

Emotional Intelligence as a Mediator between Social Anxiety and Peer Pressure among Young Adults of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: Why does emotional intelligence protect some young people from social anxiety and peer pressure but not others, and does it work the same way in a culture built around family honor and group loyalty as it does in the Western samples where the construct was developed? This study explored that question among 200 Pakistani young adults (100 men, 100 women; 27% students, 73% employed) recruited from four cities using stratified quota sampling, each of whom completed self-report measures of emotional intelligence (EI), social anxiety, and susceptibility to peer pressure. As expected, EI was negatively related to social anxiety, $r = -.324$, $p < .001$, and social anxiety was in turn strongly related to peer-pressure vulnerability, $r = .444$, $p < .001$ - a pattern consistent with a partial mediation pathway running from EI through anxiety to conformity. What was not expected was a positive, not negative, correlation between EI and peer-pressure vulnerability itself, $r = .227$, $p = .001$. This is not considered to be noise but something that actually says something about the way life works within a collectivist society, where those who have the capacity to understand the expectations of the group are not necessarily those individuals that would resist conformity. The findings regarding gender followed a similar line of thought, where the level of EI was similar among men and women, $t(198) = 0.57$, $p = .566$, while women had higher levels of social anxiety, $t(198) = 2.23$, $p = .022$, and an almost significant gap with regard to peer pressure, $t(198) = 1.93$, $p = .055$. The occupation factor had an effect as well; students showed higher levels of social anxiety compared to employed people, but lower willingness to openly conform.

KEYWORDS: Emotional Intelligence, Social Anxiety, Peer Pressure, Collectivism, Young Adults, Pakistan, Mediation

Introduction

A mental health crisis is brewing among Pakistani youth without making too many news headlines as other social issues do. According to WHO, around one out of every four individuals in the age range of 15 to 29 in Pakistan

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suffers from anxiety disorder, which is higher than the world average rate and also growing owing to factors like urbanization, economic pressures, and the breakdown of the extended family system that used to protect young people from such mental health problems (Ghazal, 2022). Social anxiety, which is the fear of getting criticized for one's actions in social settings, and peer pressure, which is the influence of social groups that encourages an individual to act as expected by the peer group, are two common mental health issues observed among the youth. Both factors are not exclusive to Pakistan only but are quite severe in nature due to the collectivist culture that defines an individual through the reputation of the whole family (Jibeen, 2016).

Emotional Intelligence (EI), broadly speaking, the capacity to recognize, interpret, and manage emotions and use emotionally informed information adaptively (Mayer et al., 2004), is one of the very few psychological constructs whose utility might be able to span both of these issues. The connection between high EI and low anxiety, and more resistance to negative social pressure, has been the subject of decades of studies, mostly conducted within the individualistic tradition; these are good examples of that body of work (Stoewen, 2024). However, this literature is based almost exclusively on Western samples, and it is important to reflect on the implications of that reality: a construct centered on self-regulation and autonomy might have limited utility in a culture where the exercise of emotional restraint is achieved through social conformity. Not an insignificant problem of adaptation, since, if EI is indeed dependent on cultural values that promote independence, programs modeled on Euro-American prototypes could fail silently when applied to Pakistani youth.

Problematizing the Research Gap

Three gaps in existing literature served as motivation for this study. First, much Pakistani literature tends to consider EI as a predictor of a single outcome - academic stress in one case, job performance in another - and not a means by which one particular stressor is connected with another. The second gap is that little work has been done in Pakistan to establish whether collectivism norms have any influence over the strength or even the direction of EI's role in reducing stress. Despite several theoretical papers which assert that this is the case (Rizvi, 2025), empirical literature on the topic is scarce in the area. Finally, occupational context has been largely ignored in the previous literature, being simply considered as irrelevant information about participants without any regard to the different nature of social pressure they face when completing a certain task at university or in the workplace environment.

