



Exploring the Development of Cultural Intelligence: A Study on Expatriates in the Tourism Sector of Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is increasingly recognized as crucial for the success of expatriate professionals in the globalized tourism industry. Working abroad presents a multitude of challenges, necessitating a nuanced understanding of different cultures, specifically within the work country context. Existing literature commonly utilizes quantitative approaches to compare CQ across countries and regions, often neglecting the individual experiences and affective components at play within specific host and origin country dynamics. To bridge this research gap, this qualitative study aims to look into the evolution of CQ among expatriates in the tourism sector of Southeast Asia. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve expatriates possessing varied backgrounds, through exploring their first-hand experiences and perceptions. This research probes into how CQ influences their cross-cultural competencies and capacity for innovation. This research findings underscore the importance of motivational CQ and cultural distance, thereby enriching the composite CQ framework, which includes motivational, cognitive, metacognitive, and behavioural dimensions. The implications of this paper extend to the realm of global talent management, with particular emphasis on fostering expatriate talent.

Keywords: *Cultural intelligence, Expatriate professionals, Communication, Southeast Asia, Cross-cultural competencies*

INTRODUCTION

The escalating trend of globalisation and the presence of diverse cultures in work environments have emphasised the significance of cultivating and improving individual cultural intelligence (CQ) (Andresen & Bergdolt, 2017; Bücker & Korzilius, 2015; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Raver & Van Dyne, 2017). Individual CQ, encompasses a system of interactive knowledge, capabilities, and skills that allow individuals to effectively adapt and function successfully in culturally diverse workplaces (Earley & Ang, 2003; Thomas et al., 2008). CQ has been linked to several positive outcomes, including stronger individual and organizational performance (Lee & Sukoco, 2010; Presbitero, 2017; Presbitero & Toledano, 2018; Wu & Ang, 2011), creativity (Xu & Chen, 2017), knowledge sharing (Collins et al., 2017), and voice behaviour (Jiang et al., 2018).

Past literature demonstrate that expatriate talent assumes diverse roles, including knowledge transfer (Chen et al., 2024; Kang & Shen, 2018; Kong et al., 2018; Vlačić et al., 2019), organisational development through control (Peng & Beamish, 2014; Torbiörn, 1994), and coordination (Cerdin & Brewster, 2014; Johnston & Menguc, 2007). In accomplishing these objectives successfully, expatriates must effectively adapt to new cultures (Huff et al., 2014; Takeuchi et al., 2008; Wu & Ang, 2011). Cultural adjustment typically encompasses three dimensions: general, work, and interaction adjustment (Black, 1988; Song et al., 2023; Wu & Ang, 2011).

In comprehending and adjusting to a culturally diverse environment, CQ plays a vital role, representing a progressive advancement in cross-cultural studies. CQ has become a crucial competence for individuals seeking success in burgeoning cosmopolitan cities and intercultural contexts (Aggarwal and Wu, 2021; Sharma and Hussain, 2017). To mitigate the potential adverse effects of cultural differences in interactions with individuals from diverse cultures, the application of CQ skills and awareness is essential (Ang, Van Dyne, & Rockstuhl, 2015; Earley, 2002).

Nevertheless, the expansion of the tourism industry on a global scale has necessitated the ability to engage in successful interactions with individuals from diverse national cultures. As a result, the sector confronts the different challenge of effectively managing and delivering cross-cultural services while assessing their performance in line with the expectations of clients, employees, and providers (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2018; Lam, Cheung, & Lugosi, 2022; Mohsin, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial to explore the CQ development in the area of tourism sector in understanding the cross-cultural encounters from their home country as this sector possess different understanding in their own culture, the culture of the country that they are working as well as the culture of the different client as well as the employee.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

The recent outbreak of pandemic triggered a significant shift in global workplace which leading to a transition of virtual communication and increased reliance on information technologies (Ancillo, Gavrila, & Núñez, 2023). This transformation highlighted the crucial role of CQ in addressing language and communication barriers especially within global context (Presbitero, 2020). According to Earley and Mosakowsk (2004), the term “cultural intelligence” refers to the ability of an outsider to interpret a foreigner’s unknown gestures in a different way from what their countrymen would understand them. This especially critical for the global business leaders to handle multinational companies that deal with diversity workforce in their daily routine (Crowne, 2008).

