

Immigration, Teendom & Identity Building Online: *How social media plays key role in the adaptation of teens new to life in Montréal.*

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Fig. 1: (left) Instagram post by 13-year-old Ukrainian teen // (right) Facebook post by 12-year-old Moldovan teen.

1 Introduction

MyLifeAsEva, Cameron Dallas and Zoella. These are just three of the famous North American YouTubers that a 16-year-old girl from Tehran routinely followed “from the moment my mom submitted the application to move to Canada,” Helia recalls with enthusiasm when we meet at a café near her Montréal high school, a full nine months after she boarded a plane to an entirely new continent with her mother and sister. “I wondered what life in Canada would be like, so I’d watch these YouTubers to get little glimpses of the cultural norms and customs here.” She points to MyLifeAsEva’s prom video as informative because “we don’t have that in Iran,” and Cameron Dallas’s funny challenges as teaching her about boy-girl friendships. “He’s a boy and has some female friends who aren’t his girlfriends—and he talks about

that, too.” As for Zoella and MyLifeAsEva’s morning fashion routines, they gave her “an idea of how I should prepare for going to school in Canada, because in Iran we had uniforms; we couldn’t put on nail polish or make-up and had to wear hijabs.”



Fig. 2: Video posted by American YouTuber and vlogger Eva Marisol Gutowski (aka MyLifeAsEva) on 8 April 2015.

Helia is one of 13 participants who volunteered to participate in my anthropological study about teenagers who had recently immigrated to Canada, to find out how they engaged in identity building online. Helia and the other participants all immigrated to Canada with their families in the last 24 months and were enrolled in a *classe d'accueil*—meant to teach age-appropriate French-language proficiency—at a Montréal high school at the time of this research. I met all 13 participants in the spring of 2016 for individual interviews, the aim being to find out whether their engagement and presence on social media platforms had in any way helped them acclimate to new social mores and their new life in Montréal.

Many studies have previously looked into the particular difficulties faced by immigrant teens (Allen, Armand, Gibson, Markowitz, Reitz, Roy, Suárez-Orozco). It's widely agreed upon that children from immigrant families face greater and more complex challenges during adolescence than their peers, mainly due to the swift and often radical contrasts “between their cultural background and the community into which they are trying to integrate” (Roy 2011). Besides the routine identity struggles many teenagers might experience—academic troubles, peer pressure, bullying, first heartbreak, juggling newfound responsibilities, drug and alcohol use, etcetera—studies have explored how immigrant adolescents also have to deal with acculturative stress (Markowitz 1994). Acculturation is described as “the process of cultural and psychological change that takes place following continuous cultural contact,” where “changes can occur along two distinct dimensions: the level of involvement in the ethnic culture (i.e., maintenance) and the level of involvement in the host culture (i.e.,

participation).” (Reitz 2014: 755)

In exploring the notion of acculturation, David L. Sam and John W. Berry identified four main strategies (assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization), with integration being used by those “with an interest in maintaining one’s original culture while having daily interactions with other groups—there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time they seek, as a member of an ethnocultural group, to participate as an integral part of the larger social network.” (Sam 2010: 476) While not all 13 of my participants would label their efforts as “integration”, they all expressed their dual desires to both remain involved in their original culture and also participate in the host Canadian culture.

My research isn’t thus focused on the specific challenges these immigrant teenagers face, but rather on their use of various social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, SnapChat, WhatsApp, Flickr, Tumblr, etc.), and whether they feel such tools have helped them adapt (or “integrate”) to their new environment. Has “following” their new classmates on social media helped my participants get to know these peers better and more quickly? As digital natives¹, how extensively do they use online culture to (re)build their identities, bridge a cultural divide and repair the ruptures created by displacement? When you’re away from everything that’s familiar to you and from all the people and places that had previously defined you, are you more likely to head online to craft your sense of self? How much does integration into a new culture happen via the online world for digital natives? Given that the digital world has provided youths with new possibilities for extending social worlds and experimenting with self-expression (Ito 2010), how are immigrant teenagers in particular making use of such tools immediately following their relocation?

Lastly, I also sought to find out how important it had been for these immigrant teenagers to use social media to stay connected to their friends and family back home, and how they negotiated their fragmented identities in different online spaces, chiefly between platforms they used with friends in their country of origin versus the platforms they had only started to use with friends in Canada.

If I take Facebook for example, this morning when I checked my feed, everyone had posted photos, but it’s so different. They’re just such different cultures. Koreans all upload selfies (especially girls) because they change their profile pictures all the time, whereas friends here barely change it once a month. Sometimes it kind of feels awkward to post something in Canada, like you’re making a big statement. – Shinwhoo, 15

¹ The term digital native very broadly refers to young people who are comfortable with digital media, and is defined by Trottier as “people born after 1980 who were socialized in a world with personal computers and the Internet” (2014: 26).

