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Factors influencing emotional intelligence ability among Malaysian managers: A Delphi study

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Abstract: The study, focusing on Malaysian managers, employs a two-round Delphi research methodology to identify and rank variables influencing their emotional intelligence at work. The research is structured into five key areas, with factors ranked in ascending order of significance. Empathy and emotional resilience are deemed the most important, followed by emotional and self-awareness, work-life balance and stress management, social awareness and relationship management, learning and development, adaptability and continuous improvement, cultural and organizational dynamics, experience, and age. This study sheds light on the variables impacting Malaysian managers' emotional intelligence skills and provides a ranking of key factors essential for successful development. It not only offers crucial guidance for personal and professional balance but also provides insightful recommendations for understanding and enhancing emotional intelligence skills in the workplace for Malaysian managers and organizations.

Keywords: Malaysian managers; emotional intelligence abilities; workplace; Delphi method; mental health

1. Introduction

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has become a crucial characteristic in the field of business management in recent years. It has prompted organizations globally to promote EI in their corporate cultures in order to create a productive and harmonious workforce (Supramaniam and Singaravelloo, 2021). Distinguished academics have recognized EI as a crucial indicator of job success, positing that it may contribute up to 80% of accomplishments in professional environments (Ferreter, 2010; Rinn, 2021, 2022). EI is the capacity to recognize, comprehend, and regulate one's own emotions as well as the emotions of others (Solih et al., 2024). It plays a crucial role in promoting social interactions, improving work productivity, and enhancing overall welfare (Suleman et al., 2020). Having a high EI is closely associated with being skilled in communication, effective in resolving conflicts, and able to handle stress well. These qualities make it an essential competency for leadership positions (Brauckmann and Pashiardis, 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of EI and the need for managers to have a profound emotional understanding and to prioritize well-being

through strategic implementation (Margheritti et al., 2023). Managers who possess a strong set of emotional intelligence skills are more capable of effectively handling the emotionally challenging situations brought about by the pandemic. As a result, they are able to cultivate a workplace environment that is more supportive and empathetic (Alismail et al., 2022; Umesh et al., 2023). Nevertheless, individuals with lower emotional intelligence (EI) face a persistent obstacle as they grapple with a lack of self-awareness and empathy, which frequently leads to less efficient management techniques (Irlbeck and Dunn, 2020).

While the significance of EI in improving managerial effectiveness and organizational outcomes is widely acknowledged, often surpassing conventional measures of intelligence (Voola et al., 2004), there is a lack of understanding regarding the development and application of EI within the specific socio-economic and cultural settings of developing nations, like Malaysia. The disparity is especially noticeable following the global pandemic, which has not only emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence in handling workplace challenges caused by the pandemic, but also exposed a crucial requirement for compassionate and emotionally intelligent leadership to promote employee well-being (Adeola et al., 2022; Worline and Dutton, 2022).

This study aims to explore the factors that influence the emotional intelligence of managers in Malaysia, particularly considering the complications brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this research is driven by the subsequent question: What are the key factors influencing the emotional intelligence of managers in Malaysia? This study aims to enhance the theoretical and practical understanding of EI by utilizing the Delphi technique to analyze these factors. The findings of this study can provide valuable insights for Malaysian managers to improve their EI skills and effectively adapt to the changing dynamics of modern organizational settings. Central to our exploration are three foundational theoretical models of EI: Goleman's (1995) EI Performance Model, Bar-On's (1997) EI Competencies Model, and Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso's (1999) EI Ability Model. These models collectively provide a robust framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of EI and its critical role in personal and professional success.

The study proceeds with a comprehensive literature review on EI, highlighting the relevant theories that underpin our investigation. Following this, we describe our methodology, focusing on the two-round Delphi method for collecting and analyzing expert perspectives. We then present and discuss the findings, aiming for expert consensus on the key factors of EI among Malaysian managers. The implications of these findings, their significance, and potential impact on the field are subsequently explored. The study concludes by summarizing the main findings, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Emotional intelligence ability

Recognizing the importance of addressing challenges in a competitive and rapidly changing economic environment, fostering innovative behavior within organizations is increasingly acknowledged as crucial in the evolving landscape of

global business dynamics (Begum et al., 2022). This viewpoint emphasizes the crucial significance of employees in enhancing organizational efficiency and attaining strategic objectives (Nuraini, 2023). The historical prevalence of authoritarian leadership styles in Malaysia, which was caused by a lack of employee awareness regarding labor rights, has experienced substantial change. The lingering effects of colonialism, which solidified hierarchical management methods, have progressively yielded to leadership models that are more participatory, collaborative, and empowering. This shift aligns with a broader trend towards inclusivity and active involvement in the workplace (Bush and Ng, 2019; Mehmet, 1977; Pellegrini et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022).

At the heart of this transformative process lies the growing acknowledgment of EI as a fundamental aspect of successful leadership and organizational growth. Emotional intelligence, which refers to the capacity to comprehend, control, and utilize emotions in oneself and others, has been identified as a crucial factor in determining the effectiveness of leadership. It influences behaviors and the decision-making process of leaders (Ciarrochi et al., 2002; Mahdinezhad et al., 2017). The EI ability model, as described by Salovey et al. (2004), emphasizes the aptitude to identify, comprehend, and manage emotions in order to facilitate emotional and cognitive development. This model, which focuses on the inherent ability to understand and navigate the emotional aspects of the workplace, has significant implications for improving team dynamics and promoting a thoughtful and emotionally intelligent leadership style (Clarke, 2010; Ninivaggi, 2017).

