A Comparative Study of Internet Usage in France and the UK

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Abstract

The research identifies the broad factors that influence the use of the Internet in France and the UK. A survey is undertaken to assess the factors that have shaped, and continue to shape, web use in a cross-cultural setting; in particular government intervention, business pressure and socio-cultural developments such as the evolution of popular culture. The survey highlights emerging trends concerning the growing popularity of online communication, accelerating socio-linguistic change and prompting discussion in France about how to limit English jargon being absorbed into the French language.

To further the investigation, web use was monitored to evaluate language use online in an everyday context. French and English-language web logs (blogs) were used to indicate the transformative power of technology and language.

How Universal is Online Consumer Behaviour?

The context for this question is the emergence of online communication in a professional and social framework, at a time when both domains are undergoing significant growth in ICT (information and communications technology), referred to as NTIC (nouvelles technologies de l’information et de la communication) in France. The purpose of comparing Internet use and adoption across two different cultures serves to identify marketing opportunities and provides a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communications.

The capabilities of the Internet fall into two broad categories: firstly, a communications medium and secondly, a direct response medium enabling users to purchase and sell products and services (Cravens and Piercy, 2003). The “reach” and speed of Internet communication coupled with its unique characteristics of interactivity and personalisation made Internet communication a useful tool for individuals and business alike (Chan-Olmsted and Ha, 2003). As a communications medium, the Internet provides users with access to other web users worldwide. Individuals can choose how and when to communicate and to whom; for example using Internet telephony or a web cam, in real-time (web conferencing) or consecutively (email). As a commercial means of communication, the Internet business model gives suppliers direct access to existing and potential customers and new levels of efficiency with fewer assets and lower management overheads. By virtue of the medium, the users of this type of global communication may rarely, if ever, come into physical contact with each other. They represent a wide range of socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds which consequently results in different user behaviour. In France alone, there are significant regional differences in Internet infrastructure and psychographics, that is, lifestyle and other psychological characteristics of an individual. The lifestyle concept (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 1999) which states that consumers often choose certain products and services over others because they are associated with a certain lifestyle - notwithstanding the way in which the Internet has been marketed to consumers - may explain the key differences in consumption patterns, and levels of Internet adoption/usage amongst the French, Britons and Americans.
To compare Internet use and adoption in a cultural setting, this investigation sets forth a rationale for studying technology and infrastructure from the perspective of computer-mediated communication (CMC), intercultural relations (global and specific), social implications and the particular context of Internet communications. The study traces the emergence of an online lifestyle marked by virtual communication and endeavours to detect trends in France and UK by identifying the services individuals use online and those they prefer not to use online. The subject raises issues of attitudes to ICT and online behaviour in a cultural context. The research will indicate that either one country has superior technology infrastructure that would mean users are more ready (or able) to use ICT in preference to traditional/face-to-face interaction. Or, on the other hand, it will denote that there is no significant difference in online behaviour among web users in France and the UK other than users being in different phases of adopting the new technology (that is, the French are later in the adoption cycle) thus confirming the vital role played by change agents in the technology diffusion process. Rogers’s (1983, p.6) theory underpins contemporary diffusion and adoption literature, defining change agents as “individuals who influence clients’ innovation decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency”. Isolating the change agents reveals the critical success factors that lead to the successful adoption of new technology. Given the large volume of information required in the diffusion process, the change agent must select only relevant data in order to avoid giving too much (a situation referred to as “information overload”) or too little. Yet the diffusion of new ideas and processes to potential adopters needs to take into account the high level of uncertainty involved with adopting innovation which can only be overcome by providing sufficient information (O’Connor, 1996). Moreover, it has been recognized that the diffusion of innovation is often a social as well as a technical process (Lee, 1994). However, most models related to ICT diffusion and adoption are based on data collected in large organisations and may not be directly applicable to the individual in a cultural setting. Culture has an enormous impact on the speed at which individuals are prepared to change their habits and values. Realising the speed of technological evolution, consumers react in one of two ways; they either “leapfrog” - postpone or refuse to adopt an innovation because they expect a newer and better generation soon - or faced with multi-featured technologies they become overwhelmed by the complexity of too much new information too soon (De Marez and Verleye, 2004).