2 Considerations About the Setting

This research was conducted in a highly charged international political context: as the divisive, racist² and anti-immigrant³ rhetoric of Donald Trump's election campaign was monopolizing the airwaves south of the border, Justin Trudeau and his centrist Liberal Party of Canada had just scored a decisive, majority government victory in federal elections months earlier, partly on a pledge to welcome 25,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees into the country by the end of 2015⁴. Canada, a country that counted nearly 8 million immigrants in 2015—or 21.8% of its population (Beaudoin 2016)—ended up welcoming 46,700 refugees in 2016 alone, which stands as the largest single-year number of refugees in nearly four decades, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Puzic 2017).

As Sam and Berry explore, how successful immigrant youths ultimately are in adapting to their new environment not only has to do with their efforts and skill sets, but the nature of the society where they've resettled. They make a distinction between settler societies “that encourage and welcome immigration, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States,” and nonsettler societies “such as France and Germany where immigration is regarded to be a necessity aimed at assisting less privileged people.” (Sam 2010: 478) In the Canadian province of Québec, there's the additional hurdle of language that newcomers must overcome. As stipulated by the Official Language Act of 1974⁵ (or “Bill 22”), Québec is the only province in Canada where French is the sole official language, which immigrant children are expected to speak or learn in school upon arrival. For those children whose level of French language proficiency is not up to par, Québec's Ministère de l'Éducation set up a system of *classes d'accueil* (literally: welcome classes) in 1969 with the aim of “allowing students to acquire minimal language competencies that correspond to their age, needs and interests before they are integrated into the regular classes, for the students to develop a positive attitude toward the francophone community and to help them acquire the specialized language pertaining to various subjects taught in the Québec classroom” (Armand 2005: 143).

Québec's Ministère de l'Éducation defines what it considers to be integration—as long term, multidimensional and definitely not

² Newman, Ben et al. “During the election, Donald Trump's racist rhetoric activated the fears of people in areas with growing Latino populations.” Blogs LSE US Centre, 24 January 2018. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2018/01/24/during-the-election-donald-trumps-racist-rhetoric-activated-the-fears-of-people-in-areas-with-growing-latino-populations/> Accessed 20 April 2018.

³ Hooghe, M., & Dassonneville, R. (2018). Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 51(3), 528-534.

⁴ Geddes, John. “Can the Liberals bring 25,000 Syrian refugees here by the end of 2015?” *Maclean's*, 29 October 2015. <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/justin-trudeaus-risky-refugee-promise/> Accessed 20 April 2018.

⁵ “Looking back at 40 years of French as Quebec's official language.” *CBC.CA*, 31 July 2014, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/looking-back-at-40-years-of-french-as-quebec-s-official-language-1.2724050> Accessed 20 April 2018.

assimilation—in its 1998 *Politique d'intégration scolaire et d'éducation interculturelle*: “It requires efforts of adaptation and adherence to common values on the part of immigrant students, but also an openness to diversity and the implementation of specific methods on the part of the school environment that welcomes them.” (Ministère 1998: 1-2)

3 Considerations About the Research Group and *Bagages*



Fig. 3: Me being mic'ed as the *Bagages* team prepares to film my classroom presentation. Photo taken by Julia, one of my informants.

My 13 research participants are all students enrolled in various *classes d'accueil* at a public high school in the city of Montréal. Their ages range from 12 to 18, and they hail from Iran (5), Moldova (5), Ukraine (1), South Korea (1) and Syria (1). Their native languages are Russian (6), Persian (5), Romanian (4), Korean (1) and Arabic (1). Their high school is among those in the Montréal area that receives the greatest number of students destined for *classes d'accueil*, as MéliSSa Lefebvre, theatre teacher to all my research participants and my main point of contact at the school, explained to me. “The number of immigrant students who go through the *classes d'accueil* increases every year. We currently have five *classes d'accueil*, but we're in talks of possibly opening a sixth before the end of the school year, principally as a result of Syrian refugees coming in.”

During the spring of 2016, when I conducted my research at the high school, most of my participants were also taking part in *Bagages*⁶, a school play and documentary project initiated by Lefebvre and filmmaker Paul Tom about what it's like to be an immigrant teenager in Montréal. I witnessed firsthand how much each of my 13 participants were personally invested in this project, which had them reflect on their identity(ties) and celebrated their courage for learning a new language and getting acclimated with an entirely new culture. This is precisely the type of positive learning environment Gibson argued was needed—those “that support additive or empowering forms of

⁶ The French word for “suitcases” or “luggage”.

acculturation and teacher-student relations based on collaboration rather than coercion (Gibson 1997: 446).

The initial presentations of my research project in two of Lefebvre's classrooms were filmed by Tom for possible inclusion in the documentary (though thankfully were left on the cutting room floor!). The resulting documentary was released in the fall of 2017 at Canadian film festivals, after which it aired on public broadcaster Télé-Québec to great acclaim and a number of prizes⁷. All to say: the teenagers I met for this project were already well versed in notions of migration and acculturation, good at articulating their multiple and ever-changing identities, and very comfortable discussing the ups and downs of their ongoing relocation/uprooting experience. After all, they had volunteered to take part in my project.