The assessment of EI in the Malaysian context, particularly among middle-level managers, highlights its importance in shifting from conventional leadership models to more democratic and emotionally intelligent leadership approaches. This shift is especially significant in industries, where the success of businesses and the quality of service depend on the efficient management of staff performance and the interactions between managers and employees (Alameeri et al., 2021; Jose et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2009). The significance of EI in organizational contexts is further emphasized by its essential role in human resource management (HRM). Research suggests that the ability of HR managers to effectively utilize EI can have a significant impact on organizational outcomes, influencing strategic HR activities and practices (Cuéllar-Molina et al., 2019; Terpstra and Rozell, 1996). This includes a wide range of functions in HRM, such as selection, recruitment, training, and development, where emotional intelligence is acknowledged as a crucial asset for both employees and HR managers (Odame et al., 2020; Reilly and Karounos, 2009).

The works of Mayer et al. (2004) have made substantial advancements in the field of EI by expanding our knowledge of its various dimensions and its influence on leadership and organizational performance. In conjunction with Goleman's (1995) influential contributions, their research has established a structure for evaluating and enhancing EI in professional settings, highlighting its significance in effective leadership, team productivity, and conflict resolution. In addition, studies conducted by Bar-On (2006) and Petrides et al. (2007) have broadened the understanding of EI by examining its connection to job satisfaction, employee engagement, and the overall organizational climate. These studies emphasize the diverse influence of EI on the work environment. Examining demographic variables, such as age and gender, in

relation to EI provides further understanding of how EI is developed and applied in organizational contexts. Research has shown inconsistent results, suggesting differences in EI among various demographic groups (Gürol et al., 2010; Harrod and Scheer, 2005; Kumar and Muniandy, 2012; Pandey and Tripathi, 2004). This has important implications for designing customized EI training programs.

This literature review highlights the crucial importance of EI in effectively managing and leading in the complex landscape of modern leadership, especially within the Malaysian context. Organizations can effectively improve employee satisfaction, promote innovation, and achieve superior organizational performance by cultivating the growth and utilization of emotional intelligence competencies among leaders and HR professionals. This examination supports the need for further empirical research to enhance our understanding of EI and its impact on leadership effectiveness and organizational success in different industries and organizational levels. The aim is to bridge the gap between theory and practice in order to fully comprehend the role of EI.

2.2. Theoretical underpinning

Three foundational models have contributed significantly to the enrichment of the conceptualization of Emotional Intelligence (EI): Goleman's (1995) EI Performance Model, Bar-On's (1997) EI Competencies Model, and Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso's (1999) EI Ability Model. Each model, unique in its approach and focus, adds to a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of Emotional Intelligence (EI). These models emphasize the importance of recognizing EI as a crucial factor in achieving personal and professional success. Goleman's model underscores the significance of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills in leadership performance (Al-Fawaeer and Alkhatib, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021), which are vital for successful leadership and maintaining a harmonious work environment. Bar-On (1997) expands the conceptual range by highlighting emotional and social competencies as essential components of psychological well-being and adaptability (Shuo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Mayer et al. (1999) establish a connection between EI and cognitive abilities involved in processing emotional information, proposing a quantifiable method to understand how EI influences decision-making and problem-solving.

A key area of convergence among the models is the acknowledgment of self-awareness and self-regulation as foundational to EI (MacCann et al., 2020; Taherkhani and Moradi, 2022). These skills empower individuals to identify and control their emotions, enabling effective responses to various social and professional demands. Furthermore, empathy is consistently highlighted as a vital component for understanding and connecting with others, emphasizing the role of emotional intelligence in promoting interpersonal relationships and efficient communication (Wan et al., 2023). Despite these shared characteristics, the models differ in their conceptualization and application of EI. Goleman's and Bar-On's models encompass a broader range of personal and social competencies, such as motivation and stress management, which closely align with personality traits and character development (Cavazos et al., 2020). In contrast, the model proposed by Mayer et al. (1999) defines

EI as a set of cognitive abilities specifically related to emotions, emphasizing the capacity to reason about emotions and utilize emotional knowledge adaptively. The synthesis of these models suggests that a comprehensive understanding of EI requires considering both cognitive abilities and personality traits. By recognizing EI as both a skill for processing emotional information and a collection of personal competencies, its applications broaden to include enhancing leadership effectiveness, organizational performance, fostering psychological well-being, and interpersonal harmony. From a practical perspective, this integrated view indicates that programs aimed at developing emotional intelligence should not only focus on enhancing specific emotional skills, such as emotion recognition and regulation, but also consider broader competencies like interpersonal communication and adaptability.

This research is predicated on the idea that these dimensions of EI are not inherent traits but can be developed and enhanced through varied experiences and contexts. This view aligns with the findings of Boyatzis et al. (2000), which assert that emotional intelligence skills are crucial for effective leadership and can be improved through intentional learning and development strategies. The study recognizes the complexity of leadership roles in contemporary organizations and acknowledges that external factors such as age, experience, organizational culture, and work-life balance can influence the development and expression of EI in managers (Awosusi et al., 2020; Oztimurlenk, 2020; Singh and Kaur Gujral, 2022; Sposito et al., 2023). Theoretical analysis involves examining how these factors might interact with Goleman's Emotional Intelligence components to affect leadership effectiveness.

