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What Does 'Having Close Friends from Abroad' Mean for the Intercultural Competencies: A New View on the Antecedents of Cultural Intelligence

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Abstract: The study analyzes the impact of intercultural friendship on cultural intelligence (CQ), which is defined as an individual's ability to operate effectively in a new intercultural environment. Two hypotheses were tested using an online questionnaire completed in the autumn of 2022 by 358 university students from a private university in Prague, Czech Republic. The participants represented 26 countries, with the majority being Czech nationals. The hypotheses were as follows: (1) overall cultural intelligence, and (2) all its components (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral) would be higher or lower depending on whether individuals had close social ties, operationalized by the binary variable "intercultural friendship". The first hypothesis was confirmed. However, the second hypothesis was only supported for the motivational and cognitive facets of CQ. Our results indicate that CQ is fundamentally a relational construct, developing primarily through contact with members of other cultures. Contextual factors, such as language skills, travel to foreign countries, residence abroad, and the frequency of intercultural contacts, create situational prerequisites for establishing closer intercultural relationships. However, they do not contribute directly to the development of intercultural skills but rather do so indirectly through these relationships.

Keywords: cultural intelligence (CQ); intercultural/cross-cultural friendship; CQ theories; antecedents of CQ

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1. Introduction

The development of cultural intelligence (CQ) enables individuals working, studying, or living abroad (i.e., in culturally different environments) to better adapt to foreign settings (He et al. 2019). CQ continues to be a topic of significant academic interest, as this research helps to understand and explain the performance of employees in culturally diverse environments (Alshaibani and Bakir 2017; Rockstuhl and Van Dyne 2018; Tu et al. 2019). Cultural intelligence transcends specific cultural contexts; it characterizes individuals based on their ability to navigate successfully in culturally new and unfamiliar environments. In this regard, CQ is influenced by personality traits and characteristics, such as openness to new experiences or extraversion (Presbitero 2018), the degree of ethnocentrism (Lee et al. 2018), and demographic or biographical variables (Wawrosz and Jurásek 2023). Individual outcomes in intercultural situations can also be partially predicted based on cognitive abilities (Ang and Van Dyne 2015), as well as social intelligence or emotional intelligence (Crowne 2013). Moreover, the perceived degree of difference between the individual's familiar cultural environment and the new one plays a significant role (Zhang 2013). Recent studies (Kokubun et al. 2024) even explore less conventional relationships, such as the association between lifestyles (e.g., diet and walking habits) and CQ, finding that dietary balance and walking frequency are significantly associated with CQ.

To fully grasp the importance of the factors mentioned above, it is crucial to recognize that CQ is fundamentally a relational variable. CQ, as the foundation of cross-cultural or intercultural competencies (Matsumoto and Hwang 2013), develops through interactions with individuals who embody specific cultural values. Significant development of intercultural competence and CQ is unlikely if individuals in a foreign country remain insulated within their own cultural environment and continue to live in their socio-cultural bubble. Our article emphasizes that CQ is inherently a relational construct—individuals develop and express their CQ primarily through relationships with people from different cultures. While it seems intuitive that increased contact with individuals from other cultures may lead to higher CQ, this relationship has not been sufficiently tested.

One form of intercultural contact is intercultural friendship (Gareis 1995; Alexandra 2018), which can occur through both distant communication (e.g., correspondence) and close, personal relationships (e.g., regular in-person meetings and conversations between individuals from different cultures). This study aims to investigate whether cultural intelligence (CQ) and its facets (metacognitive, cognitive, behavioral, and motivational) are influenced by the presence of intercultural friendships. Specifically, it examines whether CQ and its facets differ between two groups of respondents: those who report having close intercultural friendships and those who do not. The notion that having a close friend from another culture may be a prerequisite for developing intercultural skills has not been thoroughly tested, nor has the question of whether certain antecedents (such as the number of foreign countries visited) influence the likelihood of having a close friend abroad. This article contributes to the investigation of these topics. The main research questions are:

1. Is there a significant difference in the mean of cultural intelligence scores for individuals with friends-foreigners compared to those without these intercultural relational ties?
2. Do the respondents who reported having a close friend from abroad score higher in all CQ facets (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, behavioral) than those who did not report having a close friend from abroad?

The article is organized as follows. The Literature Review in Section 2 explains the main terms (cultural intelligence and intercultural friendship), including their relationships. Section 3 introduces our hypotheses, including the conceptual research schema of our study. Section 4 describes how the hypotheses are investigated, the results are summarized in the Section 5 and discussed in the Section 6. Section 7 summarizes the main points.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Intelligence

There are numerous definitions of cultural intelligence (CQ) (Liao and Thomas 2020). One of the most widely cited is by Earley and Ang (2003), who defined CQ as the human ability to adapt effectively to new cultural contexts. They proposed that cultural intelligence comprises three facets: a cognitive facet (specific knowledge acquired about a new culture), a motivational facet (the tendency to act upon cognitive knowledge), and a behavioral facet (the ability to behave appropriately in a foreign culture). Subsequently, a fourth facet was added to this concept: the meta-cognitive facet (Ang and Van Dyne 2015), which reflects the ability to consciously process and regulate perceptions during intercultural encounters. As Sternberg et al. (2023) argue, CQ is a distinct construct that is related to but not identical to general intelligence. It differs by incorporating practical, tacit knowledge gained from experience; it is not the quantity of experience that matters, but rather what one learns from that experience. CQ is expressed in human behavior—individuals with higher CQ are better able to recognize, understand, and adapt to cross-cultural contexts (Alifuddin and Widodo 2022). Consequently, CQ contributes to greater life satisfaction (Jurásek and Wawrosz 2023).

