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Structural Model Analysis of Emotional Intelligence and COVID-19 Anxiety with the Mediating Role of Perceived Social Support and Social Cohesion in University Students

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The present study aimed to investigate the structural relationship between emotional intelligence and COVID-19 anxiety, considering the mediating roles of perceived social support and social cohesion among university students.

Methods and Materials: This research employed a descriptive-correlational design with an applied purpose and field data collection method. The statistical population included all students enrolled in Payame Noor University of Bushehr Province during the second semester of the 2021–2022 academic year (N = 7,900). A sample of 237 students was selected using simple random sampling based on the Morgan table. Data were collected using four standardized instruments: Cron's Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (2007), the Coronavirus Disease Anxiety Scale (CDAS), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and Keyes' Social Well-being Questionnaire (1998). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using SmartPLS and SPSS-25 software was used to test the hypothesized relationships.

Findings: The results demonstrated that emotional intelligence significantly and negatively predicted COVID-19 anxiety ($\beta = -0.136$, $t = 2.247$, $p < 0.05$). Perceived social support also negatively predicted COVID-19 anxiety ($\beta = -0.340$, $t = 6.899$, $p < 0.001$), and emotional intelligence significantly predicted perceived social support ($\beta = 0.496$, $t = 13.321$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, emotional intelligence significantly predicted social cohesion ($\beta = 0.534$, $t = 11.478$, $p < 0.001$), and social cohesion negatively predicted COVID-19 anxiety ($\beta = -0.201$, $t = 2.927$, $p < 0.01$). The indirect effects of emotional intelligence on COVID-19 anxiety through perceived social support ($\beta = -0.169$, $t = 5.501$) and social cohesion ($\beta = -0.107$, $t = 2.661$) were also significant.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the protective role of emotional intelligence in reducing pandemic-related anxiety through the enhancement of perceived social support and social cohesion.

Keywords: *emotional intelligence, COVID-19 anxiety, perceived social support, social cohesion, university students.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the dynamic interplay between emotional intelligence, perceived social support, and psychological health has garnered increasing attention from scholars, especially in light of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Emotional intelligence (EI)—defined as the capacity to identify, regulate, and utilize emotions effectively—has been widely recognized as a vital protective factor in promoting individual well-being and reducing mental health challenges, including anxiety and stress (Malek Mohammadi et al., 2015). The emergence of the COVID-19 crisis intensified psychological vulnerabilities among different groups, particularly students, as they experienced disruption in academic routines, uncertainty, social isolation, and fears of illness and death (Salari et al., 2020). These conditions have underscored the critical need to explore individual and social coping mechanisms that mitigate the adverse mental health impacts of such global emergencies.

Emotional intelligence has repeatedly been found to serve as a psychological buffer in stressful contexts. Studies demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence exhibit stronger emotion regulation abilities, which enable them to manage anxiety and distress more effectively (Li et al., 2021; Moosavi et al., 2019). Moreover, emotional intelligence fosters enhanced interpersonal communication and empathy, leading to improved social relationships and support systems (Ghazvineh et al., 2022). These interpersonal resources, in turn, contribute to the perceived availability of social support—a multidimensional construct referring to the belief that one is cared for and has access to assistance from others when needed (Boland et al., 2017). The mediating role of perceived social support in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological outcomes has been validated in numerous studies. For instance, Ullah et al. (Ullah et al., 2023) revealed that perceived social support significantly mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress, emphasizing the interdependence of emotional and social competencies in regulating psychological responses to academic pressure.

Social cohesion, as a macro-level dimension of social well-being, also plays a critical role in supporting psychological resilience. It refers to the degree of connectedness and solidarity among individuals within a society, which often fosters a sense of belonging, trust, and collective efficacy. When individuals perceive high levels of social cohesion, they are more likely to experience emotional stability and reduced anxiety, especially during collective crises such as a pandemic (Farahati, 2020). Azpiazu et al. (Azpiazu et al., 2023) emphasized that both social support and emotional intelligence independently and jointly contribute to adolescents' life satisfaction, with social cohesion enhancing the beneficial effects of emotional intelligence on subjective well-being. In academic environments, this interplay is especially relevant, as students navigate developmental transitions, academic pressures, and social identity formation simultaneously. As such, understanding how emotional intelligence influences psychological outcomes through perceived social support and social cohesion is essential for developing comprehensive interventions to safeguard student mental health.

