

Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Well-Being Among Young Adults: An Integrative Review and Implications for Sustainable Development

Goal 3

Syed Toasin Rehmat, Sania Shakeel
Assistant Professor
Higher Education Department - J & K

1. Introduction

Young adulthood is a consequential period of human development in which individuals negotiate increasing autonomy, identity, education, employment, intimate relationships, and broader social responsibilities. Although the boundaries of young adulthood vary across developmental and cultural contexts, the late teens and twenties are often characterized by substantial exploration and transition. Arnett (2000) conceptualized the period from approximately 18 to 25 years as “emerging adulthood,” emphasizing identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and possibilities concerning future life directions. Importantly, this developmental period is not experienced uniformly; socioeconomic conditions, cultural expectations, educational opportunities, family structures, and employment circumstances shape the extent and nature of young people's transition toward adult roles.

The developmental opportunities associated with young adulthood coexist with considerable psychological demands. Decisions concerning education and careers, financial independence, interpersonal relationships, social identity, and future aspirations can generate uncertainty and stress. These pressures are particularly relevant to mental health because patterns of emotional regulation, coping, interpersonal functioning, and help-seeking developed during adolescence and young adulthood may influence later functioning. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) notes that approximately half of mental-health disorders in adulthood begin by age 18 and that many remain undetected and untreated. More recent WHO estimates indicate that one in seven adolescents aged 10–19 experiences a mental disorder, while suicide is among the leading causes of death among people aged 15–29 years (WHO, 2025). Although these estimates should not be interpreted as prevalence estimates for all young adults, they demonstrate the importance of viewing mental health as a developmental and public-health priority extending across the transition into adulthood.

The contemporary mental-health agenda increasingly emphasizes that psychological health cannot be adequately understood only through the presence or absence of mental disorders. Prevention and treatment remain essential, but health promotion also requires attention to the psychological capacities and social conditions that enable individuals to function effectively and experience a meaningful life. WHO guidance consequently emphasizes the development of coping, problem-solving, interpersonal, and emotional-regulation skills, together with supportive environments, as important components of promoting young people's mental health (WHO, 2025). This shift provides a strong rationale for examining positive psychological constructs that may help young adults navigate developmental challenges, among which **psychological well-being** and **emotional intelligence** have received substantial research attention.

1.1 Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being represents a broader conception of positive functioning than the mere absence of psychological symptoms. It concerns how individuals experience themselves, their relationships, their environments, and their sense of development and purpose. Within the well-being literature, an important distinction is made between **hedonic** and **eudaimonic** approaches. Hedonic approaches emphasize happiness,

life satisfaction, and the balance of positive and negative affect, whereas eudaimonic approaches emphasize meaning, self-realization, personal growth, effective functioning, and the pursuit of valued goals. These perspectives are related but conceptually distinct, and treating them as interchangeable can obscure important dimensions of human well-being (Diener et al., 2018).

Ryff's multidimensional model provides one of the most influential eudaimonic frameworks for psychological well-being. Ryff (1989) proposed six dimensions of positive psychological functioning: **self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth**. Ryff and Keyes (1995) subsequently tested this model using nationally representative data and found evidence supporting the multidimensional structure. Their findings also demonstrated that psychological well-being captures aspects of positive functioning that are not fully represented by commonly used indicators such as positive affect and life satisfaction.

This distinction is particularly relevant to young adulthood. Autonomy reflects the increasing importance of independent decision-making; environmental mastery concerns the capacity to manage changing educational, occupational, and social demands; personal growth reflects continued psychological development; positive relations involve the formation and maintenance of meaningful interpersonal connections; purpose in life concerns direction and meaningful goals; and self-acceptance involves a realistic and positive relationship with oneself. Psychological well-being therefore provides a theoretically appropriate framework for examining how young adults adapt to developmental transitions rather than simply whether they feel happy at a particular point in time.

A focus on psychological well-being also complements, rather than replaces, the study of psychological distress. An individual may experience relatively low levels of depression or anxiety while still lacking purpose, social connectedness, autonomy, or a sense of personal growth. Conversely, temporary emotional distress does not necessarily imply an absence of positive psychological functioning. Consequently, examining well-being as a multidimensional construct may provide a more comprehensive account of young adults' mental health than relying exclusively on psychopathological indicators.

1.2 Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) emerged as a formal psychological construct through the work of Salovey and Mayer (1990), who described EI as a set of abilities involving the appraisal and expression of emotion, regulation of emotion, and the use of emotional information in thinking, planning, motivation, and goal-directed behaviour. The construct subsequently developed into several theoretical traditions, most notably **ability-based, trait, and mixed or competency-based** approaches. Mayer et al. (2004) conceptualized ability EI as involving the perception of emotion, facilitation of thought through emotion, understanding of emotional information, and management of emotion.

The distinction among EI models is important for interpreting the literature. Ability EI conceptualizes emotional intelligence as a form of information-processing capacity, whereas trait EI concerns individuals' perceptions of their own emotional abilities and dispositions. Mixed models incorporate emotional and social competencies alongside motivational and interpersonal characteristics. Consequently, studies described broadly as examining "emotional intelligence" may not be examining precisely the same psychological construct. This conceptual heterogeneity is one reason why findings across EI research should be interpreted with attention to the theoretical model and measurement instrument employed.

Despite these differences, the major perspectives converge on the importance of understanding and managing emotional information. Emotional awareness enables individuals to identify and differentiate emotional experiences; emotional understanding concerns the interpretation of emotional states and their causes and consequences; and emotional regulation involves managing emotional responses in ways that facilitate adaptive functioning. These processes have particular relevance during young adulthood because individuals

are increasingly required to manage emotions independently while simultaneously navigating complex social, academic, and occupational environments.

EI may therefore be conceptualized as a **potential psychological resource** rather than simply a personality characteristic. The capacity to recognize emotional experiences may facilitate self-understanding; the capacity to regulate emotions may support adaptive responses to stress; and interpersonal emotional competence may facilitate communication, empathy, and relationship quality. These processes are theoretically relevant to several dimensions of psychological well-being, including self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, and purpose in life.

