French Stereotypes, Truth or Myths? (1 of 9)

I eluded in a previous article (https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/productivity-happiness-other-statistics-jean-capdevielle) to some stereotypes about French people and as a Frenchman who lived almost half his life abroad, I heard just about everything!

The interesting thing is that when you live in France, you don't really realize how many things are said or believed about your nation and your people. It is a bit like accents, everybody has one, but everybody believe they don't: it is the way they speak, so it is accent-less.

So, what are the most commonly spread stereotypes about French people and are they true or not? (you can of course count on me to look at it through an honest and unbiased lens 😊)

Why bothering writing about it you might ask (and why bothering reading it 😊?)? Fair questions indeed… In my 20+ years working life, from Children Carer to Account Manager and from Canada to Singapore, the most crucial lessons I learned I believe is the power of perspective. The way the same fact or event will be seen, interpreted and understood in various ways be different people is universal: we are all faced at some stage with the issues and misunderstanding induced by this very reality. Dealing with it appropriately, whichever the situation (personal, work…) is a precious skill to learn… Hopefully, this series of articles will help give you some perspective on perspective itself… deep right?

Also, I'm not going to lie, it was quite fun to do and quite satisfying to debunk some of these myths… but no spoilers, let's get into it!

Once again, let's see what good old Wikipedia has to say about it*:

High fashion

France, particularly Paris, has been perceived for being a high fashion place where designer clothes and cosmetics are made.

Hygiene

The French are perceived as having poor hygiene, originating from American soldiers during World War II.

Rudeness

French waiters have been perceived as rude and disrespectful, especially to foreigners who speak little to no French.

Romance

French men and women are perceived as being very romantic.

Smokers

Smoking in France is a common trope when associated with France.

Laziness

The perception that French workers are prone to strikes and take a lot of time off has established a stereotype of the French being workshy.

Weak military

Despite being one of the world's leading power from the 18th century, the French military had been perceived as poor in armed combat and could be easily defeated in armed struggles, thus likely to surrender. The stereotype was attributed to France's role during World War II, in which French forces surrendered to German forces in just 46 days, but also due to the poor performances in various wars, such as the Battle of Assietta, the Haitian Revolution, the Franco-Prussian War, and the Battle of Dien Bien Phu during the First Indochina War.

I'm pretty sure these would ring a bell for most (and of course a little less for the French amongst you) but what is really behind it, how much of it is true?

I'll try in the upcoming weeks to get to the bottom of these, 1 stereotype at a time. Stay tuned, I look forward to reading your comments and thoughts.

Please note that I will purposefully skip 2 of these:

- **High Fashion**: I don't know enough at all – won't surprise those of you who saw me outside of work.
- **Smoking**: unfortunately, I know too much about it 🙁

But, as a "hors d'oeuvre", the below quotes and citations set the scene nicely… or not, some are actually quite offensive to the French but being the country of the "lumieres" (the philosophers, not the lights) we can take it with philosophy I'm sure:

"France is the most civilized country in the world and doesn't care who knows it." **John Gunther**

"France has neither winter nor summer nor morals—apart from these drawbacks it is a fine country." **Mark Twain**

"How can anyone govern a nation that has 240 different kinds of cheese?" **Charles de Gaulle**

"Dogs smoke in France." **Ozzy Osbourne**

"We always have been, we are, and I hope that we always shall be, detested in France." **Duke of Wellington**

"What I gained by being in France was learning to be better satisfied with my own country." **Samuel Johnson**

"Everything is on such a clear financial basis in France. It is the simplest country to live in. No one makes things complicated by becoming your friend for any obscure reason. If you want people to like you, you have only to spend a little money." **Ernest Hemingway**

"They aren't much at fighting wars anymore. Despite their reputation for fashion, their women have spindly legs. Their music is sappy. But they do know how to whip up a plate of grub." **Mike Royko**

"If the French were really intelligent, they'd speak English." **Wilfrid Sheed**

*"I love French wine, like I love the French language. I have sampled every language, French is my favourite. Fantastic language. Especially to curse with. Nom de dieu de putain de bordel de merde de saloperie ….. It's like wiping your arse with silk. I love it**." The Merovingian (Matrix Reloaded)**

*Source : *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_French_people*

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jean-capdevielle-4435722_france-perspectives-stereotypes-activity-6764320397153464320-ctur

This week: High Fashion

Wikipedia*: *France, particularly Paris, has been perceived for being a high fashion place where designer clothes and cosmetics are made.*

"Fashions fade, style is eternal." —**Yves Saint Laurent**

<u>Disclaimer</u>: *Not at all my area of expertise…*

What is high Fashion? well, according to the Wikipedia (again), Haute couture (or 'high fashion') is the creation of exclusive custom-fitted clothing. Haute couture is high-end fashion that is constructed by hand from start to finish, made from high-quality, expensive, often unusual fabric and sewn with extreme attention to detail and finished by the most experienced and capable sewers.

In other words: expensive, sometimes weird (mostly actually), clearly not for you and I and displayed by models completely unrepresentative of the population… Although I never understood the fascination with high fashion (I'm a country boy after all) I understand that it actually sets the fashion trends for the following months, etc etc…

From a business stand point, there's no debate and the stereotype is spot on:

- Most notorious Fashion Week in the world
- Some off the biggest luxury/Fashion brands: Dior, Chanel, Givenchy, Hermes…**
- Biggest luxury conglomerate in the world, LVMH***:
    - Eur53 Billion of revenues in 2019
    - CEO Bernard Arnault is the wealthiest man in France, 3rd wealthiest man in the world

OK, but does it mean that French people have a higher fashion sense? This is hard to judge, I would say yes as I always thought that French women in particular were always classier that in other countries, but this is personal opinion (and I'm married to French woman 😊).

That being said, what is certain is that we are as much prone to fashion Faux-Pas as anyone else:

Popular attire of the French youth (some of it anyway), classy through and through. Fair enough, it is practical and comfy indeed…

My personal favourite: The Suit & Tie with short sleeves shirt. The apogee of refinement… You may laugh now but it is a very common work attire especially amongst French engineers (no offense, I'm a French Engineer myself).

