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Emotional intelligence as a predictor of career decision-making self- efficacy: A cross-disciplinary study of Vietnamese university students

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Abstract

As the current job market has become increasingly competitive due to impacts of artificial intelligence (AI), the transition from university to professional life requires students to achieve high academic performance, transferable skills and emotional resilience to make informed career-related decisions. The present study aims to examine the predictive relationship between Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy (CDSE), among 275 students studying at a private university in Vietnam. Through a scale-based assessment, participants' EI and CDSE levels were measured across the four main components of trait-based EI (Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Empathy, and Relationship Management) and the five prominent parts of CDSE (Goal Selection, Occupational Information, Problem-Solving Skills, Planning, and Self-Appraisal). Findings indicated moderate to high levels at both EI and CDSE domains. Furthermore, all four EI components signinificantly predict CDSE, with Self-Awareness as the most critical factor in effectively navigating the future career. Recommendations are offered for universities to integrate EI literacy into curriculum development to enhance undergraduates' self-confidence and foster adaptive capacity to thrive in rapidly envolving work environments.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence; Career Decision-Making; Self-Efficacy; Higher Education; Vietnamese students

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, unemployment faced by fresh graduates has remained a pressing concern, further challenging university students amidst AI-driven job displacement. In Vietnam, there has been a significant gap between academic qualifications and practical job requirements, which makes career readiness a fundemental priority in higher education [37]. Apart from specialized knowledge acquired at university, career preparedness also requires sufficient confidence in making decisions for furture work. This confidence is regarded as Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy (CDSE), which refers to a person's belief in their ability to carry out tasks necessary for making well-informed career decisions [36]. Existing studies have shown that higher levels of CDSE are associated with more proactive career exploration, thereby contributing to greater success in the labor market [1,35,41].

Among the psychological drivers underlying career advancement, Emotional Intelligence (EI) has received growing attention in both educational and organizational research. EI is defined as an individual's ability to recognize, understand, regulate and manage emotions effectively [16,31]. Previous studies highlighted EI's multifaceted contributions to healthier interpersonal relationships, improved academic performance, and more effective leadership [32,22,19]. However, while a majority of studies have focused on examining the role of EI in shaping career-related decisions across diverse professional fields, limited empirical studies has explored this relationship within higher education contexts, particularly in Southest Asia [30].

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Within the Vietnamese context, prior research has largely concentrated on exploring how students' personality traits and employability skills influence career decision-making abilities, with limited attention given to the underlying psychological constructs regarding self-confidence and emotional skills [37,28,21]. Based on the current body of literature, empirical studies that investigate how different components of EI influence a student's confidence in making career choices remain underexplored. This study addresses the literature gap by examining the relationship between EI and CDSE among Vietnamese undergraduates. To be specific, it aims to investigate whether the four components of EI (self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship management) significantly predict the university students' confidence in making career-related decisions (CDSE). Therefore, three research questions are proposed as follows: (1) What are the students' levels of emotional intelligence (EI)? (2) What are the students' levels of career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE)? (3) To what extent do the dimensions of EI significantly predict CDSE?

Accordingly, it is hypothesized that EI and its four components will serve as positive predictors of CDSE among the studied students.

- H1: Emotional intelligence (EI) significantly predicts career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE)
- H1a: Self-awareness significantly predicts CDSE.
- H1b: Self- regulation significantly predicts CDSE.
- H1c: Empathy significantly predicts CDSE.
- H1d: Relationship management significantly predicts CDSE.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizations of Emotional Intelligence

Based on the literature, Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been approached under two distinct perspectives, offering a broad definition of EI as a set of cognitive abilities or a collection of personality traits. The ability-based model, developed by Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, treats EI as a set of cognitive abilities to perceive, process, understand and manage emotion-related information. This model focuses on an individual's actual performance on tasks demanding emotional skills, which has widely been recognized as the most psychometrically established framework in EI research [23,24].

