"A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE AND WORK": INSTRUMENTALISED STORYTELLING IN
FINNISH UNIVERSITIES' INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MARKETING

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Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tarkastellaan kotimaisten yliopistojen kansainvälisessä hakijamarkkinoinnissa käytettyjä yksilötarinoita. Päätutkimuskysymys on, millaisia mallitarinoita rakentuu niissä opiskelija- ja alumnitarinoissa, joita suomalaiset yliopistot käyttävät kansainvälisessä hakijamarkkinoinnissaan. Lisäksi alakysymyksenä on, miten nämä mallitarinat toisintavat tai haastavat uusliberaalin protagonistin tai hyvän maahanmuuttajan juonikaavoja. Tutkimus pyrkii myös perustelemaan kertomuskriittisten näkökulmien merkitystä uraohjauksen teorioille, ammattikäytänteille ja tutkimukselle.

Tämän laadullisen tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys yhdistää narratiivisen psykologian ja kriittisen kertomustutkimuksen näkökulmia nivoen yhteen tarinallisen kiertokulun teorian, tarinatalouden ja välineellistetyn tarinankerronnan käsitteellisiä ulottuvuuksia. Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu viiden yliopiston (Helsinki, Tampere, Turku, Aalto, LUT) kansainvälisessä hakijamarkkinoinnissaan käyttämistä ja verkossa julkaisemista englanninkielisistä opiskelija- ja alumnitarinoista (42 tarinaa yhteensä). Teoriasidonnaisessa analyysissa on hyödynnetty kertomuksen prototyyppimääritelmän, narratiivisten aikakehysten ja narratiivisen positiointiteorian menetelmällisiä näkökulmia.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat yliopistojen kansainvälisessä hakijamarkkinoinnissa rakentuvan vahvasti idealisoituja mielikuvia elämästä ja opiskelusta Suomessa. Aineistossa rakentuu yksi mallitarina, joka toisintaa niin uusliberaalin protagonistin kuin hyvän maahanmuuttajankin juonikaavoja. Mallitarinan tarinamaailmassa ei esiinny häiriötiloja ja sen Suomi kuvataan tasa-arvoisena meritokratiana, jossa koulutus lähes yksin mahdollistaa sujuvan siirtymän suomalaiseen työelämään. Päähenkilö kuvataan länsimaisen katseen kautta mahdollisimman samastuttavana ja Suomeen jäämiseen orientoituneena. Tarinamaailman Suomen kuvauksissa painottuvat keskeiset maabränditekijät. Koulutus jäsentyy ajallisesi selvärajaisena suoritteena, johon ei liity resurssi- tai elämänhallintakysymyksiä. Aineistossa ilmenneet poikkeukset korostivat mallitarinan idealisoitua luonnetta.

This master's thesis investigates personal stories used in Finnish universities' online materials for international student marketing. The main research question is what kind of model stories are construed in the student and alumni narratives Finnish universities use in their international student marketing. The main question entails a subquestion of in what ways do the (model) stories reproduce or contest the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant. Additionally, this study aims to highlight the relevance of story-critical perspectives for career guidance research, theories, and praxis.

The theoretical framework of this study connects narrative psychology and critical narratology by converging the conceptual dimensions of the model of narrative circulation, the story economy and that of instrumentalised storytelling. The research material consists of 42 student and alumni stories used for international online student marketing by five Finnish universities (Helsinki, Tampere, Turku, Aalto, and LUT). The material has been analysed abductively, applying the methodological perspectives of the narrative prototype, narrative timeframes, and narrative positioning theory.

The results show that universities convey idealised notions about studying and living in Finland in their international student marketing. In the material, one model story was construed. The found model story reproduces both the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant masterplots. The story world of the found model story contains no disturbances and construes Finland as an equal meritocracy, where the marketed education all but exclusively enables a smooth transition to the Finnish labour market. The protagonist of the model story is depicted through a Western gaze as "just like us" and eager to stay in Finland. The story world emphasises the well-established traits of the Finnish country brand. Education is framed as a temporally defined process, in which resource or life management issues are of no concern. The idealised nature of the found model story was further highlighted by the anomalies found in the material.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

CIMO   Centre for International Mobility

FNAE   Finnish National Agency of Education

FUURT   Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers

HEI   higher education institution

ISB   International Student Barometer

MEC   Ministry of Education

MJ   Ministry of Justice

UAS   university of applied sciences

1   INTRODUCTION

"The secret to a happy ending is knowing when to roll the credits" – this lyric by The Drive-By Truckers (2006) often repeats in my mind when I talk to the international students of our university in career counselling sessions. By international students I refer to non-Finnish degree students and doctoral researchers, who have moved here to study or to do research from abroad. What prompts the line to enter my consciousness is how often the person sitting opposite to me is in the throes of a mental tug-of-war: do they have a realistic chance of carving out a career for themselves in Finland after all, or should they just cut their losses and move on? What typically characterises these ruminations are feelings of disenfranchisement, disappointment, and being let down.

It is easy for me as a career counsellor to share their frustration. On my couch, it is too late for expectations management. Finland is working hard to increase the number of international students and doctoral researchers in higher education and to integrate as many of them as possible into the Finnish labour market as highly skilled workforce (Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 2022). Indeed, international students are seen as "ideal immigrants" due to their allegedly high employment potential (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a, p. 299). However, many of the students who initially come here to study with high hopes of pursuing a career and building a life in Finland, find their expectations not met by the realities of the Finnish society and working life, and are more or less forced to leave the country (eg. Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a; Välimäki et al., 2023; Zafar & Kantola, 2019).

The situation is challenging for the students as well as for HEI career counselling. However, it also raises some ethical questions about HEIs' student marketing efforts. According to Jetsu and Manninen (2022), student marketing is a sector of HEIs' marketing and branding activities that strives to affect the applicants' mental images.

What kind of vistas, then, are Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) selling to their applicants about living and studying in Finland?

I will approach this question from a narrative perspective. We live in a "story economy" or a "story-telling boom" (Fernandes, 2017; Mäkelä et al., 2021; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022; Salmon, 2017) where stories of personal experience are taking up more and more narrative space both on social and traditional media (Hyvärinen, 2010; Mäkelä, 2018), leading to our social realities being increasingly constructed by other people's personal experiences via the act of narration. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that personal stories have become a widely used marketing tool also for HEIs (Burns, 2015). Indeed, HEI websites are riddled with student stories, alumni stories, student testimonials, and the like. Burns (2015) argues that applicants may find such stories of personal experience as "persuasive" after narrowing down their options to a few institutions, and that the stories can have a significant effect on the final choice. In addition, according to Burns, "using student narratives as recruitment tools may make the idea of higher education more tangible as long as the stories are realistic and representative of life on that campus." (p. 111)

Thus far, the ethical aspects of HEIs' student marketing have been studied mainly via content analysis. Hartley and Morphew (2008) find that college viewbooks convey idealised notions about studying and college life, and present higher education as a commodified product and the students as its consumers or customers. The student-customer has also been studied as an ideal produced by the marketisation (or neoliberalisation) of higher education (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2021; Plamper & Jauhiainen, 2022; Staunton, 2022). Molander and Souto (2022) discover that the visual contents of Finnish HEI's application brochures reproduce white normativity as well as ableist and ageist ideals of studenthood. On the other hand, the diversity of the student body may be overrepresented in HEI application brochures as a marketing strategy (Pippert et al., 2013). Jetsu and Manninen (2022), for their part, find through discursive thematic analysis that the online student marketing communication of

Finnish HEIs emphasise working life stories and language, which further strengthens the marketisation of higher education.

In this study, I aim to increase understanding about student marketing as a socio-cultural and narrative phenomenon by investigating the student and alumni stories Finnish universities use in their international student recruitment materials online. I maintain that, given Jetsu and Manninen's (2022) definition of student marketing and the prevalence of personal stories in our social realities, it is not merely the thematic content or the discourses or language present in the stories that are relevant in informing the applicants' expectations or mental images. It is also the narrative structures themselves: causalities presented, paths taken, obstacles faced and overcome, decisions made, story worlds construed, and examples set.

I will use the terms "story" and "narrative" interchangeably to refer to presentations of temporal sequences "more or less readily interpreted *as* a story" (Herman, 2009, p. 135). I will apply a story-critical approach rooted in the context of the story economy (see chapter three). In so doing, I will refer to the students and alumni sharing their stories as protagonists instead of narrators to emphasise my reading of them as characters in the stories instead of actual narrators. I will also treat these stories as cultural texts designed for marketing purposes instead of truthful accounts of any individual's authentic experiences or of objective reality (matter discussed further in chapter 4.3).

Further, factoring the context of the story economy into my analysis requires me to explore new ways of looking at narratives in careers research. Hence, as a secondary aim, this paper will serve as an example of how a story-critical approach to narratives, trailblazed by the researchers in the Danger of Narrative research project (eg. Mäkelä, 2018; Mäkelä et al., 2021; Mäkelä & Karttunen, 2020; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022), could be adapted to careers research, and how such an approach might provide novel perspectives into the debate concerning socially just career guidance vis-á-vis the prevailing career counselling paradigms in the new millennium, informed especially

by Mark Savickas's narrative psychological Life Design theory (2012; Savickas et al., 2009).

To achieve this, I will utilise Vilma Hänninen's (1999, 2004) narrative psychological model of narrative circulation as my theoretical framework. In my analysis, I will also use a mix of methods from these fields of research, namely Herman's (2008, 2009) narrative prototype, a compilation of narrative timeframes (Herman, 2002; Miettinen, 2007), and narrative positioning theory (Bamberg, 1997). Further, I will argue for the importance of careers researchers, practitioners, and educators to start paying more attention to the effects and ramifications the storytelling boom can have on individual career planning.

In the next chapter, I will explore the relevance of my research topic in the context of internationalising Finnish higher education. In the third chapter, I will further discuss the story economy, its connection to the neoliberal doctrine, and present my story-critical approach. Then, I shall move on to describe the research process and discuss my findings, and finally to providing some closing thoughts about the research process and revisit my argument about the story economy and careers research, praxis, and education.

2   WANTED: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In this chapter, I will first discuss the progressive internationalization of Finnish higher education over the 21st century and the political, societal, and economic reasons behind it. Then I will move on to discuss so-called brain drain phenomenon, meaning the outflow of highly educated workforce from the country. Finally, I will provide an overview of the push and pull factors behind these opposing trends, and briefly discuss the meaning of these larger phenomena to individual career planning.

2.1   The Internationalisation of Finnish Higher Education

The internationalization of HEIs has been key in Finnish education policy ever since the 1990's (MEC, 2022, p. 14). The efforts have borne fruit. According to Juusola et al. (2021), the number of international degree students in Finnish HEIs has been on the rise throughout the 21st century: from 2000 to 2019, the number grew by 231 per cent, and by 2020, it had reached 20.000, comprising about 10 % of all degree students in higher education (p. 9). In 2023, the January joint application to Finnish higher education saw a record number of applicants, with the share of international applicants (over 50.000) more than doubling from last year (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2023)

However, Finland is striving to increase the number of international degree students in higher education even more. The MEC (2021) has set a goal of tripling the number of new foreign degree students in higher education by 2030. This goal builds on and is in line with the aims and procedures of the national Talent Boost programme, launched in 2017 by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's government. The programme is "designed to boost the immigration of senior specialists, employees, students and researchers". More recently, PM Sanna Marin's government placed added emphasis on "the immigration and integration of international students and researchers in Finland". (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, n.d.).

The need for attracting even more international degree students and researchers (and integrating them into the society and the labour market) is very much a necessity for both the Finnish society and its HEIs alike. Finland has the fastest ageing population in Europe (Razvadauskas, 2016, as cited in Mathies & Karhunen, 2021b, p. 876). Thus, the lack of skilled workforce is a genuine societal challenge (MEC, 2021; Ministry of the Interior, n.d.).

Moreover, the field of higher education in Finland has suffered significant cutbacks in governmental funding across the board during the past ten years. With the rate of tuition-fee paying students on the rise and averaging at about forty per cent of all international degree students in Finnish HEIs in 2020 (MEC, 2022, p. 21), attracting international students from outside the EU/EEA region is becoming also an increasingly important financial question for Finnish HEIs.

2.2   Do They Stay or Do They Go?

While Finnish HEIs are doing a good job attracting international students and researchers, there is another side to the story: brain drain, meaning the outflow of highly educated international workforce. As for the severity of the problem, there is a level of ambiguity inherent in the question, as not nearly all the students ever plan to stay in the first place. In addition, it needs to be noted that a 100 % retention rate is not a realistic goal for any country. However, despite some conflicting findings on the subject, there is strong evidence to show that brain drain is a genuine challenge for the Finnish society with the most well-educated being the most eager to leave, and that the rate is getting worse.

Mathies and Karhunen (2021a) found that, after three years after graduation, roughly a third of internal graduates have emigrated. This is in line with the findings of the Centre of International Mobility (CIMO) (2016). Both also argue that their results indicate the rate of brain drain is not as high as previously thought. Also the statistics from 2019 by Education Statistics Finland show similar results, but they do not

include doctoral graduates (FNAE, n.d.). However, despite the relatively low emigration rate compared to some other countries, the total number of international degree students in Finnish higher education remains also relatively low. Moreover, in contrast to the other studies and surveys presented here concerning brain drain in Finland, Zafar and Kantola (2019) do not look at the emigration rate alone, but also its relation the influx of foreign-born people with prior higher education (2019), and find that the brain drain rate has increased gradually throughout the new millennium.

More pertinent for this study, however, is how these studies and surveys on brain drain align in showing that the phenomenon is not homogenous across the board, and that universities are bearing the brunt of it with the most well-educated graduates being the most eager to leave. The reasons for the unevenness are threefold. Firstly, graduates from universities are more likely to leave the country than graduates from universities of applied sciences (UAS) (CIMO, 2016; FNAE, n.d.; Mathies & Karhunen, 2021b). Secondly, the higher the degree level, the likelier the graduates are to leave (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021b). As a case in point, according to the career monitoring reports by the University of Helsinki, the emigration rate three years after graduation was between 28 and 56 per cent for non-Finnish masters and between 38 and 63 per cent for non-Finnish doctoral graduates (Hagelin et al., 2022a, 2022b). There is, however, a correlation between the type and level of degrees. There are very few bachelor's degree programmes taught in English in Finnish universities and, vice versa, there are significantly fewer master's level graduates from UAS than from universities. Hence, almost all non-Finnish bachelors are UAS graduates and almost all non-Finnish masters are university graduates.

Thirdly, it also seems that the more years pass after graduation, the higher the emigration rate. The emigration rates show a rising trend across all degree types and levels when tracked one, three, and five years after graduation (CIMO, 2016, p. 3; FNAE, n.d.). As for the emigration rates of doctoral candidates, The CIMO report (2016) is very vague and thus inconclusive. Hence, regarding the progressive emigration rates of doctoral graduates over time, nation-wide empirical data is

lacking, but continuing with our case study of The University of Helsinki, the report shows the highest emigration rate of all belonging to doctoral candidates five years after graduation, the rate being somewhere between 43 and 66 per cent (Hagelin et al., 2022a, p. 19).

This unevenness of brain drain is one of the two main reasons I will focus on universities in this study. The other one is related to the marketisation of higher education (discussed in chapter 3.1).

2.3 Push and Pull Factors

As for why international applicants choose Finland, quality of Finnish education has become the leading pull factor (FNAE, 2014, 2018; Juusola et al., 2021; Välimäki et al., 2023). Before tuition fees, free education was one of the top two leading pull factors, with the reputation / quality of the Finnish education system being the other one. Other selling points included, for example, the cost of living, and the possibility to study in English. (FNAE, 2014, p. 11; Shumilova et al., 2012, p. 24) Then, in 2017, when collecting tuition fees from new students who are not EU/EEA region citizens was made obligatory for all Finnish HEIs (MEC, 2022), the International Student Barometer [ISB] (FNAE, 2018) surveyed the central factors affecting international student's choice of coming to Finland: the specific course title, reputation of the specific degree programme, quality of research, earning potential of the degree, and the cost of education (coupled with the chance for a free waiver, bursary or scholarship) were among the leading factors (2018, p. 2).

Since then, the reputation / quality of Finnish education has become the sole leading factor in generating attraction towards studying in Finland (Juusola et al., 2021; Välimäki et al., 2023), with the high standard of living, low hierarchy, good work-life balance, and proximity to nature being some of the other significant pull factors (Pappi, 2023; Välimäki et al., 2023). Not surprisingly, these pull factors also mirror Finland's well-established international country brand (Bodström, 2020; Pappi, 2023).

As for attractive prospect of working in Finland after graduation, recent surveys have found contradictory results. Juusola et al. (2021, p. 20) concluded them to be the second biggest pull factor, while according to Välimäki et al. (2023), they were rarely mentioned.

The emergence of the quality of education as the primary reason for choosing to come to study in Finland is not all that surprising. According to a report by The MEC (2022, pp. 61–66), since the introduction of tuition fees, the international student marketing of Finnish HEIs has become more professional and the institutions have been putting more effort and resources into attracting international applicants. The majority of HEIs invest most of the tuition fees back to the students through scholarships and grants, covering the fees partly or in full – which in itself is an important selling point and a reputational factor in student marketing. Controlling for these expenses, the report states that currently the annual net profits from tuition fees range from zero to four million euros per HEI, with the average sum being around 200.000 €. While these revenues might not be a huge source of income for most HEIs in Finland, their tuition fee profits have multiplied in just a few years and, as noted, there are some HEIs in Finland already making millions on tuition fees. (MEC, 2022).

