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The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem in the Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Adjustment among University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students. The study was conducted on a sample of 204 students from the University of Oran 2 - Mohammed Ben Ahmed, comprising 127 females and 77 males, with a mean age of 20.37 years ($SD = 1.92$). Three scales were administered: the Brief Psychological adjustment Scale developed by Cruz et al. (2019), the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (2002), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). Mediation analysis was used to examine the relationships among the variables. The results showed a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and self-esteem ($r = 0.347, p < .01$), as well as between self-esteem and psychological adjustment ($r = 0.303, p < .01$), whereas no significant direct correlation was found between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment ($r = 0.076$). The mediation analysis showed that emotional intelligence significantly predicted self-esteem ($\beta = 0.18, p < .001$), and that self-esteem significantly predicted psychological adjustment ($\beta = 0.45, p < .001$). The direct effect of emotional intelligence on psychological adjustment was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.02, p = .606$), whereas the indirect effect through self-esteem was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.08, 95\% CI [0.04, 0.14]$).

Keywords: emotional intelligence, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, mediation, university students.

Introduction

The primary role of the university is no longer limited to transmitting knowledge and conducting scientific research. Rather, its scope of concern has expanded to include the moral, psychological, and physical dimensions of students. The university is also expected to prepare students for life and help them develop integrated and balanced personalities capable of adapting to the demands of life and its continuing changes.

The transitional stage experienced by university students is sensitive and is characterized by multiple academic, social, and emotional pressures and challenges, making the achievement of psychological adjustment particularly important. Such adjustment is based on self-acceptance and self-appreciation, as well as the development of positive social relationships supported by emotional balance and emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is among the psychological variables that have received considerable attention from researchers because it represents an important capacity that helps individuals cope with stress and adapt to the demands of life (Bouznad, 2022). It is also considered a key factor in achieving success across various domains. Individuals who possess emotional intelligence skills are generally better able to deal with problems arising in different social situations (Halloum, 2020).

Hayek and Abu Aish (2024) state that emotional intelligence is one of the factors contributing to students' success during their university years. It also prepares them to meet the demands of professional life, develop their ability to manage emotions, assume social responsibility, and promote positive thinking and optimism, together with other characteristics that contribute to success in life. Emotional intelligence also has a positive influence on students' personalities. It can contribute to improved academic achievement and enhance their ability to adapt to their environments by guiding their thoughts and behaviors. Consequently, it may help them make effective and mature decisions.

Halloum (2020) argues that an individual who understands his or her own feelings and recognizes the feelings of others is better able to interact with them positively. This awareness can protect the individual from being overwhelmed by negative emotions and can contribute to psychological well-being and the maintenance of emotional balance.

Kim and Wanchai (2024) indicate that individual personality characteristics, including emotional intelligence skills, help students manage emotions and stress more effectively and develop positive social relationships, which may, in turn, contribute to greater academic success. Learning to regulate emotions can make students more motivated, energetic, and ambitious and better able to manage different situations and challenges. These abilities can contribute to psychological stability. However, they may also be influenced by several psychological factors, including self-esteem, which is an important concept in understanding personality development. An individual's self-knowledge and positive evaluation of the self can contribute to the development of emotional intelligence. Conversely, emotional intelligence can be regarded as an important component of the self in developing a healthy self-evaluation because its dimensions include knowledge, management, and regulation of emotions, empathy, and social communication (Al-Hayek & Abu Aish, 2024, p. 919).

Self-esteem is one of the psychological variables that can increase the likelihood of success in life, whether in academic or professional domains (Ramadan & Al-Qarni, 2023). Kim and Wanchai (2024) argue that self-esteem plays a crucial role in students' ability to achieve academic adjustment and maintain mental health. High self-esteem can enhance self-confidence, flexibility, and motivation, making it easier for students to adapt to new educational and social environments. In light of the crises and challenges faced by university students, and with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of students' personalities, this study seeks to examine the extent to which psychological adjustment is influenced by their ability to control and direct their emotions in accordance with different situations, and how self-esteem, as a personal cognitive factor, mediates this relationship. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has specifically examined the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students. This study therefore seeks to address this gap and contribute to a better understanding of the role of self-esteem among university students. Such knowledge may support the development of more effective strategies to help students achieve psychological well-being and improve academic performance. The importance of the study derives from the significance of the variables it addresses, which represent important dimensions and indicators of psychological health. The findings may also contribute to the design of counseling programs aimed at developing self-esteem and strengthening emotional intelligence skills. Accordingly, the research problem can be formulated as follows: Does self-esteem mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students? To address this question, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- There is a statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students.
- There is a statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and self-esteem among university students.
- There is a statistically significant correlation between self-esteem and psychological adjustment among university students.
- Self-esteem mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students.