In the setting of global workplace, the term “cultural intelligence” consists with knowledge, mindfulness as well as cross cultural skills that helps to enhance skill while interact with others. To put it simple, cultural intelligence refers to the ability and flexibility in understand and adapt with others culture (Thomas & Inkson, 2009). CQ refer to the drive of individual to get interested with others culture and behavioural CQ refer to the action of an individual in adapting different cultures (Leclerc, Kennedy, & Campis, 2023). Individual with higher CQ is considered as culturally competency by obtaining the ability to work with members from diverse cultural background and vice versa for individual with lower CQ which have their own intepretation while trying to adapt with others’ behaviour (Ott & Michailova, 2016; Skaria and Montayre, 2023).

Cross Cultural Knowledge

According to Ratasuk and Charoensukmongkol (2020) determined the higher the CQ of an individual will increase the innovative performance through team knowledge sharing by working effectively with members that obtained different knowledge and skills from diverse cultural background. Apart from sharing knowledge and skills, Yu, Liu, Cheng and Gao (2021) explained an individual who obtained with cross border knowledge also playing an important role to helps the businesses for overcome the crisis by implementing different strategies accordingly such as during the outbreak of pandemic which challenging the whole financial in global industry.

Chenyang (2022) found cross cultural training is significant for an organization to improve employees job performance and enhance CQ. Work engagement is a positive state in which employees feel a strong connection and are willing or able to invest their energy in their work (Yang, 2023) and the interaction with host country nationals enhances their knowledge (Hussain and Zhang, 2023). Thus, having knowledge of the different culture would strengthen the work engagement among employees.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Framework

Motivational Cultural Intelligence concerns itself with the propensity and eagerness of individuals to interact across diverse cultural environments, underscored by a demonstrated curiosity, self-efficacy, and a positive orientation towards cultural differences (Ang et al., 2007; Earley et al., 2006; Yang, 2023). This dimension encapsulates the intrinsic motivation to assimilate and adapt within varied cultural contexts, as well as acknowledging the enriching influence of cultural diversity on both personal and professional development.

Cognitive Cultural Intelligence embodies the comprehensive awareness and comprehension of differing cultural standards, values, communication modalities, and behavioral norms (Alexandra, 2023; Ang et al., 2007; Ng & Earley, 2006; Yang, 2023). It entails the assimilation of concrete data concerning various cultures, coupled with the competency to analyse and situate such information within multiple social environments.

Metacognitive Cultural Intelligence pertains to the conscious recognition and management of one's cognitive operations when navigating cross-cultural interactions (Alexandra, 2023; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Yang, 2023). This aspect involves the continual oversight, regulation, and modification of cognitive strategies to effectively manage cultural disparities, thus fostering adaptability, reflective thinking, and heightened self-awareness.

Behavioural Cultural Intelligence involves the capability to adjust one's verbal and non-verbal actions to conform with the established cultural norms and expectations (Alexandra, 2023; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Chitac et al., 2023). This segment is characterized by the exhibition of flexibility, empathy, and adeptness in cross-cultural communication during interpersonal dealings, and the ability to proficiently handle diverse social situations with tact and consideration.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) in the Tourism Industry

The tourism industry, by its very nature, is characterized by frequent intercultural interactions, making CQ particularly crucial for expatriates in this sector. Tourists come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and their expectations, behaviours, and communication styles vary significantly. Expatriates in the tourism industry must navigate these cultural differences to provide high-quality service, ensure customer satisfaction, and foster positive cross-cultural relationships (Zhang & Shao, 2022; Stoermer et al., 2020).