Furthermore, this inquiry draws upon the extensive body of knowledge in organizational behavior and psychology to explore how managers can enhance their emotional intelligence to adapt to diverse and changing work environments. This includes analyzing the role of adaptive challenges, as suggested by Heifetz et al. (2009), in fostering the development of EI through real-world experiences and problem-solving. This study aims to investigate the various facets of emotional intelligence in managerial contexts, seeking to identify the key factors influencing emotional intelligence using the theoretical framework proposed by Goleman (1995). This exploration intends to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership, offering insights into how organizations can cultivate environments that promote the development of EI competencies among their leaders.

3. Methods

3.1. Sampling

This study utilized the two-round Delphi method to explore factors affecting the emotional intelligence proficiency of Malaysian managers in the workplace. The Delphi method, a qualitative forecasting technique, involved systematic solicitation of expert opinions, evaluations, and consensus-building among a panel of experienced Malaysian managers (Subramaniam et al., 2024). The research approach included eliciting opinions through well-designed tools like questionnaires, chosen for its efficacy in exploring topics with divergent viewpoints in the absence of direct empirical evidence (Tang et al., 2024). Two rounds of collecting and evaluating expert

perspectives, with feedback dissemination and consensus cultivation, constituted the research process (Tan et al., 2024).

In the initial round, the expert panel actively engaged, identifying and compiling factors influencing emotional intelligence in the workplace. Drawing from expertise and experience, they recognized critical determinants and provided insights on documented factors, including novel ones, considering the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Yusoff et al., 2021). The second phase validated and refined insights gathered in the first round. A comprehensive list of influencing factors, including new ones, was presented to the experts for ranking using a standardized questionnaire, ensuring precision and avoiding duplications in rankings.

The selection of participants was deliberate, focusing on Malaysian managers who possessed a minimum of five years of leadership experience and were recognized within their organizations for their emotional intelligence ability. This was demonstrated through their outstanding interpersonal abilities, strong decision-making skills, and exceptional leadership qualities. The study sought to assemble a heterogeneous panel representing different gender, industries, and cultural backgrounds in order to gather a wide range of perspectives on emotional intelligence within the Malaysian workplace context. Furthermore, the selection of participants was based on their firsthand experience with the difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of workplace dynamics and employee well-being. This ensures that the study is pertinent to the current challenges faced by managers. The utilization of purposive sampling in this study enhanced the research outcomes by including a diverse array of expert viewpoints regarding the advancement and implementation of emotional intelligence among managers in Malaysia.

3.2. Data collection

This study employed the two-round Delphi approach, distributing questionnaires via email to experts in the first round and providing a specified response timeframe. The first-round questionnaire is provided in the Appendix. Responses were scrutinized to identify recurring patterns or themes, and an aggregated list informed the design of the second round (Barrios et al., 2021). In the second phase, experts ranked the importance of each dimension from the aggregated list, allowing researchers to determine the relative significance of factors influencing emotional intelligence in Malaysian workplace managers (Zartha Sossa et al., 2019). The analysis involved calculating average and group rankings to provide insights reflecting consensus within the expert group (Belton et al., 2019).

To address the potential for expert attrition, the study considered the iterative nature of the Delphi method, building each successive round upon insights from the previous one (Price et al., 2020). This approach ensured ongoing effectiveness and continuity, even in cases of expert withdrawals between survey rounds, facilitating the development of consensus (Perriman et al., 2022). The entire study, encompassing both Delphi rounds, was completed within a one-month timeframe. This duration aimed for efficiency in data collection and analysis, ensuring a smooth progression throughout the research process.

3.3. Data analysis

Following data collection, the information from the initial Delphi round underwent thorough transcription, scrutiny, and categorization based on relevant themes and categories (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Thematic analysis, a qualitative research technique, was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the dataset (Lochmiller, 2021). The aim was to systematically analyze the data to uncover recurring themes, ideas, or topics, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dataset and forming insightful conclusions (Sundler et al., 2019).

To evaluate the level of agreement among the experts on the identified variables after the second Delphi round, Kendall's W coefficient was calculated (Tee et al., 2022). This measure assessed the consensus among experts in their rankings of the items (Mubarak et al., 2019). A high Kendall's W value approaching 1 was anticipated to indicate strong consensus among the experts. Statistical significance and consensus would be further confirmed by a low *p*-value below 0.05, indicating uniformity in expert evaluations and rankings (Ziemba et al., 2020). Conversely, a low Kendall's W value would suggest a lack of consensus, with a high p-value exceeding 0.05 indicating divergences in expert assessments. If needed, to enhance consensus-building, a third Delphi round might be considered.

4. Results

4.1. First-round of the Delphi method

On October 16, 2023, forty experts from various fields were invited to participate in the Delphi method as part of this research via email. Although responses were solicited from 40 experts, only 30 of them responded to the survey. The **Table 1** details the expertise of these experts in the context of Malaysian management.

Table 1. Experts' demographic profiles.

