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# French Vloggers in South Korea: An Intercultural Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

The contemporary world goes through a fundamental change with the acceleration of processes and events, which has had an impact on the interactions between people and the ways in which we represent ourselves. Even if it has become easier to travel abroad, to meet and interact with people globally, through new technologies and modes of transport, our recent times have also seen tensions and prejudices growing within social and cultural in-groups and between out-groups. In this context, this paper aims to emphasize the importance of intercultural communication in crafting a global future. Too often in the literature about interculturality, the experience of living abroad is presented as an interculturalizing experience by itself. However, this research, based on a critical approach to interculturality, highlights the fact that international mobility is important but not sufficient to develop intercultural competences. Drawing on research about transnational cultural practices and global cultural connectivity, this paper will present the results of a case study on French people living in South Korea who produce videos on Youtube where they broadcast themselves but also frequently introduce South Korean-related topics to their French audience. Using both a critical intercultural communication approach and a media discourse analysis, I analyze how these French Youtubers broadcast themselves and represent their experiences of living abroad. The study shows that despite trying to engage in an intercultural perspective with their host country, their videos contribute, even implicitly, to reinforce several cultural stereotypes.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, Vlogs, Transnational flows, Mediation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world goes through a fundamental change with the “acceleration of processes and events” (Rosa 2019), which has had an impact on the “manner of our being-in-the-world” (Rosa 2019). Even if it has become easier to travel abroad, to meet and interact with people globally, through new technologies and modes of transport, our recent times have also seen tensions and prejudices growing within social and cultural in-groups and between out-groups. In this context, this presentation aims to emphasize the importance of intercultural communication. Too often in the literature about interculturality, the experience of living abroad is presented as an “interculturalizing” experience by itself. However, this research, based on a critical approach to interculturality (Abdallah-Pretceille 2003, Dervin 2014), highlights the fact that international mobility is important but not sufficient to develop intercultural competences. This paper will present a case study on French people making videos about their experiences of living in South Korea. While I

previously analyzed these videos focusing on the use of new media technologies through a transnational perspective, this time, I combine this previous work with a new perspective using theoretical concepts from intercultural communication.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Media and Youtube studies**

All of the videos from our corpus have the particularity to be vlogs, or video blogs, a new term coined to describe a new practice of self-representation by blogging in the form of videos (Griffith and Papacharissi 2010). And while the vloggers from our corpus all use different social networks such as Twitter and Instagram, our study will specifically focus on their videos uploaded on Youtube.

Being the largest video platform on Internet, Youtube is now part of the mainstream media landscape (Burgess and Green 2013). Most studies on Youtube have focused on video production and user-generated content. And video blogging, or vlogging, is one of the most popular and dominant cultural forms “researchers have discussed [...] in relation to participatory culture” (Raun 2016). As Michael Strangelove pointed out, vlogs are indeed considered as “the epitome of Youtube as a social phenomenon” (Strangelove 2010) and a “site of self-expression” (Simonsen 2011). Indeed, as Jean Burgess explained, the study of blogs and vlogs “can reveal the cognitive and communicative processes through which individual bloggers [or vloggers] define their online identity, position themselves in relation to fellow bloggers [or vloggers], frame particular themes, topics and stories, and engage with one another’s points of view” (Burgess 2011).

Drawing on media and cultural studies, I explore the activity of vlogging and creating content on Youtube in the specific context of transnational experiences (Combe, Codreanu 2016). Digital media and technologies have reinforced the tendencies of globalization processes and interconnectedness between people, amplifying cross-border flows, intercultural interactions or cultural mixing and hybridized identification (García Canclini 1995, Iwabuchi 2002). To this end, it’s interesting to study how vloggers creating content while living abroad not only broadcast themselves but also often use their platform to talk about their host country, such as the different cultural practices they encounter or the experiences of other people they meet, be it local people or other foreigners.

