

Emotional Intelligence and Employability of College Students: The Mediating Effect of Self-efficacy

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Abstract— Employability of college graduates plays a critical role in personal career success, organizational competitive advantage and sustainable national strength. Based on the questionnaire survey and quantitative analysis on 646 final-year college students from 9 higher education institutions in Chinese mainland, the research found that the levels of regulation of emotion, self-efficacy (including both effort and context factors) and application of knowledge of male college students were significantly higher of than those of females. College students from urban areas had higher levels of overall emotional intelligence (including the dimension of appraisal and expression of emotion) and overall employability (including the sub factors: teamwork, communication and coordination, self-learning, and self-management) than their rural counterparts. Model 4 of PROCESS Version 3.5 was adopted to test the total effect, direct effect and indirect effect between emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and employability. Results showed that emotional intelligence had significant impact on employability of college students and self-efficacy played a mediating role in the correlation between emotional intelligence and undergraduates' employability. The findings could be of value to stakeholders of higher education to develop targeted measures to improve students' employability.

Keywords— college students, emotional intelligence, employability, higher education, self-efficacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world is undergoing dramatic changes in the era of knowledge economy. Economic growth increasingly depends on highly skilled workers (Oliinyk et al., 2021). As a major source for talents, higher education institutions across the world are placed with mounting pressure in developing the employability of their students (Sin et al., 2017; Rees, 2021). High level of employability of college graduates can result in the career success of individuals (Van der Heijden et al., 2022), the competitive advantage of organizations (Uribebebarria et al., 2021) and the sustainable development of nations (Gavriluță et al., 2022). As a result, it is of great importance and value to explore what salient factors affect the employability of college students.

Previous studies have identified several factors that had positive influence on college graduates' employability, among which emotional intelligence was paid much attention from academia (Udayar et al., 2018; Rizwan et al., 2019). Emotional intelligence is the ability of individuals to recognize emotions in themselves and others, deal with those emotions, motivate themselves, and communicate those emotions to others (Goleman, 1998). It also refers to the ability of utilizing emotional information to guide thought and behavior (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Emotional intelligence was proved to

have significant and positive impact on the employability of college students (Hamzah et al., 2021; Succi, 2019).

In the meanwhile, self-efficacy was also found to have significant correlation with employability (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022). Self-efficacy is defined as the belief that people are capable of performing the behaviors required for achieving their goals (Bandura, 1977). It represents people's confidence in their ability to take actions or perform tasks with anticipated outcomes (Feltz & Magyar, 2006). Students' academic achievement and their ability to find jobs after graduation are significantly influenced by their self-efficacy (Chow et al., 2019). It is worth mentioning that emotional intelligence can positively predict self-efficacy (Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2018), and higher level of self-efficacy leads to stronger employability (Tentama & Nur, 2021). It suggests that self-efficacy may play a mediating role in the correlation between emotional intelligence and employability. However, the mediating effect has hardly been studied before. This research attempts to explore the mediation of self-efficacy on the relation between emotional intelligence and undergraduates' employability. It could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between these constructs, which in turn can help stakeholders improve the employability of college students.

II. METHOD

2.1. Participants

646 final-year college students from 9 higher education institutions in the mainland of China were recruited to participate in the research. Before filling the questionnaire, all the participants were informed of the objectives of the research. Their confidentiality was well guaranteed by the anonymity of information. A convenience sampling method was adopted to collect data (Santos et al., 2019). The detailed description of the sample will be provided in the Results section.

2.2. Instrument

Emotional intelligence was measured by Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS) (Schutte et al., 1998). The scale was designed on the five-point Likert scoring system with three dimensions: appraisal and expression of emotion, regulation of emotion, and utilization of emotion. The Cronbach’s α of the scale was 0.87 and the retest reliability was 0.78. The Morgan-Jinks Student Efficacy Scale (Jinks & Morgan, 1999) was utilized to test self-efficacy of college students. It was consisted of

two dimensions: effort and context. The validity and reliability of the scale had been assured by a variety of precious studies (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007). Employability was measured by College Students’ Employability Scale (He, 2019) with five sub-factors: application of knowledge, teamwork, communication and coordination, self-learning, and self-management.

III. RESULTS

3.1. Basic Description

As shown in Table 1, 38.1% of the participants in this this research were males, and 61.9% were females. 298 students were from the rural areas (46.1%), and the other 348 students were from the urban areas (53.9%). All these respondents were studying 15 different majors. Table 1 shows the majors that had more than 20 participants, namely, health service and management (N=118), English language and literature (N=116), Chinese language and literature (N=113), civil engineering (N=105), engineering management (N=60), translation and interpreting (N=33) and business English (N=29).

