Cultural variations in perceptions of vacation attributes

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The anthropological concept of culture has been one of the most important ideas in 20th century thought. First explored and adopted by the 19th century anthropologists, the concept of culture is today incorporated into a multitude of social and behavioural science inquiries and fields of thought. ¹

Formal definitions of culture are many and varied. They tend to stress either patterns of behaviour or an organized system of knowledge and belief. Both types of definition are meaningful to those involved in the study of tourism. Tourism researchers are concerned with both observable tourism-related behaviour (eg vacation destinations visited, trip length, distance and cost) and perceptions and preferences underlying behaviour (eg perceptions of vacation attributes).

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of cultural antecedents upon perceptions of the vacation attributes of the USA and Canada. Understanding perceptions of the vacation attributes held by current and potential tourists is instrumental to effective tourism marketing and development. While it is widely accepted in marketing and tourism that perceptions are influential in directing decision making and behaviour, so far little work has been reported in the tourism literature which explores cultural antecedents of tourism-related perceptions.

Background to the study

The investigation was conducted within the officially bilingual and multi-cultural context of Canada, a country particularly well-suited for cross-cultural research. English and French Canadians comprise about 60% and 25%, respectively, of the total Canadian population. Of the French Canadian population 80% reside in the Province of Quebec where 82% of all residents are French Canadians.²

French and English Canadians are usually differentiated on the basis of ‘mother tongue’ (language first learned as a child and still understood) or household language (language most often spoken at home). However, the question of cultural identity in Canada is generally conceded to reach beyond language alone. As Saint-Jacques

and Mallen contend 'The language spoken in Quebec is not simply a different way of saying things. It is, rather, a different way of seeing things, of feeling about things, and often, indeed, the very expression of different values'. Previous empirical research findings have suggested that the different values of French and English Canadians have manifested themselves in different lifestyle profiles, work orientations, leisure patterns and consumer behaviours. The general hypothesis of the study reported here was that cultural differences between French and English Canadians also translate into unique perceptions of vacation attributes. Because French and English Canadians have been separated historically by both cultural and socioeconomic characteristics, the relative influences of both types of antecedents were investigated and compared.

Methods

Data used for the study were generated by the 1981 Vacation Patterns survey, one of the most recent years of which data from this annual survey were available at the time the study was initiated. Data were collected through in-home personal interviews with members of a nationwide probability sample of 3873 people living in Canada. Details of the sampling methodology are presented in a more extensive discussion of this study reported elsewhere.

For the purposes of this study, the sample of 3873 persons was reduced to a smaller sample size in three ways. First, only those respondents who resided in the Provinces of Ontario and Quebec were included in the analysis. The sample was delimited in this way to control, as much as possible, for regional effects upon perceptions. Second, only those Ontario and Quebec residents who reported French or English to be both their mother tongue (language first spoken and still understood) and household language (language most often spoken at home) were included in the sample and considered to be representative of French or English Canadians, respectively. The decision to use language as a functional representation of culture was based upon prior empirical research that has suggested that language in Canada is representative of different value orientations. Third, only respondents who had travelled more than 100 miles from their homes and had stayed away from home for at least one night in the two years before the study interviews, were included in the study sample. These three reduction measures produced a final sample size of 624 of which 336 (53.8%) were English Canadian and 288 (46.2%) were French Canadian.

Data were analysed through a two-step process. First, differences between the two samples in their perceptions of the vacation attributes of the USA and Canada were identified using chi-square analysis. Second, for those attributes for which differences existed, log-linear modelling was used to assess the relative influences of culture and socioeconomic antecedents.

Socioeconomic covariates

To compare the relative influences of culture (as manifested by language) and socioeconomic antecedents upon perceptions of vacation attributes, socioeconomic covariates (i.e., those variables that significantly differentiated between the two samples) were identified and introduced into all statistically significant relationships between language and the
vacation attributes. Covariates were identified using difference-of-means and chi-square tests ($P<0.05$) which tested for significant differences between the samples for seven different socioeconomic variables. Three of these variables significantly differentiated between the samples ($P<0.05$): age, education, and income.

Exploration of the interrelationships of the covariates through Pearson correlations identified significant associations between all these covariates. The positive correlation of education and income was important to subsequent log-linear modelling – the method of analysis used to determine the relative influences of socioeconomic covariates and culture upon perceptions. The requirement of log-linear modelling that as few empty cells as possible exist in the generated cross-tabulations, required the substitution of either education or income by the other. Income was chosen for presentation here due to the a priori evaluation of its effect upon perceptions of vacation attributes. Similar models, where education replaced income as a measure of socioeconomic status, were found to yield results almost identical to those described below.