Expatriates in the tourism industry often engage directly with international tourists, requiring a high level of cultural sensitivity and understanding to meet diverse

needs and expectations. CQ enables expatriates to anticipate and appropriately respond to cultural nuances in customer interactions, thereby enhancing service quality and customer satisfaction (Guadalupe, 2023). Given the diversity of tourist profiles, conflicts arising from cultural misunderstandings are not uncommon. Expatriates with high CQ are better equipped to manage and resolve such conflicts, demonstrating adaptability and maintaining a harmonious environment (Morin & Talbot, 2021). Their ability to interpret cultural cues and adjust their behaviour accordingly is crucial for effective conflict resolution. The dynamic nature of the tourism industry necessitates continuous learning and adaptation. Expatriates with high CQ are more adept at learning from their experiences, adapting to new cultural contexts, and staying attuned to the evolving preferences of international tourists (Chen et al., 2024). This continuous adaptation is essential for maintaining relevance and competitiveness in the industry.

Cultural Intelligence in Other Industries

In industries where technical proficiency is paramount, the emphasis on CQ may be less pronounced compared to the tourism industry. However, even in these sectors, expatriates benefit from high CQ by facilitating smoother teamwork, enhancing communication, and fostering a more inclusive work environment (Stoermer et al., 2020). Effective intercultural interactions in these industries contribute to project success, innovation, and overall organizational performance. In sectors such as finance or healthcare, expatriates often work in multicultural teams, requiring a blend of CQ and technical skills. High CQ enables expatriates to navigate cultural differences within the team, promoting collaboration, reducing misunderstandings, and enhancing team performance (Iskhakova & Ott, 2020). The ability to build trust and rapport across cultures is particularly crucial in these settings. For expatriates in leadership roles, regardless of industry, CQ is essential for effective global management. Leaders with high CQ are better equipped to motivate and manage diverse teams, make culturally informed decisions, and navigate the complexities of global markets (Van Dyne, Ang, & Koh, 2008). Their ability to understand and leverage cultural diversity becomes a strategic advantage in a globalized business environment.

Comparative Analysis of Tourism vs Other Industries

The tourism industry stands out due to the inherent need for direct and continuous interaction with a culturally diverse clientele. This constant exposure to cultural diversity makes CQ an indispensable competency for expatriates in this sector. In contrast, while CQ remains important in other industries, its role may be more context-specific, varying with the nature of the job, the level of customer interaction, and the degree of cultural diversity within the workplace.

Cultural interactions in the tourism industry occurs more frequently and with greater intensity than in many other sectors. Foreigners working in the tourism industry generally interact directly with a wide range of tourists on a daily basis, which requires them to have a strong ability to understand and adapt to different cultures (Zhang & Shao, 2022; Stoermer et al., 2020). In other businesses, such interactions may occur occasionally or be limited to specific situations, hence decreasing the urgent necessity for a high level of CQ. The tourism industry's focus on providing services emphasises the significance of CQ. Providing personalized and culturally appropriate service is critical for success in tourism, making CQ a core competency for expatriates. Industries that are centred around production or technology may place a higher importance on technical abilities, whereas CQ may have a secondary and less significant role (Su, 2015). In the tourism industry, the influence of CQ on business outcomes is direct and measurable, affecting consumer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and overall reputation. Expatriates with a high level of CQ contribute to improved guest experiences, which in turn promotes loyalty and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Stoermer et al., 2020). In other industries, although CQ plays a role in team dynamics, leadership effectiveness, and market understanding, its influence may be less focused and indirect, intertwined with other elements that contribute to corporate success.

