

Unveiling the role of emotional intelligence as a mediator between digital leadership and employee cynicism: a study in the private higher educational institutes

Emotional intelligence as a mediator

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Abstract

Purpose – Leaders' capacity to execute innovative and inspiring activities significantly impacts whether educational institutions succeed or fail. This paper aims to explore the gap in how digital leadership (DL) affects employee cynicism (EMPC) and emotional intelligence (EI). In addition, the moderating impact of EI on the association between DL and EMPC is examined in this study.

Design/methodology/approach – The researchers have used a quantitative approach based on cross-sectional data technique. This study examines the effects of DL at Pakistani private universities. All the teaching faculty of Pakistan's private higher educational institutes like universities were the population of the study. While using random sampling, data were gathered from teaching faculty members of such universities. Hence, 366 usable cases were found usable for final data analysis. This study performed the path analysis through the Analysis of Moment Structures in structural equation modeling (SEM).

Findings – Results confirmed that the positive impact of DL among teaching faculty in private universities in Pakistan depends on the EMPC and EI. Overall, the findings are according to the estimates. SEM evaluates that DL significantly correlates with EMPC and EI. On the contrary, EI also significantly impacts EMPC. Furthermore, findings describe that EI significantly mediates the relationship between DL and EMPC.

Practical implications – Based on the research findings, the current issues about how DL can enhance the EMPC and EI in the private educational sector are addressed. It has been explored that academic leaders must demonstrate the techniques that build up strong EI among the teaching faculty to maintain a positive EMPC. The study results offer policymakers and academic authorities significant guidance who embrace technology and will effectively lead their educational institute to acquire educational resources to enhance student engagement and learning. It has also been found that the institutes are significantly impacted by DL, by the behavior and attitude of employees, managers and representatives, eventually. The employees' attitude is majorly known as one reason that affects their productivity. Hence, this study can be found beneficial in establishing a supportive environment and identifying the leaders' EI, which can reduce the issues of EMPC.



Originality/value – The findings of the study indicate that private educational institutes need to focus on enhancing the EI of their teaching faculty and give importance to faculty members' abilities to deal with the new digital techniques to improve their effectiveness in terms of teaching methodology and maintaining the teacher-student relationship. According to the researchers' knowledge, very few studies have examined the connection between DL, EMPC and EI. However, the association between DL and EMPC is examined for the first time in a specific Asian context, namely in Pakistan, with the mediating effect of EI. Therefore, understanding the effects of cynicisms will be a valuable addition to existing literature.

Keywords Digital leadership, Emotional intelligence, Employee cynicism, Higher education sector

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The global educational system has been increasingly shaped by digitalization over the past decade, drawing interest from educators, scholars and decision-makers. As other industries are changing, the quick development of digitalization is also taking place in education (Bond *et al.*, 2020). From distance to door, digital education infuses and helps education spread worldwide (Ronchi and Ronchi, 2019). The educational sector's creation is one of the industrial revolution's key components (Jung, 2020). The education sector has the opportunity to offer a more important goal in terms of adequate information, understanding deployment and communication circumstances. Now, all techniques and ways of practical learning will need to be accommodated in conventional classroom education (Wu *et al.*, 2018). When someone efficiently learns a new technology, they are deemed skilled; however, Education 4.0 is a beneficial talent now but might not be in the future without proper leadership (Khan and Qureshi, 2020).

Leading the new literacy movement is undoubtedly challenging for digital leadership (DL), leaders who require support from various sources to succeed. According to Somech and Drach (2004), the most crucial element in an organization is its human resources. In educational institutes, the teaching faculty is an element that dedicates its time, skills and creativity to the endeavor. Regardless of formal job requirements, organizations, especially universities, will inevitably depend more on teaching faculty members who are willing to contribute to successful change. The organizational literature distinguishes between these voluntary and advantageous organizational behaviors and gestures for those that can be assigned by formal role obligations (Van Yperen, 2017). Thus, if teaching faculty members are not rewarded by their organization or receive no reciprocity from their colleagues, it could negatively impact their motivation. There may be minimal opportunities for advancement, resulting in employee cynicism (EMPC) (Ikpenwa *et al.*, 2023). EMPC encourages immoral actions like knowledge hiding, misleading and fraudulent (Aljawarneh and Atan, 2018). EMPC is considered a potential barrier that could limit DL's ability to foster and promote positive behaviors (Barnes, 2010). Moreover, EMPC has been shown to have numerous negative directional and behavioral returns within an organization (Kalshoven *et al.*, 2011; Khan, 2014). These behavioral returns include low job satisfaction, declining organizational commitment, diminished in-role work behaviors and low emotional intelligence (EI).

The digitalization of traditional teaching and administrative processes is causing a rapid transformation in Pakistan's private education sector. Educational leaders have progressively implemented digital techniques to improve organizational performance and efficiency since the emergence of digital technologies. Yet, issues like EMPC and disparities in EI still exist in these organizations, even with the increased focus on DL. The private sector of educational institutions in Pakistan is subject to certain contextual considerations that impact the adoption and use of DL techniques. These issues include resource limitations, legal obstacles and sociocultural aspects (Butt *et al.*, 2020). It is critical to comprehend how DL affects EMPC and EI in this particular setting to guide leadership tactics and cultivate an innovative and

growth-oriented workplace environment. This study is noteworthy for demonstrating that relatively very few researches have been conducted on the precise relationship between DL and EMPC in private higher educational institutions. To fill this knowledge gap, this study examines the role of DL in the relationship between EMPC and EI. This is accomplished by incorporating a fresh perspective while carrying out ongoing research in this crucial field of organizational behavior to respond to the following questions:

- RQ1.* How does DL impact the EMPC and EI, among the teaching faculty of private educational institutions in Pakistan?
- RQ2.* What can be the relationship between the DL and EI among the teaching faculty in private educational institutions?
- RQ3.* Does EI mediate in the relationship between DL and EC of faculty members in private educational institutions?

