



## Research Article

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# Emotional Intelligence and Entrepreneurial Success: An Empirical Study of Entrepreneurs in the Saudi Market

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## Abstract

*This study empirically examines the influence of emotional intelligence on entrepreneurial success using a quantitative research survey administered to a sample of 306 Saudi entrepreneurs. The results revealed that emotionally intelligent entrepreneurs are more likely to succeed in their new venture. Furthermore, the research findings identified differences in the influence of emotional intelligence dimensions on entrepreneurship success. The findings of this study offer useful implications for entrepreneurs and practitioners who provide resources to entrepreneurial startups.*

**Keywords:** *Emotional intelligence, Entrepreneurial success, Entrepreneurship, Saudi Arabia*

## 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is recognised as a growth engine for the development of new markets due to its substantial impact on economic and social development (Martínez-González et al., 2019). Entrepreneurship has been perceived as an active source for expansion and promotion of productive activities in all aspects of economic life worldwide (Sitepu, 2020). Entrepreneurs are among the most important agents of economic growth; they can create jobs, enhance innovation, and increase exports. Successful entrepreneurship depends upon the abilities of entrepreneurs to manage themselves and others (Baron & Markman, 2003). The entrepreneurship role requires commensurate leadership and business skills, facing challenging situations involving uncertainty, difficulties, and frustrations; entrepreneurs with distinctive traits are better able to survive and succeed (Schindehutte et al., 2006).

Given the importance of entrepreneurship, factors in entrepreneurial failure have been subject to extensive studies. It has been indicated that a major cause of entrepreneurs' failure during the early stages of their businesses life is because that they failed to empathise with customers and with their staff (Wagner, 2013). Thus, entrepreneurs need to acquire cognitive and social skills which can enable them to perceive others in an accurate way, leave good impressions when meeting others, and

persuade others through interpersonal interactions, all of which contribute to entrepreneurial success (ES) (Baron & Markman, 2003).

The emotional intelligence (EI) of entrepreneurs is thus essential to the success of entrepreneurs and their organisations, and it has been found to encompass a number of cognitive and social skills. Researchers described EI as the ability of individual to recognise his/her own emotions and others' emotions, and to facilitate, understand and regulate these emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Prior studies have noted that addressing EI can enhance the understanding of ES by evaluating individuals capabilities of managing their own emotions and other emotions (e.g., Baron & Markman, 2003; Cardon et al., 2005; Cross & Travaglione, 2003; Humphrey, 2013; Zhou & Bojica, 2017).

Although the topic of EI has been investigated substantially in different contexts, in terms of workplaces, careers, personal performance and satisfaction, leadership, teams, and education, much less effort has been directed toward examining the attributes of EI in the field of entrepreneurship (Baron & Markman, 2003; Cross & Travaglione, 2003; Goleman, 2005; Rhee & White, 2007). Thus, this paper extends existing literature on EI by proposing a theoretical framework which could link EI with the entrepreneurial performance.

This research contributes to the findings of the literature on entrepreneurship through investigating the relationship between EI and ES in the Saudi market. Based on our knowledge, this study can be considered the first to examine EI within the context of entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Emotional Intelligence (EI)

EI was defined in the pioneering study of Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions". In subsequent research, Mayer and Salovey (1997) described EI as including four main aspects: identifying, facilitating, understanding, and regulating of emotions. Studies on EI has been mainly conducted in psychological and sociological fields of research, reflecting these interpersonal parameters.

However, the topic of EI has received increasing attention from management scholars, due to growing interest in addressing the impact of emotions on performance (Grandey, 2000; Ingram et al., 2017; Joseph & Newman, 2010; Law et al., 2004; Mayer et al., 2008). It has been found that EI plays a major role in affecting innovation, productivity, efficiency, morale, health, work satisfaction, revenues, sales, service quality, consumer loyalty, staff retention, and commitment (Cherniss, 2001; Ingram et al., 2017).