The construct of CQ is currently well articulated; there is a fairly good understanding of the factors that positively develop cultural intelligence; there is an understanding of what beneficial outcomes a developed CQ can lead to, and why this construct is important. The interest of researchers is mainly focused on examining the influence of mediators

and moderators on the previously established direct relationships between CQ and other variables (either as antecedents or outcome variables). The research concerning antecedents investigates, for instance, the number of countries visited (Ott and Michailova 2018), the length of stay abroad (Hu et al. 2017), the frequency of inter-cultural contact with the local population (Presbitero and Toledano 2018), the number of foreign languages an individual knows (Eisenberg et al. 2013), and level of knowledge of foreign languages (Huff 2013).

2.2. Intercultural Friendship

The concept of friendship falls within the domain of positive psychology (Hall 2012; Hart 2020), as close social relationships have a significant positive impact on a wide range of outcomes, including mental health (Cleary et al. 2018), sense of well-being (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2013), social skills and happiness (Demir et al. 2012), psychological resilience (Graber et al. 2016), and longevity (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010). Friendship also contributes to better health, reduces stress and loneliness (Lodder et al. 2017), increases the likelihood of receiving help from others (Van der Horst and Coffé 2012), and lowers the risk of mental illnesses such as depression (Warren et al. 2018).

These positive outcomes are evident in relationships between two individuals who understand each other well and share a strong bond, regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds. However, not everyone is equally capable of establishing and maintaining intercultural friendships due to differences in mental dispositions, preferences, capabilities, or opportunities. It can be assumed that an individual is more likely to form friendships in a foreign country the longer they live there and the more frequently they interact with locals. Logically, one might also expect that the ability to communicate in the local language increases the likelihood of forming close ties with individuals of different ethnic and cultural origins.

2.3. Relations Between CQ and Intercultural Friendship

Close and friendly relationships between individuals from different cultural backgrounds have several positive outcomes, such as reduced fear of communicating with strangers (or a greater willingness to engage in communication with them), openness to other people's views, and reduced prejudice (Williams and Johnson 2011). That is an essential prerequisite for successful intercultural encounters, as more tolerant people do not distance themselves as much from individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. International friendships motivate individuals to attend more multicultural events, travel abroad, stay longer abroad, and be more willing to study at a university abroad (Williams and Johnson 2011).

These features are well described and explained by various theories, including contact theory, social exchange theory (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Cropanzano et al. 2017), attachment theory (Azizi et al. 2015; Fearon and Roisman 2017), social learning theory (Yarberry and Sims 2021), and intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew et al. 2011). However, to the best of our knowledge, the relationship between friendship and cultural intelligence has not yet been examined, despite the availability of a common theoretical foundation applicable to human interactions characterized by intercultural diversity. For instance, according to social learning theory (Hart 2020), individuals, through close ties and the direct influence of a friend from a different culture, assimilate new patterns of behavior, attitudes, and emotional responses associated with a different cultural environment into their existing mental framework, which is shaped by prior experiences and knowledge. In this way, they develop their cultural intelligence, particularly the behavioral facet. International friendships create favorable conditions for learning about and understanding other cultural worlds, customs, and values. Sharing these culturally diverse inner worlds in a friendly manner strengthens mutual trust, reduces natural fears of unfamiliar cultures, increases willingness to engage with individuals from the cultural background of one's friend, and diminishes and overcomes prejudices against other cultures or ethnicities.

Social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al. 2017) offers a perspective on the motivation to socialize with individuals from different countries and cultures through the lens of cost–benefit analysis. People often evaluate relationships—whether consciously or unconsciously—using economic principles. Motivation to interact with those from different cultural backgrounds can stem from intrinsic sources (e.g., innate curiosity and openness to new experiences) or extrinsic factors (e.g., learning a foreign language or improving job prospects). While intercultural relationships, such as friendships and partnerships, offer many advantages, they also present challenges (Fontaine and Dorch 1980), which individuals weigh when deciding whether to establish, maintain, develop, or terminate such relationships.

Attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby 1999; Azizi et al. 2015) suggests that close friendships are more likely to develop when individuals can respond appropriately to another person's cues. This process involves not only social and emotional intelligence but also culturally informed approaches. Individuals may receive cognitive cues from intercultural friendships—whether through conversations and shared experiences or by learning factual information about their friend's background—which can influence the development of the cognitive facet of cultural intelligence (CQ). Exposure to friends from different cultures may also encourage individuals to integrate new knowledge into their mental framework, thereby enhancing the meta-cognitive facet of CQ.

Intergroup contact theory posits that familiarity between groups reduces the likelihood of conflict (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Contact between different cultural groups (e.g., between white and Black Americans) helps to diminish prejudice and distrust. This theory has been supported by numerous practical studies (see Pettigrew et al. 2011; Pettigrew 2021). However, it highlights that certain conditions must be met, including equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities. From this perspective, intercultural friendships can yield similar benefits by fostering recognition of shared traits and developing according to these principles.

