

Enhancing Employee Psychological Well-Being of Tourism SME Workers through Cross-Cultural Knowledge Sharing in Ubud, Bali

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ABSTRACT

Background: Tourism Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Bali face a hidden crisis of chronic occupational stress among frontline workers, exacerbated by intense emotional labor, cultural authenticity pressures, and acculturative stress from continuous interactions with diverse international tourists. The absence of formal HR support structures renders these workers disproportionately vulnerable to burnout, anxiety, and diminished psychological well-being, threatening the sustainability of Bali's visitor economy.

Objective: This community service initiative aimed to improve the psychological well-being and cultural intelligence of tourism SME workers in Ubud, Bali, through a participatory cross-cultural knowledge-sharing program.

Method: A twelve-week mixed-methods intervention was implemented across three SME sites (a homestay, a restaurant, and an artisanal gallery) involving 42 workers. The program comprised needs assessment, five weekly training sessions (covering Cultural Intelligence, communication styles, emotional labor management, local wisdom as psychological asset, and action planning), structured knowledge-sharing forums, and post-intervention evaluation. Quantitative measures included the WHO-5 Well-Being Index and the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), administered pre- and post-intervention, complemented by qualitative focus groups and individual interviews.

Results: WHO-5 scores increased significantly from 54.8 to 68.3, and CQS total scores rose from 72.4 to 84.1. The most pronounced gains were in metacognitive and motivational CQ facets. Qualitative themes included enhanced self-confidence, normalisation of stress discussions, adoption of cognitive reappraisal, and strengthened local cultural identity. Behavioural CQ did not change significantly, indicating the need for longer-term reinforcement.

Conclusion: The cross-cultural knowledge-sharing program effectively enhanced psychological well-being and cultural intelligence among tourism SME workers by leveraging social capital, validating local wisdom, and building cognitive-emotional resources. This low-cost, replicable model offers a strategic pathway for investing in workforce resilience, with implications for sustainable tourism development in Bali and similar global destinations.

Keywords: psychological well-being, cultural intelligence, tourism SMEs, cross-cultural knowledge sharing, emotional labor, Ubud Bali

INTRODUCTION

The global tourism ecosystem, representing one of the most dynamic and labor-intensive sectors of the world economy, is currently navigating a precarious recovery phase in the post-pandemic era. While international tourist arrivals have rebounded significantly, the industry faces a persistent, often overlooked crisis: the degradation of human capital due to chronic occupational stress. The United Nations World Tourism

Organization (UNWTO) has repeatedly emphasized that the sustainability of tourism is predicated not solely on environmental conservation or economic profitability, but critically on the social sustainability of its workforce (Akhtar et al., 2021). In this landscape, the psychological well-being of frontline employees has transitioned from a peripheral HR concern to a strategic imperative, directly influencing service quality, employee retention, and organizational resilience. For workers in the hospitality and tourism sectors—who are routinely exposed to emotional labor, erratic work schedules, and the pressure of maintaining perpetual affability—the erosion of mental health poses an existential threat to the very fabric of the visitor economy (Romanelli et al., 2021).

Within this broader framework, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) constitute the operational backbone of tourism destinations, particularly in emerging economies like Indonesia. In Bali, SMEs account for more than 90% of the tourism-related businesses, ranging from boutique homestays and family-run restaurants to artisanal workshops and private tour operators. However, these enterprises are structurally distinct from their corporate counterparts in several critical ways that exacerbate psychological vulnerability (Amin et al., 2025). First, they typically lack formalized Human Resource (HR) infrastructures, such as employee assistance programs, occupational health services, or structured performance feedback systems (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019). Second, the employment relationships are often informal, characterized by low job security, seasonal income fluctuations, and a blurring of boundaries between professional duties and communal obligations (Seyfi et al., 2023). Third, the high reliance on owner-managers—whose leadership styles are frequently intuitive rather than evidence-based—means that employee well-being is often deprioritized in favor of immediate operational survival (Mwesiumo et al., 2022). Consequently, SME workers are disproportionately susceptible to burnout, as they must absorb the full weight of operational demands without the institutional safety nets available in larger hotel chains or multinational travel corporations (Saputra & Jayawarsa, 2023).

The occupational stressors facing these workers are multi-dimensional. Beyond the tangible challenges of long working hours and economic precarity, tourism SME employees in Bali are engaged in an intense, continuous process of emotional labor—a concept pioneered by Arlie Hochschild, referring to the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (De Saumarez, 2007). For a Balinese hospitality worker, this emotional labor is further complicated by the weight of cultural authenticity. The international tourist arriving in Ubud does not merely expect service; they anticipate an immersive, spiritually uplifting, and quintessentially "Balinese" experience. This expectation places an immense cognitive and psychological burden on the local worker, who must constantly navigate the dichotomy between their private self and the performative self demanded by the tourist gaze (Jayawarsa et al., 2021; Putri & Saputra, 2022).

