

Jacob Shropshire

Harney

2019 Franco-American Fellows Program

April 2019

The Impact of the Internet on Cultural Diffusion Among French and American Students

The internet has become a massive part of our everyday lives, and with this popularity has come new forms of communication. In fact, the internet often takes the place of much of the communication that used to happen face to face. Social media has become a scrapbook of our culture, and students now use social media more than any other generation before. We often hear that our generation is the most globally connected generation that the world has ever seen, but I began to wonder for myself to what extent two very different cultures, such as Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and Amiens, France, could be connected. The internet has the ability to cross the language barrier and diffuse culture in a spectacular way, and cultural diffusion between America and France is heavily influenced by the use of online social media.

Thanks to the Alliance Française d'Oklahoma City, I was able to spend a week in Amiens and going to school at Lycée Delambre to discover the extent at which this connection exists. While I was there, Madame Micard, the Professor in charge of the Center of Distribution of Information (CDI), offered to send out a survey online to all of the French students that attended the school. These survey results were compared against the results from the survey my English teacher Ms. Swaim sent out at my school in Piedmont. In addition, I brought with me a second

phone that was set up with a French sim card and phone number, a French E-Mail account, and French accounts of every other type. This meant that to any social media account that I was using, I could appear entirely as a French native, which allowed me better to analyze how exactly social media is perceived in France. From all of this, I collected mostly qualitative data about the way social media is used both in France and in the US.

The first thing I looked at from my data is the social media that teens in France and America have in common. More than 73% of students both in the US and France use at least one of the top three forms of social media used by teens; Instagram, Snapchat, and Youtube. The reason behind this is the visual aspect of these three platforms, all of which are focused on providing users with photo and video functionality. For a generation whose time spent on social media is not so much intentional as it is something done to kill time in between events, it's important to be able to get the information you need in just a snapshot. However, all three of these platforms also have a text element that is crucial to making a form of social media truly social. In fact, both Instagram and Snapchat allow users to directly message one another, recreating the timeless features that have been around since the early days of AOL Instant Messenger.

When it comes to the social media platform with the most international influence, Instagram is the winner by a landslide, with 44.6% of American teens and 42.9% of French teens feeling that they see the most influence from the opposite country via this platform, and second place being Youtube, with less than half the amount of people saying they felt the most international influence on it. With such a heavy emphasis on photos, this starts to make sense, but the gap between Instagram and Youtube is not explained by visual content alone. The

difference between Instagram and everything else is that the story you create with a post is not told through language, but rather by your photo or video content alone. Comments, captions, and chats are language features that are just that: *features*. They don't take the spotlight from the real show, the picture. It is this emphasis on photos and visual content rather than textual media means that it can be consumed at a more rapid pace, and more importantly has very few interactions with the language barrier that so many other social media forms run into.

With the emphasis that can be seen on visual based media, it makes sense that the top two categories in which teens see the most foreign influence are both visual arts. Fashion, which is considered by Americans to be the category in which the most French influence exists, is a visual art, and seems to fit into the stereotype of French society, especially with Paris being the "Fashion Capital of the World." Funny enough, the same is seen in France, as the number one most American influenced category being cinema, which fits right in to the Hollywood-like perception of the United States. The other striking category that has a high level of American influence in France is music due to the higher rate at which music is produced here in the US.

With Instagram, Snapchat, and Youtube being the top social media forms, it's easy to wonder why all of the hundreds of other social media forms haven't struck the same chord with teenagers as these ones. A major reason of the success of these companies is their quick natured ability. Unlike some generations, teens rarely use social media to converse or discuss topics, but rather to share pieces of their lives with the world, and see what the world is doing with their lives. This means then, that the use of social media to students is not something with a predicted timeline; students use social media when it's convenient, not when it's scheduled. This results in the desire for as much info to get across at once, and if a picture is worth a thousand words, the

big three social media giants are having people write to their heart's content. With access to a camera within reach, and a stable internet connection, every teen out there can show the world exactly what they're thinking without ever typing a word.

Visual based social media is popular among teens, regardless of the nationality, because of its ability to send a message, tell a story, or get a point across at a faster rate. Because of the popularity of this nonverbal and non-textual media, the language barrier no longer needs to be crossed when communicating with someone online. Instead, people can share interests with, follow, like, or otherwise interact with people from across the globe who might not speak the same language, and still communicate effectively without words at all. In addition, because there is no language barrier, French students who might or might not speak any English are much more likely to be heavily influenced by and exposed to American culture. Conversely, Americans are very unlikely to be very influenced by the the French culture, and will experience much less French society online. This can be explained by the vast amount of media produced by the United States as well as the lack of close proximity that the US has to a French-only speaking country, unlike the French, who live in close proximity to the UK. Teens from around the world are focusing on the United States, and what we post online will be seen and interpreted to people who don't always speak English, and it is crucial to recognize just how important our role as Americans is to the spread of ideas worldwide, on the internet and otherwise.

I would like to give a monumental thank you to L'Alliance Française D'Oklahoma City, as well as L'Academie D'Amiens for sponsoring this research trip for me and the other fellows. Thank you to Mrs. Shaw, who put an innumerable amount of hours into organizing this trip for us. Thank you to the Lefebvre family for welcoming me into their home, and to the faculty of Lycée Delambre for welcoming all of the fellows into their school. A thank you also goes to Mr. Harney, our chaperone for the trip, for introducing us with dignity to a culture different from our own. And lastly, thank you to the other fellows who accompanied me on this trip for making it an experience that I have grown immensely from, and will certainly never forget. Merci beaucoup à tous!