Furthermore, existing research highlights the psychological toll of the pandemic on young populations. The prevalence of coronavirus-induced anxiety has been well documented, with studies reporting heightened fear, sleep disturbances, and somatic symptoms among students (Salari et al., 2020). These symptoms are exacerbated when individuals lack emotional regulation skills and supportive social networks. Research by Taleghaninejad et al. (Taleghaninejad et al., 2021) shows that emotional intelligence significantly predicts internet addiction via its relationship with stress-coping styles and perceived social support, suggesting a broader relevance of emotional skills in managing behavioral and emotional disorders in youth. Notably, Rozen and Aderka (Rozen & Aderka, 2023) reviewed the centrality of emotion dysregulation in the etiology and maintenance of anxiety disorders, particularly social anxiety, reinforcing the importance of emotional competencies as targets for prevention and intervention.

The mediational pathways involving emotional intelligence, social support, and psychological outcomes are increasingly being recognized in empirical studies. Bakhshi and Sedighi Arfaei (Bakhshi & Sedighi Arfaei, 2021) found that emotional intelligence training enhanced social self-efficacy and reduced social anxiety and perfectionism in female students, indicating that emotional learning not only regulates internal states but also strengthens interpersonal skills. Similarly, Eskandari and Baratzadeh Ghahramanloo (Eskandari & Baratzadeh Ghahramanloo, 2020) demonstrated that emotional intelligence predicts media literacy and addiction to social networks through the mediating role of social support, thus underlining the necessity of emotional and social competencies in the digital

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age. These findings are echoed in studies showing that social support serves as a critical pathway through which emotional intelligence influences both academic and psychological variables (Malinauskas & Malinauskienė, 2018).

From a theoretical standpoint, the interconnection between emotional intelligence and perceived social support can be interpreted through the lens of the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. This theory posits that individuals who experience positive emotions (such as those fostered by emotional intelligence) are more likely to build enduring personal and social resources, including social ties, trust, and cooperative networks—all of which serve as buffers against stress and anxiety. Hussein (Hussein, 2021) confirmed the positive impact of emotional intelligence on academic motivation, mediated by mental health, further suggesting that emotional capabilities lay the foundation for both internal motivation and external engagement. Additionally, Keshavarz Afshar and Mirzaee (Keshavarz Afshar & Mirzaee, 2018) found that emotional intelligence, along with social adjustment and motivational strategies, significantly reduced academic anxiety, thereby highlighting its broader implications in educational contexts.

Although much attention has been paid to the individual contributions of emotional intelligence and social support in psychological well-being, their combined and mediating effects remain an emerging area of inquiry. Moosavi et al. (Moosavi et al., 2019) found that emotional intelligence was significantly associated with better mental health and social adjustment in university athletes, implying that this construct operates across different student populations and environments. Similarly, Maktabi (Maktabi, 2008) demonstrated the effectiveness of emotional intelligence training in reducing social anxiety and improving adjustment, validating the construct as an actionable target in mental health programming.

Importantly, the present study responds to a notable gap in the literature by examining the structural relationship between emotional intelligence and COVID-19 anxiety with the mediating role of perceived social support and social cohesion among students. While prior studies have confirmed the individual and dyadic associations between these variables, few have simultaneously investigated all four in a comprehensive structural model. By doing so, the current research aims to elucidate the underlying mechanisms that explain how emotional competencies translate into psychological resilience, particularly during unprecedented public health crises.

Taken together, the reviewed literature underscores the importance of developing emotional and social competencies in students to buffer against the psychological impact of crisis events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study builds upon and integrates existing findings by investigating how emotional intelligence affects coronavirus anxiety through the indirect pathways of perceived social support and social cohesion, thereby offering valuable insights for psychological interventions, educational policy, and student well-being initiatives.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is a descriptive-correlational research design. In terms of purpose, it is applied research, and regarding the method of data collection, it is classified as field research. The statistical population of this study includes all students enrolled at Payame Noor University in Bushehr Province, totaling 7,900 individuals who were actively studying during the second semester of the 2021–2022 academic year, according to available data. Based on sample size determination guidelines in structural equation modeling (SEM), 10 participants per item are typically considered. The sampling method used in this study is simple random sampling, and the sample size was determined to be 237 participants based on the Morgan Table.

2.2. Measures

The standard emotional intelligence questionnaire was developed by Cron and colleagues in 2007. It contains 25 items across four dimensions: self-awareness (items 1–6), emotion regulation (items 7–10), empathy (items 11–15), and social skills (items 16–25). The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by Cron et al. (2007), and in the present study, its content validity was also reviewed and confirmed by academic advisors and supervisors. The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value above 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability.

