

Blog Analysis: An Exploration of French Students' Perceptions Towards Foreign Cultures During Their Overseas Internships

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Increasingly, tourism and hospitality university programs in France include internships which add a vocational dimension to the academic aspects of the course. These internships a) provide exposure to real world professional situations, b) add market value to the student experience, and c) offer a foothold for employment. The field of blog research is increasing in an effort to understand the social and economic context and impact of blogs: however, most existing studies only provide insight into English-language content. This paper explores French tourism and hospitality undergraduate student blogs—completed during their 4-6 month internships outside of France—as a manifestation of their knowledge. Qualitative analyses by means of text mining of the students' posts, was used to assess their experiences and perceptions. Utilizing content analysis, 28 blogs were examined with the aim of understanding blogs and blogging under the theoretical framework of cultural perceptions. Results demonstrated that these internship blogs provide rich and authentic feedback; the blogs facilitate student monitoring while allowing for a wide cross-section of readers to assess different destination-based student internship experiences. The results showed that the “image” students projected of their destinations were chiefly positive, yet tended to conform to their preconceived ideas of these places. This study underscores the importance of empathy and appreciation when working in foreign contexts, because even though student internships were located all over the world, a tendency to believe in stereotypes of peoples and places remained. The findings a) shed light into the process of perception transformation during overseas work placements, and b) have practical and methodological implications for researchers and educators who see academic blogging as a teaching and learning tool.

De plus en plus, les programmes universitaires de tourisme et d'accueil en France comprennent des stages qui ajoutent une dimension vocationnelle aux aspects académiques du cours. Ces stages fournissent une exposition à des situations réelles du monde professionnel, constituent une valeur ajoutée à l'expérience d'apprentissage et offrent une possibilité de s'implanter dans le marché du travail. La recherche portant sur les blogues est un domaine en expansion qui cherche à comprendre le contexte et l'impact des blogues sur les plans sociaux et économiques. Toutefois, la plupart des études à date ne portent que sur le contenu de langue anglaise. Cet article se penche sur les blogues d'étudiants français au premier cycle dans un programme de tourisme et d'accueil, complétés alors qu'ils faisaient des stages de 4 à 6 mois à l'étranger. Ces blogues sont interprétés comme étant une manifestation des connaissances des étudiants. Des analyses qualitatives effectuées par la fouille de textes publiés par les étudiants sur leurs blogues ont servi dans l'évaluation de leurs expériences et leurs perceptions. Une analyse du contenu de 28 blogues a été effectuée pour comprendre les blogues et le blogging selon le cadre théorique

des perceptions culturelles. Les résultats indiquent que les blogues animés pendant les stages offrent une rétroaction riche et authentique. Les blogues facilitent le suivi des étudiants tout en permettant à un large éventail de lecteurs l'accès à diverses expériences vécues par les étudiants pendant leurs stages. Les résultats ont révélé que l'image qu'ont projetée les étudiants de leurs destinations était surtout positive mais qu'elle tendait à correspondre aux idées préconçues qu'ils se faisaient de ces endroits. Cette étude souligne l'importance de l'empathie et de la reconnaissance dans les milieux de travail étrangers car, malgré le fait que les stages se sont déroulés partout au monde, la tendance de croire aux stéréotypes liés aux gens et aux pays demeuraient. Les résultats mettent en lumière le processus de la transformation des perceptions lors de stages de travail à l'étranger. Ils ont des incidences pratiques et méthodologiques pour les chercheurs et les enseignants qui voient en les blogues des outils d'enseignement et d'apprentissage.

During their bachelor's degree course in International Tourism and Hospitality Management (RISLAV), French students who opt for the overseas placement track at the University of Cergy-Pontoise are required to apply for and obtain an internship abroad of at least four months in a non-French speaking country, carried out within a framework of cooperative education (Inui, Wheeler, & Lankford, 2006). Foreign students enrolled in the program, meanwhile, carry out their internship in France. According to the University's program literature (2017),

this internship abroad is a real opportunity to discover a new country and culture. It will allow you to open up new opportunities for your future. It is beneficial for all students to be personal and professional. It is not uncommon for former students to be offered and to accept permanent contracts in the countries/companies that hosted them on internships (Author's translation).

Even though students are expected to find their internships on their own, they have access to a database containing hundreds of addresses of companies where former students completed their internships. The companies are also evaluated by the former students who record qualitative evaluations of the company, the country they completed the internship in, and the tasks accomplished during their internship. There are also language classes in French, Italian, German, and Spanish, where students are coached in the writing of their CVs and cover letters as part of the academic program. Once the internship is secured, an administrative procedure allows them to settle all the details of arrival, and all stakeholders must sign established protocols to make the agreement legally binding. Some interns are offered a salary, some a stipend, others are offered free room and board, while others receive no remuneration at all; this issue is left entirely up to the host company. During their internships students are entrusted with professional responsibilities while acquiring expertise that will benefit them academically, personally, and professionally, thus bridging the gap between the academic curriculum and the industry (Airey & Johnson, 1999). There is a further challenge, as French students are thrust into a non-native language environment. The subsequent development of a range of transferable life skills prepares graduates for autonomous post-campus life and boost their employability. Bodenhorn, Jackson, and Farrell (2005) highlighted the possibility of deepening cultural awareness for students employed in multi-national environments; since this study's objective is to explore French students' perceptions towards foreign cultures during their overseas internships, strengthened consciousnesses of international societies would fall into the scope of the investigation parameters. This is interesting for this study because the result is that the

interactivity and ease of access adds to the credibility of the material. For Tribe (2002), work placements encourage students to come to terms with understanding and developing critical and ethical awareness. The university's stated objectives of internships, in comparison, dealt with discoveries related to a country and a culture as well as professional opportunities.