In the end, it is all a matter of taste, beauty is in the eye of the beholder …

Sources:

*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haute_couture

** https://www.theceomagazine.com/business/finance/the-top-10-most-powerful-luxury-brands-on-earth/

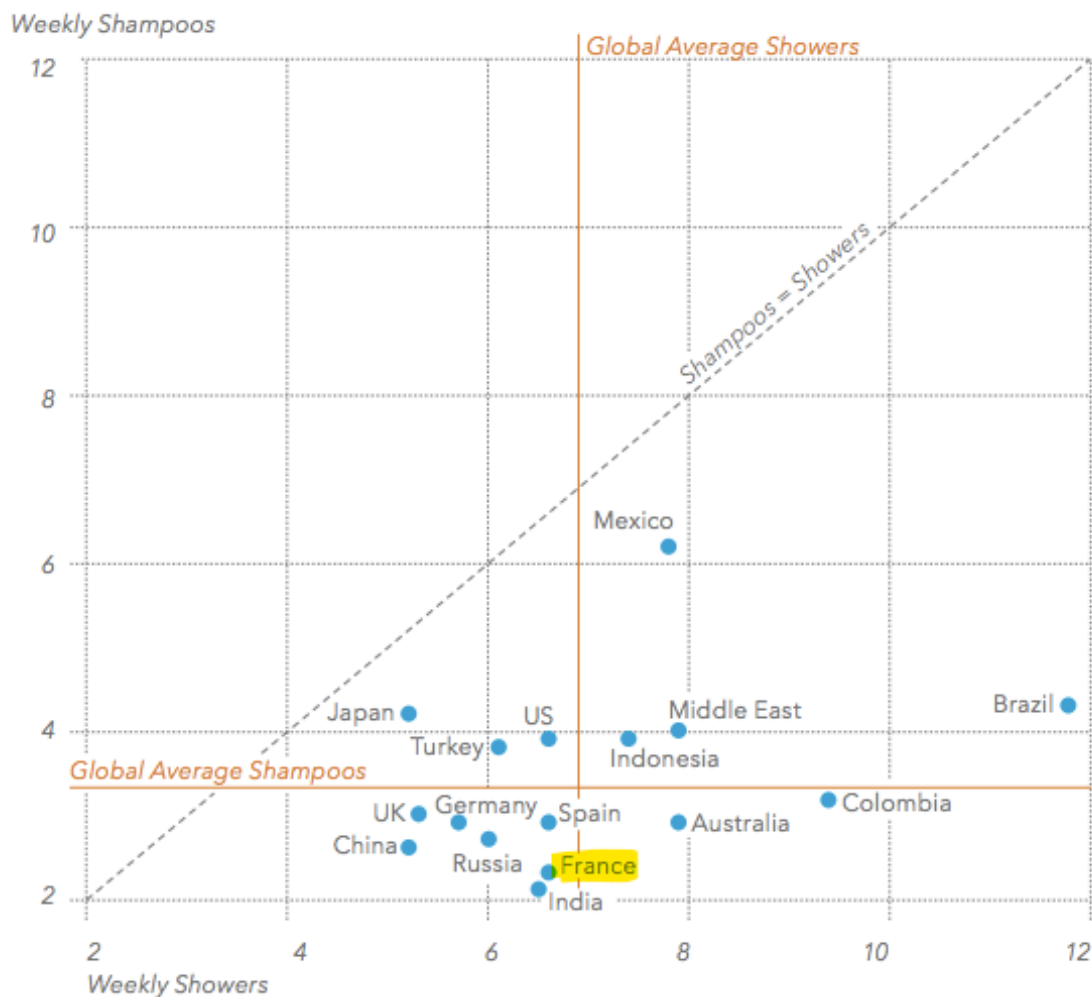***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LVMH

This week: Hygiene

Wikipedia*: *The French are perceived as having poor hygiene, originating from American soldiers during* [World War II](#).

"I'm a massive fragrance fan - I think fragrance is part of someone's hygiene, and I'm a big believer in leaving an impression through scent." **Rita Ora**

No one likes to hear their hygiene is questionable so this one is actually quite offensive… let's put it to rest once and for all:

Average Showers and Shampoos by Country

As per the graph above*, France is pretty much around the average in terms of shower per week, and under average when it comes to shampoos.

Moreover:

- The recommended number of shampoos per week is around 2**
- The actual recommendation from some dermatologists if to shower only every other day (that is apparently what is best for the skin)***

In other words, the hygiene of French people is simply OK and this myth is definitely busted…

Where does it this terrible stereotype comes from then? Two leading theories:

1. Actually, not quite the WWII version commonly admitted. And let share a side comment here as this theory puzzles me. Historically, the Americans mostly arrived in France in 1944 pretty much 4 years after the French army was defeated, so there would have been little encounters between US and French soldiers, only possibly:
   o With the Free France troops in Africa and France
   o In POW camps (1.8 Million French POW at the end of WWII)

In both instances, let's just say that the French soldiers were not quite in a position to display the best hygiene practices…

So, the "real" genesis here is that the actual development of a decent water supply infrastructure in England happened much earlier than in France, so ordinary people in British cities began to wash more. A visitor to France in the mid- to late 19th century would have noticed the difference. It seems then that the stereotype initiated in England, was propagated by the English and eventually stayed alive long after France's water supply infrastructure got the same level as England's.

2. War on perfume: the cliché was also kept alive by jealous competitors to the renowned French perfume industry. It is not rare to hear that these delightful scents are only due to the fact the French needed to come up with good products to cover up their bad smell.

Grasse****, a small town 40Km away from Nice and the French riviera, has been the world capital of perfume since the 16th century. In the Middle Ages, Grasse specialized in leather tanning. Once tanned, the hides were often exported to Genoa or Pisa, cities that shared a commercial alliance with Grasse. Several centuries of this intense activity witnessed many technological advances within tanning industries. The hides of Grasse acquired a reputation for high quality. But the leather smelled badly, something that did not please the glove wearing nobility. This is when Galimard, a tanner in Grasse came up with the idea of scented leather gloves. He offered a pair of scented gloves to Catherine de Medici who was seduced by the gift. Thereafter, the product spread through the Royal Court and high society, and this made a worldwide reputation for Grasse.

So, here you go, whichever angle you look at it, nothing really sustains this stereotype today only stemming in the end from jealousy and/or spread of outdated information.

Sources:

*https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/02/how-often-people-in-various-countries-shower/385470/

**https://www.luxyhair.com/blogs/hair-blog/how-often-should-i-wash-my-hair

***https://www.healthline.com/health/beauty-skin-care/how-often-should-you-shower

https://www.thelocal.fr/20200923/please-stop-telling-french-people-that-we-smell-we-do-wash-every-day

https://www.france24.com/en/20110628-french-are-cleanest-europe-study-hygiene-united-minds-teva-poll-stereotype

****Grasse - Wikipedia

Rudeness:

Wikipedia: French waiters have been perceived as rude and disrespectful, especially to foreigners who speak little to no French

"We decided that the French could never write user-friendly software because they're so rude."
Douglas Coupland

Probably the most famous, wide spread and recurring cliché about France… But what is rudeness?

***Rude** describes a type of behaviour that isn't appropriate and usually isn't very nice, either — like yelling "You stink!" at a children's talent show.*

So, apparently, French waiters are perceived as rude by visitors who do not speak French: this seems to be the "admitted" origin for this Cliché. Let me highlight a few points here:

- Looking at the definition of "rude", there is the notion of "appropriate". Problem is, it is a matter of culture: what is appropriate somewhere is not elsewhere. It is all relative and there are many such examples. For instance, burping at the table is considered rude in many countries, France included, while it is OK in others and actually rude not to do it in others. So, rudeness exists only through prism of our own education and cultures, rendering the concept itself inherently flawed.

- Moreover, developing on the remark above, provided the relativity of the concept, how can one label something as "rude" when visiting a different country/culture than his? Either because they are unable to understand differences can exist or because they believe their culture is "better" or "truer" entitling them to issue a judgement… Sounds familiar?