No.	Age	Gender	Experience	Position	Background of management
E1	30	Male	3	Project Manager	LIMA LIMA GROUP (LLG) is an established provider of renewable energy solutions that is principally involved in businesses related to the use of biomass to produce renewable energy.
E2	61	Male	30	Managing Director	RAMS Healthcare Supplies is a family-owned company that specialises in trading, supplying and business pertaining to all kinds of medical products
E3	29	Female	4	Regional Manager	
E4	27	Male	2	Project Manager	JABIL is a global manufacturing company with more than 250,000 employees across 100 locations in 30 countries.
E5	25	Male	3	Video Manager	Tin City Impact is a marketing agency that provides various solutions such as lead generation, website creating, graphic designing and many more.
E6	27	Male	3	Team Leader	NEOSEM partners with their customers to help drive device performance and improved product quality through test solutions specifically optimized to their process needs.
E7	55	Male	31	General Manager	Benchmark is a worldwide provider of innovative product design, engineering services, technology solutions and advanced manufacturing services.
E8	32	Male	8	Team Leader	S&P Global provides essential intelligence. They enable governments, businesses and individuals with the right data, expertise and connected technology so that they can make decisions with conviction.
E9	53	Male	27	CEO	SRI SUBRA MANAGEMENT SERVICES has been specializing in personalized taxation and accounting services in MALAYSIA since 1991.

Table 1. (*Continued*).

No.	Age	Gender	Experience	Position	Background of management
E10	31	Female	10	Manager	Hong Leong Bank Berhad, a key player in Malaysia's financial sector for over 100 years, offers a wide range of services, including consumer and business banking, trade finance, treasury, wealth management, private banking, and Islamic financial services.
E11	51	Female	15	Headmaster	SK Chenein is a primary school that was developed for the indigenous children in the Sg. Siput area of Perak. Originally this school was established in Jeram Petai which is close to the small town of Lasah to accommodate the education of the Orang Asli community in this area on January 1, 1961.
E12	29	Male	5	Assistant Manager	Sime Darby Plantation is a founding member of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and the world's largest producer of Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO), with a production of 2.097 million MT.
E13	29	Male	4	Team Leader	Liscio is a secure cloud-based web and mobile software solution that simplifies client communication and collaboration.
E14	30	Female	4	Executive Manager	Fusionbrand helps start-ups, SMEs, MNCs & government departments & individuals to understand what constitutes branding & why it is important to the organisations well as the internal & external benefits.
E15	24				Established with the ambition to empower small businesses, Sync is a self-service digital platform for companies to create the stories and content that matter. Through PR & content marketing, SYNC saves time, money, and provides a platform for companies to create a brand image and gain the recognition they deserve.
E16	24	Female	3	Team Leader	
E17	30	Female	7	Executive Manager	Mantra offers integrated brand communication solutions. They are essentially an ad agency, a design house, an event organiser, a digital specialist and social media agency all rolled into one. They help brands reach their customers and meet their business goals through advertising, events and digital.
E18	26	Female	3	Team Leader	They are a leading recruitment and executive search service provider in the dynamic Asia Pacific region that are dedicated to connecting talent with opportunity.
E19	24	Male	3	Sous-Chef	Sassolino is an Italian restaurant located in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. The restaurant combines the best of classic and modern Italian cuisine.
E20	24	Female	3	Team Leader	Penang Halal International (PHI) is the state government agency responsible for the promotion of the Halal business ecosystem in the state of Penang in Malaysia.
E21	29	Male	5	General Manager	Omniraise is a new marketing and fundraising agency working for some of the highest profile, blue-chip global NGOs across Asia.
E22	45	Female	12	Country Manager	BTL Industries has become one of the world's major manufacturers of medical and aesthetic equipment with direct offices in more than 80 countries around the world.
E23	24	Male	3	Team Leader	Fairview International School (FIS), Malaysia's largest network of A Top Global IB Schools, operates campuses in Kuala Lumpur, Subang Jaya, Ipoh, Penang, and Johor Bahru.
E24	30	Female	7	Editor in Chief	BusinessToday is an online news publication that provide readers insights into the economy, current trends, consumer news and event on emerging technologies.
E25	36	Female	5	Regional Manager	Deloitte is a leading global provider of audit and assurance, consulting, financial advisory, risk advisory, tax & legal, and related services.
E26	34	Male	8	Producer	Astro AWANI stands as Malaysia's most trusted news brand, holding the position as the top channel for breaking news in the country. Providing a diverse range of bulletins, current affairs, and news commentary programs in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, Astro AWANI is a reliable source for timely and insightful news coverage.
E27	42	Female	12	Editor in Chief	China Press is a Malaysian Chinese-language newspaper set up by Tun Henry Lee Hau Shik (H. S. Lee). It is one of the largest Chinese-language daily newspapers in Malaysia.
E28	30	Male	6	Editor in Chief	The Edge Malaysia is a leading financial news organisation in the country. Their core editorial policy is that we have a public duty to seek out and report the truth.
E29	35	Male	6	Head Journalist	Eco-Business is an independent media and business intelligence company dedicated to sustainable development and Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) performance.
E30	36	Female	8	Content Manager	LITE (previously known as Lite FM) is one of Malaysia's English-language radio stations. It was previously known as Light & Easy.

During the initial round of the Delphi method analysis, the attending experts proposed 30 factors relevant to the study. These factors were thoroughly examined and synthesized, subsequently being divided into eight dimensions. Each dimension addressed a different aspect of the emotional intelligence abilities experienced by Malaysian managers in the workplace. **Table 2** displays the detailed findings of this classification.

Table 2. Consolidation of round one Delphi findings.