This instrument was developed and validated in Iran to assess anxiety stemming from the COVID-19 outbreak. The final version consists of 18 items divided into two components: items 1–9 assess psychological symptoms, and items 10–18 assess physical symptoms. It is scored on a 4-point Likert scale (Never = 0, Sometimes = 1, Often = 2,

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Always = 3), with total scores ranging from 0 to 54. Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety. The reliability of this scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding α = 0.879 for the first factor, α = 0.861 for the second factor, and α = 0.919 for the entire questionnaire. The Guttman's Lambda-2 coefficients were also reported as 0.882, 0.864, and 0.922 for the first factor, second factor, and overall scale, respectively. For criterion validity, correlations with the GHQ-28 were calculated, showing significant relationships with the total score (r = 0.483), anxiety (r = 0.507), somatic symptoms (r = 0.418), social dysfunction (r = 0.333), and depression (r = 0.269).

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) is a 12-item instrument that measures perceived social support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others, using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (Zimet et al., 1988). Total scores range from 12 to 84, while each subscale score ranges from 4 to 28. Higher scores indicate greater perceived social support. The psychometric properties of this scale have been confirmed in international studies.

The standard Social Well-Being Questionnaire, developed by Keyes and colleagues in 1998, includes 33 items aimed at assessing social well-being across five dimensions: social integration, social coherence, social contribution, social actualization, and social acceptance. The questionnaire is scored on a Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). In a study by Saffari Nia et al. (2014), the reliability of the scale was assessed using the test-retest method, and its validity was examined through confirmatory factor analysis. The Pearson correlation coefficient between test and retest administrations indicated strong reliability, and the results of confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the model's goodness-of-fit based on the original factor structure proposed by Keyes (1998). The Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was reported to be 0.76.

2.3. Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data, structural equation modeling (SEM) based on partial least squares (PLS) was used, implemented through SmartPLS and SPSS-25 software.

3. Findings and Results

Before analyzing the research hypotheses, descriptive statistics of the variables are presented in the following table.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of the Studied Indicators

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-awareness	16.97	3.85
Emotion regulation	16.33	4.16
Empathy	19.30	4.52
Social skills	18.89	4.46
Family	13.87	3.93
Community	14.53	3.85
Friends	12.71	4.61
Psychological symptoms	16.56	6.34
Physical symptoms	11.39	4.77
Social participation	18.47	3.20
Social acceptance	22.99	4.21
Social actualization	20.65	3.66
Social cohesion	18.12	4.30
Social integration	21.95	4.12

The structural model fit was evaluated using the adjusted R^2 and Q^2 indices. As shown in Table 1, the adjusted R^2 values are reported. According to Chin (1998), the thresholds of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 are considered as weak, moderate, and strong R^2 values, respectively. Based on this, the R^2 and adjusted R^2 values for the model's dependent variables are at a relatively moderate level. For evaluating the overall model fit—which considers both the measurement and structural model—GoF (Goodness-of-Fit) index was calculated using the formula:

$$GoF = \sqrt{(\text{Mean Communalities} \times \text{Mean } R^2)}$$

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The mean of communalities is obtained from the average communality of the first-order latent variables. Wetzels et al. introduced thresholds of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.36 as indicators of weak, moderate, and strong GoF values.

Table 2

Goodness-of-Fit Calculation of the Structural Model

Variable	R^2	Communality
COVID-19 Anxiety	0.309	0.857
Social Cohesion	0.285	0.759
Perceived Social Support	0.246	0.732

As a result, the obtained GoF value of 0.461 indicates a strong overall model fit. Given the confirmation of acceptable model fit, the estimated path coefficients are presented below.

Table 3

Estimated Path Coefficients

Path	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Social Cohesion → COVID-19 Anxiety	-0.201	0.069	2.927	0.004
Perceived Social Support → COVID-19 Anxiety	-0.340	0.049	6.899	0.000
Emotional Intelligence → COVID-19 Anxiety	-0.136	0.061	2.247	0.025
Emotional Intelligence → Social Cohesion	0.534	0.047	11.478	0.000
Emotional Intelligence → Social Support	0.496	0.048	13.321	0.000
Emotional Intelligence → Social Cohesion → COVID-19 Anxiety	-0.107	0.040	2.661	0.008
Emotional Intelligence → Social Support → COVID-19 Anxiety	-0.169	0.031	5.501	0.000

According to the results in Table 3, the indirect path coefficient from emotional intelligence to COVID-19 anxiety through perceived social support is -0.107. The corresponding t-value is 2.661, which exceeds the threshold of 1.96, indicating that the estimated coefficient is statistically significant. Therefore, the research hypothesis is confirmed.

