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Emotional Intelligence Across Demographics in Malaysia: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) plays a critical role in fostering human well-being, effective emotional regulation, and professional success. While empirical studies highlight its global significance, there is a need to synthesize its specific impacts within the Malaysian context. This systematic review aims to explore the effectiveness, importance, and influencing factors of emotional intelligence across different demographic groups in Malaysia. Guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, a comprehensive literature search was conducted using the Scopus database for articles published between 2016 and 2023. Based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 10 relevant journal articles were selected for final analysis. The synthesized findings reveal that the impact of EI varies significantly across age groups. For children, the implementation of structured EI modules effectively nurtures early emotional regulation and positive behaviours. Among youths, particularly university students, higher EI demonstrates a strong positive correlation with academic performance, self-efficacy, and better stress management. In adults, high trait EI serves as a crucial motivator that reduces maladaptive perfectionism, enhances overall happiness, and improves service quality in professional settings. This review underscores the dynamic benefits of emotional intelligence at every stage of life. The findings provide valuable insights for educators, counsellors, and policymakers to integrate targeted EI development programs in both educational institutions and the workplace to enhance psychological well-being and productivity among Malaysians.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Systematic Review, Emotional Regulation, Self-Efficacy, Academic Performance, Malaysia

Introduction

In contemporary educational and professional environments, navigating social complexities and sustaining psychological well-being require competencies beyond traditional cognitive

abilities. As modern social and organizational structures become increasingly demanding, Emotional Intelligence (EI) has emerged as a cornerstone psychological construct. EI plays a vital role in enhancing academic performance, facilitating effective conflict resolution, promoting psychological safety within teams, and fostering positive interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, individuals with elevated EI are better equipped to regulate their affective states during stressful events, navigate interpersonal friction, and employ proactive behaviours to achieve personal and professional goals.

Theoretically, EI is fundamentally defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as to perceive and influence the emotions of others. First conceptualized by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as a framework for understanding how affective information guides cognitive behaviour and decision-making, the construct established emotions as integral components of rational functioning. Expanding upon this framework, Goleman (1997) asserted that traditional measures of general intelligence (IQ) account for only a small fraction of an individual's life success, positioning emotional intelligence as a primary determinant for the majority of personal and workplace achievements. Grounded in theories of self-regulation and social cognition, EI serves as an essential psychological mechanism for adaptive behaviour across life stages.

Problem Statement and Research Gap

While the global significance of emotional intelligence is well-documented, its specific manifestations and functional impacts are deeply influenced by cultural, educational, and systemic contexts. In Malaysia, numerous independent empirical studies have explored EI across diverse sectors, including preschool education, critical healthcare training, and corporate leadership. However, the existing literature remains highly fragmented.

There is a notable absence of synthesized research that systematically consolidates these scattered empirical findings to evaluate how EI functions across the entire human developmental spectrum specifically encompassing children, youths, and adults within the Malaysian demographic. Without a holistic consolidation, existing studies offer only isolated snapshots rather than a continuous developmental perspective.

Study Purpose and Policy Significance

Addressing this research gap is crucial for both theoretical advancement and practical application. Synthesizing localized empirical evidence across demographic cohorts is essential for policymakers, counsellors, and educators to design targeted, age-appropriate EI interventions and curriculum frameworks. To resolve this literature fragmentation, this systematic review consolidates empirical literature across children, youth, and adult cohorts in Malaysia, establishing a grounded evidence base for fostering psychological well-being and productivity nationwide.

Research Objectives and Questions

To address this gap, this systematic review aims to synthesize the current empirical literature on emotional intelligence within the Malaysian context. Specifically, this study abandons broad theoretical inquiries to focus strictly on actionable, demographic-based evidence. The review is guided by the following focused research questions:

1. What is the effectiveness and impact of emotional intelligence interventions and competencies across different demographic groups (children, youths, and adults) in Malaysia?
2. What are the specific academic, psychological, and professional outcomes influenced by emotional intelligence within Malaysian educational institutions and workplaces?

