

## Competitive Intelligence in the Tourism Sector: Empirical Evidence from Moroccan Hotel Firms

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**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on competitive intelligence in the tourism sector. Its purpose is to examine empirically the level of competitive intelligence efforts and practices in Moroccan hotel firms. In order to address our research question, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 senior managers of hotel establishments in Morocco. The results highlight that senior manager are aware of the value of knowledge in their decision-making in the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic. The study also shows that they are very sensitive to information about competitors, customer preferences, and the evolution of the pandemic. Another finding is that competitive intelligence practices in Moroccan hotels are still informal and limited to irregular data collection.*

**Keywords:** *Competitive intelligence, Knowledge, decision-making, strategic management, hotel firms, tourism, Morocco.*

### 1. Introduction

In Morocco, tourism is a vital sector that strongly enhances economic growth. The hotel industry in particular contributes highly to the economic development of many cities. With the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the travel restrictions that were adopted to limit the spread of the virus, it was directly and profoundly affected.

Hotel firms were already facing a complex, hardly predictable environment long before Covid-19. However, this current unprecedented crisis has generated a new reality with fierce competition and an incredibly high level of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

In order to be able to cope with such a context and develop their activities, hotel managers are required to implement and adopt practices such as competitive intelligence. As pointed out by El Otmani [5], this pandemic is

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now making competitive intelligence a top concern for decision-makers, above all others.

Since most of the existing literature focuses on competitive intelligence practices within the manufacturing industry while few empirical studies address it in the hotel industry in Morocco, the aim of this study is to address this gap. In fact, its purpose is to explore empirically the level of competitive intelligence efforts and practices in Moroccan hotel firms.

This paper will be structured as follows: In the first part, an overview of competitive intelligence will be provided. Then, the research methodology will be addressed in the second part. The third and last part will be about the analysis and discussion of the results.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Competitive intelligence through its definitions

Competitive intelligence is a managerial practice that raises a significant and growing interest in the academic field. Many researchers and professionals have attempted to define and frame a notion that has caused so much confusion and that presents a semantic complexity that makes its dissemination and understanding among economic actors difficult and delicate.

In fact, Jakobiak [12] explains that the ambiguity of this concept is due to the multiple activities that can be integrated into it. The table below provides a variety of competitive intelligence definitions. The aim is not to see which one is most appropriate or to be exhaustive, but to agree on certain elements that could help clarify and discern this concept (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Competitive intelligence definitions

Authors	Definitions
Levet (2002)	Competitive intelligence would then articulate the mastery of information access and processing techniques and knowledge management, through collective learning and cooperation in order to enlighten the decision-making process.
Larivet (2006)	Competitive intelligence manages information flows between the company and its environment. It is, therefore, in a way, a mode of strategic information management. More precisely, it is a way of managing

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	information asymmetry.
Delesse (2011)	It's a cultural, strategic, and operational response to the problems of governments, business leaders, and decision-makers in general. Transdisciplinary, it mobilizes specific skills and collective intelligence.
Oubrich and Rih (2015)	A management approach focused on the mastering of information and the co-production of new knowledge.
Damaisin D'Ares (2016)	Competitive intelligence is a state of mind using mental faculties to understand and discover relationships between things related to the human activity of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of goods and services, leading to conceptual and rational knowledge of them and their environment.

Source: Author

Competitive intelligence is, indeed, a dynamic process of collecting, processing, disseminating, interpreting, and managing strategic information to support decision-making in an unpredictable environment with intense and fierce competition. Its practices enable managers to identify competitor's intentions, evaluate their capabilities, and therefore create a sustainable competitive advantage while abiding by the rules of ethics and codes of conduct.

## **2.2. Competitive intelligence through its components**

On its components, competitive intelligence has three: the collection of information, or monitoring; the protection of human, material, and immaterial assets; and the offensive or proactive use of information [24]. The following figure illustrates competitive intelligence components (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Competitive intelligence components  
Source : Edited version [4]

As mentioned in the figure above, competitive intelligence has both an offensive and a defensive aspect. The first one refers to the searching, gathering, processing, and dissemination of useful information, and the implementation of particular techniques, aiming at anticipating the evolutions of a market or reducing a competitive advantage by attacking an economic opponent [3]. As for its defensive aspect, it aims at protecting information qualified as strategic against any malicious act that could lead to a loss of competitive advantage or to the endangerment of the company's image and reputation.

