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## At the crossroads: Rethinking study abroad students' social networking and intercultural communication in the age of globalization



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### Abstract

The literature exploring study abroad students' social networks and intercultural communication traditionally considers three categories of social ties: the co-national network, the multi-national network and the host national network. However, the data collected from a yearlong digital ethnography and the narratives on the social media posts of seven Australian university students of French highlight the need to reconceptualize these traditional divisions. Findings point to three insights that contribute to the discussion on social network development and intercultural communication in study abroad context. First, quasi-permanent communication with home through social media induces the emergence of an additional social network that has not, until now, been addressed in the literature: the online co-national network. Indeed, participants' interactions with home directly influence the way in which they adjust to their host environment and socialize during their sojourn. Second, the social tie composed of multi-national students who are proficient or native speakers of the target language should also be considered as an extra category owing to their buffer position between second language learners and the host community. Third, the multi-national and the co-national networks were largely compartmentalized from the host national network shedding light on the issues that study abroad students face in socializing with local people.

**Keywords:** study abroad, social networking, social media, intercultural communication, globalization

### Introduction

Over the past few decades, the number of students traveling abroad for higher education has consistently increased (UNESCO, 2018). As international travel will progressively start resuming after the global Covid-19 pandemic, it is crucial to better understand how students learn from and interact with the different communities with whom they are in contact while abroad. In this article, intercultural communication is defined as “interpersonal communication between individuals or

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groups who are affiliated with different cultural groups and/or have been socialized in different cultural (and, in most cases, linguistic) environments” (Jackson, 2014, p. 3). In the field of study abroad, much research has investigated learners' linguistic gains and the factors fostering or hindering students' access and engagement with native speakers in the host community (Fraser, 2002; Isabelli-García, 2006), with a particular focus on short-term study abroad programs (Dewey, Ring, Gardner, & Belnap, 2013; Kinginger, 2010; Shiri, 2015). More research, however, is needed to understand how students create, develop, and maintain their social networks over time and engage and interact, both offline and online, not only with locals but also with the various communities they will encounter while abroad.

Consequently, this study seeks to address the following questions:

- 1 What is the composition, structure, and nature of the relationships that study abroad students create and maintain abroad?
- 2 What does the use of social media reveal of study abroad students' social networking strategy and intercultural interaction?

To answer these questions, a digital ethnography of seven Australian university students learning French in France or Switzerland on a year-long study abroad program was conducted. Data were collected by following and cataloguing participants' posts on both Facebook and Instagram which then served as prompts for in-depth, photo-elicitation interviews.

### **Social networking and intercultural communication in study abroad context**

The research on the composition of and the specific functions that each social network for study abroad students fulfills is long-standing (Bochner et al., 1977; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Most studies in this field are network density analyses, limited to counting the number of contacts from each social network type a subject has without focusing on the quality of the relationships created nor on the potential benefits for the students in terms of intercultural learning. To date, research has consistently found that study abroad students' social networks comprised three circles: co-national or compatriot students, other study abroad students or multinational networks, and host nationals (Coleman, 2015; McManus, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2017; Schartner, 2015).

#### **Co-national network**

Most studies have found that the co-national network, which consists of compatriot students also studying abroad, is the primary social tie for students. Bochner et al. (1977) found that the main function of this network is the expression of affirmation of the home culture. Maundeni (2001) confirms this initial finding and adds that compatriot friends provide continuity in students' feeling of cultural identity which, in turn, contributes to reduction of acculturative stress when adjusting to the new environment. In fact, falling back on social relations with compatriot students would be a natural behaviour when facing cultural differences and linguistic difficulties. On this point, in her study of four American students studying abroad in France, Wilkinson (1998, p. 32) notes that “the spontaneous formation of home culture ‘islands’ may actually have been the most efficient way for the students to keep from drowning in the French ‘ocean’ while they began to process the barrage of cultural differences and linguistic challenges faced on a daily basis”. This network may work as a buffer with the host community as it may attenuate the stress that students often face when crossing cultures especially at the beginning of the sojourn (Kim, 2001). Compatriot students provide a source of comfort and, through social and cultural interactions, a better understanding of the host culture (Woolf, 2007).

Conversely, Ward and Searle (1991) found that the co-national network may have a negative impact on the acculturation process and may render students less willing to adjust to different cultural norms and form friendships with local people. As a result, second language learners who prioritized friendships with co-national students would lack opportunities of meaningful interaction in the target language (DeKeyser, 2007) which, ultimately, may negatively affect their learning (Maudeni, 2001), their cultural adjustment, and their overall satisfaction abroad (Hendrickson et al., 2011).