In contrast, the trait-based model, proposed by Goleman and Bar-On, incorporates personality characteristics to explain how emotional and social competencies contribute to adaptive functioning in occupational and interpersonal contexts [16,3]. Goleman's framework categorizes EI into four interrelated components, including self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship management. Through the trait-based EI model, prior studies have consistantly shown that these emotional competencies are associated with more effective coping behaviors under stress, stronger interpersonal connections, and improved work performance [27,40,13]. In higher educational contexts, scholars further emphasized the essential role of EI in addressing academic challenges, enhancing learning engagement, and promoting overall psychological well-being [33,39]. In the present study, the trait-based model of EI was adopted due to its primary focus on individuals' perceptions of their emotional abilities, which is closely associated with self-appraisals of confidence in making career-related decisions.

2.2. Foundation of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy (CDSE) is rooted in the theory of Social Cognitive developed by Bandura, which suggests that individuals' beliefs in their own capabilities influence their motivation, emotional responses and ability to overcome challenges [2]. In terms of career growth, CDSE demonstrates a person's self-confidence in fulfilling five prominent tasks, including goal selection, occupational information, planning, problem-solving, and self-appraisals, to be able to make informed decisions for their career [36]. Specifically, CDSE reflects how confident a person is in evaluating their own work skills, researching employement trends and requirements for specific job areas, selecting a career path that aligns with their skills and interests, making short and long-term plans with realistic goals, and overcoming challenges related to career transitions.

Findings from previous studies has demonstrated that students possessing high levels of CDSE are more likely to engage in career exploration, make thoughtful decisions, and deal with obstacles more effectively when joining the future workforce [17,25]. In contrast, students with lower levels of CDSE tend to exhibit indecisiveness, delayed career planning, and avoidant behaviors when making important career decisions [38].

2.3. The Relationship Between EI And CDSE

The existing literature has long supported a positive correlation between EI and CDSE across multiple cultural and disciplinary contexts. Goleman argued that both cognitive thinking and emotional processing skills equally contribute to make well-grounded decisions for the future career [15]. In the same vein, it is further suggested that EI has a positive influence on work commitment and career decision-making competencies [9]. Evidently, it has been proven that individuals possessing higher EI are inherently aware of personal strengths and weaknessses, stay motivated when facing career-related challenges, and maintain a good connection with experts in the field to gather useful information [29,26]. In higher education contexts, EI has been found to predict high levels of CDSE among Chinese students, thereby reducing difficulties in making decisions for their career paths [30]. Furthermore, findings from the study by Bei indicated that students with higher EI rely more on adaptive coping strategies, such as problem solving or seeking external support rather than avoidance to deal with career uncertainty, which in turn results in high CDSE [4].

Collectively, the existing body of literature has explained the correlation between EI and CDSE in which self-awareness helps individuals understand their interests, emotional self-regulation fosters psychological resillience through career challenges, empathy and relationship management strenghthen social networks for gathering useful occupational information and in-depth career exploration. However, studies examning the EI and CDSE interrelationship at the teritary level, particularly within the Vietnamese higher education setting, remain underexplored.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional quantitative design to explore the predictive relationship between EI and CDSE. The chosen research design suited the purpose of this study since it allowed the researcher to determine whether the two variables were related to each other using data collected at a specific point in time, as well as to conduct group comparisons and regression analyses. Prior to data collection, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee. All the participants were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary and that their responses would be confidential and used only for research purposes.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The study sample consists of 275 students from various majors at a private university in Vietnam. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit students in their final years, who are generally facing significant pressure regarding their future career decision. The demographic profile of the study sample is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Gender	Year 3	Year 4	Total
Female (72.7%)	65	135	200
Male (27.3%)	24	51	75
Total	89 (32.4%)	186 (67.6%)	275

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Emotional Intelligence Scale

Emotional intelligence (EI) was assessed using a 20-item scale adapted from the Goleman's framework, which encompasses four core components, namely Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Empathy, and Relationship Management. Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with each subscale score between 5 and 25 [16]. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese following Brislin's forward-backward translation procedure to ensure consistency between the original and translated versions [8]. The adapted scale further presented acceptable internal reliability in this study, with Cronbach's $\alpha = .783$.