In addition to the key factors that influence the acceptance of the Internet in France and the UK, each culture has its respective notion of communication; in France the emphasis is on face-to-face communication and the importance of using correct sentence structure and spelling. In contrast, native English speakers place the urgency on transmitting the message rather than correctly formulating the syntax, and virtual communication is considered a useful alternative to face-to-face exchange. For these reasons, Internet growth varies from country to country, and “official” statistics confirm that Internet user activity is not universal. Paradoxically, while broadband availability is more widespread in the UK (greater geographic cover and cheaper), there is a higher rate of broadband take-up in France. Efforts to understand the nature of Internet use in a cultural context raise the question of how ICT was introduced and how the different cultural environments reacted (and continue to react) to its growth and development. Theories of culture provide a framework for appreciating how new technology can be influenced by socio-cultural values. It is equally important to view Internet usage from a linguistic perspective, to explore the impact of native language on ICT use, given that native language has a fundamental influence on the thought process of the individual and thus the way in which communication technology is used. Linguistic anthropology holds that to understand people and their behaviour, it is necessary to speak their language (Copans, 2003) based on the belief that “le comportement culturel des
membres d’une société est déterminé par la langue qu’ils parlent” (p. 87) (the cultural behaviour of the members of a society is determined by the language they speak). Language reflects both the social and cultural importance ascribed to a subject and object, and also to the concept of space and time, and consequently an individual’s capacity to understand and use technology.

Published Internet statistics vary greatly in their authenticity, depending on the research organisation and the methods of data collection, but they generally suggest that the French, faced with the same technology, exhibit different trends in Internet usage and adoption compared to the USA or UK. There are three plausible explanations for this;

Firstly, it is believed that the French think of themselves as supremely rational beings - logical and intellectual (Asselin and Mastron, 2001), enjoying abstract thought and considering themselves philosophers in a rational culture where demonstrating clarity of logic has greater importance than adopting a pragmatic approach. According to the philosophy of Descartes the individual is not only expected to believe what is clearly and distinctly presented to them, he suggests that they cannot do otherwise, since whatever is thus presented is irresistible to their judgement (Stevenson, 2004). Whether in a business or social context, new ideas and suggestions are often received with scepticism or negativity simply because the audience wants to hear the arguments (Sheth, Mittal, Newman, 2002). Thus to a certain extent, the French still embrace the art of diplomatic negotiating invented in France in the XIV century (Czinkota, Ronkainen and Moffett, 2003). Given that French consumers are reputed to seek novelty and elegance, valuing aesthetics in product design and language, one would expect rapid uptake of innovative technology and ICT in general.

Secondly, the behaviour of the members of any cultural group is dependent, almost entirely, on the history of the people in that society (Lewis, 1996). To the French, history, continuity and tradition are significant to their perception of themselves and their culture (Asselin and Mastron, 2001). Change is not seen as intrinsically good and although the French are willing to change, research demonstrates that they will only do so if the benefits outweigh the loss of security and continuity (op. cit.). Besides being a creation of historical influence and climatic environment, the mentality of a culture - the inner workings and genius of the mindset - are also dictated by the nature and characteristics of the language of the group. It is interesting to consider the ways in which a language can influence a nation in the way that they think and behave. Lewis (1996) found that the restricted liberties of thought that any particular tongue allows will have a pervasive influence on considerations of vision, charisma, emotion, poetic feeling, discipline and hierarchy. This phenomenon is echoed by Rossetti (1997) who found that language, culture and society interact to give members of different genders different levels of power and recognition in society. In Western culture, especially that of North America, the cultural norm and thus the social standard is regulated in accordance to the values of men. This form of cultural maintenance and perpetuation, in many ways has worked to empower the male gender while relegating the female gender to a secondary status in society.

Lastly, the relationship between France and the United States gives some insight into the problems that can arise from cultural differences; a common perception of France found in contemporary American media is that of an arrogant country and is visible in the plethora of anti-American publications (Meunier, 2004). Historically, it is argued that the absence of French immigration to the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth century means that, unlike the English and Irish, the French stayed outside the “melting pot” and did not
experience the growth of modern America (Jospin, 2004) and are consequently struggling to adapt to the challenges of globalisation. In contrast, after more than half a century of immigration from North African countries, France has retained a relatively constant idea of itself as a nation whose residents, in order to gain the title “citizen”, must actively take on its culture, including the all-important French language, and participate in civic life (Beller, 2004). The cultural aspect of citizenship is still dominant. It would seem that the USA (and to a lesser degree the UK) have absorbed multiple cultures and are therefore perhaps more tolerant and open-minded than the French towards immigrants. Research by Gooderham and Nordhaug (2001) indicates that the spread of globalisation has contributed to a convergence of common values among younger generations across Europe; in their study, France has a lower score for uncertainty avoidance and the UK shows signs of less individualism compared to the earlier findings of Hofstede (1980). Since the sample was composed of students, however, it might be argued that when they enter the workplace their values might change; but values acquired prior to entering the work place are relatively stable. Economists such as Baverez (2003) consider France to be in decline as a result of a combination of three key factors; lack of research funding, high labour costs and tax burden, in addition to the constraints imposed by the indolent public sector (complex, time consuming bureaucracy). Over the last few years, the anti-globalisation feeling has become influential on French society, media and politicians - with the result that there is an atmosphere of distrust of the globalisation process so widespread that the French now appear to share a negative pensée unique (a fixed idea) about globalisation (Meunier, 2003).