For these students, editing and maintaining a blog—personal journals made accessible to the public via the web—was part of their program's pedagogy. Students who opted out of blog writing had to submit a 30-page internship report, while bloggers in contrast only needed to write 15 pages. Additionally, bloggers were required to submit one structured electronic report to their university-assigned tutor per month, while non-bloggers had to submit two reports per month. However, the blogging students were strongly encouraged to write weekly posts that could contain photos, videos, and audio. These entries could describe or show the events that occurred during their internship. Moreover, the posts could be highly subjective and reflective, offering their thoughts, opinions, and preferences while they were away from their institution, and for many students, their country and home.

The blog entries, arranged in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2002) during the data collection process, provide a platform for what is academically expected to be analytical and critical reflections (Yang & Chang, 2012). This is important for this study because the result is that the interactivity and ease of access adds to the credibility of the material. In turn, this is needed to ensure scientific integrity in the subsequent interpretation and analysis of the data. Blogs have unique technological attributes such as ease-of-use, information archiving, and their interactive nature, which sets them apart from other forms of computer-mediated communication (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Huffaker, 2004). This interactivity and ease of access shows the veracity of the content.

Literature Review

Research has confirmed many positive uses of blogging, including developing students' analytical and critical skills Oravec (2002), as well as encouraging autonomy and learning through collaboration. Blogs are being used more frequently as a teaching tool in second-language classes since they allow students to take "a more communicative role" (Pinkman, 2005, p. 14). This communicative role lends itself to the explorative approach of this study, specifically in terms of probing perception, since the students are expressing their own thoughts, reacting to new situations as they occur, and sharing that reaction through their blogs. Blogs were described as "I, I me-me-me environments" by Thorne and Payne (2005, p. 382), emphasizing the individual ownership of blog spaces as being very personal. Therefore, within the scope of this investigation, this means that the information gleaned not only has a first person view but also one that is recognized as such and defended by the writer. Additionally, some researchers have claimed that blogs can improve writing skills (Downes, 2004; Hall & Davidson, 2007). A blog is primarily a form of writing, almost a genre, which as such has its own rules, in that it is usually short and regularly updated. However, the students have expressed themselves regularly in this form meaning that this element of consistency can improve their skills.

The constructivist social approach is based on different language situations such as expression, explanation, negotiation, and engagement with peers (Bakar & Ismail, 2009). Undoubtedly, all these conditions can be applied to the competence of writing a blog particularly since there are variations in social and political outlook expressed in the style and in the content of each blogger. Furthermore, the writing process involves structuring information and

reflecting on errors before an editing process can begin. The students will therefore have to carry out all these steps in order to publish posts which are clear for the general public, and also to satisfy the academic dimension of the exercise.

We can also identify how the constructivist approach can be applied to the use of a blog when students are writing about a collaborative project such as an internship since their teachers, family members, and peers also have access to their posts and are among the main group of people who leave comments on the blogs, as demonstrated by the blogs in this study. Chan and Ridgway (2006) describe a blog as an environment in which students must “actively engage in the co-construction of knowledge with their peers and with their tutor” (p. 2). The understanding here is that writing a blog is an authentic writing experience and encourages students to think about their own opinions, while considering how their views can be interpreted by others before publishing their post. Blogs therefore give a purpose to writing in that students write for an audience and not just for their tutor. Kennedy (2003) notes that “Web publishing gives students a real audience to write to and, when optimized, a collaborative environment where they can give and receive feedback” (p. 3). Furthermore, Goodwin Jones (2006), as cited in Bakar & Ismail (2009), mentioned other positive aspects of blogging: a blog offers a) an opportunity for collaborative learning through two-way communication that is promoted between a blogger and a reader, and b) it is in this student-centered learning environment that students can develop the skills of persuasion and argumentation. This gives a new dimension to the posts, and allows students to feel as if they have a real audience. The sum effect being more authenticity and interaction in the posts analyzed. The key to using blogs seems to depend on the course design, particularly within a student-centered the context, meaning that the technicalities of the exercise must be ironed out and explained to students; it helps if a course includes the use of blogging interfaces, writing applications, and a choice of platforms within the course design. The format, context, and frequency of the written text needs to be clearly explained to students as well, so that it appears coherent within the scope of the course

The conclusion that can be drawn from this brief literature review is that there are many applications for using blogs in second language learning. Stanley (2005) summarizes five reasons: a) providing a real writing experience for students, b) offering students additional reading practice, c) increasing the sense of community amongst students in particular classes or cohorts, d) encouraging the process approach to writing, and e) developing autonomy and constructivist learning skills. The fourth step, the process approach, outlines how students are encouraged to respect appropriate phases, including prewriting, drafting, and revising while they are writing blog posts. This will help them to fully use the linguistic tools at their disposal to write: these tools include detailed and accurate descriptions, a focus on accuracy of descriptions, and providing supported information when possible. The fact that students are actively involved in a process of creating, organizing, and curating content as opposed to being passive receivers of transmitted information means that students are contributing to the knowledge they acquire. This review suggests that a well-organized vocational training targeted at helping students to acquire employable skills and designed with understanding of the benefits can make a blog a very educational tool for English teachers and their students alike in an increasingly globalized world. In fact, higher education can no longer ignore internationalization and globalization (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008). The fact that this study seeks to explore students’ perception towards other cultures while the students are abroad makes it therefore quite relevant in terms of Wiers-Jenssen’s concerns about the importance of internationalization and globalization. In terms of