### **2.2. Transnational and migration studies**

Most transnational and diaspora studies have mainly focused their attention on migrants’ and expatriates use of the Internet, exploring how “those living in the diaspora may digitally [deterritorialize or] reterritorialize themselves” (Leurs 2014). With this research, I offer a decentered approach of transnational cultural practices and global cultural connectivity. Instead of focusing on self-representation only, my goal is to also analyze how vloggers decenter themselves to talk about and represent other people’s experiences and other social and cultural practices. For that, I use vlogs as an entry-point to provide insights into the ways in which foreigners share their everyday experiences of living in South Korea as well as their perceptions and understanding of Korean culture.

### **2.3. Intercultural communication**

After previously working on this topic from a media and cultural perspective, I update in this paper my previous findings with a new corpus and a new approach focusing on intercultural communication which is based on my most recent research project in this field. Intercultural education and communication literature especially shows that “immersion in a different culture does not in itself reduce stereotypical perceptions of otherness” (IEREST 2015). It’s important to not consider “mobility as a value in itself”, but to also pay attention to the “the quality of the experience abroad, in other words, on the factors which can influence and foster the development of intercultural skills.” It’s precisely something I am going to analyze in these vlogs.

As intercultural communication is mainly explored through face-to-face communication or other types of interactions between people who are culturally, nationally, and linguistically different, I consider that it can also be analyzed from the perspective of media production and indirect communication, through user-produced content for instance, from which we can examine how people define or redefine themselves but also how they perceive, understand and represent other cultures or communities.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Methodological framework

Using a discursive analysis of these vloggers' Youtube channel and their videos, our study focuses on these following research questions for each channel:

1. Who are these vloggers and what is the general theme of their channels?
2. What are the different topics of their videos?
3. How do they broadcast themselves? What kind of relationship do they try to develop with their audience?
4. How do they represent (directly or indirectly) South Korea?
5. Finally, do they demonstrate intercultural competence or do they "reinforce and naturalize stereotypes" (Wall 2009)?

#### 3.2. Presentation of the corpus

After previously working on English-speaking vloggers, from different nationalities, mainly because most of these videos are made in English (Le Forestier 2017), I decided to expand my research with a new corpus of videos made by French-speaking vloggers. I was interesting to find which topics were developed in these videos, as well as the ways in which South Korea was represented, to see if it was similar to English-speaking videos or if we could find some differences.

A random sample was found and selected by using several keywords in French such as "vivre en Corée" (*living in South Korea*) or "Mon appartement en Corée ou à Séoul" (*My apartment tour in Korea or in Seoul*), two topics that were highly addressed by English-speaking vloggers. From these, I found twenty-five channels that could correspond with what I was looking for. While I was trying to find French-speaking videos (from different countries), all the vloggers found for this new corpus ended up being French.

Even if there are far fewer channels of French people vlogging about their experiences in South Korea, the scale of the data was still too big for this case study as there were almost three thousands videos available. Given the scale of the data, I decided to divide the study in two parts. I started with a preliminary study on the twenty-five channels with a more quantitative approach, which was followed by a qualitative discourse analysis on a selection of six channels. The criteria of selection of these six channels were as follows: the vloggers had to speak in French; they had to live in South Korea (in the present or in the past); and they had to upload videos regularly for at least a year to make sure there was content to analyze. I will not address this topic in this paper, but the vloggers also should not have been a public figure prior the creation of their channel as I was interesting to see if their channels have contributed to turn them into "social media celebrities" or not. The channel of Fabien Yoon was thus removed from the corpus as he was already a well-known model, actor and entertainer in South Korea (since 2008) before being active on his Youtube channel at the end of 2020. Finally, the vloggers had to have uploaded more than twenty videos and/or have more than ten thousands subscribers. Despite trying to have gender parity in the selected channels, only two channels of female vloggers matched the precedent criteria of selection.

