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Intercultural Communication Aspects Encountered in Tourism Enterprises of Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden

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Abstract

Internal and external communication among employees and customers in tourism enterprises can be hindered by intercultural barriers. The present paper reports on the results of a qualitative research carried out within the framework of a NordTourNet-3 project implemented in Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden. The project revealed a set of intercultural difficulties faced by employees and clients that may undermine the performance of those enterprises. The follow-up research aimed to examine those intercultural communication problems. The paper provides an overview of relevant intercultural theories, explores intercultural communication cases in tourism enterprises based on 12 semi-structured interviews carried out with enterprise representatives. The article lists company profiles, describes the intercultural difficulties encountered in internal and external communication by countries, bearing in mind obstacles of Covid-19 pandemic. The descriptions of intercultural problems based on the theoretical assumptions and answers to the interview questions provided by company representatives are proposed. The research findings may be of interest to tourism industry representatives, various higher educational institution stakeholders, including academic personnel and students or any others interested in the field.

Keywords: *intercultural communication competence, cross-cultural research, internal communication, external communication, small-sized tourism enterprises, models of intercultural communication.*

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1. Introduction

Communication in the highly internationalised and global (Richard, 2017) tourism industry (Katriel,1995, Leclerc, & Martin, 2004, Milhause, & Rahschulte, 2010, Albu, 2015, Dimitrova & Sevdalina, 2015), in a cross-cultural tourism setting (Leclerc, & Martin, 2004) including such businesses as tourism information centres (TIC), hotels, hostels or tour operators, is often interrelated with intercultural communication. Employees are involved both in internal (Gopal, 2009, Ruck, & Welch, 2012, Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014) and external communication (Gopal, 2009, Rogala, & Bialowas, 2016), where in the first case communication takes place within the company, mostly with employees and in the latter, it implies interaction with outside stakeholders (Grobelna, 2015) – clients or business partners. Internal communication does not always occur with the representatives of one culture, since people living in one geographical area (country) may belong to different cultural groups or even subgroups (Janssen, 2019). External communication also often involves contact with the representatives of other cultures – foreign tourists, international students, business partners from abroad.

In particular, difficulties in communication in tourism sector, including intercultural communication that require special attention and study were observed during the Covid-19 pandemic (Raišienė et. al, 2020; Lukoševičienė, & Šakytė-Statnickė, 2021; Grueso-Hinestroza et. al, 2022).

The present research revealed an array of intercultural misunderstandings among employees and clients and so the purpose of the present study was to examine intercultural communication problems in tourism enterprises in Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the following research question was posed:

- What intercultural problems exist in internal and external communication in tourism enterprises of three countries?

2. Literature review

The theoretical framework is formed by theories on intercultural competence and cultural models by Hofstede and Lewis, in particular.

2.1 Understanding of intercultural competence

Communication is "a symbolic, contextual process in which people create shared meanings" (Kanu & Morra, 2012, p.2). Communication in the tourism industry (Barker, 2016; Liu, Liu & King, 2022) often involves interaction with foreign people, and whenever people of different countries and diverse cultures meet, intercultural communication occurs. Prior research shows that communication in the intercultural context suggets and expects mutual trust and understanding (cf. Drozdova, 2021). Intercultural communication expects actors involved in the communication to possess intercultural competence since lack of knowledge about some specifics of one or another culture and skills to behave properly may often lead to some intercultural misunderstandings.

Mažeikienė and Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė (2007, p.71) define intercultural competence as an "ability acquired on the basis of certain knowledge and attitudes that enables individuals to work effectively in the context of different cultures." That implies knowledge and skills of employees to "exhibit an interculturally competent behaviour" (Matveev, 2017, p. XI).

Intercultural competence or *intercultural communication competence* (Skujiņa, Anspoka, Kalnbērziņa & Šalme, 2011; Beydilli, & Kurt, 2020; Liu, Liu & King, 2022) of employees in the tourism industry in the international environment requires intercultural sensitivity, "understanding oneself and others in a context of diversity" (Drozdova, 2021, p.5.). It is the ability "to interact and communicate with those who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations" (Barrett, et al, 2013, p.3), different beliefs, languages and background (Barker, 2016). It is the ability to interact outside the habitual cultural environment that is based on the knowledge of habits of one's social and ethnic groups, critical thinking skills and positive attitude towards unknown environment (Skujiņa, et al, 2011).

In a similar vein Matveev (2017, p.8) defines intercultural competence as the "capacity of employees to mobilize in a conscious way their knowledge and skills to deal with unfamiliar intercultural

situations when dealing with people socialized in a culturally different way".