Recent research (e.g., Pidduck et al. 2022) has examined the relationship between cross-cultural experience and CQ, revealing that CQ can be enhanced through various forms of cross-cultural exposure. For example, corporate expatriates and short-term assignees, who experience more intensive and prolonged cross-cultural interactions, tend to develop stronger multicultural identities. In contrast, global business travelers and virtual team members, who often have less intense cultural interactions, show less significant CQ development. Cross-cultural friendships contribute to the acquisition of cross-cultural experience, though their impact depends on factors such as the intensity of the friendship, including the frequency and strength of interactions.

3. Hypotheses

We formulate, based on the previous text, the following hypotheses:

(H1). *People who self-report having no intercultural close friendships would have lower scores on scales measuring cultural intelligence than those who have friends from abroad;*

(H2). *People who self-report having no intercultural close friendships would have lower scores on scales measuring facets of cultural intelligence (metacognitive, cognitive, behavioral, motivational) than those with friends from abroad.*

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is influenced by various factors beyond intercultural friendship. In our research, we utilize logistic regression to examine several such factors: the number of countries an individual has visited or lived in (Crowne 2008), the duration of foreign stays (Rose et al. 2010), the frequency of intercultural contacts (Sousa et al. 2019), and the knowledge of foreign languages in terms of both their number and proficiency level (Shannon and Begley 2008).

Our approach can be described as follows: The antecedents of CQ investigated in this study provide contextual conditions for developing cultural competence, primarily through direct interaction with individuals from foreign cultures (Lee et al. 2018). In other words, possessing extensive knowledge of multiple languages—even at a high level of proficiency—is insufficient for cultural effectiveness if this knowledge is used solely for reading foreign texts rather than engaging in direct communication with people from other cultures. From this perspective, frequent questionnaire items measuring the frequency of intercultural contact may be interpreted differently by respondents. For example, individuals might report high levels of intercultural interaction because they engage daily with people from foreign cultures. However, if these interactions occur within a predominantly ethnically homogeneous environment, the impact on CQ may be limited, and the reported frequency of intercultural contact could be misleading. A typical example is observed among Chinese and Russian students studying at Czech universities, who often interact primarily with each other, resulting in lower CQ. Similarly, Lee et al. (2020) note that differences between Cantonese and Mandarin can hinder Macao students studying in China from fully participating in local life and developing their CQ.

We, therefore, argue that traditionally considered antecedents—such as the number of foreign countries visited, the length of stay abroad, the frequency of intercultural contacts with the local population, the number of foreign languages spoken, and the proficiency in those languages merely create a conducive context and preconditions for developing intercultural ties. However, these factors alone do not guarantee an increase in cultural intelligence (CQ). Instead, the enhancement of CQ is more effectively realized through the element of "friendship", operationalized in this study as a binary variable. This suggests that a proactive engagement, rather than a passive presence in an interculturally different environment, is essential. Therefore, cultural skills are not primarily driven by mere knowledge of foreign languages but by the active application of this knowledge in intercultural interactions.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Participants

Our hypotheses were tested using an online questionnaire completed by a sample of 358 respondents, following the exclusion of cases with missing data from an initial 372. Having 300 or more cases (as in our case) likely leads to a stable factor solution (Field 2009). The respondents were university students at the Czech private University of Finance and Administration (VSFS) during the fall term of the 2022/2023 academic year. All of them studied at the Faculty of Economic Studies and were enrolled in both Czech and English Bachelor's and Master's degree programs, such as Economics and Management, Finance, Marketing Communication, and Informatics. The students were contacted via university email. Additionally, lecturers who directly taught the students encouraged their participation to maximize the response rate. It is important to note that participation was voluntary and anonymous, with no incentives provided (e.g., credits). The authors of this article do not have information on the identities of the respondents. Participation in the survey adhered to standard ethical guidelines (see Israel 2014 for details), and apart from completing the questionnaire, participants were not subject to any other research or testing.

The Czech Republic is relatively homogeneous, with only about 10% of its population (approximately 1 million out of 10 million) being foreigners. However, the Faculty of Economic Studies at VSFS is quite international. At the time of the research, it had 1525 students enrolled. Of these, about one-third (485) were international students who had lived in another country before beginning their studies. This group of international students can be further divided into the following subgroups: 1. Regular Students: these students were enrolled in full bachelor's or master's programs and primarily came from post-Soviet countries (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan) and post-socialist countries (e.g., Serbia, Bulgaria); 2. Erasmus Students: these students participated in short (one or two terms) exchange programs and came from various European na-

tions, including Germany, Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Hungary, and others. As demonstrated by Jurásek and Wawrosz (2021), many empirical studies on cultural intelligence utilize university student samples and achieve strong external validity.

Women comprised 63% of respondents, and 37% were men. There were 8% of respondents under 20 years of age, and 61% of respondents were between 20 and 29 years of age. Bachelor's degree programs were enrolled by 32% of the respondents, master's degree programs by 55% of respondents, and the rest were enrolled in doctoral degree programs. The questionnaire was completed by respondents from a total of 26 countries in the following languages: Czech (59%), Russian (21%), English (11%), and Chinese (11%). Czechs were the most represented among the respondents (56%), followed by respondents of Russian (10%), Chinese (8%), and Ukrainian (6%) nationalities. Respondents were also asked to indicate the reasons for their stay abroad. As a rule, they usually stay abroad (this applies mainly to Czech respondents) during holidays or vacations (51%), for work (3%), study (11%), or study and work together (23%). Another 12% of respondents said they spend time abroad for other reasons.