Methodology

Search Strategy

This systematic review was conducted in strict accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement guidelines. The PRISMA framework was selected to ensure a transparent, systematic, and reproducible process for identifying, screening, selecting, and synthesizing relevant empirical literature. A systematic literature search was executed using the Scopus primary academic database, chosen for its comprehensive indexing of peer-reviewed journals across psychology, social sciences, and education. The search was restricted to empirical articles published between 2016 and 2023 to capture the most recent literature. The search string utilized a combination of Boolean operators (AND, OR) and key terms aligned with the core constructs and localized context : ("emotional intelligence" OR "emotional quotient" OR "EI" OR "EQ") AND ("components" OR "relationships" OR "effectiveness" OR "impact") AND ("Malaysia" OR "Malaysian")

The database query was executed in August 2023 to align with the predefined inclusion timeframe. The initial search yielded a total of 20,760 articles. To ensure the relevance and quality of the synthesized literature, automated database filters were sequentially applied. The search was first restricted to articles published between the years 2016 and 2023, yielding 9,342 records. Following this, the search was further refined by excluding irrelevant article types (e.g., book series, books, and trade journals), limiting the geographic context strictly to Malaysia, excluding non-English languages (such as Bahasa Malaysia and Indonesia), and removing specific irrelevant journal sources.

Following the application of these structured database filters, 53 potential articles were retrieved and saved for human screening. During the eligibility phase, the titles, abstracts, and full texts of these 53 articles were manually evaluated against the research objectives, ultimately resulting in the retention of 10 articles for the final qualitative synthesis.

Table 1
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Phase	Particulars	Literatures Excluded	Remaining Literature
Initial Search	**Key terms:** Emotional Intelligence	0	20,760
Inclusion 1	**Year:** 2016-2023	11,418	9,342
Exclusion 1	**Article Type:** Book Series, Book, Trade Journal, Undefined	4,405	4,937
Inclusion 2	**Country:** Malaysia	4,525	412
Exclusion 2	**Language:** Bahasa Malaysia and Indonesia	405	7
Exclusion 3	**Journal Source:** Asian Social Science, Life Science Journal,	352	53

	Indian Journal of Public Health, Pertanika, Frontiers in Psychology, International Business Management		
Manual Screening	**Eligibility:** Articles manually excluded after reading the abstract/full-text (e.g., did not directly measure EI, wrong context)	43	10