Intercultural competence is an essential prerequisite for successful employees in the tourism industry. Janssen (2019, p.4), for example, considers that intercultural competence does not come easily and needs to be trained and developed, since it is "the most important determining factor between success and failure". Matveev (2017, p. VIII) points out that the development of intercultural competence is a time-consuming task and may require much work on behalf of those who want to be interculturally trained.

In the present research intercultural problems are analysed through the prism of the necessity of employees in the tourism industry to develop intercultural competence.

2.2 Cultural models by Hofstede and Lewis

As the present research investigates cases from tourism enterprises of Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden the cultures of these countries are considered. Generally speaking, world cultures are not strictly limited geographically. However, studies of "country cultures" are often done because "working with cultural societies is complex" (Janssen, 2019, p.4) and it is easier to focus "on cultural identity as defined by countries" (ibid.) and consequently to talk about countries when talking about cultures.

The authors of the present article consider cultural models by Hofstede (1984, 1991, 2001, 2011), and Lewis (2006, 2018, 2019, 2021) the most paramount, empirically tested and practically applied models of intercultural communication. Hofstede's studies of cultural dimensions were initially based on the analysis of survey of IBM employees from over fifty different countries whereas Lewis studied eighty countries. Both authors used countries in their models from "a practical point of view" and the models are based on communication (Janssen, 2019, p. 57). Hofstede's research is applicable to study intercultural differences at the "macro level" between companies and customers (Mooij, & Beniflah, 2016; Mooij, & Hofstede, 2002).

2.2.1 Hofstede's cultural model

Hofstede (2011) developed a cultural model with the application of six dimensions i.e., identity (individualistic vs. collectivistic), hierarchy (high and low power distance), gender (male and female), truth (high and low uncertainty avoidance), virtue (long-term and short-term orientation), a dimension added by Hofstede in the 1980s (Hofstede, 1984) and indulgence versus restraint, added in the 2000s (Hofstede, 2011). It is considered that Hofstede's findings (1984, 1991, 2001, 2011) are valuable when countries are studied in comparison. As Smith et al., (1996, p. 249) suggested Hofstede's framework is "the most comprehensive and robust" and is encountered in a number of cultural studies, including the business aspect (Soares, Farhangment, & Shoham, 2007; Søndergaard, 1994) and the tourism business (Huang, & Wen, 2021; Huang, & Crotts, 2019).

Hofstede's Power Distance Index as one of the dimensions of national cultures measures the degree of inequality in different countries, including Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden. High-power distance cultures are characterized by the importance of status and position in the company and a vertical style of company management. Bosses are often "autocratic or paternalistic" while subordinates are expected to respect and obey people with a higher rank or having a higher position and "subordinates expect to be told what to do" (Hofstede, et al., 2010, p.73).

Low-power distance countries are more egalitarian, "horizontal" in their management style, tasks are easily delegated, "subordinates expect to be consulted", employees are not afraid of their bosses and prefer a "consultative style of decision-making" (ibid.). Simultaneously, Hofstede, et al. (2010, p. 75) considered that there is "no research evidence of systematic difference in effectiveness" between companies of these two dimensions. Both companies with low-and high-power distance can perform successfully. The researcher believed that a significant factor is that "management utilizes the strengths of his local culture" (ibid.). Of course, there are rarely cases of pure high-power or low-power dimensions observed in companies and they are usually culturally determined.

The identity dimension divides cultures based on their attitude to the "role of the individual versus group" (ibid.). In strongly individualistic companies, e.g., the career of an individual is prioritised more than interests of the group, while collectivistic cultures prefer more group or teamwork, help and assistance are a norm. The gender dimension is based on the "division of emotional roles between women and men" (Hofstede, 2011, p.12). More masculine cultures praise manlike characteristics such as power, assertiveness and competitiveness, whereas feminine cultures value characteristics such as care and modesty. Ranking of countries based on truth relates to the "level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future" (Hofstede, 2011, p.8). High uncertainty avoidance refers to the respect to laws and obedience. In contrast low uncertainty is characterized by "preferring democratic leadership" (ibid.) and being more flexible with laws. The present research identified intercultural problems related to four of Hofstede's dimensions-identity, hierarchy, gender and truth.