Novelty and Contribution

This paper attempts to make a contribution in three ways. First, empirically, it is one of the first attempts to look at the link between EI and social anxiety and vulnerability to peer pressure, in an adult Pakistani sample that was carefully selected to represent gender balance, occupational diversity, and four of Pakistan's largest cities. Second, theoretically, it seeks to explore whether, in the light of social learning theory and Tsabedze, W. (2017)'s transactional stress appraisal model, the ability EI model proposed by Mayer et al. (2004) needs any modification when applied to a collectivist society, and if so, whether social awareness acts as a counter to peer pressure or something closer to increased sensitivity to it. Third, in practical terms, the findings would be beneficial to educational establishments, employers and psychological services of Pakistan attempting to develop social-emotional learning schemes based on collectivist principles rather than operating in contradiction to them. What follows is a literature review by theme, the development of a theoretical model appropriate to the context, the description of methodology and results of the study and finally some discussion of the implications of the principal unexpected finding.

Literature Review

Rather than review literature on EI, social anxiety, and peer pressure in isolation from each other, this literature review focuses on the question this study is trying to answer: Does emotional intelligence act as a protective mechanism against social anxiety and peer pressure in collectivist culture just as effectively as in individualistic cultures, where most research into EI has been done?

Emotional Intelligence: Competing Models and Their Cultural Assumptions

There are three dominant theoretical frameworks in EI literature, and it seems helpful to understand their differences before addressing the question of their portability. According to the ability model (Mayer et al., 2004), EI is comprised of cognitive competencies: perception, understanding, and management of emotions, which can, in theory, be assessed via performance assessment. In contrast, trait EI models cover a wider scope of EI-related dispositional tendencies such as empathy and social skills and measure them just like they do other traits – through self-reports (Tsabedze, 2017). The mixed EI models occupy a middle ground between cognitive and motivational/personality EI dimensions. What all three models share, however, and something that is usually not stated explicitly, is a common assumption of individualism in their definition: EI is seen as an individual's personal resource which allows him/her to manage his/her emotions and pursue his/her own goals Mayer et al., (2016). This assumption is hard to fit into the collectivist self-construal since the goal of emotional regulation is frequently to maintain group harmony. A Western instrument treats 'saying no without guilt' as evidence of healthy self-regulation; in a culture organized around biraderi obligations, the same behavior can carry a real social cost, which changes the emotional calculus involved in doing it. That tension is the fault line this paper is built to test.

Social Anxiety as a Culturally Inflected Cognitive-Behavioral Phenomenon

The social anxiety disorder model presented by Blöte et al. (2014) is a well-known feedback cycle in which people overestimate both the probability and consequences of negative evaluation, leading to avoidant behavior and physical arousal, which reinforce initial anxiety. This feedback is not culture-neutral despite often being considered such. In a collectivistic environment, the evaluative audience never stays within the narrow boundaries of the immediate social context, extending their judgment to kinship networks, which continues to have its weight in time even after the event itself. Ali et al. (2023), who conducted research among Pakistani university students, found that while the participants showed high levels of social anxiety, fear of letting down their families played an even more important role than simple personal embarrassment – the distinction between them, however, is not considered by most Western cognitive-behavioral models. The difference is relevant to the current paper because if social-evaluative fear in Pakistan is relational, then the EI protection strategy based on private emotional regulation may also become relational, focusing on public perception of oneself.

Peer Pressure and Conformity in Collectivist Youth Contexts

In peer-pressure studies, overt behavioral conformity - that of adopting dangerous behaviors in order to fit in - is differentiated from a more subtle, less overt form of normative influence - whereby group expectations become internalized, but no one explicitly pressures the adolescent to comply. In their work with Pakistani adolescents, Batool and Batool (2025) noted that the former form of resistance was widespread and socially acceptable, whereas the latter form of resistance was uncommon and when exhibited by participants in the study, was interpreted as an act of disloyalty, rather than as an exercise in self-respect. This distinction is important in terms of theory. If all behaviors that reflect resistance to peer influence are collapsed into one "peer-pressure vulnerability" scale, a culturally specific

distinction will simply be ignored, namely that it costs a social group very little to resist a cigarette offer, but a lot to oppose one's peers and family.

