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Intercultural Communication in Tourism Enterprises of Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Valerija DROZDOVA
Turiba University
Language Department
valerija.drozdova@turiba.lv

Abstract. The paper analyses intercultural communication problems in tourism enterprises of Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden. It gives an overview of intercultural theories and their application to the characteristics of employees in three countries. The methodology includes both primary and secondary types of research: analysis of scientific literature and qualitative research. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted in three countries. The results show cultural peculiarities typical to each country and provide possible solutions to intercultural problems. The research aims to examine intercultural communication problems in tourism and hospitality enterprises and to identify types of strategies and actions required to develop intercultural communicative competence and to solve intercultural communication problems. The article provides company profiles, describes intercultural difficulties encountered and the designed employee-assessment questionnaire. The research findings may be of interest to tourism industry representatives and higher education institution stakeholders, including academic personnel and students who study intercultural communication as an important discipline in the tourism faculty.

Keywords: intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence, cultural dimensions, tourism and hospitality enterprises, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

Businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry are inherently connected with intercultural communication through the work of employees who may have different cultural backgrounds and may experience "intercultural encounters" (Houman & Flammia 2011, Tutunea 2021) with foreign customers or clients visiting a foreign country for different purposes and periods of time, including

Erasmus and full-time international students, work commuters, tourists, immigrants, expatriates, seasonal guests, and others. As Koc, for example, claims, tourism and hospitality businesses may be called "people businesses" because representatives of diverse cultures and countries meet, and these encounters happen among service providers and customers (Koc 2021: 175).

Intercultural encounters (Tutunea 2021: 44) include sharing language and culture, where "culture is the result of the communication within the community". However, intercultural communication may sometimes be partially obstructed, or communicators may have mutual misinterpretations and misunderstandings based on intercultural communicative competence deficiency or lack of intercultural awareness.

This obstruction can be especially aggravated by "external influences" such as the COVID-19 pandemic that has a negative effect on different business sectors, especially on the travel and tourism industries (Abiose & Patrick 2022: 9). Keeping this in mind, the aim of the present study was to look at intercultural encounters in 12 tourism and hospitality enterprises of Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic and to design a questionnaire on the basis of the problems and obstacles noticed in the intercultural communication that may assist in the intercultural training of the personnel in the tourism sector in order to develop their intercultural communicative competence or to become more aware interculturally.

The paper presents the theoretical framework including reflections on intercultural communicative competence, intercultural communication model, and cultural dimensions by Hofstede (1984, 1991, 2001, 2011), Lewis (2018, 2019, 2021), and Hall (1976, 1990). The empirical part discusses the results of findings from 12 interviewed companies. The next part is devoted to the development of the questionnaire and, finally, conclusions drawn from the study of intercultural encounters will be presented.

2. Literature review

2.1. Intercultural communicative competence

Intercultural communicative competence in the business context can be defined as the ability of employees to mobilize their skills, knowledge, behaviour, and values in order to deal with intercultural situations that are unfamiliar or problematic (Matveev 2017: 8). This means that tourism and hospitality industry employees have to possess knowledge of different cultures, possible differences in behaviour, be able to assess and adapt to those differences as well as interpret values that may differ from those of their own cultural group.

Lustig and Koester (2013) described the following components of intercultural communicative competence: contextuality, appropriateness and effectiveness, knowledge, motivation, and actions. Intercultural communicative competence is contextual and includes relational and situational contexts. Behaviour is regarded as appropriate when "suitable given expectations are generated by a given culture" and effective when it "leads to the achievement of desired outcome" (Koster 2013: 67). Knowledge comprises understanding of "norms of appropriateness" in that particular culture, whereas motivation includes "emotional associations" (ibid.) such as feelings and intentions. Actions, in their turn, are related to performance. An actor may possess the necessary information in the cultural context and may have motivation and feeling but may lack skills to achieve the necessary outcomes.

Intercultural communicative competence in the tourism and hospitality industry has been studied by an array of researchers recently, including the following: Leclerc and Martin (2004), who researched communication competences of tour guides; Koc (2021), who investigated the measurement ability of self-report scales and tests on intercultural communicative competence (awareness) by tourism and hospitality employees; Tutunea (2021), who determined the relationship between intercultural communicative competence and virtual exchanges; Liu, Liu, and King (2022), whose research showed "different insights about attitudes, behaviours, language and affective communication" in the intercultural communication context.