The brain drain phenomenon, and the way it seems to grow more severe as time goes by after graduation, only tells us what we already know: It is harder for immigrants and people with a foreign background (and other minorities, such as the Roma) to build a career in Finland than it is for the mainstream population. Indeed, the longer foreign-born individuals with higher education have presided in Finland, the more negative they are in their evaluation of the international inclusivity of the Finnish working life (Välimäki et al., 2023). Moreover, well over half of international degree students evaluate that the Finnish labour market is not equal to everyone (Pitkänen et al., 2023). In 2017, the unemployment rate of people with a foreign background living in Finland was more than double compared to the mainstream population, and out of the people with a foreign background that were employed,

only about 30 % had jobs that matched their education (Mannila, 2021). Out of the foreign-born people who are employed or actively seeking employment, 40 per cent have experienced discrimination due to their language background, nationality, ethnicity, or skin colour (Välimäki et al., 2023). Finding employment is especially difficult for women and people coming from outside the EU (Välimäki et al., 2023). Moreover, according to the ISB survey carried out in 2018, international degree students in Finnish higher education were most dissatisfied with "different matters linked to employment" (as cited in FNAE, 2018, pp. 5–6). The same FNAE report (2018) lists the top the three areas of dissatisfaction as the difficulty of earning money during studies, gaining work experience during studies, and finding and utilising the institution's career services.

The situation raises some ethical questions concerning Finland's efforts to recruit as many international degree students as possible. There is evidence that integrating into the Finnish labour market is at least as difficult, if not even more so, for immigrants with foreign higher education degrees already residing in Finland than it is for the international graduates of Finnish HEIs (Välimäki et al., 2023). Khan et al. (2021) identify a variety of structural reasons for this, ranging from the strict residence permit system and the segmented labour market where highly educated migrants are overrepresented in low-paying jobs and unpaid internships, to language proficiency as a recruitment barrier. On the note of language proficiency, a recent report by the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment showed that, across the board, less than one in four companies are willing to hire an immigrant with less than fluent Finnish skills (Lehmuskunnas et al., 2020).

Numerous studies have explored the role of structural discrimination in creating and maintaining these difficulties. The results are all but unanimous in showing that discrimination does exist both in recruitment and in the working life, and it comes in many forms, such as favouritism and discrimination based on ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexuality, age, and their combinations (see eg. Ahmad, 2022; Kanninen et al., 2022; Kanninen & Virkola, 2021; Lehmuskunnas et al., 2020). For

example, simply having a non-Finnish sounding name can be a significant obstacle for getting into a job interview (Ahmad, 2020). According to people working in immigrant or Roma organizations and/or in immigration or Roma inclusion, "[n]ew types of employees are seen as a risk. … [I]nternational talent is needed in Finland, but at the same time, the skills and potential of the foreign-born people residing in Finland go unused. The foreign-born people themselves have already lost faith in finding employment to match their education…" (Ministry of Justice [MJ], 2022, p. 49).

These findings elaborate on and contest the long-standing tradition in academic and public discourse of framing the challenges foreigners and people with a foreign background face in the Finnish labour market simply as development points for individual employability, such as improving language skills, building professional (Finnish) networks, and acquiring relevant labour market information (see eg. Alho, 2020; Shumilova et al., 2012). Sultana (2017) calls this "the 'responsibilisation' agenda, imputing as it does that individuals fail to get employment (…) because they have not studied and trained long and hard enough, have not mastered job-search skills, written appropriate CV's, sat for interviews, and adequately 'edited' themselves to become 'employable'." (p. 69).

From the perspective of individual career planning, the contradictions between the hard-sold, idealised country brand, structural barriers of employment, and neoliberal ideals about individual employability constitute mixed messages, to say the least. In this study, I aim to investigate how personal stories used in student marketing play into all of this by applying a story critical approach, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Also, I will present my research questions.

3   THE STORY-CRITICAL APPROACH

In this study, my research strategy and approach to narratives as research units are firmly rooted in social constructionism and the relativist view of language as constructing reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Jokinen, 2021). I share Gubrium and

Holstein's (2009) view that narratives construe their own realities, informed by their respective storytelling contexts, as opposed to viewing (personal) narratives as means to tease out information about the protagonists or the external objective reality. In this chapter, I will present my story-critical approach, starting by discussing how it can be adapted to careers research.

In careers research and praxis, leading theories in the 21st Century (such as Planned Happenstance by John Krumboltz (e.g. Mitchell et al., 1999) and Life Design by Mark Savickas (2012; Savickas et al., 2009) have focused on embracing the unknown. Over time, rooted in narrative psychology, the latter has prevailed as the dominant theory and paradigm. The ethos has been that in the modern fast-paced world the future is inevitably unpredictable and unknowable, and therefore the individual's best strategy for building a career is to prepare for this unexpectedness and develop their "career adaptability" (see eg. Savickas, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2023).

However, in focusing on the individual's potential and adaptability and the narrative processes of identity and career construction, the Life Design theory fails to take into account, for example, the wider societal contexts, societal positions, power relations, as well as the mechanisms of intersectionality and segregation, that affect the individual's carer planning (Hooley et al., 2017; Vehviläinen & Souto, 2022). Moreover, the Life Design theory is arguably rooted in a "retributive" conceptualisation of social justice, as defined by Irving (2010):

> Positioned as the sole authors of their economic success(es) and failure(s), individuals are expected to self-manage their 'career', and subsequently are held personally responsible for their welfare and that of their families. Inequality is positioned as an unfortunate outcome of a globalised, technologically advanced and competitive market-focused 'modern' world, which individuals can overcome through personal determination, innovation, and 'hard work'.

Hence, it can be argued, that the Life Design theory (Savickas, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009) is inherently normative of the neoliberal agenda. Indeed, Savickas's theory is largely predicated upon the notion that whatever so called scripts used to govern and

steer individuals' futures have long since disintegrated, leaving people to write their own stories (Savickas, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009).

In this paper, however, I propose that there is no shortage of scripts susceptible to affect our career planning and decisions. In fact, in the age of the story economy (see next subchapter), those scripts are innumerable and that as careers researchers, practitioners, and teachers, we would do well to pay serious attention to them. I maintain that in aligning with the neoliberal agenda, Life Design theory and the current narrative paradigm in career counselling based in it idealises and normalises personal storytelling engaged in "neoliberal subject-making" (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996) (concept discussed in subchapter 3.2). My argument based in Gubrium and Holstein's ideas about narrative reality (2009), shifting the focus from the inner narratives of the protagonist to the stories we see and hear as possessing the power to influence and inform our career planning processes and as well as our internal narratives.

I am not saying, however, that narratives acting as external influences for individual career planning would be novel idea. It is a least implicitly interwoven into the careership theory (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) with its basis in sociology and Bourdieu's notion of social capital, and more explicitly taken into account in Patton and McMahon's (2021) metatheory of career development, the Systems Theory Framework (STF), which recognises the media and communal, institutional, and societal discourses as influencing our individual career planning. However, what these theories fail to acknowledge are the pitfalls of instrumentalised storytelling in the age of the story economy (see following two subchapters).

In this chapter, I will first discuss the story economy in more detail as well as the concept of instrumentalised storytelling. Then, I will move on to briefly discuss narrative psychology and the social constructionist narrative turn in social sciences. I will then describe the narrative psychological model of narrative circulation (Hänninen, 1999, 2004), which will serve as my theoretical framework in this study.

My research focus will be on what Hänninen calls "told stories", and my proposed connection between narrative psychology and narratology will emerge through my viewing of told stories in the context of the story economy and instrumentalised storytelling (methods discussed in chapter 4). Finally, to close this chapter, I will present my research questions and provide some ethical considerations pertaining to my story-critical approach.

3.1   The Neoliberal Story Economy

We live in a story economy, where stories of personal experience are all the rage (Fernandes, 2017; Mäkelä et al., 2021; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022; Salmon, 2017). They may even rival scientific and statistical knowledge as allegedly valid sources of information: as Mäkelä and Meteroja (2022, p. 192) note, "in contemporary social media-induced narrative environments, stories of personal change and disruptive experience often end up dominating over scientific knowledge or discussion of structural social issues." Further, stories of personal experience are increasingly taking over narrative space in social, digital, and traditional media outlets and platforms. Hyvärinen (2010, pp. 76–77) coins this progress as "the cultural turn to narrative", stating that "[t]he changes within media, both in terms of its growing societal power and strong emphasis on personal revelations create both models and demand for an increasing number of personal stories". Indeed, the storytelling boom has led to the storification of the media, meaning a shift in focus from investigating the complexities of large phenomena to telling simplified or "instrumentalised" (concept discussed in the next subchapter) stories of individuals (Fernandes, 2017; Mäkelä, 2018; Mäkelä & Karttunen, 2020; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022). Mäkelä (2018, p. 182) provides a case in point: "…major Finnish news media [is] increasingly providing the readers with personal conversion stories that could as well have been published in a self-help book."

Highlighting the individual and downplaying the structural, the story economy is firmly rooted in the neoliberal project. Referencing Fernandes, Mäkelä and Meretoja

note that: "the contemporary storytelling boom is, in essence, inextricable from the neoliberal doctrine that highlights the upward mobility of an individual, while downplaying supra-individual societal structures and processes" (2022, p. 192). As a concept, neoliberalism is notoriously hard to define exhaustively. For the purposes of this study, however, I will turn to Hooley et al. (2018) who describe its core tenets as "marketization and privatisation of society" (pp. 9–11), and Sultana (2017), who argues that as "the notion of the entrepreneurial, self-creating individual attains quasi-heroic status, citizens are attributed with the self-governing responsibility for insuring themselves against insecurity and precarity. They consequently have only themselves to blame if things fail to work out." (p. 66).

The neoliberal doctrine reaches all spheres and levels of society, and higher education is no exception. Exploring the marketisation of higher education, Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2021) note how "[s]tudents, who were previously considered younger members of an academic community, have been re-cast as consumers, who shop for and purchase experiences and employability". At the same time, however, they have "imperfect information about the services which are on offer, and there are structural (geography, for example) and cultural (language, for example) factors which create barriers to students." (p. 26).

The views of Alajoutsijärvi et al. mirror Staunton's (2022) findings regarding elite graduate employment websites. According to Staunton, the websites use the language of benevolence, diversity, personal progress, and social belonging to position students as consumers and to frame career as something that is consumed. Moreover, he continues, future careers are communicated to students as commodified "liminal experiences" of identity transformation. Hackely et al, as quoted by Staunton, describe the liminal experience as "a doorway into a new identity, and hence, a new and more satisfying life" (Staunton, 2022, p. 432).

However, the marketisation and commodification of higher education and graduate are a bigger leap from the old ways for universities than they are for the UAS (Jetsu &

Manninen, 2022). The starker contrast between the old and the new is one of the two reasons I am focusing on universities in this study. The other reason is that the brain drain phenomenon is a significantly bigger problem for universities than it is for the UAS, as discussed in chapter 2.2.

One of the core tenets of the story economy is the instrumentalization or curating of (personal) stories (Fernandes, 2017; Mäkelä & Karttunen, 2020; Salmon, 2017). As discussed in the previous chapter, the neoliberal ethos favours telling stories of personal experience in way that highlights the individual as the driving force of the story, downplaying cultural, societal, and contextual factors that might have been at play in bringing that story about (Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022). Individuals make rational decisions void of limitations of context, fully engaged in (and responsible for) the enterprise of maximising their happiness and realising their personal potential (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996). Fernandes (2017, p. 2) coins this "neoliberal subject-making", adding how "[h]istories, ambiguities, and political struggles are erased in an effort to create warm and relatable portraits of others who are 'just like us'".

Also, for the purposes of this study, it is important to take note of how closely neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017) ties in with the ideals of Savickas's Life Design theory and career adaptability (Savickas, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2023). In this paper, I argue that while personal stories remain an important tool for career counselling, there is a need in the theory and praxis of the field to identify the narrative mechanisms of neoliberal subject-making and their potential ramifications to individual career planning.

Further, instrumentalised storytelling begets ethical issues in how it may mislead our attention and only lends itself to the use of certain kinds of stories: the great challenges of our time that transcend the individual's perspective and life span, such as the ongoing ecological crises and increasingly uneven distribution of global wealth and wellbeing, are in essence unnarratable (Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022). Thus, attempts

at describing these phenomena through instrumentalised storytelling are susceptible to being overtly simplified, limited, or even misguided in their perspective.

3.2   Exemplums and Masterplots

However, there is more to the story. When instrumentalised, affective stories of personal experience get (edited and) published on a public platform by a third party, they are transformed from mere personal narratives to "exemplums": allegedly representative examples of phenomena larger than the story itself (Mäkelä & Karttunen, 2020). In other words, when a personal story gets printed in a paper or published, say, on a university website, it becomes an example, a recipe for other individuals to follow, especially if they are striving towards similar outcomes. However, as per the neoliberal doctrine and the mechanics of storification, these stories will often, ever so subtly, hide many of the contextual particularities that make that one person's story unique and potentially incomparable to the situation of the engaged audience member.

The student and alumni stories under scrutiny in this study are arguably exemplums in essence. As such, I conceive them to possess the potential to affect prospective applicant's expectations about living, studying, and working in Finland, and therefore to be intrinsic to the initial stages of the process in which the individual first decides to apply to Finnish higher education, then moves to Finland, and, ultimately, stays in or leaves the country after graduation. However, I am not saying that instrumental / curated storytelling is inherently moral or immoral, good or bad. It is simply a way of getting a message across in today's narrative environments. On the contrary, as Fernandes (2017) notes, curated stories can be used for example to drive social change, and they possess the potential to become "subversive stories" if the narration transcends the personal level and engage with structural, communal or political modes of storytelling.

In the context of this study, my interests with instrumentalised storytelling and exemplums lie partly in their relationship with neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996) and in what ways it is reproduced or contested. In investigating this relationship I will utilise the theoretical concept of masterplot, defined by Mäkelä and Karttunen (2020) as a skeletal story structure that is rooted in myth, folklore, fairytales, and cultural tropes, but represents the prevailing value systems of its own time, and is upheld by big media and the narratives they publish.

I am interested in two masterplots in particular. The first one I shall call "the neoliberal protagonist" masterplot. Referring to the idealised onwards-and-upwards trajectory of a neoliberal individual, the neoliberal protagonist masterplot is in essence a narrative manifestation of "neoliberal subject-making" (Fernandes, 2017, pp. 10–11), and as such intrinsic to instrumentalised storytelling in the story economy. The neoliberal protagonist masterplot is also woven into the fabric of the pan-Western myth of triumph of reason and the individual's journey through life as a process of constant growth and evolvement, based in the Enlightenment ethos of the 18th Century (Hänninen, 1999, Fernandes, 2017).

The second masterplot I am interested in is that of "the good immigrant" (DenUyl, 2021; Fernandes, 2017). According to DenUyl (2021), the notion of the good immigrant emerged as a hot topic in the media and in political discourse especially during the Trump presidency. She continues that the key element in the masterplot is the juxtaposition between the protagonist, "the good immigrant", and the antagonist, "the bad immigrant". The eponymous hero is "high-achieving, likely to contribute to the national economy, well-assimilated, patriotic, and unthreatening", whereas the antagonist "bad immigrant" poses a threat to the society and, often, "has dared to enter the country illegally." (DenUyl, 2021). This definition also works in the Finnish context: drawing on previous research, Bodström (2020) describes the ways immigrants have been represented in the media since the 1990's. She identifies as one of the key mechanisms of representation the notion of "polarity", in which immigrant are "represented as a collective threat to be controlled – as criminals or a

natural disaster – or as equalising the workforce balance and or offering more international restaurant alternatives" (p. 27). Moreover, in the Finnish context, the masterplot of the good immigrant arguably shares many similarities with the notion of international students as "ideal immigrants" (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a, p. 299).

With regard to the good immigrant masterplot, it needs to be said that the term "immigrant" is highly problematic as it may stigmatize the people it is used to refer to (Kurki, 2019). It also produces "immigrantisation", where foreign-born people with varied backgrounds are seen as one homogenic group (Kurki, 2019). Therefore, in this study, I will not use the term "immigrant" to refer to individuals or groups of people, but to othering social constructs such as the good immigrant masterplot, which are designed to differentiate between "us" and "them".

Just as the neoliberal protagonist masterplot, the good immigrant masterplot is also closely tied to Fernandes's (2017) concept of neoliberal subject-making, as the core traits, actions, and goals of the proverbial good immigrant, as described by DenUyl (2021) and corroborated by Bodstöm (2020) and Mathies and Karhunen (2021a), are arguably predicated on the individual being unhindered by contextual factors and able and willing to prove their worth, without significant external help, in the eyes of the mainstream population. In so doing the good immigrant masterplot also echoes the cultural, Dickensian cultural trope of "the deserving poor" (Mäkelä & Karttunen, 2020), further revealing its discriminatory undertones.

I will utilise the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant as something of a litmus test regarding the presence of neoliberal subject-making in the stories under scrutiny. This is firstly because, analytically, I deem neoliberal subject-making as too intuitive a concept to be used in analysis as such, whereas the masterplots discussed in this chapter lend themselves more readily as methodological tools for my analytical process (described in detail in subchapter 5.5). Secondly, as will be discussed in the introduction to chapter four, in this study I will

utilise theoretical triangulation, meaning investigating the research questions from multiple analytical perspectives, to further enhance the reliability of the analysis.

Next, before discussing my theoretical framework and presenting my research questions, I will provide a brief overview of the genealogy of narrative psychology.

3.3   The Narrative Turn in Psychology

Before presenting my theoretical framework, I will briefly discuss the emergence of the social constructionist paradigm in qualitative narrative research, its relevance to social sciences in general, and to narrative psychology in particular.

In social sciences, life stories and biographies have been researched ever since the first decades of the 20th century. The narrative turn, which took place in the field in the 1980's, however, challenged the positivist paradigm of taking people's recounts of their lives for granted as objective descriptions of reality by substituting a social constructionist paradigm (Hänninen, 1999, p. 18). The new approach emphasized the question of how much people construe their stories through the narrative form (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). In other words, people's stories were perceived as representing cultural realities of communities instead of objective reality (Hänninen, 1999).