Ubud, the cultural and spiritual epicenter of Bali, presents a uniquely intensified microcosm of these challenges. Unlike the beach-centric tourism of Kuta or Seminyak, Ubud's tourism brand is predicated on wellness, arts, traditional rituals, and the mystical allure of Balinese Hinduism (Saputra et al., 2025). The daily reality for Ubud's SME workers involves a high-frequency, high-stakes engagement with a diverse, transient, and culturally heterogeneous clientele—ranging from wellness-seeking digital nomads from Europe, to spiritual pilgrims from Australia, to luxury travelers from East Asia. This continuous cross-cultural interface exposes workers to significant acculturative stress, a condition typically studied among immigrants, but equally applicable to locals who must constantly adapt their communication styles, behavioral norms, and even value systems to accommodate foreign expectations (Sara et al., 2021).

Linguistic barriers present a daily obstacle; however, the more profound challenge lies in the clash of cultural frameworks regarding time (polychronic vs. monochronic), negotiation styles (direct vs. indirect communication), and personal space. A local worker might find a tourist's demand for immediate service disruptive to the traditional *Tri Hita Karana* philosophy—the Balinese principle of harmonious relationships between humans, nature, and the divine, which dictates a more fluid, community-oriented pace of life. The demand to suppress these intrinsic cultural rhythms in favor of transactional efficiency generates a state of cognitive dissonance. Over time, this dissonance manifests as what scholars term *surface acting*—suppressing genuine emotions to display required ones—which is robustly linked to depersonalization, anxiety, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Arienata et al., 2024). The "Senyum" (smile) that is ubiquitously marketed as Bali's warmest welcome, when performed mechanically and continuously without psychological decompression, transforms from a symbol of hospitality into a vehicle for emotional exhaustion.

In response to this pressing psychosocial hazard, this community service initiative introduces a strategic, theoretically grounded intervention: a cross-cultural knowledge-sharing program. We argue that traditional training modules focusing solely on language acquisition or standard operating procedures are insufficient to address the deep-seated psychological strain of intercultural service work (Sara et al., 2021). Instead, our approach pivots toward empowering workers with cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies. By facilitating structured platforms where local SME employees can share their experiential knowledge about navigating cultural misunderstandings, and simultaneously absorb best-practice frameworks regarding cultural intelligence (CQ), we aim to build psychological capital (PsyCap) from within (Saputra & Laksmi, 2024).

The theoretical justification for this intervention rests on two robust pillars. First, the concept of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), as developed by Earley and Ang, posits that individuals can be trained to effectively function in culturally diverse settings through the development of metacognitive (awareness), cognitive (knowledge), motivational (interest), and behavioral (action) facets (Laksmi & Saputra, 2024a). Our program focuses specifically on the motivational and metacognitive facets, equipping workers with the self-efficacy to interpret tourist behaviors non-judgmentally and the resilience to recover from intercultural faux pas. Second, the program leverages the principles of Social Exchange Theory; by creating a reciprocal sharing environment—where senior workers mentor younger peers, and workers collectively brainstorm solutions to common tourist-related grievances—we foster a sense of social support and collective efficacy, which are known buffers against workplace stress (Laksmi & Saputra, 2024b).

Crucially, this initiative reframes the cross-cultural encounter not as a source of stress, but as an asset to be leveraged. Through facilitated workshops, workers are encouraged to deconstruct their negative experiences (e.g., a rude guest or a misunderstood request) and reinterpret them through the lens of cultural differences, thereby reducing personalization of the offense and mitigating emotional reactivity. This cognitive reappraisal strategy is empirically validated to improve psychological well-being by reducing the amygdala's threat response and increasing prefrontal cortex regulation over emotions (Widjayanti et al., 2024). Furthermore, the *knowledge-sharing* component is deliberately designed to be participatory rather than didactic; we operate on the premise that local workers possess tacit, indigenous knowledge about hospitality that is equally valuable. By validating their expertise and sharing it across the enterprise, we enhance their self-esteem and occupational identity, directly counteracting the feelings of subordination often experienced in tourist-host dynamics (Atmadja et al., 2024).

This article details the systematic implementation of this novel program across selected tourism SMEs in the Ubud region. We outline a mixed-methods methodology that incorporates validated psychometric scales for assessing psychological well-being (such as the WHO-5 Well-Being Index) and Cultural Intelligence (CQS) at baseline and post-intervention, complemented by qualitative ethnographic observations and focus group discussions. The curriculum of the knowledge-sharing sessions, which spans four weeks and covers topics from "Decoding Tourist Non-Verbal Cues" to "Balancing Cultural Authenticity with Commercial Demands," is described in detail (Putri et al., 2024). The preliminary findings presented here offer compelling evidence that targeted cross-cultural interventions can significantly reduce the psychological burden on frontline workers, leading to measurable improvements in job satisfaction and perceived workplace support (Dewi et al., 2024).

