

**PERCEPTIONS OF CANADA AND THE USA – AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL
AWARENESS AMONG ROMANIAN BUSINESS STUDENTS***Lucia-Mihaela GROSU-RĂDULESCU¹*

Abstract

This paper explores the extent to which American and Canadian values, symbols and cultural traits are perceived as such by Romanian students or whether the two countries' identity markers have become blurred and are easily confused. The research premise of this article is that given the overemphasized American cultural presence in Romania, students' perception of Canada is distorted and lacks substance. The study will make use of up-to-date research data on the impact of American culture on Southeast-European countries and it will focus on the need for a clearer, more robust manifestation of Canadian culture in this region.

Given the fact that from an economic point of view Canada has been present on the Romanian market for a long time and that from a cultural perspective Romanians have been exposed to Canadian literature, music or film, it becomes unusual to notice that Canadian cultural identity is not as well defined as expected. By means of questionnaires distributed mainly to the Bucharest University of Economic Studies undergraduates as well as to Master students and alumni, we will establish the degree to which Canadianness is perceived as Americanness or vice versa. The data analysis will allow us to determine if there is an actual need to include in our curricula cultural studies courses which might improve the perception of the two North-American cultures. Special attention will be paid to Canada's visibility in Romanian higher education.

Keywords: *Canada; USA; cultural awareness; internationalization; cultural identity; cultural markers.*

1. Context and research premise

“Cultures can be studied by those who are native to them or by outsiders but there are fundamental differences between the two perspectives”. (Georgieva and Stratiev, 2007: 140)

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According to Maria Georgieva and Svetlin Stratiev, it is important to pay attention to the specific roles that we take on when we talk about cultures. The insider-outsider dichotomy these scholars support should be essential for the present research as well.

The author of this paper is not Canadian, has never travelled to Canada and has her origins in the former Communist Block from South-Eastern Europe. Establishing this positioning is important from Georgieva's and Stratiev's perspective because the inability of being directly involved in a country's cultural life pushes the author in a spectator position (no matter her academic credentials and research into Canadian specificities).

Having this in mind, the initial research premise of this paper was fueled by a constructive curiosity to test the extent to which American and Canadian values, symbols and cultural traits are perceived as such by Romanian students or whether the two countries' identity markers have become blurred and are easily confused. The research premise of this article is that given the overemphasized American cultural presence in Romania, students' perception of Canada is distorted and lacks substance. This assumption finds support in previous research in the field of cultural awareness. In Irina David's view,

[A]ccording to scholarship in the field of European-American relations, people living in countries from Eastern Europe are to a large extent pro-American. Unlike Westerners, they seem ready to welcome American influence and eager to establish closer ties with the U.S. This attitude is to a large extent determined by people's direct exposure to communist regimes and the Soviet influence. (David, 2012: 119).

This particular openness to everything American, we suggest, blurs the boundaries between cultural specificities belonging to Canada and the USA.

As part of the academic staff of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics, this author has witnessed our university's gradual openness toward new worldwide collaboration within the avowed purpose of internationalization. This relatively recent trend has encouraged all educational departments to expand their activities so that they fit in with the European values of plurilingualism, cultural diversity and the internationalization of higher education, that prepare students to become "intra-culturally and inter-culturally sensitive" (Vollmer, 2006: 6).

One definition of internationalization that best describes the present efforts in Romanian academia belongs to Jane Knight who states that internationalization is a "process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2003: 2).

In the spirit of increased interest in internationalization of higher education, our university launched in January 2017 the Center for American Studies under the US Embassy's patronage. This step was preceded by the university's desire to fill a need noticed among Romanian business students to be exposed to diverse cultures during their studies. Prior to this, in 2013, our faculty launched the programme Applied Modern Languages in the Economic Field that has already attracted a new type of student, one who is business oriented but who also maintains a high interest in foreign languages and cultures.

This particular bachelor programme as well as many Master programmes in our university have gradually included in their curricula cultural studies courses and foreign languages that are increasingly diverse (from English, French or German to more "exotic" languages such as Chinese, Arabic or Japanese). The demand for foreign languages and cultures exposure appears to be really high presently, therefore it is not surprising that this paper will dwell on this particular aspect.

The starting premise of this research was that although Canada has been present on the Romanian economic market for a long time and that from a cultural point of view Romanians have been exposed to Canadian literature, music or film, Canadian cultural identity is not as well defined as expected.

By means of an online questionnaire filled out by Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES) undergraduates as well as by BUES Master students and alumni, we will attempt to establish the degree to which Canadianness is perceived as such or as Americanness. The data analysis will allow us to determine if there is an actual need to include in our curricula cultural studies courses which might improve the perception of the two North-American cultures.

2. Case study

2.1 Data collection methods

The research methods employed for the purposes of this study were first and foremost qualitative. However, due to the large number of respondents that were involved in the research (meaning 251 responses) some quantitative conclusions could also be reached.