- The Cliché, is I believe often associated with Paris, and to France by extension. Paris, however is not France and the divide is quite clear: Parisians do have a word, "*province*", to define all that is not Paris. I always found that very offensive as someone coming from a culturally rich, proud and unique part of France (my beloved Pyrenées). Being simply put in the same bag as every other region when mine is objectively better never sat well with me 😌. Neither does being labelled as "rude" because of Paris and Parisians: not only it is untrue, but it is unfair!

- Since it seems the cliché is heavily linked to the waiters' attitude in France, let's set a couple of things straight:

    o Unlike other countries like the US where waiters are paid with tips only, waiters in France have a fixed salary in most cases. This mean they do not need to smile, be overly courteous or do anything in particular in the hope to get a big tip. This over-nice attitude from Northern American waiters is by the way quite disturbing for us French (for me at least), a bit "too much" or over the top.

o They are pros: unlike other places like Australia for instance where waitressing is mostly a casual job with a lot of turnover, it is a career in France. One could argue this means that waiters in France are better at their job (serving people quickly and efficiently). I will not judge but I'll encourage you think of an overcrowded Paris Café terrace where only 1 waiter caters for the whole thing, doing table service, payment management, clean up, etc etc… while you don't wait much to be served… OK, they may not smile, but dam, they are efficient and if you pay close attention, they are at full speed all the time, quite impressive. In contrast, imagine a similar setting in Australia: mostly no table service, long wait to order/get a drink, tables not quite cleaned quickly, and yet there seems to be staff everywhere… I'm not saying this is the norm bit it is something I witness quite often. Ok they are friendly and smiling, but personally, I'm not here to make friends so the quicker I can get my order the better. 1-0 to France on this in my book.

As you gather from the above, my assessment of this stereotype is that it is utter nonsense… But let's imagine for 1 second that yes, it is true, French people are rude and it is an undeniable fact. Well, France is the most visited country in the world, Paris the most visited city and both have held that spot for years. If the rudeness of French people was such an issue, one might think it could affect the number of tourists visiting? I also have a theory on this, 2 in fact:

- People just don't care: France's charm far outweighs the inconvenience of the alleged rudeness of French people

- It has become an expectation: people visiting France expect waiters to be rude so we stick to the cliché just to avoid disappointment, maybe part of the little "*je ne sais quoi*" that people come to look for in France…

To conclude on this one, even French people use this stereotype to laugh about themselves:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JamYcUAY1yo&list=PLVS0kohK8UTBc71z9hhhpbvuo4BiyKhNa&index=2

Who said we were stuck up, arrogant and could not take a joke?

Source:

*https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/rude

French Stereotypes, Truth or Myths? (5 of 9)

Smokers:

Wikipedia: Smoking in France is a common trope when associated with France.

> *"Giving up smoking is the easiest thing in the world. I know because I've done it thousands of times."* **Mark Twain**

So, according to this stereotype, everybody smokes in France. The data however suggests otherwise*:
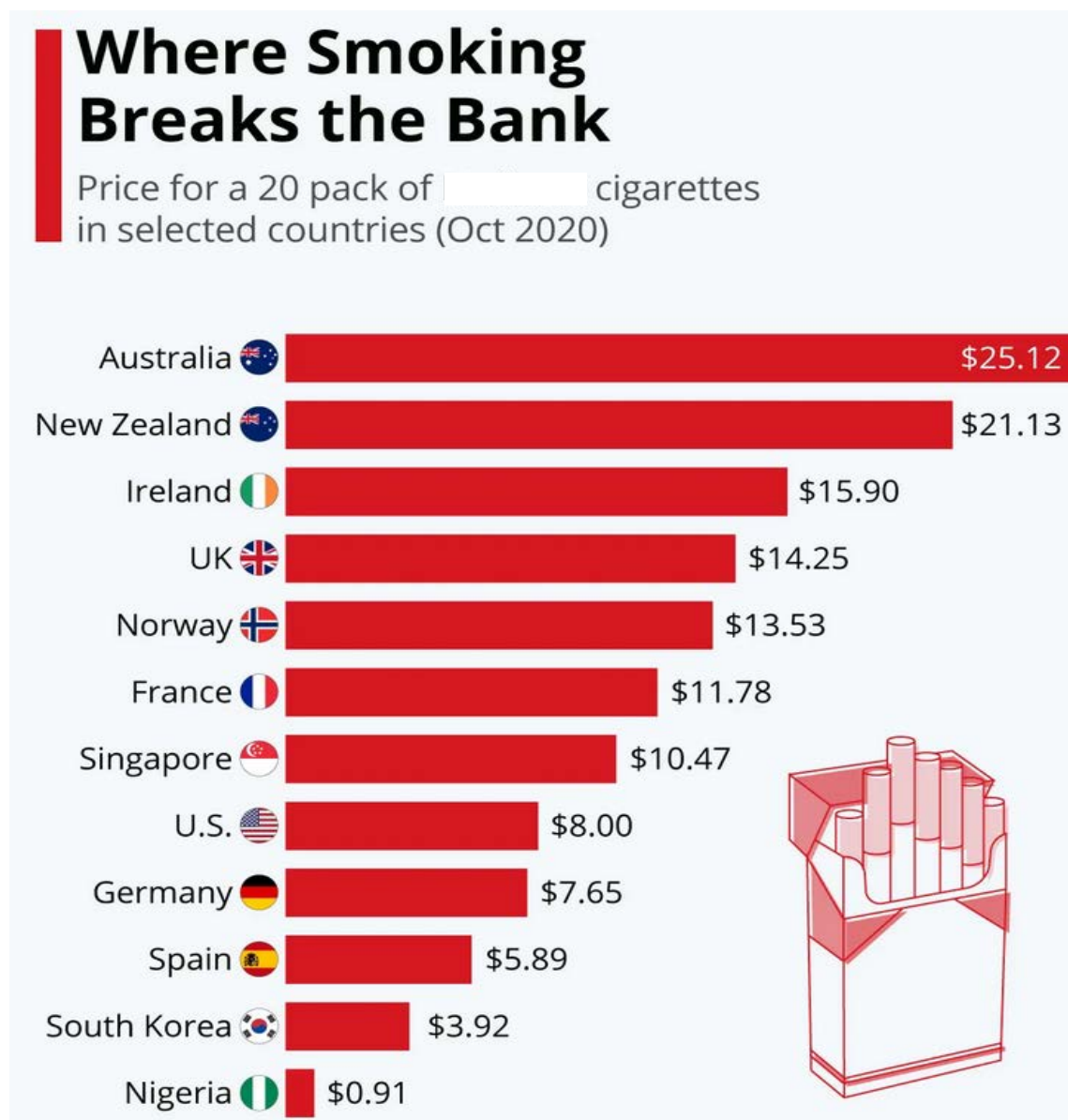
Rank	Country	Smoking rate	Relative smoking rate
1	Kiribati	52.2	
2	Nauru	47.5	
3	Greece	42.4	
4	Serbia	41.6	
5	Jordan	41.0	
6	Indonesia	39.8	
7	Laos	39.1	
8	Lebanon	38.3	
9	Bosnia and Herzegovina	38.3	
10	Chile	38.0	
11	Croatia	36.4	
12	Latvia	35.3	
13	Bulgaria	35.0	
14	Bahrain	34.3	
15	Czech Republic	33.1	
16	Andorra	32.5	
17	Russia	32.5	
18	Estonia	32.3	
19	Samoa	30.3	
20	Germany	30.3	
21	Israel	30.1	
22	Ukraine	30.0	
23	Tonga	29.9	
24	Georgia	29.6	
25	Romania	29.5	
26	Lithuania	29.4	
27	Albania	29.1	
28	Spain	29.1	
29	Slovakia	28.2	
30	Hungary	28.2	
31	Poland	27.9	
32	France	27.6	
33	Armenia	26.9	
34	Belarus	26.8	
35	South Korea	26.7	
36	Kyrgyzstan	26.3	
37	Mongolia	26.1	
38	Fiji	25.7	
39	Philippines	25.6	
40	Kazakhstan	25.5	
41	Turkey	25.5	
42	China	25.3	
43	Malta	25.0	
44	Egypt	25.0	
45	Netherlands	24.8	

Only 27.6% of the French population smokes, placing it at the 32nd place World Wide. Nothing to brag about, this is the kind of rankings you'd prefer to be at the bottom of.