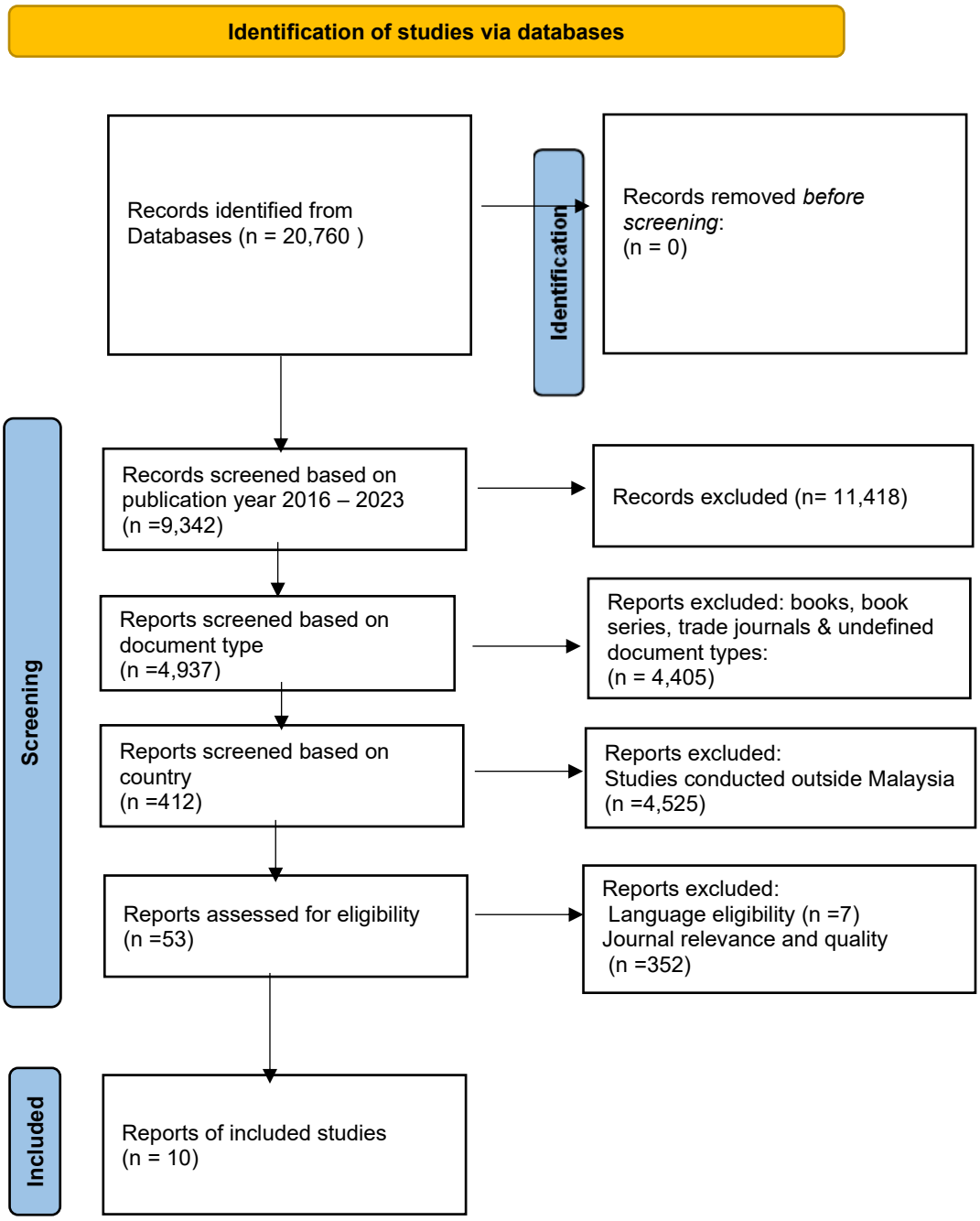


Figure 1 PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Literature Search and Selection Process for Emotional Intelligence Studies

Table 2

Summary of Selected Literatures

Author (Year)	Title of The Article	Sample	Study Design	Key Findings
Rohaizad et al. (2017)	The Effectiveness of Teaching and Learning Module to Enhance Preschool Children's Emotional Intelligence	100 preschoolers	Quantitative (Rasch Model Analysis)	The Emotional Intelligence Module (KE) is highly reliable for nurturing positive emotions in preschool children.
Abdul Rashid et al. (2020)	Student's Emotional Intelligence and Self-Efficacy Towards Their Academic Performance: A Survey on Public Higher Learning Institution.	150 public university students	Quantitative Survey	Higher EI in university students significantly correlates with better academic outcomes and elevated self-efficacy.
Badri et al. (2021)	Trait Emotional Intelligence and Happiness of Young Adults : The Mediating Role of Perfectionism	259 young adults (18-35 years)	Quantitative Survey	High trait EI effectively lowers maladaptive perfectionism, functioning as a mediator to enhance overall happiness.
Siva et al. (2021)	Emotional Intelligence among Undergraduate Dental Students and its Relationship with Academic and Clinical Performance	250 dental students	Quantitative Survey	Dental students demonstrated moderate EI levels with no gender differences, which significantly correlated with academic and clinical performance.
Rohaizad et al. (2021)	An Analysis of Preschool Children Emotional Intelligence Using RASCH Model.	20 preschool children (4-6 years)	Quantitative (Cohen Kappa Rating/Scale)	EI evaluation requires integrating psychological and educational perspectives, emphasizing the use of analytical rubrics for measurement.
Karkada et al. (2022)	Academic Performance Improves with Emotional Intelligence Awareness and Physical Exercise among Medical Students	360 medical students (180 Test, 180 Control)	Quasi-experimental	Combining EI awareness with physical exercise significantly improves academic grades compared to a control group.
Daud et al. (2022)	Emotional Intelligence among Medical Students and its Relationship with Burnout	182 medical students	Quantitative Survey	Explores and emphasizes the relevance of EI in demanding academic environments for mitigating burnout among medical students.

Ahmad et al. (2022)	The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Stress among Pharmacy Students at University Teknologi MARA Puncak Alam during Covid-19 Pandemic	315 pharmacy students	Cross-sectional Correlational	Found a weak negative correlation between EI and stress during pandemic online learning, with no demographic factors showing connection.
Saad et al. (2023)	Emotional and Spiritual Quotient For Sustainable Education's Service Quality	127 university lecturers	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS)	Both EQ and SQ provide the essential motivating capacity for lecturers to deliver high-quality, sustainable educational services.
Nasir et al. (2023)	An Investigation of Emotional Intelligence and Counselling Self-Efficacy among Counsellor in Training	373 counselling students	Quantitative Survey	Significant positive correlation between EQ and self-efficacy, highlighting its crucial role in helping counselling students build a professional identity.

