

# JE SUIS FRANÇAIS

## MOI NON PLUS

Le vrai  
baiser  
français

Garder les  
hommes effrayants  
loin

Les femmes  
françaises  
ne grossissent pas

# le Printemps 2013





## Introduction

*Je Suis Francais - Moi Non Plus* is a survival guide for an outsider visiting Paris, presented in the form of a fashion magazine. Through this medium of representation a commentary is made on the importance of beauty and fitting in visually.

## Background

All my life I have lived in fairly protected and predictable communities. I was born and raised in a small northern Michigan city, and then moved to Ann Arbor later to continue my schooling. The move to higher education was a big step for me, but it wasn't really until I spent a semester abroad in Paris that I was truly pushed out of my comfort zone. This experience was nerve-racking and thrilling at the same time, which was exactly what I needed. Though it was a big city, and a great distance from the only 2 places I had ever lived, those weren't the main reasons for my discomfort. My main discomfort stemmed from the French people's form of communication and the culture that accompanied it.

It became my goal to provide a commentary on these struggles and experiences, so I have written from first-hand knowledge about the lessons I have learned. These lessons were some that I wish I had known before I dove head first into a foreign culture myself, providing the main reason why I want to share them with others now. I barely had any knowledge of the French language before going overseas for the academic program, so this difficulty with being understood and properly understanding others was amplified. This was true more so for me than was the case with many of the other students. Slowly I learned phrases and words I was comfortable with using, and it was meal times that I had to adapt to quickly.

All of the food was an incredibly large part of my experiencing the culture. Not only is French culture very passionate about the experience of food, but also eating meals throughout the day is essential for every person, no matter the person's ethnicity or background. It was these constant interactions to receive food that taught me the most about communication. Though in the beginning I could not necessarily understand what the women were saying, working behind the counters at the Boulangeries, through the repetition of ordering from them multiple

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*figure 1 - a passionfruit macaron with chocolate filling*

times a week I learned meanings of phrases through contextual use, and also gained confidence in speaking an order. Misunderstanding and misrepresentation were my biggest fears while living in Paris and so I found myself questioning what we communicate, through both language and behavior, when in a situation that feels foreign to us. Everything I did, said, or wore, sent a message to any witness. As far as what message I was sending, I was never entirely sure.

The idea of the City of Paris is a romantic and beautiful one for most Americans. Not only is the physical city, with its historical architecture and general atmosphere thought of in this way, but also for the beautiful people thought to inhabit it. (figure 2) "Paris is the big city for fashion. There are huge fashion shows here that display the latest designs."<sup>1</sup> Because fashion is one of France's top three exports and is one of the leading employers, it is clear why fashion is so important to them. "When designers have to choose a place to show their collections, Paris is usually on the

<sup>1</sup> Watts, Jasmine. "Top Five Fashion Cities for Shoppers and Industry Careers." Yahoo! Voices. Yahoo!, 4 Apr. 2007. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.



*figure 2 - just one of the numerous beautiful French women seen outside of the Chanel fashion show during Paris Fashion Week*

top of the list."<sup>1</sup>

Through all of my experiences during my four months abroad I was able to see the biggest cultural differences through my gastronomical undertakings, and at the same time the many obvious similarities. The food in Paris was not only enjoyable to consume, but it was a full experience including the appreciation of beauty. Just like in a recipe, where one single ingredient doesn't make a dish, it is not only one experience or aspect of a time abroad that influence one's feelings about the place and culture. The way of preparing a recipe also has a similar feeling of rehearsing and putting on a performance. Every dinner with my host family felt like a performance to me with lines to learn and rehearse as well as staging directions and acting cues to memorize.

It is immediately obvious from my experiences, as well as countless others told to me, that there has always been a culture gap and difficulties in communication. With the adaptation of technology these days, however, it seems that the world is getting more global. Finding some way to communicate with anyone in the world is getting more and more



possible. The internet proved to be an instrumental tool for me while living in Paris. I used the “translate” function on Google for basic translations, though not necessarily grammar. Even more than that website, I used Facebook. I would “chat” with the other students in my program on there while doing homework in our separate apartments and I would also constantly post to my own profile, documenting my experiences. I originally posted about my exploration and adaptations for my loved ones back home in the United States, but it actually ended up giving my host sisters insight into my everyday activities. Having my Facebook profile available to them was what really allowed them to get to know me on a slightly deeper level than my rudimentary language skills allowed. The current technology made a big difference for my overall experience.