Findings in the literature on the function of the co-national network are thus somewhat contradictory. Geeraert et al. (2014) argue that the influence of compatriot friends may, in fact, vary over time depending on the particular phase of the stay: positive at the beginning when the acculturative stress is at its highest and negative later on as it may impede cultural learning and adjustment. However, individual differences more clearly explain the variations observed. Expected patterns as described by Geeraert et al. (2014) can be inaccurate. While some relationships could foster mutual assistance and push students to step out their comfort zone and engage with the host community, others could inhibit intercultural learning and cause students to retreat into ethnocentrism. These contradictory findings reveal the need for longitudinal ethnography and for in-depth analysis of the creation of these friendships as well as their dynamics.

### **Host national network**

The host national network is composed of host nationals, including domestic students. There is a common assumption among study abroad students and educators that study abroad automatically entails developing relationships and intercultural communication with host nationals (Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013). However, even though students usually expect to develop connections with locals (Sakurai et al., 2010), lack of meaningful interactions with host nationals has been repeatedly reported (Brown, 2009; Schartner, 2015). Deardorff (2009, p. 212) warns against a risk of “ghettoization” of study abroad students and the role of institutions in limiting this risk in fostering contacts with local people and especially domestic students.

Three main reasons are commonly given to explain this difficulty in connecting with host nationals. First, the language barrier makes it hard for foreign students to develop relationships with host nationals (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). Second, study abroad students may perceive discrimination (Kinging, 2008). Third, most host nationals already have well-established social networks and often do not seek or need friendship as much as study abroad students (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Rienties et al., 2012).

The literature on students’ social network development consistently shows that connection with host nationals is essential in the adjustment process. Although, at the start of a sojourn, contact with host nationals is not essential for students’ adjustment, Geeraert et al. (2014) found that students who did not develop connections with host nationals over time were more likely to experience higher levels of stress. The acculturation process is therefore complex and evolves continuously throughout the sojourn. Long-term stays are more likely to give students opportunities to develop friendships with locals since meaningful interaction occurs over time (Volet & Jones, 2012). Longitudinal research is once more needed to explore the structure and composition of students’ friendships with locals.

### **Multinational network**

The multinational network comprises other international and study abroad students from around the world. Upon arrival in the host environment, students usually start forming friendships with other study abroad students as they share a common bond of being outsiders (Kim, 2001). In contrast to

other social ties, the role of friendships developed within the multinational network remains largely unexplored (Young et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the benefits of this network are manifold: it increases students' intercultural awareness since they are exposed to various cultures and fosters a sense of commonality. While Sovic (2009, p. 747) refers to "cosmopolitan friendships", Montgomery and McDowell (2009) talk about a community of practice strengthening a sense of belonging and well-being. Students find support in this community which reinforces their social identity. For instance, Kashima and Loh (2006) found that multinational ties were related to better psychological adjustment and identification with the host university. Additionally, the multinational network enables students to learn and practice the target language through interaction with other language learners. Hendrickson et al. (2011) note that because students often feel embarrassed, notably due to their accent, they feel more confident speaking with other multinationals. Surprisingly, studies of multinational students with native or high levels of proficiency in the host language are absent from the literature despite the fact that these students, for instance Québécois students studying in France or Switzerland, are a valuable source of the target language exposure for second language learners. Additionally, they give second language learners the opportunity to acquire a sense of global citizenship as they realize that the language they are learning is part of a larger space than just the host country.

### **Social media and study abroad**

In the literature of study abroad, social media has so far mostly been treated as a variable, that affects the quality of the experience and the exposure to the target language and culture, with the goal of assessing the implications for linguistic gains. On the one hand, some researchers argue that social media has a positive impact on the quality of immersion in that it can reinforce connections and strengthen communication with the host community (Durbidge, 2019), ease anxiety and the fear of missing out (Hetz et al., 2015), reduce homesickness (Mitchell, 2012) and facilitate access to information (Mikal et al., 2014). On the other hand, some have found a negative impact of its use, in isolating students from the host culture (Kelly, 2010; Magnan & Lafford, 2012).

On the positive side, the research on social media use in study abroad contexts upholds a common assumption that digital connectivity allows study abroad students to maintain their social bonds with their supporting networks back home, which, in turn, contributes to their well-being (Godwin-Jones, 2016). In an article drawing on a case study with nine participants from an intensive English language program in the United States, Mitchell (2012) found that many of her participants joined Facebook during their sojourn in order to bridge the distance with friends and family and consequently reduce their feelings of homesickness. Online communication with home was also found to help reduce students' acculturative stress (Sandel, 2014), ease social adjustment, and strengthen feelings of belonging to the host society (Lin et al., 2012). Using a survey administered to students from five of the largest study abroad programs in the United States, Mikal and Grace (2012) confirm that digital connection with home eases acculturation due to the "continuity provided by a sense of connectedness and the consistency of online communities" (Mikal & Grace, 2012, p. 300). They also report that students used the Internet to create virtual opportunities to connect with the host communities and seek practical information about the host culture, such as finding a cultural event. Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) confirm the finding that social media help students to expand their network in the host community upon their arrival.

