

## Abstract

Cultural intelligence (CQ) has become a key competence in today's globalized world. Hospitality organizations are expected to be more flexible and adaptable than ever in front of the changing international clientele. While still limited, management scholars are increasingly acknowledging the critical role of Cultural Intelligence in business success. Understanding CQ is pivotal in distinguishing between success and struggle in today's interconnected world, especially in the hospitality sector where attention to detail often separates average service from exceptional service. The current research project aims to study the rather traditional Swiss hospitality industry, which is confronted with new markets with hitherto unknown cultural specificities, and to develop new approaches to investigate the CQ levels of frontline workers that can improve the quality of service. The project also aims to develop innovative CQ-focused training for hospitality stakeholders to successfully improve intercultural encounters in Swiss hospitality settings.

## Key Words

*cultural intelligence; Swiss hospitality; cultural diversity; enhanced service quality*

## Track

*Special Track 2: Innovative Research Methods*

## Focus of Paper

*Industry/Educational (working paper)*

## Introduction

Cultural Intelligence is a relatively new area of focus in research, with its first academic publication appearing in Earley & Ang (2003). Since then, it has evolved into a practical framework designed to enhance professionals' ability to work and manage effectively in culturally diverse environments (Livermore, 2024). This is particularly relevant in today's hospitality industry, where standard operating procedures often face challenges in delivering culturally sensitive and intelligent solutions during intercultural interactions. Historically, since the rise of mass tourism in the 1950s, tourism services and infrastructure primarily followed Western practices and standards. As a result, hospitality, as part of the tourism industry, has been shaped by global service norms intended to meet tourist expectations, regardless of their cultural differences.

In Switzerland, the tourism landscape has changed over the past two decades, with new customers from previously underrepresented countries like China, India, and the Middle East. This shift has introduced new challenges in intercultural service interactions, potentially leading to misunderstandings, reinforced stereotypes, and even cultural conflicts between hosts and guests (Losa & Varga, 2016).

Although international tourism in Switzerland plummeted during the Covid pandemic, it appears to be returning to pre-pandemic levels. In 2022, Switzerland saw 17.2 million overnight stays (+99.8%), with foreign demand doubling compared to 2021. The key contributors to this increase were visitors from the Gulf States (+395,000/+92.9%) and India (+304,000/+399.9%), while there was also a notable recovery in Asian visitors, with an increase of 1.8 million overnight stays (+232.8%) to a total of 2.6 million (FSO, 2022). This surge in international interest raises questions about whether the Swiss hotel industry, along with its practices and training, is equipped to warmly welcome the growing number of culturally diverse guests.

In response to these changes, *HotellerieSuisse*, a hospitality-centred agency, identified, yet not measured, the lack of cultural knowledge in 2019 and developed basic booklets to raise awareness among hospitality stakeholders about how to effectively welcome increasingly diverse clients. However, only one study has explored cultural dimensions in relation to customer orientation, innovation, and corporate performance within the Swiss hotel industry (Tajeddini & Trueman, 2012). As a result, Swiss hotels lack sufficient academic research to support their efforts in managing the growing number of international guests. To improve this situation, hotels need a strong understanding of cultural intelligence and actionable guidelines to effectively welcome diverse clients (Tajeddini & Trueman, 2012). Traditional Swiss hospitality requires a CQ-focused adjustment to identify where cultural intelligence is most needed in service interactions and to enhance service quality accordingly.

Hospitality is about ensuring guests feel welcomed, comfortable, and cared for. However, in interactions between hosts and guests, hosts often need to make more significant adjustments than guests, as visitors typically stay for a limited time and do not feel the need to change their behaviour (Lee et al., 2018). Cultural competence is especially vital in the hospitality sector, more so than in other industries (Lee et al., 2018). Kim and Jeong have also pointed out that "cultural competencies will become one of the crucial soft skills leading to career success in hospitality in the future" (2018, p.121). Yet, current research, though limited, suggests that the intercultural awareness and skills of hospitality employees are alarmingly low (Koc, 2021). This gap can be partly attributed to the standardization of hotel operations and a general lack of focus on enhancing cultural intelligence in hotel companies. While Switzerland aspires to be one of the most sustainable destinations globally, there has been no prior study of cultural intelligence in its hospitality industry.