Overall Significance

Overall, although CQ is a vital skill for expats in many sectors, its significance is most notable in the field of tourism. CQ is a crucial trait for optimal performance in the tourism sector due to the requirement for direct, culturally sensitive interactions with international tourists and the service-oriented nature of the industry. Yet, the importance of CQ in various sectors differs based on the particular circumstances and characteristics of cross-cultural engagements. However, possessing a high CQ is still a valuable advantage that improves the efficacy of expatriates, promotes collaboration, and contributes to the success of organisations in an ever more globalised environment. This study emphasises the significance of CQ for tourism professionals in Southeast Asia. It supports the globalisation of the sector and the ability to serve a varied range of clientele.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of this study is centred around qualitative research techniques, utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews to gather data. This technique, described by Adams (2015), combines open-ended questions with more directed inquiries, allowing for a conversational style that can yield comprehensive insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. Given the qualitative nature of this research which focuses on participants' perceptions and experiences and the way they make sense of their lives (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), the research findings are displayed in direct quotations from the participants.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected for their ability to explore deeply into the lived experiences of expatriates, uncovering rich narratives about their professional journeys within the tourism sector within Southeast Asia. The flexibility of this format is particularly suited to exploring the nuances of how expatriates understand and adapt to their international roles.

Sampling Strategy

The current research purposively conducted twelve (12) qualitative interviews with expatriates who worked in the tourism industry within the Southeast Asia region for at least two years. This intentional choice ensures that the study focuses on individuals best positioned to provide meaningful information about the development of CQ in a foreign work setting.

Data Analysis Framework

Following collection, data were systematically analysed with the objective of understanding the cultivation of CQ among expatriates. This analytical process was guided by the four-component CQ framework proposed by Van Dyne et al., (2012) which encompasses (a) Motivational CQ, in assessing the expatriates' drive and energy to adapt and function effectively within different cultural contexts. (b) Cognitive CQ, by evaluating the understanding of cultural norms and practices among expatriates, including knowledge of cross-cultural issues. (c) Metacognitive CQ, by investigating the cognitive processes that expatriates employ to comprehend and react in culturally divergent situations. (d) Behavioural CQ, by observing the actions and adaptability of expatriates in their intercultural communications and interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study illustrate the vital role that CQ plays in the professional lives of expatriates within the tourism industry across Southeast Asia. The data, derived from expatriates working in various countries within this region, was methodically analysed through the lens of the four core components of CQ which consists of Metacognitive, Cognitive, Motivational, and Behavioural.

Respondent's Details						
	Years of working experience overseas	Current industry you are working in	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Current working country
A	6	Travel Management company	40	Female	Indonesia	Malaysia
B	7	Travel Payment solutions	28	Male	China	Hong Kong
C	2	Travel Management company	43	Female	Indonesia	Malaysia
D	10	Destination Management	62	Male	Malaysia	Malaysia
E	15	Destination Management	42	Male	China	Malaysia & Thailand
F	10	Travel Management company	39	Male	Czech Republic	Thailand
G	15	Air Transportation	42	Male	Czech Republic	Thailand
H	6	Air Transportation	52	Male	China	Icelandic
I	3	Travel payment solutions	27	Female	Malaysia	Singapore
J	10	Travel Technology	37	Male	China	Singapore
K	2	Air Transportation	43	Male	China	Korea
L	7	Travel Technology	36	Female	China	Singapore

Table 1: Respondent's Profile

Metacognitive understanding of CQ

Findings highlighted importance of studying and understanding cultural information while engaging with the host country's culture. Metacognitive understanding of CQ refers to the mental capacity of the individual to acquire and understand cultural knowledge (Alexandra, 2023; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Ang et al., 2007; Earley, Ang & Tan, 2006). Consequently, the respondents in the present study demonstrated a receptive attitude, thorough preparation, and utilisation of shared sectors such as education, business, and legal frameworks. This level of comprehension enabled them to navigate potential misunderstandings, embrace cultural diversity, and adeptly adapt to diverse cultural contexts. These results align with earlier literature, which posits that individuals with a strong metacognitive component are cognizant of cultural preferences and norms in different countries or groups, both prior to and during their interactions (Alexandra, 2023; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Ang et al., 2007). As expressed by a respondent which highlighted on the metacognitive component,