Conversely, many studies claim that digital connectivity to home may prevent students from fully engaging in the host culture consequently reducing their interactions with target language speakers. Kinginger (2008) reports on this negative impact in her case study of an American student in France. Digital communications with home through emails and instant messages with friends and relatives

prevented the student from feeling “really immersed” (Kinging, 2008, p. 96). In a more recent study, Lee and Ranta (2014) correlate students’ use of Facebook with their difficulty to connect with local people. Similarly, in his study of international students studying in Australia, Olding (2013) reports that Facebook was primarily used to maintain relationships with compatriot students rather than creating contacts with locals. Kelly (2010) even warns that digital communication with home “has the very potential to render full-immersion study abroad obsolete” (Kelly, 2010, p. 104). However, these warnings are based on a nostalgic discourse of “it was better before” and the assumption that both full immersion, if it had ever existed, and the initial cultural shock, are necessary and beneficial for all students (Kim, 2001; Sovic 2009; Woolf, 2007).

Scholarship on the use of social media in study abroad contexts has several limitations. The first major limitation of studies is that social media use in the study abroad context is consistently considered as a variable that either facilitates or hinders language learning and/or the quality of immersion. However, this focus on both language learning outcomes and immersion quality often comes at the expense of opportunities to understand social media as a powerful and insightful venue for study abroad students’ self-presentation and identity negotiation. Second, more longitudinal studies are needed to better understand why contradictory findings have been found. On the one hand, social media use facilitates contact with local people, while on the other, social media applications may draw away students from the host culture. These findings demonstrate above all else that the use of social media is highly individualized and can serve radically different aims.

Students can now communicate with their networks from home almost constantly and immediately throughout their sojourn. They can find support and receive feedback and comments on the aspects of their experience they choose to promote. Their social networks from home, therefore, can directly influence every aspect of their experience, including their social network development. This has transformed the way students apprehend their study abroad experience. As Kinginger (2013, p. 345) points out: “ready access to travel and to technology-enhanced social networking (e.g. Facebook or Skype) has changed the nature of study abroad to the point where today’s experiences are fundamentally different from those of earlier eras”. Since students arguably no longer have the same relationship to study abroad, and social media is a major reason for this new state of affairs, the issues and outcomes have also changed considerably, demonstrating a clear need for further investigation. The implications of this quasi-permanent digital connectivity for the way students apprehend their experiences of study abroad are yet to be explored since, to date, social media has been mostly reductively framed as a variable that fosters or hinders second language acquisition.

### **Research Method**

The study is based on a double-track methodology consisting of a digital ethnography, via Facebook and Instagram, complemented by two sets of photo-elicitation interviews. Participants include seven Australian university students learning French in France or Switzerland on a year-long study abroad program. Digital ethnography “transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the Internet” (Hine, 2008, p. 257). Social media enables researchers to blend into the audience and facilitate a longitudinal and almost non-intrusive observation of participants on a daily basis. In the field of study abroad, traditional research methods relying exclusively on participants’ self-reported data often collected via pre- and post-interviews and surveys did not attenuate what Stewart (2010) describes as a “black hole” period when researchers lose contact with their participants during their sojourn. Social media allows researchers to overcome this issue providing a window into students’ experiences.

Digital ethnography started upon participants’ departure after I was added to their friends list on

Facebook and as a follower on Instagram. It then ended upon their return to Australia. Data were collected by following and cataloguing their posts on both platforms throughout their year abroad. These textual and photographic posts subsequently served as prompts for in-depth interviews using a photo-elicitation method which is “based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002, p. 13). This method of interview proved to be extremely beneficial in studies investigating students' experience abroad (Umino & Benson, 2016; Wang et al., 2017) due to two essential features of photographs: they sharpen memory (Rose, 2012) and they open windows into participants' lives (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Today's study abroad students were born in the digital age and social media is fully integrated into their daily lives. They use photographs in many of their posts as tools of self-presentation and online identity construction (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Van Dijk, 2008). Network technologies, such as smartphones and widespread Wi-Fi, simplify the production and sharing of photographs. Pictures can be captured, posted, and viewed almost anywhere and at any time via social media, which explicitly incite users to share images allowing diverse representations of the self. Van House (2011) argues that “making, showing, viewing and talking about images are not just how we represent ourselves, but contribute to the ways that we *enact* ourselves, individually and collectively, and reproduce social formations and norms” (Van House, 2011, p. 131). The advancement of technologies has not only transformed students' mobility through easy access to travel and digital technologies but also the social world and the way they communicate and socialize. Social media therefore has the potential to reveal students' negotiation of identity, their strategies for creating and maintaining social networks, as well as their intercultural interactions while studying abroad.

