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Identity, migration, and social media: Generation Z in USMCA

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Abstract

Purpose: This research analyzes national identity representations held by Generation Z youth living in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) countries. In addition, it aims to identify the information on these issues that they are exposed to through social media.

Methods: A qualitative approach carried out through in-depth interviews was selected for the study. The objective is to reconstruct social meaning and the social representation system. The constant comparative method was used for the information analysis, backed by the NVivo program.

Findings: National identity perceptions of the adolescents interviewed are positive in terms of their own groups, very favorable regarding Canadians, and unfavorable vis-à-vis Americans. Furthermore, the interviewees agreed that social media have influenced their desire to travel or migrate, and if considering migrating, they have also provided advice as to which country they might go to. On another point, Mexicans are quite familiar with the Treaty; Americans are split between those who know something about it and those who have no information whatsoever; whereas Canadians know nothing about it. This reflects a possible way to improve information generated and spread by social media.

Practical implications: The results could improve our understanding of how young people interpret the information circulating in social media and what

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representations are constructed about national identities. We believe this research can be replicated in other countries.

Social implications: We might consider that the representations Generation Z has about the national identities of these three countries and what it means to migrate could have an impact on the democratic life of each nation and, in turn, on the relationship among the three USMCA partners.

Originality/value: As one of the few studies carried out on USMCA national identities and by qualitatively exploring the representations that Generation Zers have about them, it may provide information that could contribute to expanding understanding among the citizens of the region.

Keywords: Gen Z; national identity; Mexico; United States of America; Canada; social media;

1 Introduction

On January 1, 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, thus creating the world's largest free trade area: the region has a combined GDP of US\$30.73 trillion and includes the world's largest economy, the United States, with a GDP of US\$26.85 trillion; the ninth largest, Canada, with US\$2.09 trillion; and the 14th largest, Mexico, with US\$1.66 trillion (International Monetary Fund 2023). The Treaty was updated on July 1, 2020 and changed its name: The Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) in Canada; the Tratado México, Estados Unidos y Canadá (T-MEC) in Mexico, and The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in the United States, also known as NAFTA 2.0.

In addition to its commercial importance, North America has a strategic position, given that 497 million people live in the region, and it has the most significant international migratory flow: the United States is the country with the greatest influx of migrants, and Mexico is the second country in terms of the number of migrants it produces. Generally, the United States has a migrant population of 15.3 %, Canada 21.3 % and Mexico 0.9 %. The United States alone has close to 50 million migrants within its borders. Similarly, the United States is the country that issues the most remittances, and Mexico is the third largest recipient (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021).

In this context, we think it is essential to find out how the people of the three trading partners, so intimately linked by migratory processes, perceive each other. In particular, the perceptions of the young people of Generation Z living in the three countries must be studied, because today's young people will define the direction of relations in the region in the coming decades. The objective of this research was, therefore, to analyze the perceptions that young people living in the three treaty countries have about their counterparts, about those other young people with a

different national identity and who, in some cases, have migrated, left their country or are from another nation. In addition and given that communication systems are crucial to identity processes (Martín Serrano 1986), we seek to identify what information about these other countries and their adolescents these young people receive through social media.

1.1 Gen Z and social media in the USMCA

According to the Pew Research Center (Dimock 2019), Generation Z encompasses young people born between 1997 and 2012 who grew up with the digital revolution fully entrenched, so they are known as digital natives. Of the 497 million people living in North America, almost 105 million are Generation Zers: 65.9 in the United States, 20 % of its population (Census Bureau 2020); 31.5, or 25 % (INEGI 2020), in Mexico and almost 7 million, 18.2 % (Statistics Canada 2021), in Canada.

The role of cultural communication industries is fundamental within this context. They control identity management and have thereby: “transformed the understanding of the world and the place of individual identity holders within it.” (Girou 1988, 64) Thus, digital media play a relevant role in the dispute over identities. Particularly social media – “those digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection” (Burgess et al. 2018, 1) – act as mediators and can offer or disseminate the specific contents of each community’s identities, which can be transformed as socio-historical changes unfold.

Digital culture is installed in North America, where 93 % of Canadians, 92 % of Americans, and 76 % of Mexicans use the Internet (The World Bank 2021). However, let us go further: we live in a society dominated by social media: 59.9 % of the world’s population, 4.8 billion people, use social media (Statista 2022, data as of January 2023).

Of the total population using social media, 494.93 million are in North America (9.47 %). In other words, the regional penetration rate of such platforms is 73.9 % (Statista 2022), and looking at it by country, 72.5 % of Americans, 85.6 % of Canadians, and 72.7 % of Mexicans use them and at an average rate of 7.3 platforms per month (DataReportal 2023).