Table 1: Basic Description of the Sample

Variable	Category	N	Percent
Gender	Male	246	38.1
	Female	400	61.9
Residence	Rural	298	46.1
	Urban	348	53.9
Major	Health Service and Management	118	18.3
	English Language and Literature	116	18
	Chinese Language and Literature	113	17.5
	Civil Engineering	105	16.3
	Engineering Management	60	9.3
	Translation and Interpreting	33	5.1
	Business English	29	4.5

The scales adopted in this research demonstrated sound reliability and validity. Cronbach’s alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency with a generally accepted rule: $0.9 \leq \alpha$ excellent; $0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.9$ good; $0.6 \leq \alpha < 0.7$ acceptable; $0.5 \leq \alpha < 0.6$ poor; $\alpha < 0.5$ unacceptable (Wiklander et al., 2015). As shown in Table 2, the overall Cronbach’s α coefficient of EIS is 0.919 and that of each sub-factor is greater than 0.8. The overall Cronbach’s α coefficient of SE is 0.751 and that

of its two dimensions are greater than 0.7. The overall Cronbach’s α coefficient of EMP is 0.950 and that of all its five dimensions are greater than 0.7. In the meanwhile, A KMO greater than 0.6 and a bartlett’s test of sphericity of statistical significance are required (Eklund & Bejerholm, 2017). Table 2 shows that the KMO of each sub-scale and their respective dimensions are all greater than 0.6 and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was statistically significant at 0.001 level.

Table 2: Reliability and Validity of the Scale

Scale	Dimension	Cronbach’s α	KMO	Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity
EIS	AEE	0.846	0.87	0
	RE	0.849	0.879	0

	UE	0.812	0.672	0
	EIS-Total	0.919	0.933	0
SE	EF	0.821	0.779	0
	CON	0.704	0.729	0
	SE-Total	0.751	0.814	0
EMP	AK	0.909	0.719	0
	TM	0.883	0.724	0
	CC	0.865	0.827	0
	SL	0.79	0.663	0
	SMG	0.788	0.732	0
	EMP-Total	0.95	0.863	0

Note: AEE= appraisal and expression of emotion, RE=regulation of emotion, UE=utilization of emotion, SE=self-efficacy, EF=effort, CON=context, EMP=employability, AK=application of knowledge, TM=teamwork, CC=communication and coordination, SL=self-learning, SMG=self-management.

3.2. Differences in Emotional Intelligence, Self-Efficacy and Employability Between Genders

The normal Q-Q plot showed that the variables to be analyzed are very close to normal distribution (Mott et al., 2020), which indicated that the data was suitable for independent-samples T test. The result of Levine’s Test for Equality of Variances demonstrated that all the dimensions between both groups had equal variances ($p>0.05$). As shown in table 3, male and female college students had statically significant difference in the effort dimension of self-efficacy and the application of

knowledge dimension of employability at 0.001 level. They had statically significant difference in the regulation of emotion dimension of emotional intelligence, and the context dimension of self-efficacy at 0.05 level. However, no statically significant differences existed in the perspectives of overall emotional intelligence (including the sub-factors of appraisal and expression of emotion, and utilization of emotion), and overall employability (including the dimensions of teamwork, communication and coordination, self-learning, and self-management).

Table 3: Independent Samples Test Between Genders

	Male		Female		t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
EI	4.07	0.54	4.01	0.52	1.4	0.16
AEE	4.02	0.62	4.01	0.6	0.21	0.84
RE	4.08	0.56	3.98	0.56	2.14	0.03
UE	4.19	0.67	4.1	0.62	1.69	0.09
SE	3.29	0.51	3.15	0.44	3.73	0
EF	3.56	0.64	3.38	0.6	3.65	0
CON	3.13	0.58	3.01	0.52	2.68	0.01
EMP	3.8	0.68	3.75	0.61	1.01	0.32
AK	3.69	0.79	3.49	0.78	3.18	0
TM	3.93	0.73	3.96	0.65	-0.48	0.63
CC	3.9	0.69	3.87	0.65	0.57	0.57
SL	3.75	0.75	3.72	0.73	0.52	0.6
SMG	3.67	0.82	3.65	0.81	0.32	0.75

3.3. Differences in Emotional Intelligence, Self-Efficacy and Employability Between Different Family Backgrounds

The normal Q-Q plots of emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and employability between the participants from rural and urban households demonstrated adequate normal distribution. Equal variances ($p>0.05$) were confirmed within all comparison groups via Levine’s Test for Equality of Variances. Independent-samples T

test (Table 4) showed that college students from rural and urban areas had significant difference in terms of the appraisal and expression of emotion dimension and overall employability (including the sub-factors of teamwork, communication and coordination, and self-learning) at 0.01 level. They also had significant difference in overall emotional intelligence and the self-management factor of employability. Nevertheless, no significant difference was detected in the regulation of emotion and utilization of emotion factors of emotional

intelligence, the overall self-efficacy (including both dimensions of effort and context) and the application of knowledge dimension of employability.