3.3.2. Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale

CDSE was measured using a 10-item short-form questionnaire adapted from Taylor and Betz's CDSE scale [36]. The adapted CDSE scale includes five subscales, particularly Goal Selection, Occupational Information, Problem-Solving Skills, Planning, and Self-Appraisal. Each subscale consists of two items, which were rated on a five-point scale from 1 (Completely Lacking in Confidence) to 5 (Very Confident). Following the same forward-backward translation procedure, the Vietnamese version of CDSE questionnaire also showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .802).

3.3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires, which consists of two sections measuring EI and CDSE, were distributed to the student participants via Google Forms. The collected responses were then entered into SPSS for statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores, were calculated to summarize EI and CDSE levels across all subscales. Pearson correlation analysis was subsequently conducted, followed by a multiple linear regression analysis to examine how strongly each EI component predicted CDSE.

4. Results

4.1. Emotional Intelligence Levels

The results in Table 2 show the participants' EI levels across the four components. Overall, the mean scores range from 16.33 to 18.05 out of a maximum of 25, indicating moderate to high levels of emotional competencies among the participants.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics EI Levels

EI Components	Min. Score	Max. Score	Means	SD
Self– Awareness	7	25	18.05	3.28
Self– Regulation	8	25	16.33	3.78
Empathy	5	25	17.67	3.44
Relationship Management	8	25	17.01	3.68

As shown in Table 2, Self-Awareness recorded the highest mean score (M=18.05), showing that the students were generally able to recognize their own emotions and understand how different emotions influence their behavior. Empathy had the second highest mean (M=17.67), followed by Relationship Management (M=17.01), reflecting an moderate ability to understand others' emotions and maintain positive interpersonal connections. The lowest mean was observed for Self-Regulation (M=16.33), indicating that some students may experience difficulties in managing emotions, coping with stress and making rational decisions.

4.2. Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Levels

The recorded levels of CDSE across five subscales are shown in Table 3. Overall, the mean scores range from 6.23 to 7.02 out of a maximum of 10, indicating moderate to high degrees of confidence across the sample.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for CDSE Levels

CDSE Subscales	Min. Score	Max. Score	Means	SD
Goal Selection	2	10	6.81	1.88
Occupational Information	2	10	7.02	1.78
Planning	2	10	6.23	1.97
Problem-Solving	2	10	6.74	1.82
Self-Appraisal	2	10	6.98	1.93

In particular, the respondents recorded the highest level of confidence in gathering career-related information, with Occupational Information (M=7.02). Self-Appraisal ranked the second with M=6.98, suggesting that participants were confident in evaluating their own strengths and weaknesses. This was followed by Goal Selection (M=6.81) and Problem-Solving (M=6.74), which both reflect moderate levels of confidence in determning career goals and dealing with challenges. Meanwhile, Career Planning recorded the lowest mean score (M=6.23), indicating a limited confidence in planning for future career pathways among the participants.

4.3. Correlations between EI Components and CDSE

Pearson correlation analysis revealed that all four EI components were positively and significantly correlated with the CDSE total scores (p<.01). Table 4 presents the correlation coeffcients.

Table 3 Pearson Correlations between EI Components and CDSE

EI Components	r	p-value
Self-Awareness	0.495	< 0.01
Empathy	0.455	< 0.01
Relationship Management	0.44	< 0.01
Self-Regulation	0.335	< 0.01

According to Cohen's [12] benchmarks, all four correlations represent medium effect sizes, with Self-Awareness indicating the strongest association (r=.495), followed by Empathy (r=.455) and Relationship Management (r=.446). Self-Regulation had the weakest correlation, with r=.335, yet still remained significant.

4.4. The Predictive Relationship between EI Components and CDSE

To assess the independent predictive contribution of each EI components to CDSE levels, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with the four EI components entered as predictors and total CDSE scores as the outcome. Table 5 presents the results.

Table 4 Multiple Regression Predicting CDSE from EI Components

Predictor	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(constant)	6.088	2.223	-	2.739	0.007
Self-awareness	0.579	0.113	0.286	5.104	0.000
Self-regulation	0.207	0.092	0.118	2.247	0.025
Empathy	0.409	0.109	0.211	3.760	0.000
Relationship management	0.390	0.100	0.216	3.889	0.000

The regression analysis indicated that the model was statistically significant, with all four EI components independently predicted CDSE levels. Particularly, Self-Awareness had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that students who are more aware of their emotional states tend to feel more confident in making career decisions. Relationship Management and Empathy, with $\beta = 0.216$ and $\beta = 0.211$ respectively, showed similar and significant effects, which highlights the important role of interpersonal skills in career readiness. Although Self-Regulation recorded the weakest effect ($\beta = 0.118$), it still made a meaningful contribution to CDSE levels.