The indirect path coefficient from emotional intelligence to COVID-19 anxiety through perceived social cohesion is -0.169. The corresponding t-value is 5.501, which also exceeds the threshold of 1.96, confirming the statistical significance of the estimated coefficient. Consequently, this research hypothesis is also supported.

Table 4

Results of Structural Equation Modeling

Independent Variable	Mediator	Dependent Variable	Path Coefficient	t-value	Result
Emotional Intelligence	Social Support	COVID-19 Anxiety	-0.107	2.661	Confirmed
Emotional Intelligence	Social Cohesion	COVID-19 Anxiety	-0.169	5.501	Confirmed

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the structural relationship between emotional intelligence and COVID-19 anxiety, with the mediating roles of perceived social support and social cohesion among university students. The results confirmed that emotional intelligence has a significant negative direct effect on COVID-19-related anxiety. Furthermore, the findings indicated that both perceived social support and social cohesion mediate this relationship significantly. These outcomes offer empirical support for the theoretical proposition that emotional capacities contribute to the development of social and psychological resources, which in turn mitigate the psychological impacts of stressful life events, such as a global pandemic.

The negative association between emotional intelligence and COVID-19 anxiety found in this study is consistent with a growing body of research emphasizing the role of emotional regulation in psychological resilience. Students with high emotional intelligence tend to be more capable of managing their emotional responses to uncertainty,

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isolation, and health threats. This is supported by the findings of Li et al. (Li et al., 2021), who demonstrated that emotional intelligence serves as a protective factor against psychological disorders during the pandemic, especially when complemented by social support. Similarly, Rozen and Aderka (Rozen & Aderka, 2023) noted that emotional regulation is a critical mechanism in reducing anxiety, especially in socially anxious populations, which aligns with the nature of pandemic-related fears that often manifest in social withdrawal and health-related rumination.

The results also confirmed the mediating role of perceived social support in the relationship between emotional intelligence and coronavirus anxiety. In line with prior research, this finding highlights the importance of interpersonal resources in buffering against psychological distress. Individuals with high emotional intelligence are more likely to foster meaningful social interactions and supportive relationships, thereby increasing their perceived social support. Ullah et al. (Ullah et al., 2023) emphasized this mediational pathway, showing that perceived social support significantly reduces academic stress in emotionally intelligent individuals. Likewise, Ghazvineh et al. (Ghazvineh et al., 2022) demonstrated that perceived social support mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic satisfaction, suggesting that support mechanisms are critical in educational and emotional contexts.

The role of social cohesion as a mediator was also statistically significant in this study. Social cohesion, reflecting collective trust, belonging, and solidarity, appears to enhance the psychological advantages of emotional intelligence by reinforcing individuals' sense of integration in a broader community. This finding supports the work of Azpiazu et al. (Azpiazu et al., 2023), who found that adolescents with higher emotional intelligence and perceived support reported greater life satisfaction, mediated in part by feelings of social connection and group belonging. Moreover, Farahati (Farahati, 2020) emphasized the importance of social cohesion in reducing the societal impacts of COVID-19, arguing that strong community bonds can reduce the psychological burden of crises by promoting mutual trust and resilience.

Furthermore, the findings of this study align with Malinauskas and Malinauskienė (Malinauskas & Malinauskienė, 2018), who showed that perceived stress and social support significantly mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being in athletes. This supports the current study's model, in which emotional intelligence serves as the antecedent variable that activates mediating pathways—both perceived social support and social cohesion—which ultimately reduce anxiety levels. Taken together, these findings highlight that emotional intelligence operates not only intrapersonally but also interpersonally and socially, influencing one's ability to both receive support and feel integrated into a cohesive social system.

Importantly, this study also builds on prior evidence of the educational and developmental value of emotional intelligence training. Maktabi (Maktabi, 2008) found that emotional intelligence training significantly reduced social anxiety and improved adjustment in students. Similarly, Bakhshi and Sedighi Arfaei (Bakhshi & Sedighi Arfaei, 2021) demonstrated that emotional intelligence training led to reductions in social anxiety and perfectionism by increasing social self-efficacy. These results provide a practical foundation for recommending interventions that enhance emotional competencies as a means of addressing pandemic-related anxiety and psychological distress.