With the evaluation of these research questions, this study will contribute by offering a valuable understanding of the relationship of DL, EMPC and EI within the context of private educational institutions in Pakistan. This study would also offer insightful information to planners and legislators creating policies to support teaching faculty members dealing with EMPC. Thus, the novelty of this research is that it provides recommendations for mitigating the unfavorable effects of EMPC in educational settings and maximizing the beneficial role of DL and EI in promoting positive behaviors in general and specifically in the Asian context in which underdeveloped countries like Pakistan are situated. This study adds to the literature in several ways. The study first clarifies DL's role as a key driver of digital transformation brought into the education system. Specifically, the conceptual model describes pathways that illustrate how the role of DL and EI reduce negative behaviors such as EMPC. Second, the mediator model provides organizations with practical advice on addressing issues that arise in universities and other higher education institutions to lessen EMPC. The paper is structured as follows: introduction, literature review and hypotheses development, research methodology, data analysis, discussion and conclusion, and lastly, limitations, contributions and future recommendations.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 Digital leadership

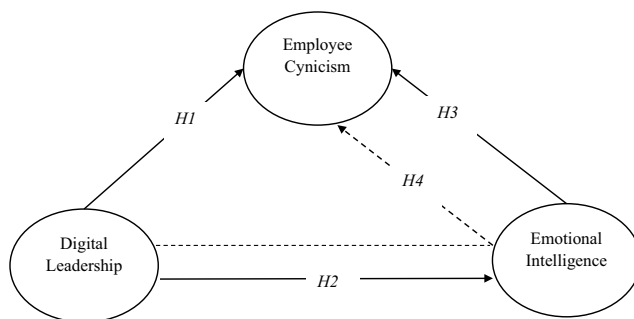
These leaders are known as keen observers and frequent participants who offer assistance and support to others in return for their work, all the while keeping an attentive eye on things and periodically reassessing basic presumptions to make sure they remain relevant. Such leaders are involved in the matters when it is needed. They also freely express their basic principles and opinions, however, when it is seen as necessary they get involved in managing important conflicts (Arham *et al.*, 2022; Hadi *et al.*, 2024). The literature argues that transformative digital culture must be promoted and disseminated throughout the organization, and decision-making in complex environments must be facilitated by a leadership style that supports transformation brought by digitalization and ongoing innovation (Kane *et al.*, 2019). Managers' lack of knowledge on implementing change hinders transformation brought by digitalization. Managers who want to implement transformation brought by digitalization must possess DL as a critical ability. To achieve transformation brought by digitalization, DL refers to an organization's capacity to effectively utilize digital marketing and digital executives' commercial and strategic leadership talents to lead and manage interdisciplinary teams with digital and non-digital skills (Benitez *et al.*, 2022). DL is illustrated by utilizing digital resources within the organization to accomplish goals and objectives.

Considering the drastic changes DL aims to bring about in education, it is regarded as revolutionary leadership (Arham *et al.*, 2022). DL seeks to involve students, teachers and other stakeholders in developing education and inspiring change. The transformational and transactional leadership styles with an EI perspective are strongly aligned with the techniques of DL. The importance of EI in both digital and transformational leadership styles centers on a leader's capacity to inspire and encourage students, educators and other personnel in the field of education. Nonetheless, certain workers display withdrawal behaviors, like being late, being more often absent from work or involved in daydreaming, and putting in less effort at work, which can significantly impact organizational performance (Sagie *et al.*, 2002; Mousa, 2017a, 2017b). EMPC may share specific fundamental characteristics with these passive withdrawal behaviors. According to studies conducted in the early 1990s, EMPC was already present in the workplace, and workers in the modern era appear to be growing more cynical, particularly in workplaces where scandals, mistrust and opportunistic behavior are commonplace (Reichers *et al.*, 1997; Twenge *et al.*, 2004). Counterproductive behaviors, intentions to comply with unethical requests, reduced organizational commitment, badmouthing, poorer performance and a lack of job satisfaction are some of the negative consequences of EMPC that have been perceived to follow, which leads to increased levels of intention to quit (Luksyte *et al.*, 2011; Kuo *et al.*, 2015; Mantler *et al.*, 2015; Simha *et al.*, 2014; Armmer, 2017; Mousa, 2017b). Many researchers have examined various aspects of EMPC, but their focus has primarily been on employees' attitudes and how they may best serve their organizations (Aslam *et al.*, 2015; Mantler *et al.*, 2015).

As a result, it has been noted that EMPC must be addressed to improve employees' EI and performance for organizational sustainability. Even though EMPC has become a topic of study for several social science disciplines, including management, religion, philosophy, political science, sociology and psychology (Helm *et al.*, 2015; Rose *et al.*, 2017). Researchers have examined EMPC's various dimensions, and in the context of organizations, various models for studying EMPC have been developed (Mantler *et al.*, 2015; Rose *et al.*, 2017). However, few studies have been done to determine the effect of EMPC on performance in developing nations, particularly in Pakistan (Bashir, 2011; Aslam *et al.*, 2015). The current study fills this gap in the existing literature by investigating the effect of DL on EI and EMPC. It also examines the mediating impact of EI on the relationship between DL and EMPC among teaching faculty in Pakistan's private higher educational institutes (PHEIs). To the researchers' knowledge, only a few studies have investigated the relationship between DL and EI. However, with the mediating effect of EI, the relationship between DL and EMPC is, for the first time, investigated in the Asian context, particularly in Pakistan. Therefore, understanding the consequences of cynicism will contribute to the existing literature. Thus, based on the existing relationships and gaps in the literature, we proposed the model (Figure 1) to confirm the DL, EI and EMPC relationship among the teaching faculty of PHEIs in Pakistan.

