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Exploring the abilities of emotional intelligence in psychological empowerment: digital leadership as mediator

Abilities of
emotional
intelligence

Sadia Anwar

*Institute of Commerce and Management, University of Sindh,
Jamshoro, Pakistan, and*

Umami Naiemah Saraih

*Faculty of Business and Communication, UniMAP, Kangar, Malaysia and
Department of Business Administration, Daffodil International University,
Dhaka, Bangladesh*

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Abstract

Purpose – Numerous studies have been conducted on psychological empowerment's effects on individual and organizational outcomes. This research study investigates the effects of emotional intelligence (EI) on psychological empowerment (PE) directly and indirectly through digital leadership (DL) in higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan.

Design/methodology/approach – This study investigates the academic authorities' capacity to follow the EIs in identifying the PE from Pakistan's HEIs. The researchers have applied a survey questionnaire to collect quantitative cross-sectional data. To conclude, the researchers used 427 useable cases to get the results.

Findings – Based on the structural equation model (SEM), the results reveal a positive and significant effect of EIs, subscales like self-regulation (SR), self-awareness (SA), self-motivation (SM) and social skills (SS), on DL and PE. Besides, DL positively and significantly affects PE. Finally, DL mediates the association of SR, SA, SM and SS with PE.

Practical implications – This research can bring a new vision in exploring the policy to the higher authorities for the educational sector to have better direction and interpretation of EIs, DL and PE to develop new measures of positive and proactive attitudes in the organization. The results support developing DL practices toward digital transformation among HIEs.

Originality/value – This study contributes significantly by presenting valuable empirical insights for HEIs leaders. Importantly, it introduces a construct mediating the role of DL, effectively addressing the remaining gaps in the literature.

Keywords Emotional intelligence, Psychological empowerment, Digital leadership, Education system, Higher educational institutes

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Every firm undergoes constant internal innovation and change to navigate the dynamic market landscape, experiencing rapid and successive modifications in this competitive era, where competition is the essential driver of success (Saleh *et al.*, 2022). Understanding the role of psychological empowerment (PE) in managing organizations is crucial. It is considered a tool that enhances speed, flexibility and an organization's decision-making capacity by sharing power, information, autonomy and promoting active member participation. Human resources need to be more involved in decision-making processes. Therefore, like other organizations, educational institutions strive to change and compete to attract, motivate and retain staff members while improving performance. Emotional intelligence (EI) and digital leadership (DL) are valuable skills when addressing significant workplace challenges and changes (Barreiro and Treglow, 2020).



Research findings emphasize the considerable and strongly positive link between academic heads' EIs and leadership with educational authorities in public universities while identifying workplace transformation (Nurkhin *et al.*, 2023). Although more studies are required on DL, it is considered a key indicator for managing various employee and management prospects. Properly handled, DL and EIs have a positive impact and are necessary to enhance PE. Consequently, the researchers explored the relationship between EI and PE, mediating through DL at Pakistani higher education institutions (HEIs). The study's conclusions aim to provide improved ways to enhance PE by boosting EIs and the impact of DL among leaders. A second empirical validation and innovation of this research lies in the mediating effects that would deepen the depth of the literature. Finally, the study offers fresh perspectives on the empirical support of HEIs in emerging nations.

RQ1. Is PE significantly influenced by leaders' EIs flexibility subscale and DL?

RQ2. How significantly can DL mediate the relationship between EIs subscales and PE?

This study's findings may help policymakers develop policies that may be helpful for innovative changes that might become necessary in today's competitive era. This could also assist the stakeholders in recognizing the need for maintenance of PE based on EIs along with the essential digital tools that aid in overcoming obstacles and maximizing opportunities.

2. Literature review and conceptualization

EI involves comprehending and effectively regulating interpersonal relations. Various attitudes and constructive behaviors related to the job, such as job satisfaction and performance, are also influenced by EIs (Sha *et al.*, 2022). The inability of educational leaders to navigate reform challenges has hindered efforts to change the educational system over the years. Throughout Pakistan's history, the higher education system has been a significant topic of debate among various groups, including policymakers, government officials and educators (Parveen *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, the quality of Pakistan's higher education system deteriorated significantly, leading to the establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002. Pakistani universities faced substantial gaps in the knowledge base and advancement of the higher education system due to globalization's competitiveness and compatibility. In response, HEC Pakistan established the Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) in 2006 to monitor and evaluate the internal excellence verification process for academic instruction, learning and academia at universities. The aim was to bridge gaps between the fundamental and reasonable regulations of quality education throughout institutions in Pakistan (Asad *et al.*, 2021).

