Tourist Board (MEK). The board has been established by the Ministry of Trade and Industry to promote tourism in Finland.

The site contains information about travelling in Finland and practical facts and figures. An interesting detail about the site is, that under the part "Things To Do" it also contains a section called "Crazy Events". There is a list of peculiar events like Wife Carrying World Championships, Witch Trials, Rock Music Football and so on, which are taking place in Finland every year.

From the guidebooks, probably the most well known is the *Lonely Planet* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/europe/finland/>), and it was mentioned many times in our results. The guide combines maps, itineraries, history and recommendations for accommodation and dining for almost any place worth mention in Finland.



### 4.3 Image of Finland given in the sources

All the sources cover naturally the basic tourist information about Finland, but here we tried to concentrate on the image that was transferred along this information. It seems that the topmost image given is Finland being "Europe's last wilderness" (Visit Finland, 2006). There are lots of photos from the nature in Finland, middle summer lake views, sceneries from Lapland, and people sitting around a bonfire and roasting sausages and fish.



Picture 15 - Otsamo Hill, Lake Pielinen and Koli Hill. (Nature in Scandinavia, 2006)



Picture 16 - Lapland, Reindeers (Comma Image, 2006). Bonfire (All road tour, 2006)

On the other hand it is said, that Finland is a modern country. However, this perspective is not at all *visible* in these sources. There are of course facts and figures, like GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and pie charts about different industries, but high technology and modernity is not shown neither in the photos nor in the "normal" life descriptions that can be found in these sites.

In addition, interesting detail is, that every single photo of any town is taken during summer - as if there would be absolutely nothing to see during the rest 9 months of the year? Still, in the same site it is possible to find even very old quotation, which are telling a completely different story:

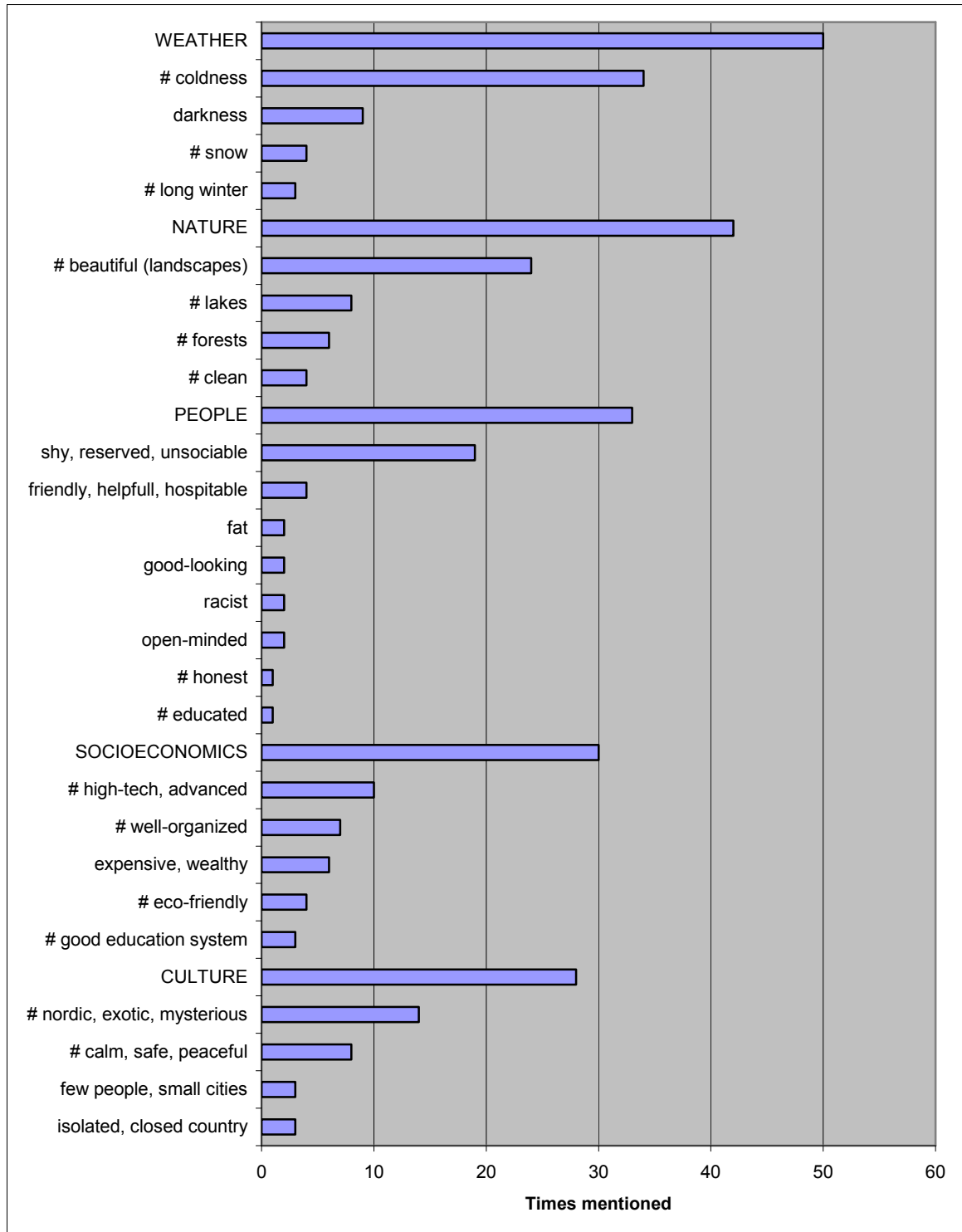
*"It would be difficult to find a town (Helsinki) of 80.000 inhabitants in England so clean, so bright, with such museums, libraries, and public buildings. Even Bedford is not as educational as Helsingfors (Helsinki), nor is Brighton so well served with social amusements, concerts and theatres."*