The first component is monitoring. It consists of defining, collecting, analyzing, and disseminating relevant information to feed the thinking of decision-makers [14]. Its aim is to monitor and understand the competitive environment and detect emerging trends [9]. In fact, it puts into meaningful relationships the heterogeneous information collected, which interpretation favors the development of strategic sense on the possible evolutions of the environment [19]. In addition, monitoring is a generic term that can be associated with many qualifiers depending on the sector, the company's culture, its competitive field and the resources allocated to it [21]

As for lobbying, it's the proactive and offensive aspect of competitive intelligence. It's a set of legal actions, notably indirect, implemented on individuals or entities identified as being able to exert a certain pressure on the actors of the market considered [3]. It consists in getting the one you want to influence to change his or her paradigm of thought, to modify his or her fundamentals. In a very concrete way, it induces a change in the level of perception of realities [15]. It allows the company to use information in order

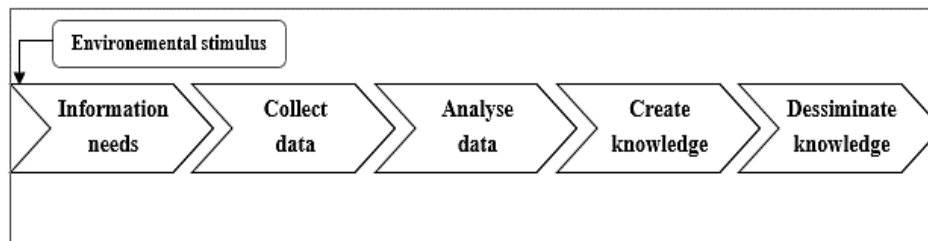
to impact and influence its environment and obtain agreements in favor of its interests.

Another component of competitive intelligence is the protection of information. It represents its defensive aspect, which aims to preserve the company's information assets. In fact, a company may face certain risks that are difficult to control, such as natural disasters or errors such as data deletion. Not to mention that the competition is so intense that many companies may find themselves the target of internal or external malicious acts.

### 2.3. Competitive intelligence through its process

Competitive intelligence is a process contributing, by constructing meaning, to modify the representations that the actors of the organization have of their environment [25].

A review of literature reveals that information is at the heart of the competitive intelligence process. This latter involves five key steps which include the following: identifying information needs, collecting and analyzing data, creating knowledge and then disseminate it [22], [20], [10], [2], [13]. The next figure represents competitive intelligence process (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Competitive intelligence process  
Source : Edited version [23]

It appears that the competitive intelligence process starts with the identification of information needs due to the emergence of a strategic problem. Then comes the data collection stage using human and technological means. The next step is analyzing data. In [28], it involves estimating the quality, reliability, and usefulness of the data collected, synthesizing it in a clear and concise manner, and classifying it by strategic axis.

The fourth step is to develop and create useful knowledge, it requires interpreting all the information available thanks to some human skills. Then, it should be noted that simply creating knowledge is not enough. It is imperative

to disseminate it to the relevant managers so that they can use it in their decision-making. Actually, there are several means of dissemination, such as computerized systems and internal databases, ... Moreover, this step requires taking some security measures in order to protect the knowledge developed by the company [16]. In short, competitive intelligence implies observing, understanding, and communicating strategic knowledge for better decision-making.

#### **2.4. Competitive intelligence practices in hotel firms**

It goes without saying that hotel industry has become more competitive. The reasons behind are mostly related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the advent and the development of new technologies and easier access to information.

In this sense, one of the key elements to take into account in decision-making is the environment in which the business operates. This is where competitive intelligence makes sense, understood as the process of establishing the environmental information needs, information acquisition and its analysis, transforming it into intelligence and putting it at the service of decision-makers in the company [27]. The hotel industry must observe, understand, and formulate dynamic strategies. Consequently, competitive intelligence is a necessity for any hotel [17].

Competitive intelligence is one of the emerging trends that is triggering the awakening of a growing interest in the field of strategic management [8]. Even though a large consensus recognizes its value, most of the existing literature investigates it in the manufacturing industry. To the best of our best knowledge, there has been a lack of empirical research in the context of hotel firms worldwide, much less in the Moroccan context.

It should be outlined that according to previous studies, there is a positive relationship between competitive intelligence activities and firm performance [18], [17], [26]. As a matter of fact, few research studies tried to identify and examine competitive intelligence activities and practices within hotel firms in different countries. For instance, Salguero et al. [26], have conducted a study on competitive intelligence use in the Spanish hotel industry. Their findings indicate that facing fierce competition drive hotel managers to make a greater effort to obtain competitive intelligence.

Köseoglu et al. [18] investigated the level of knowledge and awareness of competitive intelligence among hotel managers in Minot, North Dakota. Their findings illustrate that hotel managers have a low level of awareness of

competitive intelligence. There is also a lack of formal education or training in competitive intelligence.

In their paper, Köseoglu et al. [17], addressed how hotel departments manage competitive intelligence practices both formally and informally. They found that competitive intelligence practices are very limited. They are mainly focused on customer experience and competitors.

As for [1], he attempts to explore how competitive intelligence dimensions generate direct effects on innovation in tourism industry of China. His study highlighted that competitive intelligence (CI) plays an important role in the process of innovation when it comes to service businesses. The author notes that Customer CI has a stronger effect on exploratory service innovation than on exploitative service innovation. While opponent and supplier CI have positive effects on both of them.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Choosing a qualitative study**

Qualitative studies help clarify and define a research problem, formulate hypotheses regarding the relationships between variables, enrich a theoretical model and develop measurement scales. A qualitative approach to research aims to understand how individuals make meaning of their social world. It is committed to multiple views of social reality whereby a researcher's respondent becomes "the expert", it is his or her view of reality that the researcher seeks to interpret [11]

In the same vein, qualitative research is used where there is a concern for understanding how things happen and how they are related, rather than only measuring the relationship between variables [6]. It identifies the presence or absence of something, unlike quantitative observation, which implies measuring the degree of presence of a characteristic [7]. That is why we considered qualitative study as the most appropriate approach to explore the level of competitive intelligence efforts and practices in Moroccan hotel firms.