In particular, young people between 16 and 22 spend 38.2 % of their Internet surfing time on social media, with times ranging from 1.55 h a day in Canada and 2.15 in the United States to 3.11 h in Mexico. Moreover, social media are the news source for 45.3 % of young people in Mexico, 28.9 % in Canada, and 26.9 % in the United States (DataReportal 2023).

Social media are everyday tools for digital natives. According to the Institute of Digital Economy (ICEMD) (2017), the social media they use most are Snapchat,

YouTube, and Instagram. As a generation that respects diversity and thinks globally, they identify these media as multitasking and multiscreen. They also prefer communication through images, memes, and emoticons.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Social and national identities

A multidisciplinary theoretical approach (Álvarez-Macías 2017) is needed to analyze social identities, since it is a concept that encompasses individual, social, and community dimensions. Hence, social identities are complex and multifaceted (Sautereau and Faas 2023). Therefore, our theoretical approach encompasses contributions from social psychology, anthropology, sociology, communication, politics, and history.

First, from social psychology, Tajfel (1984) defines social identity as a system based on the awareness that a person belongs to a social group and the value and emotional meaning that he/she gives to this linkage. Given that, social identity is a tool that enables a person to locate him/herself, as well as his/her group, within a social map. Since relationships of power, status, and differentiation configure the map, identity is a system of social relationships that enables categorizing and ordering in terms of inclusion or exclusion based on such categories. The social categorization process comprises three elements: cognitive, evaluative, and emotional, according to Tajfel. The cognitive element allows the person to recognize him/herself as part of a group; the evaluative element helps him/her evaluate the membership positively or negatively; and the emotional element assigns certain emotions associated with the evaluation. The system leads the person to carry out “social comparison” processes by comparing the evaluations of different groups with his or her own. The system also generates “social competition” through which the person accentuates what is similar among the individuals of a group and increases the perceived differences concerning the others. Social competition aims to achieve a favorable position for one’s own group and have that recognized by the others.

Second, from anthropology, Barth (1976) defines social identity as a system that enables interaction between groups according to specific rules and with certain sanctions. By interacting with these rules, social boundaries or “ethnic borders” are established that separate and classify each group and allow cultural differences to be maintained even though there is exchange among the groups.

Third, grounded in sociology and focused on communication, Martín Serrano (1988, 1993, 2008) develops a robust theoretical framework through which he establishes that identities, as cognitive and narrative representations, result from

mediation processes. Throughout his analytical work, Martín Serrano (1988) demonstrates how mediation provides a historically constructed model of order that links collective representations with mechanisms of belonging through social identities and the two consensuses that these construct: through supra-social consensus, communities use elementary mental forms to describe their versions of what the world is like and what they are like; through intra-social consensus, members of each community can share these representations and identify with them and with each other. Martín Serrano thus explains that social identities are representations produced through mediation processes that enable people to make sense of reality and their environment. Thus, identities have mediating dimensions that offer criteria of belonging, values, elements of resistance, and worldviews: “To control the way of mediating is to apply to the content of reality the model of order and type of meanings that the recipient of the information will use to understand the present, foresee the future, and, therefore, act.” (Martín Serrano later, 2008, 147)

In their political dimension, identities fulfill one of the three functions identified by Castells (2001): legitimizing, resisting, or carrying out a project within power relations. It is, therefore, important to study how national identities are constructed, their symbolic contents, and what meaning is given to them by those who identify with or exclude themselves from them, because, from this standpoint, controlling identity administration is a resource that allows us to recognize or deny social groups and endow or deny them rights and legal legitimacy, through policies and regulations: “The intervention of power in identity processes leads us directly to what we could call ‘identification policies’ of the State.” (Giménez 2002, 40–41)

However, to address national identity processes, it is necessary to start from the analytical basis we have described: social identities, as social representations generated in social mediation processes (Martín Serrano), use of symbolic mechanisms such as comparison and social competition to achieve a positive, socially recognized valuation of the social group (Tajfel); they also maintain cultural differences and establish social boundaries (Barth 1976). Many of these representations are used to control social groups and legitimize national projects in a political dimension (Castell).

From political science, Anderson (2006) argues that social identities are the sense of belonging that individuals and groups have with specific social categories. Social identities, he explains, can be based on race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality, for example. However, the author makes a distinction when referring to national identities, stating that while they are also social constructions, they are based on a different series of factors, such as culture, religion, history, and language, a perspective shared by Smith (1997). In this sense, national identities are supported by the concept of nation, which Anderson (2006) defines as “a political community

imagined as inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined, because even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow countrymen, never see them or even hear of them, but in the mind of each lives the representation of their communion.” (23)

Sautereau and Faas (2023) agree that social and national identities are interrelated, because the latter is the result “of the progressive erosion of religion and dynasties as forms of community. It is rooted in common ethnic ancestry, values, responsibilities and duties. This notion is based on the idea of ‘us’ versus ‘others’.” (559) They further state that national identity can be a source of social identity, highlighting, however, that national identity can also be an obstacle to linkage with other social identities.