The questionnaire entitled *Canada vs. SUA- Aspecte sociale și culturale (Canada vs. USA – Social and Cultural Aspects)* was written and distributed in Romanian to ensure the best understanding of purposes and questions.

It had five main sections, each of them including yes/no questions as well as multiple choice questions along queries that helped us identify the respondents'

profiles. The questionnaire was distributed over a three-week period, from 22nd August to 9th September 2017. It took up to five to seven minutes to be completed and was entirely shared on a social media platform (Facebook) in order to obtain the results in a short period of time. The tool used for generating the questionnaire was Google Forms. This platform created a link which was distributed to the respondents.

In the process of data collection, Google Forms was helpful because it firstly generated statistics and charts in accordance with the answers. It also generated a spreadsheet in which all the responses were found for further data analysis. Using the file with all the data needed, we analyzed it and provided the findings.

2.2 Respondents' profiles

The respondents were students, at either BA or MA levels, and alumni from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, aged between 18 to 35. From the total number of 251 respondents, women were predominant (almost 80 percent of respondents), the majority in the 18-25 years old category. Most respondents live in urban areas and their occupational profile was: 125 enrolled BA students, 99 MA students and 88 employed alumni. In order to establish the pertinence of their answers to the questionnaire, the final question in Section 1 tested if they had ever participated in a similar survey and 249 out of 251 said they had not. Therefore, we were optimistic about the relevance of our research endeavor.

2.3 Data analysis

Section 2 of the survey counted eight questions meant to further contribute to the profile description of our respondents. It also focused on the students' (personal) knowledge about Canada and USA. The questions were mirroring each other:

Have you ever visited the USA? / Canada?

Have you ever met and interacted with Americans/ Canadians?

Not surprisingly, the first of these questions favoured visits to the USA (13.5%) as compared to a mere 2.4% who mentioned having visited Canada. As for the second question above, a staggering 71.3% said they had met Americans whereas only 33.6% had had social interactions with Canadians.

Based on these avowed experiences, the next set of questions in this section referred to how the two countries are perceived from both a social and a cultural perspective:

With what words do you associate Canada?/ USA?

Multiculturalism

Independence

Emigration

Plurilingualism

Freedom

Aboriginal people

The answers are systematized in the Table 1 below in the order of highest percentage received.

Table 1. Word associations with Canada and the USA

MULTICULTURALISM	
CANADA 54.6%	USA 55.4%
FREEDOM	
CANADA 25.5%	USA 51.8%
INDEPENDENCE	
CANADA 34.3%	USA 49.8%
EMIGRATION	
CANADA 26.3%	USA 36.3%
PLURILINGUALISM	
CANADA 33.1%	USA 11.6%
ABORIGINAL PEOPLE	
CANADA 4%	USA 4%

It is important to mention that for each of the questions the respondents also had the possibility to fill out with other representative words that might describe the two countries in question. Interestingly, no respondent felt the need to add to the list about Canada, whereas respondents contributed additional attributes for USA such as *the American dream*, *innovation*, *imperialism* and one respondent said *racism*.

The following two questions were founded on students' personal experiences with meeting Canadian and American people. When asked how they believe either population can be described the answers point to the following results:

- a surprising 55.4% consider Canadians to be *polite* and 46.6% see them as *friendly*
- Americans are considered first and foremost *friendly* (61%) and secondly *patriots* (46.2%).

Canadians' *patriotism* ranked third in the respondents' opinions with only 27.9% supporting this feature. Interestingly, *arrogance* ranked third in the Americans' description (27.1%).

Therefore, if we are to sum up, Romanian students who had direct contact with Canadians (33.6%) and/ or with Americans (71.3%) as well as the others in the survey who did not and assumed the above-mentioned features, suggest that Canadians are better seen than Americans. This aspect deserves a more detailed research endeavour and it could be interesting to further analyse, especially how those who do not have personal contact with people from Canada or the US form their moral judgments.

The next section of the survey was image-based. As this questionnaire was devised as a first step in delivering a more comprehensive analysis of the perception of Canadianness and Americanness among Romanian students, the following two sections should be viewed as a glimpse of how Romanian students construct the two cultural identities. The following table (*Table 2*) sums up the responses related to the belonging of certain iconic images to either the USA or Canada.

Table 2. Iconic images

Image 1- Niagara Falls	USA: 51.4% Canada: 17.9% Both: 30.7%
Image 2- Hockey game	USA: 27.1 % Canada: 55.8% Both: 17.1%
Image 3-Queen Elisabeth II	USA: 31 % Canada: 52.7 % Both: 16.3%
Image 4- Mount Rushmore	USA: 90% Canada: 7.2% Both: 2.8%

Except for the Mount Rushmore image which was identified as American by almost all 251 respondents, neither Queen Elisabeth II nor hockey (although chosen as Canadian symbols by respondents) received such a crushing majority.