2.1 Emotional intelligence (EIs), digital leadership (DL) and psychological empowerment (PE)

Digitalization has altered ways of thinking, making decisions and seeing the world, affecting institutional behaviors and organizational environments. As a result, it has become crucial for organizations to integrate EIs and DL. Research indicates that understanding, recognizing and controlling emotions are increasingly vital for leaders to exercise effective leadership (Foltin and Keller, 2012). Effective communication among employees is essential for this purpose and formative indicators of EIs such as self-regulation (SR), self-awareness (SA), self-motivation (SM) and social skills (SS) play an influential role in this regard (Foltin *et al.*, 2012). PE is viewed as an individual's perception of the motivating process, enhancing their self-efficacy at work (Amor *et al.*, 2020). SA is a crucial ability to identify the presence, limitations, strengths and actions and how one exhibits these attributes. EIs are required for effective leadership because great leaders can successfully control their emotions and the

emotional processes involved in managing others (Miao *et al.*, 2018). Leaders in the educational sector need EI to recognize the maximum potential of teachers and students in learning, teamwork and SS. Over three decades of literature have emphasized that organizations should avoid hierarchical leadership styles in favor of employee empowerment (Zhou *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, SS encompasses daily abilities for engaging and communicating with others, involving spoken and non-spoken communication methods like gestures, body language and facial expressions (De Klerk and Stander, 2014). SS is based on self-competence or self-efficacy perceptions, including the perception of personal control, which forms a motivational aspect (Meng *et al.*, 2016). Numerous studies have shown a strong correlation between EIs and leadership (Sha *et al.*, 2022; Nurkhin *et al.*, 2023). Building on the assumption that EIs can influence DL and PE, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a and H1b. SR significantly and positively predicts DL and PE.

H2a and H2b. SA significantly and positively predicts DL and PE.

H3a and H3b. SS significantly and positively predicts DL and PE.

H4a and H4b. SM significantly and positively predicts DL and PE.

Nevertheless, there are notable gaps in the existing literature. First, addressing the current knowledge gaps, research establishes the direct impact of EIs on DL and PE. However, the subscale of EIs is not explicitly linked to DL and PE (Zhou *et al.*, 2018). Second, studies illustrate the evolving landscape of DL, encompassing education, other industries and businesses. Western researchers have identified seven stages for DL, covering communication, public relations, branding, professional development, student learning involvement, opportunities, settings and learning space. However, research on the impact of EIs on PE has primarily occurred outside the field of education (Zhou *et al.*, 2018). Contextually, earlier studies did not focus on the intellectual leaders in Pakistan, demanding urgent attention (Chaudhry and Ali, 2016; Memon *et al.*, 2022). Despite the significant challenges academic leaders face in managing ongoing operations and anticipating future trends and complexities in Pakistani HEIs, the relationship between EIs, DL and PE among these leaders remains a research gap lacking empirical evidence. Building on the prior literature and identified gaps, the researchers propose a conceptual model (Figure 1) considering the academic leaders of Pakistan. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. DL significantly and positively predicts PE.

2.2 Digital leadership (DL) as a mediator

Organizations are also recognized as the setting for face-to-face interaction between leaders and employees. Most researchers devote their time to exploring the issues related to clients' services, observing supervisors' instructions, reporting to them, or collaborating and working with coworkers (Kim *et al.*, 2017; Barreiro *et al.*, 2020). Positive emotional expression is associated with a higher likelihood of success at work; this shows performance and EIs are closely related. EIs are linked to other intangible aspects of employment, such as job satisfaction, loyalty and turnover intention of employees. A leader with an optimistic leadership viewpoint may immediately improve the psychological resources of their workforce. Workers who feel more supported by their leaders are more likely to feel more empowered (Amor *et al.*, 2020). As a result, it has been determined that further research, particularly among Pakistani leaders, is necessary to decide on the mediating effect of DL between EIs and PE. To examine the significance of digitalization in the education sector, most research in the context of educational institutions has primarily disregarded the aspect of DL. Second, the study discovered that in developing nations like Pakistan, the influence of