1.3 Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Well-being

The proposed relationship between EI and psychological well-being is supported by several complementary mechanisms. First, emotional awareness may help individuals identify and understand their reactions to stressful or challenging situations. Greater emotional clarity can potentially reduce confusion surrounding emotional experiences and facilitate more deliberate responses. Second, emotional regulation may allow individuals to manage negative emotional states without becoming overwhelmed by them, thereby supporting adaptive coping and psychological functioning. Third, interpersonal emotional competencies may facilitate empathy, communication, and conflict management, all of which are relevant to the positive-relationship dimension of psychological well-being.

The empirical literature provides substantial evidence of an association between EI and positive well-being, although the magnitude and consistency of this association vary according to developmental stage, EI model, and outcome measure. A meta-analysis by Sánchez-Álvarez et al. (2016), encompassing 25 studies and 77 effect sizes from 8,520 participants, found a positive association between EI and subjective well-being ($r = .32$). Importantly, the association varied according to how EI was measured, with stronger relationships generally observed for self-report approaches than for performance-based ability measures.

More recent evidence has strengthened the empirical basis for this relationship. Llamas-Díaz et al. (2022) systematically reviewed 41 studies of EI and subjective well-being among adolescents, with 37 studies contributing to quantitative synthesis. Their meta-analyses indicated significant positive relationships between EI and both affective well-being ($r \approx .35$) and cognitive well-being ($r \approx .27$). However, the authors also found differences according to EI model, with self-report approaches demonstrating stronger associations than performance-based ability EI. These findings support the relevance of emotional competencies to well-being while simultaneously illustrating the methodological heterogeneity within the field.

A systematic review specifically examining trait EI and adolescent psychological well-being similarly concluded that the literature generally supports a protective role of trait EI, particularly in relation to psychological and social functioning. However, Mancini et al. (2024) identified important limitations, including the relatively limited evidence base, differences across constructs and measures, and the need for more rigorous and cross-cultural research.

Evidence extending beyond adolescence also suggests a broader relationship between EI and human flourishing. A recent second-order meta-analysis synthesized 62 meta-analyses encompassing more than 3,000 studies and approximately one million participants. Robinson and Zell (2026) reported an overall association of approximately $r = .28$ between EI and human flourishing, with positive associations across ability, trait, and mixed EI approaches. At the same time, they identified substantial heterogeneity and found that associations were generally strongest when both EI and flourishing were assessed through subjective self-report measures. These findings are important because they provide broad evidence for the relevance of EI to positive functioning while also cautioning against interpreting the relationship as uniform across methods and constructs.

The literature therefore supports a generally positive association but does not justify a simple causal conclusion that emotional intelligence necessarily produces psychological well-being. Much of the evidence is correlational, and self-report measures of EI and well-being may share method variance. Personality characteristics, social support, socioeconomic conditions, coping resources, and other contextual factors may also influence both constructs. Furthermore, the stronger associations observed in subjective self-report research raise the possibility that perceived emotional competence and perceived well-being may partly reinforce one another.

Another important issue is that **subjective well-being and psychological well-being are not synonymous**. Much of the meta-analytic evidence has focused on happiness, life satisfaction, or affective well-being, whereas Ryff's model emphasizes eudaimonic functioning. Consequently, the evidence base provides strong support for an association between EI and positive well-being broadly construed, but the specific relationship between EI and the multidimensional construct of psychological well-being among young adults requires more focused examination.

1.4 Young Adults, Mental Health, and Sustainable Development Goal 3

The importance of psychological well-being among young adults extends beyond individual adjustment because mental health is explicitly incorporated into the global sustainable-development agenda. **Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3), Good Health and Well-being**, seeks to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for people of all ages. Within SDG 3, **Target 3.4** explicitly calls for the promotion of mental health and well-being alongside the prevention and treatment of noncommunicable diseases.

This emphasis is significant because it frames mental health as a component of sustainable health and development rather than solely as a clinical concern. The SDG framework therefore supports a continuum-based perspective encompassing prevention, promotion, treatment, recovery, and positive functioning. For young adults, such an approach requires attention not only to mental-health disorders but also to the psychological and social resources that enable individuals to cope with developmental challenges and maintain healthy functioning.

Emotional intelligence may be relevant to this agenda as one potential psychological resource. Emotional awareness and regulation, adaptive coping, interpersonal competence, and resilience are conceptually aligned with several established domains of mental-health promotion. Recent research syntheses have also examined the development of EI among university students, highlighting growing interest in EI-focused educational and psychosocial interventions for populations exposed to academic and psychological pressures (Asiedu et al., 2025).

However, it would be scientifically inappropriate to claim that EI alone can achieve SDG 3 or that EI training is a substitute for professional mental-health services. Rather, the potential contribution of EI should be considered within a **multilevel mental-health-promotion framework** in which individual psychological competencies interact with family, educational, social, economic, and health-system environments. The relevance of EI to SDG 3 consequently lies in its potential contribution to positive psychological functioning and preventive mental-health strategies, particularly when integrated with broader evidence-based approaches.

1.5 Rationale for the Present Review

Although the literature linking EI with well-being has expanded substantially, several unresolved issues justify a focused synthesis. First, the field remains conceptually heterogeneous because ability, trait, and mixed EI models are frequently examined under the same broad label. Second, the term well-being encompasses distinct constructs ranging from affective happiness and life satisfaction to multidimensional eudaimonic functioning. Third, evidence is uneven across developmental stages, with considerable research focusing on adolescents and university students rather than young adults as a broader population.

The existing evidence syntheses also reveal methodological concerns. Meta-analytic findings demonstrate positive associations but substantial heterogeneity across EI models and measurement methods. The stronger associations observed for self-report EI and subjective well-being suggest that measurement method may influence observed relationships. Furthermore, the predominance of cross-sectional research limits conclusions regarding directionality and causation.