4.2. Measurement and Procedures

Cultural intelligence was measured by the frequently used Cultural Intelligence Scale (Ang et al. 2007) which is composed of 4 facets and 20 items in total: Metacognitive CQ (4 items, the Cronbach's alpha is 0.797), Cognitive CQ (6 items, the Cronbach's alpha is 0.832), Motivational CQ (5 items, the Cronbach's alpha is 0.860) and Behavioral CQ (5 items, the Cronbach's alpha is 0.862). The sample items are, for instance, "I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I use when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds" for Metacognitive CQ, "I know the legal and economic systems of other cultures" for Cognitive CQ, "I enjoy interacting with people from other cultures" for Motivational CQ, "I change my verbal behavior (e.g., accent, tone) when a cross-cultural interaction requires it" for Behavioral CQ. Since the respondents included both students of Czech origin and international (non-Czech) students, an innovative approach was taken to ensure full comprehension of all questionnaire items. The questionnaire was distributed in four language versions—English, Czech, Russian, and Chinese—an approach not commonly used in similar studies. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire in the language they master best.

Three language versions of the Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Scale, specifically English (Ang et al. 2007), Russian (Belovol et al. 2012), and Chinese (Schlägel and Sarstedt 2016), had already been validated in prior studies. However, the Czech version had not undergone validation until this study. For the creation of the Czech version of the questionnaire, in accordance with the recommendations (Schlägel and Sarstedt 2016; Roux and Suzuki 2017), the back-to-back translation method has been used (Bücker et al. 2015). This process involved translating the original 20-item CQS (Ang et al. 2007) from English into Czech and then back into English by a different translator fluent in both languages. Similar methods have been employed in previous CQ research (Cramer 2018). Recognizing that linguistic nuances and the ability to accurately comprehend questionnaire items can significantly affect results in intercultural research. The method used should ensure equivalence of meaning across languages.

Descriptive statistics and correlations were examined for the four dimensions of Cultural Intelligence in Czech: Metacognitive CQ, Cognitive CQ, Motivational CQ, and Behavioral CQ. The mean score for Metacognitive CQ was 5.32 with a standard deviation of 0.73, showing a strong positive correlation of 0.82 with Cognitive CQ. Both Cognitive CQ and Motivational CQ had a mean score of 3.94, with a standard deviation of 1.06. Behavioral CQ had a mean score of 4.75 with a standard deviation of 0.87. The results indicate that the four CQ dimensions are positively interrelated, with individuals scoring high in one dimension also tending to score high in the others. The generally high mean scores suggest that the sample demonstrates a relatively high level of cultural intelligence.

After collecting the responses, structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis to examine the fit of the data to the hypothesized four-factor model of CQ was performed. The statistical software SmartPLS 4 was used to conduct data analysis that aimed to assess the validity and reliability of the measurement model, examining four latent variables of the CQ construct: Metacognitive, Cognitive, Motivational, and Behavioral. The measurement model addressed latent variables inferred from observed variables. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was employed to assess the model's validity and reliability (Hair et al. 2020).

To assess the model fit of the Czech version of the CQ scale, several indices were used based on the recommended thresholds (Dash and Paul 2021). The chi-square value for the estimated model was 299.350 with 164 degrees of freedom, which was significant (p = 0.000). Although this significant p-value is common in large samples, other fit indices suggested a good model fit. The ChiSqr/df value was 1.825, indicating an acceptable fit. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) was 0.879, and the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) was 0.845, both suggesting a relatively good fit. Additionally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.061, and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was 0.063, both indicating a good fit. The Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) values were 0.922 and 0.933, respectively, further supporting a reasonable model fit.

Reliability analysis showed that Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for all CQ dimensions were above acceptable thresholds, indicating high internal consistency. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha values were 0.879 for Behavioral CQ, 0.823 for Cognitive CQ, 0.824 for Metacognitive CQ, and 0.876 for Motivational CQ. Average variance extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5 for all dimensions except Cognitive CQ (=0.444), which suggests good convergent validity overall. Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio and the Fornell–Larcker criterion. HTMT values for all pairs of latent variables were below the 0.85 threshold, and the diagonal values of the correlation matrix were higher than the corresponding inter-construct correlations, supporting discriminant validity. Generally, the overall model fit was considered acceptable.

To assess current friendships based on intercultural ties and relationships, the participants were asked about the number of foreign visited countries and the number of foreign countries in which they lived, the reasons for visiting other countries (1 = only for work; 2 = only for studies; 3 = for both study and work; 4 = for vacation; 5 = other), the time spent abroad in total, the frequency of contacts with local residents, how often they go to local shops, restaurants or markets (1 = never; 2 = occasionally; 3 = sometimes; 4 = very often; 5 = always), the number of foreign languages they know, and whether they have a close (or best) friend from abroad (0 = No; 1 = yes). They were also asked to assess their capability to speak in Czech (0 = none; 1 = poor; 2 = good; 3 = excellent).