Emotional Intelligence as Protective Mechanism: Convergent and Divergent Evidence

The buffering role played by EI against psychosocial stress has been firmly documented elsewhere, and increasingly Pakistani research demonstrates the same trend, where EI has been shown to be negatively associated with academic stress (Khan & Kamal, 2023), better emotion regulation and mental wellbeing and resistance to peer pressure among youth but the results are mixed (Ullah, 2021; Khan (2017)). The effectiveness of EI at reducing stress via anxiety mediation is much reduced among Pakistani respondents scoring high on collectivist values - an interaction effect almost entirely missed in most global meta-analyses. Furthermore, Khan and Kamal (2023) have highlighted the differential ways in which Pakistani men and women regulate emotions, using different channels such as strategic restraint for men and socially acceptable seeking of help for women - which suggests that a composite score for EI might be quietly hiding a moderating effect in itself. Finally, Malik et al. (2025) highlight another complication with EI scores in Pakistan, where norms regarding masculinity discourage the expression of emotion. Taken together, all of the aforementioned literature does not provide an answer to whether EI acts as a protective factor for Pakistani people. Instead, the studies prove that its protective effect depends on several factors, including the type of outcome, gender, and collectivist orientation of a particular social context.

Synthesis and the Present Study's Gap

Three strands come together in this design. First, the theoretical framework of EI relies on an individualistic, self-regulatory paradigm that may not carry over to the collectivist case (Rizvi, 2025). Second, social anxiety in Pakistan has more of a relational than personal make-up (Khan & Kamal), and this implies that EI's anxiety-coping pathway should rely at least as much on social and relationship skills as on personal regulation. Third, the phenomenon of peer-pressure resistance in collectivist youth cultures cannot be viewed as one phenomenon since it involves a clear distinction between behavioral compliance and a far more insidious normative pressure (Ali et al., 2025). The point is that no prior study of EI in Pakistan has tested the construct for social anxiety and peer pressure simultaneously while also controlling for gender and occupation as structural factors. This is the gap that the present study attempts to fill – and, as the Discussion shows, this is also why a positive correlation between EI and peer-pressure vulnerability can be considered a cultural finding rather than a mere statistical fluke.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

First, the theoretical framework of EI relies on individualistic and self-regulatory principles, which may not necessarily work in a collectivist context (Rizvi, 2025). Second, social anxiety is relationally defined rather than individually determined (Cejudo et al., 2018). Building a model appropriate to this context required incorporating ideas from three different theoretical frameworks rather than just one. The basic architecture of EI in Mayer et al. (2004) four-branch ability model includes self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management. The construction of these competencies is explained by social learning theory in Bru-Luna et al. (2021), which emphasizes the importance of observing behavior in emotionally intelligent people as role models within family and peer group structures. This is especially important in the case of a collectivist context in which behavioral patterns spread through kinship groups rather than as the result of individual practice alone. The transactional model of stress and coping of Krishnan and Awang (2025) provides the explanation for the link between EI and reduced social anxiety: individuals who are able to appraise socially evaluative situations as non-threatening feel less anxious about them. Batool and Lewis (2022) socioemotional selectivity theory provides another piece to

complement the peer pressure piece of the model, suggesting that emotionally intelligent individuals are selective about the kind of relationships that benefit them and reduce their interactions with relationships that create anxiety – but in the context of collectivism, the individual is faced with a conflict because there are certain family and biraderi relationships that cannot be avoided.

The model thus derived is presented in Figure 1. The experience of peer pressure is the independent variable, EI (along with its four underlying competencies) is the mediating mechanism, while social anxiety and overall psychosocial well-being are the dependent variables. The roles of gender and occupational class – either student or employee – are considered moderating variables for both of these relationships, because structural location as well as gender socialization affect how EI is exhibited, and how effectively it serves as a stress buffer in Pakistan (Ali et al. 2025; Shahzad et al., 2025). Embedding the entire model within the Pakistani collectivist context is not just an aesthetic consideration but the model’s main premise. Its strength, and indeed direction, is best understood within that context.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework

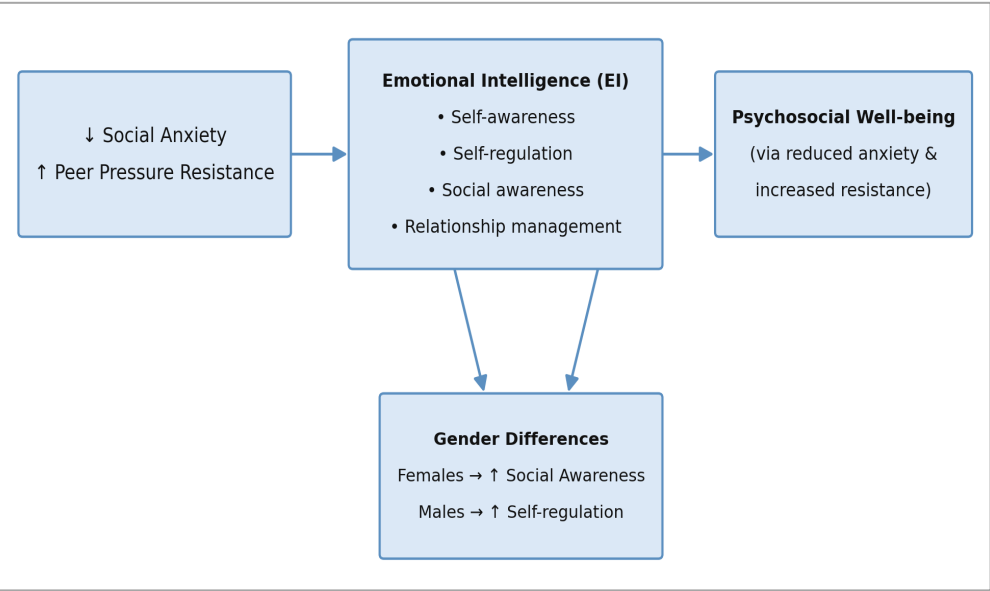


Figure 1:Hypothesized mediation model of emotional intelligence linking peer-pressure exposure to social anxiety and psychosocial well-being, moderated by gender and occupational context, within Pakistan's collectivist setting.

Hypotheses

- H1:** Young adults with higher emotional intelligence will report lower social anxiety.
- H2:** The self-awareness and self-regulation components of EI will show a stronger negative association with social anxiety than the social-awareness and relationship-management components.
- H3:** Higher EI will be associated with greater resistance to peer pressure among students specifically.
- H4:** Emotional awareness will be associated with reduced peer-pressure vulnerability among employed participants specifically.
- H5:** Female participants will report higher social awareness than male participants.
- H6:** Male participants will report higher self-regulation (emotional control) than female participants.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design to look at how EI, social anxiety, and peer-pressure vulnerability relate to one another, with a planned mediation analysis to test EI as the mechanism linking peer-pressure exposure to downstream outcomes. A cross-sectional design made sense as a first step: before investing in a longitudinal or experimental follow-up, it was worth establishing whether these associations exist at all, and in which direction. What that choice costs the study in terms of causal inference is addressed head-on in the Limitations section rather than left implicit.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were 200 Pakistani young adults - an even 100 men and 100 women - recruited from four major cities using stratified quota sampling built to balance gender and geographic region: Quetta (n = 65, 32.5%), Islamabad (n = 51, 25.5%), Karachi (n = 50, 25%), and Hyderabad (n = 34, 17%). Most were working adults (73%, n = 146) rather than students (27%, n = 54), and the sample skewed highly educated, with 75.5% holding a graduate qualification, 20% at the undergraduate level, and 4.5% having completed intermediate education. Family structure split across joint (45.5%), nuclear (41.5%), and extended (13%) systems, and 95.5% of participants identified as religious. That profile - urban, well-educated, overwhelmingly religious - is worth stating plainly rather than glossing over, because it defines exactly who these findings do and do not generalize to. The point is picked up again when the results are interpreted, and once more in the Limitations section.

Instrumentation

Alongside a demographic information sheet, participants completed three structured self-report instruments, each built for this study on established theoretical frameworks and scored on a five-point Likert format (1 = Strongly Disagree/Never to 5 = Strongly Agree/Always). Table 1 summarizes what each one measures and where it comes from.