In addition to mediating variables, the direct paths confirmed in this study are supported by other empirical evidence. For instance, Moosavi et al. (Moosavi et al., 2019) found that emotional intelligence directly correlates with better mental health and social adjustment among student-athletes, suggesting that emotionally intelligent individuals can independently regulate stressors without exclusively relying on external support. This finding aligns with the present study, where emotional intelligence not only indirectly reduced anxiety through social pathways but also had a direct mitigating effect. Similarly, Hussein (Hussein, 2021) found that emotional intelligence positively influences academic motivation via its impact on mental health, reinforcing the integral role of emotional regulation in broader psychological functioning.

The present findings are also theoretically congruent with the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, which posits that positive emotional states expand individuals' awareness and encourage novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions. These broadened mindsets help build lasting personal and social resources, including social networks and emotional resilience. Emotional intelligence, by cultivating positive affect and constructive emotional expression, enables individuals to form stronger relationships and perceive higher social support and cohesion—key buffers against stress and anxiety in crises (Boland et al., 2017).

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Moreover, the interrelationships identified here contribute to a more nuanced understanding of student mental health during global disruptions. As Salari et al. (Salari et al., 2020) noted in their study on coronavirus phobia, the psychological toll of pandemics is exacerbated by intolerance of uncertainty and health anxiety. The present findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence and strengthening perceived support and social belonging may reduce students' susceptibility to these pandemic-specific fears. These protective mechanisms help explain why some individuals are more resilient in the face of adversity while others experience debilitating anxiety.

In the academic context, these results further underscore the multifaceted role of emotional intelligence in shaping students' psychological, interpersonal, and educational experiences. Taleghaninejad et al. (Taleghaninejad et al., 2021) demonstrated that emotional intelligence predicts not only stress coping but also internet addiction through perceived support. This indicates that students with high emotional competencies are not only less prone to anxiety but also less likely to engage in maladaptive coping mechanisms. The current study's finding that emotional intelligence predicts reduced anxiety through perceived support and cohesion lends further empirical support to these assertions.

Finally, the findings also have cross-cultural relevance. The emotional and social constructs examined in this study—emotional intelligence, perceived support, and social cohesion—are applicable across diverse educational and cultural settings. As seen in the work of Keshavarz Afshar and Mirzaee (Keshavarz Afshar & Mirzaee, 2018), these constructs are influential even in culturally diverse environments, influencing academic anxiety and adjustment. Thus, the structural model confirmed in this study can serve as a framework for international and multicultural educational institutions aiming to address student mental health through systemic emotional and social interventions.

Despite the robustness of the results, this study is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes any causal inferences. Although the structural model indicates directional relationships, longitudinal data are necessary to confirm the temporal sequence among emotional intelligence, social support, social cohesion, and anxiety. Second, the reliance on self-report instruments may introduce bias due to social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment. Third, the sample was limited to students of one academic institution in Bushehr Province, which may affect the generalizability of findings to other regions, educational settings, or age groups. Additionally, contextual variables such as cultural norms, family structure, or access to resources were not controlled, which may influence both perceived support and social cohesion.

Future research should consider using longitudinal or experimental designs to explore the causal relationships among the variables more thoroughly. Implementing emotional intelligence training programs followed by post-test evaluations could help establish effectiveness in reducing anxiety and improving social functioning. Researchers should also consider incorporating qualitative methods—such as interviews or focus groups—to gain deeper insight into how students perceive social support and cohesion. Furthermore, expanding the sample to include students from diverse universities, academic levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds would enhance the external validity of the findings. Future studies may also explore moderating variables such as gender, academic major, or living situation to examine how these factors influence the proposed structural model.

Educational institutions should prioritize integrating emotional intelligence training into curricula or co-curricular programs to foster students' emotional awareness, self-regulation, and empathy. Counseling centers can develop workshops that simultaneously build emotional skills and promote social connection among students, especially in the aftermath of large-scale crises. Administrators should also invest in building cohesive campus communities where students feel a strong sense of belonging and trust. Creating peer support networks, encouraging faculty-student engagement, and promoting inclusive policies can enhance students' perceived social support and cohesion—both of which are essential for emotional resilience and academic success.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the study and participated in the research with informed consent.

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