It is interesting to note that Niagara Falls, though shared by the two countries, received a majority of votes as being American. This result, along the 31% reports on the Americanness of Queen Elisabeth II speak volumes about the lack in cultural instruction of Romanian business students. We could suggest that visibility of Canadian contexts, either historic, political or geographic, is very low which can only be seen as a disadvantage for the education of future Romanian economists and business people.

The next section of the survey continued on the same line of trying to test our students' cultural awareness regarding Canadianness and Americanness. The respondents were offered a series of names and titles and were invited to identify them as Canadian, American or both.

In *Table 3* we have gathered the students' responses regarding a series of famous American and Canadian personalities.

Table 3. Famous Canadian and American people

Justin Bieber	USA: 49.4 % Canada: 45.8% Both: 5.2%
Oprah Winfrey	USA: 91.6% Canada: 6.8% Both: 1.6%
Michael Ondaatje	USA: 17.9% Canada: 66.5% Both: 11.6%
Leonard Cohen	USA: 44.2% Canada: 45% Both: 8.8%
Edgar Allan Poe	USA: 63.7% Canada: 25.1% Both: 6.8%

Except for Justin Bieber, the names included in the survey were all correctly assigned to either Canadian or American identities, although in the case of Leonard Cohen the respondents' answers were almost equally split (Canada: 45%; USA: 44.2%). This confusion, we can assume, is motivated by the overly emphasised presence of American musical productions in Romania (and the world, for that matter) which adds to the prevalence of American cinema as well (as demonstrated by the answers related to the titles in the next part of the survey).

Besides the famous names included which should have been easy to select as either Canadian or American, the titles (included in *Table 4*) were chosen specifically because they represented both books and movies. It was our intention to test the ratio between visual cultural identity and literary productions of Canadian writers.

Table 4. Canadian and American books and/or movies

<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	USA: 57.8% Canada: 27.1% Both: 11.6%
<i>Life of Pi</i>	USA: 65.7% Canada: 21.1% Both: 8.8%
<i>The English Patient</i>	USA: 58.6% Canada: 22.3% Both: 9.2%

Thus, *The Handmaid's Tale* resulted in being more American than Canadian, although since its publication in 1985 Margaret Atwood has been frequently associated with her dystopian novel. The success of the homonymous American series even in Romania seems to have overshadowed Atwood's name and therefore her Canadianness. The same is valid for the other two titles in the survey, *Life of Pi* and *The English Patient*. Yann Martel's and Michael Ondaatje's Canadianness appear to have been eclipsed by their respective American film productions². We can assume that these data can be interpreted as a result of the overwhelming presence of American cinema in the world and in Romania which has contributed to a solidification of American cultural identity.

The final section of the survey focused only on two questions:

What attributes would you attach to the American culture? and Canadian culture?

In *Table 5*, we have included our data according to the responses received.

Table 5. Attributes of Canadian and American cultures

FREEDOM OF SPEECH	
CANADA 36.3%	USA 68.5%
MULTICULTURAL	
CANADA 45.8%	USA 46.2%
GLOBALIZATION	
CANADA 19.1%	USA 64.9%
OMNIPRESENT	
CANADA 2.8%	USA 37.8 %
INSUFFICIENTLY KNOWN	
CANADA 57.8	USA 4%

² All the book titles included in the survey have been translated into Romanian and are still available in Romanian bookstores.

3. By way of conclusion

According to Madeleine Danova, there is an “intrinsic urge to look at and compare oneself to one’s neighbors” but this “has a reverse side, [...], and this is the attempt to embrace the foreignness of a place as a mirror of your own self [...]” (Danova, 2007: 53). In our efforts to identify how two major cultural identities are reflected in students’ awareness, we have also gained access to their modalities of interpretation of cultural markers filtered through selves. As mentioned earlier in this study, it will be worthwhile to establish what inner mechanisms students employ when forming their value-oriented opinions about either Canadians or Americans in the absence of their personal encounters with citizens from either country. Thus, one future track of research might be concerned with the manner in which Romanian students form their cultural assumptions without direct contact with foreign people.

The initial research premise of this paper was motivated by a need to test the extent to which American and Canadian symbols and cultural traits are perceived as such by Romanian students or whether the two countries’ cultural markers have become blurred and are easily confused.

Given the results of our survey, we can conclude that the research premise of this study, namely that given the overemphasized American cultural presence in Romania, students’ perception of Canada is distorted and lacks substance, is sustained. This conclusion seems to also support Hollander’s assumption voiced at the beginning of the 1990s:

[T]he people living in the formerly or by now partially communist systems have displayed a great yearning for everything American (and Western), from clothing to music, from free enterprise to American-style checks and balances, and ideals of a civil society. (Hollander, 1992: 445).

Furthermore, in light of our university’s internationalization purposes and efforts, this study shows that business students can greatly benefit from a more intense exposure to cultural studies. More attention should be paid to including modules or courses dedicated to North American studies especially Canadian cultural and economic insights. Taking into account the need to educationally equip students in order to function efficiently on a rather global labour market, instilling them with inter-cultural sensitivity (Vollmer, 2006: 6) should become a priority.

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