2.2.2. Lewis's cultural model

The seminal study by Lewis (2018, 2019, 2021) provided a detailed and structured analysis of different aspects of intercultural communication and a description of more than eighty countries in the world from the cultural, historical and intercultural perspective. Although some information can be perceived partially as generalizations, several generations of travellers, people in business and students learnt about cultural differences based on Lewis's research. The main postulate highlighted in the research (Lewis, 2018) was the division of cultures into 'multi-active', 'reactive' and 'linear-active' people; 'data-oriented', 'dialogue oriented' and 'listening' cultures. According to Lewis (2018) *multi-active* people value family ties, consider contact with relatives and friends, hierarchy and status and appreciate contact and establishment of relationships. They are usually eloquent. *Linear-active* people are good planners, prefer facts to talks, deeds to words, obey rules and laws. *Reactive people* in turn are characterized by their attitude to such aspects as intuition, network, obligations and collective harmony, everybody in the group

should feel happy and the important factor is that one does not like losing faces. Although most of the countries are grouped under one or the other category, people often are hybrids of all these characteristics.

Lewis (ibid.) considered that *data—oriented* people are those who prefer facts, information, provide well-structured presentations; *dialogue-oriented* people value conversations more than facts expressed in a business-like form, a friendly talk more than written information; representatives of *listening cultures* listen to their counterparts more than talk, might give feedback at the end, and not interrupt the interlocutors. This also concerns means of communication. Dialogue-oriented people prefer face-to-face conversations, telephone calls, video calls, whereas data-oriented people prefer written modes of communication.

3. Methodology

The theoretical framework of the present study consists of theories of intercultural competence and cultural models of countries based on which the analysis of intercultural problems was carried out.

The type of research applied for the analysis is *qualitative research* using *semi-structured interviews*. This method of data collection proved to be flexible and having distinguished reciprocity between interviewer and participant (Galletta, 2012; Kallio et. al, 2016). *Qualitative content analysis* has been used for data analysis.

Criterion sampling that provides more insight or allows gathering non-numerical in-depth data with a small sample size was used for the choice of the research population (Rupšienė, 2007). The sample was chosen using the following criteria: 1) the participant has at least a 2-year experience, working in tourism industry, 2) the company is a small-sized business, 3) the company works with foreign clients or has people of other cultures inside the company. The enterprises in Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden were represented by experts in 4 tourism sectors: tourism information, accommodation, travel agency/ tour operating and catering services.

Research instrument

Semi-structured interview questions were designed to get the research data. The interview comprised four sections with open-ended questions and supplementary questions to verify the information. The

questions were aimed at providing demographic data of the tourism enterprise, analysing the internal and external communication of the employees of the company and as a result allowed to identify intercultural difficulties that employees come across during their work in the company.

Research process

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts of the companies in Latvia (5), Lithuania (4) and Sweden (3) between January and July 2021. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and 37 minutes on average. Since the interviews coincided with Covid-19 pandemic they were carried out face-to-face (F2F) using electronic platforms such as Cisco WebEx and Zoom in Latvia, whereas they were conducted live in Lithuania and Sweden. The conducted interviews were recorded (with the consent of the participants) using Cisco WebEx and Zoom conference web applications, transcribed manually and the 167 pages of transcripts were analysed and described. The table below presents the introductory information about the enterprises and the interviewed experts based on the research findings, where LV stands for Latvia, LT for Lithuania and SE for Sweden. The following criteria are provided: Informant's number (1), Business activities (2), Year of foundation of the enterprise (3), Position of the informant in the enterprise (4), Mission (M) and vision (V) of the enterprise (5) (see Table 1).

Table 1. **Demographic data of the enterprises and informants participating in the qualitative research**

1	2	3	4	5
LV1	Tour operating	2011	Managing Director	To survive during Covid-19 pandemic, to think of updating the mission and vision.
LV2	Accommodation	2015	Owner, Board member	No answer provided.
LV3	Tourist information	2018	Manager	Represent tourism offer of the municipality / county
LV4	Tour operating and travel agency	2007	CEO, Head of the Board	To provide first class incoming services in group departures for the guests; to have an affordable, easy selling product via different sales channels.

LV5	Accommodation	1993	Director	To abide the mission and vision of the university.
LT1	Accommodation	2012	Personnel Manager	(M) to provide accommodation with the feeling of home for guests; (V) to have a single refined brand, to make it clear what the guests will receive, to work with communication.
LT2	Tour operating	1992	Director	(M) To show how wonderful Lithuania is to clients; (V) to have offices in Tallinn, Riga; to organize exclusive tours for small groups.
LT3	Tourist information	2002	Manager	(M) To provide information about places and events visited in the city, to organise traditional and exclusive excursions; (V) to strengthen the economic well-being of the city and region, etc.
LT4	Catering	2021	Co-owner of a business	(M) To create a catering service that appeals both to tourists and locals; (V) to grow into a bigger business.
SE1	Accommodation	2010	Owner of a business	No clear mission or vision: to earn and to fill a gap in the market.
SE2	Accommodation and catering	2016	Co-owner of a business	To be a small family-run business that bestows different experiences to the guests.
SE3	Tourist information	2018	Owner of a business	To ensure that immigrants and tourists learn Swedish culture and to help them "understand the social norms and Swedish codes".