The present article focuses on the concept of intercultural communicative competence in the context of tourism and hospitality industry enterprises, as its awareness is an inherent part of the working environment of tourism and hospitality industry employees who have intercultural encounters on a daily basis.

2.2. Intercultural communication model

Berardo and Deardorff in turn suggested that "intercultural communicative competence is a process" that evolves during life, and there is no final end to this developmental process. The process implies the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes of intercultural communicative competence. The authors also consider that intercultural communicative competence requires "awareness of the context" in which communication happens (Berardo & Deardorff 2012: 47).

The model developed by Deardorff (2006, in Berardo & Deardorff 2012: 46) clearly shows processes that occur with an individual in the course of communication (interaction) in an intercultural context. It demonstrates processes that take place in the formation of intercultural communicative competence. The following five components are needed for successful communication in the intercultural context: attitude, knowledge, skills,

external and internal outcomes. All the processes are mutually interconnected and interdependent: attitudes (respecting other people's values, being open or tolerant) develop knowledge. An individual obtains deep cultural knowledge and possesses cultural self-awareness. Knowledge correlates with skills such as being able to listen, observe, evaluate, analyse, and others. Knowledge and skills lead to outcomes, inner processes (internal outcomes) such as becoming adaptable, flexible, or emphatic and external processes (external outcome), that is, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately and to behave appropriately in different intercultural situations.

So, to succeed in intercultural communication, tourism and hospitality industry employees might need to possess suitable attitudes and feelings towards clients or customers belonging to other cultures, which may include being respectful, flexible, non-judgemental and tolerant, being able to analyse and to listen to the other party.

Berardo and Deardorff suggest using this model to train people and to help them better understand the development of intercultural communicative competence. The author of the present article considers that the constituent elements of the model can be applicable for training tourism and hospitality industry personnel too (Berardo & Deardorff 2012: 48).

2.3. Cultural dimensions by Hall, Hofstede, and Lewis

The present research aims to study cases of intercultural encounters in the tourism and hospitality industry in three countries. Key researchers in the field of intercultural communication who structured the knowledge about cultures and developed cultural dimensions that can serve for the empirical analysis of cultures in the context of countries were Hall (1976, 1990), Hofstede (1984, 1991, 2001, 2011), and Lewis (2018, 2019, 2021).

Hall claimed that high-context communication implies not only words but also, for example, silence and body language, which can have more context or implication. High-context communication is less direct, implicit, whereas low-context communication relies more on words, on what has been said and is more explicit. Therefore, representatives of two different poles of this continuum may experience intercultural misunderstandings based on the misinterpretation of each other – of what was or was not said explicitly (Hall 1976: 19).

Another dimensional continuum was developed by Hofstede (2011), who described cultures on the basis of such virtues as gender, hierarchy, identity, and truth. The dimension of gender divides cultures into masculine and feminine, where representatives of the masculine group are characterized by such traits as orientation on work, achievements, and competitiveness, and feminine cultures, in their turn, highlight such virtues as care, family-orientedness, and harmony.

The dimension of hierarchy groups cultures into high-power and low-power categories, with people or organizations that are more autocratic, possessing more vertical management style belonging to the former and more egalitarian with more horizontal style of management belonging to the latter.

Identity is the dimension that describes the approach of people towards a group or an individuum, where preference for work, collaboration, and support of a group is more characteristic of collectivistic cultures, whereas individualistic cultures may be described by the preference of an individual to prioritize his/her individual achievements at work or in life.

The dimension of truth is connected with the level of uncertainty, dividing people into high and low-uncertainty avoidance cultures based on people's ability to adapt or tolerate vulnerable or unpredictable situations. People with low-uncertainty avoidance are more confident about unpredictable situations, whereas high-uncertainty people are more dependent on law and obedience and as a result have more stress in the "face of an unknown future" (Hofstede 2011: 8).

Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) developed country dimension indic, which rated countries according to the above-mentioned dimensions: Power Distance Index (PDI), Index of Individualism (IDV), Masculinity versus Femininity score (MAS). Having analysed Hofstede's findings on the countries under scrutiny – Sweden, Latvia, and Lithuania –, it was discovered that Sweden is considered to be the most egalitarian (PDI 40) (2010: 54) among the three countries observed in the present article. Latvia (PDI 44) and Lithuania (PDI 42) are situated somewhere in the middle of 57 countries studied by Hofstede et al. (2010). We can observe that Lithuania (IDV 60) has the lowest rank among the three countries (more tendency to be collectivistic), and Latvia and Sweden have a higher rank, being more "individualistic". According to Hofstede, Latvia and Sweden are considered countries with high feminine scores (both ranking 76 and 72). Lithuania was ranked 70-71 (Hofstede et al 2010: 143).