Many, such as 13 year-old Erfan, knew little about Canada before landing in Montréal. "The only thing I knew was that it was the country located above the United States." 17-year-old Kimia recalls the shock she experienced upon arrival. "It was the first time I saw black people and blond people with blue eyes. The streets were also so different, full of trees and clean, just like the buses and cars." For 14-year-old Rein, arriving to Canada meant security more than anything else, as she was fleeing a neighbourhood in Aleppo, Syria that was bombed periodically. "I would wake up in the morning to the sound and sight of bombs being dropped, so my siblings and I were not allowed to go onto the balcony. For three months, we only had one hour of electricity per day and very little water. It was very dangerous."



Fig. 4: Selfie by Rein, 14 years old, posted to Facebook.

A commonality among all my research participants was the great respect they had for and solidarity they felt with their parents, often using the word "hero" to describe them. In Markowitz's research, she noted: "parents who frequently let their children know that they had emigrated for 'their' sake establish high expectations for achievement

⁷ *Bagages* won multiple prizes at the 2018 Géméaux awards (the highest honour for French-language, made-for-TV storytelling in Canada) and the Vues sur Mer festival (2018), in addition to an Audience Award – Canadian Feature Film prize at FCVQ (2017), the Télébec prize at FCIAT (2017) and the Prix du jury des détenues at RIDM (2017).

of the goals they set.” (1994: 4) In the case of these Montréal teenagers, I got the feeling this notion of parents having “sacrificed” something was present, though not in a guilt-inducing way, but rather one that instills in them a greater desire to succeed, knowing how much harder it must be for their parents to suddenly be transplanted. “We left because mom wanted a better future for us,” Kimia told me. “In Iran, it’s more difficult to lead the life you want, the life you dream of. My mom is in college right now, she just got 100% on her first exam for which she studied really hard, and I’m so proud of her! She motivates us all the time.”

4 Methodology

As earlier stated, I presented the theme of my anthropological research (immigrant teens and their use of social media platforms) to two different groups of *classes d’accueil* students at a Montréal high school with the support and approval of their theatre teacher, Méliissa Lefebvre. Out of 5 possible classes d’accueil, Lefebvre and I determined it would be best to present my project to the two groups with the highest levels of French-language proficiency, to minimize potential language barriers during the interview process.

My PowerPoint presentation in each classroom went into detail about who I was, what my upbringing in Montréal had been like, which cultural touchstones I gravitated towards at their age and what the Internet and new technologies amounted to in the late 1990s. As I explained, my project wasn’t focused on the hows and the whys of their migration stories – which they were already exploring at length in Lefebvre and Tom’s ongoing documentary project *Bagages* – but in the hows and whys of their online behaviours and social media activities since starting school in Montréal. I invited those whose curiosity had been piqued to send me an email, at which point we would set up a time and place for a semi-structured, one-hour individual interview in English, French or Spanish. 13 students reached out to express interest, and I met each one whenever and wherever was most convenient to them: nine took place at the school itself, two at the students’ homes, and another two at nearby cafes. Half the interviews (7) were carried out in English, with the other half (6) in French. I obtained informed consent forms for each student, signed by a parental guardian, which proved to be extremely simple in large part because all parents were already on board for *Bagages* and for their children sharing their personal immigration experiences for an upcoming broadcast documentary. We agreed that all visual material used in this research paper would be used 1) with their express consent and 2) while blocking out features that could potentially allow facial recognition software to identify them, should this paper ever find its way online.

Regarding the qualitative data I gathered during my interviews, I was chiefly interested in their detailed accounts of all social media activities – both a breakdown of their usage, as well as their own musings on why they use certain platforms and the emotional consequences of their interactions online. I also asked each participant to submit screenshots of two social media posts of their choosing that

they felt best reflected their online selves. I wanted to explore how they presented themselves online, but on their own terms, as autonomous managers of their own reputations (Shoemaker 2010), and according to the posts they were most proud of. In addition to this, my semi-structured interviews gathered qualitative data pertaining to their migration stories, their memories of life back in their country of origin, their initial impressions of Québec society in general and Montréal schools in particular, their professional aspirations, their cultural/sports/leisurely interests and their networks of friends in Canada and elsewhere. All these interviews were taped, transcribed and coded.

As for pitfalls encountered during my research, the one I had anticipated from the get-go was a potential language barrier. 3/13 interviews proved more difficult than expected due to French or English language limitations on the part of my participants. What I did to mitigate this was send a detailed list of questions I would be asking each participant via email or Facebook in advance, so they would have the opportunity to think about the words they would need to use in their answers, if need be. The one I didn't quite see coming was how the age gap between my participants and I would play out in our communications. While I never thought twice about reaching out to them via email to set up meetings and interview times (and imposing email as our way to communicate), I found that most (10 out of 13) participants would not respond to me within 48 hours, while many of these same teenagers were liking my posts on Facebook and my pictures on Instagram. When I casually brought this up with one of the participants, he very respectfully smiled and explained to me that "no one ever uses email" and that "my email to you was the first time I sent anyone other than a teacher an email". I adjusted then and there for the remainder of the process to interact with my participants via Facebook Messenger and Instagram DMs⁸, according to their preference.