**Table 1.** List of the 25 Youtube channels (data collected in July 2021)

Name of the channels	Woman/Men	Number of subscribers	Number of videos
SleepingBeauty	Woman	334,000	344
Laurent Caccia	Man	269,000	554
Pape San	Man	248,000	146
Togen	Man	147,000	47
Mayline et Lou	Women	115,000	219
Jake - The Korean Dream	Man	114,000	99
파비아양 Fabien Yoon	Man	87,800	35
Korea Dash	Man	86,500	52
VeryFrenchTrip	Women	60,100	165
Marine Anne Ohhlala	Woman	53,100	472
TOKKI DOKI	Woman	44,100	88
Le journal de Nunaya	Woman	27,400	200
Elisa Sgn	Woman	24,800	20
Amélie Dit	Woman	19,100	80
Evans Becker	Man	11,800	11
Fabien Sekai	Man	3,420	42
Jeff SoMec	Man	3,370	60
Leadventure	Woman	1,790	68
HUGSEOUL	Woman	1,720	29
Alixé	Woman	1,620	24
AkiiraKR	Woman	594	71
Heaven C	Woman	584	44
Mandoo	Woman	542	11
Dreamy Megane	Woman	539	22
UneFrançaiseEnCorée	Woman	208	25

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1. Focus on the channels

Using the data from the channels as well as those found on the website social blade.com (which were collected in July 2021), the first results of our quantitative analysis of the twenty-five channels show that most channels are owned by women, sixteen channels against nine channels run by men (Table 1). However, the most subscribed channels are mainly owned by men, which also have the most viewed videos. The first channel in terms of number of subscribers is “SleepingBeauty”, run by

Marie Tuffery, but the channel is more health and lifestyle oriented with only sixteen videos about her life in South Korea (which she has already left) on a total of three hundred and forty four videos.

When it comes to uploading content, all the channels were created between 2010 and 2020. Six channels have more than 100,000 subscribers, nine channels between 10,000 and 100,000 subscribers, five channels between 1,000 and 4,000 subscribers, and finally five channels under a thousand of subscribers. In terms of number of videos uploaded, it fluctuates between eleven and more than five hundred videos. When it comes to their personal profiles, the vloggers are all between twenty and thirty-five years old, but their socioeconomic status can be divided in four categories: having a working holiday visa (3), being students (7), being workers (7) or introducing themselves as entertainers, models, Youtubers, or social media influencers (8). Contrary to English-speaking vloggers, there is not any same nationality-couple or international couple among these vloggers.

#### **4.2. Broadcasting themselves and other people's voices**

The study reveals that the vloggers typically show their personal experiences while living in South Korea. We find some topics in common to most vloggers, as they talk about their arrival in South Korea, why they decided to live there, and most of them even do their apartment tour.

They use different camera shots and settings, usually fixed shots on a tripod, when they shoot at home, without any camera moves, except some zoom effects. Otherwise, they also shoot outdoors holding their camera by hand, talking to the camera while walking. Usually, all of them are always in front of the camera, and they talk directly to their audiences, using the singular or plural form of the pronoun "you" in French.

However, the content analysis also shows that one of the specificities of this type of channels is that the vloggers do not only broadcast themselves, they also use their platform to give some information about South Korea. The topics are usually quite similar and repetitive, like Korean food and tourist sites and destinations for instance, or Korean language and social and cultural practices such as how Korean people calculate their age, how to address people, or what to do and not to do in South Korea in order to be polite and respectful towards the local people. For the most part, this is the kind of information that is usually found in travel guides or Korean language textbooks.

Despite this overall lack of originality when it comes to topics, few channels stand out by offering insights on topics that are rarely addressed. For instance, it's the case of the channel "Togen" run by a young entrepreneur named Nicolas. In 2018, he started a series called "What's up Korea?" in which he introduces local news topics and events such as the tragic story of the sinking of the Sewol ferry in 2014 ("La tragique histoire du Sewol (Documentaire + Témoignage d'une survivante) - WHAT'S UP KOREA #31" – video uploaded in June 3 2020), the suicides of students or celebrities, or the story of sexual abuses or murders. The vlogger explained at the beginning of his series "What's up Korea?" that he wanted to address topics that are usually ignored by other vloggers or Youtubers talking about South Korea because they are "less attractive" and "fun" according to him. Despite the seriousness of the topics being discussed, it is necessary to mention that the titles of his videos are usually quite catchy which emphasize the fact that these videos are more entertaining than informative, following the trend of Youtube native content compared to traditional news media.