### 2.2 Identifying emotions

Perceiving or identifying emotions is the primary and initial aspect of EI. It is related to the emotions which can be expressed and communicated using nonverbal methods including facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, body language, and artwork. This attribute of EI contains a number of abilities, such as the identification of feelings, accurate expression of emotions, and the identification of real emotional expressions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

### 2.3 Facilitating Emotions

According to Salovey and Mayer (1990), the second dimension is the ability to make use of emotions to facilitate thoughts which would guide the cognitive system and enhance thinking. This aspect of EI makes the person capable of employing emotions to alter attention towards significant events and to enhance the process of making decision.

#### 2.4 Understanding Emotions

This dimension is related to an entrepreneur's ability to understand and recognise the reasons behind emotions (Kerr et al., 2006). It has been noticed that entrepreneurs with a deeper understanding of complex emotions can deal more effectively with challenging situations, as they have the ability to identify the causes of emotions and troubleshoot problems among their team members, colleagues, and other organisational stakeholders (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). This aspect of EI involves the abilities to label emotional responses, to recognise differences and similarities that are related to actual emotions and emotional labelling, and to interpret emotions by identifying their originality and meanings (Brackett et al., 2011).

#### 2.5 Regulating emotions

This attribute is about the ability of individuals to manage their emotions and others emotions. This can be achieved through preventing, reducing, stimulating, or altering emotional responses. As explained by Brackett et al. (2011), this dimension is related to the process of taking a decision about the utility and suitability of generating or expressing a certain emotion. Based on evaluating the situation and the usefulness of the emotion, the individual can decide whether to express or otherwise manage and control this emotion.

#### 2.6 Entrepreneurial Success (ES)

Entrepreneurship has been identified as a key activity to exploit opportunities and establish new ventures (Baron & Henry, 2010). It emphasises seeking new opportunities and creating products and services that facilitates the development of new ventures (Shepherd, 2004; Venkataraman, 1997). Ahmetoglu (2014) argued that in addition to being pertinent to the establishment of a new business, entrepreneurship is also essential for the set of behaviours and activities that are performed by entrepreneurs as part of on-going and continuous development by well-established firms, and it is essential for long-term competitiveness and profitability.

In order for entrepreneurs to succeed in their new business, they should possess specific abilities and skills like being able to innovate, take decisions, solve problems, communicate, and work with and influence others (Ahmetoglu, 2014). Ngah and Saleh (2015) defined ES as the criteria which are adopted by entrepreneurs to assess their ventures' degree of success. Okreglicka (2015) reviewed the literature on factors of small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) success, and classified them into internal and external factors. The internal factors are related to the personality of the entrepreneur which is considered as a driving force of small enterprise. External factors include environmental influences, encompassing the competitive environment and macro-environment.

### 3. Hypotheses Development

EI can be regarded as an attribute of social intelligence (Gardner, 1993; Mayer et al., 2004). Individuals with high EI can be able to adjust and to act properly in different social situations (Mayer et al., 2004). It has been indicated that social skills can increase ES. Baron and Markman (2000) found that socially intelligent entrepreneurs can achieve better financial measures of success. Their research findings showed that social perceptions and adaptability can influence the financial performance of new ventures in the cosmetic industry.

EI may improve entrepreneurial performance by directing entrepreneurs toward managing their relationships with customers, mobilising available resources (Cardon & Shepherd, 2012), developing commitment toward organisational goals (Ingram et al., 2017), enhancing innovation (Ngah & Salleh, 2015) and responding dynamically to changing circumstances, including opportunities and threats (Huy, 1999). EI contains awareness as a basic aspect which allows individual to make distinctions

towards others' moods, motivations, intentions, which in turn stimulate social interaction (Gardner, 1993). This process of self-awareness can enable a variety of social attributes and interactions which are critical for the success of entrepreneurs (Baron & Markman, 2003; Kwapisz et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurs who implement strategies of emotional management and show a good level of self-awareness toward their emotions and the emotions of people around them, can take better decisions, deal with conflicts, and negotiate more effectively (Ingram et al., 2017). Zhou and Bojica (2017) suggested that as the level of EI increases, entrepreneurs will be more likely to perceive their entrepreneurial performance positively, reflecting self-awareness of entrepreneurial skills and competencies. In this regard, they argued that EI can positively affect job performance and satisfaction, which makes it possible to link it to other forms of career success particularly personal success.