A.M.C. Clive-Bailey

*Vignettes from Finland or Twelve Months in Strawberry Land, 1895*

## 4.4 Expectations

After going through the sources, we then decided to see how much in common people's expectations had with the sources. To do that, we went through the questionnaire results once again. We came up with more precise list of expectations, and managed to form 5 categories where those seemed to fit into.



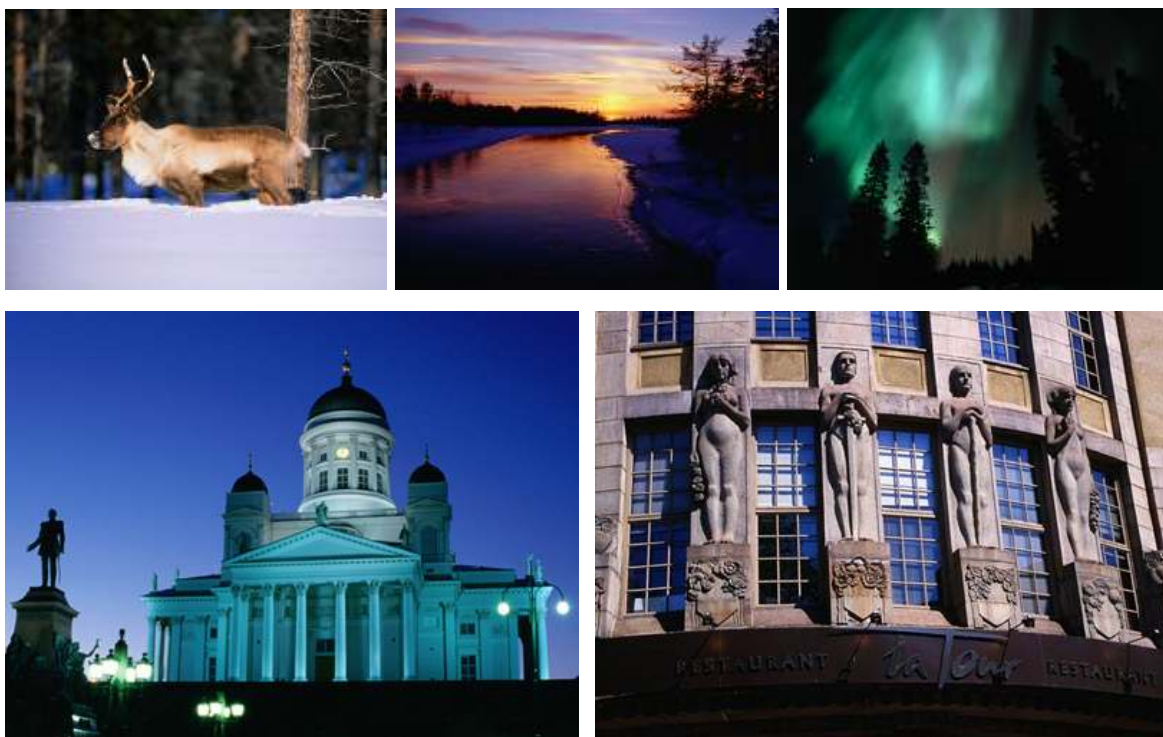
**Picture 17 - Expectations sorted by groups.**

In the graph above there are also total amount of mentions bars for each category - to give an idea, which *kind of* things people most often had expectations about. To compare expectations

with the image given in the results, we marked with "#" those expectations, which were also supported by the sources.