2.2 Digital leadership and employee cynicism

Digital leadership is characterized as the incorporation of digital technology, including mobile devices, communication applications and online applications, in leadership styles of educational administrators in the direction of a long-lasting shift in how technology is used in the educational sector. To put it briefly, DL is the result of combining hardware, technology, resources and leaders. The definition of DL is expanded. Offering vast digital networks such as online forums, wikis, blogs, online file sharing and video conferencing to improve leadership and teaching and learning methods is equally as important as using computers and mobile technologies for carrying out leadership tasks (Saputra *et al.*, 2021). DL aims to advance transformation brought by digitalization while granting greater autonomy to



Source: Developed by the researchers

Figure 1.
Conceptual model of
the study

subordinates. Moreover, DL necessitates developing digital infrastructure considering the whole organization (Bach and Sulíková, 2021). The transformation brought by digitalization is fundamentally an organizational change process that uses digital technology to modify how organizations generate value (Vial, 2019). Since improving performance is the main goal of organizational change, businesses are actively searching for effective transformation strategies due to the uniqueness of digitalization (Vial, 2019). Digital technology is essential to the transformation brought by digitalization (Foroudi *et al.*, 2017). DL is a crucial component of transformation brought about by digitalization (Saputra *et al.*, 2021).

However, Luksyte *et al.* (2011) define the EMPC as a combination of various counterproductive behavior, based on the intentions to comply with unethical requests, and a decrease in organizational commitment (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Mousa, 2017b). Employees having issues with EMPC are mostly found not satisfied with their jobs, defamation, poor work performance and increased resignation intentions (Simha *et al.*, 2014; Kuo *et al.*, 2015; Mantler *et al.*, 2015; Armmer, 2017). Numerous academics have examined various aspects of EMPC their focus has primarily been on employees' views and how they serve organizations (Aslam *et al.*, 2015; Mantler *et al.*, 2015). Dean *et al.* (1998) define EMPC as an employee's unfavorable attitude toward the organization. According to the researchers when workers are involved in the transformation, they could feel unfavorably about the shift, resulting in unfavorable actions and, ultimately, resistance to the change. Favorable employee attitudes are associated with favorable outcomes because employee perceptions and perceived outcomes are typically positively connected (Cullen *et al.*, 2014). It is necessary to precisely specify the characteristics of the integral individuals, specifically employees and their interactions within and between organizations. Employee interactions might produce unexpected, surprising outcomes (Bach and Sulíková, 2021; Saputra *et al.*, 2021; Benitez *et al.*, 2022). Thus, researchers have identified this issue that whenever change is brought in the organizations, the leaders face issues related to cynicism (Tonet, 2019; Sukoco *et al.*, 2022). The researchers put out the following hypothesis in light of the above discussion:

H1. DL has a significant impact on EMPC.

2.3 Digital leadership and emotional intelligence

Education supervisors must work as change agents and facilitate deep learning during DL development (Sullivan and Glanz, 2005). Leaders who adopt DL techniques closely resemble emotionally intelligent individuals. It effectively tackles the consequences of change by

leveraging the leadership role to strengthen teachers' dedication toward new teaching methodology, circulate an improved vision and foster distributed leadership. As technology allows for more individualized learning experiences centered on the student's learning objectives, DL can be developed using the transformational method in educational supervision with the enhancement of EI (Hadi *et al.*, 2024). Learners may find more interesting and relevant learning experiences when they are supported by technology. Organizing leadership around real-world difficulties is another benefit of the transformational technique. Through digital learning communities, technology allows educators to reach students outside the classroom and facilitates their use of educational resources (Drigas *et al.*, 2023).

Interpersonal skills have become one of the important determinants of effective leadership in the last few decades (Goleman, 1998). In this competitive era, the increasingly service-oriented organizations like the educational sector, the leadership roles also involve inspiring and motivating others, fostering positive attitudes at work and fostering a sense of significance and contribution among employees. However, previously leaders were only expected to plan, supervise and control an organization's overall operations (Choudhary *et al.*, 2017). According to Schoemaker *et al.* (2018), organizations engaged in leadership selection have set new standards for leadership training programs to cultivate these competencies in leaders who are evolving based on new technological techniques. Because of this, studies have been conducted to determine the fundamental qualities and actions of leaders who effectively carry out these modern leadership tasks based on digitalization. Based on these studies effective leadership training and selection criteria facilitate future leaders' recruitment and professional development (Buil *et al.*, 2019). However, it has also been observed that total intelligence is a combination of both emotional and cognitive intelligence, where cognitive intelligence deals with the personal intelligence that comes before EI (Wen *et al.*, 2019). Drigas *et al.* (2023) are of the view that the concept of EI has dual responsibilities one of them is to understand and connect to the self's emotions and manage others through effective coping with the current situation.

Because of this, the idea of EI is assessed and actively researched in the context of the educational sector, based on the two notions of emotions and intelligence. Emotional intelligence can be broadly defined as the ability to use emotions intellectually to organize and shape feelings in a way that improves significant outcomes by influencing actions, behaviors and reasoning. To determine an emotional response to particular work scenarios, Goleman (2001) defines emotional intelligence as the degree to which a person can apply comprehensive decision-making and reasoning to particular situations. Furthermore, Johnson and Hackman (2018) maintain that emotional intelligence allows for scanning through adoptions to make logical decision-making more effective and efficient. They also link emotional intelligence to better degrees of personal competence. Thus, DL at educational establishments utilizes strategic collaborations with teaching faculty and other relevant parties to facilitate systemic enhancement. In this competitive era, if the organizations like educational institutes want to remain successful they should have emotionally strong digital leaders or train their digital leaders to improve their emotional intelligence (Hadi *et al.*, 2024; Anwar and Saraih, 2024; Ertio *et al.*, 2024). The researchers put out the following hypothesis in light of the above discussion:

H2. DL has a significant impact on EI.