The first set of interviews was undertaken halfway through their sojourn via Skype and the second one was conducted face to face shortly after their return to Australia. Interviews of both sets lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Quotations from the first set will be labelled as “Interview 1” and those from the second set as “Interview 2”.

Interview transcripts were coded and analysed using a two-cycled coding method (Saldaña, 2009) for identifying themes and recurring patterns in participants' narratives. Descriptive coding was employed for the first cycle which “summarizes in a word or short phrase — most often a noun — the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 70). Pattern coding was then undertaken to strategically assemble the data into broad category headings. These two coding techniques were chosen for their suitability to ethnographies as well as for their pertinence in the selection process for participants' posts that were discussed during the interviews. Indeed, this selection was the result of a preliminary interpretation of the data collected through the online observation. The purpose of combining data sources is to elicit information that digital ethnography alone does not comprehensively capture. Thus, digital ethnography raised questions that were then explored during the interviews.

The study was advertised to about 60 students during one of their preparation sessions for study abroad. Seven of them responded favourably. They had completed three years of their degree in International Studies (IS) and a professional degree that is combined with the IS degree. The degree structure requires the completion of at least four semesters of French before their departure abroad. Participants were students learning French at a Sydney-based university in Australia. They were all born and raised in Australia, lived in the Sydney metropolitan area in their family homes, and were aged between 20 and 21 at the time of their departure. All participants were native English speakers and active users of both Facebook and Instagram. Alexandra, Erika, and Trevor went together to Lausanne, Switzerland while the other four stayed in France: Diana and John in Lyon, Anne in Montpellier, and Patricia in Aix-en-Provence. In order to preserve their anonymity, elements of

identification in their posts, such as profile names, the posts' authors and commenters, any names or identifying elements in status updates, as well as all the faces on the photographs collected were obscured. However, participants' pseudonyms appear on the posts for clarity.

### Findings and Discussion

Table 1 summarizes the categories of people who could be identified in the posts (overwhelmingly in photographs but there are also a few verbal mentions through the tagging feature of the platforms). Three categories emerged from the digital ethnography: family and friends, multinational and co-national students, and locals. For each category, posts were counted and reported by social media platform. The percentages were calculated against the total of posts collected for each category and platform. In total, 1576 posts were made to Facebook and 894 to Instagram. People could be identified in 821 of the Facebook posts and 202 in those from Instagram. The paucity of local people in their posts is striking: only 14 include locals. Conversely, most people in their posts are multinational students, compatriot students, and participants' relatives and friends from Australia. This was essentially due to the types of activities participants were engaged in with members of these networks such as travels, sightseeing, parties, and events organized for international students which generate more photographs. This heavy documentation enabled me to follow, almost day by day, their experience with members of these networks. By contrast, photographs of local people, being almost absent, did not, at first, help me to understand the formation of relationships among the local community and the extent of their intercultural communication. While this initial observation could give the impression that participants were unable to develop relationships with local people, their interview data proved to be extremely valuable in reconstructing their stories and uncovering a much more complex reality, in which locals were indeed present.

**Table 1** *Categories of people identified on participants' posts on Facebook and Instagram*

Participants	Family & friends		Multinational & co-national students		Locals		Total	
	FB N (%)	Insta N (%)	FB N (%)	Insta N (%)	FB N (%)	Insta N (%)	FB N (%)	Insta N (%)
Erika	2 (3.51)	3 (8.12)	54 (94.74)	34 (91.89)	1 (1.75)	0	57 (100)	37 (100)
Anne	14 (11.76)	45 (75)	103 (86.56)	14 (23.33)	2 (1.68)	1 (1.67)	119 (100)	60 (100)
Trevor	0	1 (9.1)	27 (100)	10 (90.9)	0	0	27 (100)	11 (100)
Diana	325 (88.55)	50 (86.21)	39 (10.63)	7 (12.07)	3 (0.82)	1 (1.72)	367 (100)	58 (100)
Alexandra	10 (11.76)	1 (5.26)	74 (87.06)	17 (89.47)	1 (1.18)	1 (5.26)	85 (100)	19 (100)
John	99 (78.57)	3 (42.86)	26 (20.64)	4 (57.14)	1 (0.79)	0	126 (100)	7 (100)
Patricia	13 (32.5)	5 (50)	24 (60)	5 (50)	3 (7.5)	0	40 (100)	10 (100)
Total	463 (56.39)	108 (53.47)	347 (42.27)	91 (45.05)	11 (1.34)	3 (1.48)	821 (100)	202 (100)

In this study, three broad categories of social ties will be analyzed: the tie formed from co-national students from their home university and other Australian universities, the tie composed of other multinational study abroad students and, lastly, the tie comprising locals, including domestic

students. Although a significant part of posts concerned the family and friends category, this tie was set apart as it goes beyond the scope of the discussion on the need to rethink the traditional social networks, namely the multinational and the co-national students, and the host national network. Furthermore, posts related to multinational study abroad students and compatriot students, were grouped together as most photographs with multinationals also included Australian students. Lastly, the “locals” category comprised photographs including mostly local students.