Despite Switzerland's positive global image in hospitality, the increasing cultural expectations of international tourists can pose challenges and even lead to negative consequences. Misunderstandings due to communication failures or cultural misinterpretations could be mitigated if the hospitality industry demonstrated greater cultural intelligence. As cross-cultural encounters are a daily occurrence in the hospitality industry, it is crucial to examine whether industry players are prepared to meet the evolving needs of a culturally diverse clientele.

## **Literature Review**

One of the pioneering studies on cultural intelligence was conducted by Earley & Ang (2003), who defined it as an individual's ability to effectively navigate culturally diverse environments. CQ differs from social intelligence (SQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ). While SQ primarily develops through social interactions and experiences, and EQ focuses on managing emotions in interpersonal contexts, CQ emphasizes awareness, adaptability, and competence when engaging with different cultural backgrounds (Livermore, 2024). Though emotions contribute to CQ, the primary focus remains on building skills for effective intercultural interactions. CQ must be distinguished from related concepts. Social intelligence refers to the broader ability to engage effectively with others (Crowne, 2009), while cultural intelligence specifically addresses interactions across different cultural contexts. Emotional intelligence, which involves recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions (Mayer et al., 1999), can support CQ in cross-cultural exchanges but remains distinct, as it applies to interactions within one's own cultural setting. Empirical research has shown only modest correlations

between CQ and EQ, indicating their conceptual differences (Davai et al., 2022). In the early 2000s, research on CQ was influenced by previously established cultural frameworks from scholars such as Edward Hall, Fons Trompenaars, Geert Hofstede, Michelle Gelfand, and the GLOBE project (Nardon, 2006). CQ has gained prominence in tourism studies, with researchers like Frías-Jamilena et al. (2018) demonstrating that tourists' prior experiences influence their CQ and contribute to their perception of a destination's value.

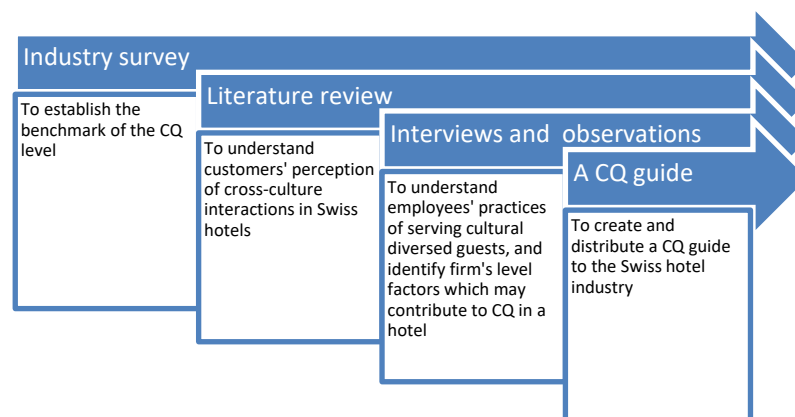
The four components of the CQ model are motivational, cognitive, metacognitive and behavioural (Ang et al., 2007). Motivational CQ is about the intrinsic and extrinsic interest of working or interacting with people from culturally different backgrounds. Cognitive CQ explains the general knowledge an individual has about other cultures. On the one hand, individuals have culture-general knowledge that focuses on value norms, culture-specific philosophy, history, politics, and local languages, with a particular focus on communication styles. Context-specific knowledge, on the other hand, describes knowledge about local perspectives on behavioural norms and practices within demographic subcultures, such as age, occupation, and gender (Livermore, 2024).

Metacognitive CQ is about assessing the previously mentioned cognitive CQ and developing a strategy to use it in culturally different contexts. The three processes that facilitate metacognitive CQ are planning, building awareness and checking the specific details of cross-cultural situations. This component is about anticipating, monitoring and adapting judgements in intercultural experiences. The final component, behavioural CQ, is the ability to translate the previously mentioned elements into practice. It is about the intelligence of verbal and non-verbal communication practices, with culture-specific nuances, applicable in culturally different situations (Livermore, 2024).