It can thus be established that national identity is not only a social construction based on a series of symbols, myths, and narratives but also a complex phenomenon that can vary from one person to another (Smith 1997). Moreover, these social constructions, national identities, are a critical factor in world politics (Huntington 2004) due to their characteristics and uses.

2.2 National identities and migration

If a single phenomenon were to be described as relevant to the study of national identities, it would be migration, especially from our point of view in the context of the USMCA. According to Marrow and Klekowski von Koppenfels (2018), migrations have a significant impact on national identity because they can generate a sense of belonging to both the community of origin and the community of destination. They therefore posit that migrations are challenging traditional national identities, because they are generating new, more fluid, and transnational identities. For example, a Mexican teen living in the United States may describe himself or herself as Mexican, American, or from both national identities. This complex process of national identification can be challenging, as the adolescent may be attracted to two different cultures (Schmidtke 2001). Even globalization is challenging traditional national identities in young people, as they are increasingly exposed to global influences, which may lead to adopting new identities that are not nationality based (Momesso and Lee 2019):

The literature broadly agrees on the fact that the primary form of belonging is provided by the nation-state. However, these debates have evolved into a new narrative as a consequence of more recent social and economic changes brought about by globalization, which have undermined states’ control over actions, movements, possessions, beliefs, and eventually how they frame their identity. (1)

In this sense, the national identities of adolescents in Mexico, the United States, and Canada may be affected by migratory processes. Adolescents who are immigrants or offspring of immigrants may have a more complex identity than adolescents whose background does not include migration.

Another relevant concept within our research context is national image, defined by Triandafyllidou (1998) as the representations a nation has about itself and other countries and how such images are formed within one's own country. Triandafyllidou distinguishes, however, between this national image and national identity: the former being about how a nation perceives others and how people define or perceive themselves as part of a group within a nation. For example, Highhouse (2022) finds that when people consume content about China on TikTok and like that content, those people have a more favorable national image of China than those who do not like the networked content. Similarly, when consumption of online video content is higher, there is a positive effect on China. This distinction is relevant, as our focus is on how young people perceive the national identities of other young people, not the national images of countries.

On the other hand, migration processes involve various forces beyond economic factors, such as investment in human capital, religiosity, and social media (Highhouse 2022; Hoffman et al. 2015). Thus, new social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok significantly impact the national identities of adolescents. These social media are making it easier for adolescents to connect with people from all over the world, which can lead to the adoption and forging of new identities not based on nationality.

Therefore, we consider relevant factors in analyzing the national identities of Generation Z, as (a) the migration experience, in other words the personal or family experience related to the process of changing residence and leaving the country of origin to settle in another, because in these processes national identities are reinforced or transformed; and (b) the use and consumption of social media, because the openness and interactivity that characterize these media make them relevant in the perception of national identity that young people have about teenagers from other countries: "Given this, when we consume media that is from, or that include those we perceive as 'the other,' it is assumed that the information is processed in a different way than if it was from those who share the same national identity" (Highhouse 2022, 699).

Thus, to achieve our research objective, we focused on Generation Z's perceptions of young people in the three USMCA-linked countries in terms of national identities. Given that, we posed three research questions:

Q1. What social representations do Gen Z youth living in the USMCA countries have about adolescents in their nation and adolescents in the other two nations?

Q2. Do these young people receive and consume content from and about teenagers in the other countries through social media?

Q3. What role do they consider that such content plays in the adolescents' perceptions of the other youths' national identities?

In summary, this paper focuses on national identities as cognitive and narrative representations resulting from processes of mediation, which provide a historically constructed model of order. Therefore, such representations can be identified through the narratives shared by communities and individuals who identify themselves through symbolic and psychological mechanisms. We are particularly interested not in direct analysis of social networks or social media interaction but in how they perceive their use in relation to national identities and how this perception is communicated by adolescents themselves.

3 Methodology

To conduct the research, we selected a qualitative approach, because it allows for delving into people's perceptions and representations (Hashmi et al. 2017). Furthermore, according to Couldry and Kallinikos (2018), it is also suitable for studying social media, as it facilitates learning about people's reflections on such media, how they evaluate them, and how that evaluation is related to their sense of value and priorities. Within this methodology, we decided to use the semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interview technique for the fieldwork, because it is a flexible tool that would enable reconstructing social meaning and the system of social representations (Alonso 1995; Charmaz 2014; Valles 1997, 2002).

To answer the research questions, we decided to interview young people from Generation Z in urban communities with a medium-high socio-economic level, as this condition guarantees that these young people have easy, fast, and permanent access to technology and the Internet. The groups of interviewees in each country would thus be comparable in one essential characteristic: constant exposure to social media content. Therefore, we first proceeded to select the appropriate context for addressing the research questions, and then the individual cases to be interviewed were selected from within this context.