the value of international internships, the modern world is actively seeking to erase commercial and cultural borders; this trend is also a feature of higher education, where 2.5 million students annually study outside their country of origin (OECD & UNESCO, 2014). The French board of the Council of Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) states that internships involve a degree of self-supervision and which enables students to “learn by doing” and reflect on learning in a way that allows them to “achieve learning aims and objectives” (CAS, 2008, p. 1). This shows that both the CAS’s and UNESCO’s concerns regarding international internships and the learning by doing approach are integral aspects of the work placement/blog field work at the heart of this study. Citing data from the American Council on Education (CEA), Hayward and Siaya (2001) reported that 90 percent of the 500 college seniors interviewed agreed that an international education would help them work better with people from other cultures. Moreover, 88% of the respondents thought that an international education would give them a competitive advantage in the workplace (Hayward & Siaya, 2001). Educators are becoming more aware that a well-structured international internship experience allows students to acquire comprehensive skills and competencies which are required for the internationalized marketplace.

The Purpose of the Study

Despite extensive research as evident in part by the above literature review and education blogs in general, academic studies on blogs by French undergraduate students in the context of overseas internships is rare. This study is therefore a contribution to educational research in general as it would provide information in an emerging research domain. French tourism students’ blog reflections on their overseas work placements could add a new dimension to the discussion on perceptions and identity; in turn, this could positively inform the way language and culture education is conceived since they provide a unique, culturally-specific viewpoint. In fact, because thought informs discourse, and when one group’s cultural habits (the students’) are pitted against another (host country) through contact and analysis via blog entries, the result could be extremely edifying for educators as well as the learners themselves. For example, the experience of social relationships in daily general and professional life in a different society may cause some students to feel threatened, exposed, misunderstood, homesick, like an outsider, or question their own customs in the light of a newly-discovered way of life. The study uses blogs written by students reading for a Bachelor’s Degree in International Tourism Management at the University of Cergy-Pontoise. The blog entries give rise to a tutor/student discussion during monthly reports, or face-to-face conversation when the student returns following their internship. It is not always easy to replicate the situations students experience while abroad in their internships, but attempts could be made at role play in the classroom to prepare prospective interns. The objective of role playing exercises is not necessarily to train them to react in the same manner to every possible scenario, but rather to question their own beliefs about the Other and to promote cultural awareness.

The objectives of this paper are to identify and analyze student perceptions of cultural differences while on their international placements, and to investigate how the students addressed the cultural challenges they encountered as outlined in their blog posts. Even though the blogs were published and therefore available for critical study by the public at large, an upstream email was sent to the entire student and faculty body mentioning data collection and analysis, offering students to opt out if they desired. No student chose to be excluded from the

study. The research approach is qualitative (Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2003) and since this study is exploratory in nature, the qualitative approach will be more useful in gaining insight into underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations for opinions expressed in the posts. Of particular interest for this paper is the extent to which French students interacted with members of the host society, and how students viewed their own identities based on how they described themselves on their blogs. As such, one of the contributions this article offers is that it provides a unique insight into the specificities of French students in overseas internships.

Internships are generally based on understood concepts of experiential learning. However, there are few standards among programs that offer this type of education in an international context. With participation in international internship programs continuing to increase, by outlining the specific contexts of the internship available through the International Tourism Management Bachelor's Degree at the University of Cergy-Pontoise, this paper helps international organizations to assess the differences and similarities with other programs in order to envision standardization and good practices specifically for international internships. If the standards for program development and administration, performance evaluation, and university credit structure for internships are accepted across the board by the international community, then this will benefit all stakeholders. This is particularly pertinent in cases where mobility is an issue. Students, institutions, and potential employers are ensured an across the board coherence in terms of actionable skill sets. Therefore, instead of starting all over, international students and young employees can be entrusted with the tasks as their local counterparts. By contributing to this effort, this paper promotes the interconnection of global education systems, which will aim to strengthen partnerships between higher education, the wider business world, and students, ultimately helping to position graduates advantageously to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The proposed framework focuses on contextualized social elements. The concepts within the framework used in this paper are the combination of a) a discussion of existing literature on blogs which guides the analysis, and b) a discussion of the emerging findings on how this online tool is used in the practice of scholarly communication. This descriptive framework will help to clarify the manner in which the different concepts are interwoven; for example, content and context, or purpose and form. The framework therefore helps to classify themes while promoting an iterative process of analysis.

Hypotheses

This paper has four hypotheses, as follows:

1. French students will often blog about confirmation of stereotypes they already held prior to travelling to their internship destination.
2. Students will unfavorably or favorably compare French culture to that of the host country.
3. Students will express negative or positive reactions to being the Other in a new cultural landscape.
4. Students will share a pathway to self-awareness related to career choice.

Methodology

To test the four hypotheses, data was collected from a sample of 29 student blogs; 26 were

written in French, one in English, and two in both English and French. This sample represented the students enrolled in the bachelor's degree course in International Tourism and Hospitality Management at the University of Cergy-Pontoise in 2014 who had chosen to write blogs. Each blog link was verified and one inactive URL was removed; thus, 28 blogs remained (males = 5, females = 23), which represents the final sample. Voyant Tools—a web-based reading and analysis tool for digital texts—was used to organize the data. Culminating the 28 blogs into Microsoft Word created a corpus of 560 posts totaling 322 pages. Each blogger posted an average of 20 posts. Ages of the blog authors ranged from 19 through to 28, with the mean age of 21 years old.