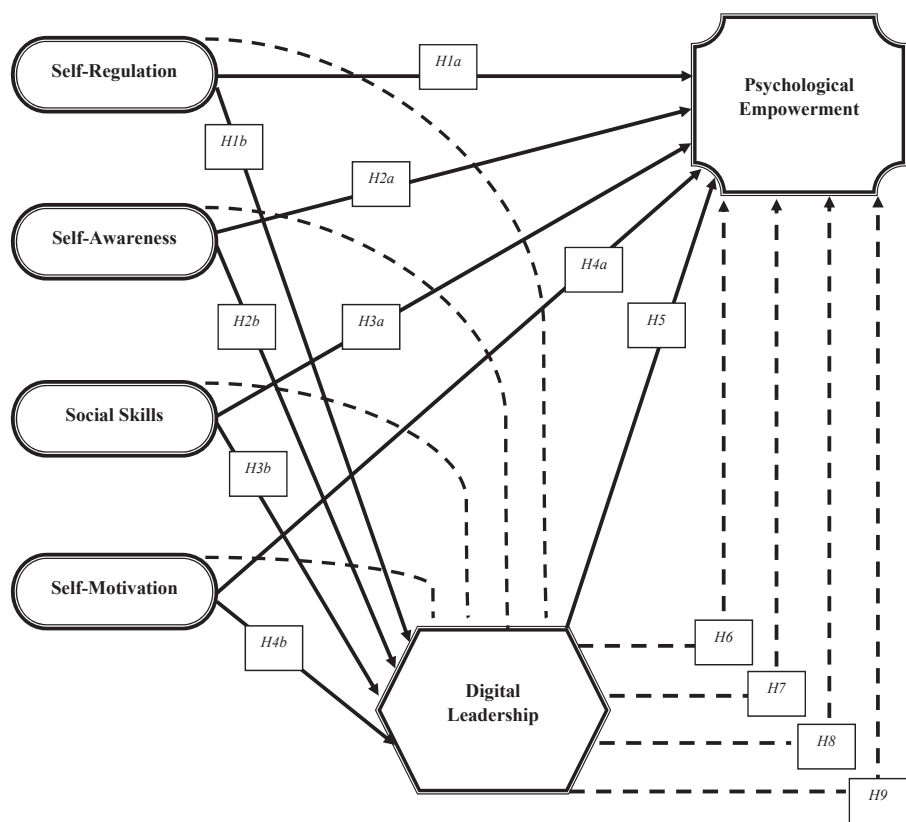


Figure.1.
Conceptual model

Source(s): Authors’ conceptualization

DL on EIs and PE could open up new perspectives in the era of education (Antonopoulou *et al.*, 2021a; Nedelcu and Petre, 2021).

- H6.* DL mediates the relationship between SR and PE.
- H7.* DL mediates the relationship between SA and PE.
- H8.* DL mediates the relationship between SS and PE.
- H9.* DL mediates the relationship between SM and PE.

3. Methods

3.1 Approach and respondents

The quantitative research protocol involves reviewing contemporary literature to formulate research questions and gathering scientific data using scales. The questions are designed with a clear and measurable range of answers. Subsequently, data were analyzed using quantitative scientific methods to address the research questions (Hoang *et al.*, 2020; Barreiro *et al.*, 2020). Respondents, including Deputy Vice-Chancellors, deans, deputy deans, directors/ chairpersons and heads of departments, were randomly selected from lists obtained from

relevant HEIs' online pages in Pakistan. According to Pakistan's HEC estimates, there are approximately 146 higher degree-granting institutions in the nation (HEC, 2021).

3.2 Reliability and validity

Cross-sectional data were gathered through an adapted survey questionnaire strategy. Before extensive data collection, a pilot study assessed the questionnaire's reliability. The reliability test, focusing on item consistency, is crucial for survey quality (Snyder, 2019). With 45 responses from the pilot study, valuable suggestions were obtained and input from university professors in organizational behavior and human resource management (HRM)-ensured questionnaire validity. Their expertise guided adjustments, resulting in a valid and reliable survey instrument.

3.3 Data collection procedures and sample size

Post-pandemic challenges led to the introduction of online data collection forms for respondent convenience (Barnes *et al.*, 2021). We employed Google Forms to collect data from various universities in Pakistan (Nurkhin *et al.*, 2023). The questionnaire, administered in English, was distributed to approximately 700 participants across public and private universities. We received 427 valid responses, forming the basis for the final analysis.

