

France 'Gallic Moan' proves answer to hard times

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(From L) Didier Guedj, 49, Maxime Valette, 20, and Guillaume Passaglia, 27, the founders of the internet site "Vie De Merde" or "VDM" pose in Reims. It's the online answer to a "Gallic Shrug": a tongue-in-cheek French website where people can let off steam about the small miseries of daily life, which has become a surprise hit export to the United States.

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"Vie De Merde" -- which means roughly "Life Sucks" -- was launched 15 months ago around a simple concept: tell the world a one-liner about your day that is guaranteed to give strangers a chuckle.

The site's English version, "FMyLife.com" -- "FML" for short -- became

an overnight sensation in the two months since its launch, with some 1.7 million people logging on each day, and huge fan groups on Facebook and [Twitter](#).

Got dumped by your girlfriend? Humiliated by your boss? Lost your wallet -- or your job -- for the umpteenth time? Here is a place to vent your despair, a collective blog where public grumbling is elevated to an art form.

"Today, a kid I coach on a regular basis was talking to me about what I did outside of work," wrote one shame-faced user of the English site.

"After we were done with the conversation, she told me with a straight face that I need to get a life and get a boyfriend. She's 10. And she's right. FML."

Far from offering sympathy, 2,394 people gleefully clicked on a little button to tell the poor soul: "I Agree, Your Life is F***ed," and 364 to say "You Deserved that One."

France has no word for "Schadenfreude" but the success of both sites rides on the bittersweet comfort to be found in other people's misfortunes -- and the therapeutic value of casting oneself as a loser.

"Today, I got hired as a temp in the company that laid me off two months ago. VDM," sighed a miserable user of the French site, whose address is www.viedemerde.fr.

Launched as a joke by [Internet entrepreneurs](#) Maxime Valette, 20, and Guillaume Passaglia, 27, the original French site draws some 200,000 visitors a day and the "VDM" acronym has become part of teen jargon.

It has spawned a spin-off book and tie-ups with a French radio station

that broadcasts daily nuggets gleaned on the site, and a gossip [website](#) that tracks celebrity wardrobe malfunctions and so on in a "VDM" section.

But its founders were unprepared for their runaway success in the English-speaking world, where FMyLife.com ranks in the 100 most visited sites and has generated a huge Internet buzz in the United States.

"The English version took off so fast we are having trouble keeping up," said Passaglia, a computer scientist from Reims, a provincial town in French Champagne country.

While the tone is jovial, the concept of the "serial loser" battered by the travails of daily life is in sync with the changing mood in Europe and across the Atlantic, hit by waves of belt-tightening and soaring unemployment.

"We don't get people talking about the economic crisis -- but it seems to have helped that it launched in this climate. The site definitely seems to answer a need for people to come together, perhaps because of the downturn.

"And we've received tonnes of emails from people saying how much better the site makes them feel. It turns out people all over the world share the same small [miseries](#), and huge moments of embarrassment."

Three full time staff, Passaglia, Valette and their 49-year-old associate Didier Guedj, work up to 16 hours a day to select new posts.

"We also get a lot of help from friends, especially for the US site," said Passaglia, whose team lets through about one percent of the 10,000 English submissions it receives daily.

"Our editorial line is that a story has to be funny, to be published for the first time, and to have universal appeal."

Despite their mass appeal, both sites are still at cottage-industry stage in financial terms.

Both funded by advertising, the French site turns a profit of "a few thousand euros" after staff and operating costs, but the burgeoning US version is still a loss-leader.

"We may have hundreds of thousands of visitors but that doesn't mean we have hundreds of thousands of dollars," said Passaglia.

"US advertisers are still wary because the site is so transgressive. I'm sure we'll break even eventually -- but we want to be careful not to assault users with tonnes of adverts either."

"The main thing is we want the site to last, to keep on being fun to develop and to read."

With a US book deal in the tubes, and plans for new versions in Spanish, Russian and German, however, the site's young founders claim to receive daily calls offering to buy them out.

"But we never take them up," Passaglia said. "VDM is our idea and we want to keep on growing it. It's a concept that travels well."

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