Collectively, these factors provide an insight into why French speaking citizens in France but not necessarily francophone web users from elsewhere will use the Internet differently from native Anglophones.

A useful measure of Internet use in France and the UK is to compare the impact of high-speed connections (broadband) from a user perspective, examining the extent to which web users are participating in the information society and reaping the benefits of new Internet-based services such as voice over Internet (VoIP) communication technology, telework (working away from the office using mobile technology), e-learning (delivery of educational services via the Internet) and blogging (maintaining a personal online diary). To provide an insight into contemporary Internet use, a survey of online activities was undertaken over a 3-month period by 1000 Internet users in 2 major European cities, Manchester and Lyon respectively (chosen for their demographic and economic similarities) to establish whether having access to similar technology means that consumers share similar patterns of online behaviour or not. Designed to be self-selecting, the survey was available online and offline, and Sphinx software was used to analyse the survey data. Concerning the online survey, the openness of the Internet makes it difficult to control the sample, since anyone in theory could log on and complete the questionnaire and it is difficult to encourage non-respondents to access and complete the survey. A further limitation of the survey study is the self-selection of respondents; making available a survey online means that people who use online services may choose not to participate either because of the time it takes to complete a survey or because they did not want to reveal their online habits (or both).

For the offline component, two people were contacted in each city to distribute 500 copies of the survey within Lyon and 500 in Manchester during the 3 month period. The individuals (aged 26 and 55 years for Manchester; 22 and 37 years for Lyon) were selected for their impartiality in ICT research thus reducing bias to a minimum. Respondents were informed that the aim of the study was to better understand the similarities and differences in ICT usage in France and the UK. Extra blank copies were made available but were not requested. The
individuals were responsible for distributing and collecting the questionnaires at the following venues in Lyon and Manchester; a works council (Unison NW and Comité d’Entreprise UPI), a leisure club (Village Leisure Club and Le Gym Centre) and a language centre (The German Club and LIPS-IGS Lyon). These venues were chosen because they represent a large cross-section of the population of each city.

The results of the survey (online and offline) reveal a degree of similarity between France and the UK in Internet attitudes and behaviour, and also flag up (cultural) differences in risk-taking and willingness to change. The results were compared to government and private sector statistics, highlighting the fact that information about Internet use in Lyon and Manchester is neither collected nor published in the same way, and is continuously evolving. On the whole, the majority of respondents in both cities were under 40 years old and female. Of particular interest is the degree to which respondents of different ages use Internet-based services for online purchases. For instance, the results demonstrate that the most frequent users of online purchasing websites are aged between 30-49 for Manchester respondents and 20-29 for Lyon respondents which confirms the notion that both countries have adopted the Internet but are currently using online services for different activities because they are in different phases of the adoption process. Whether or not they adopt identical online behaviour over time will depend on a number of factors such as consumer spending power, government legislation and socio-cultural influences.

It can be concluded that there is an urgent need for a country-wide information campaign to educate and inform users about how to get the full benefit of Internet technology. It is apparent that the 21st century web users in France and the UK exhibit overall similar attitudes and behaviour regarding the Internet especially in the under 30 age group - although this may not have always been the case. The particularity of the under 30s is that many of them grew up with Internet access and exposure to the English language through popular culture. The fact that an increasing number of people in this age group are going online means that France may ‘leapfrog’ the UK and adopt higher performance ICT whilst UK users continue to move through the stages of adoption. Emerging cross-cultural trends are frequently documented in the media, though the focus is often on the negative influence of the Internet such as how ICT is changing the values of a society. In particular, the growing popularity of online communication in France has prompted recent discussion about how to limit English vernacular being absorbed into the French language and has raised concerns about the use of Internet as a tool for communication. It is clear that further research is needed to gain an understanding of online communication in a cultural context.
References


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