There is also a need for greater cultural breadth. Evidence generated predominantly within particular educational or cultural contexts cannot automatically be generalized across societies with different family structures, social expectations, economic conditions, and understandings of emotional expression. The systematic review by Mancini et al. (2024) specifically identified the need for more cross-cultural and methodologically rigorous research.

Finally, the psychological literature and the sustainable-development literature have largely developed along parallel lines. Research on EI and psychological well-being generally focuses on individual psychological outcomes, whereas SDG 3 addresses population health and sustainable well-being. A synthesis that explicitly connects emotional competencies, psychological well-being, mental-health promotion, and SDG 3 can therefore provide a broader conceptual contribution.

Accordingly, the present review examines the literature on emotional intelligence and psychological well-being among young adults through a critical and thematic perspective. Particular attention is given to emotional awareness and regulation, coping and resilience, interpersonal functioning, differences in EI conceptualization and measurement, and the extent to which existing evidence can inform mental-health promotion within the framework of SDG 3. The review aims not merely to establish whether EI and well-being are associated, but to examine **how the relationship has been conceptualized, what the evidence consistently demonstrates, where findings remain uncertain, and what implications follow for future research and practice.**

2. Review Methodology

2.1 Review Design

The present study employed an **integrative literature review with qualitative thematic synthesis** to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological well-being among young adults. This approach was selected to integrate findings from diverse empirical and theoretical studies and to identify recurring patterns, explanatory mechanisms, contextual variations, and gaps in the existing literature. The review was informed by the principles of transparent evidence reporting outlined in PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021).

2.2 Literature Search

A structured literature search was conducted using **Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, PubMed/MEDLINE, and ScienceDirect**, supplemented by Google Scholar and reference-list searching. Literature published primarily between **2015 and 2026** was considered, with particular emphasis on recent studies published from 2020 onward. The search combined terms related to *emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, young adults, emerging adults, university students, mental health*, and *SDG 3* using appropriate Boolean operators.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Peer-reviewed studies examining emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, or their relationship among young adults were included. Systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and theoretically relevant studies were also considered to strengthen the conceptual synthesis. Studies focusing exclusively on children or older adults, non-scholarly publications, editorials, opinion papers, and studies without sufficient relevance to the

review objectives were excluded. Studies reporting positive, null, or contradictory findings were retained to ensure a balanced synthesis.

2.4 Data Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

Relevant information was extracted concerning study characteristics, participants, theoretical frameworks, measures of EI and psychological well-being, major findings, and methodological limitations. The literature was then examined thematically to identify recurring patterns and areas of convergence and divergence. The synthesis focused particularly on **emotional awareness, emotional regulation, coping, resilience, interpersonal functioning, and eudaimonic psychological well-being**. Differences arising from EI models, measurement approaches, cultural contexts, and study designs were also considered.

2.5 Methodological Rigor

The quality and relevance of the evidence were critically considered during synthesis, with particular attention to sampling, measurement, research design, and potential sources of bias. Greater interpretive weight was given to systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and methodologically rigorous empirical studies. Because much of the existing literature is correlational, findings were interpreted as associations rather than evidence of causality.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

As the review was based exclusively on previously published literature and involved no direct participation of human subjects, formal ethical approval was not required. The review followed principles of academic integrity, transparent reporting, accurate citation, and APA 7th edition referencing.

3. Thematic Synthesis of the Literature

3.1 Emotional Awareness and Self-Understanding

Emotional awareness represents a foundational component of emotional intelligence (EI), involving the ability to perceive, identify, and differentiate emotional states in oneself and, within broader models of EI, in others. In the ability model, emotional perception constitutes the first branch of emotional intelligence and provides the basis for subsequent emotional understanding and regulation (Mayer et al., 2004). From the perspective of psychological well-being, the capacity to recognize and understand one's emotional experiences may be particularly relevant to self-acceptance and environmental mastery, as it can facilitate more deliberate responses to internal and external demands.

The empirical literature generally supports an association between emotional intelligence and positive psychological functioning. Mancini et al. (2024), in a systematic review of 34 studies examining trait emotional intelligence and psychological well-being during adolescence, reported that higher trait EI was generally associated with more adaptive psychological and social outcomes. Their review considered evidence concerning psychological constructs, interpersonal relationships, scholastic functioning, and practice-oriented outcomes. Importantly, the authors noted that the existing evidence base remains limited by methodological heterogeneity and insufficient representation of diverse cultural contexts. These limitations are relevant when extending findings from adolescent populations to young adults.

Evidence from university populations provides further support for the relevance of emotional intelligence to psychological well-being. Shengyao et al. (2024) examined 518 undergraduate and postgraduate students in China and found that emotional intelligence was positively associated with psychological well-being and with positive psychological characteristics, including self-efficacy, motivation, and resilience. Their structural equation model further indicated that these positive psychological characteristics mediated the association between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence

may be related to well-being not only through immediate emotional processes but also through broader psychological resources that facilitate adaptive functioning.

Emotional awareness should nevertheless not be conceptualized as sufficient for psychological well-being. Awareness of emotional states may increase psychological insight, but awareness without effective regulation or appropriate social resources may not result in improved functioning. Thus, emotional awareness is more appropriately considered one component within a broader system of emotional competence involving understanding, regulation, coping, and interpersonal functioning.

3.2 Emotional Regulation and Adaptive Coping

Emotional regulation provides a particularly important theoretical pathway between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. Emotional regulation involves processes through which individuals influence the intensity, duration, expression, or behavioural consequences of emotional experiences. Adaptive emotional regulation should not be equated with emotional suppression. Rather, effective regulation involves responding to emotional experiences in ways that are appropriate to situational demands while maintaining longer-term goals and psychological functioning.

This distinction has particular relevance during young adulthood, when individuals encounter academic, occupational, financial, and interpersonal demands that may generate substantial emotional responses. The ability to recognize emotional reactions and regulate them effectively may facilitate more adaptive responses to stressful situations and reduce the likelihood that transient emotional states will disproportionately influence behaviour.