In addition, the sources are creating an image of a purely Nordic (= cold) country with lots of nature and wilderness, where people are "genuinely surprised to see tourists" (Lonelyplanet, 2006). The weighting might be slightly different from the expectations (depending on the source; Finnish sources are also offering different points of view whereas other sources tend to present only straightforward simplifications - in other words, stereotypes), but still all the major elements can be found in there.

To be honest, we were surprised how closely people's expectations were following the image given in the sources. After all, in our study of sources we covered only the most used websites (and one guidebook), which even together form only a small portion of the information sources people were using. Still, people mentioned the same things, which were highlighted in the sources, and they even used the exactly same phrases, when doing so!



**Picture 18 - Typical Finnish views? (Lonely Planet, 2006) There are 5 photos on the website, none of them showing any people, but 3 showing Lapland's natural wonders and 2 showing old buildings' facades from Helsinki.**

One possible explanation is that also their friends (and family) had been using the same sites, thus increasing the influence of the information given on these sources. Nevertheless, noticing this correlation made us wonder, how much power do those information sources actually have on us? Continuing the thinking process it was then very interesting to read the following old quotation, which can be found in Virtual Finland (Virtual Finland, 2006):

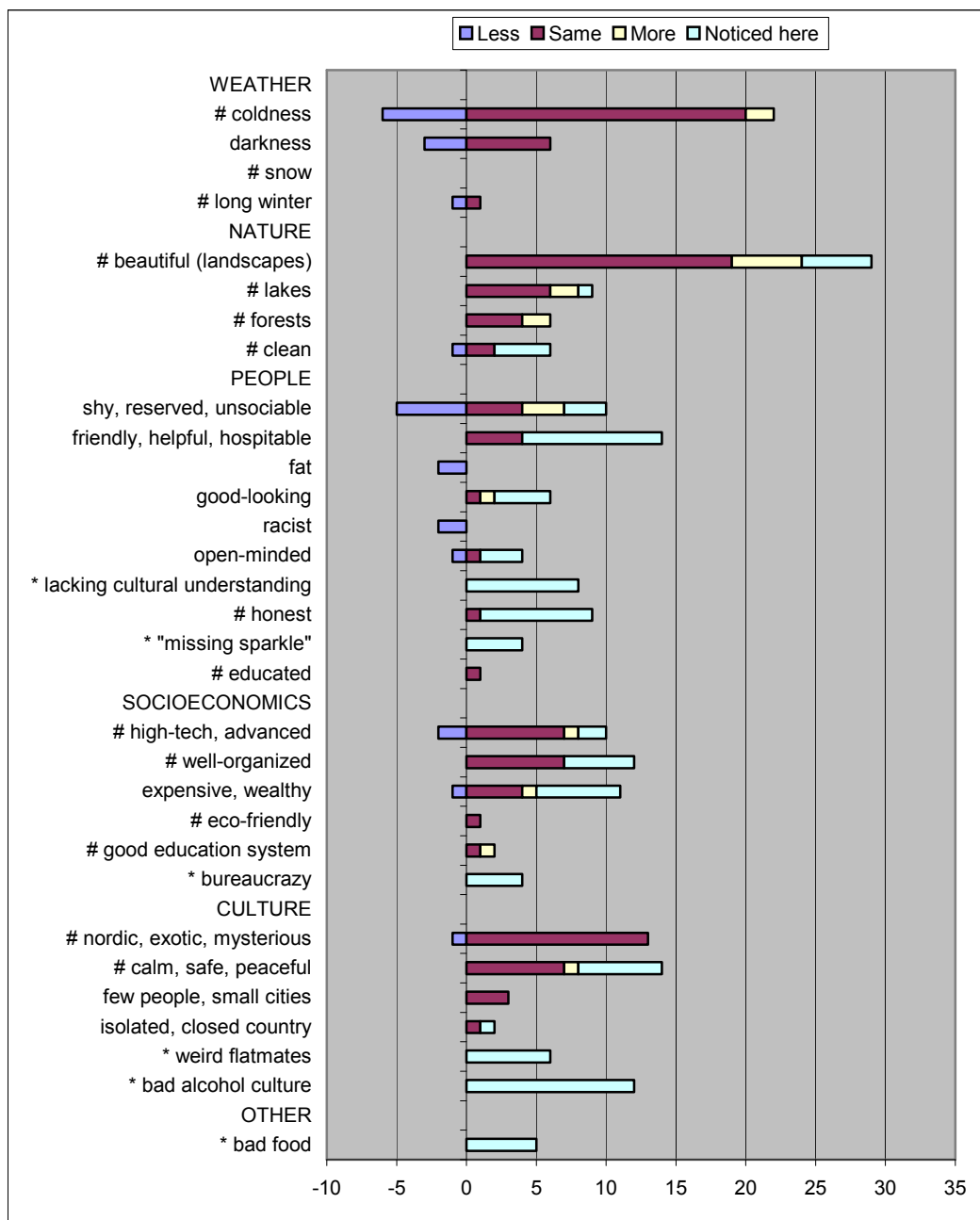
*"The climate is severe; there is scarcely any spring or autumn, but there are nine months of winter in the year... The people ... live to a good old age when they do not undermine their constitutions by the abuse of strong drink..."*

