

# Cultural Intelligence and the Quality of Tourist-Resident Interactions: A Qualitative Study in Ho Chi Minh City

Nguyen Ngoc Tam<sup>1,2</sup>, Vo Thi Ngoc Thuy<sup>3</sup>, Le Van Hoa<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Hospitality and Tourism - Hue University, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>Saigon University, Vietnam

<sup>3</sup>University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

## KEYWORDS

Cultural intelligence,  
intercultural  
communication,  
tourist-resident  
interaction,  
tourism experience,  
urban tourism.

## ABSTRACT

In multicultural urban destinations, interactions between tourists and residents play a key role in shaping tourism experiences. While prior studies often focus on tourists' individual cultural intelligence (CQ), less attention has been given to how CQ develops through everyday social encounters. This study investigates how CQ is perceived and acquired via ordinary encounters between international tourists and locals in Ho Chi Minh City. The study, which is based on the Interactive Acculturation Model, includes 38 in-depth interviews with both groups. The findings indicate that cultural awareness, particularly sensitivity to nonverbal cues and role expectations, aids in behavioural adjustment. The expression of CQ varies according to social dynamics, recurrent exposure and perceived role expectations. Emotionally resonant events are generally the result of mutual respect rather than fluent communication. This study enhances tourism research by emphasizing the relational and context-dependent aspects of CQ. It also highlights the need for more comprehensive approaches to engagement. In practice, this entails promoting intercultural training, creating socially friendly environments and developing communication infrastructures that facilitate adaptable and inclusive interactions.

## 1. Introduction

Interaction between visitors and locals has long been recognized as a central factor in shaping the travel experience (Stylidis et al., 2022). More than just an exchange of information, it is a two-way process where individuals share emotions, expectations and cultural behaviors to create social relationships. In an urban environment such as Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), where contact between international tourists and the local community takes place frequently and

is not limited by traditional service models, everyday interactions such as eating, asking for directions or having a short conversation in public can become an emotional stimulus and attachment to the destination (Tabaeeian et al., 2023).

However, the quality of these interactions is not always positive or effective. Cultural differences, language disparities, media stereotypes or social role expectations can lead to superficial interactions, misunderstandings or even implicit conflicts (Reisinger & Turner, 2012). In addition, differences in the level

\*Corresponding author. Email: [levanhhoa@hueuni.edu.vn](mailto:levanhhoa@hueuni.edu.vn)

<https://doi.org/10.61602/jdi.2026.87.01>

Submitted: 5-Aug-2025; Revised: 17-Sep-2025; Accepted: 6-Oct-2025; Online first: 7-Oct-2025

ISSN (print): 1859-428X, ISSN (online): 2815-6234

of cross-cultural contact between regions also led to a gap in the behavioral capacity of residents – downtown residents tended to exhibit better international communication skills than periphery residents.

In this context, CQ has emerged as a key competency to help individuals effectively navigate a multicultural communication environment. CQ is defined as the ability to perceive, understand and adjust behavior in accordance with different cultural norms (Earley & Ang, 2003). Many studies indicate that CQ has a positive effect on visitor satisfaction, perceived service quality and interaction efficiency in the tourism industry (Lam et al., 2021; Frías-Jamilena et al., 2018). In particular, visitors or residents with high CQ often show behavioral adaptability, understanding and openness in communication, thereby creating meaningful encounters and positive emotions.

However, the majority of current academic works still approach CQ from an individual perspective, detached from the social context in which the communicative behavior takes place. At the same time, the overemphasis on visitor CQ means that the role of residents – participants in co-creating the experience – has not been properly studied (Coves-Martinez et al., 2022; Styliadis, 2022). Meanwhile, cultural integration is the result of two-way negotiation between the incoming group and the host group.

In order to fully explain the quality of interaction between tourists and residents in a multicultural tourism environment such as HCMC, it is necessary to approach CQ not only as a personal capacity but as a social phenomenon. The Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) argues that the outcome of interaction depends on the alignment between the cultural orientation of the two parties – the visitor and the host. IAM applications frame CQ as a dynamic competency shaped through iterative interactions, reflecting evolving expectations, roles and social structures at the destination. Based on the issues outlined above, this study aims to address three key research questions:

(1) How is cultural wisdom expressed in the interactions between international tourists and locals in Ho Chi Minh City?