The following discussion emphasizes the need for a reconceptualization of study abroad students' social network development. First, participants' narratives underscore the quasi-permanent connection with home through social media which fosters the emergence of an online co-national network. Second, students who are native or proficient speakers of the target language constitute a sub-category within the multi-national network that needs to be taken into consideration, notably owing to their buffer position between study abroad students and local communities.

### **Online co-national network**

After departure, social media became a way for participants to communicate with home. Some would speak almost daily with their parents and friends, some less regularly but all kept an ongoing connection with their networks from home. Trevor used WhatsApp to communicate with his family. He would not often speak with them but rather exchange messages:

*My immediate family, we have a WhatsApp group. I call them sometimes, but not super regularly because I'm busy and they're busy. The time zone as well, it's not always possible to live chat with someone. You just have to send them messages.* (Trevor, Interview 1)

Anne communicated once a week with her parents and used several means including emails and FaceTime. She also had to set up a Facebook account for her mother to keep in touch:

*My mum got Facebook on the day I left to stay in contact with me.* (Anne, Interview 1)

John also chose Facebook as his primary means of communication with his family:

*I speak to my family on Facebook or Messenger. That's when I tell them about my living situation.* (John, Interview 1)

Patricia and Alexandra had similar habits. They both spoke weekly via video chat to their respective family and used Messenger quite frequently:

*I videocall mum and dad probably once a week, but then during the week, my mum's often messaging me on Messenger.* (Alexandra, Interview 1)

In the age of social and widespread use of digital technologies where study abroad students carry their home in their pocket into the host environment, intercultural interaction not only occurs in face-to-face settings, but also online through social media platforms. Ongoing connectivity and access to their supporting networks from home highlighted in participants' narratives raises new questions that extend and update the literature on social network development. In addition to the three social ties that are traditionally recognized, I argue that a fourth one, the online co-national network, has emerged with the advance of digital technology and needs to be addressed when analysing study



abroad students' social networks. Indeed, the ability to communicate with home had a deep impact on participants' socialization process and their adjustment to their host environment.

For John, who suffered from homesickness during his first days in France, being able to communicate with his family and share his experience was important for reducing his acculturative stress:

*Everything was so new and bizarre. Everyone at home was in the same exact place I left them, [...]. So I just wanted to show the family where I was and what was going on, and how different it was where I was to where they were. (John, Interview 1)*

Being able to communicate his emotions and share his experience with his supporting networks at home through social media helped John to reduce his homesickness and smooth his adjustment to the new environment. Social media prevents students from feeling disconnected by maintaining a sense of stability. Mikal and Grace (2012) point out that "the Internet provides continuity in two ways: (a) by allowing students to maintain contact with members of the home culture; and (b) by serving as a transitional device, providing sense of community and the perception of available support" (Mikal and Grace, 2012, p. 14). The perception that support is available if needed is essential in the reinforcement of students' self-confidence and emotional stability, which was proven to benefit students' ability to enjoy their experience and their willingness to engage with the host community (Mikal et al., 2014).

The experiences of Erika and Alexandra, who have gone together in Lausanne along with Trevor, illustrate how online co-national networks can influence students' offline socialization in the study abroad context. While looking at her Instagram post (Figure 1), Alexandra recounted that, on her initiative, both she and Erika took part in a ski trip organized by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) in the French Alps with forty other students: mainly from Quebec, the United States, and Australia. In organising the trip, Alexandra was putting into practice advice that her mother had given her earlier during a conversation on Skype:

*My mum had given me a big lecture: "You have to say yes to everything. It doesn't matter if you don't know anyone. You just have to go." So, I was like, "Okay, I'm going to say yes to everything". Erika didn't want to go, because she was like, "We don't really know anyone that well yet". But I dragged her with me. (Alexandra, Interview 1)*

There is a direct correlation between Alexandra's mother's advice and the way that she strategically planned to increase her chances to socialize with multinational students, even against Erika's apprehensions. This demonstrates how Alexandra's online home network directly influenced her offline social networking.