5 Research Findings

On the whole, what struck me as applicable to all 13 participants was how they left electronic trails on a variety of platforms, allowing for constant self-positioning and ways to establish connections with others. This echoes Agger's assessment of adolescent identity. "Kids write (text) furiously, both to enrich their identities and to form community (...) [because] they may feel isolated, without a tight community, friends, or lovers." (2015: 8) Much of what was intrinsic to each participant's identity were things they either asserted or reaffirmed online: posts, stories and memes they shared, pictures posted and videos uploaded. It would appear as though their process of integration into the host (Canadian) culture was taking place online just as much—if not more—than via in-person interactions.

A key takeaway from observing and listening to each participant's use of various social media platforms would be that it's ultimately not about what the platform's intended use may be, but about how

⁸ Direct messages.

individual users adopt it. For instance, 12-year-old Nikita only created a Facebook account a month ago “because many students in my class had it, and I didn’t want to be left out”, but his use of the platform is mostly limited to visiting the fan pages of Rafael Nadal (his hero) and *Fast & Furious* (his favourite film). 16-year-old Julia, by contrast, is on Facebook to find groups that post job listings, as she’s looking for work and wants to reach out to the Russian community in Montreal for assistance. She also uses Skype to stay in touch with her grandparents, which can be very emotional. “Sometimes, my mom and I will start talking to them on Skype and we’ll start crying, because we miss them so much.” 14-year-old Anastasia is most active on VKontakte⁹, where her “gallery is full of quotes – some are funny, others from books and literature.” Trottier’s notion of digital media as public sphere seems especially apt here: how the now mostly privatized public squares and parks of the 20th century have been replaced by online spaces that are considered crucial for communities to “engage socially, culturally and politically with others” (2014: 41).



Fig. 5: Instagram post by Kamyar, 18 years old.

And yet, the social media learning curve appears to have been quite steep for some of the participants. 13-year-old Erfan only used Telegram before arriving to Canada because Facebook and YouTube were filtered in Iran. “So to have the opportunity to be on social media

⁹ VKontakte (or “VK”) is a Russian online social media and social networking service similar to Facebook.

and be connected to what is happening in the world, read the news and follow your favourite actors and musicians, is incredible.” For others, like 16-year-old Arina, a lack of money prevented many people in her native Moldova from participating in these social capital-building activities. “In Moldova, nobody had cool smartphones or laptops. We were poor kids. Last year was the first year we started using Facebook, VK, Snapchat and Instagram back in Moldova. When I arrived at [name of Montreal school], everyone was like, ‘you don’t have Facebook?’” This goes back to Gibson’s argument that the process of identity formation and transformation for minority youth “is an inherently political one because of the unequal nature of power relations that exist in schools” (1997: 446-447).

6 Finding Ways Around the Language Hurdle

“Real life is more interesting than Facebook, but some people like me, their French and English is not perfect, so it’s hard to be friends with people suddenly. If you have someone in your Facebook list of friends, it already creates a little bit of a connection. That helped me feel more welcome when I arrived.” – Arina

Arguably the most daunting hurdle to overcome for immigrant youths in Québec is the matter of language. As Julia explained to me, she was initially very apprehensive about speaking French. “When I came to school here, I had a great fear of speaking and saying something wrong. Someone would ask me a question, I understood and wanted to answer, but I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t sure of myself.” As theatre teacher Lefebvre also explained to me, speaking “Québécois French¹⁰” is of utmost importance to her immigrant students, as they badly want to fit in. They often avoid speaking with their fellow Québécois classmates, she tells me, out of fear and a feeling of intimidation. And as Sam makes the case, second-language (or in the case of these participants, usually third-language) proficiency and communication competence are key to a newcomer’s sociocultural adaptation. “Cultural learning approaches assume a direct relationship between language fluency and sociocultural adaptation. Good language proficiency is argued to be associated with increased interaction with members of the new culture, and a decrease in sociocultural maladaptation.” (2010: 475)

Among the most impressive findings of this research were the accounts of many participants using social media platforms in creative ways to overcome the French language barrier. That’s precisely what Reitz refers to when discussing how immigrant youths with high efficacy beliefs “have higher aspirations to acquire host cultural competence” (2014: 756). For Shinwhoo, it was using Google Translate on Facebook. For Emad and Erfan, it was speaking with friends on Facebook using an online dictionary, thereby giving them more time to properly think about and compose their verbal utterances. “When I speak with other Québécois kids face-to-face, it’s so difficult, because

¹⁰ Non-francophones should note that “Québec French” is easy to detect by native French speakers anywhere because of its singular phonological features.

of their accent, and because I don't speak great French like they do," Erfan tells me. "But when we speak on Facebook, for instance, we can use dictionaries and take our time before answering. That really helps us create a connection with them."