The Practical Aspect

1. Study Approach: Given the nature of the research topic, the descriptive approach was adopted.

2. Study Population and Sample: The study population consisted of university students. The study sample included 204 male and female students from the University of Oran 2 - Mohammed Ben Ahmed. Participants were selected using an accidental sampling method from various departments of the Faculty of Social Sciences. The sample comprised 127 females and 77 males, with a mean age of 20.37 years and a standard deviation of 1.92.

3. Study Instruments: Data were collected using the following instruments:

1. Emotional Intelligence Scale:

The Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; Wong & Law, 2002) was adopted. It is a self-report instrument consisting of 16 items distributed across four subscales: Self-Emotion Appraisal, Others' Emotion Appraisal, Use of Emotion, and Regulation of Emotion. Each subscale consists of four items. Responses are provided on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score is obtained by summing the scores across all four subscales. Higher scores indicate higher levels of emotional intelligence. Wong and Law (2002) recommended using the overall score obtained by combining the four subdimensions.

The validity of the scale was examined through internal consistency by calculating the correlation coefficients between the total scale score and its individual items. The correlation coefficients ranged from 0.33 to 0.71.

The reliability of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.74.

2. Self-Esteem Scale: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) was used to measure individuals' general self-esteem. The scale was developed by Rosenberg and subsequently translated and culturally adapted by Ali Boutek. It consists of 10 items measuring global self-esteem among adolescents and adults, including five positively worded and five negatively worded items. The instrument uses a four-point Likert response format: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Total scores range from 10 to 40.

The validity of the scale was assessed through internal consistency by calculating the correlation coefficients between the total score and the individual items. The coefficients ranged from 0.30 to 0.67.

The reliability of the scale was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.76.

3. Brief Psychological Adjustment Scale by Cruz et al. (2019): This instrument was designed to measure general psychological adjustment. It consists of six items, each assessing how respondents felt during the previous week. The items were developed to reflect three aspects of psychological adjustment: symptoms of psychological distress, interpersonal functioning, and social-role functioning. Two items assess psychological symptoms such as anxiety and depression; two assess the quality of social relationships and interactions; and two assess performance in different roles, including work, family, and community roles. The items are rated using a seven-point response format ranging from “not at all” to “very much.”

The validity of the scale was assessed through internal consistency by calculating the correlation coefficients between the total score and the individual items. These coefficients ranged from 0.30 to 0.78.

The reliability of the scale was verified using Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.78.

Results

First Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students. To test this hypothesis, the correlation coefficient between participants' scores on the emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment scales was calculated.

Table 1. Correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Adjustment among University Students

Sample size	Correlation coefficient (r)	Significance level
204	0.076	Not significant

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that there is no statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students.

Second Hypothesis: There is a statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and self-esteem among university students. To test this hypothesis, the correlation coefficient between participants' scores on the emotional intelligence and self-esteem scales was calculated.

Table 2. Correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem among University Students

Sample size	Correlation coefficient (r)	Significance level
204	0.347	0.01

The results presented in Table 2 indicate a statistically significant positive correlation at the 0.01 significance level between emotional intelligence and self-esteem among university students.

Third Hypothesis

There is a statistically significant correlation between self-esteem and psychological adjustment among university students. To test this hypothesis, the correlation coefficient between participants' scores on the self-esteem and psychological adjustment scales was calculated.

Table 3. Correlation between Self-Esteem and Psychological Adjustment among University Students

Sample size	Correlation coefficient (r)	Significance level
204	0.303	0.01

Table 3 presents the correlation coefficient between self-esteem and psychological adjustment among university students. The results presented in Table 3 indicate a statistically significant positive correlation at the 0.01 significance level between self-esteem and psychological adjustment among university students.

Fourth Hypothesis

Self-esteem mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students.