**Figure 1** Alexandra's Instagram post. Photograph of Alexandra and an Australian friend in the French Alps.

For Erika, her first couple of weeks were very challenging and she reported feeling sad and struggling to adjust. At that time, she was communicating extensively with her mother, who was supporting her. Incited by Alexandra, she finally decided to take part in the ski trip. The significance of Erika's behaviour can only be appreciated through the online connection with her mother which was, at that time, like a digital umbilical cord:

*It was the first time I was doing something so spontaneous [...] we were in the middle of nowhere, we didn't have Wi-Fi so it was very much learning to live without a phone for a few days in the middle of nowhere and not speaking to my mum, which I did a lot back in the beginning, and just relying on the friendships that I had with those people. It was definitely me becoming more independent and being okay in the middle of nowhere in France with a bunch of students. It was definitely an experience that was rewarding because I learned how to ski and I got to travel like I'd never travelled before. (Erika, Interview 1)*

For Erika, more than the physical separation from home, it was the lack of connectivity in the French Alps that forced her to cut the cord with her mother and fully rely on herself and her friends. This was, by Erika's later admission, for the best because this trip was a turning point for both her and Alexandra. In taking part in this trip they widened their social networks. Those they met during this trip became their closest friends during the first semester. They also got to strengthen their friendship with one another. In addition to learning how to ski and experiencing a new way of traveling, Erika realized that she could disconnect from her supporting network at home, and gain independence and self-confidence.

### Multinational proficient or native speakers of the target language

Multinational networking was greatly encouraged by the host universities and the ESN. All students, regardless of their study abroad program, could enroll and take part in the events and activities offered. Most participants sought practical information and found out about the ESN on Facebook before their departure. They made connections with the network and participated in events upon arrival. Developing online networks among multi-national students seemed to be straightforward. For instance, Alexandra retrospectively noted that multinational students readily added each other on Facebook in order to keep in touch and share information for traveling opportunities:

*The Erasmus people were always adding each other, because they think it's good to have as many contacts as possible, because people are always travelling somewhere.*

(Alexandra, Interview 2)

Through the bridging feature of social media, the aim is to expand their social networks as quickly as possible, and to share and gather information to avoid missing opportunities linked to their goals of study abroad (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Among participants' multinational networks, many had friends who were proficient in French or even native French speakers. Universities in France and Switzerland routinely host students at different stages of their learning process with both specialist language schools catering to learners of French at various levels of proficiency and students enrolling in discipline-based classes in the main university. Some of the multinational students were therefore already proficient in French or native speakers. This reflects the changing landscape of study abroad, where second language learning is no longer the primary objective (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2015).

Erika's experience illustrates this changing reality. When she saw her Instagram post (Figure 2), she shared that, upon arrival in Lausanne, she attended the orientation week where she met several Québécois students also studying abroad who had been already living there for a few weeks and took part in the ski trip mentioned in the previous section. They comprised most of her multi-national network during the first semester:

*I saw them every day and it was from that orientation week. It wasn't until I met them that things started looking up. They were definitely the reason that I started feeling better. I had places to go to with people and if I wanted to go grocery shopping I could do it with somebody else and not just by myself. They changed the entire experience for me for the better for sure.* (Erika, Interview 1)

Erika's first weeks in Lausanne were very challenging emotionally. She was destabilized by the separation from home and her family. Forming friendships with these students from Quebec was a way to reduce her acculturative stress and adjust to her host location. Her friends — all native speakers of French but yet still studying abroad like her — were mediums through which she felt empowered enough to engage with her host environment. It seems that they acted as buffers in her interactions with locals, arguably because of their proficiency in French and greater knowledge of the host location. The benefits of her friendships with them were multiple:

*I learnt swear words in French. They helped me out with assignments. If I had to interview people, I would interview them. They helped me to understand French better. Maybe it's just because I spent so much time with them that I'm only used to hearing them speak French.* (Erika, Interview 1)

Erika learned aspects of the language that she might not have learned otherwise in the formal context of her French classes. She was also exposed to different accents and vocabulary. In this regard, she exemplifies language learning outside the classroom. She benefited not only linguistically from them, but also academically; in addition to receiving support from them for her assessments, she interviewed them as part of the same assignments. She also clearly identified her friends from Quebec as relevant resources to explore intercultural issues as part of an academic task.



**Figure 2** Erika's Instagram post. Photograph of Erika and her Australian and multinational friends.

Anne's experience with her university's soccer club is also enlightening in how students who are proficient in French bring specific benefits to other study abroad students. By joining the soccer club (Figure 3), Anne met several local students, as well as other multinational students who were all proficient in French:

*I met another two girls who weren't French but one was from Australia and one was from Spain and their French was very good. And then after that an American exchange girl. But again, she's been speaking in French for eight years as opposed to my two. I found that was really intimidating at first but I really am glad I did it.*  
(Anne, Interview 1)

According to Anne, she was the one with the lowest level of French which did not reinforce her self-confidence. However, it did not prevent her from fully taking part in soccer training and becoming a fully-fledged member of the team. She earned her position in the team based on her skills—which was not dependent upon her linguistic proficiency—and played in tournaments. Furthermore, as Erika did, Anne interviewed her teammates, including the other study abroad students, as part of an assignment for her home university in relation to the intercultural issue of women's soccer in France. The benefits of her engagement with this multinational network were therefore cultural, intercultural, academic, and linguistic.