Results

Effectiveness and Influence of Emotional Intelligence Across Demographics

Based on the systematic screening process, 10 articles were selected for the final analysis. The synthesized findings demonstrate that the impact and effectiveness of emotional intelligence (EI) vary significantly across three primary demographic groups in Malaysia: children, youths, and adults.

Children

Early childhood is a critical window for emotional development. Rohaizad et al. (2017) demonstrated that children with high EI are better equipped to lead organized and harmonious lives. Their evaluation of the Emotional Intelligence Module (KE) showed it to be a highly reliable tool for nurturing positive emotions in preschoolers, achieving an item reliability score of 0.89. To accurately assess these developmental milestones, Rohaizad et al. (2021) emphasized that the measurement of children's EI should integrate both psychological and educational perspectives, recommending the use of analytical rubrics to properly evaluate their emotional regulation capabilities.

Youths

The majority of the reviewed literature focuses on youths, particularly university students, revealing a strong positive correlation between EI, academic performance, and psychological resilience. Abdul Rashid et al. (2020) found that higher EI in public university students is directly linked to better academic outcomes and elevated self-efficacy. Similarly, Nasir et al. (2023) reported a significant correlation between Emotional Quotient (EQ) and counselling self-efficacy, highlighting its crucial role in helping counselling students build a stronger professional identity.

In high-stress fields such as medicine and dentistry, EI acts as both a performance enhancer and a psychological buffer. Siva et al. (2021) observed that dental students possessed moderate levels of EI, which correlated significantly with their academic and clinical performance, noting no statistically significant differences between male and female students. The protective role of EI against academic distress is further supported by Ahmad et al. (2022), who identified a negative correlation between EI and stress among pharmacy students navigating online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, Daud et al. (2022) emphasized the relevance of EI in demanding academic environments by exploring its relationship with mitigating burnout among medical students. Furthermore, EI is a dynamic skill that can be actively developed; Karkada et al. (2022) demonstrated that combining EI awareness with moderate physical exercise significantly improved the academic grades of medical students compared to a control group.

Adults

Among adults, EI significantly contributes to personal well-being and professional service delivery. Badri et al. (2021) highlighted that high trait EI in young adults effectively mitigates maladaptive perfectionism—a mediating factor that can persistently decrease happiness and overall well-being if left unmanaged. In professional and organizational environments, particularly academia, Saad et al. (2023) established that elevated EQ, alongside spiritual quotient (SQ), provides the essential motivating capacity for university lecturers to consistently deliver high-quality, sustainable educational services to their institution

Discussion

The primary objective of this systematic review was to synthesize empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness and impact of emotional intelligence (EI) across various demographic groups in Malaysia. The findings suggest that EI is not a static trait but a dynamic, developmental competency that yields distinct benefits at different stages of life: early emotional regulation in children, academic and psychological buffering in youths, and professional well-being in adults.

Early Intervention and the Teachability of EI

A significant theme emerging from the literature on Malaysian children is that EI can be actively taught and structurally developed. The success of teaching modules integrated with psychological frameworks—such as Gagne's Information Processing Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory—demonstrates that early childhood is a critical window for emotional development. Studies by Rohaizad et al. (2017) and Rohaizad et al. (2019) confirm that structured interventions significantly enhance positive emotions and emotional comprehension in preschoolers. This finding is crucial for educational policymakers, suggesting that EI should not be viewed merely as a secondary soft skill, but as a core component of the foundational preschool curriculum that requires standardized analytical rubrics for accurate measurement.

EI as a Psychological Buffer and Performance Enhancer in Youths

Among Malaysian youths, particularly university students, the synthesized literature overwhelmingly positions EI as a crucial determinant of self-efficacy and academic success.

Interestingly, when analysing students in high-stress medical and dental fields, studies by Siva et al. (2021) and Mohan et al. (2021) independently found no significant differences in EI scores between male and female students. This suggests that within the Malaysian higher education context, the development of emotional intelligence may transcend traditional gender norms, driven instead by the rigorous demands of their academic environment.

Furthermore, the review highlights EI's critical role as a psychological buffer. Ahmad et al. (2022) found a negative correlation between EI and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic transition. This is consistent with the finding that EI awareness, especially when combined with physical exercise, actively improves academic grades. Consequently, higher education institutions must integrate EI and emotional regulation training into their professional development programs to foster resilient graduates.