(2) What socio-cultural factors influence the friendliness, effectiveness and depth of these interactions?

(3) How to enhance cross-cultural interaction to improve the travel experience and build a cohesive destination image?

Theoretically, the study contributes to expanding the application of the concept of CQ to the field of tourism and at the same time affirms the importance of a sociological approach in explaining communicative behaviors. The use of IAM as a foundation allows for the interpretation of CQ as a dynamic capacity, formed through a chain of interactions and social feedback, rather than just static personal characteristics. In

practical terms, the study provides practical suggestions for intercultural communication training in the tourism industry and at the same time provides a scientific basis for policy planning to build the image of a humane, friendly and inclusive destination.

## 2. Theoretical basis

### 2.1. Cultural Intelligence

The concept of CQ was proposed by Earley and Ang (2003), to explain an individual's ability to adapt and communicate effectively in diverse cultural environments. This is a specific form of intelligence, which is different from emotional intelligence (EQ) or academic intelligence (IQ), is defined as “an individual's ability to function effectively in intercultural contexts” (Earley & Ang, 2003).

CQ consists of four closely related elements: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral. The metacognitive factor reflects the level of consciousness and cultural strategy adjustment during cross-cultural interaction, allowing the individual to monitor and adjust his or her own cultural assumptions (Earley & Ang, 2003). The cognitive factor refers to an individual's knowledge of cultural norms, values and customs, accumulated from learning and practical experiences. Motivation is the driving factor of energy, initiative and perseverance in engaging in intercultural situations, especially in challenging conditions (Earley & Ang, 2003). Finally, behavior reflects the ability to exhibit behaviors that are appropriate to each specific cultural context, demonstrating flexibility in behavior. Although each factor measures a separate aspect, an individual who actually has a high CQ is the one who comprehensively develops all four of these factors, because the factors have a mutually supportive relationship in cognition, motivation and behavior (Earley & Ang, 2003).

CQ enhances service quality, especially through metacognitive, motivational and behavioral components. In the field of tourism, CQ is identified as a factor that has a positive influence on many aspects of experience and service efficiency. Compared to emotional intelligence, CQ is more closely related to employee performance and customer perception of service quality in cross-cultural interactions (Lam et al., 2021). CQ also plays an essential role in the training of human resources in the tourism industry and is a predictor of work performance in a multicultural environment. Studies show that hotel staff with high CQ tend to bring higher levels of satisfaction to travelers, especially for non-Asian guests (Lam et al., 2021). In addition, CQ positively affects the perceived value of guests, hotel satisfaction and perceived service quality (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2018; Lam et al., 2021).

In particular, travelers with high CQ tend to adapt

better to cultural differences, thereby feeling more positively about both travel aids (such as mobile apps) and the overall destination experience (Coves-Martinez et al., 2022).

Much of the current research focuses on the CQ of tourists or tourism industry workers (Coves-Martinez et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2021), while the role of local residents, who are directly involved in creating the experience, has not been fully emphasized. In addition, CQ is often seen as a personal attribute, not yet tied to the social context in which behavior is formed and expressed.

Numerous international studies also affirm the role of CQ in tourism across diverse contexts: Styliadis (2022) in Europe demonstrated that resident–tourist interaction quality directly shapes destination image; Frías-Jamilena et al. (2018) identified CQ as a universal competence with broad consequences for tourism experiences; Lam et al. (2021) in Hong Kong highlighted the combined effect of CQ and EQ on hotel guest satisfaction; while Tabaeian et al. (2023) in the Middle East analyzed host–tourist interaction in relation to memorable experiences and revisit intention. Research in Vietnam indicates that Cultural Intelligence (CQ) facilitates expatriate adjustment, with metacognitive CQ influencing adaptation through work and interaction, while cognitive CQ directly affects overall adjustment (Dang & Khai, 2021). These findings expand the theoretical foundation and provide a global reference point for the present study in HCMC.

## **2.2. Interaction between tourists-residents**

Interaction between visitors and local residents is the process of direct communication and emotional sharing between two groups, thereby establishing and maintaining social relationships. This is a two-way process in which both visitors and residents participate in exchanging information, expressing emotions and adapting behaviors to build mutual understanding (Styliadis et al., 2022). This interaction not only bridges the cultural gap, but also shapes the overall feeling of tourists about the destination and contributes to improving the quality of life of the local community.