Table 4: Independent Samples Test Between Family Residence

	Urban		Rural		t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
EI	4.08	0.5	3.99	0.55	2.06	0.04
AEE	4.08	0.57	3.92	0.64	3.4	0
RE	4.03	0.55	4.01	0.58	0.53	0.59
UE	4.16	0.64	4.11	0.64	1.06	0.29
SE	3.2	0.46	3.2	0.49	0.22	0.83
EF	3.41	0.61	3.49	0.64	-1.6	0.11
CON	3.09	0.54	3.03	0.56	1.34	0.18
EMP	3.85	0.58	3.68	0.7	3.33	0
AK	3.61	0.76	3.51	0.81	1.67	0.1
TM	4.04	0.56	3.84	0.79	3.69	0
CC	3.97	0.6	3.78	0.72	3.51	0
SL	3.83	0.7	3.63	0.78	3.38	0
SMG	3.73	0.79	3.58	0.83	2.27	0.02

3.4. Correlations Between the Variables

As shown in Table 5, the mean scores of overall emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and employability were all greater than 3, which indicated that the participants had moderately high levels of emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and employability. Table 5 also revealed that the overall emotional intelligence was

significantly correlated with self-efficacy and employability as well as their sub factors, except the context factor of self-efficacy. Among all the sub-factors of emotional intelligence, only appraisal and expression of emotion had significant correlation with the context factor of self-efficacy. Significant association also existed between the overall self-efficacy and employability as well as its sub dimensions.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between the Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1.EI	4	0.5	1												
2.AEE	4	0.6	.898**	1											
3.RE	4	0.6	.918**	.685**	1										
4.UE	4.1	0.6	.807**	.580**	-.724**	1									
5.SE	3.2	0.5	.216**	.215**	.177**	.167**	1								
6.EF	3.5	0.6	.372**	.286**	.382**	.324**	.718**	1							
7.CON	3.1	0.6	0.051	.107**	-0.01	0.017	.892**	.327**	1						
8.EMP	3.8	0.6	.546**	.426**	.551**	.478**	.264**	.512**	0.027	1					
9.AK	3.6	0.8	.408**	.316**	.411**	.363**	.303**	.474**	.104**	.850**	1				
10.TM	4	0.7	.475**	.363**	.487**	.420**	.188**	.416**	0.015	.891**	.663**	1			
11.CC	3.9	0.7	.544**	.435**	.539**	.474**	.218**	.438**	0.012	.927**	.705**	.895**	1		
12.SL	3.7	0.7	.517**	.397**	.532**	.448**	.244**	.495**	0.01	.916**	.728**	.741**	.782**	1	
13.SMG	3.7	0.8	.444**	.354**	.443**	.382**	.198**	.425**	0.007	.791**	.594**	.572**	.628**	.783**	1

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.5. The Mediating Effect of Self-efficacy

PROCESS version 3.5, a SPSS macro, was used to test the mediation effect (Rosental & Shmueli, 2021) of self-

efficacy. We chose Model 4 with Bootstrap samples of 5000, Bootstrap CI method of Bias Corrected and Confidence level of 95%. As shown in Table 6, the total effect of emotional intelligence on employability was

0.664 ($p < 0.001$). The direct effect of emotional intelligence on employability was 0.623 ($p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of self-efficacy on the association between emotional intelligence and employability was 0.04 ($p < 0.001$). Figure 1 demonstrated that emotional

intelligence had a significantly positively impact on employability, and self-efficacy played a mediating role in the correlation between emotional intelligence and employability.