Students whose internships were located outside of Europe were a minority. One student each was in South Africa and Australia, two were in South America, four were on the North American continent (including one in the Caribbean), and there were four blogs from interns in Asia. With 17 placements, students placed in European countries accounted for the majority of bloggers.

Framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) was used to identify themes. This qualitative method is a variant of content analysis and uses a matrix developed by Ritchie and Spencer to facilitate breakdown and examination of quantitative data. It is aptly suited for studies on perception since it enables research on specific questions in a pre-designed sample considering *a priori* issues asked within a limited time frame. Thus, this research—including the four framing hypotheses—are an example of a framework analysis. The primary concern of framework analysis research is to describe and interpret what is happening in a specific setting (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The methodology can be divided into four categories: contextual (or familiarization with the content), diagnostic, evaluative, and strategic. The goal of the *Contextual* category is to identify a) the form and nature of the content by probing for attitudes or perceptions held, b) the nature of people's experiences, c) their needs, as well as d) looking at the elements which operate within the context under study. The *Diagnostic* category examines the reasons behind the issues probing the underlying factors for certain attitudes and perceptions, as well as the reasons why certain decisions or actions were taken or not taken; at this stage the themes and sub-themes are normally identifiable and can thus be indexed. The *Evaluative* and *Strategic* categories appraise the effectiveness of the actions taken to achieve objectives and analyze the elements that affect the successful delivery of them. These categories also determine how and if experiences affect subsequent behaviors as stated by bloggers. An example of this would be how the student avoids obstructions, which hinder their objectives from being met. From this, the researcher can identify new plans or actions. Moreover, they can recognize the types of services required to meet their needs and to improve the system, thereby making it more effective to overcome problems. The four methodological categories lead to the final stages of the research process, which are the summarization and interpretation of findings.

Limitations

The blogs in this sample were written as a required component of the students' degree programs while they were away on internships. Once the students obtained their degree all of the blogs were abandoned; meaning, the bloggers did not add new content but remained available on the internet. The findings are therefore limited to the period in which the blogs were active. In addition, blogs are limited means of data collection compared to interviews, because while this type of content analysis allows for an investigation into perceptions, it does not benefit from

direct researcher-blogger contact which could offer a more nuanced perspective. What is more, while the bloggers' tendency to give recommendations might be significant, it must be noted that the students were advised that their blogs would offer a one-of-a-kind first person account for subsequent interns. This means that perhaps the students were also writing to some extent, with this specific reader in mind.

Given that the bloggers posted under their own names and thus did not benefit from the cover of anonymity, there might have been limits to how comfortable the students were in sharing their opinions, self-expression, and self-reflection. This limitation might also be exacerbated by the fact that students were instructed to create their blogs as part of their course requirements. However, this perceived limitation may on the contrary be liberating to students who are *digital natives*: defined by Marc Prensky (2001) the term refers to children raised in a digital, media-saturated world that require a media-rich learning environment to excel, and therefore, sometimes enjoy the visibility and empowerment offered by the opportunity to become active participants of the online community. Indeed, many particularly highly self-regulated students maintained far more than the once weekly academically-required entry, including videos and a multitude of photographs of the location, their acquaintances, and of course, themselves.

Results

The students used the platforms Wordpress, Wix, and Jimdo to create their blogs. The blogs were divided into at least five distinctive sections: a) a "home page"; b) an "about me" page; c) a page about their internship, subdivided into months; d) a page about their "adventures"; and e) another page linking to their peers' blogs. Some students added pages dedicated to local life, the town, a contact page, and a photo and video archive. The results show that blogs allowed students to work autonomously, particularly for content creation and to reflect on cross-cultural and linguistic comparisons. The students' online communication was closely and almost exclusively linked to their offline existence; thus, discussions generated by blog posts were usually with classmates or family.

Emerging Categories, Themes, and Subthemes

Following the methods of framework analysis, the first step, called familiarization, is applied by reading the blogs repeatedly to become completely immersed in the data and context. This is the textual equivalent of "deep hanging out" coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1998). Familiarization allows the researcher to get to the second step, identifying the key themes and sub-themes, that make up the thematic framework of the blogs. This leads to the indexing process, which consists of selecting the interesting fragments of the blog, highlighting themes and sub-themes which are then coded thematically. The next step is summarizing, which allows the researcher to tell the story that emerges from the fragments selected. The summaries are then compared thematically across blogs; following this, they are interpreted by attempting to make links and develop explanations across content and themes.

Following the process outlined above, four themes were identified: Culture, Identity, Space, and Interaction (See Table 1). Each of these themes provided further investigative and interpretative pathways. The four themes were then divided into like pairs of a) Culture and Identity and b) Space and Interaction.