2.4 Emotional intelligence and employee cynicism

The ability to evaluate and understand one's own emotions and those of others for prescriptive and informational purposes is referred to as EI. Furthermore, when combined, understanding emotions and body language produces new emotions. The ability to control

one's emotions and those of others is necessary for effective emotion management. People with higher EI can overcome unhappiness and channel it into positive activity (Westerlaken *et al.*, 2017). Higher EI individuals perceive events and appearances at a deeper level. They try to diffuse conflict and do not often act abusively (Kisamore *et al.*, 2010). An essential component of EI is the capacity for both understanding and regulation of emotions. Better mental health at work, increased possibility of receiving assistance from others and reinforcement of helpful conduct are all potential outcomes (Tripathy, 2018). High EI leaders favorably affect their subordinates, as evidenced by a decreased likelihood of desire to resign and enhanced perceptions of routine tasks (Falahat *et al.*, 2014). Better interpersonal skills enable leaders to build strong relationships with those beneath them, which benefits all parties in several ways (George, 2000). Gorgens-Ekermans and Brand's (2012) study showed that EI moderates the relationship between stress and burnout. A study by Jordan *et al.* (2002) examines the relationship between affective responses and behavior and the relationship between affective responses and job insecurity, focusing on EI as a moderator.

The literature shows that organizational managers and researchers are paying more attention to employees' attitudes, which can have a negative impact on the entire organization (Kuo *et al.*, 2015; Sahoo *et al.*, 2023). Thus, the EMPC within an organization is a crucial factor in this regard. Dean *et al.* (1998) define EMPC as a weak mindset of employees, with negativity serving. EMPC has been defined by other researchers as an attitude of dis-friendliness toward the organization due to the organization's constant attempts to burden its workers, based on a lack of honesty, and decision-making based on individual experiences and knowledge (Koumaditis and Themistocleous, 2015). Ozler *et al.* (2011) described it as a bad attitude that employees have toward a company and its employees that comprises unhappiness, unrest and hopelessness. They added that it was the result of an employee's perception that the organization lacked integrity. It has been researched by various researchers that employees' cynicism acts occur when their moral, ethical and expectations are not met (Nair and Kamalanabhan, 2010). According to Abraham (2000), there is a negative correlation between EMPC and organizational performance. Pelit and Pelit (2014) discovered a significant and affirmative relationship between mobbing and EMPC among Turkish hotel workers. Aslam *et al.* (2015) examine the correlation between EMPC and privatization. The researchers discovered that behavioral resistance had an interactive influence on the relationship between dispositional resistance, employees' intention to quit and organizational contextual factors. In addition, the empirical literature demonstrates that dissatisfaction and subsequent disappointment with the organization itself leading to a high degree of EMPC are caused by elements such as excessive executive compensation packages, employee layoffs, emotional intelligence and the organization's inability to meet predetermined goals (Aslam *et al.*, 2015; Kuo *et al.*, 2015). Thus such experiences of employees lead to emotional exhaustion as a direct consequence of perceiving that the organization has not fulfilled its commitments. Consequently, the perceived breach not only provokes adverse conduct but also physical and emotional fatigue. In some of the research, EMPC behavior has been identified that can be managed by the EI of employees (Akhlaghimofrad and Farmanesh, 2021; Sahoo *et al.*, 2023). Based on this discussion the researchers found it important to explore the relationship of EI with EMPC and hence, put out the following hypothesis:

H3. EI has a significant impact on EMPC.

2.5 Emotional intelligence as mediator

The skills of individuals have become more important for effective leadership than in recent decades (Goleman, 1998; Buil *et al.*, 2019). According to Choudhary *et al.* (2017), leadership

tasks now include inspiring and motivating others, promoting positive attitudes at work, fostering a sense of importance and participation among employees, along controlling, planning and inspecting the general operation of an organization. The organizations engaged in leadership selection have set new standards for leadership training programs to cultivate these competencies in evolving leaders (Schoemaker *et al.*, 2018). Because of this, studies have been conducted to determine the fundamental qualities and actions of leaders who effectively carry out these modern leadership tasks.

In this competitive era, EI has become a need for identifying future leaders and a technique for enhancing leadership abilities based on modern technology (Alzyoud *et al.*, 2019). However, it has been observed that still many areas need to be researched to know the effectiveness of EI (AIZgool, 2020). The factor of EI is a combination of cognitive use of emotions to manage them in a way that increases productive outcomes by influencing the actions and behaviors of others. Johnson and Hackman (2018) linked higher levels of personal mastery to EI, which allows for scanning through adoptions to support effective and efficient rational decision-making. As a result, employees who experience EMPC experience sentiments of unease, distrust and despondency (Kahn, 2014). EMPC offers an explanation for numerous organizational occurrences, such as psychological withdrawals within the organization, mental disengagement from work resulting from employees daydreaming or cyber-lazily, physical withdrawals within the organization and physical departures of employees from their workplace due to tardiness or absenteeism (Akhlaghimofrad and Farmanesh, 2021). Many research works have focused heavily on investigating the relationship between EMPC and other aspects of organizational behavior, including work-related quality of life, job burnout, organizational cynicism, job stress and turnover intention (Simha *et al.*, 2014; Mousa, 2017b; Sahoo *et al.*, 2023). In this competitive era rapidly evolving landscape of technology in educational institutions, the DL is considered the important element that influences organizational standards and attitudes of employees. In this competitive era, where every organization is bringing innovation through technology, it has become important for the educational institutes to bring such innovations too, but the EMPC behavior can also not be ignored, but it can be managed if the DL with high EI can be managed or should be trained to lead such institutions (Akhlaghimofrad and Farmanesh, 2021; Sukoco *et al.*, 2022; Sahoo *et al.*, 2023; Hadi *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the relationship between DL and EMPC needs to be explored further in a broad sense, specifically in the context of EI. In this regard, this research has tried to fill this gap by examining the mediating role of EI in the relationship between DL and EMPC. To give organizational leaders a more comprehensive knowledge of the processes at work and practical recommendations, this research will contextualize the problem within Pakistan's private education sector. Furthermore, these interconnected relationships have yet to be analyzed in Pakistan's private educational sector. Therefore, the researchers proposed the following hypothesis:

H4. DL significantly impacts EMPC with the mediating effect of EI.