The interaction between tourists and local residents plays an important role in the travel experience, contributing to the formation of a cognitive and emotional impression of the destination. When these interactions are authentic and positive, they not only enhance satisfaction but also drive return intent and traveler loyalty (Styliadis et al., 2022).

However, the quality of interaction between visitors and residents is not always uniform and CQ plays a key role in turning an ordinary encounter into a meaningful experience. Travelers with high CQ tend to observe, adjust their behavior and respect cultural differences while residents with high CQ tend to be

more open and flexible when interacting with people from other cultures (Li et al., 2022). On the contrary, if one of the two parties lacks CQ, the interaction is likely to become awkward, shallow or lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

In resident-visitor interaction, people's behavior can be classified into two dimensions: facilitation vs. harm and active vs. passive, forming four forms: active support, passive support, active hindrance and passive hindrance (Tse & Tung, 2022). This behavior not only reflects CQ capacity but also shows the influence of the social environment on the quality of interaction and tourism experience. Accordingly, residents of the center – who are in frequent contact with international visitors – often show higher CQ, more flexible and friendly responses. In contrast, people in suburban areas or lack of cross-cultural experience tend to be reserved, even defensively (Reisinger & Turner, 2012).

## **2.3. Interactive Acculturation Model**

In the context of urban tourism, where cultural contacts between international visitors and local residents take place frequently, a theoretical framework that can explain the two-way interaction process is needed. The Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) proposed by Bourhis et al. (1997) is a suitable tool for analyzing this relationship, as it emphasizes mutual adjustment between cultural groups rather than just one-way from the individual to the community.

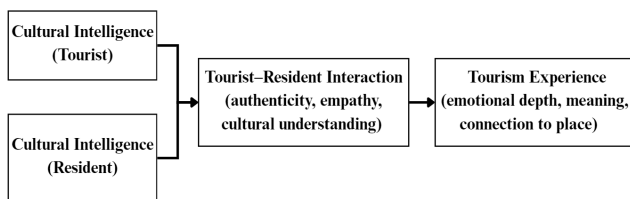
Unlike traditional adaptation models that focus on the behavior of immigrants or individuals who have just joined the community, IAM sees cultural integration as the result of a combination of orientation from visitors and reactions from residents. Each party brings its own cultural expectations and perspectives – which can be open, neutral or conservative – and how the two parties work together will determine how effective and positive the interaction is.

IAM also allows for the analysis of residents' behavior in relation to broader social conditions, such as the level of exposure to visitors, the image of the destination in the media and economic disparities. This is especially relevant for HCMC, where residents have very different backgrounds and cultural experiences depending on the area of residence and living conditions.

More importantly, IAM emphasizes that CQ is not a fixed capacity, but is formed through repetitive social interactions, where the individual continuously adjusts behavior according to the reactions of others and the context. In tourism, this is evident when tourists and residents are immersed in the specific cultural norms of the service environment. Cross-cultural interactions are therefore not only the exchange of information, but also the process of comparison, reflection and reshaping of cultural perceptions.

## 2.4. Proposed analysis framework

In the context of urban tourism globalization in HCMC, the quality of cultural interactions between international tourists and local communities is a key factor shaping the travel experience. This study proposes a model grounded in the IAM framework, analyzing the relationship between the CQ and the quality of bilateral interactions, thereby explaining how these experiences contribute to an emotionally rich and meaningful journey, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Research Model**

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research design

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how CQ contributes to meaningful interactions between international tourists and local residents in HCMC, thereby elucidating the role of these interactions in shaping emotional tourism experiences. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to uncover nuanced perspectives, explore affective dimensions and interpret context-specific behaviors that are often elusive with quantitative methods.

Instead of measuring fixed variables, the study focuses on how individuals perceive, react and adjust their behavior in everyday cultural encounters. IAM served as the primary conceptual framework, enabling the examination of how interactions are co-shaped by cultural preferences, power dynamics and the broader social environment.

### 3.2. Sampling and participant selection

The study focused on adult international tourists who had visited HCMC in the past year and interacted with Vietnamese residents through casual encounters, service exchanges or organized activities. Using a purposive sampling approach, participants were selected based on their ability to articulate cultural impressions and reflect on social interactions.