Professional Service Quality and Well-being in Adulthood

As individuals transition into adulthood, the utility of EI shifts from academic performance to personal well-being and professional service delivery. The review highlights that high trait EI is instrumental in mitigating maladaptive perfectionism, which otherwise diminishes happiness in young adults. In the professional realm, particularly within academia, a leader or educator's emotional quotient (EQ), paired with their spiritual quotient (SQ), directly impacts their teaching effectiveness and service quality. This aligns with global organizational behaviour theories which posit that high EI allows professionals to navigate interpersonal dynamics, reduce occupational burnout, and build supportive, psychologically safe environments.

Limitations of the Study

While this review provides valuable insights into the Malaysian context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the literature search was exclusively restricted to the Scopus database. Although Scopus is a robust repository of high-impact journals, the reliance on a single database may have resulted in the omission of relevant studies indexed in other databases like Web of Science, PubMed, or Google Scholar.

Secondly, the strict exclusion of articles published in Bahasa Malaysia and Indonesia may have excluded pertinent local research that captures the cultural nuances of emotional intelligence in rural or non-English-speaking Malaysian communities. Finally, the final synthesis was limited to 10 articles, highlighting a general scarcity of localized empirical research. Future systematic reviews should adopt a multi-database approach and include bilingual literature to provide a more comprehensive cultural analysis of emotional intelligence in Southeast Asia.

Implications

The findings of this systematic review present significant theoretical and practical implications for various stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, organizational leaders, and mental health professionals in Malaysia.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this review consolidates the previously fragmented literature on emotional intelligence within the Malaysian context, providing a comprehensive understanding of how EI functions across different developmental stages. It reinforces foundational psychological

frameworks such as Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Gagne's Information Processing Theory by providing localized empirical evidence that EI is not a static trait, but rather a highly teachable and dynamic competency that evolves from early childhood into adulthood.

For Early Childhood Education (Children)

The evidence strongly dictates that EI should be formally integrated into early childhood education curricula. Policymakers and preschool educators must utilize validated, structured teaching modules to foster early emotional regulation. Implementing these modules equipped with analytical measurement rubrics will ensure that young children develop the fundamental capacity to lead organized and harmonious lives.

For Higher Education and Counsellors (Youths)

Given the strong positive correlation between EI, self-efficacy, and academic resilience, higher education institutions must prioritize EI development programs. For university counsellors and student affairs professionals, understanding and assessing a student's emotional intelligence level is crucial. This awareness allows counsellors to foresee how students might respond to academic pressure and aids them in formulating highly targeted and effective intervention strategies. Such strategies are exceptionally vital in high-stakes environments, such as medical and dental faculties, to help mitigate student stress and prevent burnout.

For Organizations and Workplaces (Adults)

In professional settings, human resource departments and organizational leaders should utilize EI profiling and training to foster a supportive and psychologically safe workplace. The findings demonstrate that developing employees' trait EI can effectively reduce maladaptive perfectionism, thereby enhancing their overall happiness and well-being. Furthermore, prioritizing the emotional and spiritual quotients (EQ and SQ) of leaders and educators is an essential strategy for ensuring sustainable, high-quality service delivery and productivity across organizations.

Conclusion

This systematic review underscores the profound and dynamic impact of emotional intelligence (EI) across various demographic groups in Malaysia. By synthesizing the selected literature, the findings provide robust evidence that EI is a critical catalyst for human well-being, effectively enhancing personal, academic, and professional outcomes at every stage of life.

For children, the integration of structured EI modules into educational frameworks is proven to cultivate early emotional regulation, helping them to appropriately express their emotions in diverse circumstances and unlock their hidden capabilities. Among youths, particularly university students, high EI serves as an essential psychological buffer against academic stress. It is significantly correlated with improved academic performance, elevated self-efficacy, and the enhancement of other cognitive and spiritual competencies.

In adulthood and professional settings, elevated trait EI and emotional quotient (EQ) not only reduce maladaptive perfectionism and increase personal happiness but also foster supportive work environments. This positive atmosphere is vital for boosting productivity, alleviating professional stress, and ensuring high-quality service delivery.

The insights gathered from this review hold significant practical implications for educators, organizational leaders, and mental health professionals. For counsellors, a deeper understanding of an individual's EI level is crucial for formulating targeted and highly effective intervention strategies for clients. However, the limited number of eligible empirical studies identified in this review highlights a notable research gap. Future research should be broadened to encompass a wider geographical scope, including comparative studies across Southeast Asia and the broader Asian region, to further understand the cross-cultural dimensions and long-term impacts of emotional intelligence.

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