That being said, almost a third of the population smoking is already quite substantial and it is easy to understand this stereotype: a foreigner visiting France will see (and smell) 1 out of 3 people smoking. That ought to give the perception everybody smokes in France.

Let's consider now a few other aspects:

- **Cost****

Where Smoking Breaks the Bank

Price for a 20 pack of _____ cigarettes in selected countries (Oct 2020)

Country	Price
Australia	$25.12
New Zealand	$21.13
Ireland	$15.90
UK	$14.25
Norway	$13.53
France	$11.78
Singapore	$10.47
U.S.	$8.00
Germany	$7.65
Spain	$5.89
South Korea	$3.92
Nigeria	$0.91

Looking at the costs associated to smoking, France ranks quite high, actually higher than most countries with a higher prominence of smoking. One could conclude French are diehard hardcore smokers… Germans seem to be even more determined…

- **Pop culture**

That is probably what contributed to keep the myth alive with some iconic mind images from French smokers. Many of our famous artists or "celebs" are always depicted stick in hand.

From Jacques Chirac to Catherine Deneuve, from Serge Gainsbourg to Brigitte Bardot, and the list goes on and on…

Django Reinhardt

Albert Camus

Brigitte Bardot

Fabien Barthez (Soccer World Champ 1998)

Lucky Luke

Now that the war against smoking has been going on in France for a few years (no smoking inside, bars and clubs included, constant price raises, …) what we can observe is that yes, indeed, smokers numbers actually go down, but they do not go down quietly: lots of these measures and laws are interpreted in France as a denial of individual liberties, a scandalous attempt to control our behaviour and a pathetic coup of all the killjoys out there…

In smoking like in everything else, French people don't like to be told what to do… We are free spirits at heart and we are willing to fight for it!

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it". **Voltaire**

Sources:

*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prevalence_of_tobacco_use

**https://www.statista.com/chart/15293/price-for-cigarettes-per-country/

https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/22/in-france-smoking-still-has-that-certain-je-ne-sais-quoi

Romance:

Wikipedia: French men and women are perceived as being very romantic.

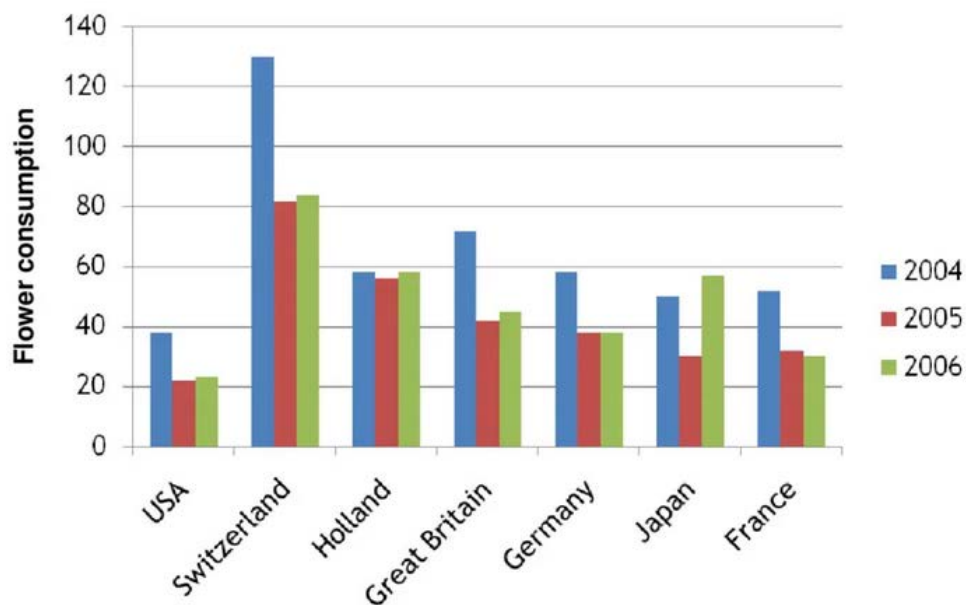*"French is the language that turns dirt into romance."* **Stephen King**

Finally, a stereotype that is flattering and that of course I'd love to confirm. I could simply tell you that yes, we are great at Romance but it would be too easy and too convenient. Let's have at it then!

(Wikipedia) Romance is an emotional feeling of love for, or a strong attraction towards another person, and the courtship behaviours undertaken by an individual to express those overall feelings and resultant emotions.

The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Family Studies states that "Romantic love, based on the model of mutual attraction and on a connection between two people that bonds them as a couple, creates the conditions for overturning the model of family and marriage that it engenders." This indicates that romantic love can be the founding of attraction between two people. This term was primarily used by the "western countries after the 1800s were socialized into, love is the necessary prerequisite for starting an intimate relationship and represents the foundation on which to build the next steps in a family."
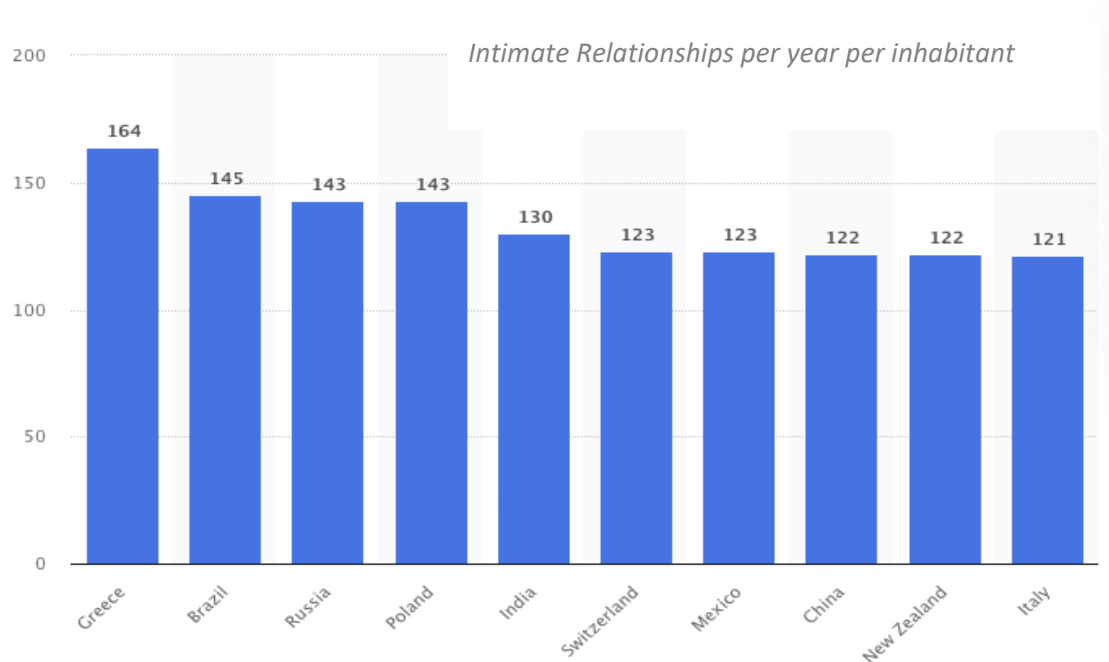
Phew… What am I to do with that? Provided I'm apparently not the most romantic guy around, let's try to "factualize":

