

# **Study Abroad in the Age of Social Media**

Irwin Compiegne

BA – Contemporary French Literature and Teaching French as a  
Foreign Language, *Université d'Aix-Marseille*

MA – Didactics of French as a Foreign/Second Language and  
Intercultural Education, *Avignon Université*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

University of Technology Sydney

2020

# **Certificate of Original Authorship**

I, Irwin Compiegne, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature:

Production Note:  
Signature removed prior to publication.

Date: 06 February 2020

## Acknowledgements

This thesis has been completed with the support of the UTS International Research Scholarship.

There are many people who made my thesis possible. First, I am extremely grateful to my supervisor A/Prof Julie Robert for her mentoring, dedication and intellectual guidance throughout my candidature. I would not have gone through this research project over the past three and a half years without her advice. Her constructive feedback challenged me every time, helped me to see the big picture and improve my articulations of findings.

I would like to acknowledge several other scholars from UTS, starting with my alternate supervisor, Prof Lesley Harbon, for her support and invaluable comments throughout my project. I am grateful to the panellists of my candidature assessments for their insightful and pertinent feedback, Dr Elena Sheldon, who assessed my research at every stage, A/Prof Elaine Lally, Dr James Meese and Dr Amelia Johns. In addition, I owe a huge thank you to Dr Angela Giovanangeli and Narelle Fletcher for their help and insights at the beginning of my project.

I am also thankful to Prof Jane Jackson who kindly took time to meet me when she came to Sydney as a visiting scholar. I have been extremely fortunate to receive the insights, recommendations and thoughts from such an expert of in the field of study abroad.

I extend a special thank you to Dr Brigitte Jandey who offered me my first opportunity in Australia to follow my passion for teaching French Language and Culture and pushed me to undertake this PhD.

There is one person without whom I would not have done even a fraction of everything I achieved in the past 16 years, my wife, Dr Burcu Cevik-Compiegne. From the non-degree Diploma of FLE to this thesis, I could move through each phase only because of you, your support and your love. I know how difficult it was to allow me the time and space to focus on my research, especially with the pregnancy. I am looking forward to new adventures with you, Samuel and Lucy.

Throughout my candidature, I was very fortunate to have the most supportive and friendly network among the fellow PhD students at UTS. I would like, first, to deeply thank my

friends from my Pomodoro writing group, Dr Chrisanthi Giotis, Bilquis Ghani and Cale Bain for their support in my writing especially at the final stage of my candidature. I would also like to acknowledge Bherokh Abbasnejad, Daniel Ouyang, Suman Laudari, Zablon Bosire Pingo, Pauline Murray-Parahi and Marie Palmer for their kindness and friendship.

I am also thankful to Dr Guenter Plum for copy editing and proofreading my thesis, making it more readable.

Finally, this project would not have happened without my generous participants who shared their thoughts and granted me access to very personal aspects of their lives. Thanks to them, I could vicariously be part of their adventures and escape the monotony of my study desk. From the very first meeting, they were all very enthusiastic to share their experiences. I am grateful beyond words, this thesis exists because of them.

To Burcu, Samuel and Lucy.

# Table of Contents

<b>Certificate of Original Authorship</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Background .....	2
Research questions and conceptual frameworks .....	5
Research methodology .....	6
Research contributions .....	7
Overview of the thesis .....	9
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Study abroad, education and travel .....	13
Identity, study abroad and second language acquisition .....	20
Students’ social networks in study abroad .....	28
Social media and study abroad .....	35
Unanswered questions .....	43
<b>Chapter Three: Research Methodology</b> .....	<b>47</b>
Research questions .....	47
Theoretical frameworks.....	48
Rites of passage .....	48
Emerging adulthood.....	50
Research design .....	53
Principles of ethnography .....	53
Digital ethnography .....	54
Facebook.....	55
Instagram .....	56
Benefits of using social media data .....	57
Photo-elicitation: definition, origin and benefits .....	59
Phases of the study .....	62
Data collection .....	62
Participants .....	68
Data analysis .....	72
Conclusion.....	74
<b>Chapter Four: Rethinking Students’ Social Networking in a Study Abroad</b>	
<b>Context</b> .....	<b>76</b>
Social network representation via social media .....	77
Compatriot networks .....	80
“On site” co-national network .....	80
Online co-national network .....	86
Multi-national networks .....	89
Students who are either proficient or native speakers of the target language.....	92
Host national networks .....	95
Conclusion.....	115
<b>Chapter Five: Travel during Study Abroad</b> .....	<b>120</b>
A year of travel.....	121