In another perspective, few vloggers, such as Pape San or Laurent Caccia, give space to other people's voices by letting them talk directly about their experiences. We can mention videos about Korean people who do not comply with the standards ("être TATOUEUR ILLÉGAL en Corée", video uploaded on Laurent Caccia's channel in August 11 2020), about the experience of mixed-race people ("Être métisse en Corée" video uploaded on Pape San's channel in April 1 2021) and how they are perceived in Korea, or about the experience of Muslim people ("La vraie vie des MUSULMANS EN CORÉE", video uploaded on Pape San's channel in April 7 2021) and other Asian people living there ("La dure réalité des asiatiques (non-Coréens) en Corée", video uploaded on Pape San's channel in September 16 2020).

#### 4.4. An intercultural approach: limits of their culturalist perspective

From these findings, we can consider that these vloggers play a role of cultural mediators which is sometimes confirmed by the fact that some of these vloggers have become “cultural ambassadors” appointed by the Korea embassy in France, such as Mayline and Lou from the channel “VeryFrenchTrip”, and other similar programs in Seoul.

However, the content analysis also highlights a general tension between reducing and reinforcing stereotypes. Very often, the videos tend to reinforce unconsciously cultural stereotypes by adopting a culturalist approach to South Korea, which means that culture is understood as “shared habits, beliefs and values of a national group” (Kotter 1996). Consequently, it gives, as Fred Dervin explained, a “rather too imaginary, homogeneous, and limited and *solid* pictures of national groups” (Dervin 2007). The culturalist approach is visible in videos that deal with topics that are largely addressed and depict Korean people with typical characteristics because of their national group. It also appears in videos that adopt a more comparative approach which focuses on cultural differences between France and South Korea when it comes to relationships, with family or with love partners for instance.

Overall, it gives the impression that the intercultural skills lie on learning knowledge about national cultures and countries to be able to communicate with the Other. However, intercultural studies that have developed a more critical approach (Dervin 2014), have demonstrated that learning grammars of cultures is not sufficient to be interculturally competent. It is as important to develop a more reflexive and analytical approach which takes into account the strangeness and unpredictability of the experience but also the fact that everyone has multiple identities which they convoke in various identification strategies depending on the context.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper only focused on a small part of a bigger research project which aims to develop a more precise analysis of this type of Youtube videos which are similar yet quite different from travel vlogs made by tourists who only visit countries without living there (Peralta 2019). Even if most of the vloggers of our corpus do not have any collaboration with cultural institutions, such as the Embassy of South Korea in France or the Korea Tourism Organization, some of their videos can still be considered as destination marketing tools (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts 2007). However, beyond promoting a destination image (Peralta 2019), these videos also have the specificity to broadcast the real experiences of people living in a foreign country that are culturally quite different. After living in South Korea for a while, some vloggers experiment a tension between the initiative attractiveness they had for the country, which made them wanted to visit the country or to live there, and the more complex reality of actually living there as foreigners. It is also noteworthy that their digital activity as vloggers has contributed to make them social media celebrities with a community of followers similarly to travel influencers (Sigala and Gretzel 2018). Indeed, some started to create video content as complete amateurs, while being student or having a full time job, but some of them have since become full-time Youtubers, after finishing their studies or quitting their job, and professionalized their production and improved the overall quality of their videos. While most research has focused on the characteristics of travel videos as well as on the influence of the travel influencers on their followers (Chen, Shang and Li 2014), there is still a lack of research projects that investigate the specificities of these kind of videos made by vloggers living in a foreign country, not just visiting it. Overall, there is a need to develop more studies based on intercultural communication in order to not only conceptualize more precisely these digital activities as well as the representation of (inter)cultural dynamics, but also to explore how these videos influence viewers’ perspective on foreign countries and outgroups as well as on the possible intergroup contacts.

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