3.1 Selection of the qualitative sample

The three countries that make up the USMCA have significantly different population sizes: the United States has 332,314,000 inhabitants (Census Bureau 2022); Mexico, 126,014,024 people (INEGI 2020); and Canada, 38,007,166 (Statistics Canada 2021). Consequently, one of the most important decisions was to select comparable localities, as far as possible. Therefore, we decided to narrow down the options in three decremental steps: first, within the country, we identified the next level of political division or population density, either regional area, province, or state; second, within that, we proceeded to select a state or city, from among the larger ones; and, third, in each city we selected a municipality, district or county.

Thus, within each of the USMCA countries (Mexico, United States, and Canada), we selected a city, based on four criteria: (a) being one of the five largest populations in the country and having a central metropolitan area; (b) having a high standard of living; (c) having a significant percentage of migrant population; and (d) offering accessibility for the study, understood as a criterion of convenience resulting from the research team's previous contacts with local academic communities.

Given these characteristics, in Mexico, we chose the capital city (Mexico City), because it is the most populated city (22 million people) with the most significant metropolitan area in the country, in addition to having a high percentage of migration and several neighborhoods with a high standard of living (INEGI 2020). In Canada, the city selected was Toronto, as the largest city in the country – with more than 6 million inhabitants (Statistics Canada 2021) –, the one with the highest percentage of migrants (Statista Research Department 2022), and one of the 10 cities with the highest standard of living in the world (The Economist 2023). Both Mexico City and Toronto met the accessibility criterion. In the case of the United States, several cities met the first three criteria: New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Chicago. They are among the five largest cities in the country (Census Bureau 2022), have major metropolitan areas and high levels of standard of living (Alund 2023), as well as the highest percentage of migrants per city nationally (Migration Policy Institute 2022). In the end, we selected Houston (2.3 million inhabitants) due to the accessibility criterion, i.e. convenience for conducting the research (see Table 1).

In the end, interviewee selection took place in the three localities chosen through the following five criteria: (a) economic and political relevance; (b) neighborhoods classified as medium-high socio-economic level; (c) conurbations to the political center but with a degree of administrative autonomy; (d) identified as migrant reception areas; and (e) not perceived as a cultural or ethnic reference of a specific national or local identity.

Table 1: Population size of city under study in Mexico, Canada and U.S.

Population in:	(a) Country	(b) Regional area, province, or state	(c) State or city	(d) Municipality, district or county
(a) Mexico	126,014,024			
(b) Mexico City metro- politan area		22,000,000		
(c) State of Mexico			16,992,418	
(d) Naucalpan				834,434
(a) Canada	38,007,166			
(b) Ontario		6,417,516		
(c) Greater Toronto area			2,731,571	
(d) North York				644,685
(a) United States of America	332,314,000			
(b) Houston metropol- itan area		7,155,058		
(c) Harris County			4,780,913	
(d) 7th congressional district				651.620

Note: Despite the population difference between Mexico, Canada, and the U.S., the research was conducted in locations of similar size. The figures report the number of inhabitants. Source: Prepared by the authors with data from INEGI 2020, Statistics Canada 2021 and U.S. Census Bureau 2022.

3.2 Selection of interviewees

Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling to compare cases bound by strategic criteria (Ruiz Olabuénaga 2012). Therefore, we constructed a typological pigeonhole, “ an instrumental device used by researchers to make a selection of interviewees aimed at controlling (minimally guaranteeing) sample heterogeneity, in analytically relevant variables.” (Valles 1997, 212).

The Spanish term introduced by Valles has been translated as a typological matrix, typological pigeonhole, or matrix crossing type (Iniesta-Arandia et al. 2014) and used in different disciplines (Álvarez-Macías 2021; Cordero-Ramos 2011; Olivar Tascón 2023; Orozco-Martinez et al. 2022; Trimano and Emanuelli 2012). This tool helps identify the appropriate profiles for obtaining broader knowledge. In this case, the typological pigeonhole was constructed based on biological gender, country of residence, and migration experience. The latter was defined without taking into account the legal migration status of respondents but rather their personal experience regarding the process of changing residence. In other words, we established four categories:

Table 2: Interviewees’ migratory experience and country of residence.