3. Methodology

In this study, an adapted questionnaire is used for the collection of data and statistical data analysis. EMPC, EI and DL were taken up to develop the study's variables. It has been observed that when employees have a positive attitude, they become more creative and engaged, working to the best of their abilities to accomplish their objectives and advance, whereas when they have a negative attitude, their creativity and engagement decrease. Compared to less EI employees, highly EI employees typically performed better. A trust

disaster could lead to heightened cynicism and a person's seeming disengagement from an organization. Furthermore, research suggests cynicism may benefit hiring companies and workers (Kosmala and Richards, 2009). Thus, it is maintained that workers will positively react to their work through greater commitment and motivation, which can result in improved performance if they trust their managers and receive support from their supervisors (Price and Reichert, 2017). Few researchers have focused on an actual connection between EMPC and EI (Johnson and Hackman, 2018; Buil *et al.*, 2019). Creating a scale to measure DL is challenging for private-sector educational institutions. Developing a standard for DL measurement at various organizational levels is also challenging. The criteria were thoroughly discussed with the teaching faculty before the administration to improve reliability for further data analysis.

3.1 Sample and procedure

The study aims to assess employees' EI and EMPC with DL at Pakistani private-sector educational institutions. Private university teaching faculty were the unit of analysis considered as the study's population. In this research the inclusion criteria were the teaching faculty of different departments in private universities of Pakistan, regardless of age, gender, experience, educational level and participants' willingness were included. However, the exclusion criteria were that the teaching faculty who were retired or belonged to educational institutes other than universities were excluded.

Respondents' data were gathered using the random sampling technique (Dörnyei, 2007; Arslan and Roudaki, 2019; Kengatharan, 2020). Random sampling techniques are preferable as they are considered time and cost-effective. In light of this, this also allows the researcher to obtain the sample size more quickly and affordably than with other methods. For the calculation of sample size, the G*Power software with a confidence interval of $p/-3$ and a confidence level of 95% was used (Faul *et al.*, 2007). The sample size was determined to consist of 400 participants. For data analysis, the statistical package SPSS version 26.0 was used in this research. A survey was distributed to 400 distinct employees using Google Forms, guaranteeing the privacy and anonymity of their answers. Only 366 complete surveys were received, and the respondents did not return 34 responses; as a result, the responses that were returned were utilized to extract the data. The overall response rate was 91.5%. In Pakistan, English is extensively used as the official language. Thus, the questionnaires were presented in that language (Arslan *et al.*, 2019).

3.2 Measurements

The items used in this study were adapted from the previous studies. As, in this study, we used eight items to measure DL, as adapted by Büyükbeşe *et al.* (2022); seven items to measure EI adapted by Bar-On (1997) and Jiménez (2018); and seven items to measure EMPC adapted by Dean *et al.* (1998), Brandes *et al.* (1999) and modified by Stanley *et al.* (2005) (Table 1). Furthermore, we used a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree 1 to strongly agree 7 to measure all the items on the scale.

4. Data analysis

To accomplish the objectives of the study, respondents' primary data were collected via an adapted questionnaire, and SPSS 26.0 was used for data analysis. Since the survey is frequently used to assess item internal consistency, we ensured its reliability through pilot research. We validated our methodology and found that the overall reliability was 0.854. In contrast, every item's reliability was higher than 0.70, considered acceptable (Hair *et al.*, 2019). We also looked at the factor loading to determine how well the items linked with the

Table 1.
Measurement scales

S. no.	Variables	Definition	Items	Source	Cronbach's α
1	Digital leadership (DL)	Digital leadership is the strategic use of digital thinking and an innovative vision of leaders that promotes the organization's digital transformation initiatives. Digital leaders excel in promoting and coordinating teams quickly and effectively. They bring together individuals with diverse skills and backgrounds to collaborate on digital projects and initiatives, fostering a culture of teamwork and collaboration	DL1: Has an innovative vision DL2: Has the ability to build and coordinate teams quickly DL3: Has up-to-date knowledge and skills about digital technologies and digital transformation DL4: Acts proactively in the digital transformation process in the organization DL5: Balances new and existing business areas, modern trends and past traditions, and innovation and integration DL6: Finds ways to attract new digital talent to organization DL7: Encourages employees when encountering difficulties in the digital transformation process DL8: Acts as a guide and role model for those who work in the digital transformation process	Büyükbese et al. (2022)	0.815
2	Emotional intelligence (EI)	Emotional intelligence can be defined as the ability to remain composed and level-headed during challenging or stressful situations, enabling effective decision-making and problem-solving. It is the capacity to practice of actively listening to others without interrupting or dominating the conversation, showing respect of others perspectives and contributions. One's ability to consider alternative viewpoints and adapt one's opinions or beliefs based on new information or evidence, fosters intellectual flexibility and growth	EI1: I keep calm in difficult situations EI2: I make rash decisions when I'm emotional EI3: I back down even when I know I am right EI4: It's hard for me to make decisions on my own EI5: I interrupt when others are speaking EI6: It's difficult for me to change my opinion EI7: I say "no" when I need to	Bar-On, (1997) and Jiménez (2018)	0.857

(continued)