To ensure conceptual depth and avoid translation bias, only international participants with intermediate or advanced English skills were included, based on self-assessment and initial screening. This approach

aligns with prior research stressing linguistic clarity in cross-cultural studies to ensure validity and minimize semantic distortion (Reisinger & Turner, 2012). Local residents were interviewed in Vietnamese, the shared language with the research team, enabling richer insights and reducing misinterpretation. Open-ended questions guided exploration of emotional, cultural and interpersonal dimensions. The full interview guideline is available in Appendix.

### 3.3. Data collection procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to clarify three main contents corresponding to three research questions: (1) how tourists and residents demonstrate CQ in daily interactions; (2) how socio-cultural factors such as prejudice, communication space, economic differences affect the quality of interactions and (3) the actual conditions and expressions that help improve intercultural interaction capacity, towards a more connected tourism experience. Data collection was stopped when theoretical saturation was reached, which means that more interviews no longer generated new material or topics.

Interview questions explored participants' perceptions of cultural differences, how they adjusted their behavior in interactions and their experiences (positive or negative) in HCMC. Interviews were conducted directly at public places or via online platforms, lasting from 30 to 50 minutes, recorded (when permitted) and fully transcribed. At the same time, field notes were used to capture context and nonverbal cues, ensuring a richer understanding of participants' responses.

### 3.4. Data analysis techniques

Transcripts were analyzed thematically using the six-step method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme revision, theme naming and report generation. NVivo 15 was used to facilitate coding and category development.

To ensure consistency and minimize subjective bias, a team of three researchers independently coded a selection of transcripts before discussing and harmonizing their codes. This intercoder agreement process enhanced analytical reliability.

Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analysis to document conceptual shifts and interpretive reasoning. Final themes were retained based on three criteria: their recurrence across cases, alignment with the frameworks and relevance to the research objectives.

**3.5. Trustworthiness and rigor**

Credibility was enhanced through member checking, with several participants confirming that the summaries reflected their views. Transferability was supported by providing rich contextual and participant descriptions. Dependability was maintained via a clear audit trail of coding and analytic notes. Confirmability was strengthened by reflective journaling to minimize researcher bias.

**3.6. Ethical considerations**

All participants received prior information about the study’s aims, procedures, and their rights, and gave informed consent before participation. They were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. These steps align with established ethical guidelines in qualitative research.

**4. Results**

**4.1. Descriptive statistics**

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

	In-depth Interview (Tourists)	In-depth Interview (Residents)
Total participants	24	14
Gender		
Female	11	7
Male	13	7
Age Group Classification		
18 - 30	15	4
31 - 50	9	8
Over 50	0	2
Region		
Asia	8	14
Europe	12	0
Oceania	4	0
Frequency to Ho Chi Minh City		
First time	11	-
Second time	6	-
More than 2 times	7	-

The tourist group consisted of 24 participants (P) (13 male, 11 female), mostly aged between 18 and 30 (15 participants), coming from Europe (12), Asia (8) and Oceania (4), with the majority visiting HCMC for the first time (11 participants). And 14 residents (R) (7 male, 7 female), primarily aged 31 to 50 (8 participants), all of whom were Vietnamese residents

living in HCMC. This distribution ensured sufficient diversity to explore intercultural communication experiences from both perspectives.

**4.2. Themes**

*4.2.1. Cultural awareness: The foundation for behavior change*

One of the main barriers in interactions between international tourists and residents of HCMC is the language gap, reported by 10 tourists (P03, P06, P08, P09, P10, P12, P16, P18, P22, P24) and 7 locals (R01, R02, R06, R8, R9, R10, R14). Tourists described feeling embarrassed, passive, or even ignored in basic situations like asking for directions or placing an order. As P03 recalled: “I felt completely marginalized when I tried to order at a small restaurant – no one understood English and worse, they didn’t even look at me.” This highlights not only the language barrier, but also a deeper sense of exclusion from the communication space, where tourists felt invisible or unacknowledged. On the other side, local residents also expressed hesitation and a lack of confidence, as R06 admitted: “I really want to talk but I don’t know English.”

These experiences reveal that language barriers are not just technical issues but structural ones, disrupting communication and creating asymmetry between locals and tourists. This aligns with Kim & Gudykunst (1988), who argue that lacking a shared language often leads to defensiveness and avoidance. Despite English being a global tourism language, locals still struggle due to accent and expression differences. In a city promoting itself as friendly and experiential, this highlights the deep-rooted challenge of linguistic gaps in tourist interactions.