Migratory experience	Country of residence					
	Mexico		Canada		USA	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Local (L0)	MEX-F-L0	MEX-M-L0	CAN-F-L0	CAN-M-L0	USA-F-L0	USA-M-L0
Migrant (M1)	MEX-F-M1	MEX-M-M1	CAN-F-M1	CAN-M-M1	USA-F-M1	USA-M-M1
Migrant parents (M2)	MEX-F-M2	MEX-M-M2	CAN-F-M2	CAN-M-M2	USA-F-M2	USA-M-M2
Ascendants (M3)	MEX-F-M3	MEX-M-M3	CAN-F-M3	CAN-M-M3	USA-F-M3	USA-M-M3

Note: The typological pigeonhole allowed us to carry out a strategic sampling so as to obtain greater interviewee diversity, with economy and accessibility. In the nomenclature of each cell, F is female, and M is male. Migratory experience is indicated with letters and numbers: L0 designates local people, M1 migrants, M2 when the parents are migrants and M3 when the grandparents are the migrant generation. Source: Prepared by the authors.

1. Local (L0), when the interviewee’s country of residence was the same as his/her country of birth, as well as that of his/her parents and grandparents.
2. Migrant (M1), when the interviewee was born in one country and now resided in another.
3. Migrant parents (M2), when the interviewee was born in his/her current country of residence, but it differed from the country of birth of his/her parents.
4. Ascendants (M3), when it was only the grandparents who were born in a country other than the current country of residence, but the parents and interviewee were born in the current country of residence.

Also, we set constant age and education conditions for all potential participants: (1) high school students, and (b) between 15 and 20 years old. The typological pigeonhole thereby enabled a strategic selection of cases following two criteria: heterogeneity and economy-accessibility (Valles 2002) (see Table 2).

The typological box we constructed shows criteria cross-referencing and gives us eight types for each country. We decided to interview a total of two people from each typology, resulting in a qualitative sample of 16 people in each city, a total of 48 interviewees ($N = 48$).

3.3 Participant recruitment

We recruited the young people in two stages: first, within the chosen municipality/district, we identified public or private schools with upper-middle socio-economic status students and contacted the first interviewees through teachers and parents.

Table 3: Age distribution of interviewees.

	Country of residence					
	Mexico		Canada		USA	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Migratory experience	Age					
Local (L0)	16	16	17	17	18	17
	18	18	18	17	18	18
Migrant (M1)	16	16	16	17	16	18
	18	17	17	17	18	18
Migrant Parents (M2)	18	18	16	17	16	17
	19	18	17	18	17	17
Ascendants (M3)	17	17	17	16	18	16
	18	17	17	17	18	18

Note: The interviewees were young people between 15 and 19 years old, high school students with different migration experiences. Source: Prepared by the authors.

We then used the snowball technique to recruit the rest of the young people, by asking participants to refer other young people living or studying in the area, who were not their close friends. In every case, we explained the purpose of the study. We verified that they met the characteristics set out in the typology box, as well as the constants of age, socio-economic, and educational levels. After verification, interview dates and times were agreed upon.

Thus, we interviewed males and females between 15 and 19 years old, with a secondary education, living in urban areas and of diverse birth origins: local, migrant, children of migrants, and ascendants. The sample comprises 16 people in each city ($N = 48$), and the interviews took place in Toronto, Mexico City, and Houston (see Table 3). Some were face-to-face, while others were conducted virtually through a video call platform. An initial thematic outline was used for the interviews, and then, as the interviews progressed, relevant elements brought up by the teens were incorporated, so as to pose new questions and gather more information.

The interviews lasted between 20 and 65 min and were exclusively audio-recorded. The data collection work started in Mexico. Participants (and their parents, in the case of minors) were informed in advance about the research purpose, objectives, and development and gave their written consent. Moreover, at the beginning of each interview, participants were again informed of the terms of use for their data and the information provided. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, according to individual interviewee preference. In the end, all interviews in

Mexico City were in Spanish; in Toronto, all were in English; and in Houston, all were in both languages.

The constant comparative method (Flick 2007; Glaser and Strauss 1967), supported by the program Nvivo, was used to analyze the information. This method involves an iterative process in which data are analyzed, categories are obtained, and then the researcher returns to the data to improve the analysis (Damle et al. 2022): “In grounded theory methodology, there is a continuous interplay between analysis and data collection using a constant comparative method whereby particular data points are constantly compared to other data points in order to form categories and concepts.” (Clandinin 2005, 221). Data are compared, to identify differences and connections, and comparisons are concretized through the empirical material (Flick 2007).

In this way, we compare data with data, interview with interview, and identify similarities and differences. The relevance of this method is that it allows us to look for patterns and ideas by comparing codes to determine whether they fit well with the data and provide answers to the research questions. Specifically, the data analysis was conducted in three stages (Charmaz 2014): (a) initial reading of each interview, to establish the first ideas that emerged from the data and record them in memos; (b) second, detail-focused reading, which allowed us to create open codes, focusing on perceptions of what interviewees said they did and their assessments, without labeling specific subjects or people; (c) iterative reading, i.e., we went back to the data, to the interviews, to refine the initial codes so that we could better capture the meaning and perceptions held by the young people.