According to Hyvärinen (2010), the narrative turn in social sciences was brought on by two theoretical trends: Firstly, there was Lyotard who criticised the "grand narratives" in science, and in so doing aligned with Foucault's and Derrida's work promoting the importance and visibility of minorities and other alternative or "small" voices to be heard. Secondly, a new metaphor of "life as narrative" was adopted, meaning that narratives were now seen not merely as peepholes into past events, but as elemental in their own right in construing and studying the human condition. (Hyvärinen, 2010)

The turn also reached the field of psychology, as noted by László (2011). According to him, it served as a qualitative alternative or a counterapproach to the cognitivist (quantitative) tradition in the field. Theodor Sarbin coined the term "Narrative Psychology" in 1986, arguing for the need for qualitative research of stories in understanding human behaviour. In addition to Sarbin's work, such contemporaries as Dan McAdams, Jerome Bruner, and Donald E. Polkinghorne developed the theory and methodology in the new field. (László, 2011)

Since finding its way into the field of psychology, the qualitative narrative movement has had an indisputable impact on its research, theory, and praxis. However, the debate over what ultimately constitutes and defines narrative psychology is ongoing. The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology defines it as a form of social constructionist psychology that explores "how people deal with experience by creating and responding to stories" (Colman, 2015). This is close to Hänninen's (1999) view of narrative psychology assuming that "a person makes sense of her/his life by interpreting it as a narrative" (p. 107). László (2011), however, turns the lens towards identity from a constructivist standpoint, suggesting that the gist of narrative psychology is that it observes narratives as means and material for identity construction. Schiff (2006, p. 21) in turn argues that the core tenet of narrative psychology is "an ideological commitment to the priority of intention and meaning in human lives and interactions". However, in this study, I share the view of Hänninen and Koski-Jännes (1999, p. 1838) that "[n]arrative psychology suggests that in forming their stories people make use of the cultural stock of narratives and myths that is accessible to them", as this view directly pertains to the model of narrative circulation and the ethos of the story economy.

3.4   The Model of Narrative Circulation

In this study, as my theoretical framework I will utilise Vilma Hänninen's (1999, 2004) model of narrative circulation, rooted in narrative psychology. It provides theoretical tools for researching narratives from interpersonal and intercultural perspectives:

how do the stories we see and hear affect our own narratives about our lives and ourselves, and vice versa, how the stories we tell affect the storied projects of others? Moreover, I will use the framework to bridge the gap between careers research and narratological concepts, such as instrumentalised storytelling, exemplums, and masterplots.

In her model, Hänninen (2004) differentiates between three narrative modes: the lived, the told, and the inner narrative. These modes interact and affect each other in different ways. They are linked by the three other elements in the model, namely the situation, and the cultural as well as personal stocks of stories (see figure 1).
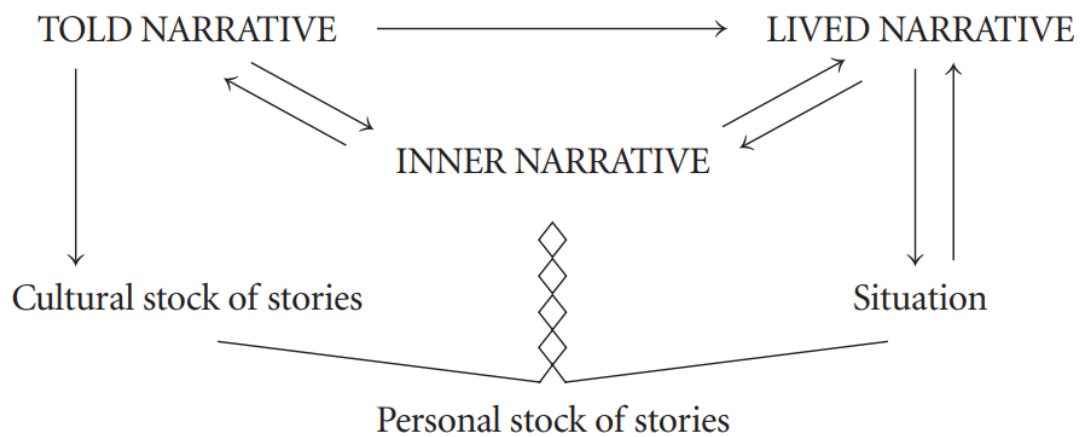
Figure 1: The Model of Narrative Circulation (Hänninen, 2004, p. 73)

In this study, my focus is on the told narrative. However, the nature and functions of the concept are best understood in relation to the inner narrative. Hänninen (2004) describes the inner narrative as "a continuous mental process consisting of a multitude of subnarratives of varying time-spans and varying degrees of self-reflectedness … it makes sense of the past, provides a vision of the future, defines the individual's narrative identity, articulates values and moral standards, and helps to regulate emotions." (p. 74). The subnarratives that are oriented towards the future as can be seen as story models of how we envision our lives to go. Hänninen calls these future-oriented inner narratives "narrative projects". (1999, 2004)

In my view, given the larger context of the story economy and the heightened socio-cultural gravitas of the personal narrative, the dynamic between the personal stories we tell and the narrative projects of others cannot be overlooked. As Hänninen points out, "[s]tories are made public to the wider audience via retellings, media and narrative research. The social processes which filter the circulation of private stories to larger audiences shape the recipients' narrative resources in important ways" (2004, p. 80).

However, we never recite our narrative projects or other inner stories to anyone verbatim. It would not even possible, because inner stories are only partly formed in language. Instead, when we narrate our inner worlds to others, we inevitably construe different versions, fragments, and reconstructions of them. These verbalized accounts of our inner stories are the told stories in Hänninen's model (1999, 2004), and they have a double function. Firstly, they affect our inner stories, meaning that there is an element of reverse engineering at play in the process of forming and verbalizing narratives about our lived experiences. The way we tell them affects the way we perceive and construe them in our minds. Secondly, when our told stories reach an audience, the stories enter the audience members' respective personal stocks of stories, which comprises all of the stories we can remember, "including both narrativised personal memories and those adopted from the cultural stock of stories." (Hänninen, 1999, pp. 159–160).

The cultural stock of stories, in turn, refers to all the stories we have seen or heard over the course of our lives, "ranging from pieces of gossip and TV advertisements to novels and sacred texts, and from fairytales to real-life stories available for us" (Hänninen, 1999, pp. 159–160). We may then utilise these new stories to inform our own narrative projects. In other words, when creating our narrative projects, we make use of the stories available to us in the cultural stock of stories to enrich our personal stock of stories, which we in turn use to inform our narrative projects. (Hänninen, 1999, 2004).

In the cultural stock of stories (Hänninen, 1999, 2004), there are internal hierarchies and contradictions. All cultures and societies have their widely accepted, defining cultural narratives that are often rooted in folklore, myth, and prevailing value systems (Hänninen, 1999, 2004). These can also be called "master narratives" (Hyvärinen, 2021; Lueg & Wolff Lundholt, 2021). Individual stories then can either be normative of these master narratives, ie. align with them and reproduce them, or emancipatory, when they provide some new perspective to the master narratives or even contest them (Hänninen, 1999, 2004). Emancipatory stories can also be called "counter narratives" (Fernandes, 2017; Hyvärinen, 2021; Lueg & Wolff Lundholt, 2021). The distinction between normative and emancipatory narratives is intrinsic to my secondary research question (presented in the next subchapter).

As to how people then choose narratives from the cultural stock of stories to use as examples for their own life planning, Hänninen (1999) uses an interesting metaphor of a "warehouse of stories" where people, especially when facing a new situation, "try on" different stories to find one that fits their respective situation. However, the warehouse metaphor (Hänninen, 1999) refers to the notion that not all stories in the cultural stock of stories are available to everyone. In this regard, it resembles Chase's (2005) constructionist narrative concept of "voice". Chase describes voice as one of the lenses or main approaches in narrative research. According to her, voice is what protagonists use to construct reality and assign societal positions in narration, the "combination of what, how, and where" which "makes the protagonist's voice particular" (p. 657) [1]. However, if we regard every individual story and particularised

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[1] As a sidenote regarding the limitations of this study, it needs to be noted that the concept of voice bears similarities to the concept of intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw (1989). Intersectionality has been the focal point of many heated public and academic debates over the past forty years and refers to the complexities of the individual's relationship to the society around them, namely, how our personal

voice (Chase, 2005) as constituting its own category, the warehouse metaphor (Hänninen, 1999) and, indeed, the very notion of the segmented nature of the cultural stock of stories, lose their meaning. This begets a crucial concept for this study: the model story.

I use the term model story as a label for an intermediate category between exemplums and masterplots. When several individual stories told in a shared storytelling context align so closely with each other that they come across as more or less variations of one and the same story, they form a model story formula. The model story formula can be viewed as a skeletal story structure similar to masterplots, but instead of being upheld by big media, model stories exist within given contexts, such as in universities' international student recruitment materials. The concept of the model story is also reminiscent of what Fernandes (2017) calls "storytelling as a scripted performance" (pp. 50–54): a way of circulating variations of the same story (most often for desired effects), with all the individual variations driving home the same core messages.

In this this study, model stories are at the heart of my analysis. In the context of online student marketing, if many of the personal stories told by students and alumni share enough narrative characteristics, they will then construe model stories. In my view, if model stories exist in the realm of online student marketing materials of

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characteristics and societal positions intersect and overlap, creating different "intersections" in which we find ourselves in (and in the eyes of) the society, especially regarding the dynamics of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Arguably, implementing intersectionality as an analytical concept into my research would provide interesting additional perspectives into the politics of representation in the research material. However, it is not the key focus of this research, and therefore, further analysis on intersectionality is beyond its scope.

Finnish universities, they are highly susceptible in inform the applicants' narrative realities (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) and, consequently, also their narrative projects (Hänninen, 1999, 2004), painting in broad strokes scenes and vistas about studying and living in Finland.

3.5 Research Questions

This study aims to increase understanding about international student marketing as a socio-cultural and narrative phenomenon and, more specifically, the role of personal stories in it. Using narratological methods of narrative analysis and outgoing from Jetsu and Manninen's (2022) definition of student marketing as striving to affect the applicants' mental images, I will explore these stories hypothetically being complicit in moulding or creating the applicants' expectations and perceptions about living in (and relocating to) Finland. My main research question is:

What kind of model stories are construed in the student and alumni narratives Finnish universities use in their international student marketing?

The main question entails a sub question:

In what ways do the (model) stories reproduce or contest the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant?

In the next chapter, I will discuss my chosen methods for investigating these questions.

4   RESEARCH METHODS

In choosing my methods, I strived to ensure the reliability and coherence of my analysis by anticipating the hazards my story-critical approach might impose on them. The biggest risk I anticipated was that during the multiple rounds of close reading conducting the analysis would require, I would become overtly critical of the material and concentrate on the negative at the expense of the positive. I tried to avoid this mainly through two strategies: Firstly, my approach to the analysis was abductive (Douven, 2011) in the sense that, instead of imposing a rigid theoretical model straight onto the material or simply letting the material "speak freely", I strived to keep the inferences I drew about the material as close as possible to the theories presented in this paper and also to discuss the findings in relation to those theories. Secondly, I utilised theoretical triangulation, meaning using multiple theoretical tools and concepts to investigate the same material, as it can add to the quality and enhance the reliability of qualitative analysis (Aaltio & Puusa, 2020).

Next, I shall discuss my chosen methods. The first subchapter focuses on Herman's (2008, 2009) narrative prototype. Then, I will discuss narrative timeframes (Herman, 2002; Miettinen, 2007) as well as positioning theory (Bamberg, 1997), before closing with some additional ethical considerations pertaining to my story-critical approach and the chosen methods of analysis.

4.1   The Narrative Prototype

As my main tool of analysis and as something of an overarching methodological framework to which all the other analytical devices would be subservient, I used Herman's (2008, 2009) definition of the narrative prototype. Herman defines four basic or prototypical elements of narrative: situatedness, event sequencing, worldmaking / world disruption, and what it's like (Herman, 2008, 2009). As my main analytical tools I will utilise the first three, with situatedness serving as more of a superimposed perspective to the material than an actual analytical tool.

Herman's (2008, 2009) theory is grounded in cognitive psychology, but draws on a vast array of influences from different scientific fields, such as social, narrative, and discourse psychology, sociolinguistics, comparative media studies, and rhetorical theory (Herman, 2009). Herman's narrative prototype is widely used and one of the most influential definitions of narrative in postclassical narratology (Mäkelä, 2018). It is also extremely useful in investigating instrumentalised storytelling, as Herman borrows Fludernik's (1996) concept of "mediated experientiality" to highlight recounts of personal experience as a key element in narratives (2008, 2009).

Herman's theory is based on the view that "stories are accounts of what happened to particular people – and of what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences." (2009, p. 2). The basic elements of narrative "should be viewed, not as failsafe guarantees of the presence of narrative, but rather as critical properties of texts that circulate in communicative contexts in the manner that is characteristic of – or prototypical for – narratives." (p. 15). Furthermore, the theory does not frame the presence of narrative in a text (or in any other type of communicative presentation) as a binary either-or question, but as a gradient matter: the elements of narrative can manifest in varying degrees, and boundaries between categories (such as text-types) are fluid. (Herman, 2009)

Situatedness refers to "a representation that is situated in – must be interpreted in light of – a specific discourse context or occasion for telling." (Herman, 2009, p. 14). It works in two ways: Firstly, the communicative context in which the presentation or story is told and witnessed affects both parties' processes – the creating (narrating) as well as the interpreting of the telling. Conversely, Herman notes that the processes of telling and interpreting the story also shape the communicative contexts themselves in which these processes take place. The process of telling shapes the context into an occasion of storytelling while the audience co-creates the situation by assuming the role of recipient and "ceding the floor" (p. 39) to the storyteller. In co-creating the occasion for telling, the teller and the audience also enter a pact where the audience

can "expect the payoff from reading the text to be commensurate with the amount of "floor space" or interpretive engagement the text itself requires" (p. 39). In this study, the noteworthy aspect of situatedness is that the stories I'm investigating are marketing material. Therefore, as will be discussed in more detail in subchapter 4.3, I will treat them as cultural texts designed for specific marketing purposes, not as truthful descriptions of either the protagonist's experiences or objective reality.

Event sequencing, the second of Herman's (2009) four basic elements of narrative, refers to how "[n]arrative representations cue interpreters to draw inferences about a structured time-course of particularized events." (p. 75). All in all, event sequencing is closely linked to the third basic element of narrative, worldmaking / world disruption, which I will discuss next in this chapter. In essence, the concept has two sides. Firstly, it suggests that narratives can be distinguished from other text-type categories also concerned with presenting sequences of events, such as descriptions and explanations, by the tendency of narratives to focus on particularized events – as opposed to the general state of things or "how the world tends to be" (p. 92). Secondly, event sequencing deals with the way narratives inform the audience about the time-course of those events. (Herman, 2009). To analyse more fully the second aspect of event sequencing, namely the temporal structures present in the stories in my research material, I deployed Herman's (2002) narrative timeframes as well as Riessman's (1991) definitions of "hypothetical stories" and "habitual stories" (as cited in Miettinen, 2007a). I will discuss these additional analytical tools in detail in chapter 4.2.

Worldmaking / world disruption means, according to Herman (2009), that "[t]he events represented in narrative are such that they introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld involving human or human-like agents, whether that world is presented as actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc." (p. 105). To understand what Herman means by the first part of the term, *worldmaking*, one must first grasp the constructionist nature of its cornerstone, the concept of *storyworld*. Herman (2009) defines storyworld as "the world evoked

implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative, whether that narrative takes the form of a printed text, film, graphic novel (. …) Reciprocally, narrative artefacts (texts, films, etc.) provide blueprints for the creation and modification of such mentally configured storyworlds." (pp. 106–107). This is to say that, instead of viewing the storyworld simply as the environment described or visualised in a narrative, storyworld refers to the mental representation about the world of the story created in their mind's eye of the audience. In doing so, they use the textual or visual ques present in the narrative to deduce information and to form mental images about the storyworld, and then to fill in the gaps using their prior knowledge and life experiences as construction material. Conversely, also the creator of the narrative has built a storyworld in their mind, of which they strive to evoke the desired aspects in the narrative by using textual or visual ques or whatever tools are available to them in the chosen medium of the narrative. However, the unique mental storyworld envisioned by the creator is not identical to any of the respective and equally unique storyworlds construed by members of the audience. (Herman, 2009)

As for the disruption part of the worldmaking / world disruption element of narrative, Herman refers to the similarity of Propp's (1968), Todorov's (1968), and Bruner's (1990;1991) ideas about the disruption in the storyworld being the most crucial defining characteristic of narrative (as cited in Herman, 2009, p. 133). Herman describes the concept as the story moving from "an initial state of equilibrium, through a phase of disequilibrium, to an endpoint at which a different sort of equilibrium is restored (…)" (p. 133). In other words, the sequence of events the characters go through in storyworld must include some form and degree of deviation from normality or what is expected.

Finally, the fourth basic elements of narrative, as defined by Herman (2009) is called **what it's like**. This element, which Herman also calls "the factor of consciousness" (p. 139) , is interesting because it deviates drastically from the traditional Aristotelian idea of what constitutes a plot. In his seminal work Poetics, Aristotle (trans. 2017) defined the plot (*mythos*) as the structure of actions that functions as the unifying

thread running through the narrative, tying together all the different elements of the story. Mythos has been central to modern definitions of plot categories. For instance, Campbell (1973) argues that the hero myth is a near-universal plot pattern, in which the protagonist faces and eventually overcomes challenges and obstacles (Hänninen, 1999, p. 51; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022). Further, Hänninen (1999, p. 51) presents Frye's (1957) typology of plot patterns including, among others, *tragedies*, where the protagonist fails in their endeavour, *comedies*, where the conflict between the protagonist and the community resolves happily, and *satires*, where dominant value system get overthrown or turned upside down.

However, instead of focusing on what the characters *do* in the course of the story, Herman (2009) emphasises what and how the characters *feel* moving through the story, experiencing the events in the narrative. Borrowing from Fludernik (1996), Herman calls this aspect of narrative "experientiality" or "mediated experientiality" (as cited in Herman, 2009, p. 141). For Fludernik (1996), mediated experientiality, understood as the presence of a "human experiencer" in a narrative, is the main defining characteristic of a narrative (see also Mäkelä, 2018).