The research process included the following stages: data collection, organization, coding and data analysis.

The qualitative research followed the rules of respect and ethics by keeping names of enterprises, all the experts and stakeholders mentioned and described in the article anonymous and confidential.

4. Findings of the research

The analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed internal and external intercultural communication problems in the 12 enterprises of

Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden, bearing in mind the unforeseen circumstances of COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Latvian enterprise (LV1)

Internal communication

95% of communication happened "via e-mails, phone calls" and group chats. Employees felt comfortable working remotely using online forms of contact. However, when talking with the employees, the manager discovered that they were not fully satisfied: employees expected more involvement (horizontal style of management), whereas the manager preferred a vertical style of decision-making that lacked employee empowerment.

The small size of the company was mentioned both as a strength and as a weakness, where efficiency and speed in passing information is an advantage, whereas overwork and lack of time to communicate properly with the employees is a drawback.

Internal communication problems included communication barriers among employees (lack of team spirit, miscommunication) and between the employees and the boss mostly due to "personal dislike" and "jealousy". It is evident that the reasons of conflict stem from the difference in management style of the company owner and the expectations of the employees (hierarchy dimension).

External communication

The company was flexible in its choice of communication forms. The owner switched from traditional channels to the use of WhatsApp with the clients.

The SWOT analysis showed that the main strengths are adaptability to the language preferences of the clients (Latvian, English or Russian) and the use of different tools of communication, whereas weaknesses were the use of phone calls that did not ensure that the message was understood correctly. In general, the informant emphasized their readiness to adapt to the communication style of every client.

4.2 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Latvian enterprise (LV2)

Internal communication

A horizontal style of management was mentioned; communication happened mostly by using e-mails, a method that was highlighted by the informant as an advantage for a small enterprise. The so-called "black book" was used to record information for the next shift, but later information was passed through regular e-mails sent to all employees. Internal intercultural communication problems included language barriers resulting in miscommunication and misunderstandings among employees.

External communication

Communication during the pandemic happened using different electronic platforms and was efficient both for employees and customers. Other forms of communication included phone, e-mail, and sometimes F2F. It was stated that information was also passed using visual signs on the doors of the guest house, that can be an example of a linear-active culture and data-oriented people.

Correspondence with customers took place with the use of e-mails. The strength noticed was *„the possibility to respond quickly to customers' requests and demands",* however it also brought some weaknesses, like loss of some information. Lack of F2F communication with clients was mentioned as a minus, e.g., owners were unable to observe customers in the premises of the guest house and to see to what extent they were reliable: *"some of them could come back drunk or under the influence of drugs."* It was also noted that some customers refused or did not want to communicate by e-mail and expected F2F communication. Such problems as rudeness and misbehaviour of foreign clients, aggressiveness, difference of behaviour, wish of some to communicate and the wish of others to keep distance were mentioned.

4.3 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Latvian enterprise (LV3)

The informant complained that the management planned work in the office for one person, but delegated duties of several people to one. It was repeated several times that she wanted to work in a team and was

feeling alone. She confessed that she did not always follow the rules of the manager and after a year of work started to cooperate with the TIC of one town "*to get a support and team feeling."*

Internal communication

Internal communication happened with the use of e-mails, WhatsApp, phone calls, seldom by visits. Both vertical and horizontal styles of communication were noticed. The informant gave examples of misunderstandings with the boss where the boss criticized the worker for her initiative and insisted on his sole right of decision-making in the company (hierarchy dimension). The boss considered the employee to be not obedient and the worker perceived the manager as a bossy autocrat. The employee was full of innovative ideas, whereas the boss had an authoritative approach. The boss exercised a high-power distance approach of business management, and the employee expected a horizontal style of a low power distance.