*Voltaire, Histoire de Charles XII (description of Sweden and Finland), 1731*

### 4.5 Experiences

Next, we compared the expectations with the experiences reported. Unlike in 3.5 *Experiences after arrival* we now took count not just the answers to "Have your thoughts changed?" - question, but also the positive and negative things and other comments people mentioned. In this way we got more complete picture of what people had experienced, how did they find it and/or had they actually expected it - as in some cases people said that their thoughts had not changed, but it could be seen from their answers to positive/negative -questions, that in fact, this was not the case. This also explains the big amount of "No changes" -answers in 3.5 *Experiences after arrival*.

Putting all together, we created the following graph. We used the same categories than in the previous chapter, still marking those aspects with "#", which had been supported by the sources. There are also some new ones, marked with "\*".



Picture 19 - Experiences vs. expectations.

In the graph the length of the bars tells straightly the amount of the mentions of that aspect. The bars are thus straightly comparable with each other and with the bars in the graphs presented earlier.

The categories of the bars are showing proportions of the experiences compared to the expectations about the same aspect. Thus, the bigger the "Same"-part is, the better the expectation was supported by the experiences. Respectively, the bigger the "Less"/"More"-part, the less/more was the expectation supported by experiences.

The "Noticed here"-part shows the amount of mentions, when people were not expecting the aspect in question, but which they had, nevertheless, experienced in Finland. Shortly put, by combining each person's expectations with his/her experiences, positive/negative and other thoughts as a whole, we were comparing the *images* people had before and after arriving to Finland, and the proportions are showing how much these images are resembling each other.

**Weather** and climate seemed to be mostly as expected. Most people had expected it to be cold and dark, and they were not disappointed. Those who had been in Finland already for longer time, said it was not *that* cold nor that dark - probably this was due those people getting used to the climate, and also the fact, that they had been to Finland during the summer time, too. The ones that said it was (much) colder than expected, had all arrived from countries close to the equator line, and most of them had not had much time to get information about Finland before their arrival.

*"It is as cold as I thought it would be. However, I didn't take into account the beautiful forrests that grow everywhere! Together with the lakes they make spectacular scenery." (female, Poland, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"The winters are not so dark as I was expecting and -20 degrees Celsius (or below) do not seem so terrible as it may sound (e.g., compared with a similar temperature in Romania)" (female, Romania, had stayed over a year)*

*"Cold is relative ;)" (female, Czech Republic, had stayed over a year)*

**Nature** with its numerous lakes, forests and landscapes, turned out to be even more beautiful than people had expected. Everybody that had expected to see beautiful nature, had definitely found it, and most of the people that had not expected it, had experienced it nevertheless. There were no differences between people stayed for shorter or longer time and/or people travelled a little or a lot.

*"Now I think different about Finland because of the experience, its much more different to live the woods, the lakes, the snow than see it or read in paper, and I simply love this country, of course you don't stop feeling homesick once a while, but my idea of Finland hasn't changed, just improved." (male, Mexico, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"Landscapes are especially wonderful, it is really pleasant to travel through the country and see all this wilderness" (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"...the landscape is even more beautiful than what I imagined..." (male, Spain, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"It is beautiful, calm and peaceful." (female, Iran, had stayed over a year)*

The only less positive nature-experience was gotten by one French guy, who had found a pile of garbage just dumped in a forest. Mostly the nature was noticed to be cleaner than expected, though.