"I used to work in Canada and the UK & Europe that are reputedly known for their advance working culture influenced by their multi-nationality roots. In this complexity environment one has to interact with open mind and do preparations to deal with the local culture and sensitivities. The advantage is that both

countries are Commonwealth and English-Speaking countries that I could leverage on some common areas like education, business and legal frameworks.” (Participant D)

“Being aware of the cultural norms, values, and traditions (customs) of the host country is important. This understanding helps me in avoiding misunderstandings or mistakes in social situations... Respect for diversity – no superior culture exists, not push to adapt culture from another region/cultural group...Flexibility and Adaptability – adjust to local behaviours.” (Participant F)

“Learns about cultures through online resources, books, language basics, questions, avoiding stereotypes, and reflecting on personal cultural biases.” (Participant G)

These testimonies from participants exhibit a practical application of metacognitive CQ in various settings and reflect a conscious effort to integrate into the host country's culture with sensitivity and adaptability. As recognized in the discussion, these attributes are not only essential for professional effectiveness but also for personal growth and intercultural cooperation in the globalized sphere of the tourism industry.

Cognitive understanding of customs, traditions, and expectations

In their personal and professional connections, expatriate professionals used their grasp of conventions, traditions, and expectations. This component also emerged on the current study which demonstrate the differences in the different culture that they encounter. Cognitive understanding of customs, traditions, and expectations refers to a person's general knowledge and the structure of their cultural knowledge regarding the norms, practices and convictions of different cultures (Alexandra, 2023; Ang et al., 2007; Ng & Earley, 2006). They encountered difficulties due to cross-cultural differences, particularly in dining habits, dress, interpersonal connections, work ethics, hierarchy, and decision-making. They did, however, believe that their ability to cope well with such contrasts contributed to their success as expatriates in working comprehending and adjusting to a culturally diverse environment. The findings are in line with earlier literature which demonstrate that individuals with a high CQ component understand the similarities and differences between cultures (Brislín, Worthley, & McNab, 2006; Frías-Jamilena et al., 2023). As expressed by a respondent which highlighted on the component of cognitive,

“Regarding dining habits.. Chinese people are accustomed to drinking hot water, while Westerners prefer drinking cold water. Regarding attire.. in a culturally diverse context, formal social occasions may require wearing suits, white shirts, and black leather shoes. Interpersonal relationships.. Chinese people tend to

follow the tradition of treating others, while in Western culture, the norm is often to split the bill (AA system).” (Participant B)

“Main challenges are language and communication, but awareness of cultural norms helps” (Participant G)

“In Western business, contracts are crucial and strictly detailed, emphasizing written agreements. In Chinese business, trust and relationships hold more importance.” (Participant H)

“Language differences can pose challenges, potentially leading to miscommunications or conflicts in a professional role.” (Participant I)

These insights enrich the discussion by highlighting that cognitive CQ goes beyond basic awareness; it entails a deeper comprehension of cultural nuances that affect day-to-day life and business practices. It is apparent that expatriates who demonstrate strong cognitive CQ are likely to be more successful in their roles due to their better grasp of the cultural complexities inherent in their international assignments.

Motivational understanding and adaptation

Under motivational understanding of other cultures, the findings acknowledged that it stimulates them in job performance, adaptability, and the formation of new relationships in the host country. Respondents were motivated by the benefits and interests of the country they served, as well as a desire for new challenges and professional development. They overcome difficulties adjusting to new cultural contexts by reminding themselves to tolerate differences and adapt in order to survive in the new country as the motivational component is related to the individual’s desire and intention to adapt to an unfamiliar cultural environment (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2023). The findings of this study supported the motivational facet of CQ is a source of action that triggers the energy and effort necessary to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity (Alexandra, 2023; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Ang et al., 2007; Earley et al., 2006). Motivational component was perceived by the respondents in the following ways:

“For the benefits and interests of the country I served– Malaysia ...The challenges are always there in the process of adaptation of new culture. I overcome them by applying self-efficacy to adjust and adapt them which was guided by my organisational, national and religious values and practices...Develop a strong self-motivated personality and focus on our vision and mission to serve, that eventually would promote mutual benefits and healthy relationship between host

country and our own country in tourism and other areas of interests including cultural exchange" (Participant D)

"it is definitely helpful if you have some level of understanding of what to do in a diverse culture environment. Less mistakes means more efficiency." (Participant J)

"In a new cultural environment, there are different types of people, and we need to maintain communication with those of the same type as much as possible and respect those who cannot be identified." (Participant K)

The findings from the study illustrate that motivation is a critical element in cultural adaptation, acting as a catalyst for expatriates to overcome hurdles and thrive in their assignments. Expatriates who possess high motivational CQ are not only inclined to immerse themselves in the host culture but also demonstrate a strong determination to succeed, which in turn reflects positively on their job performance and intercultural relationships.

Behavioural understanding and competence in cross-cultural interactions

The current study defined behavioural understanding and competence in cross-cultural interactions as the individual's capacity to display appropriate and effective verbal and non-verbal actions when interacting with people from different cultures (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Ang et al., 2007). Expatriate employed a variety of tactics to improve their communication and adaptability. They befriended with locals of various ages and social roles, and this technique had long-term consequences on their cultural competency as well as greater understanding and communication with people from different cultures. This is because, in cross-cultural situations, both verbal and non-verbal behaviors are crucial as they represent a major part of the meaning interpreted by the other (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Chitac et al., 2023). Individuals with a high level of CQ demonstrate flexibility in their cross-cultural communications and interact competently with others from different cultures (Alexandra, 2023; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Ang et al., 2007; Earley et al., 2006; Ng & Earley, 2006; Thomas, 2006). This was succinctly expressed by the following participant:

"Make a lot of friends in local with different ages, roles, society... Help me to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures as well as ability to compare cultures with my own and better understanding." (Participant A)

"When communicating with Japanese clients, there are some gestures and body language that are completely different from our cultural system. We need to try to avoid similar misunderstandings as much as possible." (Participant 11)

"I will try to use simple words, to the point, with body languages, and the tone be more polite, and definitely smile and being kind." (Participant 12)

Overall, the study indicated that CQ is critical to the success of expatriate in tourism sectors. They can learn and grasp cultural information through metacognitive understanding, whereas cognitive understanding helps them manage customs, traditions, and expectations. Motivational understanding drives their willingness to adapt, while behavioural knowledge allows them to communicate and engage effectively with people from other cultures.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study outlined implications for the tourism sector on the importance of the impact of CQ. This research concludes that CQ holds significant importance in the development of expatriates within the tourism industry. The results reveal that expatriates currently employed in the tourism sector possess distinct key components of CQ, as delineated by Van Dyne et al. (2012), which encompass (a) Motivational CQ, (b) Cognitive CQ, (c) Metacognitive CQ, and (d) Behavioural CQ, essential for effectively working and adapting in their respective host countries. The study further reinforces the centrality of these CQ components as vital elements for expatriates operating in foreign countries. In this context, knowledge of the potential variations arising from cultural differences offers a comprehensive understanding of consumer needs, enabling the fulfilment of their cultural expectations.

This study accentuates that honing these CQ components is crucial for the tourism industry, where consumer experiences are deeply entwined with cultural sensitivity and understanding. With these insights, tourism organizations can better cater to global consumers' varied cultural needs and preferences, thus enhancing overall service quality and fostering more inclusive, culturally competent working environments. Through the strategic development of CQ within their personnel, the tourism sector can ensure more effective operations, ultimately resulting in an enriched experience for both employees and customers alike.

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