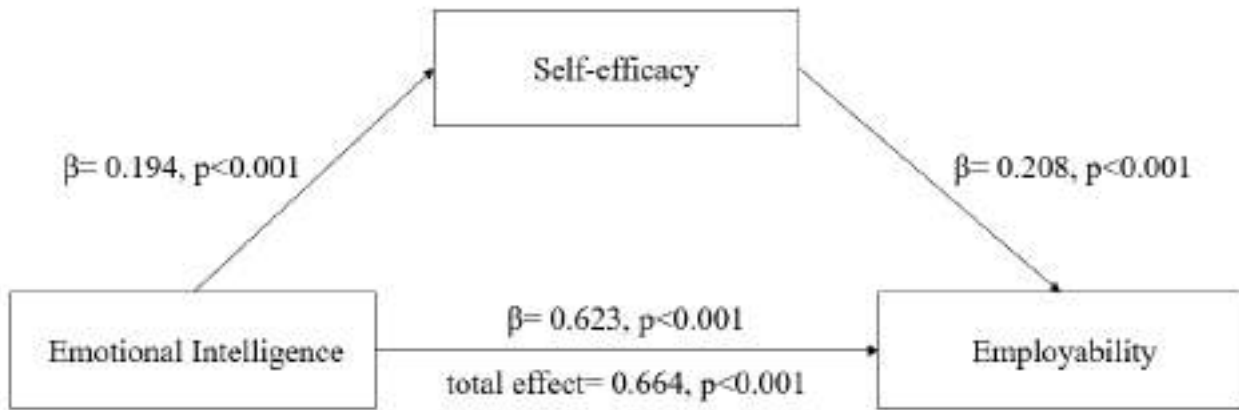


Figure 1: Mediating Effect of Self-Efficacy on Emotional Intelligence and Employability of College Students

Table 6: Mediating Effect of Self-efficacy on Employability

	Model 1 Y(Emp)			Model 2 M(SE)			Model 3 Y(Emp)		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
X(EI)	0.664	0.040	<.001	0.194	0.035	<.001	0.623	0.040	<.001
M(SE)	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.208	0.045	<.001
constant	1.094	0.163	<.001	2.417	0.141	<.001	0.592	0.194	<.05
	$R^2 = 0.298$			$R^2 = 0.046$			$R^2 = 0.321$		
	F(1,644) = 273.435, $p < .001$			F(1,644) = 31.387, $p < .001$			F(2,643) = 151.712, $p < .001$		
Bootstrap	Indirect effect			BootLLCI			BootULCI		
	0.040			0.017			0.079		

IV. DISCUSSION

The current study found that male college students had higher levels of regulation of emotion, self-efficacy (including both effort and context factors) and application of knowledge than females. More often than not, girls are more emotional than boys (Meehan, 2021), which could lead to more difficulties for them to regulate their emotions. At the same time, male students tend to have more advantages than females in STEM (Isphording & Qendrai, 2019) because they were usually planted with the idea of being smarter in science since childhood. Since the majority of the participants in this study majored in science and engineering disciplines, the scores of the male students turned out to be significantly higher than the girls in self-efficacy and the application of professional knowledge. Thus, colleges and universities are encouraged to pay more attention to female students when designing courses or activities to improve their ability in regulating emotions, strengthen

their belief to complete tasks and increase their confidence in using the knowledge they have acquired.

Results also revealed that college students from urban areas performed better in overall emotional intelligence (including the dimension of appraisal and expression of emotion) and overall employability (including the sub factors: teamwork, communication and coordination, self-learning, and self-management). The social and economic situations are quite different between urban and rural areas in China (Long et al., 2019). Students who grew up in rural families are often financially inferior to their urban counterparts (Yang, 2010). They usually have less opportunities to engage in EQ training courses or social activities. As a result, they might have a harder time in evaluating other people's emotions and expressing their own emotions. Similarly, they are more likely to have less chances to take part in job-related teamwork events, coordinate other members, learn by themselves or live a highly structured city life to improve self-management skills (Kaufmann et al.,

2020), which ultimately lead to a lower level of employability than college students from urban families. Such phenomenon is worth noticing by higher education administrators and faculty members in formulating targeted measures to develop students' employability.

Self-efficacy was identified to have a mediating effect on the correlation between emotional intelligence and employability of college students. The findings highlight the importance of enhancing self-efficacy in higher education. Self-efficacy directly affects a person's belief and efforts to take action and achieve specific goals (Bandura, 1997). Graduates may not be able to give full play to their talent in the labor market if they do not believe in their ability to perform well (Downes et al., 2021). This reminds the higher education institutions to integrate self-efficacy improvement programs into their curriculum and extracurricular activities in addition to the traditional tasks of imparting knowledge and skills.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the questionnaire survey and quantitative analysis on the final-year students from higher education institutions in Chinese mainland, the current study found that the level of regulation of emotion, self-efficacy (including both dimensions of effort and context) and application of knowledge of male college students were significantly higher than those of females. College students from urban areas had higher levels of overall emotional intelligence (including the dimension of appraisal and expression of emotion) and overall employability (including the sub factors: teamwork, communication and coordination, self-learning, and self-management) than those from rural areas. Emotional intelligence was significantly correlated with employability of college students. In addition, the research revealed that self-efficacy functioned as a mediator in the correlation between emotional intelligence and undergraduates' employability. It contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of self-efficacy in their relationship. The findings could be of value to practitioners in higher education to develop students' employability in a more targeted manner.

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