Table 1

Theme Categorization

| Theme | Subtheme | Illustrative Extract* | Related Hypothesis |
|----------|----------------------------|---|---|
| Identity | Distress | As for my life in Cape Town, Monday night blues hit due to the bad weather (yes were hit with a hailstorm here!), and due to the fact that I miss my family and friends a little. | H1, H3 |
| | Self-awareness | I realize it's a bit tiring to think all day in another language. | H3, H4 |
| | Career planning | I learned many new things about tourism here, and I feel like I am becoming...more professional. | H4 |
| Culture | Company | ... to my surprise, all the employees are barefoot, dressed in shorts and tank tops! I am relieved not to have to wear pants during my internship as the heat here is really tiring! | H1, H2 |
| | Entertainment | On the island there is no fast food, no cinema, no supermarket, no brands, no production, and hardly any "culture." | H1, H2, |
| | Eating habits | Everything is different: culture, the way of working, gastronomy ... a little clichéd coming from a Parisian, but let's be a little nationalistic; French food is still the best! | H1, H2, H3 |
| | Gendered relationships | With friends ..., physical contact happens daily: to a hug man/woman is not frowned upon; it is their way to kiss. | H2 |
| Space | Religion & sports | In Malta, the population is very religious and religion occupies a very important place in everyday life. | H2 |
| | Departure/Arrival | My last day was unforgettable; a meal was organized in my honor, gifts were offered, and there was a very moving speech from the owner ... I leave with the skills I acquired in only a few months, and the desire to continue in this field. | H4 |
| | Accommodation | I think the best solution is a roommate: this helps with the cost and friend aspects, and especially helps to practice the language! | H4 |
| | Local Travel & Sightseeing | I will have the opportunity to visit the Bolivian capital for a few hours ... The city is quite chaotic but the people are rather pleasant! | H1, H2, H3, H4 |
| | Flora & Fauna | We ... contacted the Corredor Biologico [an NGO comprising 17 associations and small producers whose goal is to preserve the wildlife] ... to ensure the proper use of natural resources. | H4 |
| | Factual Knowledge | In Ecuador, Colombia does not have this image of being permanently dangerous that it has in France. It is rich in natural heritage and hosts many tourists from Latin America. | H1, H2 |
| | Interaction | With locals & International Interns | She's really sweet. His friends did not hesitate to include me in their discussions and one of them, who had spent several months in France, helped me when I did not understand ... Obviously, the evening ended with dancing, and of course, salsa. |

*Note: All extracts are the translation of the authors.

Culture and Identity introduce the many-fold issues that emerged when students used their capacity for symbolic thinking and abstract reasoning to draw conclusions about who they are and how that construct differed from or resembled local norms. The analysis of these themes generated a representation of the interplay between self and society in these French students' perceptions of the cultural landscapes they experienced during their overseas internships.

Interaction and Space examine intercultural learning – the various methods and frequency with which students communicated with foreigners. The ways in which students explored their surroundings to gain both tangible knowledge and analytical insight were also categorized under this heading. Finally, Interaction and Space involved student perceptions of the outcomes of the contact they made with others. These themes include contractual work-related issues, accommodation, and travel.

In order to further categorize the language within the blog posts, a content analysis procedure was administered taking into account context as well as word frequencies. A standard set of subjects was then created. For example, self-referencing using first person pronouns, mentions of the bloggers family, and the French nationality were considered indicators of the Identity theme. Words that mentioned place names coupled with the mention of customs, local habits, or way of life were classified under the theme of Culture. For the theme of Space, the ways in which students mentioned navigating the new environment was analyzed. The theme of Interaction was often evidenced using plural first person pronouns and in reference to situations which promoted intercultural learning.

Additional subthemes included under the theme of Space were preparation for departure (from France as well as from the host country), accommodation, travel, sightseeing, flora and fauna, sharing factual knowledge about the internship company, place, and people. Within the theme of Culture, discovering company organizational systems, entertainment, eating habits, gender relationships, religion, and sports were included. Emotional distress (missing family, and country, as well as losing their bearings), self-awareness among people seen as different, and career planning were part of Identity theme. The Interaction theme comprised students' perceptions of interactions with locals, interactions with other interns, reactions to being perceived as the Other, and language-related angst.

Overall, the students frequently wrote about their own identity obliquely, namely in association with their view of the culture of their host country. This was usually demonstrated through a comparison of the reality experienced firsthand versus their expectations. Student bloggers provided useful information for other future interns who may want to choose their country or company destination (visa requirements, precautions, must-see sights, company culture). They also commented frequently on how they coped with accommodation challenges, their desire to meet local inhabitants, and how they communicated with their families back in France while honoring their professional and academic responsibilities. The students did not blog with equal frequency or intensity about their adventures outside of the strict academic and professional contexts. However, they all tended to experience moments of euphoria:

Time for a bus ride! The guide was great! He was interesting, taught us tons of things, and had a very nice voice. We started with a small tour of ancient Viking homes; their interiors are much bigger than we thought! Then we went to the top of the cliffs to try and observe puffins!! We saw some!!!! I was more than happy!! (Author's translation).¹

These were intermingled with low points tied to various points in their four-month placements:

“As for my life in Cape Town, Monday night blues hit due to the bad weather (yes we were hit with a hailstorm here!), and due the fact that I miss my family and friends a little” (Author’s translation).²

The student bloggers tended to highlight the value of foreign language acquisition and learning on the job; they also described themselves as being attentive to the lessons they were being taught by their local contacts. Some bloggers however, found the lack of physical comfort, hectic schedules, difficulty communicating in a foreign language over the telephone, and the repetitive nature of some tasks (usually software and other back office tasks) daunting. Generally, the bloggers preferred client-based activities.