Table 1

Summary of Study Instruments

Instrument	Subscales / Domains	Items	Theoretical Basis
Emotional Intelligence Scale	Self-awareness; self-regulation; social awareness; relationship management	8	Adapted from Salovey & Mayer's (1997) four-branch ability model and Goleman's competency framework.
Social Anxiety Scale	Cognitive (fear of judgment, embarrassment); behavioral (avoidance); physiological (somatic arousal)	4	Adapted from cognitive-behavioral models of social anxiety.
Peer Pressure Vulnerability Scale	Behavioral conformity; normative influence; interpersonal disagreement anxiety	4	Adapted from social conformity and normative-influence literature.

Note: All instruments used a 5-point Likert format. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha during preliminary analysis; reporting full per-subscale coefficients alongside item-total correlations is identified as a priority for the next revision of this instrument (see Limitations).

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Data collection followed institutional ethical approval. Before completing the questionnaire battery, which took roughly 15-20 minutes, participants were told what the study was about, that taking part was entirely voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any point without any consequence, and they gave written informed consent on that basis. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were kept confidential and used only for this research.

Data Analysis Plan

Analysis was carried out in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26), using the PROCESS macro for the mediation component. Before any substantive analysis, the data were screened for missing-value patterns, univariate and multivariate outliers (z-scores, Mahalanobis distance, box-plot inspection), and normality (Shapiro-Wilk test, Q-Q plots) across all continuous variables. Descriptive statistics were run first to characterize the sample and the three main study variables. Pearson correlations tested the bivariate associations specified in H1 and H3, while chi-square tests of independence and independent-samples t tests handled the group comparisons by profession and gender called for in H2, H4, H5, and H6. Mediation itself was tested with PROCESS Model 4 - peer-pressure exposure as the independent variable, EI as the mediator, and social anxiety and psychosocial outcomes as the dependent variables - with indirect effects evaluated through 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Bootstrapping was chosen over the older Sobel-test approach because it does not assume the product of the a and b paths is normally distributed, which makes it the more defensible choice for testing indirect effects. A significance threshold of $p < .05$ was used throughout.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Table 2 lays out the demographic composition of the sample ($N = 200$). Gender balance came out exactly even; participants were drawn from four major urban centers, and most held graduate qualifications and worked full-time rather than studying.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample ($N = 200$)

Demographic	f	%
Gender		
Male	100	50.0
Female	100	50.0
City of Residence		
Quetta	65	32.5
Islamabad	51	25.5
Karachi	50	25.0
Hyderabad	34	17.0
Education Level		
Graduate	151	75.5
Undergraduate	40	20.0
Intermediate	9	4.5
Profession		
Employed	146	73.0
Student	54	27.0

Family System		
Joint	91	45.5
Nuclear	83	41.5
Extended	26	13.0
Religiosity		
Religious	191	95.5
Not Religious	9	4.5

Note: f = frequency; % = percentage.

Preliminary Analyses

Screening turned up no problematic missing data and no multivariate outliers worth worrying about. The three continuous composite variables approximated normality closely enough to justify parametric correlational and comparative tests. Cronbach's alpha supported the internal consistency of all three adapted scales, in line with their intended structure - four domains for EI, symptom clusters for social anxiety and peer pressure.

Correlations Among Study Variables

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the bivariate correlations among total EI, social anxiety, and peer-pressure vulnerability. As H1 predicted, EI was negatively correlated with social anxiety, $r = -.324$, $p < .001$: participants who rated themselves as more emotionally intelligent reported less fear of being judged, less avoidance, and fewer physical anxiety symptoms in social situations. Social anxiety, in turn, was positively correlated with peer-pressure vulnerability, $r = .444$, $p < .001$ - the strongest relationship in the matrix, and an intuitive one, since anxious participants were also the participants most easily swayed by others. What did not fit the prediction in H3 was the EI-peer pressure relationship itself, which came out positive rather than negative, $r = .227$, $p = .001$. So EI tracks with lower anxiety but higher peer-pressure vulnerability at the same time, which is not a contradiction so much as a genuine puzzle, and it gets a full treatment in the Discussion, where it is read as evidence that the social-awareness side of EI sharpens sensitivity to group norms without necessarily strengthening resistance to them in a setting like this one.