The decision to stay silent or speak often stems from fear of judgment and a desire to avoid conflict. Three residents (R02, R06, R14) admitted they avoided speaking with tourists not due to lack of ability, but because they feared saying something wrong and feeling embarrassed. As R02 shared: “I don’t dare start a conversation; if I say something wrong in English and they laugh, it’s really embarrassing.” This reflects a common self-protection mechanism in many Asian cultures, where silence is seen as safer than risking mistakes. Unlike language barriers caused by misunderstanding, this is a form of active avoidance rooted in fear of losing control during intercultural interactions.

Differences in the way of expressing emotions and non-verbal communication between international tourists and locals are also the cause of misunderstanding and confusion in interaction. 7 travelers (P05, P07, P11, P13, P14, P17, P21) mentioned feeling confused or misunderstood when Vietnamese people do not respond clearly, nod their heads but do not take action or laugh instead of explaining.

P17 reflected: "I asked for more water, the staff laughed, nodded... and then didn't come back." In low-context cultures like Northern Europe, such behavior may seem disrespectful, but in Vietnam, it often signals a polite refusal - meant to avoid embarrassment for both parties. As P14 noted: "A nod in Vietnam does not mean 'understood and will do'". This highlights an indirect communication style, where gestures like nods or smiles do not necessarily reflect agreement. While international visitors tend to expect clear confirmation (yes/no), locals prioritize conversational harmony and often avoid direct rejection. Conversely, locals also struggle to interpret tourists' expressions, leading to mutual misunderstandings.

As R04 shared: "Sometimes Western customers use their hands to point, their faces are serious, I thought they were angry, but they are not".

In Vietnamese culture, especially in public, showing strong emotions is often seen as impolite, whereas in many Western countries, it signals honesty. High-context cultures like Vietnam rely heavily on non-verbal cues and contextual meaning, while low-context cultures such as the U.S. or Northern Europe value clarity and directness. These differences easily lead to miscommunication. According to Anxiety/Uncertainty Management theory, mismatched interpretations of non-verbal signals can heighten anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural interactions (Sun et al., 2023).

These experiences show that, although communication between tourists and residents is sometimes difficult, both sides have begun to recognize cultural differences – a manifestation of CQ at the level of awareness and thinking. However, these insights are fragmented, not deep and not enough to make them change their behavior clearly in interaction, which will be analyzed in more detail in the next section.

#### 4.2.2. Behavioral adaptation in resident-visitor interaction

In addition to cultural awareness, some residents of HCMC have demonstrated adaptive behavior in their interactions with international tourists. Without formal training, they adjust intuitively—by speaking slowly, simplifying language, using gestures, or seeking help from others. R05 (a ride-hailing driver) shared: "I speak slowly, simply and use hand signals to show directions." Similarly, R13 said: "I use gestures to explain and sometimes call my children who speak English to help." R01 expressed a similar view, emphasizing friendliness and non-verbal gestures to overcome language barriers. Though simple, these actions reflect practical flexibility and openness shaped by ongoing exposure to tourism.

From the tourist side, those small adjustments are also positively received.

P09 commented: "People don't need to speak English. As long as they smile and try to signal to me, I feel the enthusiasm and willingness to help."

P03, P08, P16, P19, P20, P23 also have a similar experience. These responses show that, in many cases, goodwill and effort to communicate are more pleasant than perfect language ability.

Some tourists even actively adjust their behavior after realizing differences in cultural communication. As P14 observed: "In Vietnam, nodding is a polite way to keep the conversation going in a friendly way." This suggests that visitors are also refining their expectations and learning to interpret local non-verbal cues – a clear manifestation of CQ at the behavioral level.

However, besides the group of residents who actively adjust their behavior, there are still many people who choose not to change the way they communicate with tourists. This does not stem from malice or indifference, but rather a rational response to objective barriers such as limited living conditions, specific work nature, lack of opportunities for contact or lack of clear motivation (R03, R07, R08, R09, R10, R12).

R08, who works as a delivery worker, shared frankly: "I don't talk to foreign customers. Unless they're the ones who pay me, the rest is irrelevant."

Here, avoidance does not reflect a lack of goodwill or competence, but rather a pragmatic choice when there is no practical benefit, no investment of time or emotion.

Similarly, R09, a night shift salesman, expressed: "No one taught and I didn't find out. Working the night shift is tired, I just hope that the shift will end and go to sleep. Those things are for the tour guide to take care of, but we only take care of sales."