Evidence from systematic review and meta-analysis supports an association between EI and well-being, although the magnitude of this association varies across conceptualizations and measurement approaches. Llamas-Díaz et al. (2022) systematically reviewed 41 studies examining EI and subjective well-being among adolescents, with 37 studies included in quantitative synthesis. Their findings demonstrated significant positive associations between EI and both affective well-being, $r = .35$, and cognitive well-being, $r = .27$. However, the magnitude of the association varied according to the EI model and measurement approach. In particular, self-report measures demonstrated stronger associations with subjective well-being than performance-based measures.

This methodological finding is important for interpreting the broader literature. Stronger relationships between self-reported EI and self-reported well-being may partly reflect shared method variance or generalized positive self-perceptions. Consequently, the existence of a positive association between perceived emotional competence and perceived well-being should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that objectively measured emotional-processing abilities produce higher levels of well-being.

Recent empirical research among university students further suggests that emotional intelligence may operate through broader adaptive psychological processes. Shengyao et al. (2024) found that self-efficacy, motivation, and resilience mediated the association between EI and psychological well-being. These findings suggest that emotional intelligence may facilitate psychological well-being partly by strengthening individuals' confidence in their capabilities, motivational resources, and capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances.

The relationship between EI and stress, however, may be more complex than a simple protective effect. Recent research among university students has reported positive associations between EI and life satisfaction while failing to demonstrate that EI significantly moderates the relationship between perceived stress and life satisfaction. Such findings suggest that EI may contribute directly to positive psychological functioning without necessarily eliminating or buffering the effects of all forms of stress. Accordingly, EI should not be conceptualized as a universal protective factor operating independently of contextual conditions.

3.3 Emotional Intelligence, Resilience, and Psychological Adaptation

Resilience provides another potential mechanism linking emotional intelligence with psychological well-being. Although resilience and EI represent conceptually distinct constructs, emotional competencies may contribute to resilient functioning by facilitating emotional awareness, regulation, adaptive coping, interpersonal support, and goal-directed behaviour during stressful circumstances.

The mediating role of resilience identified by Shengyao et al. (2024) is particularly relevant in this regard. Their findings indicate that positive psychological characteristics, including resilience, partly accounted for the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being among university students. This suggests that emotionally competent individuals may possess or develop psychological resources that facilitate adaptation to academic and personal challenges.

The relationship between emotional functioning and resilience is also consistent with broader developmental perspectives. Young adulthood requires individuals to respond to changing circumstances while simultaneously developing relatively stable identities and future orientations. Emotional competencies may facilitate this process by allowing individuals to recognize distress, regulate emotional reactions, seek appropriate support, and maintain meaningful goals.

Nevertheless, the direction of this relationship remains uncertain. Cross-sectional evidence cannot determine whether emotional intelligence contributes to resilience, whether resilient individuals subsequently develop greater perceived emotional competence, or whether both constructs are influenced by common factors such as personality, social support, socioeconomic conditions, or previous life experiences. Longitudinal and intervention research is therefore required before causal conclusions can be drawn.

3.4 Emotional Intelligence and Interpersonal Well-being

Psychological well-being is not exclusively intrapersonal. Ryff's model identifies positive relations with others as one of six dimensions of psychological well-being, emphasizing the importance of warm, trusting, and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Emotional intelligence may contribute to interpersonal well-being through emotional perception, empathy, appropriate emotional expression, communication, and regulation during interpersonal interactions.

The systematic review by Mancini et al. (2024) provides evidence linking trait EI with social and interpersonal functioning during adolescence. The review suggests that higher trait EI is generally associated with more adaptive social interactions, although the authors emphasized the need for further research across diverse cultural contexts. Such findings are theoretically consistent with the proposition that individuals who are better able to perceive and regulate emotional information may be more capable of understanding interpersonal situations and responding constructively.

Recent university-based research further suggests that psychological need satisfaction may provide an important link between EI and well-being. Research examining emotional-intelligence profiles among Chinese university students has indicated that psychological needs such as autonomy, relatedness, and competence may help explain differences in well-being associated with emotional-intelligence profiles. This interpretation is consistent with the view that emotional competencies operate within interpersonal and motivational contexts rather than independently of them.

For young adults, this interpersonal dimension is particularly important because the developmental period involves changing relationships with family members, peers, intimate partners, teachers, and colleagues. Emotional intelligence may therefore contribute to psychological well-being not simply by helping individuals manage their own emotions but also by supporting the quality and stability of their social relationships.

3.5 Emotional Intelligence and Eudaimonic Psychological Well-being

A significant limitation of the existing literature is the tendency to use different forms of well-being interchangeably. Subjective well-being generally emphasizes life satisfaction, positive affect, and the relative absence of negative affect, whereas psychological well-being, particularly within Ryff's framework, emphasizes eudaimonic functioning, including autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance.

The distinction is important because much of the quantitative evidence concerning EI has focused on subjective well-being. Llamas-Díaz et al. (2022), for example, demonstrated significant associations between EI and affective and cognitive components of subjective well-being. These findings provide strong evidence for a relationship between emotional intelligence and positive subjective functioning but cannot be assumed to provide equivalent evidence for every dimension of Ryff's psychological well-being model.

Recent research has increasingly addressed this conceptual distinction by examining multiple dimensions of well-being within the same population. Such studies indicate that emotional intelligence may be associated with subjective, psychological, and social forms of well-being, while psychological resources such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness may help explain these relationships. This multidimensional approach is particularly valuable for young-adult research because developmental well-being involves more than happiness or life satisfaction. Establishing meaningful goals, developing autonomy, maintaining relationships, managing responsibilities, and experiencing personal growth are equally relevant indicators of successful adaptation.

Consequently, future research should distinguish clearly between subjective and eudaimonic well-being rather than combining them under a single outcome category. This distinction is essential for understanding whether EI is associated primarily with feeling better or whether it is also related to deeper dimensions of psychological functioning.