Cross and Travaglione (2003) suggested that entrepreneurs who show a high level of EI can be more successful in both work and social environments. Ngah and Salleh (2015) investigated the relationships between EI, innovativeness, and ES among 15 young entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The research findings showed that positive EI can enhance innovation, which in turn can promote ES. They argued that "regulation of emotion in others" can be an essential EI dimension that influences innovativeness and ES. Ingram et al. (2017) explored EI, interpersonal processes, and venture performance. They divided the entrepreneurs' EI into two dimensions: interpersonal emotional skills, concerning the process of recognizing and managing of emotions toward others; and intrapersonal emotional skills, pertaining to regulating the individual own emotions. Both dimensions of EI have proved to have an influence on the firm's performance. Based on the argument presented above, the following hypotheses are proposed, as depicted in the research model displayed in Figure 1:

**H1:** There is a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial success.

**H2:** There is a significant positive correlation between identifying self-emotions and entrepreneurial success.

**H3:** There is a significant positive correlation between identifying other's emotions and entrepreneurial success.

**H4:** There is a significant positive correlation between use of emotions and entrepreneurial success.

**H5:** There is a significant positive correlation between regulation of emotions and entrepreneurial success.

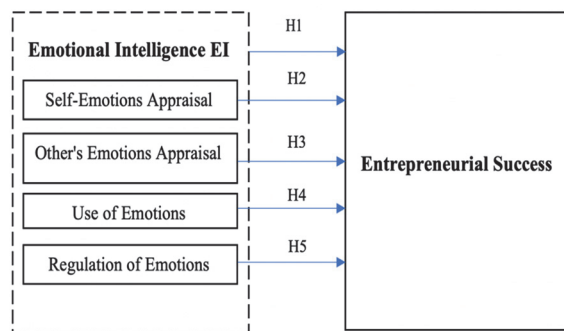


Figure 1. Research Model

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1 Research Strategy

This research adopted a deductive research approach. The research hypotheses were developed based on existing theory drawn from previous studies (as described below), which were tested with

observations that either led to confirmation or rejection of the hypotheses. A quantitative strategy was applied in the process of data collection and analysis.

#### 4.2 Data Collection Method

To suit the nature of the theoretical model of this research, a questionnaire method was administrated to collect the research data. The entrepreneurs were approached via social media applications and word of mouth. This method is perceived to suit the cultural aspects of Saudi Arabia more than alternative methods, like telephone or email (Emory & Cooper, 1991).

#### 4.3 Research Sample

The population of this research represents entrepreneurs in the Saudi market. This research used a probability sampling technique for a randomly selected sample of 384 entrepreneurs out of the total number of entrepreneurs and SMEs in Saudi Arabia ( $n = 977,535$ ) (General Authority for Statistics, 2017).

#### 4.4 Research Measurements

The primary independent variable under investigation in this paper is EI, for which the Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) was used for measurement the independent variable (Law et al., 2004). The WLEIS includes 16 items that can be classified under the four main dimensions of EI (Wong & Law, 2002), namely individual abilities to identify, facilitate, understand, and regulate emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

The dependent variable of this study is ES. There are many challenges with evaluating the performance of new enterprise, as it is considered an inherently complicated construct that is not easy to assess in a systematic way enabling practical insights (Chandler & Hanks, 1993; Zahra et al., 2002). It has long been recognised that traditional financial measures of performance (e.g., gross profit or return on investment) are not suitable for understanding entrepreneurial performance, due to the nebulous and diverse financial and non-financial attributes and impacts of entrepreneurship (Dess & Robinson, 1984). Consequently, it is recommended to use subjective measurements of performance in the situations where objective data cannot be obtained.