Separation .....	126
Transition.....	130
Incorporation .....	150
Conclusion.....	153
<b>Chapter Six: ‘You don’t fit here’: Relatives’ Visits during Study Abroad .....</b>	<b>157</b>
First tensions.....	160
Changes in the power dynamics .....	168
Apprehension about return .....	176
Conclusion.....	178
<b>Chapter Seven: Conclusion .....</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>Appendix: Pre-departure semi-structured interview — Questions .....</b>	<b>217</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b> Example of a participant’s anonymised post. ....	64
<b>Figure 2:</b> Facebook researcher’s profile. ....	66
<b>Figure 3:</b> Pattern code “Social Networking” and sub-categories. ....	74
<b>Figure 4:</b> Erika’s Facebook post. Photograph of Erika, Alexandra, Trevor and another peer on their way to Switzerland. ....	81
<b>Figure 5:</b> Patricia’s friend’s Facebook. Photograph of Patricia and other Australian students in Aix-en-Provence. ....	82
<b>Figure 6:</b> Alexandra’s Facebook post. Photograph of Alexandra and Erika dining with other study abroad students. ....	90
<b>Figure 7:</b> Patricia’s friend’s Facebook post. Patricia with other study abroad students in a bowling alley. ....	91
<b>Figure 8:</b> Patricia’s friend’s Facebook post. Photograph of Patricia holding a drawing. ....	96
<b>Figure 9:</b> Patricia’s friend’s Facebook post. Photograph of Patricia in a bar with local students. ....	97
<b>Figure 10:</b> Patricia’s friend’s Facebook post. Photograph of Patricia at a farewell party with local people. ....	97
<b>Figure 11:</b> Anne’s friend’s Facebook post. Photograph of Anne and her soccer team. ....	100
<b>Figure 12:</b> Anne’s Facebook post. Photograph of Anne and her soccer team. ....	100
<b>Figure 13:</b> Alexandra’s Instagram post. Photograph of Alexandra and her friend (domestic student). ....	102
<b>Figure 14:</b> Erika’s Facebook post. Photograph of Erika and her friends in their dormitory. ....	104
<b>Figure 15:</b> John’s Facebook post. Photograph of Diana and her French friend in Budapest. ....	114
<b>Figure 16:</b> Diana’s Facebook post. Photograph of John and Diana’s French friend in Budapest. ....	115
<b>Figure 17:</b> Alexandra’s Facebook post. Photograph of Trevor and Alexandra posing at the airport. ....	126
<b>Figure 18:</b> Anne’s Facebook post. Photograph of Anne and her family posing at the airport. ....	127
<b>Figure 19:</b> Erika’s Instagram farewell post. ....	128
<b>Figure 20:</b> John’s father’s Facebook farewell post. ....	129
<b>Figure 21:</b> Anne’s friend’s Facebook post. Photograph of Anne and Australian students in Montpellier. ....	131
<b>Figure 22:</b> Anne’s Instagram post. Photograph of Anne in Montpellier. ....	131
<b>Figure 23:</b> Alexandra’s Instagram post. Photograph of Alexandra in Lausanne. ....	132
<b>Figure 24:</b> John’s Facebook post. Photograph of Diana in Lyon. ....	133
<b>Figure 25:</b> John’s Facebook post. Photograph of Diana in Portugal. ....	137
<b>Figure 26:</b> Diana’s Facebook post. Update post announcing the addition of new photographs to her album. ....	140
<b>Figure 27:</b> Anne’s Facebook post. Photograph of Anne in Brussels. ....	141
<b>Figure 28:</b> Anne’s Facebook post. Photograph of Anne in London. ....	143
<b>Figure 29:</b> Erika’s Instagram post. Photograph of Erika in Zurich. ....	145
<b>Figure 30:</b> Diana’s Facebook post. Photograph of Diana in Copenhagen. ....	149
<b>Figure 31:</b> Erika’s Facebook post — GIF with her parents. ....	172



**Figure 32:** Erika’s Instagram post. Photograph of Erika and her parents. .... 173  
**Figure 33:** Trevor’s Instagram post. Portrait photograph of his mother in Lausanne. . 174

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1:</b> Data in numbers .....	68
<b>Table 2:</b> Participants' demographic information.....	71
<b>Table 3:</b> Categories of people identified on participants' posts on Facebook and Instagram .....	79
<b>Table 4:</b> Proportion of activities and settings represented in participants' posts.....	122
<b>Table 5:</b> Countries visited over the three-month summer break .....	125

## **Abstract**

The advancement of information and communication technology has radically transformed the nature of study abroad and the way in which students apprehend this experience. As part of this larger shift, social media and digital communications have changed the way people interact, communicate and socialise and therefore also transformed the nature of study abroad as an immersive context for second language learning. This thesis aims to better understand the holistic and socially transformative dimensions of study abroad and explores the impact of what has become a quasi-constant digital connection to home on two traditional models of study abroad: the model of social network development (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Coleman, 2013, 2015; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011, Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Schartner, 2015) and the theory of study abroad being a rite of passage (Grabowski, Wearing, Lyons, Tarrant, & Landon, 2017; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Starr-Glass, 2016) to transition to emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2010, 2012) effected through a strict separation from home. The study is based on a digital ethnography of seven Australian university students learning French in France or Switzerland on a year-long study abroad program. Data were collected by following and cataloguing participants' posts on both Facebook and Instagram. These textual and photographic posts subsequently served as prompts for in-depth photo-elicitation interviews.

Findings indicate that using social media as a research tool in the study abroad context raises new questions and provides new insights. First, participants' narratives highlight the need to rethink students' social networking paradigms as the traditional circles of study abroad socialisation are challenged by the use of social media in study abroad contexts and the shifting student objectives and motivations inherent in the larger study abroad sector. Second, the digital ethnography revealed the central role played by travel experiences while studying abroad. Contrary to expectations, these travel experiences fostered participants' feelings of belonging in their host environment and their identity transition to emerging adulthood. These outcomes at once support and complicate the conceptualisation of study abroad as a rite of passage that impacts students' identity. Third, the online ethnography revealed an unstudied but important phenomenon: the visit from participants' relatives, specifically their parents. These visits disrupted the separation from home, disturbed participants' experience and negatively impacted their

identity transition to emerging adulthood. The thesis accordingly acknowledges the changing landscape of study abroad and the need for researchers to adapt to it. Consequently it advocates for the use of research tools aligned with rather than simply evaluative or critical of students' established digital practices.