3.6 Recent Evidence Among Young Adults

The recent empirical literature increasingly supports the relevance of EI to psychological well-being among university-age populations. Shengyao et al. (2024), for example, demonstrated positive associations between EI and psychological well-being among 518 Chinese university students and identified self-efficacy, motivation, and resilience as mediating psychological resources.

Recent studies have also examined contextual and demographic differences. Research involving university students has considered the role of gender, academic context, perceived stress, and different dimensions of well-being, suggesting that the relationship between EI and positive functioning may vary across individuals and contexts. Such evidence challenges an overly generalized interpretation in which EI is assumed to operate identically for all young adults.

The emerging evidence also demonstrates the importance of studying young adults beyond a single national or educational context. Research from China and other cultural settings provides useful evidence but cannot automatically be generalized to young adults in India or other sociocultural contexts. Cultural norms surrounding emotional expression, family relationships, academic expectations, and help-seeking may influence both emotional intelligence and psychological well-being.

The concentration of research within university samples is another limitation. University students represent only one segment of the young-adult population. Young adults who are employed, unemployed, vocationally trained, married, parenting, or outside formal education may encounter different developmental demands and possess different sources of social and psychological support. Consequently, the existing literature provides a valuable but incomplete account of young-adult emotional functioning and well-being.

3.7 Contradictory Findings and Methodological Considerations

The cumulative literature provides reasonably consistent evidence of a positive association between EI and well-being, but this association should not be interpreted as uniform or causal. Three methodological issues are particularly important.

First, **conceptual heterogeneity** remains substantial. Ability EI, trait EI, and mixed models differ in their theoretical assumptions and measurement approaches. Findings obtained using self-report trait measures cannot necessarily be generalized to performance-based measures of emotional ability.

Second, **outcome heterogeneity** complicates synthesis. Life satisfaction, subjective well-being, psychological well-being, resilience, and mental-health indicators represent related but distinct constructs. Combining these outcomes without theoretical differentiation may exaggerate the apparent consistency of the evidence.

Third, **methodological design** remains a concern. Many studies use cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, limiting conclusions concerning temporal ordering and increasing the possibility of common-method variance. The stronger associations observed in studies using self-reported EI and self-reported well-being warrant particular caution.

These limitations do not invalidate the evidence. Rather, they indicate that the most defensible interpretation is that emotional intelligence is **associated with**, rather than demonstrably responsible for, higher psychological well-being. The relationship appears to involve multiple psychological and contextual pathways, including emotional regulation, coping, resilience, self-efficacy, motivation, psychological need satisfaction, and interpersonal functioning.

Overall, the evidence supports a multidimensional conceptualization in which emotional intelligence represents one potential psychological resource within a broader system of adaptive functioning. This interpretation provides a more appropriate basis for examining the implications of EI for mental-health promotion and Sustainable Development Goal 3.

4. Critical Discussion

The literature reviewed indicates a generally positive association between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological well-being among young people, including university-aged populations. However, the evidence is more complex than a simple linear relationship in which greater EI inevitably results in greater well-being. The findings suggest that EI may function as one psychological resource within a broader network of emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and contextual factors. This interpretation is particularly important when considering the relationship from a mental-health-promotion perspective.

4.1 Emotional Intelligence as a Psychological Resource

Across systematic reviews and recent empirical studies, EI is generally associated with more favourable indicators of psychological functioning. Meta-analytic evidence has demonstrated positive relationships between EI and subjective well-being, while recent studies among university students have reported associations between EI, psychological well-being, resilience, self-efficacy, and motivation (Llamas-Díaz et al., 2022; Shengyao et al., 2024).

The consistency of these findings suggests that emotional competencies may contribute to adaptive functioning during young adulthood. However, EI should not be conceptualized as an independent determinant of well-being. Psychological well-being develops within a broader ecological context that includes family relationships, social support, socioeconomic conditions, educational environments, physical health, and access to mental-health services. Consequently, emotional intelligence may be better understood as a **psychological resource that interacts with environmental and interpersonal resources**.

4.2 Emotional Regulation as a Potential Mechanism

Emotional regulation appears to provide one of the most plausible mechanisms connecting EI with psychological well-being. Young adults encounter multiple developmental challenges requiring them to manage uncertainty, frustration, interpersonal conflict, and competing responsibilities. The ability to recognize emotional responses and regulate them appropriately may therefore facilitate adaptive coping and environmental mastery.

However, emotional regulation should not be equated with emotional suppression. Psychological well-being may be supported when individuals can acknowledge negative emotions while responding to them flexibly and constructively. This distinction is important because excessive emotional suppression may itself have negative psychological consequences.

The existing evidence suggests that EI may operate through several related mechanisms, including coping, resilience, self-efficacy, and interpersonal functioning (Shengyao et al., 2024). Nevertheless, most available evidence remains correlational, making it difficult to establish whether EI directly produces these outcomes or whether emotionally healthy individuals are more likely to perceive themselves as emotionally competent.

4.3 The Importance of Resilience and Coping

Resilience and coping appear to represent important intermediary processes in the relationship between EI and psychological well-being. Individuals who understand and regulate their emotional responses may be better able to evaluate stressful situations, select appropriate coping strategies, recover from setbacks, and maintain goal-directed behaviour.

The evidence concerning resilience is particularly relevant to young adults because this developmental period involves considerable uncertainty and adaptation. However, resilience should not be interpreted solely as an individual psychological characteristic. Social support, socioeconomic security, family relationships, and institutional environments also influence the capacity to cope with adversity.

Thus, interventions focused exclusively on developing EI may have limited effects if young adults continue to experience substantial environmental stressors without adequate social and institutional support. A more comprehensive approach would combine individual emotional competencies with supportive educational, social, and mental-health environments.

4.4 Interpersonal Relationships as a Pathway to Well-being

The relationship between EI and psychological well-being also has an important interpersonal dimension. Ryff's model identifies positive relationships with others as a core dimension of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). Emotional awareness, empathy, emotional expression, and regulation may contribute to healthier communication and conflict management, potentially strengthening interpersonal relationships.