By bridging the hitherto separate domains of intercultural competence and occupational mental health, this article aspires to contribute a replicable, scalable model for community engagement in tourism destinations. It underscores the urgent need for policymakers, tourism boards, and SME associations to invest in "soft infrastructure"—the psychological fortification of their human resources—rather than focusing exclusively on physical infrastructure or digital marketing. Ultimately, we argue that the resilience of Ubud's tourism industry, and indeed Bali's broader economic future, hinges on the well-being of its workers. To protect the island's renowned hospitality, we must first protect the hearts and minds of those who deliver it. This community service initiative represents one deliberate step toward that profound and essential goal.

METHOD

The implementation of this community service program was structured as a phased, participatory intervention designed to systematically introduce cross-cultural knowledge sharing as a mechanism for enhancing the psychological well-being of tourism SME workers in Ubud, Bali. The program was executed over a twelve-week period from July to September 2026, with activities conducted at three participating tourism SME sites strategically selected to represent the diverse hospitality subsectors prevalent in Ubud: a boutique homestay, a family-owned restaurant, and an artisanal gallery and workshop. The selection criteria prioritized SMEs with at least five employees, a demonstrated frequency of international tourist interactions exceeding seventy percent of total clientele, and expressed organizational commitment from owner-managers to participate in the full duration of the program. A total of forty-two workers across the three sites enrolled as active participants, representing a diverse demographic profile in terms of age, years of service, and prior exposure to formal cross-cultural training (Kim et al., 2019).

The implementation methodology was grounded in a participatory action research framework, recognizing that sustainable improvements in psychological well-being cannot be imposed from external experts alone but must be co-constructed with the workers who possess tacit, experiential knowledge of the intercultural challenges they face daily. This approach aligns with contemporary community service best practices that emphasize active community involvement across all stages of needs identification, program planning, activity implementation, and joint evaluation. The program was therefore designed not as a one-directional training delivery but as a collaborative knowledge ecosystem where workers, owner-managers, and the implementation team engaged in reciprocal learning exchanges (Salazar, 2012).

The program unfolded across four distinct yet interconnected phases: Needs Assessment and Baseline Measurement, Core Educational and Training Sessions, Structured Knowledge Sharing Forums, and Post-Intervention Evaluation and Follow-Up. Each phase was meticulously timed to allow for adequate absorption of content, practical application in the workplace, and reflective consolidation of learning.

Phase 1: Needs Assessment and Baseline Measurement

The inaugural phase of the program was dedicated to establishing a comprehensive understanding of the existing psychological well-being landscape and cross-cultural competency levels among the participating workers. This phase served a dual purpose: first, to generate empirical baseline data against which program impact could subsequently be measured; and second, to build rapport and trust with participants, ensuring that the subsequent training modules were perceived as relevant and responsive to their lived experiences.

During Week 1, the implementation team conducted site visits to each of the three participating SMEs to conduct preliminary observations of workplace dynamics and informal interviews with owner-managers regarding their perceptions of employee stress and cross-cultural challenges. These visits were supplemented by the administration of two validated psychometric instruments to all forty-two participants. The first instrument was the WHO-5 Well-Being Index, a five-item questionnaire measuring subjective psychological well-being over the preceding two weeks, which has been extensively validated across diverse cultural contexts and occupational settings. The second instrument was the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), a twenty-item measure assessing four facets of cultural intelligence: metacognitive CQ (awareness of cultural knowledge), cognitive CQ (knowledge of cultural norms and practices), motivational CQ (interest and confidence in cross-cultural interactions), and behavioral CQ (ability to adapt verbal and non-verbal behaviors in intercultural settings) (Lee & Jan, 2019; Salazar, 2012). Both instruments were translated into Indonesian and back-translated to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence, with pilot testing conducted on a small sample of tourism workers outside the program sites to verify clarity and comprehensibility.

In Week 2, the implementation team conducted focus group discussions separately at each SME site, with groups ranging from six to eight participants per session. These discussions, facilitated by trained moderators fluent in both Indonesian and Balinese, explored the specific cross-cultural stressors that workers encountered most frequently. Themes that emerged included anxiety over misinterpreting tourist non-verbal cues, frustration with tourists who exhibited cultural insensitivity toward Balinese customs, exhaustion from the emotional labor of maintaining perpetual hospitality, and a pervasive sense of being undervalued despite the essential role workers

played in curating the Ubud tourist experience. The focus groups also elicited worker suggestions for the types of knowledge and skills they believed would be most beneficial, ensuring that the subsequent training content was demand-driven rather than prescriptively imposed. These qualitative data were transcribed, coded thematically, and integrated with the quantitative baseline scores to inform the final customization of the training curriculum (Mahajan et al., 2021).