No.	Dimensions	Themes
1	Experience and age	Age diversity
		Mature managerial self-insight
2	Cultural and organizational dynamics	Organizational culture
		Work industry challenges
		Cultural sensitivity
3	Emotional and self-awareness	Work pressure
		Dynamic management
		Emotional triggers
4	Social awareness and relationship	Relational communication proficiency
		Empathetic leadership
5	Empathy and emotional resilience	Empathic understanding and validation
		Transparent leadership
		Stress coping
		Positive exemplification
6	Learning and Development	EI-enhancing opportunities
		Cross-industry EI training
		Workplace psychological safety
7	Work-Life balance and stress	Emotionally balanced integration of work and personal life
		Stress management techniques
8	Adaptability and continuous improvement	Techno-regulatory adaptability
		Continuous EI improvement for adaptive leadership

Eight dimensions encompassing various themes influencing the emotional intelligence ability among Malaysian managers in the workplace were identified based on the outcomes of the analysis. Each dimension contained a specific number of themes.

4.2. Second-round of the Delphi method

The second phase of the Delphi process for this study commenced on November 13, 2023. The same group of experts was contacted, and they were tasked with ranking the factors influencing emotional intelligence abilities among Malaysian managers in the workplace. The experts were reminded that their responses should reflect their professional judgment, and it was emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers (Homberg et al., 2020). However, it was noted that 10 experts declined to participate in the second round. Respecting their decision is important, as their non-

participation may have been due to other commitments or time constraints. The methodology of this study recognizes the significance of panel size and response rate in the Delphi technique. Cantrill et al. (1996), Mullen (2003) suggesting that the optimal group size varies depending on the research objectives. A sample size of 10-15 experts is considered effective for ensuring in-depth discussions, in line with recommendations for achieving sufficient results and assuring validity (Skulmoski et al., 2007). In the second phase of the Delphi process, a total of twenty experts completed the ranking of the eight dimensions, the results of which are presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Second round of Delphi method.

Experts	Experience and age	Cultural and organizational dynamics	Emotional and Self-awareness	Social awareness and relationship management	Empathy and emotional resilience	Learning and development	Work-Life balance and stress management	Adaptability and continuous improvement
E1	7	5	2	3	1	6	8	4
E2	8	6	4	3	2	7	1	5
E3	8	5	3	2	7	4	1	6
E4	8	7	2	3	1	6	4	5
E5	6	8	4	3	2	1	5	7
E6	7	8	1	4	3	6	5	2
E7	6	5	3	4	1	8	7	2
E8	8	6	5	7	3	1	4	2
E9	7	6	1	4	3	5	2	8
E10	4	7	2	6	3	1	8	5
E11	6	4	7	1	2	8	3	5
E12	8	6	2	4	1	3	7	5
E13	5	3	8	6	7	2	1	4
E14	5	2	8	4	1	6	3	7
E15	4	7	1	2	5	6	3	8
E16	8	5	3	1	7	2	4	6
E17	6	2	4	3	1	5	8	7
E18	3	4	7	8	2	1	6	5
E19	4	7	6	8	5	1	2	3
E20	4	2	1	6	7	8	3	5
Mean	6.1	5.3	3.7	4.1	3.2	4.4	4.3	5.1
Ranking	8	7	2	3	1	5	4	6

The dimensions in **Table 3** are ranked by average rankings ranging from 3.2 to 6.1. Empathy and Emotional Resilience are considered the most important (3.2), followed by Emotional and Self-Awareness (3.7), Social Awareness and Relationship Management (4.1), Work-Life Balance and Stress Management (4.3), Learning and Development (4.4), Adaptability and Continuous Improvement (5.1), Cultural and Organizational Dynamics (5.3), with Experience and Age ranked as the least important (6.1). The significant agreement among experts in the second round, reflected by a

Kendall's *W* value of 0.143 and a p-value of 0.006, suggests a consensus, negating the need for a third round in the Delphi process.

5. Discussion

This study investigates the key factors influencing EI in the context of Malaysian managers, drawing on the influential theories of Goleman (1995), Bar-On (1997), and Mayer et al. (1999). Our research highlights the crucial significance of empathy, emotional resilience, self-awareness, and relationship management in promoting EI among Malaysian Managers during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The integration of our discoveries with these theoretical frameworks emphasizes the fluid abilities of EI in improving managerial strategies, underscoring its evolutionary essence and the influence of cultural and organizational environments on its manifestation. This discussion highlights EI as a crucial aspect of effective leadership. It also demonstrates the potential for development and adjustment in the diverse field of Malaysian managers, offering a comprehensive understanding of how EI can be nurtured to meet the changing requirements of the modern workplace.

5.1. Empathy and emotional resilience

Empathy and Emotional Resilience are crucial for Malaysian managers, especially in the workplace (Razali et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a lack of empathy in management, resulting in increased employee stress and dissatisfaction (Deliu, 2019). This demonstrates the importance for Malaysian managers to prioritize empathy by actively listening and providing emotional support during challenging times, improving employee relationships and satisfaction. Transparency, closely linked to empathy, is critical as a lack of empathy hinders managerial transparency, eroding trust and impairing team communication. On the other hand, emotional openness fosters a positive work environment, encouraging professional growth (Boamah et al., 2020). Emotional resilience is also crucial, enabling managers to handle stress and make sound decisions (Hartmann et al., 2022). During crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional resilience helps managers support their teams through challenges, including burnout and adapting to new work modes (Pattanjali and Bhatta, 2022). By embracing a more empathetic and inclusive leadership style, Malaysian managers can move away from traditional, authoritative approaches, thereby enhancing trust, engagement, and productivity. This creates a workplace characterized by openness and mutual respect, aligning with the core principles of emotional intelligence as outlined by leading theories. This approach not only addresses the immediate needs arising from contemporary challenges but also sets a foundation for sustainable management practices that prioritize well-being and effective communication.