To measure entrepreneurs' personal satisfaction and success, we used the success criteria adopted by two previous studies (Gorgievski et al., 2011; Zhou & Bojica, 2017), namely business performance, firm growth, staff satisfaction, social responsibility, self-satisfaction, a good work-life balance, and consumer satisfaction. The ES scale consists of 23 statements which assess the extent of entrepreneurs' self-perceived success in their businesses. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree".

Internal consistency coefficient for the research scales were measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Table 1). The Cronbach's alpha value for EI was 0.84 (*acceptable*), while that for ES was 0.94 (*excellent*).

**Table 1.** Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for Study Scales

Name of Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
Self-emotional appraisal	4	.76
Others' emotional appraisal	4	.79
Use of emotion	4	.80
Regulation of emotion	4	.87
Emotional intelligence	16	.84
Entrepreneurship success	23	.94

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Characteristics

The sample of this study is characterised according to eight demographic variables: age, gender, educational level, household income, business experience, industry experience, risk management, and office location. Table 2 provides an overview of the respondents according to demographic variables based on the descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage values). The majority of respondents were at the initial stage of their business (n = 169, 55.4%). Their industry was not related to their previous work in the majority of cases (n = 232, 76%), and most of them used their home as their workplace (n = 177, 58%). The majority agreed that they take risk management of the business regularly (n = 180, 59%), which could be a part of an entrepreneur's personality and business environment.

**Table 2.** Demographic and Work Characteristic of Respondents

Variable	Category	Number (n = 305)	%
Gender	Male	172	56.4
	Female	133	43.6
Age	19-28 years	48	15.7
	29-40 years	152	49.8
	41-59	92	30.2
	60 or more	13	4.3
Educational level	High school	53	17.4
	Diploma	19	6.2
	Bachelor	174	57.0
	Master	49	16.1
Business experience	PhD	10	3.3
	Still in initial stage	169	55.4
	0-3 years	59	19.3
	4-10 years	44	14.4
Industry experience	More than 10 years	33	10.8
	No	232	76.1
Risk management	Yes	73	23.9
	Completely disagree	10	3.3
	Disagree	64	21.0
	Agree	180	59.0
Home as workplace	Completely agree	51	16.7
	Yes	177	58.0
	No, I have a separate workplace	128	42.0

### 5.2 Testing the Research Hypotheses

The relationships between main variables of the study were assessed using bivariate correlational analyses (Pearson), to accept or reject the hypotheses. The results of (p-value < 0.01, r = 0.462) indicated that there was a significant moderate positive relationship between EI and overall ES, so H1 was confirmed. Hypotheses H2, H3 were accepted, but the results of testing these hypotheses indicate that there were significant weak positive relationships between each of self-emotional appraisal, others' emotional appraisal, and ES (H2: p-value < 0.01, r = 0.285, H3: p-value = < 0.01), r = 0.14). The research findings show a significant moderate positive relationship between use of

emotions and ES, supporting H4 ( $p\text{-value} < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.412$ ). Finally, H5 is confirmed, as the results of indicated that there was a significant moderate positive relationship between the regulation of emotions and ES ( $p\text{-value} < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.399$ ).

The overall fit of the hypothesised model was tested using Multiple Linear Regression to find the rate of EI impact on overall ES, and the direction of that relation (Table 3). The correlation coefficient ( $R = 0.462$ ) indicates how strongly the independent variable (EI) affected the dependent variable (ES), and since  $R\text{ square} = .214$ , the affecting rate of EI on ES was 21%.