This notion of controlling the flow of the conversation touches upon Agger's like-minded argument about the advantages of texting and emailing to minimize the risks involved in spontaneity. "Texting, unlike talking on the phone or face-to-face, is asynchronous; it can be conducted in a discontinuous way, with messages not requiring immediate responses. The receiver has a chance to compose herself, literally and figuratively." (2015: 12)

"I'll look at the photos my [name of Montreal school] friends post, and I'll think, 'this person is funny', or 'she is more shy'. It helps me get to know them better. I can already tell you the character traits of each person who is participating in your study because I follow them all on different social networks." – Julia

7 What They Learned About Each Other Online

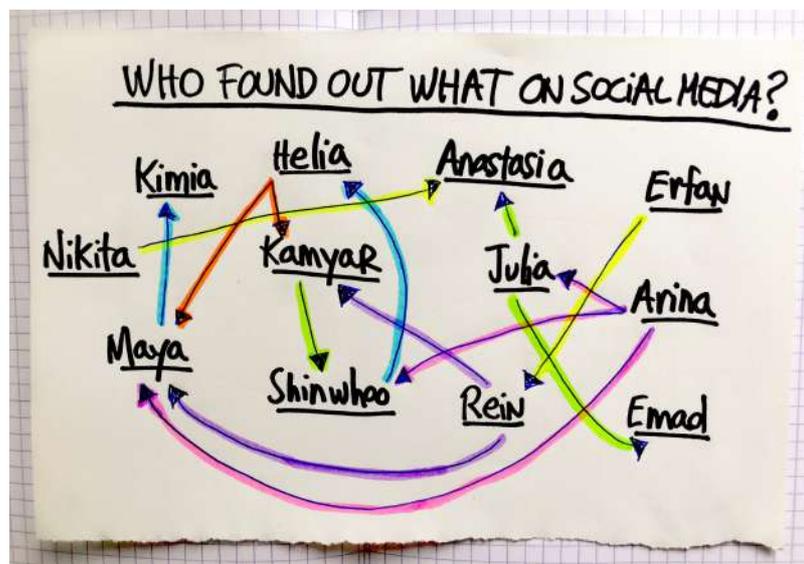


Fig. 6: Drawing from my field notes to link up participants' quotes about one another.

All my participants strongly felt as though being connected on social media had helped them get to know their new classmates better and/or more quickly. In fact, they each took turns listing off things they had discovered about their new classmates on social media, before they had even gotten the chance to know them IRL¹¹. As Trottier points out, these performances of one's identity for an online audience are "fundamental to social functioning and for individuals to fit in their social context" (2014: 4). But I would argue the stakes are even greater for immigrant youths who are suddenly thrust into a foreign-language environment where their communication abilities are heavily compromised. Hearing the excitement in Rein's voice as she recalled how she discovered that her classmate Tia "spoke Arabic because it was

¹¹ In real life.

written 'Egyptian' on her Facebook profile and there were many comments in Arabic" was telling, as social media helped her find peers who spoke her native tongue during her first weeks at the school. Moreover, many described building trust via social media as the first step in their friendships, making "the boundary between Facebook friends and 'real' friends highly permeable [and] requiring us to be suspicious of a sharp distinction between the two." (Agger 2015: 3)

Here is what my participants had to say when asked what they had discovered about other students through their social media feeds:

Rein -> Maya: "You can see on her Facebook that she draws really well!"

Rein -> Kamyar: "When I arrived in Montréal, I started playing the electric guitar, and I saw that Kamyar plays really well! I watched videos he had posted."

Nikita -> Anastasia: "I found out she plays water polo through FB."

Julia -> Anastasia: "She is shy and doesn't like to post photos of herself."

Julia -> Emad: "He is very funny. You could get the impression that he's very serious scrolling through his photos, but that's actually not the case."

Erfan -> Rein: "I didn't know Rein played the guitar until I saw it online."

Kamyar -> Shinwhoo: "I found out Shinwhoo does taekwondo."

Arina -> Maya: "Her Instagram is all art, drawing and photos. In real life, she's a simple girl, nobody would notice her. But on Instagram, wow! It's really cool."

Arina -> Julia: "She's a really sociable girl and you can see that by her Instagram. There are a lot of photos of her friends every day!"

Arina -> Shinwhoo: "When we first met, I saw his Instagram, and it was all music! I saw he loved EDM like me, so I knew there was something we could talk about."

Shinwhoo -> Helia: "I can see that Helia loves music and she doesn't post a lot of pictures, even though she's a girl."

Helia -> Kamyar: "His music taste! He's a metal head, and that's one of the first reasons why I wanted to be friends with him. I was stalking his IG page, and there were so many metal bands!"

Helia -> Maya: "Maya is so Tumblr style! When I look at her IG page, it reminds me of the Tumblr aesthetic."

Maya -> Kimia: "I found out she draws, which I didn't know before."

Promoting community building and enhancing relationships that already exist in real life (Van Dijck 2013: 201) has been the main objective of social media platforms since their inception, but what's wonderful to see with these research participants is that opportunities for "multilingual encounters and translanguaging practices" (Darvin 2016) have encouraged them to be more creative and fluid in how they self-represent online. "In the digital world, online users are able to perform different identities through creative assembly, aligning themselves with different communities and imagining other identities" (Darvin 2016:

536).