5.2. Emotional and self-awareness

Self-awareness is vital for effectively managing emotions and performance, especially under pressure (Kreibich et al., 2022). It allows managers to recognize and understand their own emotions, enabling them to regulate reactions in high-pressure situations (Al Maalouf et al., 2023). Given the substantial daily work pressure,

heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of emotional intelligence in handling pressure can disrupt organizational operations and impact employee well-being. In dynamic industries like healthcare, manufacturing, technology, and media, characterized by rapid advancements (Aqqad et al., 2019), managers must navigate uncertainty and lead teams through constant changes (van Wynen and Niemandt, 2020). Skills in understanding and managing emotions, fostering resilience, and making quick decisions are crucial for adapting to the dynamic nature of these work environments. Additionally, recognizing one's emotional triggers is a key component of emotional intelligence (Nguyen et al., 2019). Understanding these triggers, including unhealed trauma or potential emotional threats, is essential for effective workplace functioning (Drigas and Papoutsi, 2020). The need for managers to develop emotional intelligence is underscored by incorporating insights from the current theoretical models. This highlights the importance of cultivating self-awareness and the ability to recognize emotional triggers. Leadership is particularly influenced by self-regulation and emotional awareness. Managers who are aware of their triggers can effectively help employees with their emotions or stress, facilitating the ability to manage distressing emotions and providing support during difficult situations. This comprehension not only promotes a nurturing and durable work atmosphere but also corresponds with the theoretical emphasis on the crucial significance of emotional intelligence in effectively managing oneself and leading others.

5.3. Social awareness and relationship management

Relational communication proficiency extends beyond effective communication to building trust and mutual respect within organizations, crucial in diverse Malaysian workplaces with Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other cultures. Cultural sensitivity in communication, as emphasized by Hasson (2019), enhances team cohesion by understanding and respecting cultural differences. In Malaysia's fast-paced business landscape, Kotter (2019) underscores the importance of anticipating and proactively addressing communication misalignments to align team efforts with organizational goals. Empathetic leadership, particularly vital during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, involves leading with a human touch. Lee (2021) stresses that empathetic leaders prioritize employee well-being and model emotional resilience. In Malaysia, empathetic leadership requires an understanding of employees' unique challenges, balancing traditional values with modern work demands. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of emotional intelligence, the emphasis on relational communication and empathetic leadership in diverse workplaces reflects the importance of social awareness and relationship management. Creating a collaborative work environment involves acknowledging and addressing challenges through inclusive policies (Zhao et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the value of recognition by empathetic leaders in Malaysia also foster a sense of belonging and motivation, thereby enhancing innovation and creativity within the organization. This approach not only aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of emotional intelligence but also underscores its practical relevance in fostering inclusive, respectful, and cohesive work environments across cultural divides.

5.4. Work-Life balance and stress management

Malaysian managers face diverse stressors, including team oversight, project management, urgent deadlines, and COVID-19-related challenges like employee turnover and burnout (Hashim et al., 2020). Balancing work and personal life is crucial for developing emotional intelligence (Dinh, 2020). Failure to achieve this balance can result in increased stress, reduced job satisfaction, and negative impacts on relationships, affecting both professional and personal spheres. This imbalance may also lead to decreased productivity, performance issues, and potential health problems like anxiety and depression (Moscu et al., 2023). Hence, managers must prioritize self-care, establish work-life boundaries, and ensure well-being for effective responsibility management (Rony et al., 2023). This balance enables managers to recharge, engage effectively at work, and enhance their emotional management in professional and personal settings.

Stress management is vital for emotional intelligence among managers. Effective techniques include mindfulness, meditation, regular exercise, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance (Molero Jurado et al., 2019). It is clear from integrating the theoretical stances of Goleman, Bar-On, and Mayer et al. that stress management is not only an individual duty but also an essential component of the development of emotional intelligence, highlighting the significance of self-regulation and self-awareness in reducing stress. Advocates of emotional intelligence stress the importance of stress management, which facilitates composed decision-making even in demanding circumstances (Malkami, 2023). Engaging in these methods enhances managers' emotional intelligence and fortifies team relationships (Fteiha and Awwad, 2020), resulting in heightened employee engagement, enhanced productivity, and overall job satisfaction (Chong et al., 2020). Implementing efficient stress management techniques is crucial in preventing burnout, thereby decreasing the likelihood of mental health problems and enhancing the overall well-being and longevity of managers in their positions (Fragouli, 2020). This comprehensive approach emphasizes the interdependence of emotional intelligence components and their combined influence on leadership effectiveness and organizational well-being.