To further understand better the importance of intercultural relational ties that can be related to the development of cultural intelligence, the factors predicting the likelihood that respondents would report having a close (or the best) friend from abroad were analyzed. For this purpose, logistic regression was used to assess how well a set of predictor variables that are related to CQ, such as the number of countries lived for one year or more (Adair et al. 2016; Lee et al. 2018), language skills (Shannon and Begley 2008; Thomas et al. 2015), and the number of countries visited (Ang et al. 2006), predicts or explains the categorial dependent variable (having a close friend from abroad).

4.3. Design and Analysis

We used a between-groups non-experimental design (or nonequivalent group designs) to compare the cultural intelligence (and its facets) scores between the students who reported having close intercultural social ties (operationalized as a close or best friendship with foreigners). The dichotomous variable of friendship was used to create the groups; other variables (cultural intelligence and its facets) were measured to obtain a set of scores within each condition. We expected that the cultural intelligence scores (or some of its facets) of those who reported having intercultural social ties (intercultural relationships)

would be different (higher) than those without such intercultural ties. Descriptive statistics were obtained for each scale and subscale score of CQ. Data were screened for sample size, normality, outliers, linearity, homogeneity of regression, multicollinearity and singularity, and homogeneity of variance–covariance matrices (Pallant 2020), and then analyzed with independent t-tests to compare the two groups on continuous variables (testing H1); furthermore, MANOVA analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis H2.

Then, direct logistic regression was performed to assess the impact of several factors: (a) the number of visited countries, (b) the length of time spent in foreign countries, (c) the frequency of face-to-face intercultural interaction and foreign language skills, (d) the number of languages that one knows, and (e) the languages proficiency, on the likelihood that respondents would report that they had a close friend from abroad (of different intercultural backgrounds).

Last, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable, cultural intelligence, along with its facets (MC, COG, MOT, BEH). The analysis was performed in two blocks: in the first block, the intercultural friendship variable was entered, and in the second block, five additional variables were included (as the number of foreign countries visited, time spent in foreign countries, frequency of intercultural interaction, number of languages one knows, and language proficiency).

5. Results

Our analysis includes 358 answers (respondents/cases) after moving missing data. Having a close friend abroad was declared by 233 (65.1%) respondents, and 86 of them (24% from 358) declared that they have their best friend abroad. Separate means and standard deviations are provided for those with and without friends from abroad (of intercultural differences).

5.1. Friendship and Cultural Intelligence as the Whole

The construct of CQ has good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha is 0.890). An independent-sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the cultural intelligence scores for respondents with foreign friends and respondents who did not report having close friends from abroad (see Table 1). There was a significant difference in scores for both groups of respondents, i.e., for those who reported having a close friend from abroad (n = 233, M = 5.07, SD = 0.796) and those who reported not having a close friend from abroad (n = 125, M = 4.64, SD = 0.878); t(356) = 4.684, $p < 0.001$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 0.429, 95% CI: 0.249 to 0.609) was moderate (eta squared = 0.0581) (Cohen 1992).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of cultural intelligence and its facets for participants with and without close friends of different cultural backgrounds + the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha).

	With Intercultural Close Social Ties (Friends) (n = 233)	Without Intercultural Close Social Ties (Friends) (n = 125)	Internal Consistency (Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients)
Cultural intelligence (CQ)	5.07 (0.796)	4.64 (0.878)	0.890
Metacognitive CQ	5.57 (1.083)	5.41 (0.993)	0.797
Cognitive CQ	4.37 (1.029)	3.81 (1.178)	0.832
Motivational CQ	5.57 (1.087)	4.88 (1.283)	0.860
Behavioral CQ	5.02 (1.209)	4.80 (1.339)	0.862

Source: own work.

A similar independent-sample *t*-test was conducted when respondents were asked to report having a best friend from abroad. The analysis gave these results for both groups:

those who have the best friend (n = 86, M = 5.14, SD = 0.750) and those who have not the best friend from abroad (n = 272, M = 4–85, SD = 0.868); t(356) = 2.791, $p = 0.006$. However, the effect size (eta squared) was very small (0.021).

5.2. Friendship and Cultural Intelligence Facets

The CQ facets also have a good internal consistency (see Table 2). A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate differences in all CQ facets (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral) for groups of respondents when reported to have or not have a close friend from abroad. The former are the dependent variables (i.e., CQ facets), and the latter are the independent variables. Preliminary assumption testing was conducted to check for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and multicollinearity, with no serious violations noted. There were statistically significant differences between two groups of respondents, i.e., ones who reported having a close friend from abroad and ones that reported not having a close friend culturally different, on the combined dependent variables, F(4, 353) = 10.719, $p = 0.000$, Wilks' Lambda = 0.976, partial eta squared = 0.024. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the difference in reaching statistical significance was the following: cognitive facet, F(1, 356) = 21.683, $p = 0.000$, partial eta squared = 0.057, and motivational facet, F(1, 356) = 29.150, $p = 0.000$, partial eta squared = 0.076. An inspection of the mean scores indicated that those with close foreign friends reported higher levels of motivational, resp. cognitive CQ facet (M = 5.573, SD = 1.087), resp. (M = 4.368, SD = 1.029) than those without close foreign friends (M = 4.879, SD = 1.283), resp. (M = 3.809, SD = 1.178).

Table 2. Logistic regression predicting the likelihood of reporting to have a close friend from abroad.