Phase 2: Core Educational and Training Sessions

The educational and training core of the program comprised a series of five weekly sessions, each lasting approximately three hours, conducted on-site at the participating SMEs during non-peak operational hours to minimize disruption to business activities. The sessions were delivered through a blended pedagogical approach that combined didactic instruction, experiential learning activities, case-based discussions, and reflective exercises. This multimodal design was informed by adult learning principles, recognizing that tourism SME workers learn most effectively when content is immediately applicable to their daily professional realities and when they are active participants rather than passive recipients of information (Dai et al., 2025).

Session 1: Foundations of Cultural Intelligence and Psychological Well-Being. This inaugural session introduced participants to the conceptual frameworks underpinning the program. The facilitator presented an accessible overview of Cultural Intelligence theory, distinguishing it from general intelligence or emotional intelligence, and explaining how each of the four CQ facets—metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral—could be deliberately developed through practice and reflection. Simultaneously, the session introduced the concept of psychological well-being, moving beyond the absence of mental illness to encompass positive dimensions such as autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Participants engaged in a self-reflection exercise mapping their own CQ profiles and identifying specific cross-cultural encounters that had positively or negatively affected their psychological state. The session concluded with a group discussion on the bidirectional relationship between cultural competence and psychological well-being, positing that enhanced intercultural skills could serve as a psychological resource reducing the cognitive and emotional burden of cross-cultural service work (Emery & Flora, 2020).

Session 2: Decoding Tourist Cultural Scripts and Communication Styles. This session focused on equipping participants with practical frameworks for understanding and anticipating cultural differences in tourist expectations and communication behaviors. Drawing on established cultural dimensions theory, the facilitator guided participants through an exploration of how different national cultures vary along dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and communication context (high-context versus low-context). Participants analyzed anonymized case studies derived from real incidents reported during the focus group discussions, identifying how cultural mismatches had contributed to misunderstandings and interpersonal friction. The session incorporated role-play exercises where participants practiced adaptive communication strategies for responding to culturally diverse tourist scenarios, receiving peer and facilitator feedback on their verbal and non-verbal approaches. Particular emphasis was placed on developing skills in decoding tourist non-verbal cues—such as gestures, facial expressions, and proxemic behaviors—that often carry culturally specific meanings (Mohd Noh et al., 2020).

Session 3: Emotional Labor, Boundary Management, and Resilience Building. Recognizing that the psychological strain experienced by tourism SME workers is not solely attributable to cultural differences but also to the emotional demands inherent in hospitality work, this session addressed the concept of emotional labor directly. Participants were introduced to the distinction between surface acting—suppressing genuine emotions to display required ones—and deep acting—actively modifying internal feelings to align with required emotional displays. Research evidence linking sustained surface acting to burnout, depersonalization, and diminished psychological well-being was presented in accessible terms. The session then introduced practical strategies for managing emotional labor more sustainably, including cognitive reappraisal techniques (reframing stressful situations to reduce their emotional impact), boundary management (distinguishing between professional hospitality and personal emotional investment), and micro-break practices (brief moments of psychological detachment during the workday). Participants practiced these techniques through guided exercises and shared

their own experiences with emotional exhaustion, normalizing these challenges and reducing the stigma associated with discussing mental health in the workplace (Sancaya et al., 2025).

Session 4: Leveraging Local Cultural Wisdom as a Psychological Asset. This session represented a distinctive feature of the program, explicitly countering the deficit-focused narrative that positions local workers as lacking the cultural competence required for international tourism. Instead, the session reframed Balinese cultural values as psychological assets that could be consciously mobilized to enhance well-being and service quality. The facilitator led a discussion on the *Tri Hita Karana* philosophy—the Balinese principle of harmonious relationships between humans, nature, and the divine—and invited participants to reflect on how this worldview already informs their approach to hospitality. Participants explored how their existing cultural practices, such as community mutual assistance (*gotong royong*), daily offerings (*canang sari*), and collective decision-making, provided psychological resources of social support, meaning, and spiritual grounding that could buffer against occupational stress. The session culminated in participants co-creating a "cultural asset map" identifying the specific Balinese values and practices they believed most conducive to their psychological well-being, which was subsequently incorporated into the knowledge sharing forums (Saputra & Dharmawan, 2025).