**Table 3.** Multiple Linear Regression for the Entrepreneurship Success and Emotional Intelligence

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.462a	.214	.211	.54994

a. Predictors: (Constant), Emotional Intelligence

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Discussion of the Results

To date, there is a little evidence regarding the correlation between of EI and ES. This study was conducted to address this gap in the entrepreneurship literature by investigating the correlations between dimensions of EI and ES. A theoretical model was developed that linked EI to ES, then it was tested using a quantitative research approach. The empirical findings of this study reveal that a high level of EI can enhance ES. Overall, dimensions of EI were positively related to ES. EI abilities, in particular, have been demonstrated to be crucial to entrepreneurs, due to their major role in assisting entrepreneurs to manage social interactions with others. Entrepreneurs can acquire a distinctive competitive advantage by having the ability to identify, manage, and understand the emotions of themselves and others (Ingram et al., 2017).

The research findings indicate that all of the studied dimensions of EI influence ES to a certain level, but managing, understanding, and regulating emotions have greater and more significant impacts on ES than the other dimensions of EI. These results consistent with the results of prior studies that indicate the regulation of emotion has more significant influence on ES in comparison to other dimensions of EI (Ingram et al., 2017; Ngah & Salleh, 2015; Zhou & Bojica, 2017). Moreover, entrepreneurs with a greater ability to regulate emotions can display more sensitivity towards stakeholders such as employees, customers, and supply chain partners, which is conducive to organisational and entrepreneurial success (Ingram et al., 2017).

Overall, the research findings support the argument that attributes of EI can lead to more success in relation to the following aspects: staff satisfaction, social responsibility, self-satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and firm performance. These results support findings of previous research indicating that leaders with higher EI promote improved employee satisfaction (Wong & Law, 2002), customer satisfaction (Danquah, 2015), and business performance (Ingram et al., 2017; Zhou & Bojica, 2017). The self-awareness of one's own emotions and those of others can enhance individuals' attention scope, enabling behavioural flexibility, which influences decision-making, and fosters the process of solving problems (Schutte et al., 2001). Entrepreneurs with high self-awareness of themselves and others emotions are more likely to take effective decisions, deal with conflicts, and successfully negotiate (Fulmer & Barry, 2004), as they are more capable of implementing management strategies that incorporate EI (Ingram et al., 2017).

### 6.2 Managerial Implications

This study suggests that ES can be boosted by enhancing entrepreneurs' attributes of EI, such understanding and regulating feelings and emotions. Thus, it is recommended that practitioners in



the field of entrepreneurship design training programs that strength personality attributes and skills of entrepreneurs, particularly those related to EI. Furthermore, the results of this study shed light on the importance of developing entrepreneurial educational programs which can improve and facilitate the development of EI. However, the current emphasis of entrepreneurship education programmes is on technical skills, such as designing a business model and conducting feasibility analysis.

Therefore, the design of education programs that help to develop the broader skills related to ES, particularly socio-cultural attributes of EI, are highly needed. Moreover, the findings of this study can be useful for entrepreneurs who seek to improve their performance, gain funds from potential investors, and increase the financial success of their organisation, as well as for incubators and accelerators who need information to develop fruitful programs for startups.

## 7. Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to examine the effect of dimensions of EI on ES in Saudi Arabia. The research findings showed that dimensions of EI were positively related to ES. This study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship by offering a theoretical model that explains how attributes of EI can influence ES.

However, this study is not without limitations. One of this study's limitations is that self-reported data were gathered from entrepreneurs to measure the research constructs, which might increase the potential for social desirability bias. However, the research constructs were measured using validated measurement scales. It is recommended that self-perceived EI and ES be related to objective measures and quantitative empirical data (e.g., firms' financial performance) to yield more reliable results. Another limitation is that this study used cross-sectional data analysis method, which usually raises concerns about the lack of evidence for causality. Although this method of analysis has been implemented in prior research (Sy et al., 2006), using longitudinal analysis can help to decide if EI is generated before or concurrently with the success of enterprises. Future research could use longitudinal analysis to assess the relationships between EI and ES over time.

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