Indeed, many students wrote on their experiences in professional settings and the transition from working abroad in the tourism sector to being tourists themselves. Across the blogs the students tended to confirm their career choice though not necessarily in similar positions as their internships, as one blogger illustrates:

After such an experience, here’s my assessment: I still have one month left in my internship to travel and discover Peru. I feel some relief at the thought of completing my internship because it has unfortunately not been carried out in the best conditions. Still, I was able to learn a lot about this work, and about myself. I also completed my first goal, which was to improve my Spanish. I can now easily hold a conversation, even if I don’t speak perfectly. (Author’s translation)

The blogger continues,

“I understand now that working in a travel agency is not for me. Sitting all day behind a desk is a long day ... Furthermore it is an online agency, where we almost never meet clients. I much prefer human contact ... I have not been able to experience that very often during my internship” (Author’s translation).

Student bloggers also mentioned interactions with other interns or with tourists, either of French nationality or other nationalities. These were usually presented in a positive light except on issues of language where students were rather unhappy with over-exposure to other French or non-Anglophone interns because they figured that this limited their acquisition of the target language. In general, language acquisition and its challenges figured very prominently in the blogs. For example, one blogger mentioned her relief at being able to attend a meeting in English after spending her working days speaking other languages:

To do this, there is no need to be bilingual in German (which does make things easier); however, it’s necessary to have a good level of English. Since the participants are from all over the world, they are used to this kind of event and speaking in English. I therefore have the opportunity to practice speaking English, since my professional tasks are conducted mainly in French and Italian! (Author’s translation)³

Reflection on emotionally distressing or socially unjust experiences during their internships was common: “they know how to do many more things than me, but they accept me having a higher salary just because I am European ...” (Author’s translation).⁴ The students had a difficult time rationalizing these situations and often saw themselves as failing to meet their standards of justice and fairness in situations outside of their control.

Identity and Culture. The broad category of identity in the analyzed blogs encompassed

various forms of interactions and the way these led students to become more self-aware. Further analysis of this category revealed that issues related to three of the four research hypotheses were dealt with in the student blogs. The students' posts related to social/family support systems during their overseas placements, social and cultural events in which they participated, as well as their global viewpoints; these provided insight into their expectations and perceptions of France and the French. Below is an example from a blogger who was on a placement in Ecuador and participating in an exercise class: "She said that for a French girl I handled myself well. I do not see why the French would be any more rigid than Ecuadorians, but her comment made me laugh" (Author's translation).⁵ In this extract we see that when the blogger is confronted with another vision of her perceived "Frenchness," she examines and rejects it while at the same time questioning the logical validity of the assertion. Another student had a different perception of herself and other French people: "unfortunately, I fear that the French are not so gifted in languages as the Germans ..." (Author's translation).⁶

In this excerpt—which refers to foreign language use and mastery—blogger herself makes sweeping generalizations based on the French nationality. A third student communicates something else:

Even if they propose to pay me more than my colleagues, I do not feel that I can pretend that I am above their level; they can do many more things than I, so if I accepting to be paid more than them only because I am European is problematic. (Author's translation).⁷

The above quotation relates to national identity and self-perception compared to what seems to be the accepted norm in the host country. The student however rejects the status quo and reflects on the ethical validity of the state of affairs.

The interns consistently reflected on various perceptions of their European/French identities and how it differs from their own views. These differences often led students to adopt either a defensive or amused tone by either refusing to adhere to stereotypes or grudgingly accepting the classifications bestowed on them. In all of the blogs the students—even those that faced many challenges—were able to find positive aspects of their cultural discoveries. One student wrote for example that the difficulties she experienced on her internship in Thailand helped her to grow as a person:

You must understand that adaptation is VERY hard here ... it is very hard to work with Thai nationals, and I think that was one of the major problems I encountered. They are very nationalistic and close-knitted, and have difficulty accepting foreigners in their team ... From a personal point of view, this experience has taught me take a step back and reevaluate situations, to take care of myself, to combat loneliness, and develop patience. (Author's translation)⁸

Through the descriptions of various social, professional, cultural, and religious events and their perceived role in the host country, the student blog content revealed underlying representations linked to nationalities. Indeed, an assessment of posts published particularly as it relates to destinations and cultures brought to the fore the importance of cultural norms to the French interns. One student was taken aback by what she perceived as a lifestyle that was diametrically opposite to her life in France:

Although during my last days of course I did not experience the famous "culture shock," the following weeks showed me how the life I lead here is totally different than I led in Paris. Everything is

different: culture, the way of working, gastronomy ... (Author's translation).⁹

Space & Interaction. For the categories of Space and Interaction, the analysis revealed that the student bloggers' local support systems included natives of the host country as well as other interns. Further category analysis revealed all four research hypotheses were concluded under the themes of Space and Interaction. The students' posts for the most part related to their social/family support systems during their overseas placements, highlighting the overwhelmingly positive role played by local social conventions and cultural events in which they participated. The fact that they often anticipated these interactions and experiences through their pre-internship expectations provided insight into their very own perceptions of France and Frenchness as they introspected on the aftermath of their interactions in this new space. Below is an example from a blogger who was on a placement in Edinburg and handling final administrative tasks to prepare for her return to France: "How do I adequately express my desire to stay in this city where life is so nice, always bustling with very warm locals and festivals? But everything has an end. Concerning work, I've busy all week with several tasks" (Author's translation).¹⁰ The next example is an interesting snapshot of the moment the reality of the space is understood by the student blogger. Her immediate reaction, as she reflects and relates, is one of gratitude and the desire to share pictures through the platform to further engage readers:

Then finally, here I am on a much smaller plane than the previous one, en route for Cusco. Only an hour and twenty minutes before finally being able set down my luggage; during this flight I realized how lucky I am to be here, looking out at the Andes illuminated by the rising sun. I can make out the snow on the highest peaks, as well as small villages perched high in the mountains. This moment was just magical ... and I invite you to look at the pictures I have taken during this flight ... (Author's translation)¹¹

The students tended to experience acculturation and often a correction of their biases through interaction. The overseas experience and particularly the interactions in this new space fostered a more nuanced understanding of other cultures while developing the awareness that different approaches to a variety of life experiences can be equally valid. While bloggers were constantly conscious of their Otherness, this acute awareness of their status seemed to subside as they worked in teams locally towards common goals and attempted to support, collaborate, and share best practices using the company identity as a common denominator. Indeed the sustained and heightened levels of engagement produced knowledge and perception sharing which suggested that the majority of the students gained a pathway to professional and personal self-awareness.