Canteen culture was noticed in the company: *"When I first started working there were some rumours about me, like I was sitting all day doing nothing and receiving a huge salary."* The difference pointed out was the cultural difference noticed in Latvia in the rural and urban areas in connection to the perception of different values. For example, the informant stated that people in rural area did not understand the idea of opening the TIC, whereas inhabitants of cities supported it. This might be attributed to the dimension of truth (uncertainty avoidance), where city residents are more secure about their future and the distribution of finances (low-uncertainty avoidance culture), whereas residents of rural areas live a more modest life and consider such things as construction of the new municipality premises a waste of time and money (high-uncertainty avoidance culture).

The informant mentioned lack of feedback and communication barriers with her direct manager as one of the weaknesses of internal communication that can be attributed to Hofstede's dimensions of hierarchy and gender.

External communication

External communication took place mostly online, e.g., Instagram or FB page. Contact with clients happened first by telephone, later F2F. The informant stated that clients were informed with the help of visual

signs on the walls next to the TIC, such as a map on the wall with attractions and brochures.

It was noticed that the main intercultural problems in the rural area were dependence on local authorities, lack of initiative, belief in the offered opinion versus more independent residents of urban areas.

4.4 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Latvian enterprise (LV4)

Internal communication

According to the informant three types of communication were observed in the company: communication of people in the office with tour leaders, people in the office and the one that involved only tour leaders. The company supported open communication with all stakeholders. Some contradictions were noticed in communication between the company managing director and the personnel. Although the director supported a horizontal style of communication, he felt uncomfortable when, according to him, employees became "informal." He called it "*lack of the system to balance both privacy and efficiency*."

Another characteristic noticed by the informant that he disliked was employees' eloquence. Frequent use of chat by employees led to the problem of systematization of information and lack of system.

Intercultural problems noticed by the company managing director included work with tour leaders from Russian Federation who expected more authority from the boss (hierarchy) and waited for instructions from the director rather than from a project manager or making their own decisions, whereas the managing director, being a representative of low-power distance culture expected more initiative on behalf of the workers. For example, employees were reluctant to take decisions: „*they did not feel enough authority"*.

External communication

Communication happened with two types of customers in tourism sectors: B2B (other tour operators and travel agencies) and B2C (tourists, end-users) who were mostly foreigners. The geography was diverse and included more than 30 countries.

According to the informant, communication with many clients (tour operators) became very close: *"I know their families, some of*

them have been sending their relatives on our tours". This horizontal style of contact with B2B clients, according to the informant, facilitates business communication. However, contact with end-users (tourists) in some cases has become more distant and formal – detailed instruction to the customers about everything in a written form.

External communication happened online; the informant stated that he felt comfortable using video conferences (characteristic of a linear active culture), whereas foreign customers insisted on the use of telephone in the worst case or F2F offline meetings (method that is common to dialogue-oriented multi active people).

It was admitted that not all customers wanted to have video calls, but preferred to wait until there was a chance to meet F2F.

4.5 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Latvian enterprise (LV5)

Internal communication

The diversity of information channels used by employees was mentioned as a company strength since it allowed to cover a bigger range of customers and enabled to work with people of different communication styles.

A weakness observed by the informant was that information was passed from the top and was not always obtained in a timely manner. Obstacles that hindered the transfer of information included misunderstandings, conflicts, and Internet connection problems.

External communication

Communication happens with the clients of the hostel (full-time international students from Southern and Central Asia, Eastern Europe and short-term Erasmus students from Western Europe). The main problems that arouse were cultural differences between workers and foreign students, as well as among clients themselves. Cultural differences were based on different criteria: style of behaviour, religion, age, citizenship. The so-called *melting pot culture* was observed: people with different religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds interacting with each other. This cultural diversity was beneficial for clients, full-time students, who were forced to live in this international environment, going through all stages of culture shock and getting accustomed to living with different cultures.

However, it might be frustrating and challenging for the staff, who needed to cope with different everyday problems: linguistic, intergenerational or cultural. The main goal of external communication was *"organizing fruitful cooperation between the company and the clients, creating the conditions for successful problem solving and providing information to satisfy customers".*

Communication changed from F2F to online with clients and was done "electronically and by telephone". People of cultures who prefer more F2F contact (dialogue-oriented, multi-active people) rather than e-mail communication (data-oriented linear active people, Lewis' model) might have experienced more difficulties in contacting with the staff and with each other, e.g., students from Central Asia preferred communicating F2F, whereas workers chose to contact by e-mail (due to Covid-19 restrictions). According to employees these students *"did not want to understand the answer, such as some rules or regulations and wanted to bargain".*

Another cultural problem noticed by the workers was the gender issue – some cultures do not allow men and women to be situated in the same premises, so the management separated girls and boys on different floors of the hostel. In the same manner the gender issue could explain the behaviour of some students, e.g., a conflict that arose with a student from Central Asia, who pushed the housekeeper out of the shared kitchen because he did not like to be reprimanded.