4 Results and discussion

The analysis of the interviews led us to group the results into four sections that show the perceptions of the adolescents interviewed regarding:

1. The national identities of Mexican, Canadian, and American youth
2. The information they receive about young people living in those countries
3. Their perspectives on migrating
4. The Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, Canada, and the United States

4.1 What are we like, and what are other young people like?

Among the findings, it stands out that adolescents living in Canada know very little about teenagers living in Mexico: the information they have about them is very limited and scarce.

- I don't know a lot about teenagers in Mexico. **E18 (CAN-M-L0)**¹
- I know absolutely nothing. **E19 (CAN-F-L0)**
- Yeah, I'm not too familiar to say anything about teenagers in Mexico. **E30 (CAN-M-M3)**

The opposite is the perception they have of American teenagers, which is negative. They describe them as cocky, ignorant, lazy, and mainly people with very polarized opinions. In contrast, Canadians generally see themselves as friendly, disciplined, tolerant, reserved, and hardworking.

- I guess in Canada, we are again more welcoming to other cultures than in the U.S. and perhaps also more liberal. **E25 (CAN-F-M2)**
- (Americans) give me the impression that they are very arrogant and conceited. **E1 (MX-F-L0).**
- It's probably more of a stereotype, but I always think that Americans are quite conceited and think they are above other countries. Yes, and I guess also, also immature? I mean probably like fun-loving, you know, like just like they probably don't care too much about their job. **E18 (CAN-M-L0)**
- ... (Americans are) snooty, privileged, and politically one-sided ... I think a lot of teenagers in the States are polarized. **E27 (CAN-F-M2)**
- I think Canada differentiates in a way that's more inclusive than the USA. **E30 (CAN-M-M3)**
- Nationalists, I think have pride in their country. I've never seen Mexicans, for example ... **E37 (USA-F-M1)**

Mexicans' perceptions of Canadian teenagers are idealized and romanticized: they have placed them on a pedestal, describing them as open-minded, friendly, and respectful. On the contrary, and in agreement with Canadians, they perceive Americans as snooty, ignorant, nationalistic, classist, and lazy. Mexicans see themselves as hardworking, happy, open-armed, honest, and straightforward.

- Canadians are ... very respectful and kind but distant and cold. **E1 (MX-F-L0)**
- ... in the United States, I feel that they have this kind of, I don't know, I feel that the atmosphere is more tense between ... you know, how they have these issues of immigrants and those things. Well, I don't think it's like a country to go to. **E2 (MEX-M-L0)**
- Somehow, we are more independent (Mexicans). They make us learn more, ok, not only in our school but in our homes (...) Well, they teach us to survive, in a way, as kids, to do our own things ... not them (Americans). **E3 (MEX-F-L0)**

¹ To identify the responses of each respondent, they were assigned an ID: E1, E2, E3... E48.

- I am going to say ‘worried,’ but it would be for Mexicans. At least, I always like this feeling that we are social vigilantes; I don’t think it’s the best thing, but at least you show interest. **E5 (MEX-F-M1)**
- For Americans, that also applies to teenagers; I would say manipulable because, as far as I have heard, the media in the U.S. really control everyone. So, they would be manipulable and controversial. But also interested, that is, I feel that people in the U.S. are very much like that ... **E9 (MEX-F-M2)**
- I have seen that they are very liberal (Canadians), so they are people who, like very calm (...) It is more like calm the environment in which they live (...) I follow a celebrity or two and a music band from the United States and Canada, too (...) through Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. **E8 (MEX-M-M1)**
- I think they’re more like I think snooty... just like I feel like a lot of people that I like a lot of teenagers that I know in the United States, they have like a lot of like resources, and they don’t work as hard as like people who look like immigrant families or like countries where not everything is given to you. So, like white people in America, just get things easily. So maybe also like ... What’s the word? The word that means, like politically, they’re very like one-sided, polarized, polarized. Yes. I think a lot of teenagers in the States are polarized because of parental influences or influences that they like from their friends. I think that’s. **E27 (CAN-F-M2)**
- Something we, as Mexicans, consider a general culture they don’t have any idea of (...) It is not ignorance, but they are also not very informed either. **E13 (MEX-F-M3)**

Americans consider Canadian teenagers to be friendly, patient, and independent. They perceive young people living in Mexico as culturally rich, joyful, family-oriented, and extroverted. They describe themselves as open, casual, and independent.