**Analysis and results**

Perceptions of how the USA and Canada compare as vacation destinations were assessed and compared for the following 10 attributes:

- winter outdoor activities;
- a place for rest and relaxation;
- a place with quiet countryside;
- a lot to see and do there during a vacation;
- interesting cities to visit;
- attending local celebrations;
- value for money in car travel;
- value for money in motels and hotels;
- overall value for a vacation; and
- courtesy shown to tourists.

Respondents were asked to assess each of the attributes in one of the following ways – better in Canada, better in the USA, the same in both countries, or no opinion.

Each of the 10 vacation attributes was subjected to chi-square analysis. Of the 10 tests, six gave significant results, supporting the test hypothesis of dependence between language and perceptions ($P<0.01$). The six attributes to which these tests corresponded were:

- winter outdoor activities;
- interesting cities to visit;
- attending local celebrations; and the three value-related attributes:
  - value for money in car travel;
  - value for money in accommodation; and
  - overall value for a vacation.

While there are important implications in both similarities among and differences between the two cultural groups in their perceptions of vacation attributes, the discussion focuses, in the interest of brevity, on significant differences. The following discusses each of the six attributes that were perceived in a significantly different way by French and English Canadians, compares the predictive roles of cultural and
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Winter outdoor activities

Although a majority of both French and English Canadians perceived winter outdoor activities as 'better in Canada', substantially more French than English Canadians did so (67.4% and 57.7% of French and English Canadians, respectively; see Figure 1). About equal propor-

socioeconomic variables, and suggests, for cases where language remains the primary predictor, cultural explanations for the findings.

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Work by Bouchard supports the hypothesis that types of activities and levels of participation differ between French and English Canadians and may, therefore, be responsible for the variations described here. He ultimately attributes these variations, however, to cultural foundations. Bouchard identified six fundamental cultural dimensions (called cultural roots) and 36 associated personality characteristics (called keys) of French Canadians. He suggested that French Canadians have a particular affinity for winter outdoor activities because of their 'rural root' and a corresponding love of nature.

Findings of Canadian tourism and recreation studies also identify activity and participation variations. The 1982 Canadian Travel Survey, a quarterly survey of vacation travel by Canadians, revealed that 5% and 4% of all person-trips made by Quebec residents (of whom 82% are French Canadian) were for purposes of downhill and cross-country skiing, respectively. Furthermore, cross-country skis were reported in 41% of all Quebec households in 1982. Certainly, geographical features in Canada may also have some bearing on the activities and levels of participation that predominate in Quebec, and may, therefore, help to explain the variations in perceptions described here.

Interesting cities

The second attribute that was perceived significantly differently by French and English Canadians (P<0.01) was 'interesting cities to visit' (Figure 2). While the largest percentage of both samples perceived cities as 'the same' in both countries (36.3% of English Canadians; 46.4% of French Canadians), considerably more English than French Canadians perceived this attribute as 'better in the USA' (33% and 16.7% of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Probability of effect</th>
<th>Significant parameters</th>
<th>Comparison category</th>
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<td>Winter outdoor activities</td>
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<td>$10 000-$19 999/</td>
<td>$&gt;$30 000</td>
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<td>French</td>
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<td>French</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>English/the same</td>
<td>French</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>English/no opinion</td>
<td>French</td>
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<td>English/better in USA</td>
<td>French</td>
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<td>Value in accommodation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall vacation value</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>English/better in USA</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Log-linear results – age, income, language by significant vacation attributes.
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French and English Canadians, respectively). Conversely, more French than English Canadians perceived cities as ‘better in Canada’ (30.9% and 23.5% of French and English Canadians, respectively). A roughly equal percentage of respondents from both samples had ‘no opinion’.

Log-linear results associated with this attribute suggested that both income ($P=0.05$) and language ($P=0.0008$) significantly influenced perceptions of cities (Table 1). Several parameters particularly contributed to this significance. In terms of income, respondents in the $10,000-19,999$ group were significantly more likely than respondents in the highest income category (greater than $30,000$) to assess cities as ‘the same’ in both countries ($P=0.01$). In terms of language, English Canadians were significantly more likely than were French Canadians to assess cities as ‘better in the USA’ ($P=0.0002$).