Lewis (2018), in his turn, divided cultures into three categories: linear-active, multi-active, and reactive. The present study gives examples of multi-active and linear-active representatives. According to the researcher (2018), multi-active people are usually "people-oriented, loquacious interrelators" (Lewis 2018: 27) who do many things at a time, whereas linear-active people fulfil one thing at a moment and value planning, organization, structure, and facts. Lewis (2018) focused on how people of one or the other category process/gather information. Representatives of the linear-active group rely mostly on facts and data; multi-actives prefer face-to-face encounters and dialogues. He described the way representatives use communication patterns and their listening habits. In Lewis's opinion, multi-active people are more dialogue-oriented, while linear-active are data-oriented people.

The present research considers all the theories mentioned above in the empirical part to describe intercultural peculiarities in the enterprises of Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden.

3. Methodology

3.1. Aim

The aim of the paper was to identify intercultural problems in tourism and hospitality enterprises in order to determine areas of intercultural communicative competence of employees that require enhancement, to work out a questionnaire for employees' self-assessment of intercultural communicative competence, and to decide what techniques and solutions may be applicable to develop an intercultural training course for employees. The present study examined intercultural communication problems both in internal and external communication in tourism enterprises in three countries.

The research questions were: What intercultural problems did companies in the tourism and hospitality sector in Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden experience during the COVID-19 pandemic? What types of strategies and actions should be employed by tourism businesses to enhance employees' intercultural communicative competence?

The research type was qualitative research with the analysis of semi-structured interviews carried out in 12 tourism enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

3.2. Research process

The twelve respondent enterprises represented the main sectors of tourism and hospitality industry: travel and tourism, accommodation, and food and beverage. Five interviews were carried out in Latvia with a tour operator (LV1), a guest house (LV2), a tourism information point (LV3), a travel agency (LV4), and a student hostel (LV5) using the Cisco Webex platform. Lithuania was represented by 4 tourism companies: a guest house (LT1), a tour operator (LT2), a tourism and culture information centre (LT3), and a food and beverage services unit (LT4); the interviews were conducted face to face. Three companies from Sweden were interviewed over the telephone and via the Zoom platform. The companies included a bed and breakfast hotel (SE1), a hotel and a restaurant business (SE2), and a cultural trainer and influencer (SE3). The countries were assigned a two-letter country code in accordance with Eurostat Statistics: LV– Latvia,

LT – Lithuania, SE – Sweden and were numbered 1–5 accordingly: LV1, LV2, LV3, LV4, LV5, LT1, LT2, LT3, LT4, SE1, SE2, SE3.

The informants were all top managers or owners of small-sized enterprises, starting from a one-man business to a company with up to 30 employees. The analysis of the empirical data was carried out on the basis of the theories of intercultural communicative competence, intercultural communication model, and models by Hofstede (1984, 1991, 2001, 2011), Lewis (2018, 2019, 2021), and Hall (1976, 1990). The table below gives summarized data about the studied enterprises, information about the types of business in the tourism and hospitality industry, customer base, and the countries represented by customers.

Table 1. *Types of enterprises surveyed and their customer base (developed by the author)*

Coding of enterprises	**Type of business in the tourism and hospitality industry**	**Countries of customers**	**Types of customers**
LV1	Travel and tourism	LV, LT, BG, TR, UK	Business people and sports fans.
LV2	Accommodation	Scandinavian countries, DE, LV, LT, EE	Students, international travellers, walk-in guests.
LV3	Travel and tourism	LV – 99% LT – 1%	Small senior groups, families, nature and well-being lovers, cultural heritage, and active recreation lovers.
LV4	Travel and tourism	ES, IT, UK, NL, CH, DE, PT, AU, US, SG, MY, ID, etc.	B2B: tour operators, agencies, and end-users: tourists.
LV5	Accommodation	LV, IN, LK, PK, UZ, UA, RU, BY, LT; short-term Erasmus students (DE, FR, DK, etc.)	Local and foreign full-time students (BA, MA, and PhD), Erasmus students, performing groups, conference attendees, solo travellers.
LT1	Accommodation	LT, LV, EE, RU, UA	Commuters for work, tourists for a weekend, couples, families, sportsmen.
LT2	Travel and tourism	US, UK, DE	Cruise ship tourists, families.