Table 4. Regression Analysis of the Study Variables (N = 204)

Variable / Effect	B	Standard Error	t	Significance level	95% Confidence Interval
Constant	21.43	1.82	11.80	< .001	[17.85, 25.01]
Emotional intelligence (a)	0.18	0.03	5.96	< .001	[0.12, 0.24]
Self-esteem	0.45	0.09	4.98	< .001	[0.27, 0.63]
Emotional intelligence (c')	-0.02	0.05	-0.52	.606	[-0.12, 0.07]
Total effect (c)	0.06	0.05	1.24	.218	[-0.03, 0.15]
Indirect effect	0.08	0.02	—	—	[0.04, 0.14]
Standardized indirect effect	0.11	0.03	—	—	[0.06, 0.18]

The statistical analysis aimed to determine whether the effect of emotional intelligence on psychological adjustment was mediated by self-esteem. The mediation analysis showed that emotional intelligence significantly predicted self-esteem ($\beta = 0.18$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 5.96$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.24]). Self-esteem also significantly predicted psychological adjustment ($\beta = 0.45$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 4.98$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.63]).

After controlling for the effect of self-esteem in the model, the direct effect of emotional intelligence on psychological adjustment was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.02$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = -0.52$, $p = .606$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.07]). The total

effect of emotional intelligence on psychological adjustment was also not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.06$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .218$, 95% CI $[-0.03, 0.15]$). In contrast, the indirect effect of emotional intelligence on psychological adjustment through self-esteem was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI $[0.04, 0.14]$). The standardized indirect effect was 0.11 ($SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[0.06, 0.18]$).

Discussion

The results of the study showed that there was no statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students (Table 1). Although this finding differs from the results of several previous studies, including Salman (2021), which identified emotional intelligence as an important factor in stress management, particularly among adolescents, and reported a close relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment, the present finding may be explained by the complexity of the factors underlying psychological adjustment. The researchers suggest that, despite possessing emotional abilities and skills, university students may not always be able to employ these abilities effectively when dealing with the pressures and challenges they encounter. Psychological adjustment is multidimensional and is not determined solely by an individual's emotional abilities. It may also be influenced by family, academic, and social circumstances. Furthermore, university students are passing through a critical developmental stage characterized by rapid changes and transformations that may affect their emotional states and contribute to temporary difficulties in achieving psychological adjustment. This stage is also associated with the development of identity and increasing independence. The present result is consistent with several previous studies. For example, Boumaraf (2015) investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment among university students using a sample of 85 students. The findings indicated no positive correlation between psychological adjustment and emotional intelligence. Similar results were reported by Salam and Salhi (2019), as well as by Onwubiko (2020), whose study involved 107 librarians from the Madrid region aged between 25 and 60 years and found no close relationship between emotional intelligence skills and maladjustment.

The correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and self-esteem among university students (Table 2). This finding suggests that strengthening students' emotional intelligence may contribute to enhancing their self-esteem. A student who is able to understand and appropriately regulate his or her own emotions and recognize the emotions of others may develop greater self-confidence and self-efficacy and adopt a more positive view of the self, thereby becoming better equipped to cope with different circumstances. The psychological literature also indicates considerable overlap between self-esteem and emotional intelligence in terms of their dimensions and indicators. According to Bar-On's model, one of the basic dimensions of emotional intelligence includes intrapersonal components, among which self-esteem is an important element (Al-Attar, 2020). Conversely, students with positive self-esteem are more likely to possess skills for understanding and regulating their emotions, which can facilitate effective coping with stress and informed decision-making. Several studies have confirmed the role of emotional intelligence in shaping self-concept. Halloum (2020), for example, conducted a study at Tishreen University in Syria involving 70 employees to examine the relationship between self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and psychological burnout. Using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) and the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (2002), the study found a positive correlation between self-esteem and emotional intelligence. Similarly, Afreen (2022), in a study of 150 university students aged 18–28 years, found a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and self-esteem. A Saudi study examining the influence of emotional intelligence on self-esteem among students at the Faculty of Arts at Taif University also found a statistically significant positive correlation between self-esteem and all dimensions of emotional intelligence, including emotional awareness, emotional management, and social skills (Hayek & Abu Aish, 2024).