3.4 Measures

With the assistance of the EQi 2.0 scale, the variable of EIs is measured (Bar-On, 1997) which were subdivided among the subscale of EL (Stein and Book, 2011). SR is measured on six items like "I know when to speak about my problems to others." SA factor was measured through nine items, with a sample content as "I am aware of my emotions as I experience them." SS and SM both were inspected through seven items. Each SS items were like, "I seek out activities that make me happy," whereas the SM items were like, "I easily recognize my emotions as I experience them". The DL factor is measured by applying seven items of BÜYÜKBEŞE *et al.* (2022), as "I provide others with digital assistance in exchange for their efforts." The PE construct is measured by the ten items using Spreitzer (1995), like "I am confident about my ability to do my job." All the items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Never; (2) Rarely; (3) Occasionally; (4) Sometimes; (5) Often; (6) Always; (7) Almost always.

4. Data analysis

4.1 Demography

The respondents' demographic data is obtained to determine the percentage of respondents who participated in the survey. Regarding gender viewpoint, there were more males (56.21%; $n = 240$) than females (43.79%; $n = 187$). Similarly, most respondents (51.99% of $n = 222$) were between 41 and 50, while minimum respondents (5.85% or $n = 25$) were 20 and 30. The married respondents found (89.46%, or $n = 382$) were more than those who were divorced (3.51%, or $n = 15$) and those who were single (7.02%, or $n = 30$). A maximum of 347 people (81.26%) have a PhD degree, the highest qualification. The proportion of responders with a master's degree, however, was only (7.49% or $n = 32$) (Table 1).

4.2 Measurement model

The investigation should assess the indicator's consistency using loading scores from the associations between the indicators used by the construct (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Except for items, i.e. SR3, SA2, S5, S6, SS2, SS3, SS5, SM3, SM5, DL5, DL7, PE3, PE8 and PE10, the majority of

Table 1.
Demographic
information of
respondents

	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	240	56.21
	Female	187	43.79
	Total	427	100.0
Age	23–30 Years	25	5.85
	31–40 Years	60	14.05
	41–50 Years	222	51.99
	50 and More Years	120	28.11
	Total	427	100.0
Marital status	Single	30	7.03
	Married	382	89.46
	Divorced/Widow	15	3.51
	Total	427	100.0
Education	Masters	32	7.49
	PhD	347	81.26
	Post Doc	48	11.25
	Total	427	100.0
Source(s): Authors' own calculation			

items were loaded above-suggested loading (Table 2) of >0.70 (Hair, 2021). Similarly, composite reliability (CR) values range from 0.855 to 0.914 (SS = 0.855; PE = 0.914), higher than the 0.70 values suggested by eminent researchers (Hair *et al.*, 2021). The coefficients of Cronbach were found according to the range of 0.832 (SA) to 0.887 (PE) (Amirrudin *et al.*, 2021), which is excellent. Besides, average variance extracted (AVE) values are appeared greater than 0.50 and ensure acceptable AVE (Table 2).

Next, we evaluated the constructs' discriminant validity (DV) to determine their similarities and differences (Hair *et al.*, 2021) through Fornell and Larcker's (1981). DV appears to be between the range of 0.747 and 0.799 (Table 3). As a result, these overall results support the model's good DV (Hair *et al.*, 2021).

4.3 Structural model

We used the structural equation model (SEM) to assess the suggested paths. The structural path scores for H1a and H1b indicate a significant positive impact of SR on PE and DL (H1a $\beta = 0.300$, CR = 7.142***; H1b $\beta = 0.320$, CR = 8.648***). Hence, H1a and H1b are accepted. Also, the results of the SEM indicated that SA had a sizable positive effect on PE and DL (H2a $\beta = 0.149$, CR = 4.656***; H2b $\beta = 0.391$, CR = 5.924***). Hence, H2a and H2b are accepted. The third EI subscale, or SS, positively affected PE and DL (H3a $\beta = 0.420$, CR = 6.086***; H3b $\beta = 0.318$, CR = 6.360***), which accepted H3a and H3b. When this happened, the beta and CR scores (H4a $\beta = 0.254$, CR = 6.350***; H4b $\beta = 0.389$, CR = 7.480***) confirmed SM's positive and significant impact on PE and DL. H4a and H4b were therefore supported. However, we saw a direct correlation between DL and PE that was positively correlated, which was further supported by the beta and CR scores (H5 $\beta = 0.381$, CR = 6.245***). The mediation analysis also revealed a mediating effect of DL in developing relationship between SR, SA, SS, SM and PE (H6 $\beta = 0.71$, CR = 8.980***; H7 $\beta = 0.41$, CR = 8.360***; H8 $\beta = 0.61$, CR = 8.840***; and H9 $\beta = 0.51$; CR = 5.730***) (Figure 2 and Table 4). As a result, H6–H9 are accepted.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to examine how DL, PE and EIs interact. The research investigated that SR, SA, SS and SM as EIs subscale significantly and positively impact PE and DL. Earlier