5.5. Learning and development

Continuous education and growth opportunities are essential for improving a manager's emotional intelligence. Ongoing learning enables managers to gain insights into their emotions, strengths, and weaknesses (Drigas and Papoutsi, 2018). Education in emotional intelligence equips managers with the skills to understand and navigate their emotions and those of their team members effectively (Mattingly and Kraiger, 2019). This improves their ability to build strong relationships, communicate effectively, and use negative emotions in challenging situations for positive development. Staying updated on leadership techniques and business trends helps managers motivate and engage their staff (Dirani et al., 2020). Continuous learning stimulates emotional intelligence growth, enabling managers to lead with empathy, resilience, and an understanding of human dynamics in complex workplaces (Codier, 2020). A proactive approach, like self-directed learning, allows managers to stay informed about industry advancements and adapt their leadership style accordingly

(Sugiarti, 2022), fostering a culture of continuous improvement. The integration of theoretical perspectives highlight the importance of ongoing education in emphasizing the fundamental role of self-awareness and self-regulation in the development of emotional intelligence. Psychological safety is essential in the workplace to foster the development of emotional intelligence by promoting emotional self-regulation. A psychologically safe environment fosters an atmosphere where employees feel comfortable expressing their emotions and ideas, thereby promoting the cultivation of emotional intelligence skills (Liu et al., 2023). Emotional self-regulation abilities are enhanced in a nurturing setting where individuals benefit from sharing their experiences and perspectives with one another (Kwon et al., 2020). This approach, which is both reflective and supportive, is in line with the theoretical frameworks. It emphasizes the significance of creating a learning environment that promotes the development and utilization of emotional intelligence in order to achieve success in leadership and organizations.

5.6. Adaptability and continuous improvement

The adaptability to new trends, technologies, and regulations significantly shapes the emotional intelligence of Malaysian managers. Managers with strong self-management skills find it easier to navigate changing circumstances, enhancing their emotional intelligence (Makkar and Basu, 2019). This adaptability allows them to recognize and respond to shifts in team dynamics, emotional climates, and workplace stressors. Conversely, managers with weaker emotional intelligence may struggle with such changes, resulting in reduced adaptability skills (Carvajal et al., 2023). These limitations can impede understanding and empathy towards team members' emotions, hindering effective leadership, especially in dynamic work environments (Gilar-Cobi et al., 2019). Moreover, the capacity for continuous improvement in emotional intelligence and an adaptive leadership approach signals strong emotional intelligence (Jena and Goyal, 2022). By drawing upon the theoretical frameworks, it becomes evident that adaptability plays a crucial role in emotional intelligence. This highlights the importance of self-awareness and social awareness in enabling adaptive leadership. Managers who improve their EI and adjust to changes in the workplace demonstrate exceptional leadership and effectively manage their employees' emotional needs and behaviors (Jugdev, 2022). This allows them to gain a deeper comprehension, demonstrate empathy towards, and effectively deal with their employees' emotional reactions and psychological concerns, resulting in well-informed decisions that take into account the emotional welfare of their team. This viewpoint combines the ability to understand and manage emotions with theoretical frameworks, emphasizing its essential function in navigating the intricate nature of contemporary organizational existence.

5.7. Cultural and organizational dynamics

A healthy organizational culture prioritizing mental, physical well-being, and emotional intelligence fosters empathetic and supportive managers (Paz et al., 2020). When organizations emphasize emotional intelligence, managers develop strong interpersonal skills, leading to open communication and expression of emotions with

employees (Kim and Park, 2022). This enhances employee satisfaction and productivity as managers better understand and address their team's needs. Human resource policies and resources assist managers in understanding their emotional intelligence abilities, aiding them in managing both their own and their employees' emotions (Alzoubi and Aziz, 2021). A manager's emotional intelligence is influenced by industry-specific challenges, such as in the education sector, where it's crucial for managing relationships with students, teachers, and parents (Chen et al., 2019). In regulated industries like finance, emotional control is vital for managing compliance and risk-related pressures (Giao et al., 2020). Managers prioritizing emotional intelligence and self-care exhibit greater emotional resilience, understanding the unique challenges of dynamic workplaces, enhancing empathy, and situational awareness (Saha et al., 2023).

In diverse workforces, cultural sensitivity and awareness are essential. Cultural norms influence how emotions are expressed, impacting managers' perception and management of emotional intelligence (Cherian et al., 2021). The incorporation of the theoretical viewpoints in organizational settings highlights the significance of cultural sensitivity and emotional intelligence. These models acknowledge that social awareness and relationship management are crucial elements of successful leadership. Managers who are culturally sensitive possess a greater ability to accurately interpret the emotional signals of their team members. This skill is essential for facilitating effective cross-cultural communication and establishing relationships based on trust (Neill and Bowen, 2021). Cultivating cultural sensitivity mitigates the risk of misinterpretations arising from cultural disparities in emotional manifestation, thereby promoting a work environment that is more supportive and inclusive. This approach not only adheres to the theoretical principles but also emphasizes the practical implementation of emotional intelligence in effectively managing diverse and ever-changing organizational environments.

5.8. Experience and age

Age significantly shapes how managers perceive and handle workplace stressors. Younger managers may view stressors as challenges to overcome through effort and resilience, while older managers might see them as threats to be avoided (Kuntz, 2021). Diversity in age among management teams can contribute to a comprehensive approach to emotional intelligence in organizations (Triana et al., 2021), fostering mentorship opportunities between experienced older employees and their younger counterparts for knowledge transfer (Shukas, 2020). Emotional intelligence varies with age and experience, impacting a manager's ability to recognize and regulate emotions at work (Wheeler et al., 2020). Older managers often exhibit higher emotional intelligence due to life experiences and exposure to diverse work situations, developing better emotional regulation skills through years of adapting to various professional settings (Vyatkin et al., 2019). Conversely, younger managers, attuned to the emotional needs of their peers, are more likely to seek emotional intelligence training (Baba et al., 2021). Recognizing the younger generation's values of open communication, empathy, and understanding aligns with principles of emotional intelligence (Gong et al., 2019). Considering the theoretical frameworks proposed by

Goleman, Bar-On, and Mayer et al., the convergence of age, experience, and emotional intelligence in the workplace highlights the ever-changing process of developing emotional intelligence throughout various stages of life. Hence, it is imperative for managers from various generations to adopt emotional intelligence, promoting efficient leadership within a heterogeneous workforce. Acquiring these skills assists managers in comprehending the emotional requirements of employees across different age groups, managing conflicts, fostering robust relationships, and promoting teamwork among team members, ultimately augmenting the work environment (Udod et al., 2020). This comprehension enhances our viewpoint on emotional intelligence, highlighting its significance in bridging intergenerational disparities and fostering a harmonious and productive organizational culture.