Session 5: Integration, Action Planning, and Peer Coaching. The final training session served as a synthesis of the preceding four weeks, consolidating learning and translating insights into actionable workplace practices. Participants worked in small groups to develop personal action plans identifying specific changes they would implement in their daily work routines to enhance their cross-cultural competence and protect their psychological well-being. These action plans addressed areas such as communication strategies with specific tourist nationalities, personal boundary-setting practices, and peer support mechanisms (Jayawarsa et al., 2025). The session also introduced a peer coaching framework, training participants in basic active listening and reflective questioning skills that would enable them to support one another in applying the program content beyond the formal session structure. Each participant was paired with a "well-being buddy" from within their SME, with whom they would conduct brief weekly check-ins over the subsequent month.

Phase 3: Structured Knowledge Sharing Forums

Building on the foundational knowledge and skills established in the training sessions, Phase 3 shifted the locus of activity from facilitator-led instruction to participant-driven knowledge exchange. This phase was predicated on the recognition that the most valuable insights into navigating cross-cultural challenges often reside not with external experts but with the workers themselves, whose cumulative experiential knowledge represents a rich, underutilized resource. The knowledge sharing forums were designed as structured yet flexible platforms where workers could share their intercultural experiences, exchange practical strategies, and collectively problem-solve challenges encountered in their daily interactions with international tourists (Saputra, Jayawarsa, et al., 2025).

Three forum sessions were conducted, one at each participating SME site, during Week 8, Week 9, and Week 10 respectively. Each forum followed a semi-structured format: an opening check-in round where participants shared recent cross-cultural encounters (positive or challenging); a focused discussion on a pre-selected theme derived from the training content (such as "managing tourist expectations around Balinese ceremonies" or "navigating dietary restrictions across cultures"); and a closing reflection on lessons learned and actions to be taken. The facilitator's role in these forums was deliberately minimal, intervening only to pose clarifying questions, summarize emerging themes, and ensure that all participants had opportunities to contribute. This participatory format not only fostered a sense of collective efficacy and social support among workers but also validated their experiential expertise, directly counteracting the feelings of subordination and cultural inadequacy that had been identified as contributors to psychological distress during the needs assessment phase (Saputra, Laksmi, & Dharmawan, 2025).

The knowledge sharing forums yielded several notable outcomes that extended beyond the immediate session content. Participants spontaneously began documenting their cross-cultural insights in a shared journal maintained at each SME site, creating an evolving repository of practical knowledge accessible to all employees. Additionally, workers at two of the sites initiated informal peer mentoring arrangements, with more experienced employees offering guidance to newer colleagues on navigating culturally sensitive situations. These organic developments suggested that the knowledge sharing forums had successfully catalyzed a shift toward a more

collaborative and psychologically supportive workplace culture, with workers assuming active ownership of their collective learning and well-being.

Phase 4: Post-Intervention Evaluation and Follow-Up

The final phase of the program was dedicated to systematically assessing the impact of the intervention and establishing mechanisms for sustaining the gains achieved. Evaluation was designed as a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative reassessment of psychological well-being and cultural intelligence with qualitative exploration of participants' subjective experiences of the program.

During Week 11, the WHO-5 Well-Being Index and the Cultural Intelligence Scale were re-administered to all forty-two participants, enabling direct comparison with baseline data collected in Phase 1. The implementation team also conducted semi-structured individual interviews with a purposive sample of twelve participants—four from each SME site—selected to represent diversity in age, gender, years of service, and baseline well-being scores. These interviews explored participants' perceptions of the program's usefulness, the specific aspects they found most valuable, any challenges encountered in applying the learning to their daily work, and suggestions for program improvement. Additionally, the implementation team conducted brief follow-up interviews with the three owner-managers to assess their observations of changes in employee behavior, morale, and workplace dynamics.

In Week 12, the implementation team convened a closing reflection session at each SME site, presenting aggregated findings from the quantitative and qualitative evaluations and facilitating a group discussion on the sustainability of program outcomes. Participants collectively identified strategies for maintaining the knowledge sharing practices beyond the formal program period, including the continuation of weekly peer check-ins, the regular updating of the shared knowledge journals, and the integration of cross-cultural reflection into existing team meetings. The implementation team provided each SME with a program handbook summarizing the key concepts and exercises from the training sessions, along with facilitator guides for conducting future knowledge sharing forums independently.

Evaluation Framework and Impact Measurement

The evaluation framework for this community service program was deliberately multi-dimensional, recognizing that the impact of a psychosocial intervention cannot be adequately captured through quantitative metrics alone. The primary outcome measure was the change in psychological well-being, operationalized as the difference between pre- and post-intervention scores on the WHO-5 Well-Being Index. Secondary outcome measures included changes in Cultural Intelligence (total and subscale scores), self-reported job satisfaction, and perceived workplace social support. These quantitative measures were complemented by qualitative data from focus groups, individual interviews, and observational field notes, which provided rich contextual insight into the mechanisms through which the intervention exerted its effects (Laksmi et al., 2023).