And R12, a seller at the market, also frankly said: "I don't have many opportunities to learn. Besides, selling simple vegetables, whoever comes will sell them."

All of the above shares reflect one thing in common: people do not realize their role is associated with the responsibility of communicating with international tourists, so behavior adjustment becomes unnecessary in the context of their lives and work. These views reinforce the argument that CQ is not just an available personal capacity, but requires activation by social dynamics, exposure conditions and professional roles.

On the other hand, some international tourists also maintain their familiar ways of communicating, instead of seeking to adapt to the local context.

As P02 expressed his opinion: "I only speak English, who doesn't understand. Tourists can't be expected to learn Vietnamese for a few days of travel."

This statement reflects a consumerist view of travel, where tourists maintain personal habits and expectations without adapting to the local context. Such attitudes indicate low concern for cultural harmony, especially at the behavioral level – a dimension often overlooked

in prior studies. Similarly, P08 stated that “professional service is enough” and saw no need to learn local customs or language. This suggests that individuals with communication advantages may choose not to adjust when they see no necessity, highlighting that cultural intelligence is not synonymous with international knowledge or background.

These reasons reflect the essence of cultural intelligence (CQ): it is not only the ability to regulate behavior, but also a dynamic combination of capability, motivation and contextual triggers. The link between personal values and behavior varies across cultures, as cultural norms shape which actions are considered acceptable and how their meanings are interpreted. Therefore, in policy orientation and sustainable tourism training, it is necessary to approach CQ as a dynamic, contextual capacity. Instead of expecting every resident or visitor to self-regulate, it is important to build an environment and support mechanism that makes the adjustment behavior reasonable, feasible and meaningful.

#### 4.2.3. *Restructuring perceptions from travel experiences*

After adjusting their behavior, some travelers develop a stable emotional state, feeling respected and sensing goodwill even in subtle situations. This marks a subtle phase of cultural adaptation that supports social connection and psychological openness.

There were 11 visitors (P01, P02, P03, P04, P07, P13, P14, P15, P17, P22, P24) who shared that although they did not always receive a warm welcome, they still felt respected, pleasant or peaceful in the way the locals approached and behaved.

P14 commented: “I feel respected, not by words or clear actions, but through the way they behave gently, not bothering me, not too polite, but still enough for me to feel comfortable.”

P02 also described, “Sometimes I don't know if they understand me or not, but they are still warm. I feel good – although I'm not sure I'm communicating successfully.”

These emotional states are not at the positive end of the experience spectrum, but they play an important role in establishing peace of mind, setting the stage for subsequent interactions.

Some visitors (P01, P04, P06, P14, P17) have adjusted their initial expectations of friendliness in the direction of openness and directness, moving to accept the private and indirect expression of goodwill by the locals. They gradually understand that reticence does not mean indifference, but reflects the standard of respecting personal space and avoiding pressure in communication – which is characteristic of some Asian cultural contexts. As P01 shared:

“I used to be turned down when I asked for directions, but they did it very gently – as a polite

way to keep my distance. I don't feel offended, but I understand that it's a way for locals to protect their privacy or avoid trouble when they can't help.”

Instead of viewing it as coldness, tourists interpret discreet behavior as respect and courtesy. Cultural differences in emotion begin with how individuals evaluate situations based on valued relationships. Emotions are shaped through ongoing interactions within cultural contexts, so assigning positive meaning to subtle behavior reflects both personal adaptation and alignment with local values.

After forming awareness and adjusting behavior, some residents and tourists clearly showed a willingness to proactively improve cultural interaction in the future. People like R11 shared: “I take the initiative to approach them if they stand dumbfounded”, while R12 “learns basic communication sentences to be easy to support.” Tourist P16 expressed: “I read many blogs and watched videos about the culture of behavior in Vietnam. I don't want to be a rude guest because I don't know anything.” These manifestations reflect the maturity of social awareness, showing that the parties are not only adapting but also actively building more humane and sustainable interactions.

In addition to individuals who developed CQ, the data also showed that a group of people and visitors had low or unactivated CQ due to a lack of awareness, motivation or conditioning. They don't actively adjust their behavior or engage in interactions, leading to prolonged misunderstandings and gradual withdrawal from social connections. In the resident group, 3 people (R08, R09, R14) admitted that they do not see communication with tourists as a responsibility or a personal need. R14 expresses very clearly:

“I know I should learn some basic English, but to be honest, I don't think I need to learn anything – you tourists do, but I don't have anything to do with it.”