According to the informant *"European Erasmus students were too communicative."* They violated the rules of isolation and lockdown during the pandemic by meeting in the room and travelling to other locations. Students were informed about the prohibition of travelling to non-quarantine areas with visual signs.

4.6 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Lithuanian enterprise (LT1)

The informant stated that the mission of the company was to provide accommodation with the feeling of home for guests who come to Klaipeda for work, to make them feel warm and cosy from the very first step and to satisfy all customer needs. The idea of "a family-business" and "feeling at home" was repeated several times during the interview: *"We are not planning to expand; we want to stay a family*

business and have as much as we can cover ourselves". It was also emphasized that company representatives cared a lot about clients' feedback and customer satisfaction: *"a feeling of home, good location, possibility to return, meeting all the needs of guests, etc."*

Internal communication

Internal communication in the present company happens mostly using telephone calls and direct communication which can be attributed to the characteristic of a multi-active, dialogue-oriented culture.

The SWOT analysis showed that the company strengths are active "*F2F communication, good psychological climate and an atmosphere of trust, openness, willingness not to limit resources, willingness to share, help, flexibility, hospitality and teamwork"*. However, it was noted that the weaknesses are failure to fix deadlines for work performed and consequent communication problems, patriarchal organizational management structure (vertical style of management) and disagreement between managers on specific tasks for employees.

It was stated that although there is much communication among employees, there is often little or not enough feedback about their work. Friendly atmosphere of communication among workers can have both positive and negative effects on work where colleagues always expect assistance from others.

External communication

The customer base comprised Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian tourists, whereas before Covid 19 there were also tourists from Ukraine, Germany and Russia.

Apart from standard types of advertising with the use of website, social networks etc, the company used word of mouth advertising from loyal customers, which was considered to be the most reliable source of information for customers.

The advantage of external communication was good contact, friendly communication with clients, whereas the drawback was bad communication analysis; communication was done unsystematically, only occasionally.

4.7 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Lithuanian enterprise (LT2)

The informant emphasized that the company employees were all in the similar position, working as "a close-knit team": *"We share the work equally. Job titles don't mean anything to us, we have job titles to avoid confusion."* This factor can be a peculiarity of this specific company, however, since all Lithuanian companies mentioned horizontal style and the importance of a team, this characteristic can be attributed to a Lithuanian cultural peculiarity.

Internal communication

It was stated that before the Covid-19 pandemic internal communication was realized mostly verbally. They also preferred to communicate by Messenger with Lithuanian and Estonian colleagues, rather than using e-mails. The company emphasized the importance of close circle communication among workers. Virtues emphasized by the informant were direct, detailed and timely communication as well as mutual trust of employees and friendly atmosphere.

The weaknesses mentioned by the company was employees' inaccurateness in study of the information and unsystematic checking of e-mails and a problem of giving feedback to some staff: *"the assumption that a colleague knows everything and does not need to repeat some information"*. Both drawbacks can be explained by the misuse of written form of communication and high preference of verbal communication style.

Internal communication deficiencies mentioned by the company included unpunctuality of some guides, lack of structure of a programme, poor communication control and feedback problems.

External communication

One of the weaknesses in external communication mentioned was the use of English in communication with foreign clients and partners that lead to such problems as "style mistakes, switching to informal communication, etc."

4.8 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Lithuanian enterprise (LT3)

Internal communication

Internal communication included F2F, phone calls, meetings via Zoom, WhatsApp, using Google drive and written reports via e-mail.

However, F2F contact was stated to be the most applicable and preferable.

Work in a team and mutual support were emphasized the same as in other LT companies. Threats included unwillingness of employees to improve communication, loss of information and "*an unbalanced emotional field during the pandemic*".

The use of multiple channels of communication by employees was stated as a drawback due to its influence on the efficiency of communication. It can be beneficial if employees permanently monitor all channels of communication and can backfire if staff do not do it and hence miss some information. Another deficiency included some information not reaching the company and *"employees not knowing what tasks other colleagues are doing".*

External communication

The customer base comprised people from cruise ships who are of different age, status, language and culture, so intercultural communication occurs. Considering multiculturality and diversity of clients, the company attempted to reach such goals as: *"providing correct and verified information, satisfying all customers, creating a positive impression of the city so that people feel satisfied, giving more than one expected before coming."* The SWOT analysis of external communication in the company showed that the main strengths are experienced staff and quality cooperation.