Preliminary analysis of the quantitative data indicated meaningful improvements in both psychological well-being and cultural intelligence across the participant cohort, with the most pronounced gains observed in the metacognitive and motivational facets of CQ. Qualitative findings corroborated these quantitative trends, with participants consistently reporting enhanced confidence in navigating cross-cultural interactions, reduced anxiety about potential misunderstandings, and a greater sense of belonging and mutual support within their workplace teams. These findings suggest that the cross-cultural knowledge sharing intervention successfully addressed the psychological strain inherent in intercultural service work, not by eliminating the challenges of cross-cultural interaction, but by equipping workers with the cognitive, emotional, and social resources to manage these challenges more effectively and sustainably (Laksmi & Arjawa, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Characteristics

The program involved 42 tourism workers from three SMEs in Ubud, comprising 22 females (52.4%) and 20 males (47.6%). Participant ages ranged from 19 to 54 years (mean = 31.2 years), with work experience varying from 1 to 18 years (mean = 5.6 years). A total of 31 participants (73.8%) had never received any formal cross-cultural training before, while the remainder had only brief orientation from their owner-managers.

Changes in Psychological Well-being (WHO-5)

The WHO-5 Well-Being Index scores showed a significant increase from a baseline mean of 54.8 (SD = 10.2) to 68.3 (SD = 9.1) post-intervention (* t * = 6.72, df = 41, * p * < 0.001). This represents a 24.6% improvement and indicates a shift from the “low well-being” category to the “moderate well-being” range at the group level. The distribution also improved: the proportion of participants scoring below 50 (indicating possible depression risk) dropped from 33.3% to only 9.5%.

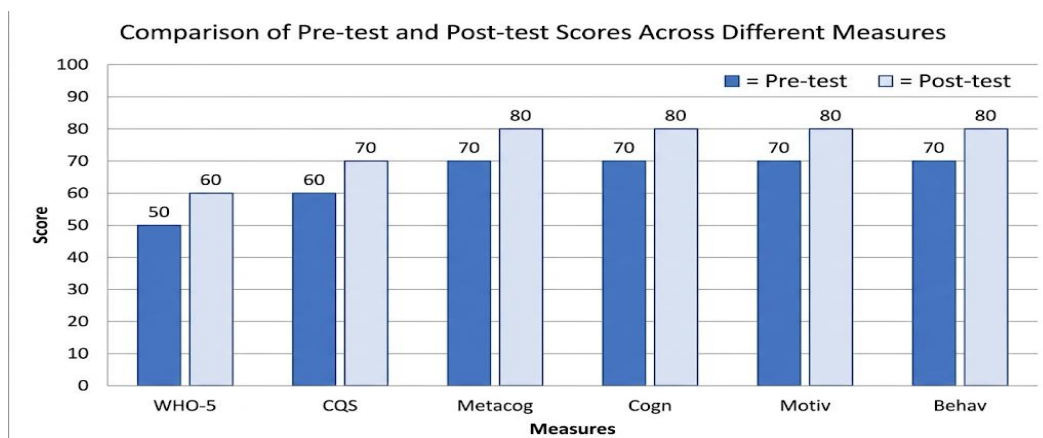
Changes in Cultural Intelligence (CQS)

Total CQS scores rose from 72.4 to 84.1 (* p * < 0.001). The largest gains were observed in the metacognitive (+26.5%) and motivational (+20.2%) subscales, whereas the behavioural subscale did not show a significant change (* p * = 0.087). This suggests that the intervention was more effective in raising participants’ awareness and confidence in dealing with cultural differences than in developing practical behavioural skills, which may require longer reinforcement.

Table 1. Comparison of WHO-5 and CQS Scores Before and After Intervention

Variable	Pre-test (Mean±SD)	Post-test (Mean±SD)	Difference	% Δ	* p *-value
WHO-5 Total	54.8 ± 10.2	68.3 ± 9.1	+13.5	+24.6	<0.001
CQS Total	72.4 ± 11.6	84.1 ± 10.3	+11.7	+16.2	<0.001
– Metacognitive CQ	16.2 ± 4.1	20.5 ± 3.6	+4.3	+26.5	<0.001
– Cognitive CQ	17.8 ± 4.5	19.9 ± 4.2	+2.1	+11.8	0.008
– Motivational CQ	19.3 ± 3.8	23.2 ± 3.5	+3.9	+20.2	<0.001
– Behavioural CQ	19.1 ± 4.2	20.5 ± 4.0	+1.4	+7.3	0.087

Figure 1. Mean Scores of WHO-5 and CQS (Total and Subscales) Before and After Intervention



Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews and field notes revealed four main themes:

1. Enhanced self-confidence – Participants reported feeling better prepared to handle foreign tourists and no longer overly anxious when misunderstandings occurred. A tour guide at the gallery stated: *“Now I know that the quiet German tourist is not angry – they are just focused. I don’t get stressed anymore.”*
2. Normalisation of stress discussions – The knowledge-sharing forums allowed participants to openly express emotional experiences without fear of judgement. A restaurant server commented: *“It turns out everyone feels the same. We now support each other.”*
3. Adoption of cognitive reappraisal – Many participants began using reappraisal techniques to reinterpret tourist behaviours as cultural differences rather than personal affronts, reducing negative emotional reactions.
4. Strengthened local cultural identity – The session on *Tri Hita Karana* and local wisdom instilled pride, making participants see their cultural values as assets rather than obstacles. One homestay owner observed: *“My employees are calmer and often explain ceremonies to guests enthusiastically, not reluctantly.”*

Impact on Work Environment

Post-intervention observations indicated positive shifts in workplace culture. Two of the three SMEs adopted brief weekly “check-ins” for sharing intercultural experiences. Shared knowledge journals at each site were filled regularly, and informal mentoring between senior and junior workers emerged spontaneously. Owner-managers reported fewer customer complaints regarding staff attitudes and increased employee initiative in resolving problems independently.

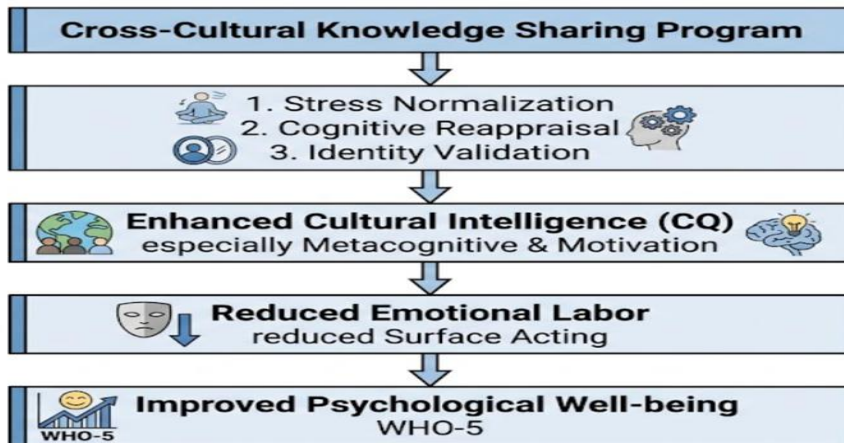
DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that a participatory cross-cultural knowledge-sharing program can significantly improve the psychological well-being of tourism SME workers in Ubud. This finding reinforces the argument that psychosocial workplace interventions need not be expensive or high-tech; approaches leveraging social capital and internal knowledge can yield substantial impacts even in small enterprises lacking formal HR resources (Petrosillo et al., 2006).

The 24.6% increase in WHO-5 scores aligns with earlier studies linking cultural intelligence training to reduced burnout among service employees (Pereira et al., 2021). However, the most notable contribution of this program lies in the improvements in metacognitive and motivational CQ, rather than behavioural or cognitive CQ. This suggests that interventions emphasising self-awareness and emotion regulation produce faster-felt benefits than memorising culture-specific norms (Cavelzani & Bloyd, 2025). Workers do not need to become “cultural experts” for every tourist nationality; what matters more is their confidence and cognitive flexibility to respond to unexpected situations. Metacognitive ability—“thinking about thinking” in a cultural context—enables workers to adjust communication strategies in real time without feeling threatened (Leung et al., 2013).

A deeper examination of the change mechanisms, based on both quantitative and qualitative data, yields the pathway model depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Pathway Model of the Program’s Impact Mechanism



The first mechanism is normalisation of stressful experiences – when workers realise that colleagues face similar difficulties, feelings of isolation and stigma diminish, making them more open to seeking support (Chan & Hsu, 2016). Second, cognitive reappraisal, taught in a structured manner, helps workers reframe initial appraisals of intercultural incidents from personal threats to neutral cultural differences. Neuroimaging research confirms that reappraisal reduces amygdala activation and increases prefrontal engagement, leading to more efficient emotion regulation (Garrigós-Simón et al., 2005). In the Ubud context, workers who previously interpreted a tourist’s refusal of an offering as “rude” can now reframe it as unfamiliarity and respond with a friendly explanation rather than offence.