On the tourist side, P02 and P08 show a self-centered view and do not see the need to adjust their behavior in the new cultural environment. This reflects a low level of behavioral CQ, when they see themselves as only consumers, with no responsibility to interact or adapt.

Low levels of CQ can lead to a series of negative consequences: individuals are not aware of cultural differences, do not adjust their behavior, which in turn makes it easy to misinterpret the situation, feel hurt, withdraw from interaction and form prejudices with the destination. According to Kim & Gudykunst (1988), when intercultural motivation and competence are not activated at the right time, communication participants are prone to falling into a defensive or apathetic state – two common barriers to cross-cultural communication.

When CQ is not formed, whether in visitors or residents, the result is often behavioral misinterpretation, prolonged negative emotions and withdrawal from interaction. CQ is not only an available capacity but

also a consequence of social awareness, role and motivation. Without a proper activation mechanism, even those with international backgrounds may not be able to promote CQ in practice.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Conclusion

This study provides insight into how CQ is expressed, adjusted and created in interactions between international visitors and residents of HCMC. Based on IAM, three key findings have been drawn:

First, awareness of cultural differences – particularly in nonverbal communication and role expectations – plays a fundamental role for individuals to regulate behavior. Although this perception is still fragmented, it is the beginning of the development of CQ, reflected in the ability to analyze situations, understand cultural implications and reinterpret experiences.

Second, the adjustment of intercultural behavior is uneven between residents and visitors, depending on motivation, repeated experiences and social conditions. Some residents demonstrate flexibility and willingness despite limited language skills, while others resist adjustment, viewing tourism primarily as a consumer service. This highlights the influence of social context in triggering behavioral responses rather than relying solely on individual capacity.

Third, positive experiences do not necessarily arise from smooth interactions but can emerge from feelings of being respected, both subtly and verbally. This indicates that CQ is not only an individual capacity but also a social capacity, formed through the exchange of expectations, emotions and roles shaped during interaction..

Compared to previous studies that have mainly focused on the CQ of tourists or tourism industry employees (Lam et al., 2021), this study extends the horizon to local residents as an experiential co-creator. At the same time, the use of IAM helps to interpret CQ as a dynamic process, depending on the social context and the level of repetitive interaction.

In practice, the results of the study show that the enhancement of CQ cannot rely solely on individual skills training, but needs to create a supportive social environment – through destination communication, friendly communication space design, community training and policies that encourage positive contact between residents and visitors. This is especially significant in the strategy of cohesive and sustainable tourism development in urban areas.

### 5.2. Management implications

Firstly, it is essential to implement short-term, context-specific intercultural communication training

for frontline groups who frequently interact with international visitors, such as market vendors, ride-hailing drivers, security guards and service staff. Instead of relying on generic skill development, the training should focus on real-life scenarios documented in the study, including giving clear directions, politely declining requests when assistance is not possible, using friendly eye contact and smiles to compensate for language barriers and handling misunderstandings arising from nonverbal differences. These sessions should be designed as brief community-based modules, easily accessible and repeated on a regular basis. By tailoring the training to situations that commonly occur in Ho Chi Minh City, the program would not only address linguistic and cultural gaps but also reduce residents' hesitation, build their confidence and gradually establish a shared standard of friendly interaction.

Secondly, integrating CQ into the training programs for tourism personnel is essential. Core skills such as recognizing nonverbal communication differences, adjusting behavior appropriately and maintaining respect and patience should be included in formal training modules. This effort should also be aligned with the city's branding initiatives, such as "Ho Chi Minh City – A Safe, Lively and Inspiring Destination" and the program "Every Business as a Friendly Destination", to ensure coherence between management policies, promotional messages and the actual quality of service delivery.

Thirdly, beyond the human factor, communication infrastructure at tourist sites should be standardized. Installing multilingual signage, designing illustrated menus and providing bilingual maps free of charge at hotels, information counters and major attractions would help reduce language barriers. These visual tools not only enable tourists to navigate and access information more easily but also demonstrate the city's professionalism and preparedness in welcoming international visitors.