*"I've been shocked to find some garbages, walking through the forest. The nature consideration is finally not so different than in my country." (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"everything is very clean." (female, Germany, had stayed 10-12 months)*

**People** was clearly the most contradictory group. Most of the people that had expected Finns to be shy, reserved and unsociable thought now that this was not true. They were very positively surprised meeting Finns that were just the opposite - and also very friendly and helpful.

*"the poeple are much nicer and openminded i have met many very nice and helpfull people"* (female, Germany, had stayed 1-3 months)

*" I've known many finnish friends, and I don't think that they are timid. Probably it's a bit difficult to acquire their confidence, but when it happens, they become friendly and sociable."* (male, Italy, had stayed 1-3 months)

*" ..people are friendly and helpful...and they possess a lot of knowledge which they like to share with others"* (female, Poland, had stayed 4-6 months)

*"...people in general is really nice and willing to help you whenever you ask them, and this is a very good point especially when you are just arrived in a foreign country."* (male, Italy, had stayed 10-12 months)

On the other hand, there were people that had had different experiences. According to them, Finns are shy and unsociable - even more than expected. There were no differences between people stayed for shorter or longer time and/or people travelled a little or a lot.

*"People are even more shy than I had though, they are just to quiet. They won't even speak!!!"* (male, Mexico, had stayed 1-3 months)

*"People are not outgoing"* (female, Poland, had stayed 4-6 months)

Some people also had expected Finns to be mostly fat people, and others had thought Finns to be good-looking. The first one was found not true, but the second one true - though one must mention, that these answers were given by Spanish and French guys that seemed to appreciate (blond) Finnish girls.

*"Girls: Certainly the girls the most beautiful of the world."* (male, France, had stayed 7-9 months)

*"Beautiful girls"* (male, Spain, had stayed 1-3 months)

*"And most of the finnish girls are nice:-)." (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

One interesting point is, that though the expectation about Finns being racists did not find support in experiences, and Finns were found more open-minded than expected, there were many that said Finns would need to "improve their cultural understanding". Finns were hoped to be more understanding towards foreigners' behaviour and habits, and in general, to get more mixed with foreign people.

*"[I would like to change] some attitudes toward other nations. Finns could be more open to foreigners"* (female, Poland, had stayed 4-6 months)

*"Some people are very closed with foreigners, they are not open minded."* (male, Spain, had stayed 1-3 months)

*"I also want to change the way people looking at you if you are different (like if you are just bullshit, they seems to be afraid and at the same time they try to ignore you, I hate it)"* (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)

*"[I would like to change] PEOPLE (they almost don't speak, they seem highly bothered to see people from outside)." (male, Spain, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"[I would like to change] mentality of some people"* (female, Romania, had stayed over a year)

*"Finns are really not the mixing kind i feel that they should try to mix more with other people.." (female, India, had stayed over a year)*

This aspect, however, was clearly inversely proportional to time stayed in Finland - meaning, that the short time stayers thought like this much stronger than longer time stayers. This suggests, that most likely *culture shock* had its effect on the answers; the time frame matches well to the

second stage, where people having culture shock are usually seeing differences in the foreign culture predominantly in a negative way. Still, as the answers were multifarious and as also some of them were given by people that had stayed over a year already, more detailed study would have been required to reliably distinguish the causes from the symptoms in this particular case.

One generally appreciated virtue about Finns was their honesty. Things were not stolen, systems were not abused, queues were not jumped and laws were respected.

*"I like the way people handle with the law/system here in an overall point of view. If there is some hole in some regulation people do not run, abusing it to maximise their own profit. They see, that if they would do, this good system would collapse of the cost of everyone." (male, Austria, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"The other good point is the finnish mentality in general, because they are honest (I lost my wallet and three hours later I had back with all the stuff inside)" (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"[I like about] "rehelisyys" (at least outside Helsinki) - a virtue not found elsewhere that much..." (female, Czech Republic, had stayed over a year)*

On the other hand, it was also said, that it might be just because of following too much rules and expectations - doing things just "correctly" - that Finns sometimes seem to be missing the spark:

*"Most of the finnish I met just seems to appreciate to be "correct", like doing nothing special, thinking nothing different, and it's so boring... Maybe people drink a lot just to forget it and also because everybody do it, so you can do it too :( OK, I also met some very interesting finish people and I really enjoy this country ;)" (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"Well, they are honest, respect the nature, they may be on time when they got a rendez-vous...but they lack (in my opinion) this little spark, something that make people funny and ready to party without any alcohol, they seem to lack of fun in their daily life, it looks like if they don't enjoy their life very well...but maybe it is a bit too early to give such an definitive judgment ;o)" (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"[I would like to change..] Maybe too much rigidity about rules -> life is sad if you can't trace your own way sometimes" (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

Also, this aspect would have needed more detailed study before making any conclusions.