This idea of staging/crafting multiple online performances of oneself is often frowned upon by social scientists for “air-brushing one’s flaws, telling tall tales, outright lying” (Agger 2015: 7). But in the case of these immigrant youths, there’s something extremely empowering about giving them the keys to constructing their own narratives, especially when language, cultural customs and social circles in their country of origin are all absent and unable to give them a much-needed confidence boost.



Fig. 7: I also found myself woven into some of these teenagers’ online narratives, as they wanted to take selfies with me to share their participation in the project on their social media feeds.

8 Cultural Capital, Interest Tokens, And Self-Embodiment

In comparing the practices of expressing personal tastes, managing impressions and performing identities through scrapbooking (now dated) or Facebook (contemporary), Day Good shrewdly observes that what they both enable “can potentially translate into real-life gains in cultural capital¹².” (Day Good 2012: 566) This is something all participants are keenly aware of, as what they post on social media platforms is intended to showcase desirable elements of their identities they want to share with others. For Maya, who aspires to someday be a model, an actress or an illustrator, her Facebook and VKontakte feeds feature selfies of what she describes as her Tumblr style – meaning

¹² According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital is the cultural knowledge that serves as currency to help us navigate a culture. It alters our experiences and the opportunities available to us. (Cultural Capital, *Sociology Live!*, 16 November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DBEYiBkqp8> Accessed 20 April 2018).

“monochromatic shirts, flower head wreaths, short hair and oversized men’s sweaters” – and pictures of her paintings.



Fig. 8: “I like the painter Vincent Van Gogh. He draws in his own personal way, and sees things unlike anyone else. I also like to draw, especially landscapes.” (Maya, 13 years old).

For Kamyar, a guitar player and musician who considers himself a “metalhead”, not living in Iran means he no longer has to be discreet about his artistic tastes and political positions. “Music posts are a priority for me, then political stuff, and then memes. Back in Iran, when I would write stuff, my parents would be so upset because the government could come and get us. In Iran, we’re not allowed to write anti-government posts, but I still tried to do it. It was dumb. Now, I post stuff that’s anti-dictators, anti-Donald Trump. That’s why he gravitated to metal early on—it’s political.” Day Good would label Kamyar’s type of online performance as a social exchange of tokens. “The value of circulating articles among friends and coworkers goes far beyond the items’ informational content. Rather, exchanging clippings is a way to establish mutual awareness among contacts, express common interests and tastes, and build rapport.” (2012: 566) These expressions of taste can also take on the form of interest tokens, such as Shinwhoo’s third-degree black belt in taekwondo, a deep-rooted passion that predates his move to Canada, and one that he shares with pride on social media. As Day Good suggests, it “can potentially speak volumes about a user’s cultural aspirations, dispositions and desires for social distinction.” (2012: 568)



Fig. 9: “I took a screenshot of this video of me board-breaking.” (Shinwhoo, 15 years old).

Last but most certainly not least is the selfie ritual, which Aggers traces back to the late 1600s self-portraiture of Rembrandt. Many of the participants (mostly girls) post selfies, including Julia, who explained to me that “I love to take them with my friends at beautiful locations outside. There are moments I can forget, but by taking selfies, it ensures I will remember them. I love taking selfies with everyone, including the police.” Aggers would argue that at their core, all selfies re-embody the thinking person, and communicate a simple, “here I am” subtextual message. (2015: 48) That declaration of one’s existence is all the more important when you’re in the midst of reinventing yourself and creating new versions of yourself to better integrate into a new society.

9 Conclusion



Fig. 10: Selfies as self-embodiments (Julia, 16 years old)

Integrating into a new society is “a dynamic process that doesn’t have a specified duration,” argues Proulx (2015: 15) in his research

about Québec's longstanding *classes d'accueil* system. "The mastery of the language, an active participation in society and the adherence to common values can take years, or might even only be reached by the second or third generation of immigrants" (2015: 15), he adds. The 13 teenage participants in this research project have led me to believe social media may speed up this process. To them, social media is not just about information gathering, or connecting with others, or identity building, or enhancing preexisting relationships: it's all those things at once. Social media platforms grant them the power to portray themselves however they want to be seen, instead of having a narrative thrust upon them by outsiders and be unable to offer a counter-narrative (due to language deficiencies or various cultural glitches, for instance). These platforms appear to help build bridges with their fellow students, particularly those who've experienced similar immigration journeys, while also reinforcing "traditional groups, such as family, caste and tribe, and (...) repair[ing] the ruptures created by migration and mobility." (Why We Post)

Social media allows them to easily stay simultaneously connected to the host culture and their original culture. While different platforms are often used for communicating with friends in different countries, the participants aren't forced to really compartmentalize their identities. Their friends in Montréal are interested in their past abroad, and vice versa. Just as social media allows these immigrant teenagers to better understand the lives and cultural knowledge of their Québécois peers, that interest and curiosity are also reciprocated by their new Québécois friends. While digital tools help these participants overcome various hurdles—French language fluency arguably being the most significant—Trottier makes a very valid point: these tools have "become the principal means through which users express their identities, and communicate with others." (2014: 23) They're ubiquitous and embedded into every aspect of their daily lives. So it only makes sense that they also be used to assist in the acculturation of immigrant teenagers.