5.9. Recommendations

Enhancing emotional intelligence among Malaysian managers necessitates a culturally tailored, holistic approach. To foster empathy and emotional resilience, scenario-based training with role-playing exercises reflecting Malaysia's diverse workplace is crucial (López, 2020). Integrating mindfulness and resilience workshops equips managers with tools for stress management (Mattingly and Kraiger, 2019). Cultivating emotional and self-awareness involves fostering a culture of self-reflection and cultural sensitivity through training emphasizing emotional intelligence in a multicultural context (Malik, 2022). Encouraging regular check-ins on emotional well-being transforms them into meaningful opportunities for connection (Kaur and Hirudayaraj, 2021). For social awareness and relationship management, cross-functional collaboration exposes managers to diverse challenges within Malaysia's business sectors, enhancing relational skills (Kuknor and Bhattacharya, 2022).

Addressing work-life balance and stress management entails embedding flexible work policies and training managers to recognize and address these issues (Marques and Berry, 2021; Vyas, 2022). For learning and development, a comprehensive approach, including a learning management system (LMS), mentorship programs, and peer groups, fosters continuous learning and emotional intelligence (Turnbull et al., 2020). Cultivating adaptability and continuous improvement involves creating an environment valuing innovation and learning from failures, with workshops celebrating resilience and creative problem-solving (Caro-Gonzalez, 2023). Training on recognizing and addressing microaggressions is vital for cultural and organizational dynamics, fostering inclusivity. Promoting diversity in age and experience within management teams is crucial. Workshops fostering intergenerational collaboration bridge gaps and capitalize on diverse strengths (Bista and Kanwal, 2023). Implementing these strategies in the Malaysian context can significantly enhance managers' emotional intelligence, leading to more effective leadership and a cohesive workplace.

5.10. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

This study utilized the Delphi technique over two rounds to investigate the factors influencing emotional intelligence in Malaysian managers. It identified eight key dimensions in order of significance: empathy and emotional resilience, emotional and

self-awareness, social awareness and relationship management, work-life balance and stress management, learning and development, adaptability and continuous improvement, cultural and organizational dynamics, and experience and age. Among these, empathy and emotional resilience were deemed most critical, essential for managers to understand and address their own and their employees' emotional needs, thereby enhancing overall workplace effectiveness.

The study provides valuable insights into EI among Malaysian managers but also recognizes specific limitations that should be considered in future research. The primary limitation concerns the sample size, which consisted of 20 Malaysian managers. This sample was intentionally selected from a broad range of industries to offer a comprehensive understanding of the managerial context in Malaysia. However, the sample size may limit the study's applicability to the larger population and different organizational types. The inclusion of a diverse sample enhances the study's validity by presenting a wide range of perspectives on emotional intelligence in leadership, helping to mitigate the limitations associated with a small participant pool. Another significant constraint is the reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce subjective biases potentially affecting the study's results. Furthermore, although the Delphi method was creatively applied to achieve expert consensus, its inherent limitations are acknowledged. The method's structured format, along with participant anonymity, was strategically used to minimize biases. Nonetheless, the method's reliance on expert opinions might not fully capture the nuanced, experiential insights accessible through more direct investigation methods.

The reviewer's insightful comments are acknowledged, noting the potential for enriching the research with interviews with corporate leaders. Interviews could provide a deeper understanding of participants' response rationales and essential contextual information missing from the current study. Expanding the qualitative research would allow for a more detailed exploration of the complex dynamics of emotional intelligence in leadership, surpassing the confines of systematic methods and self-reported data. Direct engagement with corporate leaders aims to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of EI's practical applications and challenges within the Malaysian context, leading to a richer and more grounded comprehension of the topic. For future studies, incorporating these methodological enhancements would help address the limitations identified. By combining the Delphi method with in-depth qualitative interviews, researchers could validate and expand upon the current study's findings, contributing more effectively to the global discourse on emotional intelligence in leadership. This comprehensive approach would provide a richer, contextually informed perspective on EI's impact on organizational success, offering valuable insights for both academic research and practical management applications. Additionally, further research should broaden its scope to include managers from various countries and cultural backgrounds, offering a more expansive understanding of emotional intelligence across different social and policy contexts (El Khatib et al., 2021). Utilizing existing tools and questionnaires for cross-study comparisons could validate common EI aspects and highlight dimensions specific to Malaysian managers (Barrett and Heale, 2020). Such comparative research would illuminate how cultural and contextual factors influence workplace emotional intelligence, providing valuable insights for developing targeted interventions or training programs globally.

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Appendix

Round 1 Delphi Question: Please provide a comprehensive list of factors influencing emotional intelligence ability among Malaysian managers in the workplace. Remember to interpret 'factors' in a broad sense.