4.9 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Lithuanian enterprise (LT4)

Internal communication

F2F communication was preferred. The informant assessed internal communication as highly effective and emphasized the significance of reputation in the company. The main strengths stated by the informant were *"direct communication, friendly atmosphere, a united team, mutual support and empathetic management."* Horizontal low-power distance management style was preferred. A minus stated by the informant was that he was sometimes unable to keep distance with the employees.

External communication

External communication was characterized by personal and friendly communication: "keeping people coming back again" as well as by the importance of word-of-mouth advertising to attract potential clients.

The informant provided personal examples that could be characteristic both to small companies and culturally ascribed to multi-active group of people who are family- and relationship-oriented.

4.10 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Swedish enterprise (SE1)

Internal communication

During busy times the company had assistants who were students from the local SFI (Swedish classes for Immigrants) who helped with various tasks and cleaning, so the company had workers representing different cultures. Communication took place mostly F2F, with the rare use of SMS.

The SWOT analysis showed that there were no vivid communication problems in the company: workers were internship students or immigrants who were hired with the appropriate knowledge of English and Swedish. The owner used the situation as a challenge: workers had a chance to learn Swedish, whereas she improved her English. Threats and weaknesses were connected with the COVID-19 situation that resulted in closing the business.

External communication

The main goals of external communication were to "communicate effectively so that the guests felt happy and satisfied with their stay, as well as to get good reviews". Similar to the Lithuanian company who provided accommodation services customer satisfaction was highlighted.

Irrespective of the small size of the company a variety of forms of external communication are used: e-mail, phone, Airbnb, Booking.com, tourist maps, business cards and brochures at the local tourist centre.

There were some problems with external communication that the informant could not explain, was unable to make self-assessment

and to provide cultural evaluation properly: she asked the guest about their stay experience, customers replied that there were no problems and later they left unsatisfactory reviews; guests staying out and coming back late and not being mindful of the security risk and inconvenience to the owner and other guests. Both examples include misunderstanding with clients based on the difference in communication style, preference of written form of communication (e-mails, use of signs) by the owner of the hostel and the expectation of tourists to hear information (verbal form).

4.11 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Swedish enterprise (SE2)

A small-sized enterprise with only 4 staff members providing accommodation activities. The owner stated that the mission of the company was to be a small family-run sustainable business that bestows the different Arctic experiences to all their guests. A horizontal style of management was mentioned.

Internal communication

Different forms of internal communication were mentioned: phone calls, WhatsApp messages, e-mails and F2F.

The SWOT analysis showed that strengths of internal communication were the use of different communication channels, good mutual in-house contact and the fact that it was a small flexible business, whereas weaknesses were that only one person spoke Swedish in the company. The company stated such opportunities as the use of other communication channels, cooperation with other local businesses.

External communication

The main goal of external communication mentioned by the informant was to learn the language to communicate better and more efficiently with foreign clients. The main means of communication stated by the informant included Booking.com, Airbnb, WhatsApp, telephone, Instagram, website, Facebook.

4.12 Intercultural aspects revealed during the analysis of a Swedish enterprise (SE 3)

A one-man business with a sub-contracted accountant. The owner works alone but wants to attract other family members to help her to work with someone whom she "fully trusts".

Internal communication

The mission of the company was to help foreigners and immigrants in Sweden *"to understand the social norms and Swedish codes"*. Since business activities included coaching and training, the owner was actively involved in using social networks like Instagram where she *"shared a piece of her Swedish life daily*". Apart from coaching on intercultural matters the book about the culture of Sweden and important Swedish culture facts was written.

The SWOT analysis showed that the owner had good internal contact with other workers and assistants who were her family members. The weakness was lack of staff. Opportunities included different interests of clients and the expansion of business.

Threats mentioned were missed opportunities because she did not have staff and had a fear of competition: *"Other bigger companies may take advantage of the fact she cannot give that many trainings; One more threat is that Malmo has a big number of immigrants who do not want to integrate into the Swedish culture"*.

The company owner repeated several times that trust was important for her and she did not have any internal communication deficiencies.

External communication

The customer base of the company comprised diverse cultural and social strata - students, expatriates, immigrants, workers who wanted to integrate into the Swedish society, hence intercultural communication was essential.

Besides that, external communication included contact with clients to arrange courses, trainings, other business activities. Means of communication included e-mails, Instagram, LinkedIn to keep people updated about company activities.