In fact, most participants felt so at home in the online sphere that they mentioned career aspirations that involved some online element. The most straightforward of the bunch was Shinwhoo, who described his dream job to me as a YouTuber. "My mom and dad always ask, 'but what would you post about if you were a YouTuber?' I would post about anything. My interests would not be just one subject: taekwondo, immigration or talk shows. YouTube is the key to doing it all – and people would enjoy it! I already have a bunch of ideas I'd like to do, such as explaining immigration by inviting friends of mine from different countries to share their culture."

Of course, acculturation is a two-way street, with cultural changes noticeable in both groups during the process. "No cultural group remains unchanged following culture contact; acculturation is a two-way interaction, resulting in actions and reactions to the contact situation." (Sam 2010: 473) In that respect, I found myself learning so much about my participants' cultures over the course of this research. Russian Instagram influencers, underground metal bands in Iran and taekwondo groups that train to the sounds of K-pop were just a

handful of the discoveries I made thanks to my very savvy informants. As theatre prof Lefebvre puts it, “they really have as much to teach me as the other way around. More than anything, what they have taught me is the incredible strength and resilience they have as uprooted teens integrating into a new culture. My admiration only grows with each new project I work on with them.”

I'd be interested in following up with these participants in five years time to find out how many still live in Montréal, how successful they were at learning French, whether they now feel stronger affinities with the host culture or if they instead solidified ties with their culture of origin, and whether they've developed certain social media strategies for staying in touch with all those friends who don't live in the same country as they do.

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Appendix A: A story I wrote about Bagages & my anthropological research for local daily Metro:



Récits croisés de migration et d'intégration

Des adolescents ayant tous récemment immigré au Québec livrent des témoignages courageux et ouverts sur le monde dans le documentaire *Bagages*.

MICHAËL-OLIVIER HARDING
@micholharding

Alors que son documentaire célèbre les bonheurs partout où il est présent (Québec, Rouyn-Noranda, Montréal), son réalisateur, Paul Tom, revient sur sa bouleversante expérience de tournage et sur 75 heures et plus de matériel.

Je pense qu'être québécois, psychologiquement, c'est beaucoup le fait d'accepter tout le monde. Ça, ce sont les propos généraux d'un ado colombien récemment arrivé à Montréal lorsqu'on l'interroge sur ses impressions à propos de sa terre d'accueil. Le documentaire *Bagages* suit son parcours et celui de ses camarades de classe (indiens, chinois, moldaves, syriens, sud-coréens, etc.), tous inscrits dans des classes d'accueil à l'école secondaire Paul-Gérin-Lajoie d'Outremont.

Le cinéaste Paul Tom accompagne la professeure d'art dramatique Mélissa Lefebvre (qui signe aussi la scénarisation du film) et ses élèves le temps d'une année scolaire, alors qu'ils participent à des ateliers ludiques pour prendre le pouls de leur nouvel environnement et montent une pièce pour les étudiants du secteur régulier qui s'est qualifié, en octobre 2018 à mai 2019, nous en dit davantage sur une année qu'il qualifie d'exceptionnelle, de celles qui manquent une vie.

Vous affirmez que ces jeunes incarnent les mots courage et volants. De quelle façon? Ils subissent les décisions

de leurs parents. Ils n'ont pas le choix, en raison de leur âge et de leur situation, de s'adapter. Il serait très facile pour eux d'abandonner, mais il y a chez eux une motivation intrinsèque à vouloir faire partie du monde qui les entoure. On oublie souvent dans le film que, quatre mois plus tôt, ces jeunes ne parlaient pas le français. Donc, c'est merveilleux de les voir grandir aussi rapidement. En étant en groupe et en partageant leur parcours migratoire, ils ont compris que ça pouvait être une force, que ça pouvait briser des murs qui les séparent des gens nés ici.

Au départ, vous deviez transformer la pièce en théâtre filmé pour faire circuler l'œuvre dans les écoles de la commission scolaire. Au final, ce sont plutôt les entrevues réalisées avec quelques 25 jeunes qui servent de colonne vertébrale au documentaire. Ce choix s'est-il rapidement imposé? Mélissa et moi nous sommes rapidement rendu compte que la pièce toute seule n'était peut-être pas la meilleure façon de rendre justice aux histoires de ces jeunes. C'est d'ailleurs vraiment grâce à elle et à son grand cœur qu'ils ont voulu se livrer. Elle était là pour les écouter et offrir un espace pour comprendre qu'ils n'étaient pas seuls, que même s'ils avaient tous des parcours différents, ils vivaient les

mêmes défis en arrivant à Montréal. C'est donc une expérience humaine magnifique que Mélissa a créée.