**Socio-economic** -part did not introduce big surprises. Finland was mostly seen as advanced country as presented in sources. Some did say, though, that Finland is more country of nature than high technology. It was also know that Finland is an expensive country, but some people were still surprised how much for example food and other daily necessities cost here.

*"[I would like to change] price of the food because it's really too expensive" (male, Belgium, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"[I would like to change] PRICES (quite expensive everything, for people from the rest of the world except Monaco and MonteCarlo)." (male, Spain, had stayed 1-3 months)*

Generally, it was agreed, that things are well organized in Finland. However, people that had stayed in Finland already longer time, had encountered bureaucracy and communication problems with governmental instances (e.g. KELA, tax office, ...). This makes sense, knowing that universities are currently helping with most official issues concerning exchange students, but those who stay longer because of working or becoming a degree student, have to take more responsibility. It is also a fact, that not everybody in these offices is speaking adequate English, so it is inevitable that sometimes there are communication problems:

*"[I am troubled with] difficult communication with official institutions (tax office, KELA,...)" (female, Romania, had stayed over a year)*

*"[I would like to change] bureaucracy which makes things working slower " (female, Romania, had stayed over a year)*

**Culture** -part had some duality in people's experiences. Finland was found to be exactly as Nordic, mysterious, exotic and sparsely populated country as expected (and told in sources). The thing that was not expected, was the (bad) alcohol culture and its visibility. There were several comments about Finns' drinking habits and the problems caused by it.

*"Finns shouldn't drink so fast. I often recognized that fins drink to get drunk and not necessarily to have fun." (male, Germany, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"[I would like to change] The number of drunken people on the streets: Sometimes is kind of bothering to have to deal with a drunken finn, they sometimes get really violent when drunk." (male, Mexico, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"I would also appreciate if drunk people wouldn't piss at the corner of the buildings downtown." (female, Romania, had stayed over a year)*

*"[I would like to change] the behavior of drunken finns (esp. male finns)" (female, Germany, had stayed 1-3 months)*

We agree, that the sight at the closing time of bars is not exactly pretty, but at the same time, it is a little bit odd, that people were so very surprised about it - considering that many were using friends and family as information source, and that the Finns have (at least had) a reputation for drinking? It can be, that people just did not believe it, as in most countries in Europe and western world people are said to use lots of alcohol (and thus, be heavy drinkers).

It is also possible, that those friends/ family members had not experienced or even heard of this phenomenon, but more likely is that people in generally tend to remember positive things better than the negative ones. This interpretation is also supported by the fact, that there were no differences between people stayed for shorter or longer time and/or people travelled a little or a lot - and that mentions about Finnish way of drinking can be found in many of the sources (Lonely Planet, Virtual Finland, ...).

Besides alcohol culture, people were also surprised about the way Finns live with their flatmates. The certain kind of politeness, that Finns are grown up to (by teaching them to only concentrate on their own things, and not to *disturb* others), is working perfectly against itself: as Finns try to be as invisible, inaudible and imperceptible flatmates as possible, this avoidance of interaction and communication is making their foreign flatmates to feel uncomfortable and bothered - "unwelcome" being the exact expression.

*"my finnish room mate is little bit freak" (male, Poland, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"[I am troubled with] Amazing ability for some finnish students to live 90% of their days between the 4 walls of their room without communication with their direct environment." (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"I didn't see my flatmates for one month...and they are at home. Isn't it weird?" (male, Czech Republic, had stayed 4-6 months)*

*"[I am troubled with] the way Finns live in dormitories, avoiding everyone from the morning, waiting until sb leaves the kitchen to go outside their rooms...I know they don't want to disturb others but it actually makes foreigners do not feel well and comfortable..." (female, Poland, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"I have lots of difficulty to speak with my roommate and it is true for most of eramus students." (male, France, had stayed 7-9 months)*

There was no difference between short and long time stayers, but those one travelled more seemed to mention this issue slightly less often. Possibly, during their travels, people had seen something that made them understand better Finnish behaviour and way of thinking, but this is just a wild guess.