- I think we’re more similar than people generally think... I guess in Canada, we might again be more welcoming to other cultures than the United States and maybe more liberal as well. **E37 (USA-F-M1)**
- They’re pretty happy and very sociable (Mexicans); they talk to people more; they make friends more. **E41 (USA-F-M2)**
- Young people from the United States are athletic but a bit independent. We like technology and video games (I play a lot online with Chinese people). I’m no sure about Canadians, I don’t know them well, but I think they are friendly and good people. And the Mexicans are very cheerful and funny; they’re friendly. **E46 (USA-M-M3)**
- Canadians and Americans like sports a lot, with different tastes since in Canada, they ski a lot because of the climate, and here (USA), it’s other sports. Canadians

are quiet, and Americans aren't so quiet, and here there are also some very sloppy ones; they don't dress well.... Mexicans have better appearance; they are more concerned about how they dress or behave (...) Yes, Americans are like that, but Canadians aren't, although the ones I've met are pretty similar to us. **E33 (USA-F-L0)**

Two aspects should be noted: first, the most respected image is that of young Canadians, as they are perceived very positively by all respondents. Second, although Canadian and Mexican youths' perspective of themselves is relatively similar to how other countries perceive them, the case of Americans is different. U.S. teenagers perceive themselves positively, as opposed to how most Canadians and Mexicans describe them.

4.2 What role do social media play? Are teens authentic on social media?

Generally, all teens use social media, mainly Instagram in Mexico and Canada and Snapchat in the USA; they mention TikTok in second place. The teens state they use them between two and 5 h daily, mainly for entertainment. Most interviewees say that they get to know people from other countries and what is happening in them through social media. Few, almost none, use newspapers, for example, as a news source. Regardless of the country, all the adolescents agreed that social media have influenced their desire to travel or migrate. If they are considering migrating, they say they also get advice about which country they want to migrate to.

- I haven't put too much thought into it, but yeah, I've thought about moving to some other countries before, mostly European ones like, I don't know, just to travel. **E18 (CAN-M-L0)**
- Social media can encourage people to think about one country more and like, yeah, like you said, to move there **E20 (CAN-M-L0)**
- A 100 %. I think, well, media in general, but social media, especially with advertising tools, can, you know, hyper-romanticize places, whether it be through advertisers or creators. I think without social media, we'd have fewer of these thoughts (about traveling or migrating). **E24 (CAN-F-M1)**

Finally, they think that in social media, the image of young people in these countries is not always authentic, but that young people try to make it so.

- Completely inaccurate. Not just in people posting about themselves but also people reposting like infographics and stuff like that... even with posts, we know we live in like photoshop. But I feel like that's what social media has become. If

you're going on social media and you are looking for authenticity, I feel like you are in the wrong place. **E19 (CAN-F-L0)**

- I try not to use it for information, because I understand that a lot of it is sort of word of mouth. It's coming from a source that comes from a source... and it kind of gets lost in translation. So, even if I like come across something on social media, I try to take it with a grain of salt. **E21 (CAN-F-M1)**

Teenagers in all three countries agree they receive a lot of content about the United States and its way of life. The information Americans receive is generated in and focused mainly on their own country; it is at the national level. The little information or content from other countries is usually from American migrants. In other words, what they know about other countries is through the eyes of other Americans.

Unlike their neighbors, Canadians reported receiving more content from Canada and Europe, although they acknowledge that they also consume information from the United States in smaller quantities. However, rarely is the information generated by someone native to that country: usually a Canadian migrant living there uploads the content. The interviewees explained that they receive a great deal of information from France, Italy, and Greece but that it has more of a tourism focus. They added that they know more about their own families' countries of origin, for example, Korea, Ireland, or Italy.

- Definitely the worst influence on me. I feel like if I could go back in time and stop 13-year-old me from downloading Instagram, I would've done it in a heartbeat. Because I feel like so many of the ideas and perceptions I have of myself right now and of other people, even to go as far as to say insecurities, have resulted from seeing unrealistic standards that have been presented on social media, and not just standards in terms of beauty but in terms of lifestyle. Seeing people post out restaurants every single night or going out every day makes you evaluate your life differently, and it just becomes this sort of copy and paste of I see what they want, and I want to do it too. **E29 (CAN-F-M3)**

In the case of Mexican respondents, they reported receiving most of their content from Mexico and the U.S., but also from European countries and Canada. They receive information in Spanish and English on social media, not only from Mexican migrants but also from tourists and, to a large extent, from people native to those countries. In this sense, they are the adolescents that interact the most with other communities and have broad access to more diverse information.

4.3 Are they thinking about migrating?

When discussing the possibility of migrating, young people living in Canada are open to doing so. Leaving the country is a possibility, not a goal or necessity for Canadians. Among those who are migrants or have a history of migration, returning to their country of origin or that of their parents or grandparents could be an option when they are older, but not to live there again. Others think of traveling to Europe to learn and explore, but again, they see this as a possibility. It seems that the desire to leave the country is not very strong. Their idea of leaving the country is associated with having different experiences, not for work or out of necessity.

On the other hand, for the majority of U.S. residents, migration is not in their plans. They are sure that they have arrived where they are supposed to be. It doesn't matter if they were born there, immigrated, or their parents or relatives came to the country. They all agree that they want to stay in that country for the rest of their lives.