This pathway is especially relevant during young adulthood, when social networks and intimate relationships become increasingly important sources of emotional support. The literature therefore suggests that the potential contribution of EI to well-being may extend beyond individual emotional regulation to the quality of relationships in which young adults participate.

At the same time, the relationship may be reciprocal. Supportive relationships can facilitate emotional development, while emotionally competent individuals may be more capable of developing supportive relationships. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify this reciprocal process.

4.5 Conceptual and Measurement Challenges

One of the most significant challenges in the EI literature is the lack of conceptual uniformity. Ability-based EI, trait EI, and mixed models are based on different theoretical assumptions and employ different measurement strategies. Consequently, findings obtained from self-report trait measures cannot be assumed to represent the effects of objectively measured emotional abilities.

The meta-analysis by Llamas-Díaz et al. (2022) illustrates this issue by demonstrating differences in the strength of associations between EI and well-being according to measurement approach. The stronger relationships observed with self-report measures raise the possibility that perceived emotional competence and perceived well-being may share common response tendencies.

Measurement heterogeneity also affects the conceptualization of well-being. Subjective well-being, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and mental health are related but distinct constructs. A study demonstrating an association between EI and life satisfaction does not necessarily establish an equivalent relationship between EI and all six dimensions of Ryff's psychological well-being model.

Future research should therefore provide greater theoretical precision by clearly specifying both the EI model and the conceptualization of well-being being examined.

4.6 Cultural and Contextual Considerations

The current evidence base is also limited by its geographical and population distribution. University students constitute a large proportion of participants in recent EI research. Although this population is important, university students represent only one subgroup of young adults. Young adults who are employed, unemployed, vocationally trained, married, parenting, or outside higher education may experience substantially different psychological demands.

Cultural context is similarly important. Emotional expression, interpersonal expectations, family structures, coping strategies, and definitions of psychological well-being may differ across societies. Consequently, evidence derived from Western or East Asian university populations cannot automatically be generalized to Indian young adults.

This represents an important research opportunity. India has a large and increasingly diverse young-adult population, yet research integrating EI, multidimensional psychological well-being, and mental-health promotion remains comparatively limited. Greater attention to Indian cultural and educational contexts could provide evidence that is more directly relevant to local psychological practice and policy.

4.7 From Individual Psychological Resources to SDG 3

The relationship between EI and psychological well-being has implications for **Sustainable Development Goal 3**, particularly Target 3.4, which explicitly includes the promotion of mental health and well-being (United Nations, n.d.). The findings suggest that emotional competencies may represent one component of a broader preventive and promotive mental-health framework.

However, the SDG perspective requires caution against reducing mental health to individual responsibility. Psychological well-being is influenced by structural and social determinants, including socioeconomic conditions, education, employment, discrimination, social connectedness, and access to health services. EI-based approaches should therefore complement rather than replace institutional and public-health interventions.

Within educational settings, EI development may nevertheless provide a potentially useful component of broader mental-health-promotion programmes. Universities and other institutions serving young adults may integrate emotional awareness, regulation, coping, resilience, interpersonal skills, and help-seeking within

existing counselling and psychosocial programmes. Such approaches would be most consistent with SDG 3 when they are embedded within accessible, evidence-based mental-health systems rather than presented as substitutes for professional care.

4.8 Overall Interpretation

Taken together, the evidence supports a **positive but context-dependent relationship** between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. The most plausible interpretation is that EI contributes to well-being through multiple interconnected pathways involving emotional regulation, adaptive coping, resilience, self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships, and psychological need satisfaction.

At the same time, important uncertainties remain. The predominance of cross-sectional research limits causal interpretation; differences between EI models complicate comparison; self-report methods may inflate associations; and university-based samples limit generalizability. These limitations indicate that the field has moved beyond the question of whether EI is related to well-being and now needs to address **how, for whom, and under what circumstances emotional intelligence is associated with positive psychological functioning**.

This critical perspective provides the basis for identifying the major research gaps and developing a conceptual framework connecting emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, and SDG 3.

5. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the growing body of research examining emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological well-being, important conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps remain. The existing literature provides reasonable evidence of a positive association between EI and well-being; however, the mechanisms underlying this relationship and its applicability across different young-adult populations remain insufficiently established.

5.1 Conceptual Gaps

A major limitation is the conceptual diversity surrounding emotional intelligence. Ability-based EI, trait EI, and mixed or competency-based models reflect different theoretical assumptions and are assessed using different instruments. Consequently, findings across studies are not always directly comparable. Future research should clearly distinguish among these models and examine whether particular dimensions of EI are more strongly associated with specific aspects of psychological well-being.

A related issue concerns the conceptualization of well-being. Much of the existing literature focuses on subjective well-being, life satisfaction, or positive affect, whereas fewer studies explicitly examine **eudaimonic psychological well-being**. Greater attention to Ryff's dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance would provide a more comprehensive understanding of young adults' psychological functioning.

5.2 Methodological Gaps

The predominance of cross-sectional research represents an important limitation. Although cross-sectional studies demonstrate associations between EI and well-being, they cannot establish temporal direction or causality. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether emotional intelligence predicts subsequent changes in psychological well-being or whether positive well-being contributes to the development of emotional competencies.

The widespread use of self-report instruments also requires caution. Self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability, self-perception, and common-method variance. Future research would benefit from combining self-report measures with performance-based EI assessments, behavioural indicators, qualitative accounts, and reports from significant others where appropriate.

Intervention research is another important area for development. Recent research suggests increasing interest in EI-based interventions among university students, but differences in intervention content, theoretical foundations, duration, and outcome measures make it difficult to determine which approaches are most effective. More rigorous longitudinal and experimental research is required to establish whether improvements in emotional competencies lead to sustained improvements in psychological well-being.

5.3 Population and Cultural Gaps

The literature is disproportionately concentrated among university students. Although university students represent an important young-adult population, they do not capture the diversity of young adulthood. Individuals who are employed, unemployed, vocationally trained, married, parenting, or outside formal education may encounter substantially different psychological and social demands.