5. Discussion

5.1. EI and CDSE Levels

Overall, university students in the present study demonstrated moderate to high levels of EI, with Self-Awareness emerging as the strongest competence while Self-Regulation was identified the weakest capacity. These results are

consistent with findings from the study by Petrides and Furnham who suggested that self-awareness may develop through social experiences, such as daily interactions with peers and teachers, whereas self-regulation requires greater cognitive control to deal with emotional challenges associated with decision-making [27]. Also, the relatively low scores recorded in Self-Regulation may reflect the increasing academic and career-related pressures faced by final-year undergraduates [34]. Similarly, moderate EI levels were also reported among Chinese university students, suggesting that findings from the present study may reflect patterns observed among university students in other Asian countries [30].

In regards to CDSE, the participants reported moderate to high confidence across the five prominent elements of CDSE. Specifically, the students were most confident in gathering occupational information and evaluating their own strengths and weaknesses for making well-informed career decisions. In contrast, they were less confident in career planning, which Taylor and Betz considered a cognitively demanding task that requires students to envision how their current abilities can be further developed to meet future career demands [36]. In the same vein, Grotevant et al. regarded planning as a foundation stage in career development and students who lack planning skills may struggle in seeking internships, building networks and developing professional skills [17]. However, findings from other studies reported a high level of confidence in planning but still achieved low self-efficacy in other areas such as problem solving and goal selection [10]. This inconsistent findings indicate a need for further exploration of how different factors contributing to CDSE may vary across educational and cultural contexts.

5.2. The Predictive Relationship Of Each EI Components and CDSE

Findings from the present study indicate that each components of EI significantly predict CDSE levels. The findings also align with other previous studies suggesting a strong correlation between EI and CDSE in the population of university students [30,42]. This emphasizes how crucial emotional skills are for enhancing self-confidence in making career-related decisions. Notably, self-awareness was the strongest predictor, which highlights the importance of understanding personal strengths and weaknesses in making decisions for future career. CDSE levels were also predicted by empathy and relationship management, suggesting that students who are better at understanding others' emotions and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships may feel more comfortable to connect with experts for career advice and guidance. Despite being the weakest predictor, self-regulation still played an important role in helping students manage emotional stress when facing career-related challenges. Overall, these findings highlight that EI serves as an essential psychological resource that supports university students' self-confidence and effectiveness in making career decisions.

6. Conclusion

The present study supports the hypothesis that EI is a significant predictor of CDSE among Vietnamese university students. The participants reported moderate to high levels of both EI and CDSE. Among the EI components, Self-Awareness recorded the highest scores while Career Planning was identified as the weakest aspect of career readiness. In addition, all four EI components significantly predicted CDSE with Self-Awareness showing the strongest influence. These findings propose several practical implications for higher education institutions. Firstly, an integration of EI assessment into campus-based career counselling services to offer further assistance for students with difficulties in handling personal emotions that may influence their confidence in making career decisions. Additionally, career readiness workshops should include training sessions on planning skills and practical guidance on emotional self-regulation and relationship management, which fosters students' confidence and preparedness when deciding on career choices.

A number of limitations should be acknowledged in this study. Firstly, the cross-sectional design fails to demonstrate the causal relationships between EI and CDSE. Moreover, the use of self-report questionnaires presented method bias which may affect the accurate assessment of EI and CDSE levels among the respondents. In addition, because the participants were recruited from only one private university in Vietnam, the findings may not be fully generalized in other educational contexts. Therefore, it is recommended that future research should conduct a longitudinal research designs, including participants from a wider range of universities in different countries, as well as examining other factors such as career exploration behaviors and academic self-efficacy to better understand how EI influences students' confidence in career-related decision making process.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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