Avant d'arriver au Québec, vous êtes né dans un camp de réfugiés en Thaïlande de parents cambodgiens. La prise de conscience de votre identité plurielle a souvent été au cœur de votre démarche. Suivre le parcours de ces jeunes s'est-il apporté des réponses à certains de vos questionnements? Oui, vraiment. À leur âge, j'étais encore tiraillé entre être québécois ou être cambodgien. C'est comme s'il fallait que je choisisse l'un ou l'autre. Ça que je trouve magnifique avec ces jeunes, c'est qu'ils se rendent compte qu'ils n'ont pas besoin de choisir. Ils revendiquent deux identités, parfois même trois. Ils reconnaissent déjà sans le savoir que l'identité est en mouvement, que ce n'est pas un concept figé. Moi, ça m'a pris du temps avant de le comprendre. J'aimais l'idée d'un Québec où ma fille grandirait non plus sous le regard et avec la question de «tu viens d'où?» mais s'en va, ensemble?»

info

Bagages

Du 11 au 20 décembre à la Cinémathèque québécoise et le 21 décembre à 7894-Québec

Rencontre

Des barrières à surmonter

Notre journaliste a eu ainsi rencontré 25 des adolescents du documentaire *Bagages* dans le cadre d'une étude anthropologique l'an dernier. Il a compilé ce qui dépasse tout les moyens imaginables pour transmettre le sentiment d'impuissance qui les hante à leur arrivée.

À la base, *Bagages* nous rappelle qu'une société accueillant des gens venus d'ailleurs a surtout à apprendre d'eux que le contraire, non seulement gelés à ce qu'ils ont laissé derrière eux mais surtout par la force de connectivité et l'ouverture sur le monde dont ils font preuve. Il y a notamment ce moment, très dans le film, où Mélissa Lefebvre, l'instigatrice de ce projet théâtral, présente un nouvel élève au groupe. Ne comprenant ni le français ni l'anglais, il se fait tout traduire en russe par son voisin. Cette impuissance quand vient le temps de s'exprimer, plusieurs la décrivent comme une véritable prison, comme s'ils (avaient) fermé la bouche, et tu veux mentir, se souvient Paul d'eux.

Pourtant, les efforts déployés par ces jeunes pour surmonter ces barrières linguistiques et culturelles sont de l'ordre du spectaculaire. L'an dernier, j'ai rencontré 13 des jeunes participants de *Bagages* dans le cadre d'une étude



anthropologique dont le but était d'évaluer si les médias sociaux et autres outils numériques aident ces adolescents nouvellement arrivés au pays à s'adapter à leur nouvelle réalité, à tisser plus rapidement des liens avec leurs nouveaux camarades de classe. Dans la plupart des cas, j'ai constaté qu'ils étaient extrêmement dynamiques dans l'utilisation de ces plateformes. Un jeune m'a expliqué que sur Facebook, il jouait avec ses amis son utilité de *Beats*, tandis qu'un autre ne jurait que par Google Translate, puisqu'on avait le temps et la technologie pour mieux traduire le fond de sa pensée. Éloie de s'exprimer le rendait déjà moins anxieux.

À cheval entre blogueurs russes et Patrice L'Écuyer

À-delà des médias sociaux, des plateformes *Wotoktalk*, *Tokgram* et autres *KakaoTalk* dont ces jeunes à cheval sur deux cultures m'ont parlé, nous avons aussi discuté de ce qui les passionne. On m'a appris plein

de choses sur certains vedettes russes sur Instagram, des modèles underground promue par le régime iranien et des groupes de *knokovado* installant sur fond de *Kpop*. Mais ils m'ont également appris sur certains pans de la culture d'ici. *Peinture* m'ont parlé de l'émission *Les Parents d'Ingram* et même de *Shen*, un jeu, qu'ils jouent à côté comme son émission préférée. *Foot* m'ont expliqué aux fins de *Patrice L'Écuyer* qui m'ont lu jusqu'à, mais ce jeune a dû m'expliquer sur ce *rempeaux* télévisuel québécois. «Aimé par M. L'Écuyer, c'est un jeu sur les gens vraiment célèbres dans la société québécoise, a-t-il précisé. Ça m'aide à comprendre de quoi sont les gens ici, au juste. Ça m'aide à faire rire les Québécois».

Lefebvre, qui a eu l'idée de lancer ce projet fédérateur après avoir constaté que les élèves des classes d'accueil et ceux du régulier ne se parlaient presque pas, m'a expliqué que l'école Paul-Gérin-Lajoie d'Outremont est parmi celles qui reçoivent le plus de jeunes venus de l'étranger. Son rôle dans cet engagement institutionnel parés initialement pour les principaux concernés? Leur offrir un espace pour raconter leurs histoires. J'ai l'impression qu'ils sentent qu'ils ont une place, qu'on leur fait de la place, se-elle reconnue. Et quand on sent ça, on a envie de s'ouvrir plus, de s'intéresser à ce qui se passe ici.»