Geographical representation is also uneven. Evidence from countries such as China, Spain, and other international contexts contributes valuable knowledge, but findings cannot automatically be generalized to Indian young adults. Cultural norms concerning emotional expression, family relationships, academic achievement, social support, and help-seeking may influence the ways in which EI and psychological well-being are experienced and expressed.

There is therefore a need for more **culturally grounded research in India**, particularly studies that consider the interaction between individual emotional competencies and family, educational, social, and socioeconomic contexts.

5.4 Need for Greater Attention to Psychological Mechanisms

The existing literature increasingly suggests that EI may be associated with psychological well-being through several interconnected pathways, including emotional regulation, coping, resilience, self-efficacy, motivation, and interpersonal relationships. However, these mechanisms have not been examined consistently across populations.

Future research should therefore move beyond examining whether EI is related to well-being and investigate **how and under what circumstances** the relationship occurs. Mediation and longitudinal designs may help clarify potential pathways, while qualitative research could provide deeper insight into how young adults themselves understand and experience emotional competence and psychological well-being.

5.5 Integration With Sustainable Development Goal 3

A further gap concerns the limited integration of psychological research with the broader framework of Sustainable Development Goal 3. Existing studies generally examine EI and well-being as individual psychological constructs, whereas SDG 3 emphasizes population health, mental-health promotion, and sustainable well-being.

Future research should therefore examine how evidence concerning emotional competencies can inform preventive and promotive mental-health strategies without reducing responsibility for mental health to the individual. EI-based approaches should be considered alongside social support, educational environments, socioeconomic conditions, accessible psychological services, and other determinants of well-being.

5.6 Future Directions

Future research should prioritize:

- longitudinal and prospective research designs;
- culturally sensitive research involving Indian and other underrepresented populations;

- samples extending beyond university students;
- clearer differentiation between ability, trait, and mixed EI;
- multidimensional assessment of psychological well-being;
- qualitative exploration of young adults' lived experiences;
- well-designed EI-based intervention studies;
- investigation of mediating and moderating mechanisms; and
- stronger integration of psychological research with mental-health promotion and SDG 3.

Overall, the literature has established a meaningful association between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, but the field now requires greater **conceptual precision, methodological rigor, cultural diversity, and contextual understanding**. Future research should move from the question of whether EI matters toward understanding **how emotional intelligence is experienced, how it interacts with developmental and social environments, and how it may contribute to sustainable mental health and well-being among young adults**.

6. Implications for Sustainable Development Goal 3

Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) seeks to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.” Within this goal, **Target 3.4** specifically calls for the promotion of mental health and well-being alongside the prevention and treatment of noncommunicable diseases (United Nations, 2015). The findings synthesized in the present review are therefore relevant to SDG 3 because they highlight emotional intelligence as a potentially important psychological resource associated with positive psychological functioning among young adults.

6.1 Emotional Intelligence and Mental-Health Promotion

The reviewed literature suggests that emotional awareness, emotional understanding, and emotional regulation may contribute to adaptive coping, resilience, interpersonal functioning, and psychological well-being. These processes are closely aligned with contemporary approaches to mental-health promotion. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2025) identifies emotional regulation, coping, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, resilience, and supportive social environments as important components of promoting young people's mental health.

From this perspective, EI may have relevance as a **preventive and promotive psychological resource**. Strengthening emotional competencies may help young adults recognize emotional difficulties earlier, respond more adaptively to stress, and develop healthier interpersonal relationships. However, EI should not be regarded as a substitute for professional mental-health assessment or treatment. Rather, it can form one component of a broader mental-health-promotion framework.

6.2 Implications for Young Adults

Young adulthood represents an important period for developing psychological and social competencies that may influence well-being across the life course. Interventions that incorporate emotional awareness, emotional regulation, stress management, interpersonal skills, and resilience may therefore be particularly relevant in universities and other settings serving young adults.

WHO guidance supports psychosocial approaches that strengthen emotional regulation, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, and resilience as components of mental-health promotion. Although these

recommendations primarily address adolescents, their developmental principles are relevant to the transition into young adulthood, particularly because emotional and social skills continue to develop during this period.

Universities can potentially incorporate these competencies into counselling services, orientation programmes, life-skills education, peer-support initiatives, and curriculum-based mental-health promotion. Such programmes should be developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all model.

6.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings support a **multilevel approach** to young-adult mental health. Individual emotional competencies should be developed alongside supportive family, educational, community, and healthcare environments. WHO's social-ecological approach emphasizes that young people's mental health is influenced by factors operating at individual, family, community, and societal levels.

Accordingly, policy initiatives should avoid placing responsibility for psychological well-being exclusively on young individuals. EI-based programmes should complement accessible counselling and psychological services, supportive educational environments, social connectedness, and policies addressing broader social determinants of mental health.

For practitioners, the findings suggest that emotional intelligence may provide a useful framework for developing preventive programmes focused on emotional awareness, regulation, coping, resilience, and interpersonal competence. Such programmes should be evaluated using rigorous designs to determine whether improvements in EI translate into sustained improvements in psychological well-being.

6.4 Contribution to SDG 3.4

The potential contribution of EI to SDG 3.4 lies primarily in **mental-health promotion and prevention**, rather than in direct achievement of the SDG target. The evidence reviewed suggests that emotional competencies may support psychological resources associated with positive functioning and well-being. This is consistent with the broader SDG emphasis on promoting mental health rather than focusing exclusively on the treatment of established mental disorders.

However, the relationship should not be overstated. Current evidence is predominantly correlational, and methodological differences across EI and well-being measures limit causal conclusions. Therefore, EI should be considered a **potentially modifiable psychological resource within a broader, multilevel approach to mental health**, rather than an independent solution to young people's mental-health challenges.