- I don't think so (decide to migrate to another country); I am happy here (United States), and although I feel Mexican, I am also American, so I am fine. **E38 (USA-M-M1)**

The case of Mexico is another reality. For those who live there, leaving their country is an increasingly desirable option. Despite showing great love for Mexico, the vast majority hope to leave the country at some point in their lives and think about looking for job opportunities or express the desire of studying abroad. Migrating to another country is seen as an achievement within Mexico and, at the same time, a dream.

When analyzing the meaning of migration, the interviews show that for those who live in Canada, migration represents security and opportunities; for residents of the United States, it means a better life; and for those who live in Mexico, it represents the possibility of studying, learning and, above all, hope.

4.4 Is the Treaty relevant?

Regarding the North American Treaty, the analysis of the interviews shows two extremes. On the one hand, Canadian teenagers have yet to hear about the issue; they do not know of the existence of the Treaty or its implications. On the other hand, in Mexico, everyone knows not only about the Treaty but its implications and the benefits it has brought to the three countries. It is something that is mentioned frequently and directly has an impact on their lives, according to their responses. There is a middle ground among U.S. teenagers: many have heard about it, while others have not.

In all cases, their assessment of the Treaty is positive. Some teenagers living in Mexico even consider that the relationship between the three countries should increase to achieve an alliance closer to the European Union. However, a few rejected that possibility, arguing that the United States could take total control and Mexico would become even more dependent on that country. The young Americans accepted the possibility of a closer alliance, but they considered the labor issue difficult to reconcile. In addition, they assume there would be much rejection in their country. In the case of those who live in Canada, after explaining to them what the Treaty was and its scope for trade and the economy of the region, they considered that a greater connection between the three countries would be of interest. However, similarly to adolescents in the United States, those living in Canada and Mexico also expressed the difficulty of achieving a more robust treaty.

5 Conclusions

In reviewing the results of the Free Trade Agreement between the three countries, we can conclude that the governments of Canada and the United States have an area of opportunity since most of their teenagers need to learn about the Agreement or have little information about it. This could mean a hindrance or a decrease in the economic and social benefits of belonging to the largest free trade zone in the world. As for national identities, we can conclude that Canadians have the most respected image, Americans the most negative, and Mexican adolescents are the least known by their counterparts. This is not a trivial matter, since the representations that Generation Z has about the national identities of these three countries may have an impact on the democratic life of each nation and, in turn, on the relationship between the three partners within the framework of the Treaty.

Therefore, using social media to provide young people with reliable and timely information on the subject is a real possibility and, from our perspective, mandatory for the three countries' governments since being well-informed is a right of the citizens of each of them.

Regarding social media, teenagers in all three countries think that social media affect and influence migration. What's more, teenagers recognize the powerful impact and influence social media have on them. It can also be stated that teenagers are aware that they use social media more than they think they should. For example, most reported that they delete applications seasonally, although they do not resist the temptation to reinstall and use them. Additionally, we were able to conclude that social media generate specific perspectives on migration in adolescents in the three countries: whether it is desirable to migrate or not, and if they consider it desirable, where it is better to migrate to.

On the other hand, it is a concern that while the adolescents interviewed know that social media are not good sources of information, they recognize that they consult them the most, i.e. their main sources of information. Likewise, we think that the reasons they give for needing to verify what they receive through social media merit study. What's more, despite the expressed need to verify the information, they share it without knowing whether or not it is accurate, if what is reflected there and they are passing along is authentic. When sharing the information, though, they mention that they saw it on social media, as a warning of sorts that the information may not be correct. From this phenomenon we observe that social media promote non-existent authenticity, in other words, an illusion of perceived authenticity.

Furthermore, there is a fear of uncertainty among adolescents as to the consequences that social media could produce, but they are afraid to disconnect from them. It should also be noted that American adolescents may be more vulnerable to polarization, since the information they receive is from their own national context and they are not very open to international issues, which limits the possibility of learning about and analyzing different points of view.

This research has limitations that must be shared. On the one hand, the results only reflect the perceptions of a highly specific sector of the study population, in this case, urban young people of medium-high socioeconomic level in these three cities, which leaves the door open to study how these national identities are perceived by young people from other socioeconomic strata and in other cities. On the other hand, regarding the young people's migratory experience and their sense of belonging to one or two countries, other qualitative techniques must be incorporated, such as case studies and focus groups, to be able to go deeper and include family members, since the results did not enable us to identify whether these experiences modified young people's perceptions. We also recommend conducting other research that is not only qualitative but of a mixed nature and with a longitudinal approach. The changing nature of technological, communication, and migratory processes makes it essential to follow the development of national identities – and national images – throughout the growth and incorporation of Generation Z into the labor market.

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