I find this fourth element particularly interesting because mediated experientiality is intrinsic to the stories of personal experience occupying narrative space in the current storytelling boom. As Mäkelä notes: "the narratives are pronouncedly centred on individual experience, not verifiable events." (p. 179). Hence, going into the analysis I had a hypothesis in mind that, whatever power the personal stories of students and alumni under scrutiny here might hold over the audience members' respective narrative projects, surely some of that potential would be embedded in (mediated) experientiality, namely, *how* the protagonists of the stories have *experienced* the major career transition between countries, cultures, communities, educations, and possibly jobs.

4.2   Timeframes and Positioning Theory

To better analyse the event sequencing element of the narrative prototype (Herman, 2008, 2009), I resorted to Herman's (2002) theory of timeframes. Drawing heavily from Vendler's (1967) linguistic and semantic works, Herman defines four different temporal structures that narratives can be based on: activities, accomplishments, achievements, and states (as cited in Herman, 2002, pp. 29–31). Activities (or processes) and accomplishments concern periods of time, whereas states and achievements refer to points in time. Activities refer to stretches of time that are neither unique nor clearly defined, such as "I go to school" (in the habitual sense). Accomplishments in turn refer to periods of time that have a clear beginning and ending, for example, "today I was in school". States describe points in time over indefinite periods of time. For example, the phrase "I am a student" is true at any given moment the protagonist is enrolled in an educational institution, a period of time whose precise length we have no way of knowing. Finally, achievements describe moments which are clearly defined. For example, "I passed the test" only becomes true at the moment the results of the test are revealed. These timeframes are hierarchical and not exclusive of each other. What this means is that all four time-frames may be present in the same story, with one or more of them being more prevalent than others. (Herman, 2002 [examples mine])

Herman's (2002) timeframes were useful for my analysis in providing more diverse insights about the time-courses and event sequencing in my material. However, to fill the final gaps in my analysis of the temporal qualities of the material, I also applied Riessman's (1991, as cited in Miettinen, 2007a, pp. 45–46) definitions of habitual and hypothetical stories. When researching divorce narratives, Riessman found that they often included descriptions of repetitive action (habitual stories), like "we used to swim in the river". In addition, she detected stories that never happened, like when the interviewees described what they were afraid was going to happen in each situation (but didn't) or fantasized about what might have happened if life had taken a different course (hypothetical stories).

To further enrich my analysis, I also utilized Bamberg's (1997) theory of narrative positioning. Herman (2009) briefly discusses Bamberg's theory vis-á-vis situatedness, but I find it pertinent also for the world-making element, as character positions are a vital part of any story world. According to Bamberg (1997), narrative positioning takes place on three levels: the characters, the audience, and master narratives.

The theory of narrative positioning (Bamberg, 1997) must not be confused with Bamberg's later (and better known) theory of narrative identity construction (2011). The theory of narrative positioning can be viewed as solely having to do with construing a narrative. Indeed, in this study, I will not make any inferences about the subjective processes or identity construction of the protagonists of the stories, but treat the protagonists as characters to whom different characteristics, voices (Chase, 2005) and positions (Bamberg, 1997) are (externally) given in the narration.

On the level of the characters, the focus of Bemberg's (1997) theory of narrative positioning is on the dynamics between the characters: who is in control, who is being controlled, who is awarded, who is punished, who has a positive influence on others, who a negative one, and so on. On the audience level, he continues, the question is how the protagonist is positioned in the eyes of the audience: do they come across as a victim, a hero, someone who knows better, an unreliable witness, or something else. On the level of master narratives, Bamberg is interested in how protagonists "position themselves to themselves" (p. 337). By this he refers to how and which master narratives or other culturally shared notions or beliefs the protagonists align with – for example, how gender roles or social class are represented in the narration.

4.3   Ethical Considerations

All qualitative research is predicated upon respecting the rights, integrity, and human value of those subjected to the research (Kohonen et al., 2019; Vuori, 2021). It is important to keep in mind that despite the narrative and cognitive psychological

theory and methods used in this study, the material consists of exemplums, whose untrustworthiness as well as their allure lies in how they disguise "unverifiable personal experience" (Mäkelä, 2018) as the truth. Therefore, my findings and any considerations drawn from them are not aimed at in any way or, really, even concern the individuals sharing their stories, but the institutions who have edited and published them.

The fundamental unreliability of these stories as sources of information concerning objective reality or the protagonists' inner worlds has four root causes. Firstly, it is impossible to know what exactly the informants have said verbatim and how have they said it in the original instance of narration (the videos in the material also have been cut and edited, so there is no way of knowing what has been left out and in which order the comments were originally told). Moreover, the protagonists most likely have not had very detailed information about how their stories are going to be edited, how they are going to be presented online, adjacent to what other content, and so on. Thirdly, most of the stories were in the form of interviews, which means that the chosen interview questions have potentially had a significant impact on what has been told and what not.

Fourthly, as suggested by the mechanics of situatedness (Herman, 2008, 2009) as well as the contextual nature of narrative reality (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), it is entirely plausible that the context of telling these stories has affected the way they have been told - the protagonists might have had an impression (or had one imposed on them) of what is expected of this storytelling instance, and to what end. This observation furher correlates with what Kortteinen (1992) describes as the wall of happiness ("onnellisuusmuuri" in Finnish), the social dogma of highlighting the positive and downplaying or hiding the negative in personal storytelling, that stands in the way of the researcher trying to investigate the informant's authentic experiences and subjective meaning-making. However, as noted, the factors that render exemplums as fundamentally unreliable in this regard go far beyond the problems posed by Kortteinen's (1992) wall of happiness. However, I am not proposing that the target

audience of these stories would be naïve or gullible either. As the very concept of situatedness (Herman, 2008, 2009) suggests, the prospective applicants interpreting the stories will undoubtedly be aware of the storytelling context and take into account that they are looking at marketing material, no matter how up-close-and-personal or "authentic" the stories might come across.

5   CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

In this chapter, I will first describe my process of defining and gathering the research material. In so doing, I shall break down my decision-making process and provide reasoning behind choosing the universities and forming my criteria for defining the relevant material. I will also provide a brief overview of the gathering process and the final material before moving on to discuss my analytical process, together with some of the challenges I faced choosing my methods for analysis.

5.1   Choosing the Universities

To gather the material, I first needed to decide which universities to focus on and how to define which stories should be included in the material. I concluded that while student marketing as such might have more to do with the application phase than student enrolment, statistics on the latter would be more telling of the universities' actual internationalisation efforts over time. For one, application rates might fluctuate from year to year due to different reasons: the application systems or processes might change, the number of applications one must submit of their targets might be regulated by or otherwise tied to different national policies that are susceptible to change over time, and so on. Therefore, given the long-standing national policy to increase the number of international degree students in higher education (MEC, 2021), I decided that the relevance of this study is best served by focusing on the universities who have succeeded in increasing their number of new international students the most. I found this information on Vipunen, the online service portal of Education Statistics Finland.

As for the timeframe for observing this development, I chose to look the new international degree student rates in Finnish universities in 2017 and 2021 respectively (statistics from Education Statistics Finland for 2022 not being available at the time of gathering the material). I chose this timeframe because 2017 was the year tuition fees for non-EU/EEA citizens were promulgated in all Finnish HEIs (MEC, 2022), and it feaures most drastic drop in the number of international students in Finnish universities during the new millennium. (see figure 2).
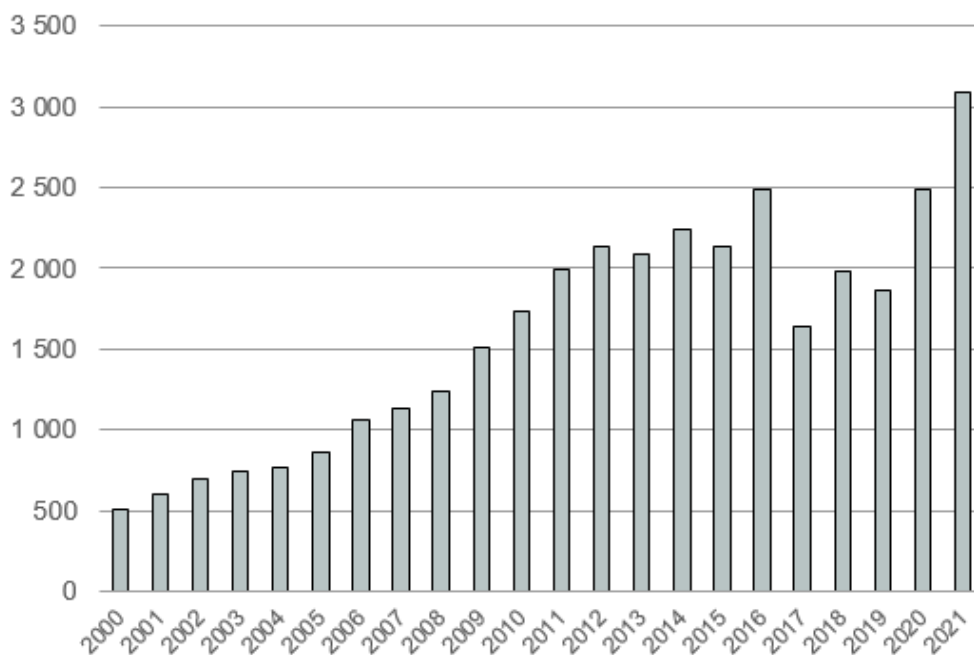
Figure 2: New foreign students in universities. Vipunen - Education Statistics Finland.

Adding the fact that the international marketing efforts of Finnish HEIs have become more elaborate and more professional since the introduction of tuition fees (MEC, 2022), the timeframe seemed pertinent for the purposes of this study.

More specifically, I decided to look at the change in the universities' numbers of new international master's degree students. The reasons I chose master's level students as the defining indicator are threefold: Firstly, based on a preliminary overview, master's degree students and graduates are by far the most common protagonists of student and alumni stories used in Finnish universities' online student marketing (as opposed to personal stories by bachelor's degree students, doctoral researchers, or

alumni). This observation warrants the hypothesis that whatever impact these stories might have on student recruitment, the effects would be most visible on the master's level admissions.

Secondly, I excluded the undergraduate student rates from the decision-making process because international bachelor's students are a very marginal group in Finnish universities compared to international master's students. As a case in point, the joint application round of January 2023 saw a record number of international applicants applying to Finnish HEIs (FNAE, 2023). Out of the international applicants who expressed first preference to Finnish universities (18,261 in total) 92 % applied to master's degree programmes and only 8 % to bachelor's level degree programmes. Hence, it seems that the focus of the universities' internationalisation efforts lies more heavily on master's level education than on undergratuates.

Thirdly, I excluded international doctoral researcher rates (and applicant rates) from the decision-making process. I did this mainly because it would be ethically problematic to include prospective doctoral applicants in the core audience of these stories on par with undergraduate and master's level applicants. As the Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers points out in their policy guidelines, doctoral researchers are professional researchers regardless of their funding status, not simply students (Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers [FUURT], n.d.). Indeed, as one of the protagonists in the material pointed out, even calling doctoral researchers "doctoral students" is highly problematic. Therefore, the doctoral researcher recruitment and admissions processes must be regarded more in terms of job seeking, recruitment, and becoming a staff member, as opposed to processes of student recruitment / admissions per se. This is not to say that I would have excluded the stories of doctoral researchers and/or doctoral degree holders from the material. Their stories can be and are used for student marketing purposes and thus were also included in the material.

5.2 Defining the Stories

Next I needed to define what kind of stories to include in the material. To do this, I used seven criteria:

1. The material had to come across as stories for the audience in everyday terms. They were either labelled as such in the headline or via some other clear signifier. This was important for weeding out other text-types told from a student perspective, such as lists of tips for the newcomer, general descriptions of living in Finland, and the like.

2. The stories could contain written text, images, video and/or audio.

3. The stories needed to be available online over time. Stories told in physical marketing events, unrecorded online meetings, or physical marketing materials would not be included. Digital versions of physical materials, such as pdfs, however, could be included as long as they were publicly available in the defined digital environments (see item 4).

4. The stories had to be in English.

5. The stories had to be published (or updated) on the university website or posted (or reposted) on their social media channels between June 2022 and January 18th, 2023. I chose this timeframe with the January 2023 joint application round in mind. The record number of international applications makes it an interesting case in point for this study and, seeing as the previous major joint application round was organized in the spring of 2022, stories published during the selected timeframe could be seen as targeted at least partly for the prospective applicants in the January 2023 round. If this timeframe did not produce enough stories from the first five universities on my list presented in the next subchapter, I would rather increase the number of universities whose stories to use than lengthen the timeframe.

6. The stories had to be published on the university level, as in on the university's main website or the university's official main social media accounts (typically named after the university), as opposed to those published by individual faculties, disciplines, or other field-specific entities. It was beyond the scope of

this study to make distinctions between fields of science. However, it was also my hypothesis is that the higher organizational status would imply a higher degree of representativeness of the institution. Hence, focusing on the university level would provide an additional viewpoint for the analysis, namely, what kind of stories get prioritized and are there some visible trends regarding them (for example, which fields get more visibility over others).

7. The students and alumni telling the stories should be or come across as foreign-born or non-Finnish. The actuality of their country of origin was not relevant for this study as such, and I did not try to gather any information about the storytellers beyond what was inherent in the material. What was important, however, was that the audience, browsing the cultural stock of stories to see what fits, could be expected to be able to relate, at least on some level, to the overall story category of "foreigners in Finland".

5.3   Gathering the Material

First, I consulted the statistics available at Education Statistics Finland to rank the universities by the increase in new international master's degree students between 2017 and 2021 (see table 1). I then decided to focus first on the top five universities on the list: Aalto university, The University of Helsinki, Tampere University, LUT University, and The University of Turku.

New non-Finnish master's degree students in Finnish universities			
	2017	**2021**	**from 2017 to 2021 (+/-)**
Aalto University	**348**	**594**	246
University of Helsinki	**93**	**273**	180
Tampere University	**192**	**342**	150
LUT University	**162**	**276**	114
University of Turku	**90**	**177**	87
Åbo Akademi University	**75**	**147**	72
Oulun University	**156**	**213**	57

University of Eastern Finland	**165**	**213**	48
University of the Arts Helsinki	**33**	**54**	21
University of Vaasa	**42**	**54**	12
University of Vaasa	**72**	**84**	12
Hanken School of Economics	**24**	**33**	9
University of Lapland	**15**	**9**	-6
TOTAL	**1 464**	**2 463**	999

Table 1. Data source: Vipunen. Education Statistics Finland.

First, I searched their Instagram and Facebook posts and then proceeded to search their official websites. During this material harvesting process, I excluded any stories that were labelled as personal stories by the headline, but were in fact void of any narrative qualities, consisting solely of pieces of advice for new students, tips or lists about places to visit, etc. In addition, I excluded stories that were not clearly aimed at applicants – for example, alumni stories that were only published in connection with the university's alumni services and activities instead of university admissions, were excluded.

The search produced 47 personal stories. However, included were eight videos by the University of Helsinki published as part of their #NewInHelsinki Instagram campaign. Due to the nature of the campaign, these eight stories were so identical in form and content, that I feared including all eight in the material would give this one campaign too much gravitas in the analysis and potentially skew the results. Therefore, I decided to include only three of the campaign videos as a sufficiently representative sample of the campaign. Thus I was left with 42 stories which I deemed enough for this qualitative study. The stories in the material included photos and text. Three of them I transcribed from speech in Instagram reels (videos) to text with additional screenshots of the visuals included in the material.

Out of the 42 stories, 31 were labelled or otherwise branded as student stories and 11 as alumni stories. Fourty stories had a single protagonist. One story had two

protagonists and one three, resulting in 45 protagonists in total. The protagonists included:

- 25 master's students,
- 4 bachelor's students,
- 9 alumni with a master's degree from the university in question,
- 2 alumni with a doctoral degree from the university in question,
- 4 doctoral researchers with no prior degrees from the university in question,
- 1 doctoral researcher with a master's degree from the same university.

Out of the protagonists, 38 were portrayed in the photos accompanying the stories. I perceived ten of them as white and 28 as non-white. This was in contrast with previous research pointing to the white normativity of Finnish HEI's visual application materials (Molander & Souto, 2022). The dichotomy might be partly due to different target groups, as the research material in Souto and Molander's study was not specifically aimed at international applicants. However, if his is the case, it brings up questions worthy of further research concerning how different people and groups are seen in the eyes of student marketing. Then again, exaggerated representations of diversity are also used as an intentional marketing strategy in student marketing (Pippert et al., 2013).

Twenty-nine protagonists clearly stated their country of origin. Some of the others alluded to prior life phases in other countries but did not explicitly say if they were originally from one of those countries, so their countries of origin remained unknown. The protagonists who did reveal this piece of information were from 18 different countries, with the most represented ones being the following:

- India (5)
- Iran (3)
- Pakistan (3)
- USA (3)

It is noteworthy that only two of the protagonists were known to be from the EU/EEA region (Germany and Norway respectively). Although it is not the focus of this study and the sample is too small to draw any strong inferences, this might indicate that the universities online marketing focus lies on attracting "paying customers", ie. applicants from outside the EU/EEA region.

5.4   Defining the Methodology

Once I had gathered my research material, I went through a process of trial and error in figuring out what methodology to use to best answer my research questions. Finally, I decided to make the narrative prototype (Herman, 2008, 2009) my main analytical tool. However, as per theoretical triangulation (Aaltio & Puusa, 2020), I did not want to limit the analysis to only one theoretical model, albeit a multifaceted one. I felt that to answer my main research question, I needed additional perspectives to the material. I then chose the additional methods discussed in subchapter 4.2 to enrich and deepen the analytical process and, hopefully, the results.

Then, I proceeded to analyse the material, sticking to the manual functions of Atlas.ti. All in all the analysis comprised five rounds of close reading the material from start to finish, analysing it for even sequencing, worldmaking/world disruption, what it's like (experientiality), timeframes (including all six chosen types of timeframes) and narrative positioning respectively. In the next subchapter, I will demonstrate how I went about using my chosen analytical tools by using examples from the research material.

5.5   The Analytical Process

In this chapter, I will once again present my analytical tools one by one, this time demonstrating how I used them in my analysis by applying them to actual samples from the research material. Even though the research material is publicly available, I have anonymised the direct quotes and labelled the stories numerically from S1 to

S42. With the anonymisation I have strived to downplay the role of the protagonists as individuals, further underlining the focus of the analysis as being on storytelling mechanisms and structures instead of identifiable details.