- A common cliché about romance and courtship is offering flowers. According to the below, France does not really stand out here*:

A very common cliché also is of course candlelit diner. No official stats on this of course, but just looking at spending in restaurants per year per person on average, France is far from the top.

- Another aspect highlighted in the definition is the fact that romance is a prerequisite for starting an "intimate relationship", as such we consider that there's a link. As per the below figure France is not even on the leader board.**
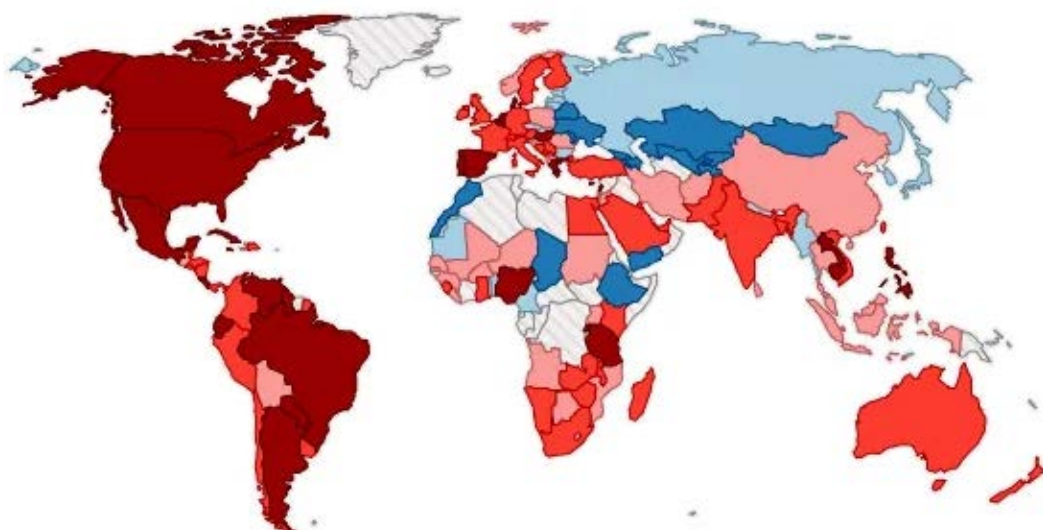

Intimate Relationships per year per inhabitant

Greece 164, Brazil 145, Russia 143, Poland 143, India 130, Switzerland 123, Mexico 123, China 122, New Zealand 122, Italy 121

Moreover, in terms of "variety", French people are below the WW average for the number of intimate partners*** (8.1 Vs 9 WW) …

- Finally, one could argue that in a country with such romantic people (allegedly), the feeling of Love would actually be in the air. Once again, a bust****:

Percent of People Who Experience Love on a Daily Basis

80% or More | 70-79% | 60-69% | 50-59% | Less Than 50%

As per above, French people do not feel particularly loved…

It does not really look like France lives up to the standard it is held to by the world… This myth must have an origin though.

Reading several articles here and there, one big recurring reason is around the setting, not so much about the people: the beauty of the architecture, the refinement of the meals, the ambient "nonchalance", the history, the French kiss (no idea where that comes from- probably like the French fries) etc etc. Once again, the little "je ne sais quoi" that seems to make the difference…

And of course, this cliché is abundantly supported in the pop culture through movies like Moulin Rouge or Amelie Poulain, through the glamour of Haute Couture, luxury brands and Perfume commercials for instance.

Even Google seems to be in on it (try for yourself):

- most romantic country: FRANCE
- most romantic city: PARIS
- most romantic language: FRENCH

I have no choice here but to sadly conclude that this Cliché is just a Cliché…

Sources:

*https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Per-Capita-consumption-of-flowers-in-selected-countries-Source-Flower-Council-of_fig4_267690568

**https://www.statista.com/statistics/245194/most-sexually-active-countries-worldwide/

***https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/02/map-the-countries-that-feel-the-most-love-in-the-world/283839/

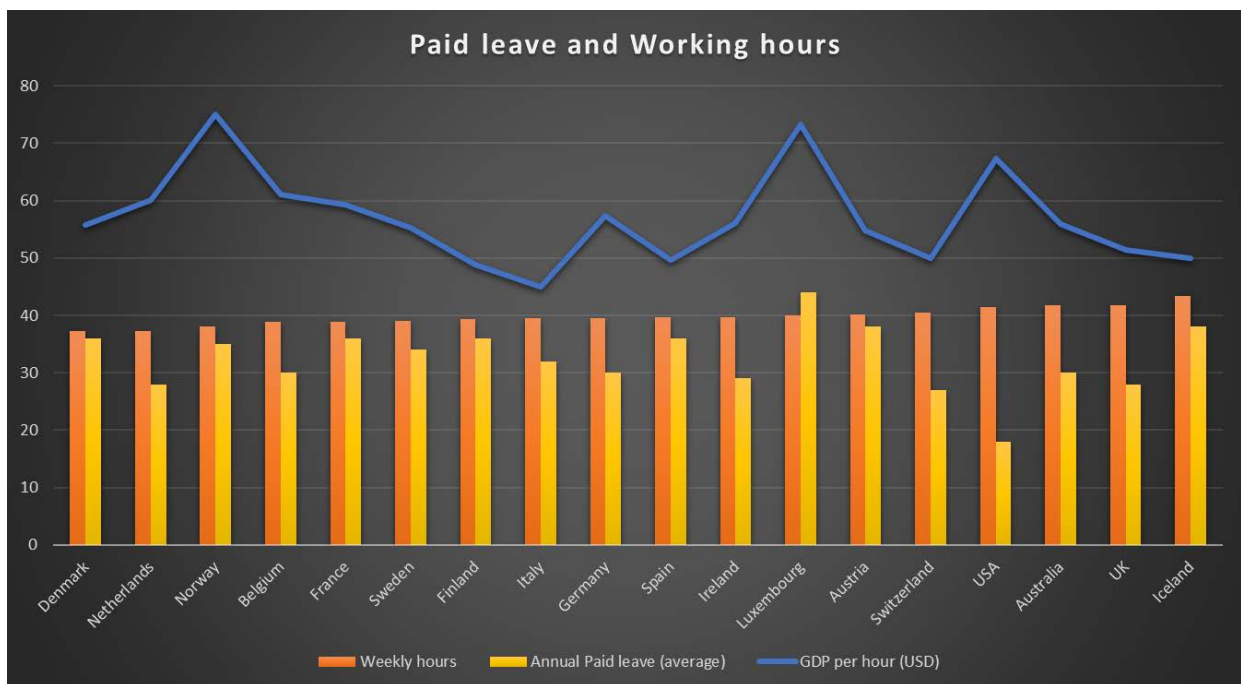****https://www.statista.com/statistics/248856/average-number-of-sexual-partners-in-selected-countries-worldwide/