S. no.	Variables	Definition	Items	Source	Cronbach's α
3	Employee cynicism (EMPC)	Employee cynicism can be defined as the perception of whether management in the organization is transparent and forthright in communicating its reasons for making decisions, providing clarity and honesty in its communication. The perception of whether management consistently demonstrates honesty and sincerity in its objectives and actions, maintaining transparency and integrity in its interactions with employees. The unwillingness to allow management to make decisions concerning employee well-being reflects a lack of trust or confidence in their ability to act in the best interests of employees	EMPC1: I often question the motives of management in this organization EMPC2: Management in this organization is always up-front about its reasons for doing things EMPC3: I believe that there are ulterior motives for most of the decisions made by management in this organization EMPC4: I think that management would misrepresent its intentions to gain acceptance for a decision it wanted to make EMPC5: Management is always honest about its objectives EMPC6: If I was given a choice, I would not allow management to make decisions Concerning employee well-being EMPC7: I am willing to follow managements lead even in risky situations	Dean <i>et al.</i> (1998), Brandes <i>et al.</i> (1999) and modified by Stanley <i>et al.</i> (2005)	0.789

Source: Adopted from the literature

Table 1.

pertinent variables. According to [Hair et al. \(2019\)](#), most items were judged acceptable if their apparent values were more than 0.70. Similarly, we validated the face validity of the survey instrument by distributing a small number of questionnaires to university professors. They review the survey's items, variables, phrasing and layout. The researchers changed a few questionnaire items based on the experts' recommendations. Because of this, the researchers could have reliable and valid questionnaires to collect a sizable amount of data for this research.

4.1 Respondents' profile

Based on the demographic data, most men (57.38% or $n = 210$) contributed to the study, compared to women (42.62% or $n = 156$). A total of 197 respondents, or 53.83%, were between 23 and 30 years old, of these 108 respondents, or 29.51%, responded, while 10.38% of respondents were between the ages of 41 and 50. But senior academics, who comprised 6.28% of the sample ($n = 23$) and were between the ages of 51 and 60, had the fewest responses. Regarding the education of the respondents, the majority (66.12% or $n = 242$) had a high school diploma; nevertheless, 33.88% of the respondents held a postgraduate degree. It has been found that 47.26% ($n = 173$) had a maximum of 6–10 years, however, 4.39% of respondents were having 16 and above years of experience in their jobs ($n = 16$) (see [Table 2](#)).

4.2 Descriptive statistics and correlations

We used descriptive statistics to examine the responses' distribution, patterns, correlations, overview and trends ([Fisher and Marshall, 2009](#)). The mean scores suggest a minimum of 4.421 for EM and a maximum range of 5.872 for EI. Similarly, comparing a minimum range

Category	Frequency	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	210	57.38
Female	156	42.62
Total	366	100.00
<i>Age</i>		
23–30	197	53.83
31–40	108	29.51
41–50	38	10.38
51–60	23	6.28
Total	366	100.00
<i>Education level</i>		
Graduate	242	66.12
Postgraduate	124	33.88
Total	366	100.00
<i>Job experience</i>		
1–5 years	112	30.60
6–10 years	173	47.26
10–15 years	65	17.75
16 and above	16	4.39
Total	366	100.00

Table 2.
Demographic

Source: Authors' questionnaire results

for EMPC (1.041) to a maximum range for EI (1.091), the standard deviation numbers show the differences. Table 3 shows that the respective significance thresholds are 0.05 and 0.01 regarding the relationship between the constructs.

4.3 Measurement model

A vital instrument that can be evaluated using factor loadings is a factor. Similarly, most items had factor loadings larger than 0.70, except for the minimum score of “EMPC8” (0.759) and a maximum score of “EI1” (0.880). Hair *et al.* (2019) state these loadings are considered relevant. However, some items (see Table 4) did not meet the necessary scores, which were >0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Examples of these items are EI4, DL7 and EMPC3. As such, we did not include unloaded goods in our study. Regarding composite reliability (CR), the remaining factors, which range from 0.929 (DL) to 0.943 (EMPC), are according to the recommended value of 0.70 (Borges *et al.*, 2001). We also looked at average variance extracted (AVE) values to determine a factor’s identity. Based on the assumptions of Hair *et al.* (2019), these values have great ranges (> 0.50) between 0.686 (DL) to 0.729 (EI). In conclusion, we verified that all factors had

Variables	Mean	SD	EI	DL	EMPC
EI	4.371	1.091	–		
DL	4.662	1.082	0.321**	–	
	4.421	1.041	0.034**	0.392**	–

Table 3.
Descriptive statistics and correlations

Notes: EI = emotional intelligence; DL = digital leadership; EMPC = employee cynicism
Source: Authors’ own estimations

Construct	Code	Loadings	CR	AVE	α
EI	EI1	0.880	0.931	0.729	0.857
	EI2	0.867			
	EI3	0.851			
	EI5	0.849			
	EI7	0.822			
DL	DL1	0.859	0.929	0.686	0.815
	DL2	0.843			
	DL3	0.833			
	DL4	0.824			
	DL5	0.819			
	DL6	0.788			
EMPC	EMPC1	0.883	0.943	0.702	0.789
	EMPC2	0.876			
	EMPC4	0.860			
	EMPC5	0.849			
	EMPC6	0.825			
	EMPC7	0.807			
	EMPC8	0.759			

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability; α = Cronbach’s alpha. Each item’s factor loadings are all significant ($p < 0.01$). EI = emotional intelligence; DL = digital leadership; EMPC = employee cynicism

Source: Authors’ own estimations

Table 4.
Measurement model

satisfactory Cronbach's alpha reliability values over 0.70, ranging from 0.789 (EMPC) to 0.857 (EI) (refer to Table 4).

In addition, we ensured that the items' constructs discriminated against one another by ensuring discriminant validity (DV) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As a result, we compared the AVE square root to increasing correlations. The square root of AVE measured diagonally was found to have a situation that outstripped the factor values of the rows and columns (Table 5).