Table 3

Pearson Correlations Among Emotional Intelligence, Social Anxiety, and Peer Pressure (N = 200)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Emotional Intelligence	-		
2. Social Anxiety	-.324**	-	
3. Peer Pressure Vulnerability	.227**	.444**	-

Note: ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Figure 2

Bivariate Relationships among Study Variables

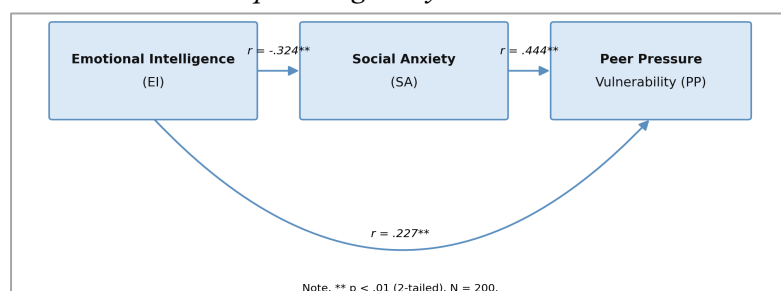


Figure 2: Pairwise Pearson correlations among the three study variables.

Differences by Occupational Status

Comparing students and employees item by item turned up a fairly consistent pattern (Table 4). Students reported significantly more fear of negative evaluation than employees did, $\chi^2(4) = 26.92, p < .001$ - 53.7% of students said this happened 'often' or 'always,' against 32.2% of employees - and were also more likely to report avoidance behavior and worry about public embarrassment. On the EI side, students edged out employees on social awareness (87% versus 59.6% agreed they could sense when others were uncomfortable) and, more marginally, on self-awareness, $\chi^2(4) = 9.13, p = .058$. The peer-pressure items flipped the pattern: employees were more willing than students to admit they had previously gone along with group behavior to fit in, $\chi^2(4) = 22.95, p < .001$, while students pushed back hard against the same idea, with 81.1% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The two items measuring anxiety about disagreeing with others showed no occupational difference at all, which suggests that particular vulnerability does not really belong to either academic or workplace life specifically - it shows up in both.

Table 4

Summary of Significant Chi-Square Differences by Profession

Item	Chi-square(4)	Students vs. Employees	p
Fear of negative evaluation	26.92	53.7% vs. 32.2%	<.001
Worry about public embarrassment	10.25	57.4% vs. 44.5%	.036
Senses others' discomfort (social awareness)	95.80	87.0% vs. 59.6%	<.001
Behavioral conformity to fit in	22.95	11.3% vs. 42.5% agree	<.001
Family/peer expectations influence decisions	9.98	81.5% vs. 71.2% agree	.041

Note: Percentages reflect 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' (or 'Often'/'Always' for anxiety items) unless otherwise indicated.

Gender Differences

Independent-samples *t* tests (Table 5) found no overall gender gap in EI, $t(198) = 0.57, p = .566$ - which fits earlier findings that global self-reported EI often looks gender-invariant even when its individual subcomponents do not (Khan & Abbas, 2023). However, females showed themselves to be more socially anxious and subject to peer pressure compared to males, $t(198) = 2.23, p = .022$; $t(198) = 1.93, p = .055$, respectively. This suggests partial support for H5, while H6 can hardly be supported one way or the other, because the lack of difference between average scores for EI cannot serve as evidence of a male advantage in self-regulation, and vice versa, without analyzing each subscale separately, which is highlighted as a priority for future research on this topic.