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
NUM_COUN	0.341	0.129	70.029	1	0.008	10.406	Lower	Upper
LIV_ABROAD	0.451	0.091	240.584	1	0.000	10.569	10.313	10.875
FR_CONT	0.350	0.147	50.703	1	0.017	10.420	10.065	10.893
LAN_NUM	0.087	0.206	0.178	1	0.673	10.091	0.728	10.634
LAN_PER	0.543	0.233	50.439	1	0.020	10.720	10.090	20.714

NUM_COUN = number of countries visited; LIV_ABROAD = the length of stay abroad; FR_CONT = the frequency of inter-cultural contacts with the local population; LAN_NUM = the number of foreign languages an individual knows; LAN_PER = level of knowledge of foreign languages. Source: own work.

Additionally, the hierarchical regression analysis was conducted, and the results are reported in Tables 3 and 4 below. In the first step, Close Intercultural Friendship explained 3% of the variance in Cultural Intelligence ($R^2 = 0.03$, F(1, 352) = 10.72, $p = 0.001$). After adding the intercultural experience variables in the second step, the model explained a total of 7.7% of the variance (R^2 change = 0.047, F change (5, 347) = 3.55, $p = 0.004$). Among the variables, only the length of stay abroad was a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.199$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that extended time spent living abroad contributes more substantially to predicting cultural intelligence than the other factors.

The hierarchical regression analyses yielded varied results regarding the influence of Close Intercultural Friendship across the different facets of cultural intelligence. For the cognitive (COG) facet, Close Intercultural Friendship was initially a significant predictor, explaining 5.9% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.059$, F(1, 352) = 21.96, $p < 0.001$), but its influence diminished when additional intercultural experience variables were added ($\beta = 0.121$, $p = 0.031$). In the motivational (MOT) facet, Close Intercultural Friendship remained a strong predictor even after adding other variables, explaining 8.0% of the variance initially ($R^2 = 0.080$, F(1, 352) = 30.59, $p < 0.001$) and retaining its significance in the final model ($\beta = 0.188$, $p < 0.001$). However, for the metacognitive (MC) and behavioral (BEH) facets,

Close Intercultural Friendship was not a significant predictor, contributing only 0.7% of the variance in BEH ($R^2 = 0.007$, $p = 0.126$).

Table 3. Hierarchical regression analysis of cultural intelligence and its facets with intercultural friendship and additional predictors.

Dependent Variable	Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
						R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
CQ	1 [a]	0.172 [a]	0.030	0.027	1.46704	0.030	10.718	1	352	0.001
	2 [b]	0.277 [b]	0.077	0.061	1.44120	0.047	3.547	5	347	0.004
MC	1 [a]	0.083 [a]	0.007	0.004	1.05920	0.007	2.452	1	352	0.118
	2 [b]	0.204 [b]	0.042	0.025	1.04791	0.035	2.525	5	347	0.029
COG	1 [a]	0.242 [a]	0.059	0.056	1.08152	0.059	21.964	1	352	0.000
	2 [b]	0.386 [b]	0.149	0.134	1.03562	0.090	7.379	5	347	0.000
MOT	1 [a]	0.283 [a]	0.080	0.077	1.15767	0.080	30.588	1	352	0.000
	2 [b]	0.402 [b]	0.161	0.147	1.11329	0.081	6.725	5	347	0.000
BEH	1 [a]	0.081 [a]	0.007	0.004	1.26257	0.007	2.353	1	352	0.126
	2 [b]	0.197 [b]	0.039	0.022	1.25091	0.032	2.318	5	347	0.043

a. Predictors: (Constant), Close Intercultural Friendship. b. Predictors: (Constant), Close Intercultural Friendship, Number of Visited Countries, Time Spent in Foreign Countries, Frequency of intercultural interaction, number of languages one knows, and language proficiency.

Table 4. Standardized coefficients for predicting CQ and its facets.

Model		Dependent Variable									
		CQ		MC		COG		MOT		BEH	
		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
		Beta		Beta		Beta		Beta		Beta	
1	(Constant)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
	INT_EX9	0.172	0.001	0.083	0.118	0.242	0.000	0.283	0.000	0.081	0.126
2	(Constant)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
	INT_EX9	0.081	0.164	0.041	0.484	0.121	0.031	0.188	0.001	0.018	0.761
	INT_EX3	0.199	0.001	0.084	0.166	0.202	0.000	0.261	0.000	0.087	0.154
	INT_EX1	0.005	0.924	−0.126	0.026	−0.048	0.369	−0.085	0.111	−0.077	0.174
	INT_EX5	−0.031	0.594	−0.006	0.922	−0.033	0.554	0.061	0.271	0.008	0.891
	INT_EX11	0.005	0.938	0.014	0.821	0.042	0.459	−0.044	0.436	0.039	0.516
	INT_EX7	0.083	0.164	0.122	0.044	0.197	0.001	0.030	0.599	0.128	0.035

Note: Close Intercultural Friendship (INT_EX9), Number of Visited Countries (INT_EX1), Time Spent in Foreign Countries (INT_EX3), Frequency of intercultural interaction (INT_EX5), number of languages one knows (INT_EX7), and language proficiency (INT_EX11).