Findings related to the four hypotheses. The first hypothesis—French students will often blog about confirmation of stereotypes they already held prior to travelling to their internship destination—is largely supported by the analysis. The French students blogged about confirmation of stereotypes they already held before travelling to their internship destination. Indeed, the locations were usually selected based on preconceived perceptions, and the students often blogged about how a variety of their interactions confirmed their expectations. This, according to Hewstone & Giles, relates to the ways that "stereotypes are used to constrain the behavioral alternatives of others, and to engender stereotype confirming behaviour from a target. In short, stereotypes become self-fulfilling prophecies" (1986, p. 16). This was confirmed

in the study because the notion of stereotypes and the students' awareness of clichéd imagery and cultural references were quite prominent among the blog entries.

The second hypothesis—students will unfavorably or favorably compare French culture to that of the host country—is also supported by the analysis. The students did unfavorably or favorably compare French culture to the country where they were completing their internships. These positive or negative ethnocentric/egocentric (Bennett 1993) worldviews may hinder intercultural communication and limit the learning experience of the internships. The intercultural development emerging from student blog posts shows what could be described as an ethnocentric projection of their own worldview onto others. The students' prolonged exposure to a foreign culture saw them identifying and evaluating differences in their blog posts. These differences were often presented from an affective, French/Eurocentric viewpoint as in the extract below: "It reminds me of France. French cheese is the best I have to admit, but it was still very good!" (Author's translation).¹² However, super-ordinate classifications did not always benefit the French way of life. Indeed, many students show strong, if somewhat romanticized, preference for the host country's way of life: "I realize how much people are much closer here. They have less, yet take advantage of everything life has to offer (more than us). This is a lesson worth learning" (Author's translation).¹³

Students will express negative or positive reactions to being the Other in a new cultural landscape—the third hypothesis—is supported by the research analysis. The French students reacted to being the Other in their new cultural landscapes. For the most part, this imposed Otherness is rejected. In fact, students do not want to be stereotyped by others and have a hard time accepting that they are seen as part of a group of people—the French—rather than as individualized people.

The fourth and final hypothesis—students will share a pathway to self-awareness related to career choice—is also supported by analysis. The students shared pathways to self-awareness related to their career choice in the field of tourism. The meta-cognitive awareness and control developed and shared through the blogs revealed that the French interns could recognize and overcome work-related, culture and space, and interaction challenges. They were able to understand their own capabilities, to analyze their own perceptions of the difficulty levels of their assignments, and apply effective strategic knowledge. This involves the continuous revision of belief, judgment, and previously-held perceptions in response to new information.

Discussion and Future Research

A key finding to emerge from the data and analysis is that the French student interns placed on overseas placements shared awareness of stereotypes—their own and that of others. From this, they became able to identify the pitfalls of over-generalizing. They tended to have overwhelmingly positive perceptions of foreign cultures. The information shared and the exploration of place, space, identity, and culture indicate that these French student bloggers are challenged across a broad range of information retrieval, identify perception, and problem solving skills.

Digital media provided the student interns with a critical platform through which they could air the different stages of their learning experiences and perception transformation. This contributed to their preparation for professional life in the travel industry, which itself requires an open-minded approach to perceptions of behavioral characteristics of an international clientele. In addition, the social interaction and self-expression the students demonstrated

emerged as dominant topics as well: this was evident by the ways the students explored their perceptions of different nationalities, and of the evolution of their culturally-biased belief systems. Blogging provided an outlet for analysis of the offline world and its social and professional constructs. As such, the posts often contained very specific contextual information linked to the company, the country, the people, as well as the ways the students interacted with all of these players. The use of pictures allowed the bloggers to intensify the sharing experience, as well as to personalize and enrich their posts.

The results also show then that educational blogs kept by student within a specified framework represent a rich source for analyzable qualitative information related to students who travel abroad as interns. Interactions with other professionals, administrative challenges, and emotional aspects related to place, space, identity, and culture often are dealt with in highly personalized manners by each student. According to Baxter and Connolly (2013), sharing information is a key feature of blogs; in this light, not only is this information of great value for future students intending to complete the program, but the blogs allow teachers to follow up their students' progress, evaluate the placement from the students' viewpoints, and analyze the learning strategies employed. If challenges emerge in this media for students, the educators can offer individualized assistance to students. In this way, program planners could use the information shared to adapt pre-internship courses to better prepare subsequent interns to deal with these potential sources of failure or emotional/professional distress.

However, further qualitative and quantitative evaluation is needed in this field; particularly, studies on French-language blogs, and blogs related to travelling and cultural perceptions are desired. The notion of student-centered learning by sharing regarding professional or country-based discussions can be applied to other fields of study as well. This in turn could also contribute to more thorough and authentic reflections about cultural perceptions as related to specific courses of study. More research of a comparative nature is also essential to analyze student social media expression outside of the French blogosphere. This will clear up the common misconception that blogs are unscientific or insignificant (Herring et al., 2004). As this field is constantly evolving and expanding, future research in a variety of communities could determine what differences if any, exists between different social groups as well as study the historical, social and in particular, educational evolution of blogging.