Overall, integrating emotional competencies into broader mental-health promotion strategies may contribute to the aims of SDG 3 by supporting young adults' capacity for emotional regulation, adaptive coping, resilience, positive relationships, and psychological functioning. Future research should determine how such approaches can be implemented effectively and equitably across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

7. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The synthesis of the reviewed literature suggests that the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological well-being among young adults may be understood as a **multidimensional and interconnected process**, rather than as a simple direct association. Emotional intelligence appears to provide a set of emotional competencies that may influence how young adults understand and manage their internal experiences, respond to challenges, maintain relationships, and develop psychological resources.

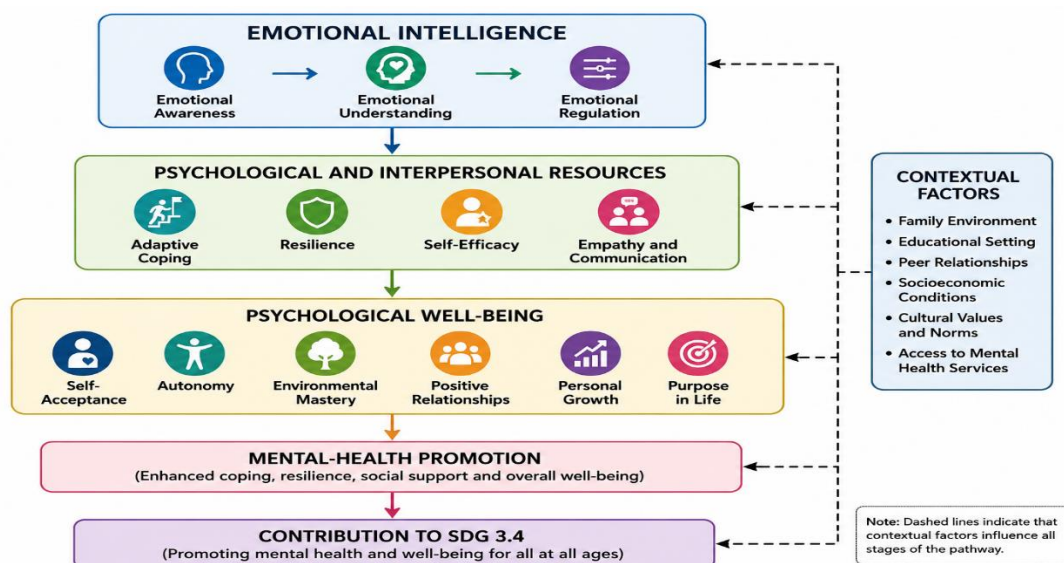
At the first level, **emotional awareness and emotional understanding** may facilitate recognition and interpretation of one's emotional experiences. These processes may contribute to greater self-understanding

and self-acceptance. At the second level, **emotional regulation** may enable young adults to respond more adaptively to stress and challenging situations, thereby supporting coping and environmental mastery.

These emotional processes may subsequently contribute to broader psychological resources, particularly **resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptive coping**. The literature also indicates an important interpersonal pathway through which emotional intelligence may influence well-being. Empathy, communication, and regulation of emotional responses may facilitate positive relationships and social connectedness.

Together, these pathways may contribute to multiple dimensions of **psychological well-being**, including self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The proposed framework therefore positions psychological well-being as a multidimensional outcome rather than simply the absence of psychological distress.

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework linking emotional intelligence and psychological well-being among young adult



The framework should be interpreted as a conceptual synthesis of the existing literature rather than a tested causal model. The available evidence does not establish that EI directly causes psychological well-being. Instead, the proposed framework identifies plausible pathways that warrant further empirical investigation. This distinction is particularly important because much of the existing literature is cross-sectional and relies on self-report measures.

The framework also emphasizes that individual emotional competencies operate within broader social and environmental contexts. Family relationships, educational environments, socioeconomic circumstances, social support, and access to mental-health services may influence whether emotional competencies translate into sustained psychological well-being. Thus, EI should be regarded as one component of a broader multilevel approach to young-adult mental health.

7.1 Theoretical Contribution

The proposed framework integrates three perspectives that are frequently examined separately: emotional intelligence, eudaimonic psychological well-being, and mental-health promotion within SDG 3. It extends the literature beyond the commonly examined relationship between EI and subjective well-being by emphasizing the multidimensional nature of psychological functioning described by Ryff.

The framework also highlights the importance of examining mechanisms and contextual conditions, rather than asking only whether EI is associated with well-being. This provides a basis for future qualitative,

longitudinal, and intervention research examining how young adults experience emotional competence and how these experiences may contribute to psychological functioning.

8. Conclusion

The present review synthesized the available literature on emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological well-being among young adults, with particular attention to the implications of this relationship for Sustainable Development Goal 3. Overall, the literature indicates a generally positive association between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. Emotional awareness, emotional understanding, and emotional regulation appear to be particularly relevant to adaptive coping, resilience, interpersonal functioning, and positive psychological functioning.

The review further suggests that the relationship between EI and psychological well-being is multidimensional and may operate through interconnected psychological processes rather than through a single direct pathway. Emotional competencies may support young adults in understanding their emotional experiences, managing stress, developing resilience, maintaining positive relationships, and progressing toward greater self-acceptance, autonomy, personal growth, and purpose in life. These processes correspond with important dimensions of Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being.

At the same time, the available evidence should be interpreted cautiously. Differences in EI conceptualization and measurement, variation in the assessment of well-being, reliance on self-report and cross-sectional designs, and the predominance of university-based samples limit the strength and generalizability of existing conclusions. The evidence therefore supports an association rather than a definitive causal relationship between EI and psychological well-being.

From an SDG 3 perspective, EI may be considered a potentially valuable psychological resource within broader mental-health promotion strategies. However, individual emotional competencies should be addressed alongside supportive educational, social, community, and health-care environments. Future research should prioritize longitudinal, culturally diverse, and intervention-based research, particularly among young adults outside university settings and within underrepresented contexts such as India.

Overall, the literature indicates that understanding and strengthening emotional competencies may contribute to a more comprehensive approach to young-adult psychological well-being. Further research is needed to establish how, for whom, and under what contextual conditions emotional intelligence contributes to sustainable mental health and well-being.

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