Table 3 presents the results of the hierarchical regression analysis, highlighting the motivational (MOT) and cognitive (COG) dimensions of cultural intelligence (CQ). These two facets show the most significant results. The motivational facet (MOT) exhibits a substantial increase in explained variance, with R^2 rising from 0.080 to 0.161 when additional predictors such as number of visited countries, intercultural interactions, and language proficiency are included, indicating a strong predictive relationship ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, the cognitive facet (COG) demonstrates a notable increase in R^2 from 0.059 to 0.149, showing that these predictors also significantly contribute to explaining variability in cognitive CQ ($p < 0.001$).

Table 4 presents standardized coefficients (Beta) and significance levels from two hierarchical regression models, predicting overall cultural intelligence (CQ) and its facets. In Model 1 when only INT_EX9 (having a close friend from abroad) is considered this

variable significantly predicts CQ (β = 0.172, p = 0.001), COG (β = 0.242, p = 0.000), and MOT (β = 0.283, p = 0.000). In Model 2, when other variables are included, INT_EX9's influence weakens, while INT_EX3 (length of time spent abroad) becomes a key predictor for CQ (β = 0.199, p = 0.001), COG (β = 0.202, p = 0.000), and MOT (β = 0.261, p = 0.000). Additionally, INT_EX7 (number of languages one knows) shows a significant impact on COG (β = 0.197, p = 0.001).

6. Discussion

Quantitative data obtained from questionnaires are fundamentally based on the qualitative judgments of respondents, which introduces a level of subjectivity to survey results. For example, a questionnaire item assessing the frequency of intercultural contact—using options such as never, rarely, sometimes, often, and very often—relies on the respondent's personal judgment. Although respondents may report frequent interactions with locals, these interactions may be superficial or limited to their own ethnic community. As a result, the impact of these interactions on the development of cultural intelligence (CQ) may be less significant than reported. Our study operates on the premise that while exposure to other cultural backgrounds creates opportunities for establishing close intercultural friendships, the extent to which individuals capitalize on these opportunities varies. This subjectivity in assessing traditional CQ antecedents, such as language proficiency or frequency of intercultural contact, is addressed through our outcome variable, "intercultural friendship". This variable represents a tangible manifestation of these antecedents and serves as a more concrete measure of the development of intercultural competencies (see Shannon and Begley 2008).

The CQ construct is inherently human-oriented. This means that CQ primarily develops through interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. While the cognitive component of CQ can be enhanced through more formal means such as books and academic courses (Young et al. 2018), the development of other CQ components relies largely on human interaction. This study updates existing knowledge by suggesting that traditional contextual variables, such as foreign travel and intercultural social contact (Lee et al. 2019), do not directly stimulate the development of cultural skills but rather create conditions conducive to forming closer intercultural relationships.

As Table 3 shows, having a close friend from abroad explains a moderate portion of the variance in both cognitive (R^2 change = 0.059) and motivational CQ (R^2 change = 0.080). This relationship highlights that close intercultural friendships significantly contribute to greater cultural understanding (cognitive CQ) and stronger motivation to engage with different cultures (motivational CQ). The frequent, personal interactions inherent in such friendships provide both deeper cultural insights and the desire to actively participate in intercultural experiences.

The logistic regression results indicate that factors such as the number of foreign countries visited, the length of foreign stays, the frequency of intercultural contact, and language proficiency predict whether an individual has a close friend from a culturally different background. This finding underscores the importance of these factors as key elements in the CQ development process. It is logical—and supported by our regression model—that individuals who engage more frequently with foreign environments, stay longer, socialize with a diverse range of people, and possess strong language skills are more likely to form meaningful intercultural friendships. Further analysis, including Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients, confirms a significant, though relatively weak, positive relationship between these antecedents and the likelihood of having a close friend from another culture (with the exception of the number of countries visited and length of stay abroad).

Greater cultural diversity and variety appear to be beneficial for CQ development. This conclusion is supported by analysis and t-test results comparing two categories of intercultural ties: very close friendships and best friendships with foreigners. The categorization reflects differences in relationship quality, such as mutual affection, time

spent together, and shared interests. It is reasonable to assume that individuals are likely to show greater trust and deeper engagement with their best friends compared to other close, but less unique, personal connections.

It is plausible, though challenging to empirically validate, that intercultural peer relationships exert a similar impact on cultural intelligence (CQ). An individual who is partnered with a foreign national and residing in a foreign country is likely to score high on CQ due to continuous exposure to cultural differences. However, their CQ may further develop if their network of intercultural contacts is diverse, rather than relying on a single dominant intercultural influence. One potential explanation for this phenomenon is the concept of the "strength of weak ties" (Granovetter 1973). According to this theory, individuals can leverage connections such as friends of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances—who may not be closely tied but are widely connected—to find job opportunities and other benefits (Tassier 2006). Similarly, a broad network of relatively superficial but diverse intercultural contacts may be more effective in developing CQ than the strong, direct influence of a single close foreign friend.

Our findings suggest that factors traditionally considered antecedents of cultural intelligence (CQ) predict the dichotomous variable of "having a close friend abroad" and are reinforced by it. However, some questions remain. Specifically, why does exposure to close intercultural relationships enhance only certain components of CQ (motivational and cognitive) but not others? One reason could be that in the presence of close friends, individuals often feel at ease and can be themselves without the need to adapt their behavior to fit in. The pressure to "blend in" or conform to different cultural norms is less pronounced within a trusted circle of friends compared to a new and unfamiliar cultural environment. This relaxation may lead to a smaller impact of intercultural friendships on the development of the behavioral component of CQ.