**Other** experiences varied a lot, and they did not form any groups with statistical meaning. Still, we decided to introduce some more aspects just because of common curiosity.

The food in Finland raised some critical comments. It was said that the food is flavourless, and that finding suitable ingredients (for cooking oneself) is hard, because of the narrow selection in the shops.

*"Food can be cooked better" (male, Turkey, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"[I would like to change] food (the food has not a lot of flavor)" (male, Germany, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"[I would like to change] The fooooooooooooooooooooooooooooood ! It's incredibly unhealthy and flavourless, I think it is the worst thing in Finland !" (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

Partly this opinion can be explained by the fact, that mostly the exchange students were eating at the university restaurants (Juvenes and Amica), and in our opinion, the food in those places should not be taken as a reliable sample of Finnish food, as the most important and determining factor for those meals is, after all, cheapness. In addition, the criticism was solely coming from the people that had stayed only for 1-3 months, so it is quite likely that also culture shock and lack of knowledge about other places for eating/shopping for food had their influence.

Sauna was found very nice. Many of the exchange students had experienced sauna for the first time ever, and they had been amazed. There was not a one negative comment about sauna.

*"Sauna - it's just such a great way to relax." (male, Poland, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"I like the sauna culture. " (female, Germany, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"sauna - it really helps to feel warm during the long cold winters" (female, Romania, had stayed over a year)*

*"Sauna: After many years a new experience feels good " (male, Turkey, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"Sauna: very relaxing, is actually really good thing to do." (male, Mexico, had stayed 1-3 months)*

The few opening hours of the shops, restaurants, cafeterias and bars were commented. We agree, that it is sometimes very frustrating to try to find an open shop or cafeteria - specially on Sundays, when one would have time to meet with friends for coffee or make some shopping. Another annoyance was the way night busses in Tampere are (not) operating during weekdays:

*"I'd like buses running at nighttime also during weekdays, not only during weekend. It would be much better for people not living downtown, because this way they would not be forced to leave nightlife places as soon as they become "populated"... ;) Also shops could stay open for a longer time, in my opinion. In fact it's quite difficult to buy something during weekdays after you go out of office, because there's not so much time available." (male, Italy, had stayed 10-12 months)*

Anyway, time as an exchange student in Finland was found to be very good in general - even though one student was a little bit disappointed not seeing any penguins... :-)

*"It's great to be together with all the internationals here!" (female, France, 1-3 months)*

*"Otherwise to sum up i really found this period in Finland great, even if of course i must take into account that's a lot of things (lot of trips, international atmosphere, less work than at home...) are not specifically due to Finland. But anyway Finland is a country where i could live one day !" (male, France, had stayed 1-3 months)*

*"i never found penguins.. :(" (female, India, had stayed over a year)*

## 5 Conclusions

### 5.1 *Development of the image*

Our hypothesis was that the image of Finland given in the sources would greatly affect to the image and expectations people have before their arrival. The results prove this assumption correct, but it also became obvious that people's cultural values and beliefs determine how the received information is actually understood. (see 4.5 Experiences/ alcohol culture)

After arrival, the image is refined and built more and more complete over the time. The process is going on all the time, and the changes in the image are often so small and smooth, that people do not necessarily notice them for a long time. (see 4.5 Experiences) In addition, culture shock is twisting people's perception to either more negative or more positive direction, depending on the stage people are in their adaptation process. Eventually, its effect becomes negligible - provided that the person reaches the final, integration stage of the adaptation process.

After returning to home country, memories about the other culture are gradually starting to fade away. Usually positive things are remembered better than negative ones, so it is as the phrase says: time goldens memories. This is partly why people are always telling that they had a great time wherever they were exchange students - though, the experience itself is also unique, of course.

### 5.2 *Resulting images*

Putting it all together, the resulting image of Finland seems to correspond in many ways the image that the sources are giving. Finland is seen as a Nordic and a little bit mysterious country with lots of beautiful nature. The weather is known to be particular, and it does not come as a surprise, that it might be dark and cold - during the winter, at least. The country is known to be a welfare state, where things are, in generally, working well and without much bureaucracy.

The Finns themselves were much harder, if not impossible, to be projected as a single image. Acknowledging this, there are still some aspects that tend to emerge from the results. One is, that the alcohol culture is seen as something that is hoped to change in the future, as the negative sides of it are disturbingly visible. Naturally, not everybody behaves the same way.