Because of my secure past in my only two locations of living prior to coming to Paris, the feeling of not belonging was particularly uncomfortable for me. I found that I desperately wanted to be able to go through my daily activities without drawing attention to myself, and wanted to avoid the overly touristy activities. I related tremendously to the writer David



figure 3 - the introductory page to the article discussing social media and its use abroad



figure 4 - a moment witnessed where this French man casually leaned against the railing to enjoy his cigarette

Sedaris as he was featured in “This American Life: Americans in Paris” as he dealt with similar feelings while living there. “He describes his experiences as moments of humiliation and moments of near humiliation. And if you hang out with him you realize, he is not exaggerating much.”<sup>2</sup> After attempting to light his cigarette on a walk David says, “This is my worst nightmare. Ok my lighter has run out of fluid, which would mean that I would have to ask somebody, for a match. So what I would say is ‘hello, do you have some fire?’ and I so hate saying that, that’s why I usually carry four lighters on me so I always have a back-up. I will not spend the afternoon asking people if they have fire.”<sup>3</sup> He was so afraid of interactions like this because of a fear of standing out. This was exactly how I felt in almost every situation I was put in while in Paris. He was so conscious of his speaking in French, and potentially being judged that he went back to the same places that had people who treated

2 Glass, Ira. “Americans in Paris.” This American Life. Chicago Public Radio, 28 July 2000. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

3 Sedaris, David. “Americans in Paris.” This American Life. Chicago Public Radio, 28 July 2000. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

him well and steered clear of those that did otherwise. He would continually go back to his favorite hardware store, even to buy things he didn’t necessarily need, simply because he appreciated the people working there. He said “I say just really stupid things when I go in there but I always say it in French, and they’re incredibly good sports. He is really really nice and it’s a place I can always count on where somebody’s going to be good to me.”<sup>3</sup> I found myself doing the same thing, returning to the places where I was comfortable and the people would treat me well. The encouragement even helped my speaking abilities by minimizing the anxieties.

With all of my feelings of being uncomfortable, I did everything I could to be prepared for a given situation, but chances are I wouldn’t know exactly what I was preparing for. Preparation is what you need in order to feel like you really fit in, and through my experiences and especially lessons learned, another student following the same path might have an upper hand. I was amazed at how much technology could assist me in my learning more about how to

communicate with the French through their culture, and even the social media used daily played a large part in my communications day to day. Facebook bridged a gap between the French women I knew who were my age and me. The biggest misconception with traveling abroad is that the act of communication is only verbal, when in fact I have discovered it to be so much more.

That being said, regardless of the information communicated through my work and readily available through technology and resources today, will learning the lessons beforehand really help the foreigner at all?



## Creative Work

### The Fashion Magazine Form

In order to present all of the abundant and necessary information to the audience of this work, and because of the beauty and influence of fashion, an illuminating work in the style of a fashion magazine was created. In a fashion magazine there are many elements making up the whole, and this nature supported the multifaceted issues that I was choosing to discuss through my work.

A fashion magazine is a common source for superficial information for women, generally focused on beauty. It is also often written in an instructional way, providing the reader with information on how to theoretically fit in.

The copies are printed on thin glossy paper and bound with a perfect binding rather than saddle stitch binding, to create the solid flat spine as is seen on the popular fashion magazines found in stores. The idea behind this professional presentation, utilizing French writing on the cover, is to make the piece easy to reference while in the foreign culture without giving oneself away as an outsider.

Having French text on the outside cover but English text throughout further enforces the theme of an attempt to fit in and also the conflict of an outer appearance not representing what lies within.

### The Written Articles

The articles included in *Je Suis Français - Moi Non Plus* all reference lessons learned during the time in that culture, so as to potentially be used for the next person going into a similar situation. Most articles are a combination of lessons learned through individual experiences but also guidance shared by others who have been in the same situation previously. (figure 5)

### The Cosmetic Advertisements Using Food

As any fashion magazine would, beauty advertisements are included intermittently with the





figure 5 - the title page to the article *French Women Don't Get Fat*

various articles. The way that these cosmetic, or superficial, advertisements are different from those seen every day is each one's utilization of food. Every product is made of food, contrasting with the plastic containers of the cosmetics.

Some advertisements presented in the work are subtle in their reference to food, such as the Lancome bronzed powder or the Bobbi Brown eye shadow palette (figure 6 and figure 7). Other advertisements are much more obvious to the viewer. The Chanel lipstick made of celery is a particularly effective example of this (figure 8). Using food as a visual medium was essential to highlight how central it was to my struggles with communication while living abroad.

### Contextual Discussion

During my time abroad I experienced extreme culture shock and through my work, it is my hope that *Je Suis Français - Moi Non Plus* creates a sense of bridging the gap between the two cultures. There has always been a culture gap and difficulties in communication, but with the adaptation of technology today it seems that the world is getting more global



figure 6 - Lancome advertisement using Powdered Hot Cocoa

and finding some way to communicate and understand one another's lives is more possible than ever.

2.7 billion people in the world today - that is approximately 40% of the entire population - are online.<sup>4</sup> "In the developing world, 31% of the population is online, compared with 77% in the developed world." As one might assume, both Europe and the United States falls into the developed world category, which explains the similarities in internet usage. "Europe is the region with the highest Internet penetration rate in the world (75%), followed by the Americas (61%)."<sup>4</sup> It is no wonder that European culture is so accessible to us as Americans through online resources, but viewing Europe's way of life in this way gives a superficial representation and puts a potentially false image in our minds.

Even though technology is tremendously helpful when preparing for an experience abroad, nothing can take the place of being there and experiencing it first-hand.

<sup>4</sup> Roy, Sumit, and Brahim Sanou. "Information Communication and Technology Industry Facts and Figures for 2013." Scribd. Information Communication and Technology Industry, 30 Mar. 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.



figure 7 - Bobbi Brown advertisement using various pressed sugars



figure 8 - Chanel advertisement using fresh-cut celery

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