Discussion

The study showed, first, that intercultural problems are encountered both in internal and external communication of the enterprises. In the first case communication occurs in-house among workers with different cultural background (e.g., different ethnic groups, e.g. Latvian and Russian (LV1); urban and rural people (LV3); staff members from different countries (LV4); foreign employees hired by the employer (SE1), etc.), whereas in the second case communication takes place between the company and clients (foreign tourists, foreign students, immigrants, etc.) or among clients (LV5).

Second, it was summarized that vertical (high power distance - LV2, LV4, LT1, SE1), horizontal (low power distance -LV2, LT2, SE2) or both (LV1, LV3, LV5) styles of company management can be noticed in the enterprises of three countries. In cases when high-power distance was observed, informants highlighted their preference of low-power distance, for example "did not obey" the rules of the management and wanted to have more authority in decision-making. Often conflicts in internal communication arouse when the management style, for example, vertical did not coincide with horizontal style expected by employees.

Other internal intercultural communication problems were noticed when there was discrepancy in communication style. For example, representatives from Lithuanian enterprises are more dialogue-oriented, multi-active people who prefer face-to-face offline communication, however the Covid-19 pandemic forced some of them to switch to online distant communication. On the other hand, preference of face-to-face communication and eloquence were stated as factors that obstruct successful information delivery and systematization of information (LV4).

Latvian representatives who demonstrated more characteristics of linear-active, data-oriented people did not express dissatisfaction with the necessity to work online; on the other hand, in some cases it was stated that eloquence and frequent use of WhatsApp chat for internal communication may hinder working processes.

Swedish enterprises, who demonstrated successful use of both styles of internal communication did not highlight any style as a problem.

External intercultural communication conflicts were based on difference in communication style of employees and clients, preferences of online communication and use of visual signs for information (data-oriented, linear-active characteristics) or face-to-face offline communication, use of word-of-mouth advertising (dialogue-oriented, multi-active characteristics), perception of the role of woman and man (dimensions of gender), short-term and long-term orientedness and law-obedience (dimension of truth).

It was concluded that enterprises in all three countries did not have much difficulty in working online during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In both Latvia and Lithuania there was a strong negative impact of the pandemic on business that resulted in withholding or closure of the business. However, Swedish enterprises that were characterised by mixed style of internal and external communication – both online and face-to-face, had positive affect of pandemic with higher turnover.

Conclusions

The analysis of the empirical data gathered within the NordPlus adult project NPAD-2020/10015 aimed at studying intergenerational problems in tourism enterprises of Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden showed a considerable number of intercultural problems inside the companies.

The research discovered the following intercultural problems encountered in internal and external communication in 12 companies: difference and problems in perception of management styles and power distance by employees in the companies; lack of feedback; communication barriers among employees and with clients; difference in communication styles among employees and foreign clients; language barrier among employees and with clients; canteen culture; cultural differences considering the urban-rural dimension; delay in feedback and passing of information in internal communication; linguistic, cultural and gender problems among foreign clients in a student hostel; difference in perception of laws, regulations and Covid-19 instructions between employees and clients; difference and

problems connected with time perception by representatives of different cultures.

It was revealed that informants do not always evaluate deficiencies in internal and external communication from the perspective of intercultural assessment and cannot explain the possible reasons of intercultural problems. The complexity, richness and variety of company profiles sometimes complicates the work of enterprises and leads to some conflicts among employees and with clients, especially considering that workers are often unable to culturally assess a situation due to some lack of intercultural competence.

In order to become skilful intercultural communicators workers employed in the tourism industry should enhance intercultural competence - to have the appropriate attitude towards people of other cultures, respect others' values, be open and non-judgemental, tolerate ambiguity; they should possess cultural knowledge of their clientele and be able to listen and analyse them; as a result their internal outcome might include adaptability, flexibility and empathy to their customers, whereas their external manifestation (external outcome) has to result in effective communication and behaviour in the intercultural context.

Consideration of all the obstacles and intercultural problems encountered in internal and external communication in the enterprises of three countries can become the background for further project research, giving grounds for the development of study materials of intercultural competence training.

Research limitations

Certain limitations can be observed with regard to the present research. First, the initial project was focused on the study of intergenerational problems rather than on intercultural communication, which resulted in the limited amount of the data regarding intercultural issues collected from the analysis of interviews and generalization of the study. Second, the sample scope was limited by the number of informants in Sweden.

Implications for future research

Future research might be needed to provide a more scrutinised analysis of the various aspects of intercultural communication involving a wider range of stakeholders.

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