**Figure 3** Anne's Facebook post. Photograph of Anne and her soccer team.

More research is needed to further explore the role played by study abroad students who are either proficient or native speakers of the target language in guiding/assisting other second language learners to access the host culture. As demonstrated in the data, this sub-category of students within the multi-national networks brings specific advantages to other study abroad students less proficient in the target language. They can potentially facilitate access to the host culture and ease interactions with local people. These are assuredly the kind of encounters that any instructor or study abroad adviser would like their sojourners to have. This social tie is an alternative source of exposure to the target language and culture, often more accessible than local people with whom, as described in the next section, it is often difficult for study abroad students to connect. Study abroad students often share the same desire to create social ties rapidly (Kim, 2001) and they are even encouraged to do so by host institutions. Unlike the local students, study abroad students who are proficient or native speakers of the target language present the double advantage of speaking the language and seeking friendship among other study abroad students. Lastly, they exemplify the cultural diversity of the target language speakers, the francophone world in this study and, therefore, are legitimate points of access to the global target culture.

### Host national networks

Across participants' narratives, a theme emerged that there was compartmentalization of the multinational and local networks preventing the formation of friendships. I argue that this separation was structural and contributed to by host institutions as well as the types of activities participants were engaged in within each network. The role of host institutions was found to increase the predominance of the multi-national student networks and, consequently, accentuate the separation from the host national community.

Compartmentalization of participants' social networks seemed to be caused by the way host universities sometimes welcome multinational students. For instance, the University of Lausanne set up a buddy system which paired a domestic student with a study abroad student. The three participants hosted in Lausanne had three different buddies. For Erika, it was a good opportunity to ease her settling by being assisted with logistical issues and to widen her local social network. However, she noticed that connecting with Swiss people was not an easy task:

*I had my buddy when I got there. Because of her, I met some of her friends. I became friends with them. But generally speaking, in Switzerland, I found that they're very exclusive. They know who the foreign students are and there's not an effort made on either side to mesh. (Erika, interview 2)*

According to Erika, there was a clear separation between both communities and she describes a situation in which multinational students, on the one hand, tend to stick together, and the local students on the other, who do not demonstrate any interest in developing friendships with multinational students.

The buddy system often turned into a mentorship system in which domestic students took study abroad students under their wing, guided them through administrative duties, and showed them around. Upon arrival, Trevor's local network consisted only of his buddy, who was there to help him deal with very practical aspects of his life:

*She was just around because I was like, "Where should I go to do this?", "Where can I buy this thing?" because she lived here, so she was really helpful. (Trevor, Interview 1)*

It seems that their relationship was limited to practical aspects rather than personal or profound ones more suited to reciprocity that could carry to a relationship beyond its initial stages. To that effect, John had doubts about this system and the domestic students' motives for being buddies:

*I am sure there was an ulterior motive that they wanted to put on their CV or something. But, good on them. But, that imbalance is just a bit odd. I don't want to feel like I'm indebted to these people for showing me their country. It's more you want natural things, which I guess is hard to organize for natural meetings. (John, Interview 2)*

According to John, transactional relationships fail to produce durable and strong friendships. While benefits on both sides are necessary to establish relationships, more profound and personal involvement is needed to create genuine friendships.

Apart from the buddy system, nothing was institutionally organized to encourage intercultural interactions between these groups of students. In fact, second language learners were almost isolated from local students due to the language classes that they had to take:

*Like most people who are foreign students do subjects that are tailored for foreign students. No Swiss French is going to take a class in French. (Erika, Interview 2)*

The language learning needs of the study abroad students kept them away from regular classes, preventing interactions within an everyday environment. In the same vein, John pointed out the same barriers arising from the language classes that he attended in Lyon:

*I always imagined it would be easy to make French friends, but I was in a language course, which was entirely for people in my situation. (John, Interview 2)*

Anne made similar observations about her experience in Montpellier:

*It hasn't been easy making a whole lot of French friends just because usually that's*

*based around Uni and because we were separated in our classes. (Anne, Interview 2)*

Since the participants' sojourns abroad started with intensive language classes, their first encounters were mostly with other second language learners. Intensive classes were therefore an effective way to expand their multi-national network. Upon arrival in the host environment, study abroad students begin to search for new relationships (Kim, 2001). However, as explained by the participants both in France and Switzerland, the downside was a structural separation internalized as a norm by the study abroad students. To bypass this obstacle, they identified alternative sources of target language exposure, as if to replicate the function of the local network:

*I find most of the students who are from France, they keep to themselves a bit more. I think international students, because they don't know as many people they will talk more. But I've met girls from Thailand, one of my friends was from Algeria. Most of them are very talented and have a base level of English but we try and speak French. (Anne, interview 1)*

In order to bypass the separation from local students, like the participants in Switzerland who formed friendships with the Québécois students, Anne identified alternative sources of target language exposure and got closer to other study abroad students who were either native speakers or highly proficient in French. This type of student was a valuable resource for participants and brought specific benefits in various aspects, linguistic as well as intercultural, by providing them with a perception of French as a global language spoken by people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Through these relationships, the participants developed a sense of belonging to a global network of French speakers.