French Stereotypes, Truth or Myths? (7 of 9)

Laziness:

Wikipedia: *The perception that French workers are prone to strikes and take a lot of time off has established a stereotype of the French being workshy.*

"Idleness is the mother of all vices." – Russian proverb

Another famous cliché… Looking at sheer numbers (same stats I used for my previous article *[here](#)),
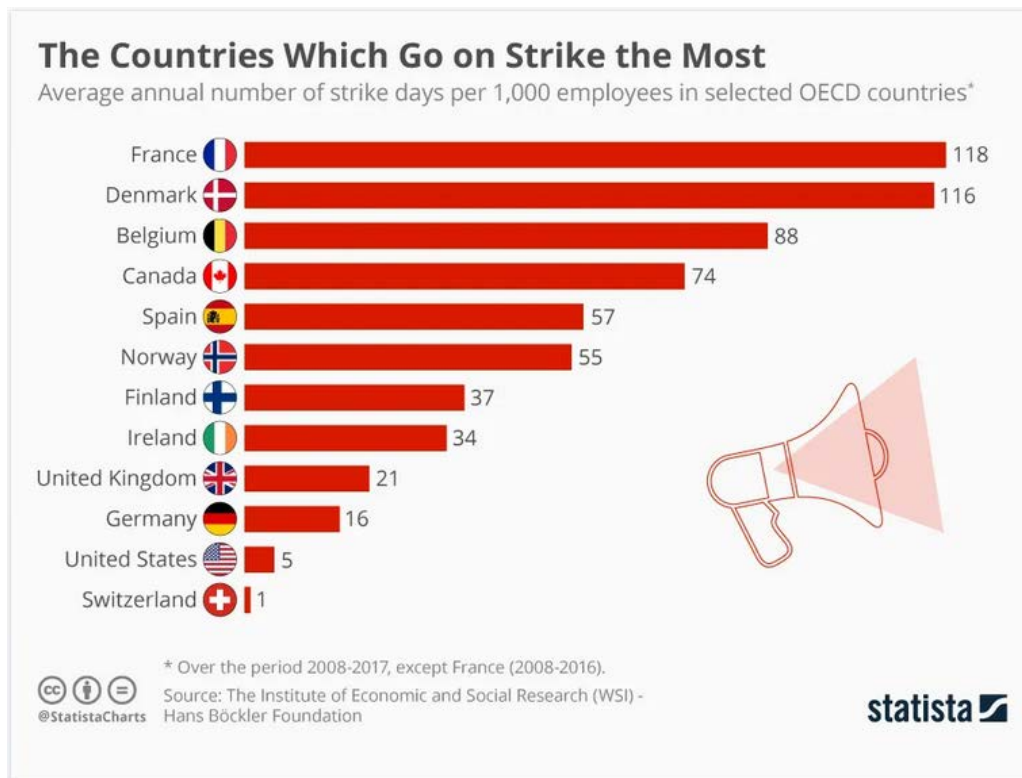we can clearly see that this stereotype does not have much to stand on:

Among the most productive countries in the world, France ranks:

- 5th in terms of weekly working hours
- 5th in terms of annual paid leave
- 5th for productivity as well

Not only France is quite average in terms of time spent at work, but it is quite productive. Lazy you said?

Now, the stereotype is not all wrong because there's one thing we excel at: Strike**!

The Countries Which Go on Strike the Most
Average annual number of strike days per 1,000 employees in selected OECD countries*

Country	Strike days
France	118
Denmark	116
Belgium	88
Canada	74
Spain	57
Norway	55
Finland	37
Ireland	34
United Kingdom	21
Germany	16
United States	5
Switzerland	1

* Over the period 2008-2017, except France (2008-2016).
Source: The Institute of Economic and Social Research (WSI) -
Hans Böckler Foundation

@StatistaCharts

statista

We are the world champs: Yay us!

One got to wonder though, why does strike = laziness in the common psyche? The fact is, originally, striking always was a militant statement to fight for basic rights and better working conditions. I don't think that many coal miners in the 19th century had the time or the luxury to be lazy, and knowing that they were not paid when striking, the consequences of protesting were dire (have a read of Germinal by Emile Zola, you'll have a taste of what it was like).

Of course, some will argue that nowadays, French people go on strike for everything and anything – maybe, but most are probably fighting for what they believe is right and that is not laziness.

As a bonus, let's have a look at what this lazy country contributed to the world ***(a very tiny sample actually):

- The **stethoscope** invented by French physician René Laennec in 1816; imagine ER or Grey's Anatomy without those?
- **Mayonnaise**: what would be dip our fries in otherwise????
- **Braille** reading systems for visually impaired people (louis Braille, 1824)
- The **Hair dryer** originated in France (Alexandre Godefroy, 1888): no French, no blow-dry…
- **Pasteurization**, the process that revolutionized food (louis Pasteur, 1864). Funny that lots of cheeses are still made with unpasteurized milk in France, simply because it tastes better 😊
- The **Metric System** (Academy of Sciences of Paris, 1700s), only 3 countries resist it still, even England uses a mix between metric and imperial now.
- The **Jet Engine** (Rene Lorin, 1913), thanks Rene for modern Air Travel!
- The Lumière Brothers invented **cinema** in 1895, probably never imagined how huge it was to become.
- The discovery of **radioactivity** – 1896 by Henri Becquerel

- Acetylsalicylic acid (**aspirin**) was first prepared by the French chemist Charles Frederic Gerhardt in 1853, the first cure for headaches…
- **Camera phone** (Philippe Kahn 1997), thanks for the selfies!... or not 😉
- Even in sports: **modern era Olympics** (if you ever wonder why all the announcements are in French on top of the local tongue), the **Football world Cup** (the "real" football – not the American nor the Aussie versions) and the **Tour de France** for instance… That being said we're not so good at winning those, that could be another cliché if it wasn't so true 😊.

   "English invent sports, French invent competitions and Germans win." Unknown

- And just for the pleasure of potentially start some controversy, **Airplanes:** Clément Ader's Eole was the first manned airplane to take off under its own power in 1890, over a decade before the Wright brothers (1903) who in the end are the ones everybody remembers…
- The first formalized **national air force** – 1909: L'Armée de l'Air, which coincidently offers me a perfect transition to the next cliché…

Sources:

*https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/productivity-happiness-other-statistics-jean-capdevielle

**https://www.statista.com/chart/20167/the-countries-which-go-on-strike-the-most/

***https://interestingengineering.com/45-of-the-greatest-french-inventions-of-all-time

Weak Military:

Wikipedia: Despite being one of the world's leading power from the 18th century, the French military had been perceived as poor in armed combat and could be easily defeated in armed struggles, thus likely to surrender. The stereotype was attributed to France's role during World War II, in which French forces surrendered to German forces in just 46 days, but also due to the poor performances in various wars, such as the Battle of Assietta, the Haitian Revolution, the Franco-Prussian War, and the Battle of Dien Bien Phu during the First Indochina War.