I will utilise a single excerpt from one of the stories (S27) to give an exhaustive example of the whole process by applying each analytical tool to the same excerpt. The headline is in bold, also numbered as paragraph 0, while the ensuing paragraphs have been assigned numbers from 1 to 6 to ease navigation:

(0) **[Student name]: My initial decision to come to [university name] was the curriculum of this EFMD-accredited programme.**

(1) [Student name] came to Finland from India to study in [master's degree programme name]. Alongside her studies, [student name] has been a research assistant and a student ambassador.

[...]

(2) As a business student, the opportunities available to me are limitless. I have had the opportunity to volunteer with the [student organisation name] and [university name] student union and work with an international marketing team, create content for Study in Finland, and be a student ambassador guiding future students within the span of eight months from my arrival here in Finland.

(3) Did I mention [campus building name] yet? It is another amazing facility where magic is constantly being created! Pushing my boundaries, I have also embraced the amazing Finnish culture and believe Finns are pretty talkative once you get to know them! The [campus name] Spirit is created by Finns and I'm fortunate to call some of these amazing individuals along with talented individuals from around the globe my friends today. The "Sisu Way of Life" is my preferred choice as I have tried avanto (ice-swimming), watched the northern lights (Aurora Borealis), skied, skated and experienced my first epic Wappu and connected with a community of amazing people from around the world!

(4) From seeking discomfort to embracing discomfort has been the motto of this journey that is still ongoing. The potential to learn and grow at [university name] is immeasurable. If you love nature like I do and live an active lifestyle while achieving business acumen, then choose [university name] as I did.

(5) My long-term goal is to build outreach programmes between businesses in Finland and India so that Finnish innovation can tap into the consumer markets in India and Indian businesses can leverage Finnish technology, sustainability, and ethical approach across industries.

(6) I look forward to all the exciting new opportunities and the future is limitless from my vantage point at [university name]. Since my short stay here, I have quite enjoyed my experience and if you are looking to broaden your worldview and embrace a new sense of discomfort, this would be the perfect opportunity for growth without boundaries or limitations. [...] (S27)

Event sequencing (Herman, 2009): as a whole, the excerpt follows the linear temporal macrostructure of past-present-future. More specifically, paragraph 1 quickly mentions the protagonist's life in India before coming to Finland. Then, in paragraphs 2-3, the protagonist describes various experiences in detail that they have had after arriving here, and, towards the end in paragraphs 5-6, they hypothesise about future business ventures.

It is noteworthy that the experiences described in paragraphs 2-3, ranging from volunteering to ice-swimming, are not temporally tied to one another:

"I have had the opportunity to volunteer with the [student organisation name] and [university name] student union and work with an international marketing team, create content for Study in Finland, and be a student ambassador guiding future students" (2)

"Pushing my boundaries, I have also embraced the amazing Finnish culture" (3)
"I have tried avanto (ice-swimming), watched the northern lights (Aurora Borealis), skied, skated and experienced my first epic Wappu and connected with a community of amazing people from around the world!" (3)

In the excerpt, there are no cues for the audience to draw inferences about the exact order in which these experiences took place. Moreover, on the textual level, the clauses describing the experiences could be arranged in any given order and the story would not change. The only thing about the experiences described in paragraphs 2-3 that is temporally relevant to the story is that they are placed in the middle, between the past life in India and the visions about the future. This temporal structure is also conveyed through the presence of three distinct versions of the protagonist in the story: the past version, who is experiencing the past events in the story, the present version, who is doing the narrating, and the future version, whom the protagonist in the present envisions building outreach programmes in the future (paragraph 5).

Worldmaking / world disruption (Herman, 2009): Starting with worldmaking, there are several textual cues present in the excerpt the audience can utilise to draw inferences about the storyworld. Thematically, three broad categories emerge:

1. **Institutional worldmaking**: "the curriculum of this EFMD-accredited programme" (0), "Alongside her studies, [student name] has been a research assistant and a student ambassador." (1), the whole of paragraph 2, "Did I mention [campus building name] yet? It is another amazing facility where magic is constantly being created!" (3), "The potential to learn and grow at [university name] is immeasurable" (4), "the future is limitless from my vantage point at [university name]" (5), "if you are looking to broaden your worldview [...] this would be the perfect opportunity for growth without boundaries or limitations." (6)

2. **Societal worldmaking**: "I have also embraced the amazing Finnish culture and believe Finns are pretty talkative once you get to know them!" (3), "The [campus name] Spirit is created by Finns" (3), "I'm fortunate to call some of these amazing individuals along with talented individuals from around the globe my friends today" (3), "The "Sisu Way of Life" is my preferred choice" (3), "experienced my first epic Wappu and connected with a community of

amazing people from around the world!" (3), "Finnish technology, sustainability, and ethical approach across industries" (5)

3. **Environmental worldmaking**: "I have tried avanto (ice-swimming), watched the northern lights (Aurora Borealis), skied, skated" (3), "If you love nature like I do" (4).

The institutional category, referring here to both the university and the protagonist's respective studies provided by the university, is the most prominent of the three. Moreover, the institutional aspects of the storyworld are described from three temporal perspectives, echoing the overarching event sequencing structure of the story. Assuming the perspective of their past applicant-self, the protagonist names the curriculum as their main reason for choosing this degree programme (1), whose quality is further validated through the mentioning of the EFMD-accreditation. Then, they switch to the student perspective by coining themselves as "a business student" and describe the storyworld in detail through past personal experiences. Finally, the protagonist describes a future version of the storyworld when they mention the future being limitless thanks to the education (6). Indeed, the abundance of opportunities emerges as a central theme, getting explicitly repeated four times (paragraphs 2, 4, 5, and 6) as well as implicitly conveyed in paragraphs 1-2, when the protagonist lists their varied roles and activities within the university sphere.

The societal and environmental worldmaking categories, however, are tied to the student perspective. Together they describe the protagonist's Finnish experience as something of an exciting and rewarding exploration into a new culture, new communities, and exotic environments. All in all, the storyworld described in the excerpt more or less beats the drum of the Finnish country brand, highlighting the quality of education, proximity of nature, and also implicitly painting a picture of a good work-life balance via the way leisure time activities, environments, and experiences are given due diligence in the narration.

As for world disruption, there is next to none present. After the relocation to Finland, the story progresses as one would expect, from one happy discovery and rewarding experience to the next. The only challenge mentioned in the excerpt, making Finnish friends, is glossed over with the benefit of hindsight: "Finns are pretty talkative once you get to know them!" (3). As noted with regard to situatedness, whatever intrigue the excerpt might entail for its (intended) audience lies in the protagonist's status as someone who has made the transition to Finland to study. In the text, however, this transition is dealt with in its entirety in a single phrase: "came to Finland from India to study" (1).

What it's like / experientiality (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009): There are several instances in the excerpt where the protagonist explicitly describes their feelings about the events and the world of the story:

"another amazing facility where magic is constantly being created!" (3)
"Pushing my boundaries, I have also embraced the amazing Finnish culture" (3)
"I'm fortunate to call some of these amazing individuals along with talented individuals from around the globe my friends today" (3)
"The "Sisu Way of Life" is my preferred choice" (3)
"experienced my first epic Wappu and connected with a community of amazing people from around the world" (3)
"From seeking discomfort to embracing discomfort has been the motto of this journey" (4)
"If you love nature like I do" (4)
"I have quite enjoyed my experience" (6)

Two observations are clear: First, there are no downsides to the protagonist's experience, everything is positive. Second, the way they describe their Finnish experience is very sales-pitchy, even borderline hyperbolic. The word "amazing" alone is used four times in the quotes. The "motto" about seeking and embracing discomfort (4) stands out as an anomaly, but its meaning is lost on me, as no feelings

of discomfort are described anywhere in the excerpt. It could be a reference to "the Sisu Way of Life" (3), which would assign things like trying ice-swimming, watching northern lights, skiing, skating and/or connecting with amazing people (3) as the source of discomfort. However, the motto (4) is directly followed by a statement about the university, not extra-curricular activities: "The potential to learn and grow at [university name] is immeasurable" (4). Hence, as for the meaning and function of the motto, the analysis is inconclusive.

The descriptions of experientiality should also be considered in the context of the whole excerpt, and especially in connection with the last two paragraphs (5-6), where the protagonist sums up the story and provides visions about their future. The protagonist's Finnish experience comes across as a positive adventure of learning, growing, and connecting, that has provided them with the means and mindset they need to realise their dreams. This finding echoes Fernandes' (2017) idea about instrumentalised storytelling as neoliberal subject-making, as well as Staunton's (2022) notion about higher education as a liminal experience. Hence, for its part, the analysis on experientiality reveals how the excerpt also leans heavily into the masterplot of the neoliberal protagonist.

Timeframes (Herman, 2002; Miettinen, 2007): The excerpt includes five of the six timeframes I have included in my analysis:

- **Accomplishments**: "came to Finland from India" (0), "I have had the opportunity to volunteer with the [student organisation name] and [university name] student union and work with an international marketing team, create content for Study in Finland, and be a student ambassador guiding future students" (2), "I have tried avanto (ice-swimming), watched the northern lights (Aurora Borealis), skied, skated and experienced my first epic Wappu and connected with a community of amazing people" (3)

- **Activities (processes)**: "Pushing my boundaries, I have also embraced the amazing Finnish culture" (3), "If you love nature like I do and live an active lifestyle" (4), "I look forward to all the exciting new opportunities" (6)
- **Hypothetical stories**: "My long-term goal is to build outreach programmes between businesses in Finland and India so that Finnish innovation can tap into the consumer markets in India and Indian businesses can leverage Finnish technology, sustainability, and ethical approach across industries" (5)
- **States**: "has been a research assistant and a student ambassador" (1), "I'm fortunate to call some of these amazing individuals [...] my friends" (3)
- **Achievements**: "My initial decision to come" (0)

The prominence of accomplishments functions to frame the protagonist as the driving force of the story: most events are described in terms of sequences of actions taken by the protagonist, comprising finite periods of time. The activities mainly play a supporting role to the achievements: the embracing of Finnish culture (3) acts as an introduction to the long list of accomplishments from ice-swimming to connecting with people (3), and the audience-addressing statement about loving nature and leading an active life (4) comes across as a reference to all the activities previously mentioned in the excerpt in which the protagonist has been engaged, most of them framed as accomplishments. mentioned the functions as a reminder of that same list of accomplishments.

The one hypothetical story present is also noteworthy because it gives direction and meaning to the narrative, providing it with a focal point where all the experiences and events described thus far converge into a single cohesive vision of the future. Looking at how the protagonist makes it about boosting Finnish trade and also complements Finland for its technology, sustainability, and ethical approach, it also connects the excerpt to the good immigrant masterplot.

Narrative positioning (Bamberg, 1997): Starting at the level of character positioning, all the characters surrounding the protagonist in the excerpt are positioned as groups

of benevolent peers and colleagues, with no individual identities or characteristics, or discernible differences in power, hierarchy, or agency:

"work with an international marketing team" (2)
"I'm fortunate to call some of these amazing individuals along with talented individuals from around the globe my friends today." (3)
"connected with a community of amazing people from around the world" (3)

Power relations are expressed explicitly only with regard to "future students" (2), whom the protagonist has guided as a student ambassador (positioning the protagonist as having a degree of power and control over the future students as well as outranking them in the social hierarchy of the university community). However, a hierarchy of power and accessibility / inclusivity is established implicitly between Finnish people / peers and other nationalities. As the three quotes show, other international students are positioned as a community of friends (who are also amazing people). In contrast, Finns are given a mixed review as being elusive and distant on one hand, and talkative on the other. Also, inexplicably, Finns specifically are given credit for creating the campus spirit:

"Pushing my boundaries, I have also embraced the amazing Finnish culture and believe Finns are pretty talkative once you get to know them! The [campus name] Spirit is created by Finns" (3)

Hence, even though subtle and conveyed mainly implicitly, there is a juxtaposition between Finns and non-Finns, with the former group being described as powerful but (initially) distant, and the latter as maybe more accessible as a group for the protagonist.

On the level of audience positioning, the protagonist is first and foremost given the role of a salesperson pitching the university and the degree programme to

prospective applicants, using their personal experiences as proof as well as inspirational examples:

"if you are looking to broaden your worldview and embrace a new sense of discomfort, this would be the perfect opportunity" (6)
"the future is limitless from my vantage point at [university name]" (6)
"Did I mention [campus building name] yet? It is another amazing facility where magic is constantly being created!" (3)

Finally, on the identity level of positioning, the protagonist is positioned as a grateful and enthusiastic fresher, still exploring the new culture and the possibilities made available for them in and through the education:

"As a business student, the opportunities available to me are limitless." (2)
"Pushing my boundaries, I have also embraced the amazing Finnish culture" (3)
"The potential to learn and grow at [university name] is immeasurable." (4)
"I look forward to all the exciting new opportunities and the future is limitless from my vantage point at [university name]." (6)

Moreover, identity level positioning makes visible how strongly the protagonist in this excerpt is also aligned with the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant masterplots. The former manifests through the upwards-and-onwards trajectory of the protagonist's story (see section on event sequencing in this subchapter), the power of transformation and convergence the protagonist bestows on their current education (see sections on timeframes and experientiality in this subchapter), and their engagement in neoliberal subject-making (see sections about event sequencing and timeframes in this subchapter). The latter in turn is exemplified by the gratefulness the protagonist shows towards the current education as well as by their eagerness to contribute to the Finnish society in the future (paragraph 5).

All in all, this isolated albeit exhaustive example of my analytical process did yield some interesting (if utterly unfit for extrapolation) results concerning my secondary research question. However, it does not as such allow me to make any inferences about my main research question, namely, the existence of model stories in the research material. For the results of my actual analysis, see next chapter.

6   THE INSTRUMENTALISED MODEL STORY

In this chapter, I will present my results as they pertain to my research questions. I have included in my results not only that which these stories have in common, but also my findings concerning any anomalies, namely, any instances present in the material that contest my main findings. With this technique I have tried to further control for the risk that my story critical approach and the multiple rounds of close reading of the material may have rendered me somewhat susceptible to concentrating on finding reasons for criticism at the expense of noticing what is "good" in these stories. In other words, I have tried to ensure that I have not only seen what I want to see, but also deliberately sought out the opposite aspects.

In the analysis, one model story emerged (summarised in subchapter 7.4). Allowing for minor variations, forty of the 42 stories analysed followed the found model story formula. The model story was also normative of the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant. In this subchapter, I will describe the results pertaining to the stories that followed the found formula. The stories that did not fit the found formula (S5, S37) will be included in the discussion in the next subchapter 6.4.

In the first two subchapters, I will provide an overview of my main findings of my analysis as regards different aspects of the found model story formula. In the final subchapter, I will discuss the emergent anomalies and what additional perspectives they provide on the main findings.

6.1   The Model Story Plot Pattern

The model story's fundamental plot pattern was revealed through analysis on the closely intertwined concepts of event sequencing and worldmaking/world disruption, as defined by Herman (2009). This skeletal plot structure, also construing some of the storyworld design, can be described as a happy adventure of learning and career

development in an idealized neoliberal storyworld. Moreover, it seamlessly aligns with the masterplot of the neoliberal protagonist and mostly also with that of the good immigrant.

First, there has been the life outside Finland, which warranted a need for change for the individual and/or, in hindsight, already contained some of the makings of the career path now fully realized through Finnish higher education:

> I started out as a ship electrician before going into university. This sparked my interest in energy engineering. This led me to the [university name] in Trondheim, Norway, where I took a bachelor's in renewable energy engineering. During my studies, I was exposed to several courses in electrical power engineering which I really enjoyed. Therefore, I decided to take an MSc in electrical power engineering. This is when I found the [degree programme name]. (S10)

> I came from Japan after finishing my bachelor's degree in Language and Area studies. East Asia has been always attractive to me not only because it is where I am from but also because it is such a dynamic and influential part of the world. I decided to come to Finland to gain a third-person perspective of viewing East Asia. (S41)

> I moved to Finland from Egypt where I had to attend a certain school, behave in a certain way, and come home at a certain time. I didn't know who I was or what I wanted. I did things in a certain way because that's what my family or society was used to. In Finland, I can study exactly what I want. I can do any type of job, travel and try out new things. Only by trying different things out can you know what you enjoy and what makes you happy. (S36)

> I knew about Finland, that it was among the best places in Europe. I got admissions from other countries, but I came to [university name] specifically topic-first. I knew this to be a place where I could work on my idea and combine my experience in science and engineering. (S3)

As the examples show, the selection of country, university, and specific degree programme are represented as choices and actions made by a free and capable individual browsing for suitable options in the global education market, echoing the neoliberal protagonist masterplot (see chapter 7.1 for further discussion) as well as

the notion of students as customers (see eg. Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2021; Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Plamper & Jauhiainen, 2022).

Further, in the stories following the model story formula, while the reasons behind choosing the education and the past life leading up to making the choice were described in some detail, the process of relocating to Finland was mostly described as simply moving or coming, if mentioned at all. The stories were all but void of any details to do with settling in, starting the new studies, dealing with bureaucracy, or the like. When some details were mentioned, they were mainly inconsequential sidenotes, usually about the weather, or generic positive remarks about the ease of the process. To demonstrate, the following representative excerpts comprise the full extent of the descriptions about the relocation process present in the respective stories:

"Coming to Finland and studying at [university name] has been a great decision to contribute to my personal, academic, and professional growth." (S28)

"As I arrived in [Finnish city name], I met several other exchange students in the MBA lounge of the main building in [city district name] and we started our joint journey." (S1)

""Everyone can speak good English. As an international student, that was super helpful when I first moved." (S15)

> Moving to [Finnish city name] in January was a big shock for me as I was used to the tropical climate back home. Although it was very cold outside, [university name] with its students and professors provided a warm environment during the orientation week and throughout my stay. (S25)

> It's been a little more than 2 months since I came to [Finnish city name] and it has been an amazing experience. Most of the people in [Finnish city name] are very well-versed in the English language, thus it was very easy to ask for help initially if I could not understand something, and people here in Finland are very

kind and quite happy to help. […] The community here is quite diverse, which makes it easier in integrating with them. (S33)

The only exceptions were unspecified mentions about "a hard start" (S11, S37), and difficulty in making friends with Finnish-speaking classmates during the first year (S23).