#### **3.2. Sampling and data collection**

The hotels sampled are a mix of large modern hotel chains and smaller private hotels. The purpose was to examine the differences in competitive

intelligence perception and practices between large Moroccan hotel groups and privately managed hotels.

Regarding the sample size, we followed the saturation principle. In fact, we ended the interviews when the information collected became repetitive and redundant and the information obtained through an additional interview was no longer relevant. Therefore, we conducted 10 interviews.

Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide that included the main questions and areas that needed to be addressed. It, therefore, allowed us to collect the same data from the different interviewees.

Advance telephone calls were made to make an appointment and, above all, to explain the purpose of our study. The objective was to establish a relationship of trust necessary for the smooth running of the interviews, which lasted nearly an hour.

Further on, a qualitative data analysis software was used to have more visibility of our data, explore it in-depth, and work in a systematic way.

## **4. Research findings and recommendations**

### **4.1. Sensitivity to information and competitive intelligence awareness**

Whether it's a large hotel chain or a small one, the senior managers interviewed agree on the indisputable importance of information for the sustainability of their activities, especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a matter of fact, their sensitivity to information varies according to its nature. Due to the uncertainty generated by the pandemic, the most important data is related to the evolution of drastic measures and traveling restrictions worldwide, the hotels market, competitors, and then client's preferences.

The majority of the respondents are not aware of the concept of competitive intelligence. They assimilate it with a technique to reduce costs and attract more tourists. Only two senior managers of large hotel chains claimed that they have heard of competitive intelligence, but when it comes to providing a clear definition, they usually reduce it to monitoring. All in all, there is a very low level of competitive intelligence awareness among hotel managers in Morocco.



#### 4.2. Competitive intelligence practices and implementation challenges

At the Moroccan hotel level, the respondents state that there is no unit dedicated to competitive intelligence. It is not integrated into any other function and does not exist under any other designation.

Data is collected by managers through their personal networks, international events, customers, and competitors. The information collected is not processed in a formalized way, it is disseminated to the concerned employees in an informal way. Indeed, it seems that the competitive intelligence is reduced to its only aspect of data collection which is not done permanently but to meet a specific need of information. Monitoring or lobbying practices do not exist in Moroccan hotels.

When it comes to implementing a competitive intelligence system at the level of the Moroccan hotels, all the interviewees mention the following challenges: The lack of competent collaborators specialized in the field and the decrease in revenues generated by the drastic measures imposed to contain the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. The respondents confirmed that they are trying to make up for last year's losses and pointed out that formally implementing competitive intelligence is not a priority.

#### 4.3. Recommendations

The research revealed that competitive intelligence is an underestimated practice among hotel managers in Morocco, even though it has several benefits. It enables them to detect threats and opportunities related to the sector through a strategic monitoring system, to have useful information at the right time and long before its competitors, and to create an information asymmetry in favor of the hotel.

In light of the study results, it is appropriate to suggest some measures that could enhance the practice of competitive intelligence in Moroccan hotels, such as:

- Organizing seminars and conferences on competitive intelligence in order to expose the concrete contributions of competitive intelligence by academics and professionals.
- Practicing territorial intelligence among Moroccan regions.
- The government could offer hotel firms subsidies to cover the implementation of competitive intelligence units and departments.

- Engage universities and educational institutions in the training of experts in competitive intelligence within the tourism sector.

## 5. Conclusions

To conclude, it should be mentioned that hotels operate in an increasingly complex and uncertain environment marked by frequent and unpredictable changes, such as different customer preferences, intense and diversified competition, regulations, technological advances, a large flow of information, and recently the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is important to adopt a competitive intelligence approach that enhances the creation of strategic knowledge required to overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities.

In order to cover the existing gap in the current literature, this paper aimed to empirically examine the level of competitive intelligence efforts and practices in Moroccan hotel firms. For this purpose, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted among 10 senior managers of hotel establishments in Morocco using semi-structured interviews.

The findings of this study indicated that senior managers are aware of the value of knowledge in their decision-making in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, they are very sensitive to information about competitors, customer preferences, and the evolution of the pandemic. Another finding is that competitive intelligence practices in Moroccan hotels are still informal and limited to irregular data collection.

On a theoretical level, the findings from this research will contribute to a better understanding of competitive intelligence practices in Moroccan hotels. It could also be a framework for future studies in this field. As for its practical implication, these results can be setting the ground for any potential implementation of the competitive intelligence process in hotel firms in Morocco.

On the other hand, the limitation of this study is that the findings need to be confirmed via a quantitative confirmatory study. For research perspectives, a focus on providing a guideline on how to implement competitive intelligence in Moroccan hotel firms is needed.

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