The more favourable perception of Canadian cities among French Canadians and of US cities among English Canadians might be partially explained by the availability of tourism information and services in French and English languages in both countries. Previous empirical work by Couturier and Mills suggested that differences between French and English-speaking residents of the province of New Brunswick in their levels of awareness of, and visitation to, provincial tourist attractions were attributable to a lack of information available in the French language. Hence the more favourable perceptions of Canadian cities held by French Canadians may reflect a higher service orientation in these cities toward French speaking markets.

Local celebrations

The third attribute that was perceived significantly differently by French and English Canadians ($P<0.01$) was ‘local celebrations’ (Figure 3). As with ‘winter outdoor activities’, the largest percentages of both French and English Canadians perceived local celebrations to be ‘better in Canada’ (63.2% of French Canadians; 48.8% of English Canadians). About equal proportions of French and English Canadians were distributed across the other three assessment categories (better in the USA, same, no opinion).

Log-linear results suggested that variations in perceptions of local celebrations were primarily attributable to variations in language (Table 1). Neither income nor age significantly influenced perceptions of the attribute. Further analysis of significant parameters identified English Canadians as significantly more likely than French Canadians to perceive interesting cities as better in the USA ($P=0.02$), the same in either country ($P=0.05$) or to have no opinion ($P=0.02$).

That a majority of both French and English respondents perceived local celebrations as ‘better in Canada’ may be an indication of the importance of these events to domestic tourism. However, the greater percentage of French Canadians that assessed local celebrations in this way suggests that they may mean different things to French and English Canadians. Again, an explanation for this finding may be drawn from work by Bouchard. Bouchard suggests that combined personality characteristics of loyalty to heritage (which springs from the rural root) and joie de vivre (which springs from the latin root) results in the attachment of great importance to local celebrations by French Canadians. In contrast, English Canadian society historically has been shaped by the Protestant work ethic that has probably contributed to

11 Bouchard, op cit, Ref 7.
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historical and contemporary meanings for local celebrations that differ from those ascribed by French Canadians.

Value-related attributes

The remaining three attributes that were perceived significantly differently by French and English Canadians ($P<0.01$) referred to monetary value in vacation travel. These were – value for money in car travel, value for money in motels and hotels, and overall value for a vacation.

The attribute ‘value for money in car travel’ (Figure 4) was assessed as ‘better in Canada’ by the largest percentage of both English and French Canadian respondents (44.1% and 54.2%, respectively). About equal proportions of English and French Canadians perceived this attribute as ‘the same’ in both countries or had ‘no opinion’. More English than French Canadians perceived value in car travel as ‘better in the USA’ (19.6% of English Canadians; 8.0% of French Canadians).

The attribute ‘value for money in motels and hotels’ (Figure 5) was perceived as ‘better in Canada’ by the largest percentage of French Canadians and as ‘better in the USA’ by the largest percentage of English Canadians (37.5% and 36.0% of French and English Canadians respectively). Only 14.6% of French Canadian respondents perceived this attribute as ‘better in the USA’. The percentage of each sample that perceived the attribute as ‘the same’ in both countries also differed considerably (16.4% and 29.2% of English and French Canadians, respectively).

The final attribute that was perceived significantly differently by French and English Canadians was ‘overall value for a vacation’ (Figure 6). The largest percentages of English and French Canadians perceived Canada to be the better country in terms of this attribute (42.3% and 45.1% of English and French Canadians, respectively). Of French Canadians 36%, as opposed to 19.1% of English Canadians, perceived the attributes as ‘the same’ in both countries, and 25% of English Canadians compared to 10.4% of French Canadians assessed overall value as ‘better in the USA’.

The significantly different perceptions of these value-related attributes illustrates the subjectivity of vacation value, even when specifically defined in terms of monetary cost, as was the case here. While findings of related empirical research conducted by the authors suggested that there is no significant difference between French and English Canadians in money spent on vacation trips, the findings reported here clearly suggest that they attach difference meanings to those costs. Overall, French Canadians appeared to consider travel in Canada to be of equal or better value to travel in the USA. Relatively speaking, English Canadians had more favourable perceptions of value in the USA.

The subjectivity of value in vacation travel was further highlighted by the log-linear results (Table 1). The effects of age and income had no significant effects upon variations in perceptions of any of the three value-related attributes. The effects of language upon assessment of the attributes were consistently significant, however, suggesting that cultural factors are primarily responsible for variations in perceptions of value as it relates to vacation travel. Significant parameters were also consistent across all three of the value-related attributes. In all cases, English Canadians were significantly more likely than were French
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Canadians to perceive value as 'better in the USA'. For the attribute 'overall value for a vacation' English Canadians were also more likely to perceive it as 'the same' in either country.