Coding of enterprises	Type of business in the tourism and hospitality industry	Countries of customers	Types of customers
LT3	Travel and tourism	LT, DE, LV, RU, BY, UA	Cruise ship tourists: solo travellers and families.
LT4	Food and beverage	LT, DE, PL	Seasonal guests and off-season locals, tourists.
SE1	Accommodation	SE, DE, NL, BE, US, DK	General tourists, visitors of family members in the area, people looking up their ancestry, adventure seekers.
SE2	Accommodation and food and beverage	SE, DE, other EU countries and countries of Asia	Tourists, university students, local people.
SE3	Travel and tourism	SE, etc.	Exchange students, workers, immigrants, expatriates, embassies.

The research process consisted of the following stages: collection of data, organization, coding and data analysis, and description. The findings provide examples illustrating intercultural problems observed in the enterprises. All the experts were interviewed following the principles of confidentiality, the rules of respect, and ethics.

4. Findings

The results of the analysis of interviews with company representatives may be divided into three subcategories: (1) intercultural differences and misunderstandings encountered in communication with foreign clients and employees who have different cultural backgrounds, (2) language problems / language barriers encountered in the enterprises, and (3) the effect of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality enterprises in three countries and the possible intercultural reasons of it.

The first subcategory of findings includes intercultural problems noticed in 12 enterprises and provides examples from interviews with the respondents from the companies.

4.1. Intercultural differences and misunderstandings

The analysis showed a variety of intercultural differences in behaviour both among employees with different cultural backgrounds (internal communication) and with foreign clients (external communication) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> (1) "We have signs on the doors, informing how many clients are allowed inside and that they have to wear a mask. And yes, the receptionist is the one that explains it to clients" (LV2).

Example 1 demonstrates the behaviour of an obedient linear-active culture that is data-oriented and who accepted changes regarding COVID-19 and used signs to inform their clientele.

> (2) Q: "How did you manage force majeure situations when clients were out of control, something unpleasant happened, or there was some disturbance (drunk customers, customers who misbehaved)"?

A: "<…> we have the panic button. Also, we sometimes call the police if there is disturbance".

This example shows law obedience of linear-active people who trust state institutions like the police and rely on their professional help (LV2).

> (3) "<…> she wanted to show who the boss is <…> everyone should sit together and talk about what could be done better and what can be changed. <…> I have written emails asking questions or asking for suggestions and I have received nothing back <…> lack of feedback and communication barrier with the direct manager" (LV3).

Example 3 demonstrates a manager with a high-power distance approach of business management and an employee from a more horizontal style that is characteristic to low-power distance. A masculine style of behaviour by the boss and a feminine style by the employee can be seen. This difference in perception of management style resulted in misunderstandings and even a conflict between the manager and the employee.

> (4) "Many people [in a rural area] do not see the necessity for a separate municipality Tourism Point because this money could have gone towards schools or other needs. In the end, the opening of Tourism Information Point wasn't natural and needed" (LV3).

The above example shows short-term orientation (Hofstede's dimension) of people in the rural area. Inhabitants preferred building schools or other amenities that were needed for current needs rather than opening a tourism information centre that could pay back only later and the returns on investment would not be immediate.

> (5) "We did not travel to visit customers. Prior to COVID-19, it was common practice. It has been replaced by video conferences. No, <name> I will not set up the video call. It is enough. If there is something new, call me, but

let us agree we will meet face to face when it is allowed, but do not torture me with video calls" (LV4).

The present example shows that communication with customers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvian enterprises happened online in most cases; the respondent stated that he felt comfortable using video conferences (characteristic of a linear-active culture), whereas customers from abroad insisted on the use of the telephone or a face-to-face offline meeting in the worst case – means of communication that are more private and common to dialogue-oriented multi-active people.

(6) "Especially in Russia, tour leaders sometimes do not feel having enough authority to make decisions. It is a common practice that when something goes wrong with a client, it is fine, and you do not need directors' orders to, for example, order a sparkling water to guests' room" (LV4).