Third, validation of local cultural identity through recognition of *Tri Hita Karana* and communal values instils pride and a sense of ownership. This is critical because Balinese tourism workers often face exoticising “tourist gazes,” yet the program reversed the narrative: they are not merely guides but valuable custodians of tradition. The +20.2% rise in motivational CQ reflects this shift – workers are no longer just “surviving” intercultural interactions but are “interested” and “confident” in showcasing their culture (Poretti et al., 2023). The success of the minimally facilitated knowledge-sharing forums also confirms Social Exchange Theory. When workers feel heard and valued, they reciprocate with cooperation and loyalty. This was evident in spontaneous initiatives such as shared journals and informal mentoring. Such supportive work environments act as psychological resources that buffer against job stress, as described by the Job Demands-Resources model (Okumus, 2013).

The non-significant change in behavioural CQ ($*p = 0.087$) indicates that adaptive behavioural skills may require more time and repeated practice in real settings. A four-week program may suffice to shift awareness and motivation but not to automate new behaviours. Therefore, sustaining the program through peer coaching and weekly check-ins is crucial to bridge this gap. From a practical standpoint, this program offers a low-cost, easily replicable model for SME associations and tourism boards. Investment in “soft infrastructure” – workers’ psychological resilience – yields measurable short-term returns. Local governments and industry players should not only focus on physical promotion but also on continuous emotion-regulation and cultural-intelligence training (Oliinyk et al., 2022).

Limitations and future directions

The study’s limitations include a relatively small sample and the absence of a control group, preventing us from ruling out history or maturation effects. Nevertheless, the mixed-method design with rich qualitative data provides strong internal validity. Future research should employ quasi-experimental designs with control groups and longer follow-ups (e.g., 6 months) to test the durability of effects. Overall, these results and discussion affirm that empowering workers through cross-cultural knowledge sharing not only enhances individual well-being but also strengthens social capital and service quality in Ubud’s tourism sector (Aydogan et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). The program stands as evidence that humanistic, locally-grounded approaches can be adaptive strategies for tackling the psychosocial challenges of global tourism in the post-pandemic era (Haver et al., 2014; Majeed & Kim, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The cross-cultural knowledge-sharing program implemented across three tourism SMEs in Ubud, Bali, has demonstrated significant positive impacts on both the psychological well-being and cultural intelligence of frontline workers. The 24.6% improvement in WHO-5 Well-Being Index scores and the 16.2% increase in overall Cultural Intelligence Scale scores provide robust quantitative evidence that participatory, theoretically grounded interventions can effectively address the chronic occupational stress and acculturative strain endemic to intercultural service work in tourism destinations.

Crucially, the most substantial gains were observed in the metacognitive and motivational facets of cultural intelligence—indicating that the program succeeded in enhancing workers' self-awareness, cognitive flexibility, and intrinsic confidence in navigating cross-cultural encounters, rather than merely transmitting surface-level factual knowledge about foreign cultures. The qualitative findings corroborate these quantitative trends, revealing that participants experienced reduced anxiety, normalised discussions of workplace stress, adopted cognitive reappraisal strategies, and developed a renewed sense of pride in their local cultural identity. These shifts collectively contributed to a more supportive, collaborative workplace culture, as evidenced by the spontaneous emergence of peer mentoring, shared knowledge journals, and weekly check-in practices.

The program's success underscores the theoretical validity of integrating Cultural Intelligence theory with Social Exchange principles and the Job Demands-Resources model in designing psychosocial interventions for vulnerable worker populations. By reframing cross-cultural interactions from stressors to assets and by validating local wisdom as a psychological resource, the intervention addressed not only the symptoms of emotional exhaustion but also the underlying cognitive and social mechanisms that perpetuate it.

From a practical standpoint, this community service initiative offers a replicable, low-cost model for SME associations, tourism boards, and local policymakers seeking to invest in "soft infrastructure"—the psychological fortification of human capital—rather than focusing exclusively on physical or digital infrastructure. The program's participatory design ensures that it can be adapted to diverse cultural and organisational contexts, making it scalable across tourism destinations facing similar challenges.

However, the non-significant change in behavioural CQ suggests that sustainable behavioural adaptation requires extended practice and ongoing reinforcement beyond the four-week intervention period. Therefore, we recommend embedding peer coaching, regular reflection sessions, and continuous knowledge-sharing platforms into routine workplace practices to consolidate and build upon the initial gains.

In conclusion, the resilience and long-term competitiveness of Ubud's tourism industry—and indeed Bali's broader economy—are inextricably linked to the psychological well-being of its workforce. This program demonstrates that targeted, culturally sensitive interventions can protect and enhance the mental health of frontline workers, thereby safeguarding the authentic hospitality that lies at the heart of Bali's global appeal. The findings call for a paradigm shift in tourism human resource development: from a narrow focus on technical skills to a holistic approach that prioritises emotional regulation, intercultural competence, and psychological capital as essential pillars of sustainable tourism.

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