Summary and Conclusion

This article examined how French students represented the professional, sociocultural, and affective dimensions of their internship placements abroad. Through content analysis and more specifically framework analysis, four key themes relating to tourism placements were outlined: Culture, Identity, Space, and Interaction. Furthermore, the paper highlighted the usefulness of "education in 'life experience' terms" (Walmsley, Thomas, & Jameson, 2006, p. 365), and the ability of students to critically reflect on the link between social constructs and the realities of the tourism business through blog writing while involved in the internship process (Tribe, 2001).

The information shared by the students presented evolving expectations, perceptions, and the challenges they encountered while overseas. Overall, students shared positive experiences which involved them coming into their own on a variety of levels. The various types of socio-cognitive awareness such as exploration of perceptions, alternate visions, and openness to cultural differences as well as self-awareness and a desire for integration found in the blog

entries seem to bear this out. Some of these student insights triggered self-assessment, self-directed learning, and readjustments of pre-internship expectations and worldviews. The student online blog engagement allowed them to come to terms with their own evolving worldviews and to analyze their socially constructed assumptions and intercultural knowledge and skills while connecting and interacting with others (Lee, 2004; Ware, 2005).

While it is true that reader comments were made infrequently, and resulting blog entry discussions were rare and even then, many made by family members or other French interns, teachers did use the blogs for formative analysis and feedback thus formalizing this aspect of the student learning experience. Overall, blogs deserve further exploration by scholars. They are important for teachers and researchers who are interested in computer-mediated communication, online communities, technological development, and classroom integration.

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Notes

1 "c'est parti pour un tour en bus ! Le guide était super ! Il était intéressant, nous a appris des tonnes de

choses et avait une voix très agréable. On a commencé par un petit tour du côté des anciennes maisons des Vikings, l'intérieur est bien plus grand que l'on imagine ! Puis nous sommes allés sur le haut des falaises pour tenter d'observer des puffins (macareux) !! Nous en avons vuuuuuu !!!! J'étais trop heureuse !!~"

2 "Quant à ma vie au Cap, les blues de lundi soir ont frappé en raison du mauvais temps (oui ont été frappés par la grêle ici!) Et le fait ma famille et mes amis me manquent un peu."

3 "Pour ce faire, nul besoin d'être bilingue en allemand (ce qui va me faciliter la tâche), en revanche obligation d'avoir un bon niveau d'anglais, puisque les participants, venant des quatre coins du globe, ont l'habitude de ce genre d'événement et sont donc tous habitués à parler en anglais. L'occasion pour moi de ne pas trop perdre mon anglais, puisque mes journées au bureau se déroulent surtout en français et en italien!"

4 "elles savent faire beaucoup plus de choses que moi donc accepter d'être payée plus sous le seul prétexte d'être européenne..."

5 "Elle me dit que pour une française je me débrouille bien. Je ne vois pas trop en quoi les Françaises seraient plus empotées que les Equatoriennes mais ça me fait rire."

6 "malheureusement, je crains que les français ne soient pas si doués en langue que les allemands ... "

7 "Même si on me propose de me payer plus que mes collègues, je ne me sens pas d'accepter étant donné que je ne suis pas de leur niveau, elles savent faire beaucoup plus de choses que moi donc accepter d'être payée plus sous le seul prétexte d'être européenne."

8 "Voilà donc vous aurez compris, l'adaptation est TRES dure ici ... il est très dur de travailler avec des thaïlandais, et je crois que ce fut un des problèmes majeurs que j'ai rencontré. Ils sont très nationalistes et soudés, et ont du mal à accepter des étrangers dans leur équipe de travail ... D'un point de vu personnel, cette expérience m'a appris à prendre du recul sur pas mal de choses, à me débrouiller seule, à combattre la solitude et à développer ma patience."

9 "Même si lors de mes derniers jours de stage je n'ai pas subit le fameux "choc culturel", les semaines suivantes m'ont montré à quel point la vie que je mène ici est totalement différente de celle que je menais à Paris. Tout y est différent : la culture, la façon de travailler, la gastronomie ... "

10 "Comment exprimer mon envie de rester dans cette ville où la vie y est tellement agréable, toujours animée avec des locaux plus que chaleureux et des festivals. Mais tout a une fin. Concernant le travail, je suis occupée toute la semaine sur plusieurs taches."

11 "Puis enfin, nous voilà dans l'avion, bien plus petit que les précédents, destination Cuzco. Il ne nous reste plus qu'1h20 de vol avant de pouvoir enfin poser nos bagages, et c'est durant ce vol que je me rends vraiment compte de la chance que j'ai d'être ici: survol au plus près de Andes, illuminées par le soleil qui se lève à peine. On peut distinguer de la neige sur les plus hauts sommets, ainsi que de petits villages perchés en haut des montagnes. Ce moment fut tout simplement magique ... et je vous invite à regarder les photos que j'ai pu prendre durant ce vol..."

12 "Cela me rappelle la France. Le fromage français reste le meilleur je dois l'avouer mais c'était quand même très bon! "

13 "Je réalise à quel point les gens sont beaucoup plus proches ici. Ils profitent bien plus de la vie que nous avec moins de moyens. Une leçon à retenir."

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