						Abilities of emotional intelligence
Construct	Item code	Factor loading above 0.7	CR > 0.7	AVE above 0.5	α above 0.7	
Self-regulation (SR)	SR1	0.823	0.869	0.570	0.838	
	SR2	0.757				
	SR4	0.755				
	SR5	0.731				
	SR6	0.705				
Self-awareness (SA)	SA1	0.841	0.863	0.558	0.832	
	SA3	0.742				
	SA4	0.724				
	SA7	0.719				
	SA8	0.702				
Social skills (SS)	SS1	0.875	0.855	0.598	0.845	
	SS4	0.752				
	SS6	0.745				
	SS7	0.711				
Self-motivation (SM)	SM1	0.895	0.890	0.620	0.850	
	SM2	0.801				
	SM4	0.761				
	SM6	0.754				
	SM7	0.715				
Digital leadership (DL)	DL1	0.803	0.883	0.602	0.881	
	DL2	0.789				
	DL3	0.787				
	DL4	0.779				
	DL6	0.717				
Psychological empowerment (PE)	PE1	0.888	0.914	0.640	0.887	
	PE2	0.885				
	PE4	0.791				
	PE5	0.758				
	PE6	0.736				
	PE7	0.725				

Note(s): AVE: average variance extracted; CR: construct reliability; AVE for the second-order model = averaging the squared multiple correlations for the first-order indicators
Each item's factor loadings are all significant (*p*<0.01)
Source(s): Authors' own calculation

Table 2. Factor loading, CR, AVE and Cronbach's alpha for the research study model

Table 2.
Factor loading, CR, AVE and Cronbach's alpha for the research study model

Factors		1 SR	2 SA	3 SS	4 SM	5 DL	6 PE
1	SR	0.755					
2	SA	0.308**	0.747				
3	SS	0.239**	0.244**	0.773			
4	SM	0.383**	0.282**	0.214**	0.787		
5	DL	0.243**	0.199**	0.108*	0.287**	0.773	
6	PE	0.275**	0.202**	0.172**	0.173**	0.172**	0.799

Note(s): **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

SR: self-regulation; SA: self-awareness; SS: social skill; SM: self-motivation; PE: psychological empowerment and DL: digital leadership