This example demonstrates internal intercultural communication misunderstandings between a manager and employees – a horizontal style of communication by the managing director (low-power distance), who expected more initiative from employees from another country accustomed to a more autocratic style of company management that is characteristic of high-power distance cultures.

(7) "With end-customers, we have become more attentive and stricter over the years. For example, when people travel, they often forget things like glasses, medicine, cameras, jackets, shoes, whatever, and up to some moment they just wrote to us 'I forgot …, can you send?', and we would send… however, now…" (LV4).

This is an example of linear-activeness and data-orientedness (Lewis's model) of company representatives in a Latvian enterprise: the way communication with customers belonging to different cultures happens in the company when some problems occur. A solution found by the company concerning communication with end-customers was "detailed instructions provided to customers about everything in a written form".

(8) "People from Uzbekistan, e.g., prefer to communicate face to face. We try to contact them electronically (due to COVID-19 restrictions). They will not always get the result they want, and not because we do not answer them, but because they do not want to understand the answer, such as some rules or regulations… They feel like it has to be the way they want it, not the way it is" (LV5).

The present example shows the difference in preference of communication style by people of different cultures, e.g. those who prefer to be contacted in a written form, via email or SMS (linear-active, data-oriented people) and those who prefer face-to-face contact (dialogue-oriented, multi-active people), as well as the difference between high- and low-context cultures.

(9) "European Erasmus students are too communicative. Especially now, during the pandemic, we had to put up signs that they were not allowed to stay together in common public areas and have fun all the time. There were even cases where students from the non-quarantine area had come to the quarantine area and had parties with dances, games, and so on" (LV5).

This can be an example of law-obedient employees who came across more frivolous students, who are more short-term-oriented and demonstrate characteristics of a low-uncertainty avoidance culture (Hofstede's dimensions).

(10) "<…> communication and transmission of information normally takes place orally, the information is passed to the administrator by phone, employees pass information to managers by phone <…> we have meetings at lunch every two weeks [before COVID-19] and now once a month. <…> we order something and discuss current issues while eating <…> the employees know that if a problem arises before 9 p.m., they can call the Commercial Director, and after 9 p.m. they can call me" (LT1).

The present example shows that employees in LT enterprises prefer face-to-face contact, telephone calls, and direct conversations, which can be a peculiarity of an individual belonging to a multi-active, dialogue-oriented, high-context culture who prefers contacting in person.

(11) An informant of LT4 stressed the importance of cooperation with other businesses, for example, TIC, whereas a company in Latvia, e.g., emphasized that they tried to cooperate with some companies, but they did not succeed: "I don't have a team; in most cases, I'm completely on my own" (LV3). The present example shows traits of collectivistic culture (LT4) and the characteristics of individualistic representatives (LV3).

(12) "Another problem she had was people expecting to have their own bathroom despite all printed information on websites and flyers stating that there were shared bathrooms" (SE1).

The above example demonstrates that the information to clients was provided in a written form, whereas clients expected the information to be passed verbally too (intercultural difference based on the difference between data and dialogue-oriented people, according to Lewis's model). However, when asked what measures the organization takes to reduce communication problems in the organization, the owner replied "she was very clear and upfront with her communication". It is possible that the informant was not conscious of these intercultural differences.

4.2. Language barriers

The analysis of interviews revealed another category of intercultural problems related to the use of state and foreign languages among employees of different ethnic origin and with foreign customers in all three countries that could create miscommunication and misunderstandings among employees and with clients. The analysis showed that 10 out of 12 companies had problems connected with language barriers in communication and an insufficient language knowledge of employees.

(1) "We always try to adapt to our clients <…> if our client speaks to us in Russian, we will respond in Russian. Of course, we initiate conversations in Latvian, but we also try to adapt to the language they are speaking to us" (LV1).

(2) "There are employees who are non-native speakers. She [an employee] understands Latvian, but she is Russian. Other employees do not understand Russian, and we communicate only in Latvian, so there is a challenge" (LV2).

(3) "Most of the people are native Russian speakers, and do not speak English at all, or if they do, it is at a very basic level" (LV3).

(4) "All Russian-speaking employees understand something in Latvian, but it is not easy. It is not that they do not understand anything at all" (LV5).

(5) "Language barrier, especially with English-speaking clients. It is difficult to understand customers coming from India. <…> difficult to understand what is said" (LV5).