Finally, a visitor feedback mechanism should be established to evaluate the level of friendliness at services and public venues such as night markets, pedestrian streets, or museums. Based on this feedback, the city could formally recognize and reward outstanding "friendly service points." Such recognition would both motivate local communities to maintain positive intercultural behaviors and foster a culture of hospitality, thereby reinforcing HCMC's image as a safe, welcoming and professional destination.

### 5.3. Limitations and future research

The study is limited because it only looks at one city and only includes a small group of visitors and locals who have different levels of exposure to other cultures. As a result, the findings may not be

generalizable to other settings, particularly rural or less globalized areas. In addition, relying solely on interviews might overlook nonverbal and unconscious aspects of cultural interaction. Another limitation concerns the sampling criteria: only international tourists with at least intermediate English proficiency were included. Future research should broaden participation to non-English-speaking tourists, using multilingual approaches or interpreters to gain a more inclusive view of intercultural interactions. In addition, while the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) offers valuable insights into two-way cultural adjustment, it was originally designed for immigration studies. Applying IAM to short-term tourism contexts may thus entail certain constraints, suggesting that future studies could integrate it with other intercultural communication theories to better capture the dynamics of brief tourist–resident encounters. Future studies could broaden the research scope to include different destinations and more diverse participant profiles and adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs to better capture the dynamic development of cultural intelligence, especially the influence of digital platforms on intercultural adaptation.

## REFERENCES

- Bourhis, R. Y., Moise, L. C., Perreault, S., & Senecal, S. (1997). Towards an interactive acculturation model: A social psychological approach. *International Journal of Psychology*, 32(6), 369-386. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/002075997400629>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Coves-Martinez, A. L., Sabiote-Ortiz, C. M., & Frias-Jamilena, D. M. (2022). Cultural intelligence as an antecedent of satisfaction with the travel app and with the tourism experience. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 127, 107049. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107049>
- Earley, P. C., & Ang, S. (2003). *Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures*. Stanford University Press.
- Frías-Jamilena, D. M., Sabiote-Ortiz, C. M., Martín-Santana, J. D., & Beerli-Palacio, A. (2018). Antecedents and consequences of cultural intelligence in tourism. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 8, 350-358. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.07.006>
- Kim, Y., & Gudykunst, W. (1988). *Theories in Intercultural Communication*. International and Intercultural Communication Annual Vol. 12. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lam, R., Cheung, C., & Lugosi, P. (2021). The impacts of cultural and emotional intelligence on hotel guest satisfaction: Asian and non-Asian perceptions of staff capabilities. *Journal of China Tourism Research*, 17(3), 455-477. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388160.2020.1771500>
- Li, X., Xie, J., Feng, Z., & Chan, H. (2022). Exploring residents' helping and tolerant behavior through the lens of cultural intelligence. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 50, 232-244. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2022.02.008>
- Dang, N. T. D., & Khai, N. T. N. (2021). The effects of cultural intelligence and Vietnamese proficiency on expatriate adjustment in Vietnam. *Ho Chi Minh city Open University Journal of Science-Social Sciences*, 11(1), 55-65. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46223/HCMCOUJS.soci.en.11.1.1922.2021>
- Reisinger, Y., & Turner, L. (2012). *Cross-cultural behaviour in tourism*. Routledge.
- Stylidis, D. (2022). Exploring resident–tourist interaction and its impact on tourists' destination image. *Journal of Travel Research*, 61(1), 186-201. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287520969861>
- Stylidis, D., Woosnam, K. M., & Tasci, A. D. (2022). The effect of resident–tourist interaction quality on destination image and loyalty. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 30(6), 1219-1239. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.1918133>
- Sun, H. W., Hashim, N., Tham, J. S., Bidin, R., & Li, Z. (2023). Superficial Causes of AUM Theory Affect Uncertainty and Anxiety among Students in a High-Context Culture. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 23(4), 120-132. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v23i4.235>
- Tabaeeian, R. A., Yazdi, A., Mokhtari, N., & Khoshfetrat, A. (2023). Host–tourist interaction, revisit intention and memorable tourism experience through relationship quality and perceived service quality in ecotourism. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 22(3), 406-429. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724049.2022.2046759>
- Tse, S., & Tung, V. W. S. (2022). Measuring the valence and intensity of residents' behaviors in host–tourist interactions: Implications for destination image and destination competitiveness. *Journal of Travel Research*, 61(3), 565-580. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287521997576>