That perceptions of value in vacation travel might reflect cultural factors is supported by previous empirical work by Mallen. In his analysis of Canadian consumer behaviour, Mallen noted that although French Canadians are willing to spend more time searching for and evaluating products, they are more likely than English Canadians to make premium-priced purchases. Findings of a corporate study reported by Mallen identified the influence of this consumer tendency upon travel accommodation decisions. That study suggested that French Canadians have a tendency to choose more expensive, better-known hotel chains when travelling. Given that Canada has somewhat fewer budget hotel chains than does the USA, the higher percentage of French Canadians who perceived value in accommodation as 'better in Canada' and 'the same' in both countries might be a reflection of this consumer tendency. On the other hand, the high percentage of English Canadians who assessed the USA as the better country in terms of value in accommodation may reflect a proclivity to use lower priced accommodation when available.

Conclusions and implications

This study has explored cultural influences upon perceptions of vacation attributes in North America. While the importance of perceptions in directing tourism decision making and behaviour is widely recognized, little empirical research has been conducted in Canadian and other contexts to explore cultural antecedents of tourism related perceptions. That vacation attributes may be perceived differently by members of different cultural groups is supported by Mayo and Jarvis. In their model of the major influences on vacation travel behaviour they suggest that perceptions are influenced by four major external factors. Two of these are culture (and subculture) and social class. Because French Canadians have been separated historically by both cultural and socioeconomic characteristics, investigation of the relative influence of both these antecedents upon vacation-related perceptions was deemed essential to the study.

Findings of the study suggested that differences between French and English Canadians in their perceptions of vacation attributes exist and are primarily attributable to variations in culture (here functionally represented by language). Income appears to exert few significant effects upon perceptions of the vacation attributes and the effects of age were not significant.

Implications of the study are of interest to those concerned with marketing US and Canadian destinations to Canadian markets, but most notably to Canadian interests. Maintenance of a strong tourism industry in Canada depends upon three major markets – Canadians travelling within Canada, visitors from the USA, and visitors from other foreign countries. Of the three markets, domestic tourism plays a particularly critical economic role. In 1982 domestic travel expenditure represented about 78% of the total tourism sector income. Accordingly, about 75% of all 1982 travel in Canada was accounted for by residents. Most of the remainder represented visitors from the USA with only 1.5% representing visitors from other countries.

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12Mallen, op cit, Ref 4.
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The importance of travel by Canadians within Canada highlights the need for sound marketing and development strategies. Results of this study suggest that French and English Canadians are likely to be responsive to different marketing strategies and messages. The favourable vacation image maintained by French Canadians suggests the potential receptiveness of this market for Canadian domestic tourism. French Canadians appear to maintain particularly favourable perceptions of Canada in terms of winter outdoor activities, local celebrations, and vacation value. The relatively less favourable image of Canada maintained by English Canadians suggests the need for image enhancement among this market. This is particularly true of English Canadians' perceptions of value of accommodations in Canada.

While differences between the two samples in their perceptions of the vacation attributes were emphasized for purposes of brevity, similarities between the samples cannot be ignored. The fact that, for most of the attributes, the largest percentages of both French and English Canadians perceived them to be 'better in Canada' suggests the strong and favourable image of vacation travel in Canada among all Canadians. However, for both French and English Canadian markets, it appears that Canada competes with the USA to some degree, particularly when vacationers are concerned about experiencing interesting cities. This attribute in particular appears to need image enhancement among both markets.

According to a 1985 article by Schaninger, Bourgeois and Buss, two principal research issues relevant to French and English Canadian consumer behaviour remain unresolved:

- Are consumer behaviour differences due to cultural or socioeconomic factors? and
- Does cultural assimilation influence consumption patterns?

The study reported here contributed to answering the first question in the context of the vacation perceptions that characterized Canada's two major cultural groups in the early 1980s.

Certainly, French and English Canadian societies, and factors that differentiate between them, continue to evolve. The socioeconomic gap between French and English Canadians is rapidly diminishing and French Canadian culture is being shaped by a tide of self-assertion and differentiation. While these continuing changes suggest that some specific marketing implications generated by the 1981 data reported here may need some modification to respond to current market characteristics, they also reinforce the view that the study hypothesis of dependence between culture and tourism-related perceptions continues to be meaningful in the late 1980s. It is hoped that the findings and methodology of this study may serve as a departure point for investigations of the second research question identified above as it relates to tourism concerns in current Canadian contexts.