Once having started their studies in Finland, the individual has explored the new educational culture and opportunities available for them. They have found their own path through embracing the extensive academic freedom, wide course selection, and quality of teaching provided by the university. These were also the most prominent themes of storyworld construction, or "worldmaking" (Herman, 2009), framing the educational institutions as the main arenas of the stories:

> [T]he student-centered approach of this degree allows students to pursue a wide range of courses following their self-interest, which I, without question, adore. Furthermore, they provide students with the resources they need to develop, express, and deliver the real difference in today's world. (S37)

> My first courses at [university name] took me by surprise because the professors and instructors focused more on the learning process and the knowledge gained. I learned how the lessons I learned in the classroom were implemented in the real world and that changed my perception of the world around me. I developed the skill of looking beyond the mundane and ordinary, of stopping to think "why" or "how" rather than accept a statement as fact. (S31)

> The multidisciplinary approach was a welcome surprise for Ibarra, who was used to a predetermined study structure. […] "I have been able to choose interesting courses from degree programmes and fields other than my own, such as gender studies and European studies. Thus, I have been able to tailor a degree for myself that is completely unique and based on my own interests." (S17)

> While at [university name], I enjoyed most, the flexibility of the university. I didn't feel like I was pressured to go down a specific path, I was supported and allowed to take my own path in my field of interest. [S23)

It is interesting that the duration of studies, or the workload to study time ratio, were hardly discussed. In some cases, master's degree studies were described as consisting of two temporal units, the first year and the second year:

"I spent the second academic year mostly doing cancer research in [facility name]" (S38)

"I was able to work in San Francisco, California for my second-year thesis project, under the [grant name]." (S15)

"[Student name] studied her first year in Grenoble and now she is studying at [university name]." (S11)

In addition, six months being a short time for doing the lab work for a master's thesis was mentioned (S38). However, these were the only references to the duration or the workload of the studies.

While studying, the protagonists have also explored local student life as well as the Finnish culture, society, and/or nature, and also enjoyed the good work life balance and the low hierarchy. Regarding worldmaking, these were the most relevant secondary themes present, comprising most of the storyworlds outside the immediate context of education:

> There is something always happening on campus: be it cookouts, sauna evenings, etc. My favorite part, though (also something unique to the Nordics) are the sit-sits. They are an interesting insight into how people here like to party and have fun. Doesn't hurt that it is also a great excuse to dress up! (S9)

> [University name] and [city name] offer a great environment for students. The city is small, probably different to huge, crowded cities where most of students come from. However, the nature is fascinating. This helps any student to easily relax by waking through the forest, reading a book while sitting in front of the lake shore, or even walk on the frozen lake during winter. The campus facilities include places to study and rest when needed. Students can balance their academic life, promoting their physical and mental well-being. There are

different departments and associations that support our engagement with the academic and professional community. I really feel identified with [university name]. (S28)

I really enjoyed discovering the Finnish culture with my neighbours on [street name]. We went to sauna together, took a dip in the frozen lake, did some fishing and barbecue, and partied all night during vappu. (S25)

One of the best parts has been experiencing the sauna culture and trying all the different saunas in Finland. I also got to travel to other cities in Finland which I really recommend doing, for example up north to visit Santa Claus. (S10)

It is very enriching to work in the labs here. You are treated as a scientist. After an introduction to the lab and being taught the protocols you get a lot of freedom. This is not only rewarding but also teaches autonomy. (S15)

"I think one of the best things about [university name] is the non-hierarchical and non-discriminatory approach. After every lesson I could come to the teacher to talk about my worries. They would always find time for me!" (S20)

Finnish people welcomed me warmly. I thought that Finns would be shy and quiet, and I didn't dare to initiate conversations at first. But people came to chat with me. I made friends with many people, for instance with my flatmates in our shared student apartment, and my neighbours. It was very nice. (S14)

I enjoy the Finnish nature and when time allows, I like to go to the forest to pick mushrooms and berries. One of the great things in Finland is the fact that the next forest (or the sea) is never far away. (S1)

Together, both the descriptions of the universities as well as those of life outside the classroom repeat the main pull factors of Finnish higher education, namely the quality of education, the proximity to nature, low hierarchy, and a good work-life balance (Juusola et al., 2021; Pitkänen et al., 2023; Välimäki et al., 2023), mirroring also the core tenets of the Finnish country brand, as determined by Pappi (2023) and Boström (2020).

Finally, depending on their current status, the protagonist in the found model story formula has either graduated and already transitioned to the Finnish labour market (all alumni were currently working in Finland) or are aiming to do so. Moreover, with the power bestowed on them by the education, they are confident in their ability to

achieve this goal. If the Finnish labour market was not explicitly mentioned, no other alternatives were presented either, at least implicitly implying that the protagonist plans to build a career in Finland:

> [University name] has just opened so many doors for me here in Finland even as an expat or foreigner. This past month I was offered 2 other jobs - So I just want to make it clear that [university name] acted as a launchpad for future collaboration and entrepreneurship." (S22)

> I intend to launch this company in Finland together with my father, who is a medical doctor. [...] I will focus on antibodies for both my bachelor's and master's theses. This research is closely related to the key focus of my future company as well. (S7)

> [Graduate name] is currently working as an R&D Design Engineer at [Finnish company name] which he started after completing his doctoral studies.
> "The topic of my doctoral thesis is closely connected with my current work. The skills I gained during my doctoral studies, help me for the development of control software and a real-time operating system-based platform for [Finnish company name]'s frequency converters," he says. (S2)

> I have heard experiences of Finnish working life from my fellow students, and nobody has bad things to say. I know that when I look for a job here, the potential employers will not judge me by my nationality or religion. They will look at my experience and qualifications. If I am good enough for the job. (S14)

Some minor deviations from this plot pattern occurred. These were: omitting the information concerning events prior to the current education (S2), aiming to find employment in Paris after graduation (S27), and omitting hypotheses about life after graduation (e.g. S22, S31, S35).

The focus on staying in Finland to work after graduation aligns with the masterplot of the good immigrant, adding the eagerness to contribute to the target society (DenUyl, 2021) to the equation. Further, the plot pattern all but seamlessly aligns with the master plot of the neoliberal protagonist, which is essentially a modernised version of Campbell's hero myth (Hänninen, 1999, pp. 50–51; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022), with experientiality (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009) replacing overcoming obstacles as the defining characteristic of the plot.

On the note of experientiality (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009), the examples depicting the final part of the plot pattern and the protagonist's willingness to stay also show how the stories are mediated through a Western (or maybe a Finnish) gaze: the protagonists emphasise their infatuation with the Finnish society and its values, effectively downplaying their own culture, home country, and background (see next subchapter for further discussion). Moreover, they aspire to assimilate into the Western/Finnish working culture, and education is framed as empowering them to do so. According to Fernandes (2017), these are typical tactics of instrumentalised storytelling, striving to "create warm and relatable portraits of others who are 'just like us'" (pp. 2, 50–54).

Moreover, the found plot pattern is representative of the defining characteristics of instrumentalised storytelling as neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017, 10) and Sultana's (2017) responsibilisation agenda. Individuals are the main agents in their own stories, make rational decisions void of limitations of context, and are fully engaged in (and responsible for) the enterprise of maximising their happiness and realising their personal potential (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996)

Overall, I found the shared plot pattern very clichéd and idealised in nature. Interestingly, from a marketing standpoint, this might be counterproductive. According to Burns (2015), it is precisely uniqueness and unexpectedness (or "quirkiness") that provide personal stories their power as recruitment tools for HEIs. In his study, the stories that elicited the most enthusiastic responses from all the focus groups were a story that featured two black squirrels running around on campus, and one where the protagonist met "a girl in jazz pants" whom they later married (p. 110). Such surprising anecdotes or details were simply not present in the research material.

6.2   A Great Place to Live and Work

If the plot pattern lacked intrigue and originality, so did the storyworlds.
The core tenet of world disruption (Herman, 2009) in the model story formula was the process of relocating to Finland and starting the new studies, but it was interwoven in the storytelling context and thus present almost only implicitly. Other more explicit instances of world disruption were framed mostly as positive surprises about studying and living in Finland, light-hearted or humorous observations about the differences between cultures and/or environments, or minor obstacles not central to the story and quickly done away with in the following sentences:

"The multidisciplinary approach was a welcome surprise for N.N., who was used to a predetermined study structure." (S19)

"This meant deciding to go farthest from my comfort zone, as I have never even experienced snow or temperatures below fifteen degrees Celsius before coming to Finland." (S29)

"One of the challenges that I faced was sending my transcripts of records by post because I'm not from the EU. And I know that some applicants didn't meet the requirements because the transcripts were delayed in the customs. So I would recommend to send them as early as possible." (S22)

Moreover, as already partly discussed vis-á-vis event sequencing, the storyworlds came across as heavily scripted and overwhelmingly positive. The level of particularisation was very low, meaning that across the board the descriptions added very little to what one would expect to find in a HEI marketing brochure. Indeed, near-identical statements about Finland being a great place to live, study, and/or work were frequent:

"Finland provides a great place to live and work." (S1)

"I think Finland is one of the best places to study and live because of the people and the places." (S31)

"[Finnish city name] is a great place to live and study in." (S15)

In addition to what has already been discussed, the educational institutions were also described as well connected with the surrounding society and providing opportunities for networking:

> The [university name] has maintained a brilliant connection with other national and international research institutions and industries that provides an efficient network for new collaborations and experiences for both students and researchers. (S42)

"I also like the strong connection between the school and the companies. We had several guest lecturers from [company names]." (S10)

"During the doctoral research [alumnus name] collaborated with several top tier companies, such as [several company names]." (S6)

Also, the internationality of the student body was a recurring observation:

"The community here is quite diverse, which makes it easier in integrating with them." (S15)

"At [university name], there are almost 90 nationalities, and both engineering and business students are on the same campus." (S27)

"The campus sort of brings people together from all over the world so that we are able to share ideas and innovate." (S29)

Further, analysis on character level positioning provided the final piece of the puzzle regarding worldmaking (Herman, 2009). Relationships between characters were almost exclusively positive. The professors and teachers were the most prominent and important group of allies, described as active agents in supporting and helping the protagonists on their journey of learning:

"[T]he professors are extremely inspiring and dedicated." (S24)

> If there is a particular technique you are interested in learning or topic you wish to explore further, it is very likely that a professor will either take time to train you or provide you with names of contacts to reach out to. (S15)

> Professors have a vast industry and academic experience. They play a fundamental role in the teaching system by motivating and guiding students during the whole learning process. More than lecturers, they become our mentors and are always at the disposal to support us. (S28)

> Special mention to the instructor and also my mentor, Assistant Professor [name]. She truly cares for the progress of her students and the amount of time she spends giving constructive and valuable feedback is commendable. (S9)

Other students were also assigned as allies, and mostly as a diverse and welcoming community of peers that provided the protagonists a sense of belonging and who actively strived to make it easier for them to get acquainted with and immersed in the local student culture. However, these inclusive peer groups comprised mainly of other international students:

"The community here is quite diverse, which makes it easier in integrating with them." (S33)

> HOAS (student apartment association) organised a lot of activities when I first came here. Like we've been to the zoo, they had some Finnish cooking classes and there I met a lot of international people and made friends with them! (S21)

> The campus community fosters both a local and international presence that rivals even the diversity of Washington, DC. For example, my average lunch

consisted of people from Ireland, Vietnam, Guatemala, and Finland while my roommates in a shared LOAS apartment represented people from Hungary, France, Germany, and Italy. (S22)

Moreover, the Finnish people in general were described partly as initially distant, and befriending them as difficult, requiring self-initiative and overcoming psychological and/or cultural thresholds from the part of the protagonists, but rewarding when achieved:

> So the challenges I faced in my first year was that my classmates are all Finnish, so it was hard for me to get involved. Then I started to learn Finnish and try to make friends with them. (S21)

> While befriending Finns is no easy task, I found that getting to know them over a topic or activity of common interest was the best strategy. I admire their reflectiveness, connection to the land, and belief that friendship has no expiration date. (S22)

> Finns are known to be naturally introverted but don't let that fool you! They can be as social as anyone once they feel comfortable enough. Everyone is patient and helpful." (S32)

The dynamics of character positioning between Finns and other nationalities construed in the stories resemble Bodström's (2020) findings about how idealized vistas about living in Finland presented to immigrants can work to promote exclusion (or selective inclusion) just as well as integration. She found that in determining citizenship mainly through engaging in the labour market, and the nation at large mainly in the well-known country brand traits of the welfare state and nature, the audience members were not invited to interact with the society and its people as a whole, but only with distinct sections of it. Insofar as the dynamics of character positioning are concerned, the results paint a picture of a phenomenon that Finnish career professionals sometimes describe in informal discourse as the English bubble and the Finnish firewall: international students find it easy to build and enter networks among themselves, but they find it hard to reach their Finnish counterparts.

A less prominent but still noteworthy category of allies was close work colleagues, who were described as forming small and tight-knit teams of which the protagonists were themselves a part of (and gladly so):

"I myself have been lucky to have been able to gather a fantastic and competent team around." (S6)

> [O]ne of the driving elements throughout my career has been the possibility to work with bright and motivated people in realizing potential of change. While the focus and target of the work has changed throughout the years, this has always been at the core and I have been fortunate to work with fantastic people [...] (S1)

The idealised, happy-go-lucky nature of the storyworlds and the model story structure in general was further established by the analysis on experientiality (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009). The results can be summed as a positive adventure of learning. In the stories that followed the found model story formula, there were almost no mentions about any negative experiences. All in all, the university experience as well as Finland as a country and a society met or exceeded the protagonist's expectations. The most pleasantly surprised were those who expressed having had some doubts or hesitations prior to moving to Finland. Any challenges (usually minor and/or brief) faced were evaluated in hindsight as valuable learning experiences or simply inconsequential:

> Coming from a metropolitan city, [city name], my beginning of staying in [city name] seemed to be a sharp turn in every means: culture, degree structure, language, weather, food, transportation, holidays, grocery, health care... But no need to panic, student life in [city name] is easily manageable and much fun. (S38)

"It took time to adjust, but it has been the best decision to come study here." (S35)

"Finland is such a different place from my home country, and it has been exhilarating to experience those differences. The weather is the most obvious one, and both the long nights and never-ending days." (S30)

"In my high school, I was taught a very methodic approach to studying, where the focus was mainly on the grades achieved and formulas memorized. My first courses at [Finnish city name] took me by surprise because the professors and instructors focused more on the learning process and the knowledge gained." (S31)

"Finland and the Nordics, to my 21-year-old self were these faraway places where life purportedly was perfect and I must say, living here is the closest one can get to ideality." (S9)

These examples also highlight well the way the stories engage in "neoliberal subject-making" through instrumentalised storytelling (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996). The protagonists are described through a Western/Finnish gaze as equally eager to assimilate into Finland as they are to distance themselves from their own culture and background, thus wanting to become "like us" (Fernandes, 2017, pp. 2, 50–54). Also, when comparing Finland and from where they are from, Finland is depicted as the more desirable environment of the two.

6.3   Deviations from the Formula

From a careers research perspective, it seems evident that the overtly idealised model story structure, tooting the horn of the Finnish country brand and educational pull factors and omitting even the slightest aleatory vicissitudes one might face upon starting a new life in Finland, is ethically problematic. This observation is given rise also via the two stories in the material that did not fit the model story structure (S5, S37). Even though both stories aligned with the model story structure in many respects, they deviated from it regarding world disruption. This was the defining reason I deemed them as not fitting the found model story formula.

In S5, which has two protagonists (a mentor and their mentee), the main element of world disruption is not just implicit in the protagonists' status as international students and professionals, but the explicitly discussed difficulties of finding employment in one's own field after graduation. The dual interview structure provides two perspectives on the issue: the mentor's, who has previously surpassed the threshold, and his mentee, who has come to realise the existence of the problem ahead and finds the mentor's perspective helpful in anticipating and hopefully overcoming it (headline in bold):

The Road to Resilience in New Media Design

This mentoring pair in service design talks to [university name] about the industry, the competition and being an international student in Finland. [...]

Due to the nature of this design field the competition for leading positions is fierce. [Mentor name] had a hard time moving from the university to career level even with his expertise, 'Once I graduated from [university name], I started looking for a job. This was not an easy process for a foreigner who doesn't speak Finnish. I went through a lot of rejection and learned a lot in the process,' [mentor name] explains. [...]

When asked what made [mentee name] reach out for guidance during his studies, he said, 'I was trying to interview people in high design positions to gather research for my thesis, so that's one reason I reached out to the Mentoring Programme. [Mentor name] helped me with my thesis by introducing me to other lead designers. As [mentor name] mentioned, it's very hard to get a job as an international student in Finland — especially on a design team — so I was also looking for help with the job-hunting process. I wanted to know what the industry is looking for and how I can shape my CV and portfolio to match the level of competition. [Mentor name] helped me with these practical things too.' (S5)

The mentor also discusses an art project he did documenting his initial challenges of landing a job:

I think a lot of people reached out to me because of a project I did during my study time. It's an installation about the struggles I was facing called [artwork name] and it's a compilation of 47 rejection letters that I received within a 6-month period, in [Finnish city name], only in the field of design. I did this

installation to reflect on my self-confidence because you start to doubt yourself. This piece of self-discovery helped me to stay positive and maybe it helps others facing the same situation. (S5)

It is noteworthy that in S5 the presence of these explicit instances of world disruption that are not just sidenotes but central to the story (the difficulty of finding employment as a foreign-born non-native Finnish speaker). In fact, they serve to highlight the protagonist's trajectory from being oppressed to dismantling oppression, their upwards shift in social and socioeconomic standing (in this case, from an unemployed recent graduate to an employed, experienced professional in the field), and their highly benevolent attitude of striving to make life better for others.