In Switzerland, Tajeddini & Trueman (2012) found that certain cultural dimensions positively impact customer orientation, innovation, and business performance in hospitality. Research by Lee et al. (2018) identified key factors that enhance CQ, including multilingualism, cross-cultural training, international travel, and interactions with diverse cultures. Gosling (2023) further established that international placements improve CQ among hospitality students, reinforcing the growing relevance of CQ in professional settings as hotels seek to offer personalized guest experiences. Given the high linguistic and cultural demands on hotel employees, their level of CQ plays a crucial role in business success. Recently, Livermore (2024) expanded on the four-dimensional CQ model proposed by Earley & Ang (2003), applying it in professional contexts. While emotional intelligence's impact on hospitality has been widely studied (Miao et al., 2021), research on CQ in this field remains limited (Koc, 2021). A review of existing literature highlights significant gaps in understanding CQ levels among Swiss hospitality employees and how its enhancement could drive business performance.

## Methodology

**Table 1. Research methodology outline**



This ongoing research seeks to assess the CQ levels of front-line hotel employees and identify real-world challenges and opportunities in Swiss hospitality. The study will employ a mixed-method and multi-method approach. The mixed-method design integrates both quantitative and qualitative techniques: a CQ test for hotel staff and brief surveys with past guests. The sequential explanatory design will be used to collect and analyse quantitative data, followed by qualitative methods to provide deeper insights (Creswell, 2007). The multi-method approach will incorporate semi-structured interviews, direct observations, focus groups, and critical incident techniques.

The current research, a pioneering effort in Switzerland, aims to assess the state of Cultural Intelligence within the Swiss hospitality industry. The first objective is to evaluate the current level of CQ among Swiss hotel employees through the Cultural Intelligence Scale developed by Ang et al. (2007). The survey aims to gauge the CQ levels of Swiss hotel staff. This anonymous survey will serve as the benchmark of CQ level for the Swiss Hotel industry. Secondly, the study seeks to explore guest experiences and expectations in Swiss hotels by analysing feedback left by guests on hotel review platforms and social media. The findings will guide the development of the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, guests may be contacted via email following their stay for further insights. Third, the research will examine the key culture-related challenges and opportunities in the Swiss hotel industry, specifically regarding the cultural norms, values, and behaviours of visitors, using the critical incident technique. Employees at participating hotels will complete the CQ survey, and the aggregate results will be compared to the benchmark to differentiate hotels based on their CQ levels. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and focus groups will be conducted at participating hotels to identify factors contributing to the CQ level of a hotel. The study will focus on three of the top ten countries sending tourists to Switzerland: India, China, and the Gulf States, as the number of visitors from these regions is projected to increase in the coming years (FSO, 2022). Finally, the research aims to develop CQ-based strategies to address complex intercultural service situations, either through a written guide or a specially tailored workshop for hotel staff. The written guide will be created and distributed to hotel staff through the trade associations and destination management offices.

### **Expected results and discussion**

Although this HES-SO funded research started in February 2025, the researchers expect to present preliminary results during the EuroCHRIE 2025 conference. Quantitative and qualitative data will be already available in November 2025. Furthermore, it is also expected that the research project will contribute to diverse aspects of service quality in hospitality settings.

Since globalization in the modern era has made intercultural interactions increasingly common, particularly within the tourism sector, offering numerous advantages and opportunities. However, these interactions also pose challenges for individuals, professionals, and organizations due to the lack of intercultural competence in academic and professional training, especially for those who need it most (Losa & Varga, 2016). Generally, tourism-related intercultural encounters occur without major conflict, yet they can be quite violent when they do occur, especially if service providers don't know how to handle them (Losa & Varga, 2016). Gozzoli and Gazzaroli (2018) highlight, underlying tensions and unresolved conflicts do arise, even if they are not always visible. Individuals often struggle with problem-solving in diverse settings, assuming that norms, values, and behaviours are universally shared leading to ethnocentric perspectives. This is especially relevant in the hospitality industry, where exceptional service is the foundation of success.

In addition, this research is directly aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: quality education. By understanding the CQ levels of hospitality stakeholders, the research can inspire the creation of educational programs focused on CQ, such as specialized courses and training for industry professionals. This initiative can also foster long-term, sustainable relationships between guests and hotels, generating economic benefits for the industry through enhanced guest experiences and service quality.

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