In a study conducted by Agha et al. (2025) among university students in Quetta, involving 219 students aged 17–30 years, the findings showed that enhancing emotional intelligence in the university environment may contribute to the development of healthy self-esteem. In another study, Singh and Patel (2025) examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and self-esteem among upper-secondary students in Delhi. The sample consisted of 500 Grade 11 students, and the findings indicated that developing emotional intelligence skills contributes to psychological and emotional support among secondary-school students.

The results of the present study also revealed a positive correlation between self-esteem and psychological adjustment in the study sample (Table 3). The psychological literature suggests that positive self-esteem plays an important role in achieving psychological and social adaptation and adjustment among university students. Self-confidence, self-acceptance, and a positive view of the self can enable students to overcome various difficulties and consequently achieve greater adjustment with their environment. Several researchers in psychology regard adjustment as closely related to mental health, referring to an individual's psychological balance, sense of security, level of self-esteem, and ability to regulate behavior in ways that are consistent with both personal needs and social expectations (Al-Yazidi & Hindi, 2017). This view is supported by numerous studies showing that self-actualization and positive self-evaluation are associated with mental health and student adjustment. The study by Al-Sherbini and Adawi (2021), conducted among students at Qatar University, showed that self-esteem is an indicator of an individual's capacity to cope with challenges and circumstances and that low self-esteem is associated with psychological difficulties. At the same time, achieving successful adjustment within the university environment may contribute to the development of personal skills and competencies, which can further enhance self-evaluation. A study by Quan and Sun (2024), involving 1,717 university students, found that self-esteem functions as a positive and protective psychological factor supporting healthy

development among adolescents. Students with positive self-evaluations were more likely to deal effectively with problems, which was reflected in better psychological and social adjustment. Similarly, another study involving 594 secondary-school adolescents from multicultural backgrounds reported a strong relationship between self-esteem and school adjustment (Cho & Yu, 2025).

The results of the present study further revealed that self-esteem fully mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment (Table 4). In other words, emotional intelligence appears to influence psychological adjustment indirectly through its positive effect on self-esteem. This finding may be explained by the fact that psychological and social adjustment requires a range of positive personality characteristics that enable students to cope effectively with different sources of stress and challenging circumstances. Students with higher self-esteem may be better able to regulate their emotions and feelings and, as a result, achieve greater adjustment with themselves and their social environment. The multiplicity of emotional difficulties and social pressures experienced by students during this stage of education makes the relationship between emotional skills and the development of self-concept particularly important. Both emotional intelligence and self-esteem contribute to psychological stability and adjustment, especially during a developmental period characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social changes. A number of studies support the idea that personality characteristics, including self-esteem, can mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and indicators of psychological well-being, such as adjustment, adjustment, and life satisfaction. Kong, Zhao, and You (2012), for example, found that self-esteem mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and life satisfaction in a study involving 489 Chinese university students aged 17–23 years who completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale. Similarly, Martin et al. (2021), in a study involving 1,287 male and female students, found that self-esteem mediated the relationship between dimensions of emotional intelligence, including self-related abilities, stress management, adaptability, and academic engagement. The study by Pareja et al. (2022), which examined the extent to which emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and psychological flexibility predicted life satisfaction among university students, involved 2,574 students aged 18–30 years and showed that self-esteem was among the variables with the strongest predictive value for life satisfaction. Finally, the study by Day and Chattopadhyay (2025) found that self-esteem was also among the significant predictors of life satisfaction among university students in Kolkata.

Summary

Self-esteem fully mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological adjustment, indicating that emotional intelligence influences psychological adjustment indirectly through its positive effect on self-esteem. These findings underscore the importance of self-esteem as a psychological mechanism linking emotional abilities to psychological adaptation among university students. They suggest that enhancing students' emotional intelligence may contribute to better psychological adjustment when accompanied by the development of a positive and stable sense of self-worth.

Recommendations

Although the study addressed three important variables for understanding human behavior, several limitations should be acknowledged, particularly its reliance on an accidental (available) sample and self-report measures. Future researchers are therefore encouraged to examine these variables from multiple perspectives and across diverse educational settings, while employing more rigorous, objective, and clearly validated measurement methods. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and psychological adjustment and would strengthen the generalizability of future findings.

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