There are also "subversive" (Fernandes, 2017, pp. 6–8) elements in the story. Firstly, the way the mentor discusses his art project as a way of airing his grievances and connecting with others who might have similar experiences, as well as the way the mentor and the mentee both call out the biases of the Finnish labour market, surpass the narrative focus on the individual and engage with what Fernandes calls "communal and political modes of storytelling" (2017, pp. 6–8). Secondly, these supra-individual perspectives also frame the protagonist's position not only as freewheeling upwards-moving individuals, but as representatives of the marginalised group of foreign-born non-native Finnish speakers in the Finnish labour market.

However, the same traits also render the story normative of the masterplot of the neoliberal protagonist as well as that of the good immigrant. Moreover, the mentee's comments about honing his cv and anticipating industry needs exemplifies Sultana's (2017) responsibilisation agenda. Therefore, despite its emancipatory leanings and counter-story-like qualities, S5 is highly complicit in neoliberal subject-making. In other words, despite discussing some of the issues foreign-born people face in the Finnish labour market, solving them is still framed as the responsibility of the maltreated individual.

In contrast, S37 entails more characteristics of an actual counter story. In S37, which is also an interview, the main element of world disruption did not concern the Finnish labour market or entering it after graduation, but the struggles of making ends meet as a doctoral researcher:

> The main challenge was not having a secured income. Of course, I had discussed this with my supervisor upon applying for the position and I knew that I should probably have my own funding at least at the beginning of the programme. In 2014, my supervisor managed to receive a grant for me. This allowed me to start my Ph.D. with funding, but unfortunately, I was not able to move to Finland and the grant expired. When I moved to Finland in 2017, I did not have any funding for the first months, and I started working as a part-time cleaner to cover my living expenses. It was tough to have a physical job and attend classes at the university. I managed to get through that tough situation with huge support at home: my dog [name].
> [...]
> I have a friend [...]. In less than 5 years, he will complete his thesis, he has published 11 peer-reviewed scientific articles, and yet he has not received any funding from the university except a ONE-month grant from his Ph.D. programme. He applied for external funding, and he received several grants. But, basically, he is defending his thesis within 58 months while he only received funding for 40 months, which is unfortunate.
> (S37)

Further, the protagonist pins the blame for the hardships mainly on the university whose education the story is trying to sell to the applicants:

> A challenge that I have already contacted the Rector about, is doing a Ph.D. on a grant at the [university name]. Grant holders are helping the university not only in terms of budget but also by representing their valuable research work to external funders. Grant holders usually are able to present their research in a more general way. So, they could be considered as scientific ambassadors of the university. Excluding them from the community by not giving them the same rights and opportunities as the Ph.D. candidates working under contract is a loss for the university. I was not convinced by the rector's answer, so I am now a member of the steering committee of the [network name] to change this situation. For example, there are universities within Finland that provide part-time contracts (10%) for Ph.D. researchers who are working on grants. Initiating this approach would solve the above-mentioned problem. Also, I love teaching and I did not have much opportunity to teach during my Ph.D. program even though I took part in different pedagogy courses. Another unfortunate fact is

that our department (Physics and Astronomy) publishes many articles in high-quality journals, but the budget system does not appreciate this.

The protagonist also provides critical perspectives on the terminology used to refer to doctoral researchers:

"As a steering committee member of [network name], I would prefer the Ph.D. researcher term instead of the Ph.D. student. There are differences between these two titles and the latter works better for us." (S37)

However, it is not all about pointing fingers. The critical comments are balanced by observations that are in accordance with the mode story formula as well as the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant. Firstly, the country brand traits of low hierarchy, proximity to nature, and the quality of education are highlighted (also, in the second paragraph of the quote, please note the protagonists original plan of staying in Finland only 4-5 years, as it will be discussed shortly in this subchapter):

> During her study time, [doctoral researcher name] has appreciated the Finnish way of working, the freedom to choose own research topics as well as the types of activities, and being close to nature. She has also been active in bringing up issues she thinks needs improvement at the university.
> [...]
> As you know, the power distance in Finland is small. When I first discussed with the head of our research group, I felt this. Also, on a larger scale, in my opinion, Finland is a place I wanted to spend 4-5 years of my life doing a Ph.D. People here keep their distance from each other, which I like! They are modest. The vast majority of cities seem to be built in the middle of a forest! In Finnish cities, you live almost in the middle of nature.
> [...]
> In our research group, I have the freedom to do my research work, I could learn from my supervisors and colleagues, and I could do high-quality research work. I have the opportunity to learn a lot about the working principles of the equipment while fixing it. We have modern facilities at the university and established collaborations with different research groups within Finland and abroad. A start-up is established by researchers in our research group, which is going to be a pioneer in compound semiconductor surface passivation. (S37)

Secondly, in accordance with neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996), Finland is framed as a functioning, unbiased meritocracy (save maybe for university grant policies) where hard work is rewarded and the protagonist as a hard-driving and high-achieving individual who, despite the beforementioned hardships, has done exceedingly well in their work with little external support:

> Excluding the first months of my Ph.D. programme that I did not have any funding, I had funding for the rest of my Ph.D. studies. I have all the fundings that you mentioned: Self-funding, grant, and salary. This is another interesting part of working/living in Finland that I have experienced: you get paid based on your performance and hard work is rewarded.
> [...]
> I am a co-inventor in three patent families, and I have 13 peer-reviewed published articles, 1 under review, 3 ready for submission, and 1 under preparation manuscript. I have received over 70,000 € research and travel grant in addition to employment contracts with the [university name] as a project researcher. I have been invited to be a speaker in two courses. I am a member of the steering committee of the doctoral programme in [programme name] at [university name]. I was runner-up in the [competition name] competition at [university name], session chair, and winner of the best presentation award at [doctoral degree programme name] annual seminar 2022. Among all, perhaps the most satisfying achievement is the feedback that I recently received from my supervisor when I asked him what he thinks about my performance and he replied: excellent.
> [...]
> In my own eyes, I am a tough supervisor. I am the hardest critic of myself. Most of the time I feel I could be better and do better. This attitude motivates me to try more and perform better. When I want to do something, I do whatever I can to accomplish it and achieve a goal. Even though, as a human, I am restricted with limited options, I believe I have a significant role in who I am and what I do. (S37)

Finally, in the protagonist describes their future aspirations. In contrast to their original plan of staying in Finland only for 4-5- years, they are now entertaining the idea of staying longer, maybe indefinitely. Moreover, this change of heart is credited specifically to the networking opportunities provided by the educational institution. The protagonist's changed attitudes towards staying in Finland longer and their apparent well-connectedness, together with their relentless work ethic and high level

of achievement, partly aligns the narrative with the masterplot of the good immigrant: (interviewer's questions in bold):

> **Can you imagine your future after graduation here in Finland?**
> To a high extent, yes. As I explained above, during my Ph.D. in our research group, I had the opportunity to build my network in academia and the industry.
> **What are your future plans after completing your Ph.D.?**
> I have different options. I could possibly work in the start-up that we plan to establish based on our patents. I could stay in academia if I manage to get funding for a project related to my latest patent and research topic. Another option would be to work outside academia where I could use the expertise I acquired during my doctoral program. Depending on the situation and timing, different options could be available. (S37)

In terms of experientiality (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009), S37 is not simply a happy adventure of learning, but presents an arch of the protagonist moving through disruptions in the storyworld (namely, the hardships of making ends meet and realising the unequal status of doctoral researchers in university hierarchy and organisation) and, maybe even a bit surprisingly, thus finding their footing in the new surroundings and becoming more determined to stay in them. Moreover, in describing the protagonist as something of an academic superhero, S37 is highly normative of the neoliberal protagonist masterplot.

All in all, S37 conveys somewhat mixed messages. On one hand, it takes on discussing the inequalities of the university policies and practices, which can be seen as countering the neoliberal ethos as well as the unthreatening nature of the good immigrant masterplot. On the other hand, the narrative toots the horn of the Finnish country brand, depicts Finland as an unbiased meritocracy where hard work is rewarded, and describes the protagonist's Finnish experience as increasing their willingness to stay, despite the hardships they have endured. The academia is framed as a demanding environment where only the fittest survive, and where (at least international) doctoral researchers need to achieve at a very high level to be able to reach economic security. At the same time, however, the university is also described

as a supportive community with a lot of academic freedom and ample opportunities for building meaningful networks inside and outside the academia.

In S5 and S37, the elements of word disruption deviating from the model story formula arguably make the stories more affective than the stories following the model story formula (excluding S17, as discussed in 6.1). Moreover, I think that the protagonists' vicissitudes as well as the contradictions conveyed in S37 give a more "realistic" air to these stories than the model story variations. Indeed, as life would have it, there usually are both positive and negative sides to our lived experiences.

These two stories also make a compelling case regarding the main findings of this study: the usability of a personal story as student recruitment material is not predicated upon the story being void of hardships, negative experiences, or contradictions. In the light of these deviations, the dominance of the model story variations cannot be explained simply by the argument that their nature as marketing material necessitates that they are rendered overtly positive and idealized and thus (allegedly) made palatable for the target audience. On the contrary, the heightened affectivity of S5 and S37 would seem to suggest the opposite.

In the next chapter, I will turn my focus to an additional theme that emerged in the process of analysis, namely, the protagonists' tones of voice (concept discussed in the introduction to the next chapter). Analysing the audience and identity levels of narrative positioning (Bamberg, 1997) revealed subtle yet interesting variations in the otherwise remarkably similar "voices" (Chase, 2005) of the protagonists.

7 TONES OF VOICE

As discussed in chapter 3.4 with regard to Hänninen's (1999) warehouse of stories metaphor, voice, as defined by Chase (2005) is what protagonists use to construct reality and assign societal positions in narration, the "combination of what, how, and where" which "makes the protagonist's voice particular" (p. 657). In this study, however, I will utilise Chase's (2005) concept of voice not as an attribute of the protagonists, but as rhetorical characteristics imposed on them as characters in the greater scheme of the story design. I will argue in the next subchapter, due to their commitment to "neoliberal subject-making" (Fernandes, 2017) through the utilisation of the neoliberal protagonist and good immigrant masterplots, the voices present in the stories that followed the model story formula were considerably homogenous.

However, when looking at this monotony of voices vis-á-vis Bamberg's (1997) audience and identity levels of narrative positioning, a more fine-grained analysis started to emerge, yielding interesting additional results. As I discuss these results in this chapter, I will use an original theoretical concept I will call **tone of voice**, which I consider to include elements from both Chase's (2005) concept of voice as well as Bamberg's narrative positioning theory (1997). In essence, tones of voice are slight variations of voice (Chase, 2005) within a group of highly similar voices. Different tones of voice are determined by how the relationship between the protagonist and the audience is framed in the story and how the protagonist is positioned in relation to the story worlds of education and work as well as to the society at large, as construed in the story.

In the next subchapter, I will further establish the roles of the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant in constructing these stories and how, through neoliberal subject-making, they were complicit in homogenising the voices of the protagonists. Then, in subchapters 7.2 and 7.3, I will present my findings regarding the protagonist's tones of voice, discussing Bamberg's (1997) audience and

identity levels of narrative positioning respectively. Finally, in 7.4, I will provide a summary of my results presented in chapter 6 and 7.

7.1   Neoliberal Protagonists and Good Immigrants

Outgoing from the idea of neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996), the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant are not only concerned with event sequences and aspects about the storyworld, but also enforce ideas about the protagonists as characters. Regarding the former, as discussed in chapter 6.2, the stories that followed the found model story formula repeated the masterplot of the neoliberal protagonist in that the protagonists were positioned as the driving force of their own story, as active and capable individuals roaming the global education market, making rational decisions with minimal contextual limitations, restrictions, or external influences.

This finding was corroborated by the analysis on timeframes (Herman, 2002; Miettinen, 2007). Accomplishments were the most frequently used timeframe type, with being the second most common. The dominance of accomplishments served to frame most events in the stories as consisting of a sequence of actions by the protagonist over a defined period, assigning them a clear beginning, middle, and ending, (as opposed to, say, focusing on the temporally vague state of being a student, or highlighting graduation as the defining moment when the process of studying is realized):

> I completed my bachelor's degree in international business and after that continued to the Master's Programme in [degree programme name]. During this journey, I have met inspiring people, made life-long friendships, created unforgettable memories and, grew personally and professionally. (S24)
>
> He began his studies in the [master's degree programme name] in [university name] in 2006 and graduated as MSc (Tech.). [Alumnus name] continued into doctorate studies in communications under the supervision of Professor [name]. During the doctoral research [alumnus name] collaborated

with several top tier companies, such as [company names]. After earning his doctorate, Singh founded [company name] with [three names]. (S6)

"I developed better time management, self-motivation – no one will do that for you" (S35)

"I found my interest in sustainability during my studies. But it was identified through different activities, not only studies." (S34)

Together with the heavily stereotypical model plot pattern, the dominance of accomplishments functioned to convey the processes of studying and transitioning to the (Finnish) labour market as smooth, unproblematic processes that effortlessly fit the protagonist's schedule and of which the protagonist is all but fully in charge.

The benefits of Finnish higher education were mostly described in terms of personal employability, resonating with Sultana's (2017) responsibilisation agenda. Further, the protagonists' meritocratic view of the world, intrinsic to the neoliberal protagonist masterplot, was conveyed through how the education in question had been – or was believed to be – the single most important (and often the only) asset in carving out a career for the individual, with little or no regard to other factors:

""The programme takes into account the fluidity of contemporary career paths. You will graduate with multiple options and skills suited for today's labour market." (S18)

"With this programme's focus on strategic international digital marketing and analytics, I believe that I will be a powerhouse and an asset to the future companies I will work with."

"[university name] has just opened so many doors for me here in Finland even as an expat or foreigner. [...] I just want to make it clear that [university name] acted as a launchpad for future collaboration and entrepreneurship." (S22)

The ease and/or quickness of the transition from education to the working life was also highlighted:

"Already before delivering my master thesis, I got two job offers and several interviews. I accepted one of them and I´m now working as a power line consultant one week after I delivered my thesis" (S10)

" I applied for the job online, completed an assignment, went through a couple of interview rounds, and got selected." (S4)

" This past month I was offered 2 other jobs." (S22)

Most stories following the found model story formula also repeated the good immigrant masterplot, some more explicitly than others. All protagonists except one were residing in Finland at the time of narration. All the alumni were also currently working in Finland. Eagerness to stay in Finland after graduation and/or contribute to the Finnish economy and society was explicitly mentioned:

"According to [doctoral researcher name], Finland is investing heavily and doing well in the race for renewables, so she has set her mind on staying in her happy place." (S3)

"I intend to launch this company in Finland together with my father." (S7)

"I would like to stay in Finland and I'm currently trying to find employment in my own field." (S14)

"My long-term goal is to build outreach programmes between businesses in Finland and India so that Finnish innovation can tap into the consumer markets in India and Indian businesses can leverage Finnish technology, sustainability, and ethical approach across industries." (S27)

"Since graduating, I have started as a full time Junior Researcher at [Finnish university name], continuing the work that I started for my Master's thesis. I have also been consulting for or advising a variety of startups and commercialisation projects." (S26)

In some stories, the protagonists' career prospects beyond graduation were not described, rendering the protagonists' narrative position somewhat ambivalent regarding the good immigrant masterplot. However, staying in Finland was described all but solely as a positive experience, and no factors that might persuade the protagonists to leave were mentioned, which is at least implicitly in line with the good immigrant masterplot. Moreover, as I argued in chapter 6.2, the protagonists' respective backgrounds were blurred to highlight their commitment and orientation towards Finland and the Finnish society.

The findings presented and discussed in this subchapter regarding the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant masterplots converged to reveal the extent to which these stories were engaged in neoliberal subject-making. Moreover, as neoliberal protagonists and good immigrants, with blurred backgrounds and accentuated personal agency and mobility, strong orientation towards Finland and an eagerness to contribute to the Finnish society, the voices (Chase, 2005) present in the stories were significantly unanimous in these respects. In the next subchapter, however, I will present a triptych of tones of voice determined by the narrative positions imposed on the protagonists in relation to their audience.

7.2   Tutors, Mentors, and Satisfied Customers

On the audience level of narrative positioning (Bamberg, 1997), three types of audience positions emerged. The found audience positions did not suggest the presence of additional model stories. Instead, they provided three perspectives to the found model story. I shall coin these three audience positions as **the tutor**, **the**

satisfied customer, and **the mentor**. Tutors and satisfied customers were the dominant categories, with mentors being significantly less frequent.

The tutor's tone of voice was characterised by the use of encouraging examples directed at an audience with little or no prior experience of studying in higher education, at least not in Finland. The narration also anticipated the insecurities and anxieties the audience members might have about the transition, often using personalised examples to normalise those feelings. The tutor's tone of voice also expressed an eagerness to describe the student experience as an exciting, positive adventure of social, cultural, and academic learning:

"Math was not my strongest subject in high school. Despite this, I was assured not to be afraid to apply to the programme. All students receive a foundation in university-level math and basic programming skills before specializing." (S18)

> On a more whimsical note, my advice would be to give [Finnish city name] a go, it could change your whole life. [University name], and [Finnish city name] in general, gave me the opportunity to learn more, to discover the unknown. It gave me the chance to pursue my passions fearlessly, to celebrate my curiosity, and revel in my wonder. Most importantly, [university name] showed me my potential, my "potential" to do the "unlimited". I cannot wait to see how [Finnish city name] will help you find your "unlimited potential"! (S31)

"During this journey, I have met inspiring people, made life-long friendships, created unforgettable memories and, grew personally and professionally." (S24)

As the examples show, the tutor's tone of voice was heavily invested, sometimes borderline hyperbolic, in describing education as a "liminal experience" (Staunton, 2022), a transformative experience that provides a gateway into a better life and a new, enhanced identity, giving the tutor's tone of voice an air of a sales pitch.