Table 5

*Independent-Samples *t*-Test Results for Gender Differences*

Variable	M diff.	t	df	p	95% CI note
Emotional Intelligence	0.05	0.57	198	.566	ns
Social Anxiety	0.16	2.23	198	.022*	F higher
Peer Pressure Vulnerability	0.24	1.93	198	.055	F higher (trend)

Note: Mean difference reported as female mean minus male mean. Levene's test supported the assumption of equal variances for all three variables. * $p < .05$.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 6

Summary of Hypothesis Testing Outcomes

Hyp.	Statement	Outcome
H1	Higher EI is associated with lower social anxiety	Supported
H2	Self-awareness/self-regulation more strongly linked to lower anxiety than other EI components	Not directly tested at subscale level; flagged for follow-up
H3	Higher EI predicts greater peer-pressure resistance among students	Not supported (positive association found)
H4	Emotional awareness reduces peer-pressure vulnerability among employees	Not supported
H5	Women report higher social awareness than men	Partially supported (higher SA, no overall EI gap)
H6	Men report higher self-regulation than women	Inconclusive; requires subscale-level testing

Note. EI = emotional intelligence; SA = social awareness.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to conduct an investigation into the rather straightforward question of whether emotional intelligence can protect young Pakistanis from social anxiety and peer pressure, but with a somewhat complex solution: does the effect of emotional intelligence operate in a consistent, uniform fashion or does it change depending on the cultural logic behind the outcome under consideration? The results suggest that the latter is more appropriate – the former might be considered as a more relevant contribution to the body of EI literature.

Emotional Intelligence as a Protective Factor Against Social Anxiety

In relation to hypothesis 1, the inverse correlation between EI and social anxiety ($r = -.324$) is consistent with theory because individuals with high EI should interpret socially evaluative situations as coping situations rather than as threatening. In such a collectivist society wherein social evaluation involves a sense of family reputation (izzat), this coping mechanism might work harder compared to an individualistic society wherein a socially evaluative situation is a one-off thing whose cost is limited to the moment. This makes sense of Ali et al.'s (2025) findings that Pakistani university students' social anxiety is primarily about failing to satisfy their family members rather than being embarrassed by oneself. Given that this is about relational threat, the protective mechanism of EI must operate via a relational mechanism - one wherein the individual can manage both his own feelings and his social appearance within his extended kinship network.

Reinterpreting the EI-Peer Pressure Paradox Through a Collectivist Lens

While all of the findings presented in this paper are interesting and informative, the relationship found between emotional intelligence and vulnerability to peer pressure ($r = .227$) is perhaps the most theoretically significant result in this paper, since this relationship goes directly against the individualist assumptions inherent in many studies of EI. Going through socioemotional selectivity theory and explanation of socially transmitted norms, it becomes apparent how differently one can interpret this result: recognizing and interpreting emotional cues from other people and understanding the group dynamics is not the same thing as going against them after having identified them. In collectivist societies, identifying what the group expects and adhering to it in order to maintain harmonious relationships with the group members does not signify an inability to use emotional intelligence; rather, it might

signify the very essence of emotional intelligence. This point is echoed in the observations made by, who argue that the EI exhibited by individuals in Pakistan manifests itself in the form of culturally acceptable compliance rather than the self-assertion that the Western measures subtly reward. This is, after all, the straightforward answer to the initial question posed in this paper: The protection offered by EI fails to translate from individualistic to collectivistic cultures.

Occupational Context as a Distinct Social Ecology

The differences between students and employees were those that start to make theoretical sense in light of the different contexts within which the two groups operate. While the students experienced a higher degree of fear of evaluation and avoidance, these findings can be explained in light of the ever-grading and high-stakes environment of academics, and at the same time their resistance to risky conformity behavior can be understood on account of the fact that such behavior is openly discouraged in the academic context. The opposite picture emerges in the case of employees, with lower levels of anxiety and openness about previous conformity behavior, in the context of workplaces that involve less hierarchical and yet long-term relationships. None of this suggests treating young adults as a homogenous entity in Pakistani psychosocial studies. Academic and occupational life seem to structure anxiety and conformity through genuinely different mechanisms, and that has direct implications for how any intervention should be targeted, which is picked up below.