## Conclusion

This article contributes necessary refinements to the model of study abroad students' social network development and sheds light on their intercultural interactions with the culturally diverse communities involved in this setting. First, the quasi-permanent connection through social media and digital communication with social networks from home has radically transformed the study abroad experience. The direct influence of online co-national networks in the way participants adjust to their host environment and the way they socialize while abroad suggests that researchers and educators must account for an additional social network that has not, until now, been addressed in the literature. Moreover, the social network comprising multi-national students proficient in, or native speakers of, the target language was found to bring participants specific intercultural benefits. These students are representative of the changing landscape of study abroad where second language learning is not always the main objective. Consequently, further research is needed to explore the influence of these multinational students on the experiences of students whose primary reason for studying abroad does remain second language acquisition.

In contrast to the overall positive impacts of the co-national and multinational networks, the data consistently show that creating friendships and developing intercultural communication with host nationals is much more challenging, notably due to the structural separation of study abroad students and host communities. Home and host institutions committed to internationalization therefore have a decisive responsibility to help build bridges between multinational and local networks and provide all students with strategies to create opportunities to connect with the different social networks available and foster intercultural interactions. The overall pattern of living of my participants reveals a core temporary sojourner identity (Mitchell et al., 2017) through which they were labeled by locals as just passing through and having different interests and goals. The ease with which one can join

multinational networks offering shared interests, emotional support, and friendships drastically contrasts with the difficulty it takes to break into local networks. Although host institutions take initiatives to foster intercultural interaction between multinational and local students, they often fail to create environments conducive to spontaneous and balanced relationships. The buddy system or conversation sessions were found to often generate unbalanced relationships based on a quid-pro-quo in which participants felt that they were put in a subordinate position of power. Consequently, before departure, students should be made aware that such systems are available and can prove useful on a practical front, for instance to help them settle in at the beginning of their sojourn or practice their linguistic skills. However, they must also be warned that they should not exclusively rely on this to make connections with locals. Conversely, friendships with proficient or native speakers of the target language who are also studying abroad compensate for this lack of opportunity and balance in relationships with locals and are, therefore, advisable for second language study abroad students. Any blanket attempts to limit contacts with peers and other multinational students could then negatively affect students' experience of study abroad, as the multinational networks are essential, notably in the acculturative and adjustment process. As shown in this study, participants found in these networks the necessary support to take risks, to step out of their comfort zones, and to have new experiences.

One way to address the compartmentalization between study abroad and local students would be to encourage the creation of interconnections and intercultural interactions between the networks. For instance, most participants tended to develop their own networks of host nationals. As a result, the host nationals did not know each other or the other participants. Interconnection between the different social networks are important for study abroad students' immersion processes into the host socio-cultural environment (McManus, 2019). Where possible, it should therefore be promoted by inciting participants to introduce their peers to their local connections. Among simple initiatives that can be implemented, the buddy system could be reformed from pairings to small groupings, so that a group of study abroad students could be assigned to a group of domestic students.

The obstacle posed in language classes could also be eased. Both language classes designed for study abroad students and regular classes that domestic students attend could become more open whenever possible. Domestic students, especially if they are studying a relevant field, such as teaching French as a foreign language, education or cross-cultural communication, could be invited to language classes as language assistants or for cultural presentations. It would also be a networking opportunity for internationally-minded locals. Such relationships would have the potential to go beyond being solely transactional for the local students and could even endure after the study abroad students leave. Similarly, study abroad students could be welcomed into regular classes as auditors, where permitted by institutional policy, in order to increase their chances of meeting local students. Nonetheless, such initiatives are not a silver bullet as some participants, thanks to their advanced level of French, could attend regular university classes taught in French without significantly developing larger local networks. This issue only highlights the difficulties of integration encountered by study abroad and full-degree-seeking international students with local students even when attending the same classes (Arkoudis et al., 2013).

Finally, from a methodological perspective, the lack of photographs of host nationals in participants' posts shows the crucial necessity to complement digital ethnography with interviews in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of study abroad students' experience. While this paucity is, to a certain extent, a reflection of the participants' difficulty to break into local networks, it is also a reflection of the lack of settings in which locals were involved, mainly the domestic setting of the host institution, in contrast to the abundance of places and activities depicted in the photographs with compatriot and multinational students. Consequently, future researchers eager to adopt similar



methodology should bear in mind that although, in this study, the few photographs including locals were very informative about the types of relationships that participants developed with host nationals, the methodology is limited, especially when social networking and intercultural communication with the host community is the main research focus. Future research must develop complementary research tools to go beyond these limitations such as researcher visits to the participants for observations and interviews, social network questionnaires (McManus, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2017) and surveys.

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