4.4 Structural model

We performed path analysis using Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) version 26.0. The adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), which we found to be 0.956 before proceeding to the examination of the hypotheses, was above the recommended value of >0.85 (Table 6) (Hair et al., 2019). In addition, the suggested cut-off value of 0.90 (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003) exceeds the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.974). Compared to the value (>0.90) reported by Schermelleh-Engel et al. (2003), the normed fit index (NFI) was 0.971 and (GFI) was 0.915, which was also acceptable. As shown in Figure 2, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.035) is less than the evaluated value of the exceptional fit to the data. The independent variables significantly and favorably impacted the dependent variables concerning the direct paths. In particular, the path analysis revealed that DL significantly impacts both EMPC and EI ($H1 = SE = 0.049, CR = 6.326^{***}; H2 = SE = 0.029, CR = 7.413^{***}$). Table 7 and Figure 2 show that EI significantly impacted EMPC ($H3 = SE = 0.035, CR = 6.257^{***}$). Thus, it was decided to accept $H1-H3$. In addition, the path analysis for the indirect associations reveals that EI is mediating in developing the DL and EMPC ($H4 = SE = 0.058, CR = 1.38; p = 0.17$) (refer to Table 7 and Figure 2). Thus, it is decided to reject $H4$.

5. Discussion

The current study looks at the triangle link between DL, EI and EMPC among Pakistani private institutions' teaching faculty members to seek the importance of Education 4.0. The

No.	Constructs	1 EI	2 DL	3 EMPC
1	EI	0.853		
2	DL	0.333	0.828	
3	EMPC	0.319	0.18	0.837

Table 5. Discriminant validity

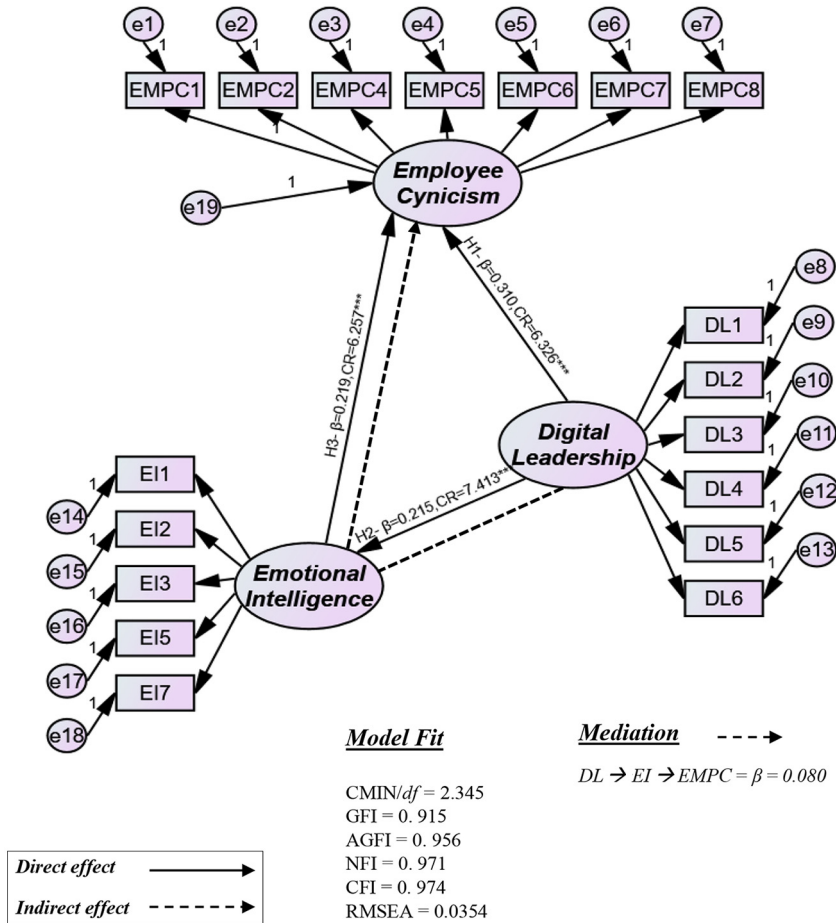
Notes: Diagonals represent the square root of the AVE; while the other entries represent the correlations; EI = emotional intelligence; DL = digital leadership; EMPC = employee cynicism
Source: Authors' own estimations

Model fit indicators	CMIN/df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
	2.345	0.915	0.956	0.971	0.974	0.0354
Suggested values	<3	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	<0.05

Table 6. Model fit indices

Notes: CMIN = χ^2 /chi-square/df; df = degree of freedom; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index; NFI = normed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation
Source: Authors' own estimations

Emotional intelligence as a mediator



Notes: EI = Emotional Intelligence; DL = Digital Leadership; EMPC = Employee Cynicis
Source: Authors' own calculation

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

H. no.	Path	Estimate	SE	CR	p	Assessment
H1	DL → EMPC	0.310	0.049	6.326	***	Accepted
H2	DL → EI	0.215	0.029	7.413	***	Accepted
H3	EI → EMPC	0.219	0.035	6.257	***	Accepted
H4	DL → EI → EMPC	0.080	0.058	1.380	0.17	Rejected

Notes: SE = standard error; CR = critical ratio; p = significance level; ***p < 0.05; EI = emotional intelligence; DL = digital leadership; EMPC = employee cynicism
Source: Authors' own estimations

Table 7.
 Hypotheses estimation

study discovered a strong correlation between DL, EMPC and EI. It also examines how EI acts as a mediator between DL and EMPC. As a result, the study confirms the findings reported in the literature that DL with EI and EMPC are positively correlated (Choi *et al.*, 2015; Abugre, 2017; Wen *et al.*, 2019; AlZgool, 2020). Meanwhile, the results of the mediating effect of EI between DL and EMPC were not supportive. It has been observed that EMPC would rise in an organization with perceived bad relationships and organizational culture, harming employees' performance, motivation and commitment (Taipale *et al.*, 2011; Price and Reichert, 2017). The results of Goleman's (2001) and Wen *et al.* (2019) research showed that managers' enhanced EI can decrease EMPC. Similarly, Abugre (2017) discovered that engaging in productive interpersonal interactions can boost employee satisfaction while lowering EMPC at work. Furthermore, research has shown that having a high EI can lessen the detrimental effects of EMPC on worker performance (Abugre, 2017). However, in this study, the results explored a different phenomenon.