The satisfied customer's tone of voice was highly reminiscent of a user/customer review. It validated the choice of education by comparing the Finnish university

experience to the protagonists alleged initial expectations, finding them met or exceeded:

> Even though my expectations were pretty high, I would say that [university name] has met all of them. I was expecting studying at technologically advanced environment, getting help with any part of my engineering career as well as with establishment of my own company. I am very satisfied with my studies at the university. (S29)

"I would highly recommend [university name] as I feel that its reputation as a leading university in academia and research is well earned due to its quality of education and the way of teaching practiced here." (S33)

> I would heartily recommend doing a doctoral degree at [university name]. To the students, [university name] provides a wonderful working environment and culture, international and multidisciplinary research groups, the flexibility of work, very good lab facilities, and for which, students get opportunities to conduct high-quality research. In addition, students get opportunities to network with many companies and organisations in the related fields through different job fairs and workshops organised in the university. (S2)

The satisfied customer's tone of voice exhibited the kind of students-as-customers perspective to higher education that Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2021) criticise regarding the marketisation and neoliberalisation of modern higher education. Moreover, in being given a product reviewer-like role, the satisfied customer's tone of voice also worked to highlight the commodified stance towards education inherent in the notion of education as a "liminal experience", as described by Staunton (2022).

The mentor's ton of voice, in turn, was actively engaged with the working life and viewed the university experience in the larger context of career. The mentor's tone of voice was also heavy on giving advice on career construction and navigating the modern working life. The university experience was described as a provider of varying career assets, such as skills, contacts, and knowledge. The tutor's tone of voice was focused also on the links and connections between the academia and the working life and stressed the importance of soft skills, extra-curricular activities, and participation:

> I think it is very important to not just learn facts and figures but to find a way to try them in practice. This might be in a student organization, an internship or as part of a personal project. Things start to make much more sense once you can contextualize them. (S1)

> [S]ometimes people learn even more from social interactions with other people, not only in the studying environment. […] I found my interest in sustainability during my studies. But it was identified through different activities, not only studies. I believe that if one is open to opportunities around them, then they are going to find the hidden gem. (S34)

> I think this is the best mindset to have - to realize that nothing listed on a brochure is going to ensure that you have the time of your life and emerge successful, but to trust that this is a place with many opportunities to meet people, have experiences, and gain knowledge that will shape you. (S16)

From a career guidance perspective, the mentor's tone of voice took a more holistic view of career in highlighting links between different life spheres. Moreover, considering how it stressed the importance of embracing chance and the unknown, curiosity, confidence, and having an open mind, the advice given included some of the core tenets of Krumboltz's Planned Happenstance theory (Mitchell et al., 1999) as well as Savickas's career adaptability (Savickas, 2012; Yang et al., 2023). In this regard, I deemed the mentor's tone of voice as constituting more nuanced and richer exemplums (Mäkelä & Karttunen, 2020) to the target audience than those of the tutor or the satisfied customer. However, given their equal commitment to neoliberal subject-making, subordinance to the model story formula, and how they ultimately also tied in with Staunton's (2022) findings about higher education being represented as a liminal, identity-transforming experience almost automatically leading to a better, happier life, the distinction was left quite superficial.

In sum, the tones of voice of the tutors and the satisfied customers arguably corroborated Alajoutsijärvi et al's (2021) notion of the marketisation of higher education, as well as strengthened the view of students as customers (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Plamper & Jauhiainen, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017). Moreover, they tied in with Staunton's (2022) notions of education being framed as a liminal experience. The mentor's tone of voice utilised a wider, more holistic view of career by

highlighting the role of chance and incorporating other life spheres into the notion from outside the education-to-work-pipeline but was otherwise all but unanimously aligned with those of the tutors and the satisfied customers.

7.3   Professionals and Pre-Professionals

On the identity level of narrative positioning (Bamberg, 1997), I identified two predominant positions defined by the degree of professionalism the protagonists were assigned. Here I will call the positions the pre-professional position and the professional position, respectively. As with the audience positions, the professional-pre-professional distinction did not warrant the emergence of new model stories. More to the point, the level of professionality served to further vary the tones of voice of the tutors, satisfied customers, and mentors.

Pre-professionalism is a term used by Tomlinson (2017), with which he refers to the evolving expert identity of a near-graduate in higher education. According to Tomlinson, pre-professionalism is characterised by, on one hand, being (somewhat) aware of what kinds of readiness or "capital", such as skills, knowledge, and social, cultural, and psychological competencies, one has gained during the education, and on the other hand, still lacking the confidence and deeper understanding of one's professional competence and development one only gains through experiences of working with other experts in the field outside the HEI.

While exemplifying varying degrees of experience in their respective fields of study, the protagonists were positioned as pre-professionals by emphasising their positive career prospects in their given field and describing their conviction that the education in question would provide them with the necessary means for realising those prospects. In other words, the descriptions of their expertise entailed significant amounts hypothesizing, which rendered them "pre-professional":

The future looks bright, as the world is in a transition of electrification in many sectors. Already nine months before my graduation from [university name], I received my first full-time job offer. So, it seems like there is a need for personnel with this type of education in the field. (S12)

"I am confident the path I have chosen here is undoubtedly the one leading to my dream." (S39)

"[Student name] believes that the studies offer a great stepping-stone to modern working life." (S18)

"I could imagine myself working in admissions, educational consulting, research, administration or as a university teacher. Will see what life brings me!" (S40)

In turn, the professionals were characterised by descriptions of how the marketed education had helped the realisation of the narrated story, typically emphasising how the studies had enhanced the protagonist's personal employability and, in some instances, helped clarify the desired career path or direction:

I did my Bachelor's at the University of Tehran and Master's as a dual degree, studying at universities in Tehran and in Paris. The idea of continuing to a PhD just gradually built up in my mind after doing my bachelor's, when I had an opportunity to work in a group that was working with fuel cells. At that time, I didn't know much about energy materials but I found it fascinating because nowadays clean energy is of interest to so many people. I started to read about energy materials, and then I found a position in Finland focusing on batteries as a clean facility for providing energy. (S42)

The topic of my doctoral thesis is closely connected with my current work. The skills I gained during my doctoral studies, help me for the development of control software and a real-time operating system-based platform for ABB's frequency converters. (S2)

[University name] played a vital role in the design and development of my idea. It started when I suggested my idea of a company and wanted to do my thesis on it. [University name] was more than open to my thesis topic and very flexible in allowing me to choose my own path. At [university name], everything was within arm's reach, so I had close access to all of the university resources, and

this is what helped me complete my thesis and ultimately bring my idea to fruition. (S23)

As a whole, the results of the analysis on audience and identity level positioning (Bamberg, 1997), as well as narrative timeframes (Herman, 2002; Miettinen, 2007), can be viewed in relation to the idea of voice (Chase, 2005), resulting in something of a taxonomy of tones of voice. Moving from the shared towards the particularised, or from the widest category towards the narrowest, at the top level the tones of voice present in stories unanimously repeated the masterplot of the neoliberal protagonist, and mostly also that of the good immigrant, thus engaging in neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996). However, they could be divided into more fine-grained categories of tutors, satisfied customers, and mentors, and even further differentiated by the varied degree of professionalism inherent in the tone of voice of each individual story.

7.4   Summary: One Story, Multiple Voices

This study sought to answer the question of what kind of model stories, if any, are construed in the personal stories by students and alumni that Finnish universities use in their online marketing. In addition, I further strived to find out if and how the (model) stories were normative or emancipatory regarding the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist and the good immigrant, signifying the presence of neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996). In the analysis, one model story emerged. The events and the storyworld of the model story were heavily stereotypical, lacking the kind of quirkiness and uniqueness Burns (2015) found to be critical for personal stories to be persuasive.

The model story, allowing for minor variations, goes as follows: First, the protagonist has had their life prior to coming to Finland. Then, they have made a conscious and active choice, free from contextual or other limitations, to come to study in Finland to improve their life situation and prospects. By and large, the processes of relocation or

settling in are not discussed. In Finland, they have found the studies in question inspiring and meaningful, and the academic community welcoming, diverse, and/or and low in hierarchy. They give positive comments about the education and/or the Finnish society, people, and/or nature. Through their education, the protagonist has found new direction and meaning in their career path. This new-found convergence is described as a commodified liminal experience (Staunton, 2022). The protagonist also perceivse that the studies have equipped them well for the labour market. Depending on their status, they have either graduated and already transitioned to the Finnish labour market or are aiming to do so (and are confident in their ability to achieve this goal).

In the model story, the Finnish universities, cities, and the country and society at large came across almost as utopias, with no downsides. The quality of education, low hierarchy, the proximity of nature, and active student culture were among the most praised aspects of the experience, tooting the horn of the well-established Finnish country brand (Bodström, 2020; Pappi, 2023) and educational pull factors (Juusola et al., 2021; Pappi, 2023; Välimäki et al., 2023). The duration of the studies or the workload to study time ratio was not discussed, save for framing master's degree studies as comprising two academic years.

Drawing from Chase (2005) and Bamberg (1997), I perceived the stories to have varying tones of voice. The tutor's tone of voice set an inspirational example, that of the satisfied customer came across as a university user review, and that of the mentor highlighted the links between the academia and the world of work outside of it. The voices further varied in their degree of professionalism, ranging from pre-professionals to professionals. Regardless of the particularities of their tone of voice, the stories repeated the neoliberal protagonist masterplot and mostly also the good immigrant masterplot.

I consider my material somewhat representative of the personal stories used by Finnish universities in their online international student marketing. Further, I maintain

that the results support the conclusion that the found model story formula is in fact dominant in that context. However, I am not suggesting that it is the only one. In my material, I identified two stories (S5, S37) that did not fully match the found model story formula and also contained some respects of "subversive stories" (Fernandes, 2017, pp. 6–7), working against the neoliberal project by shifting the focus from the individual to the communal and/or the societal modes of storytelling. In both cases the protagonists identified primarily as members or representatives of societal groups (foreign students/researchers and jobseekers in Finland), as opposed to individual agents whose possibility structures are not affected by their societal positions. Both stories also featured explicit elements of world disruption that were central to the story and addressed structural issues concerning the Finnish society. One story focused on the protagonist's past struggles in finding employment in their own field as a non-Finnish speaker, while the other one highlighted the inequalities in the university's policies for funding its PhD researchers. Even though these anomalies suggest that other model stories might exist, they did not share enough characteristics with each other to construe a secondary model story formula in this study. What was significant about these anomalies, however, is how they exemplified alternative, less idealised ways to the model story as far as using personal stories in student recruitment.

8 CONCLUSION

Narratives both construct realities in and of themselves, and inform the narrative realities and projects of their audience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Hänninen, 1999, 2004). In this study, I have aimed to increase understanding about Finnish universities' international student marketing as a sociocultural and a narrative phenomenon in the age of "the story economy" (e.g. Fernandes, 2017; Mäkelä & Karttunen, 2020; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022; Salmon, 2017). To do so, I have looked at instrumentalised stories of personal experience, i.e. exemplums (e.g. Mäkelä, 2018; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022), that Finnish universities use in their online student recruitment materials.

The surge of personal stories in student marketing is hardly surprising. The story economy and the storification of the media (Mäkelä, 2018; Mäkelä & Meretoja, 2022) have rendered personal stories an important marketing tool for HEIs, possessing the potential to affect the audience's career expectations and decisions (Burns, 2015). Moreover, the global competition for students and researchers is fierce and HEIs can leave no stone unturned if they are to succeed, or even survive. In Finland, doing sufficiently well in the global student market is a question of survival not merely for individual HEIs, but for the whole society.

It is not insignificant, however, what kind of expectations the stories convey to the applicants regarding living, studying, and working in Finland. Previous research has shown that many foreign-born individuals who struggle to carve out careers for themselves in Finland lack meaningful networks and (tacit) knowledge about the Finnish world of work (Alho, 2020; Shumilova et al., 2012). With the storification of the media and the emergence of social media all but exclusively designed for sharing personal stories, the role of exemplums as potential sources for information about such abstract phenomena as career planning and possibility structures cannot be overlooked.

Furthermore, personal stories, and exemplums especially, have a role to play in the complex societal phenomenon of brain drain, which is an increasingly acute challenge for the Finnish society and the welfare state (e.g. Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a, 2021b; Zafar & Kantola, 2019). In this study, I analysed 42 exemplums from five Finnish universities to investigate what kind of model stories are construed in them, and if and how those model stories repeated or contested what I called the masterplots of the neoliberal protagonist (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996; Sultana, 2017) and the good immigrant (DenUyl, 2021).

Even though I expected the stories to be a bit stylised in their representations of Finland and its HEIs as per marketing conventions, the uniformity and the stereotypical and idealized nature nature of the stories was a surprise. It seems blatantly obvious that this was not merely due to conventions such as "the wall of happiness" (Kortteinen, 1992), but a sign of instrumentalised storytelling. The institutions who have published these stories have likely edited them with the intention of providing readers with specific kinds of mental vistas. Further, the found model story aligned all but seamlessly with both of the masterplots, exposing their complicity in neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996), painting a clear picture of what Alajoutsijärvi et. al (2021) describe as the marketisation and neoliberalisation of universities as well as beating the drum of the established Finnish country brand, as described by Pappi (2023) and Bodström (2020).

The Finnish society came across as a benevolent, equal, and calm land of opportunities, where nature is always near and work-life balance is good. Further, Finland was perceived as a neoliberal meritocracy, where higher education provides its self-governing customer-students commodified "liminal experiences" of transformation (Staunton, 2022) and equips them to seamlessly integrate into the labour market.

Whether one considers it a good or a bad thing that these stories reinforce the country brand (Pappi, 2023) and the fantasy version of Finland the government has

been eager to promote (Bodström, 2020), depends on whether one perceives the goal of these stories to be alluring as many applicants as possible, as mediating peer-to-peer information about "what it is really like" to live and study in Finland, or something else. From the perspective of careers research and praxis, however, this seemingly society-wide tendency to airbrush reality for new and soon-to-be students and other foreigners relocating to Finland begs serious ethical questions. How do these stories prepare the applicants for the transition? How justified or realistic are the expectations they create? Moreover, as discussed in relation to Bodström's (2020) findings, they might also promote selective inclusion or exclusion by at least implicitly framing spheres and aspects of the society as being either open or closed for foreigners.

Also, I have argued that theories like Life Design (Savickas, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009) idealise neoliberal subject-making (Fernandes, 2017; Rose, 1996) and are more or less oblivious to the effects instrumentalised storytelling is susceptible to have on individual career planning. With this I hope to add to the ongoing debate in the field of career guidance about how the neoliberal agenda can be contested and more socially just perspectives to careers research, counselling, and education may be explored.

The uniformity and frequency of the model-abiding stories in the material further exacerbated these issues. When prospective applicants browse their cultural and personal stocks of stories (or the warehouse of stories) (Hänninen, 1999), these stories offer themselves up as possible future visions for them. Moreover, stereotypical and boring as they may be, as exemplums, these stories hold the power of seemingly representing phenomena larger than the story itself (Mäkelä & Karttunen, 2020).

What is more, I do maintain that that power grows significantly when multiple stories in a shared context converge to form a model story. If a single personal story in and of itself is readily perceived as a representative example of something larger than

itself, what happens when a vast majority of personal stories in a given context come across as variations of one and the same story? Is it not likely that the audience is even further enticed to take what is being told as the truth about whatever wider context or phenomena the stories allegedly represent?

Finland is working hard to increase its numbers of international degree students and researchers in higher education to ensure the future of the welfare state (MEC, 2022), while also fighting increasing brain drain (e.g. Zafar & Kantola, 2019). Therefore, the need for attracting as many international students and researchers as possible in the cut-throat competition of the global student market is understandable. However, it should not be done at the cost of the individuals' career planning. Carving out a career that matches one's education as a foreigner and a non-Finnish speaker in Finland does entail potential challenges (e.g. Ahmad, 2020; Kanninen et al., 2022; MJ, 2022). Depriving newcomers of exemplums where these challenges are discussed or even acknowledged, and substituting heavily scripted variations on neoliberal masterplots, is a clear example of Sultana's (2017) responsibilisation agenda in action. To put it bluntly, as far as expectations management goes, the found model story seems hellbent on setting the audience up for disappointments and rude awakenings. Moreover, in so doing, I maintain that these stories might actually be complicit in boosting brain drain, instead of reducing it.

As for the limitations of this study, the results represent Finnish universities' online international student marketing efforts only as far as personal stories used in them. In instances where I have commented on something as missing from these stories, it is not to say that the said information could not be available somewhere else or that other kinds of student stories could not exist in some other context. Moreover, I am not drawing the conclusion that the found model story would be the only one out there. There might well be others, as suggested by the anomalies found in the analysis. Also, drawing fom Gubrium and Holstein (2009), Hänninen (1999, 2004), Burns (2015), Mäkelä and Karttunen (2020), among others, I have made a theoretically founded argument that, in the context of the current storytelling boom, the personal

stories used in universities' student marketing hold the potential to affect the applicants' expectations and consequently the brain drain phenomenon. However, empirically proving the existence of such causalities is beyond the scope of this study.

During the analysis, some considerations arose that should be addressed here. Firstly, analysing the timeframes (Herman, 2002; Miettinen, 2007) added quite little to the results compared to the effort that went into analysing them. However, I did set out to utilise theoretical triangulation (Aaltio & Puusa, 2020) as one of my strategies to ensure the reliability of the analysis, and in hindsight it could be argued that the timeframe analysis served its purpose more in terms of ensuring analytical quality of the whole than in producing notable results.

Another thing I found myself wondering after the analysis was the size of the sample. Encompassing most personal stories published online by five Finnish universities in preparation for the January 2023 application round, I did deem the sample somewhat representative of the whole. However, close reading research material this vast is bound to produce qualitatively different results than, for example, focusing on a few carefully selected cases, which would surely enable a more fine-grained, more in-depth analysis. Even though I think I managed to maintain a balance between representativeness of the material and richness of the analysis quite well, future research investigating smaller samples might provide additional perspectives on the phenomena in question.

On the note of future research, this study has also strived to argue for the need for paying closer attention in careers research, theory, and praxis to the ramifications instrumentalised storytelling can have on people's career planning and career decisions. The experiment yielded encouraging results, and further research is needed to explore the myriads of ways the story economy and instrumentalised storytelling is complicit in informing our narrative realities, and, in so doing, liable to affect our inner narratives and narrative projects.

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