Regarding the meta-cognitive component of CQ, which involves strategies or plans for interacting with individuals from different cultures, its development may not be significantly influenced by having a close foreign friend. It is unlikely that individuals continuously adjust their mental frameworks based on regular interactions with a single foreign friend. This component may not evolve significantly due to such limited intercultural exposure. Research by Young et al. (2018) indicates that meta-cognitive CQ develops more effectively through diverse intercultural experiences, such as intercultural courses, simulation games, and extended stays abroad, rather than through interaction with a single individual. Therefore, a broader range of intercultural interactions is necessary for the substantial development of the meta-cognitive component of CQ.

As noted, to our best knowledge, no other studies have specifically investigated the impact of "having a close friend abroad" on cultural intelligence (CQ). However, related research has explored similar themes. For example, Sousa et al. (2023) examine the relationship between cultural exposure (CE) and CQ, considering CE as a multidimensional concept encompassing the duration, frequency, and nature of contact with different cultures. From this perspective, having a close friend abroad can be viewed as a form of CE. Sousa et al.'s study found that the impact of CE on CQ dimensions varies depending on the context of the exposure. Specifically, CE within the family environment positively correlates with the cognitive and motivational dimensions of CQ. This is analogous to having a close friend abroad, with both situations yielding similar results.

Lin and Shen (2020) hypothesize that both formal and informal intercultural contacts positively influence the development of CQ and its facets. Formal contacts involve structured academic interactions, such as classroom discussions, group assignments, and seminars, while informal contacts include more spontaneous and dynamic interactions, such as socializing with friends, participating in student clubs, living with foreign roommates, and engaging on social media. Their study, conducted with students at an international university in Hong Kong, found that informal contacts are significantly related to all four facets of CQ, whereas formal contacts only affect the motivational facet. Their research includes a broader range of intercultural contacts than our study and considers intercultural

friendship as one form of informal contact. The findings, consistent with our research, suggest that informal contacts, including intercultural friendships, have a more substantial impact on CQ development compared to formal contacts alone.

7. Conclusions

Our findings indicate that having a close friend abroad positively influences overall cultural intelligence (CQ), though the effect is relatively modest. Specifically, this relationship is significant for the motivational and cognitive facets of CQ. While the first hypothesis, which posited a general positive relationship between having a close friend abroad and total CQ, was supported, the second hypothesis was only partially confirmed. The effect was observed for the motivational and cognitive facets but not for the behavioral and metacognitive facets of CQ. From a practical standpoint, companies that employ individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds should foster environments that encourage the formation of intercultural friendships. This could enhance employees' CQ and improve cross-cultural interactions within the workplace.

The aim of this study was to identify factors that differentiate between groups in terms of their CQ scores. Future research should employ advanced statistical methods, such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al. 2016), to explore causal relationships between variables more comprehensively. Using PLS-SEM, researchers could examine intercultural friendship as a potential mediator, elucidating how it influences the relationship between CQ antecedents (exogenous variables) and CQ itself (endogenous variable). The friendship variable in this study was measured using a dichotomous approach, where respondents were simply asked whether they had a close friend or best friend from abroad. However, the concept of friendship could be operationalized in more nuanced ways rather than being treated as a dichotomous variable. For example, future studies might explore measures that focus on the number of intercultural friendships, the quality of these relationships, or other relevant indicators such as the frequency of mutual contacts, the closeness of the relationship, and overall satisfaction (Lodder et al. 2017; Williams and Johnson 2011). The inclusion of multiple indicators to better capture the complexity of intercultural friendship would likely lead to more specific and robust findings. The intercultural friendship variable should also be more rigorously tested as a mediator between prior intercultural experience and cultural intelligence. This approach would provide deeper insights into the development of cultural intelligence. Additionally, future research should consider including other control variables that may influence the ability to form intercultural friendships. Variables such as ethnocentric or racist attitudes, as well as psychological traits like openness to new experiences and extraversion, might significantly affect an individual's capacity to establish and maintain relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Our sample had specific characteristics, as it consisted solely of university students from a single Czech institution. Although the sample included students from 26 countries, the majority were of Czech origin. It is generally emphasized that cultural intelligence (CQ) has been studied across diverse global samples, and nationality is not expected to influence an individual's CQ (Jurásek and Wawrosz 2021). The reliability of our results, (see Sections 4.2 and 5.1), consistently exceeds the acceptable thresholds. Nevertheless, the predominance of Czech students in our sample might influence our findings, as the majority of respondents may have a somewhat different cultural context compared to the other participants. To address this issue, future research should consider using a more homogeneous sample of respondents. Additionally, cultural distance might impact the formation of intercultural relationships. Individuals who share linguistic and cultural similarities—such as those from neighboring regions with common historical experiences or similar value systems—may be more likely to form friendships.

Another limitation of our study is the reliance on quantitative methods to analyze data that inherently possess qualitative dimensions. Employing a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques, could offer deeper insights into the

relational nature of CQ. This approach would help uncover more nuanced details about how relationships, including close friendships with individuals from other cultures, influence a person's CQ. Future research should therefore consider using a triangulation of data sources and methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

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