It is clear that EMPC infuses most contemporary organizations and has a knock-on impact. Correlation and regression analysis results show that DL significantly improves EI and EMPC. In addition, results show that EI is not a positive mediator between DL and EMPC. Therefore, private organizations' management needs to raise employee EI to lower cynicism and boost performance. They should also take dependable measures to improve employee engagement and retention, ultimately improving performance. Educational institutions must be able to keep up with advancements in the technological revolution to process forging science and enhance students' potential. At the very least, the DL can be used by educational leadership to play a part in meeting the demands of Education 4.0. As part of a series of managerial operations, educational institutions must work together and make the most of their talents to see and predict technological advances to prepare human resources and infrastructure that will support education in the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. But, to create education collaboratively in the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, educational leaders will require the assistance of teaching faculty members, learners and the community at large.

6. Conclusion

In this competitive era, modern digital technologies have significantly improved educational values in the age of Education 4.0. Most of the academic sectors are using digital technology to enhance the performances of their employees. Thus, by virtue of educational leaders' expertise and exceptional abilities, their faculty members possess the necessary technical knowledge of the frameworks and policies that enhance their performances. Factors like EI have a favorable and noteworthy effect on improving DL and, eventually, EMPC in Pakistan's educational sector. The results of this study further validate the mediating role of employees' EI in the Pakistani educational sector between DL and EMPC, identifying the importance of EI in the concerned sector. The higher authorities and policymakers of the Pakistani academic industry can benefit from these findings when thinking about the role of DL in the educational sector and when creating plans that leverage digital technologies more to increase the performance of employees working in the concerned organizations. Finally, the results of this study add to the body of knowledge on management and digital technology, especially as they relate to developing nations like Pakistan.

7. Implications of the study

7.1 Practical implications

From a policy relevance perspective, the study's conclusions make significant contributions. To the researchers' knowledge, few studies have examined the connection between DL, EI

and EMPC. Also, the moderating role of EI in the relationship between DL and EMPC has not been found before. The practical implications of this research that are related to the impact of digital leadership on employee cynicism are considered an important factor because of its unique dynamics and challenges within higher educational institutes. First, knowing how DL affects EMPC in universities can help in guiding the strategic efforts meant to promote an innovative, team-oriented and academically superior culture in such educational institutes. The leaders may foster a healthy climate that promotes digital innovation and beneficial organizational outcomes by giving priority to faculty development, technology integration and data-driven decision-making. Thus secondly, the practical implication of this research explores that by developing a supportive and emotionally intelligent culture in the organization, the DL can impact positively on EI in PHEIs. Such culture can be promoted in the educational sector by increasing the EI while emphasizing the development of leadership in technical eras, by supporting initiatives for well-being and strengthening teamwork. This practice will enhance the capabilities of organizational employees along with the student's achievement in their careers. Thirdly, based on the findings of this research it has been identified that by creating an inclusive and supportive environment in the organization the EI ability of employees can reduce the issues related to EMPC in educational institutions. This supportive environment can be attained by appreciating employees for their efforts and by engaging them in different tasks. The educational sector is the main core of society; its inspired employees can contribute to the success of the organization as well as the society. With this practice, educational institutions can prioritize leadership technical development, encourage trust and transparency among the employees and take initiatives related to raising funds for employee well-being. Finally, the role of DL in mitigating EMPC through the use of EI as a mediator highlights the significance of using digital tools and platforms to promote open and honest communication, teamwork and involvement. The establishment of a digital work environment that is inclusive and supportive toward employee well-being and organizational success by giving EI development a top priority, encouraging recognition and appreciation and facilitating dispute resolution can assist the educational sector can building a better future for their teaching faculty and students. The results of this study will aid in developing professional abilities in teaching faculty of universities, including the critical thinking and problem-solving techniques required to determine and resolve challenges related to EMPC. The study's findings will benefit the educational sector.

7.2 Theoretical implication

This research contributes significantly to the body of knowledge on leadership and management, especially in the field of technology. Nonetheless, by managing organizational politics and minimizing psychological contract violations, the study's findings assist leaders in mitigating the adverse effects of EMPC cynicism, ultimately enhancing their performance. In addition, by improving the personnel selection process, the study offers psychologists insights for better-understanding employee attitudes and ensuring the correct people are recruited. Furthermore, organizational actions such as early communication, transparency, honesty and leadership development might assist in reducing EMPC by making future occurrences more predictable and controllable. Therefore, the study's results may contribute to policies and initiatives to raise faculties' understanding of digitalization and emphasize the need to encourage digital innovation along with EI. Finally, the theoretical underpinnings of the study may inspire academics and researchers working in this field to conduct additional empirical research to investigate the factors that considerably enhance digital innovation inside academic settings.

8. Limitations and future research recommendations

Similar to previous research, this study has certain limitations and offers recommendations for further investigation. It was not feasible to gather data from every section of the population due to its size. Future researchers can expand this study to include a larger sample and additional industries. Furthermore, this study compares data from private and public universities, giving future scholars room to perform comparison studies. This study considered the DL, EI and EMPC dimensions collectively; it is also possible to look at the effects of the individual dimensions. The existing knowledge can add variables, including job satisfaction, organizational transformation, burnout and unproductive work behavior. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is used in this quantitative investigation (SEM). Future studies can use mixed methodology approaches.

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