(6) "Russian-speaking staff belong to the group of people who expect that everyone understands them. Very often they use body language to express themselves and explain their needs when there is a language barrier between them" (LV5).

(7) "There is a language barrier, a young person does not speak Russian, and an older person does not speak English …" (LT1).

(7) "A problem with the use of English that can lead to such problems as, e.g., style mistakes, switching to informal communication, etc." (LT2).

(8) "Another challenge is the foreign languages spoken by employees" (LT3).

(9) "The problem of the Russian language because it is no longer known by younger generations" (LT4).

(10) "The owner used the situation as a challenge, the immigrant workers had a chance to learn Swedish, whereas she practised English" (SE1).

(11) "There are communication barriers due to language between guests and staff, which in turn causes generational issues, as the older clientele sometimes do not want to wait and end up leaving" (SE2).

(12) "Older Swedish generations have language issues, as they have not been taught in English, and they think it is not important to learn it, and people should learn Swedish instead" (SE2).

The examples showed barriers and communication problems connected with languages among Latvian and Russian-speaking employees in Latvia (LV1, LV2, LV3, LV5), the use of English by employees in Latvia (LV5), the use of Russian (LT1, LT4) and English and other foreign languages (LT2, LT3), the use of Swedish and English by employees in Swedish companies (SE1, SE2).

4.3. The effect of COVID-19

The survey was carried out during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, so, accordingly, it was essential to discover to what extent intercultural differences discovered in the companies could affect communication with foreign clients and the development of businesses under scrutiny in the circumstances of lockdown or business slow-down. Below are the answers of informants concerning the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on business in 12 enterprises.

(1) "The company manager was forced to lay off all of the employees during the COVID time" (LV1).

(2) "There used to be 5 workers before the COVID-19 pandemic; only 2 employees left when the pandemic started" (LV2).

(3) "The COVID-19 pandemic had immense influence on the work of TIC since all events were closed [cancelled] and only nature tourism was blooming. At the moment of the interview, the business was operated remotely" (LV3).

(4) "Communication with customers during the COVID-19 pandemic mostly happened online" (LV4).

(5) "All external communication is currently being done electronically and by telephone" (LV5).

(6) "The company preferred old style of communication and did not switch to new forms of communication" (LT1).

(7) "<…> the company had come to a complete standstill... No cruise sails only to the Baltic countries at the moment when the COVID-19 pandemic was taking place. This situation is not only in Lithuania but also in the surrounding countries. The self-isolation requirements also contributed to the aggravation of the situation" (LT2).

(8) "Both internal and external communication in the company took place remotely, mostly online". Live communication did not happen. However, the company noticed a beneficial side of it – 'there is more time, and we can focus more on one person'" (LT3).

(9) "A large number of foreigners were automatically removed. The Lithuanian audience [customer base] that used to fly out cheaply is here now. It's a slightly different audience [customer base] in Nida now" (LT4).

(10) "Unfortunately, the company closed in 2020 due to COVID-19, but they provided answers to interview questions" (SE1).

(11) "COVID-19 had a positive impact on business with record-breaking sales; however, the clientele has shifted to more local persons" (SE2).

(12) "COVID-19 situation was beneficial for the company – I managed to attract more contacts, had more interest from different companies. This year was the best year ever and I received <…> higher grades on my training performance than that of the previous 2 years" (SE3).

Having analysed examples of subcategory 3, it became evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on both internal and external communication in 10 enterprises out of 12, including all Latvian and Lithuanian enterprises and one enterprise in Sweden (SE1). The differences that were noticed included (1) shift from face-to-face contact to online contact with employees and clients, (2) loss of clients, (3) redundancy of staff, and even (4) business closure. As a matter of fact, it was discovered that the COVID-19 situation was beneficial for business in two cases (SE2, SE3). It became clear that employees who worked online with clients before the pandemic, such as SE3, who provided training services online, as well as the travel company (SE2), who offered more services to local tourists in Sweden where there was no lockdown initiated at the governmental level, experienced growth of their business during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all other companies were forced either to adapt to the new conditions or even close. Those companies who got used to only one style of communication, e.g. face-to-face contact, lost some part of their clientele, as well as some companies who used mostly written signs or online communication to inform clients instead of verbal contact also experienced either loss of clients or dissatisfaction with contact via the Internet.