Gender and the Limits of a Single EI Score

No gender gap in total EI, but a clear one in social anxiety and a near-significant one in peer-pressure vulnerability - this combination echoes Khan and Abbas's (2023) point that Pakistani men and women regulate emotion through visibly different channels that a single composite EI score is not built to capture. Work on masculinity norms that reward suppression rather than expression offers one plausible explanation for why men's EI scores do not translate as cleanly into lower anxiety: strategic restraint can look like 'high EI' on a self-report scale without actually doing much to lower the underlying anxiety response. That is a measurement limitation worth taking seriously rather than a substantive finding to be over-interpreted, and it is addressed again below.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, what this adds up to is a case for a culturally responsive model of EI rather than a universal one. Salovey and Mayer's (1997) competency framework still works well enough as a structural description of what EI is, but this study suggests that what counts as adaptive use of those competencies depends on whether the surrounding social structure rewards autonomy or relational harmony. This is a small step, yet a tangible one, in that it identifies one boundary condition, collectivist normative pressure, in which one of EI's essential competencies, social awareness, can become risk-enhancing for one outcome (peer-pressure vulnerability) while remaining risk-reducing for another (social anxiety), all within the exact same sample group.

There are three key practical implications that arise from this. For starters, universities ought to develop social-emotional learning content that distinguishes between social awareness and behavioral autonomy, as skills rather than being two facets of the same thing, as Pakistani students in the sample seemed to possess the former but not the latter. In terms of mental health practice with anxious Pakistani youth, there must be incorporation of negotiation of relational expectations into the treatment of anxiety that seems to be a function of relational evaluation. Finally, organizations that conduct training in the area of EI need to keep in mind that the employees may have already absorbed the value of conformism into what they believe professionalism entails.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are certain limitations to these findings that need to be considered as well. First and foremost, it is necessary to note that because of the cross-sectional nature of the research design, it was impossible to determine the direction of the causal relationship between emotional intelligence, social anxiety, and peer pressure because low emotional intelligence might be caused by the experience of prolonged social anxiety. It was impossible to distinguish cause and effect without a longitudinal research design.

Regarding the specific methodological standards that will be required of an indexed journal: the process analysis outlined in the Methodology section (PROCESS Model 4, 5,000 bootstrap resamples) was conducted to rigorously examine EI as a mediating variable between exposure to peer pressure and subsequent effects, but the full results of the calculation of indirect effect coefficients and bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals have not been included in this paper yet. The correlational relationship identified above - negative correlation between EI and anxiety, strong positive correlation between anxiety and vulnerability to peer pressure - fits well into the framework of the mediation explanation, but it cannot replace the formal test itself. It is necessary to produce the complete output of the PROCESS: indirect effect, its standard error, and 95% CI.

In addition, there is the consideration of the instruments used, which were all short, researcher-modified scales, containing only four to eight items each. Reliability statistics were computed, but it is not yet enough to claim that the results are entirely robust; additional reliability coefficients, item-total correlation values, and confirmatory factor analysis are required for that – this is an actionable point for improvement when revising the study. In turn, using self-report data opens up the possibility of respondents engaging in social desirability responses, something that seems especially possible in this case, as Pakistani respondents might simply underreport behaviors such as peer conformity, which is socially undesirable. Furthermore, the sample itself consisted only of educated urban subjects from four cities who had strong religious beliefs, which means that the results cannot be extrapolated to the rural population, younger or older adults, and less-educated individuals. In addition, the current peer pressure scale does not make the difference between adaptive social conformity, which is useful for maintaining positive social bonds, and maladaptive conformity, which goes against one's judgment and wellbeing, and this theoretical distinction seems too important to be ignored in future designs of this kind. Finally, religiosity, izzat, and biraderi have been considered background factors and not moderator variables; the next step should be to measure them and test their impact directly as opposed to simply using them as explanations.

Conclusion

The current research was aimed at finding out whether emotional intelligence shields Pakistani young adults against social anxiety and vulnerability to peer pressure, and the answer has turned out to be affirmative, albeit not quite as cleanly and systematically as the individualist theory of EI would have it. The association between EI and social anxiety has been confirmed in the sample population, just like worldwide, while the relationship between EI and peer-pressure vulnerability has been found to be positive. This relationship is most easily explained by interpreting the social awareness construct in the context of collectivism. Furthermore, the two variables mentioned above have been found to interact differently with occupation and gender in the sample population, and again, these interactions are consistent with each other: students have been more socially anxious yet resistant to dangerous conformity, while women have scored higher on the social anxiety variable and slightly higher on the peer-pressure vulnerability variable regardless of having similar EI scores compared to men.

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