The second thing does not either apply to every Finn, but one can say that the certain melancholic way of living, being and thinking is more common in Finland than in southern countries. Interesting is, that many people being like that did not seem to enjoy it also by themselves - in other words, they were struggling to get rid of the melancholy. We suspect, that there is a straight connection between this and the weather, but this was out of the scope of our study.

The most positive sides of Finns, helpfulness and honesty, were also emerging clearly from the results. These features were mentioned in the sources, expected before arrival and experienced after arrival, so one can say that they were proven real.

Hammering all these together it is then easy to see, how stereotypes of Finns are created. One must keep in mind, though, that there is no such Finn, which would have all these features in one person.

Apart from the weather, nature and people, other images of Finland were less distinctive. In general, Finland is seen as a good place to stay, where small problems during one's stay (high prices, communication with flatmates and official institutes, ...) are well compensated with all positive sides of Finland (well-organized systems, peacefulness, sauna, ...). Naturally, as exchange students most of the people were just having time of their life, some consideration should be applied.

### **5.3 Comments**

While reading the results and making comparison to information given in sources, there were some things we wanted comment.

One thing is, that why there are always just so few points of view presented in the sources. Finland is well presented as a Nordic and mysterious country, but why there is no information about how things are actually working in here? For example, there are no mentions about those facts, that snow is considered as so normal part of life, which does not really affect on transportations, traffic, opening hour or anything; everything works just the same as other times of year. Moreover, where are the photos of the cities during other times of the year than summer? Instead, there are many photos about people in Lapland chasing reindeers with their snowmobiles.

In addition, there could be a lot more information about all the possible outdoor sports one can do so easily in Finland. We do have many and many sport centres, trekking routes, rental cottages, sailing opportunities in numerous lakes, skiing tracks, and they are not told about - unless one knows exactly what to look for.

There are also lots of concerts, seminars, festivals, exhibitions, museums, theatres, and other cultural events in Finland, and also that information is not that visible in the sources.

The thing is, that people tend to pay attention to those things and aspects that are presented in sources, and thus noticing all this takes much more time than it would be necessary. The way Finland is marketed, seems also affect to people living in here, as surprisingly many Finns are repeating only the same aspects and features given in the sources. Still, if one asks those Finns about their own life in Finland and what things they personally like and do, the answers are very different from the aspects given in the sources.

Therefore, our humble opinion is, that the material in sources should be checked. Adding more defined and real-life information about Finland would be better for both tourism and to Finns, as then people would, simply put, see, experience and enjoy more about this country!

### **5.4 Closing words**

This project turned out to be more challenging than we had thought - despite of Irja's early warning not to let the project to grow too large.

It was quite easy to design the questions and the web form, and even gather the results, but doing the analysis took a lot more time and effort than we could have expected. This was simply due the fact, that as most of the questions were open ones, it was hard to categorize the answers - as every student had slightly different shading in his/her answers. Another thing is, that the amount of the material (not only the answers we got, but also the sources we studied) was just huge, and thus we had to analyse several hundreds of pages of text to be able to catch the images emerging from the answers and the sources.

Still, this project was very interesting, and we believe that we also found what we were looking for - some ideas about how Finland looks through the eyes of exchange students, how this image is created, and how it changes over the time. The subject is so large that we managed just scratch the surface, but even then we certainly got lots to think about.

## 6 References

### 6.1 Texts

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### 6.2 Photos

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## 7 Attachments

### 7.1 Web questionnaire form

This is the web form we used to gather information. It was online in UTA student web server.



**Questionnaire for exchange students**

This questionnaire is part of our (Tuukka Kärrä & Michele Lucarelli) project work for course "Investigating Aspects of Culture". All the results are collected anonymously, and they will be only used for gathering a little information about people's perceptions about Finland.

Please fill out the form completely – it takes you only some minutes. :)

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**Background information**

1. Nationality:

2. Sex:  Male  Female

3. How long have you stayed in Finland?

4. Which places have you visited in Finland?

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**Before Arrival**

5. What did you think about Finland?

6. Which sources did you use to get information about Finland?

Friends

Family and relatives

Guide books(s). Which ones?

Internet. Which sites?

Other sources(s). What sources?

(Please fill out one or more sources, why?)

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**After Arrival**

7. Now, when you are here, have your thoughts changed? How?

8. What things in Finland do you like (2 things)? Why?

9. What things would you like to change (2 things)? Why?

10. Anything else troubling you?

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THANK YOU FOR ANSWERING THE QUESTIONNAIRE!