5. Practical implications and recommendations

Having analysed answers provided by the informants, it became evident that they were not always aware of the cultural differences of their clients and colleagues and could not explain the reasons of other people's behaviours and the reasons for conflicts with them. So, based on the analysis of the interviews (Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden) and revealing various intercultural problems in the organizations where employees are in contact with each other and with foreign clients, the author worked out an Employee Self-assessment Questionnaire that may be used in an intercultural training course for tourism and hospitality industry personnel in order to raise their intercultural communicative competence. The questionnaire may be applicable for employees in regard to themselves, their colleagues, and foreign clients. It might help employees to better evaluate themselves and others, as well as to perceive the problems encountered from a different angle, understanding that differences noticed in the communication

with other people are not negative things, misbehaviours, or negligence but rather challenges that stem from the differences in values, attitudes, perceptions, styles of behaviour, and communication styles. Answers to these questions could help to analyse both internal communication in their companies and external intercultural communication as well as to adapt to changing circumstances, for example, such as an epidemic or a pandemic.

Table 2. *Employee Self-assessment Questionnaire (developed by the author)*

1. Are you aware of cultural differences while being in contact with people from other cultures at your working place?
2. What communication style do you use with your colleagues – face-to-face or distant? What modes/channels of communication do you prefer?
3. What communication style do you use with your clients – face-to-face or distant? What modes/channels of communication do you prefer? How to make sure that clients preferring another communication style than yours are approached/informed?
4. What is the importance of competition in your company?
5. Are you aware of cultural differences while being in contact with the clients with other cultural backgrounds?
6. How do you assess your foreign language competence? Does your language knowledge correspond to the requirements of your working place? What can be done to improve your language skills in case needed?
Questions based on the dimensions by Lewis, Hofstede, and Hall
7. Do you prefer working in a team or individually (collectivism vs individualism)? What style of working is more applicable in your company?
8. How would you characterize your organization? Are hierarchy, status, and authoritarian style more important, or do people prefer a democratic leadership style (high-power distance vs low-power distance)? How do you work with people having another style?
9. Does your company strictly obey rules, prefer structured leadership, or are you more flexible with rules, prefer more democratic style (high-uncertainty avoidance vs low-uncertainty avoidance)? How do you work with people having another style?
10. Does your company prefer assertive style of behaviour, value achievement, autocratic style, or do you value caring behaviour, prefer participative leadership (masculinity vs femininity)? How do you work with people having another style?
11. What style of communication is more preferable in your company? Which one is more important: clear and direct verbal communication (low-context people) or indirect communication with messages being understood from the context (high-context people)?

6. Conclusions

The present article addressed intercultural encounters in internal and external communication of tourism and hospitality industry enterprises from three countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the analysis of the interviews conducted among representatives of companies, it was possible to distinguish intercultural problems that local staff have while being in contact with foreign clients and inside the company.

It was concluded that intercultural problems are experienced by the personnel of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, a situation which leads to language barriers both in the company and in dealing with foreign clients in all three countries studied in the present research.

The personnel are sometimes unaware of the reasons for differences in behaviour or attitudes of the colleagues or foreign clients that can be connected with cultural differences based on dimensions such as hierarchy, identity, truth, or gender; which can be noticed, however, are, e.g., manner of communication, choice of form (face-to-face or distant) and channels of communication (telephone, WhatsApp, or e-mail), preference of horizontal or vertical style of management, or differences in processing and gathering information, e.g., linear-activeness or multi-activeness, data-orientedness, or dialogue-orientedness of people.

External circumstances influenced by COVID-19 forced companies in the tourism and hospitality sector to change their communication style, e.g. switch from face-to-face to online communication with their employees and foreign clients or to introduce the system of signs to inform clients. However, the analysis of the research data showed that not all of the company representatives as well and not all of the clients were able to change their communication style, partially due to intercultural differences.

It can be concluded that the personnel can sometimes lack cultural self-awareness and do not always possess the necessary intercultural communicative competence, which can be enhanced by providing intercultural training such as language courses, cultural simulations, intercultural games, or case studies by discussing and simulating typical intercultural situations. This can be particularly essential considering the possible repetition of external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, that can have a negative impact on tourism and hospitality sector businesses.

7. Limitations

Some limitations can be observed in the present research. Initially, the project focused on intergenerational studies and not on studies of intercultural communication, so it limited the researcher in the amount of surveyed data and can affect the generalization of the study.

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