Source(s): Authors' own calculation

Table 3.
Discriminant validity for the complete model by Fornell-Larcker

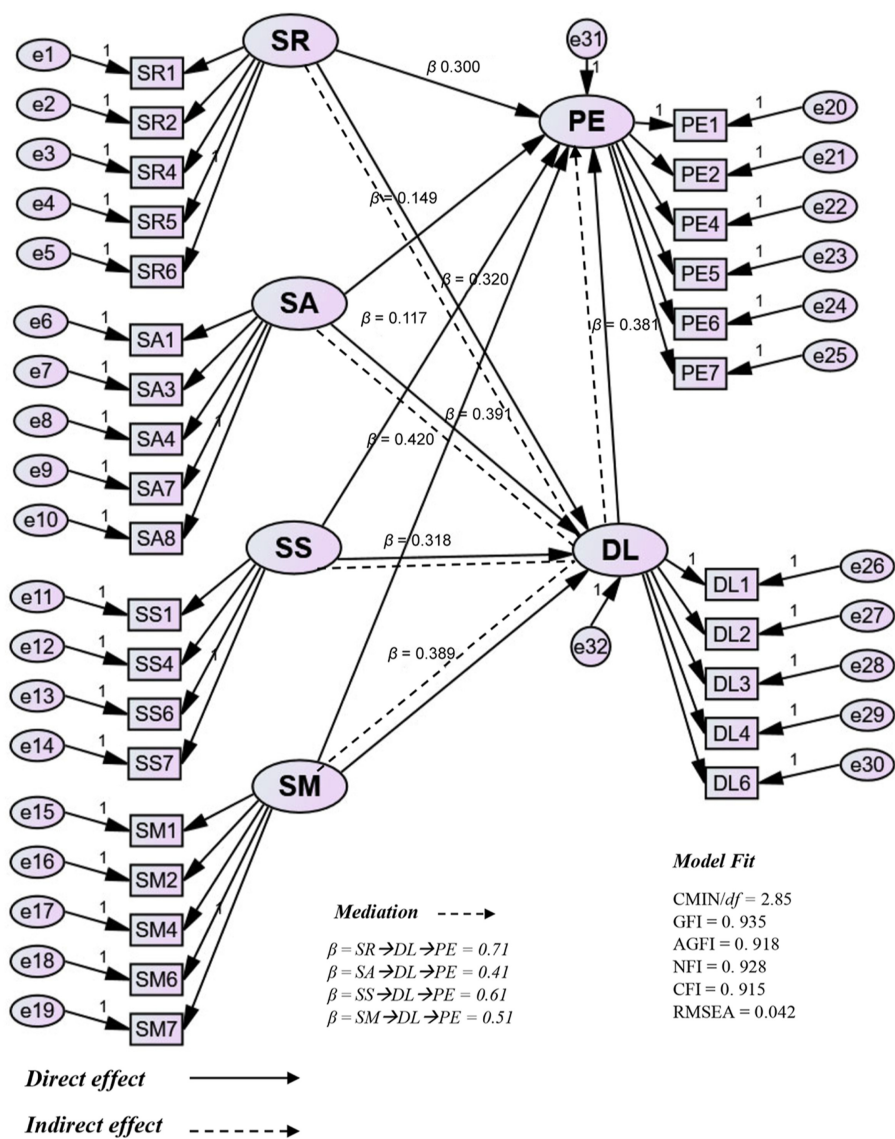


Figure. 2. Structural equation model (direct effect and indirect effect)

Note(s): SR, Self-Regulation; SA, Self-Awareness; SS, Social Skill; SM, Self-Motivation; PE, Psychological Empowerment; DL, Digital Leadership

Source(s): Authors' conceptualization

research has confirmed these beneficial connections in the literature (Nanda and Randhawa, 2019; Barreiro et al., 2020). The results revealed that the educational administration leaders of Pakistani HEIs maintained their peer levels of self-determination, self-competence and self-efficacy. They tend to be encouraging, driven and capable of controlling emotions like

H. No	Proposed relationship			Est. β (path coefficient)	SE	CR (t-value)	P	Result	Decision
H1a	SR	→	PE	0.300	0.042	7.142	***	Significant	Supported
H1b	SR	→	DL	0.320	0.037	8.648	***	Significant	Supported
H2a	SA	→	PE	0.149	0.032	4.656	***	Significant	Supported
H2b	SA	→	DL	0.391	0.066	5.924	***	Significant	Supported
H3a	SS	→	PE	0.420	0.069	6.086	***	Significant	Supported
H3b	SS	→	DL	0.318	0.050	6.360	***	Significant	Supported
H4a	SM	→	PE	0.254	0.040	6.350	***	Significant	Supported
H4b	SM	→	DL	0.389	0.052	7.480	***	Significant	Supported
H5	DL	→	PE	0.381	0.061	6.245	***	Significant	Supported
H6	SR→	DL→	PE	0.71	0.079	8.980	***	Significant	Supported
H7	SA→	DL→	PE	0.41	0.049	8.360	***	Significant	Supported
H8	SS→	DL→	PE	0.61	0.069	8.840	***	Significant	Supported
H9	SM→	DL→	PE	0.51	0.089	5.730	***	Significant	Supported

Note(s): CR: critical ratio. *** $P < 0.001$; SR: self-regulation; SA: self-awareness; SS: social skills; SM: self-motivation and PE: psychological empowerment

Source(s): Authors' own calculation

Table 4.
Structural path analysis results

irritation, excitement, rage and embarrassment. Moreover, SR, SA, SS and SM positively and significantly impact the DL and PE (H1a and H1b to H4a and H4b are accepted). Studies from previous research support the fact the formative variables of EIs have beneficial effects on both DL and PE (Foltin and Keller, 2012; Zhou *et al.*, 2018). These results demonstrated that these leaders could recognize their ability to collaborate effectively and efficiently with their peers, they possess the ability to identify the skills necessary to assemble a winning team, and they can override resistance to change. Also, the study's results confirm that DL directly impacts PE (H5 is accepted). However, the positive mediating impact of DL between SR, SA, SS and SM on PE was also identified (H7 to H9 as accepted). The findings are consistent with earlier studies conducted by De Klerk *et al.* (2014) and Meng *et al.* (2016).