"The only thing strong about the French Army is their damn body odour." **Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson**

And finally, the plat de resistance! I truly love this one because somehow, even French people believe it. I suppose that the stigma and humiliations of our latest military counter-performances still drives this idea in France and abroad…

So yes, we experienced some very famous defeats, dating back from the Gaul's era:

Alesia		1st WW	
	Waterloo		2nd WW
Indochina		Agincourt	
	Berezina		Algeria

Note: We were declared as victors in WW I but really, on our own, we probably would have lost
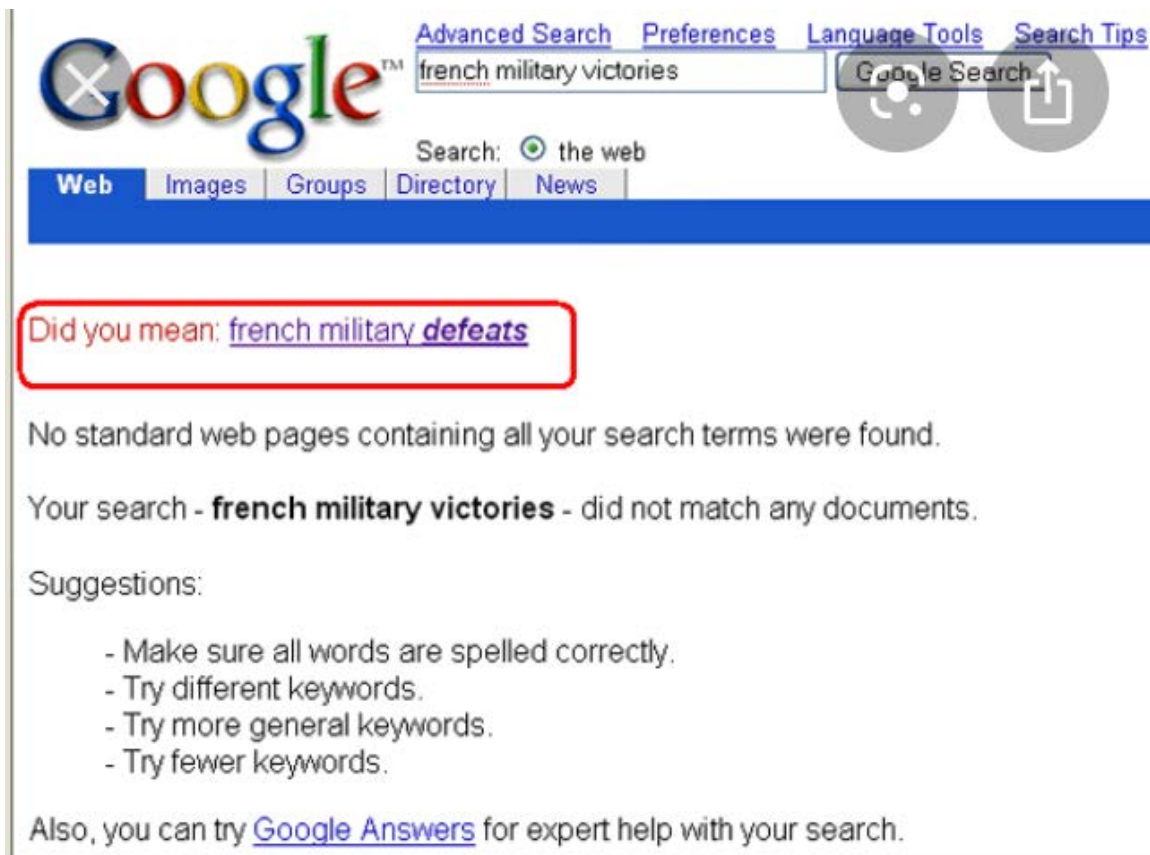
Pop culture abundantly conveys the myths as well:

" **Gen. Webb:** Kindy inform Major Heyward that he has little to fear from this General Marquis de Montcalm in the first place; and scant need of a colonial militia in the second because the French haven't the nature for war. Their Gallic indifference combines with their Latinate voluptuousness with the result that they would rather eat and make love with their faces than fight. "

from "The last of the Mohicans" movie, a masterpiece despite this comment 😉

And the myth eventually rose to the status of international joke a few years ago. When you typed *French military victories* in Google. Here's what you got:

Funny isn't it?

Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, let's see if the French army is as bad as everybody believe.

-   By number of victories********, France is the best military force in the world – pure and simple:

Yes, unbelievable right? Yet, numbers don't lie… We can always argue that it is a narrow-sided view and that it may not be representative enough. OK, let's dig a little deeper then.

What makes a great military force? I'm no specialist but let's narrow it down to 2 key aspects:

- **Equipment**
- **Men**

When it comes to equipment France has 6th largest military budget in the world*. It also has some impressive assets such as:

- **The Rafale****: the 100% French fighter, one of the deadliest fighter Jet in activity. It actually ranks 3rd behind F15 and the F22, respectively 2nd and 1st. Yet, it has proven its worth by displaying its ability to 'shoot down' an F-22 Raptor in 2009… With advanced Avionics and Sensors from Thales (yes, this is a product placement ☺) The Rafale is capable of tracking 40 targets at a time and firing simultaneously on 4 of them. Not bad.
- **The Leclerc Battle Tank*****: although getting now old, it still ranks 8th in the list of the best battle tanks money can buy… When entering into service in 1992, it brought some innovations and new features later used on other Western tanks. It can engage 6 targets, located 1.5 - 2 km away, within one minute with a hit probability of 95%. And to top it off, its turret and large calibre ammo were design and manufactured at the Arsenal of Tarbes, my hometown ☺
- **The nuke:** OK, nothing really to boast about but France is one of the few Nuclear Powers in the world and most likely the forth in terms in terms of inventory (looks like numbers out there are scarce and inaccurate, go figure…)

What about the men then? I will focus here on elite/special forces and generals/commanders since it seems impossible to evaluate the corpsmen except by their sheer number (France has about 200,000 active military) but the again, it all depends on the country's population…

Elite Forces:

- **The GIGN** (Groupement d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale) ****: It ranks as the 3rd most dangerous special forces unit in the world (rank may change in various rankings but it always makes the top 5 or top 10). From rescuing school children in Djibouti to capturing war criminals in Bosnia, this deadly task force has done it all. The force, which saw its origin following the 1972 Munich Olympics hostage massacre, is one of the deadliest groups in the world.
  They have the slickest training regime known and are prepared to take down the Somali pirates with ease. Following their motto "To save lives without regard for one's own," GIGN is known to hunt down any threat to the nation and its people.
  This 200-strong unit keeps a low profile and it's even against French law to publish pictures of their faces.
- **La Legion Etrangere**: the French foreign legion… Probably one of the most famous and notorious army corps in the world. A very tight knit group, tough as they come, always sent to worst places and missions there are. "Walk or Die" is quite literal with them.

Famous Generals and commanders: a bunch of French nationals in the list of the 100 greatest generals of all time, here are a few***
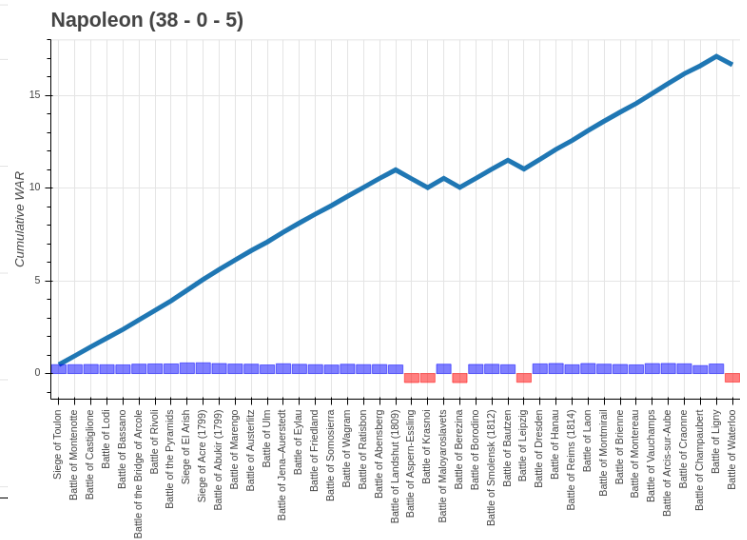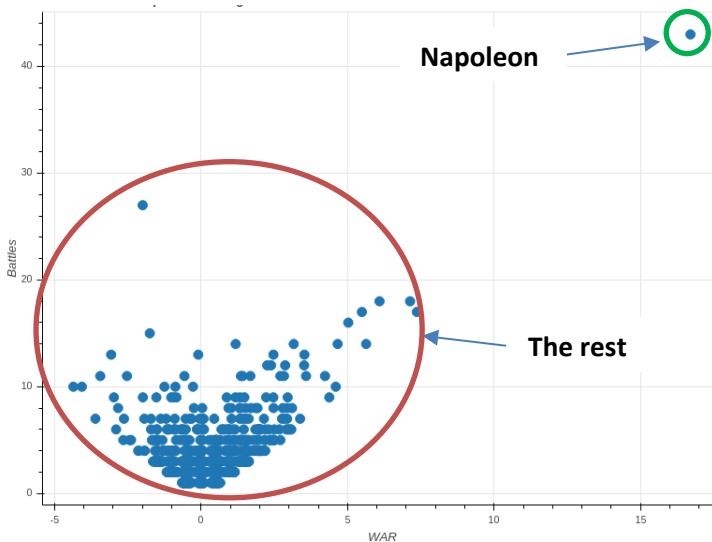
- **Charlemagne:** Considered "the father of modern Europe" and credited with the invention of school (compulsory)… Every French kid hate him for that.
- **William the Conqueror:** William (Guillaume), Duke of Normandy, won medieval warfare's most famous and decisive European encounter, the Battle of Hastings (1066), which led to the Norman conquest of England. Yes, the king of England was French…
- **Ferdinand Foch:** Although Foch earned his pre-World War I reputation as a tactician, his greatest contribution to Allied victory was as supreme commander of French, British and American forces (1918). To add to his fame and glory, he was born and raised in Tarbes, my home town…

I suppose you saw me coming miles away, I suppose I'm pathetically predictable, so yes, we will talk about **Napoleon**, arguably the greatest Military commander the world has ever know… (do you picture me right now, pumping my chest with national pride? 😊).

Everybody knows him, most praise him for his tactical brilliance, but was he really as good as we think? according to the data, the answer is a big resounding YES!

According to a sabermetrics analysis of history's greatest generals' ability to win battles, **Napoleon Bonaparte** is so far ahead of the normal distribution curve created by the data for these 6,000-plus generals (including Alexander the great, Hannibal, and other warriors of legend), it's not even close. After 43 battles, he has a WAR score of more than 16, which blows the competition away. There can be no question: Napoleon is the greatest tactical general of all time, and the maths prove it. ******(*)

After all this, I suppose it would be a stretch to conclude that France has a weak military. I can't say for sure we have a strong one either but chances are we would give a good run for their money to anyone attacking us…

« Allons enfants de la Patrie, le jour de gloire est arrive. » **Rouget De lisle, Le Mareillaise**

Sources:

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Wrap up:

"A conclusion is the place where you got tired thinking." **Martin H. Fischer**

Hopefully you enjoyed this series of articles and that you learnt a few things. Of course, it is a bonus if some it put a smile on your face, it feels like opportunities to smile are getting more and more scarce these days. Anyway, not the topic; not yet anyway 😉

The whole point, beyond the fun factor, was to give a bit of perspective, and as I was progressing in writing these articles, I realized a few things I'd like to share:

Everybody is biased: if you go back to the first article, I wrote I would look at all this through an unbiased lens… Those who know me are laughing already: impossible for me, especially when it comes to France. Fair enough. However, believe me or not, I really did try.

but looking at the articles again, it is a big fail. Through the series, there's a clear increase in the use of words like "us", "we", "our" … clearly highlighting how along the way, I definitely lost impartiality and got overtaken by my own biases.

In other words, it's a bit like if a rugby referee would end up playing with one of the team at the end of the match. OK, not quite a good example, we (France) have been playing 15 to 16 for years every time we had an Anglo-Saxon ref. #controversy😉

Keep a neutral observer stance is hard and requires significant efforts to always step back, reflect and re-think.

"It's human nature to make the complex manageable and determine things that fit your conclusions. That's bias." **Richard Burr**

The power and dangers of internet: as you can guess, I did not go to a library to find all these sources. I haven't set foot in a library in years. When everything is one click away, finding information has never been that easy.

However, it does not come without risk or effort: you can find everything and anything on the web, opposing theories, point of views, each well documented leading to more confusion than clarity when you try to make up your mind or something. You have then 2 options:

- Review various sources, compare and decide for yourself what to believe. It is a bit like averaging a series of numbers, only trickier. This is the way I proceeded, mostly.

- Start with a strong belief and simply look at sources that confirm your theory while ignoring all the rest. Nothing new here, but with the plethora of information available today, the danger is that you will find great arguments supporting some fallacious ideas. An extreme

illustration of this principle is the movie "thank you for smoking", where the key protagonists is just great at winning an argument by any means necessary.

And I have to say I'm guilty here. Not much, but because of my biases, I did, at times, favoured one source over another… But I will not say which 😉…

In this particular case, I suppose no harm is done, it's most of all for fun, but in other cases there can be consequences.

"For your own good is a persuasive argument that will eventually make a man agree to his own destruction." **Janet Frame**

The most important thing I realized I suppose is that I really enjoyed it. As such, and I apologize in advance, chances are I will keep on writing…

"Writing means sharing. It's part of the human condition to want to share things - thoughts, ideas, opinions." **Paulo Coelho**

Till the next article.