The results show that managers with intense PE levels can lower employee stress and insecurity levels. They give their organizational members chances for personal growth through decreased emotional weariness, enhanced emotional health, better working circumstances and job satisfaction. They want to prepare highly skilled instructors in universities who can handle the difficulties of education 4.0. Academic leaders with the attribute of empowering leadership can enlighten staff members on how to accomplish goals, allowing them to judge the worth of their contributions and thereby raising the work's significance to meet future organizational difficulties. The results showed that a revamped curriculum is suggested following the epidemic to introduce a new perspective in this cutthroat period. Educational institutions can successfully implement new organizational structures and technology with competitive DL strategies. The results conclude that SR, SA, SS and SM substantially benefit DL. The SR, SA, SS and SM also proved to be effective and positive predictors of PE. Also, the DL The same goes for the positive relationship that DL successfully forges between SR, SA, SS, SM and PE. The SEM scores also highlighted the positive mediating function of DL between SR, SA, SS, SM and PE among the leading academic authorities of Pakistani HEIs.

6. Contribution

The study revealed several practical contributions. The study's findings would have significant practical implications for higher authorities to address the difficulties of detecting

PE in the workforce. The study's findings would also improve employees' emotional competence and performance, giving them the knowledge and abilities to generate their organizations by developing competent workers who fit into dynamic revolutionary movements. Mostly, the western researches explored the importance of EI in organizations; thus, their outcomes in the Pakistani educational system can also be utilized. Still, few studies examined similar correlations in the Eastern cultural environment, whereas the dynamic technological transformation and industrial revolution significantly influence EIs need to be addressed (Ullah *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the results would also enhance the social and emotional capabilities among the human resources for foster the growth of positive personalities and effective communication skills, which are necessary for them to adapt to changing organizational requirements in the digital age.

Regarding the theoretical contribution, the empirical data from this study yields varying conclusions. Different philosophies and points of view were considered when attempting to explain how the relationship between perceived EI and PE was used in the workplace setting. Due to dynamic changes and needs based on the revolutionary requirements of the educational sector, various perspectives, the nature of the behavioral study and associated elements provide the researcher with unique information to examine. The study's results increase the understanding of the factors influencing the link between EIs, DL and PE. The study's theoretical contribution would support incorporating the ability, motivation and opportunities known as AMO theory to forecast leaders' intents in extending the Ability model, which aims to explain the factors that influence high performance at work. As it has already been noted, Asian countries need to do such studies so that their findings may examine the contrasts between the two different economies. The study's model might be used with two culturally distinct populations (Ullah *et al.*, 2022). The study's innovative understanding of DL as the intermediary between EIs and PE in a developmental context would be one of its most significant contributions.

7. Limitations and future research agenda

This study has brought attention to how quickly the digital world changes across all sectors, including education. Due to the lack of theoretical support for generalizing the conceptual framework, the study has limitations. Cross-sectional data based on a convenient sampling technique was adopted, which may have limited the generalizability of the findings in this study. Thus, even if a survey questionnaire is an effective tool for obtaining information for the analysis, it may be considered a limitation. Demographic variables like age, gender, position, or leaders' experience are not focused in this study; thus, it can be one of the limitations. The study also collected data only from the leading academic authorities of Pakistani HEIs.

Future research should use mixed techniques to build these relationships robustly. A more extensive and diverse sample could enhance the study's external validity. Future research should employ longitudinal data to examine discrepancies in the findings better. In the same way, other factors, such as occupational stress, turnover intention, organizational commitment and organizational outcomes, need to act as mediators between EIs and PE. Demographic variables can also be used as the control variables as they can influence the leading nature of authorities in the organization. Future frameworks should consider the different companies with various respondents.

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Corresponding author

Sadia Anwar can be contacted at: sadia.memon@usindh.edu.pk

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