

The Roles of Media Literacy, Emotional Intelligence, and Digital Intelligence in Predicting Psychological Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

As 21st-century lifestyles become more hyperconnected, digital intelligence will become critical to the success and well-being of people. However, most people may not adequately understand what digital intelligence really is or how it relates to media literacy, emotional intelligence, and psychological well-being. Furthermore, research on these variables is scarce in the Malaysian context despite the growing digital threats experienced by users. With a focus on young adults, the present study collected data from 168 participants who actively consume various types of digital media. Data were analysed using correlation and regression methods. Findings reveal that participants reported high media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence but a moderate level of psychological well-being. Both media literacy and emotional intelligence are found to predict digital intelligence, suggesting that to be digitally intelligent, one must be media-literate and emotionally astute. Finally, the results show that emotional intelligence is the sole predictor of psychological well-being. The study is one of the growing efforts to contribute to the literature on the role of media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence in predicting the psychological well-being of young adults. Overall, this study highlights that to improve psychological well-being, it is necessary to provide intervention programmes that can strengthen emotional intelligence without neglecting the importance of media literacy and digital intelligence education.

Keywords: digital intelligence, emotional intelligence, media literacy, psychological well-being

INTRODUCTION

Digital technology, well-being, and Malaysian students

Ever since digital technology was first introduced, it has been revolutionary as it aids our lives in more ways than one. However, despite its usefulness and diverse applications, this technology comes with its own set of risks, particularly those related to the four Cs, i.e., conduct, content, contact, and cyberscams (El Asam & Katz 2018, 281). Conduct risk involves high-risk acts such as online gambling, while content risk refers to exposure to harmful websites or media, including pornographic and manipulative contents. Contact risk involves predatory online relationships, such as blackmailing, whereas cyberscams involve threats to personal data, including identity fraud and the illegal use of digital information.

As people juggle the risks and benefits of digital technology, it is crucial that digital citizens be more aware of and take greater responsibility for what they consume online. One established approach to address this aspect calls for responsible digital behaviour and greater media literacy, such as making critically informed decisions and not taking information at face value, which, in turn, can prevent the consumption of harmful information (Bahramian et al. 2018, 1–2). Similarly, elements such as emotional intelligence (Audrin & Audrin 2023, 1–3) and digital intelligence (Na-Nan, Roopleam, & Wongsuwan 2019, 1466) are essential to cultivate safe online practices. These elements could pose as tools that people can utilise while actively using digital media and technology to help ensure their safety and well-being.

Well-being has been extensively studied due to its interchangeability with mental health (Liu et al. 2021, 2). Described as a positive and sustainable state that allows individuals, groups, and nations to thrive and flourish (Huppert, Bayliss, & Keverne 2004, 1331), well-being can include one's state of health (i.e., physical or physiological), state of happiness (i.e., mental or psychological), social elements (e.g., vitality and rewarding social relationships), and resilience (Huppert, Bayliss, and Keverne 2004, 1331; Alkire 2015, 7–13). In recent years, countries all over the world have placed more importance on citizens' well-being, as evident from the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the third goal that aims for good health and well-being of the citizens of the world (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2020).

Responding to the United Nation's call, the 12th Malaysia Plan from 2021 to 2025 emphasises Malaysians' well-being by listing it as one of the themes and an area of concern. The initiatives promised by the Malaysian government include a better healthcare system, an improvement of the housing situation among the low-income group, and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle (Malaysia Economic Planning Unit 2021). On the digital front, the country is undertaking strategic measures to counter cyber threats and increase cyber security awareness (Malaysia Cyber Security Strategy 2020). Since these plans are still in progress, their effectiveness cannot be ascertained as yet. However, the prospect seems fraught with ambiguities as the overall quality of well-being experienced by Malaysian citizens tends to vary from year to year. For example, the performance of the Malaysian Well-being Index (MyWI) showed a pattern of decline from 120.8 points in 2019 to 117.7 points in 2020, followed by a recovery with an increase from 118.3 points in 2021 to 121.2 points in 2022 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2021, 2022^a).

Concerns for citizens' well-being are justified, as reflected in a study by Kok and Low (2019, 102), where the researchers discovered that the well-being and mental health of Malaysian high school and university students, who will be the future citizens, leaders, and workers, are constantly at risk, with several factors coming into play. For instance, academic stress, relationships, and social, economic, or cultural changes have been found to be risk factors affecting Malaysian students' mental health and well-being (Kok & Low 2019, 106–108). Another risk factor for Malaysian students' well-being is Internet addiction, which is well on its way to being recognised as a public health issue due to the prevalence of cases it presents yearly (Omar et al. 2020, 201–203). Particularly alarming is the growing evidence of Internet overdependence as well as social media and Internet addiction among children, students, and young adults. In their review, Nik Jaafar et al. (2021) found that the prevalence rates of Internet overdependence range from 7.8 to 60.7% among youths from Malaysian universities, and factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness are associated with it (2).

Recent studies by Cheah et al. (2022, 15–17), Lee et al. (2023, 4–8), and Zakaria et al. (2023, 4–6) also show a high prevalence of social media and Internet addiction among students, and this addiction is associated with higher reports of depression, anxiety, and stress. Such addictions have become so pervasive to the point that students are showing serious signs like sleeping late due to using smartphones and getting angry when they are not allowed to use the gadgets (The Resource and Educational Technology Division of the Malaysia Education Ministry and CyberSecurity Malaysia 2022). All these studies and reports indicate that real threats are brewing in terms of Malaysian youths' well-being due to digital technology, social media, and Internet use.

Media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence

Büchi (2024) suggested that online and digital practices could either cause harm or avail benefits, which, in turn, could either decrease or increase an individual's well-being (174–176). The question of which of these consequences is likely to occur is dependent on three personal variables: media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence. Media literacy is a skill that allows users to navigate through various media contents and make critical appraisals between beneficial and harmful information to produce their own opinions and points of view (Pandian, Baboo, & Yi 2020, 351). It is often associated with fake news, digital fraud, and other digital threats, as researchers believe that possessing media literacy skills could help users to effectively appraise fake information and be responsible digital citizens (Bulger & Davison 2018, 7–15). Students and young adults are found to be more vulnerable to the risk factors posed by digital technology and the Internet, as they make up most media and Internet users (Dienlin & Johannes 2022, 137–138). It follows that increased media usage leads to increased exposure to digital threats. Hence, considering that excessive media use leads to lower levels of well-being, these digital threats to students and young adults should not be taken lightly.

Extant research has suggested that teaching and modelling media literacy should be paired with emotional intelligence so that people are able to connect, understand, and empathise with each other online. Emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to observe, label, distinguish, and correctly assess other people's as well as one's own emotions, and utilise these emotions to form

appropriate thoughts and behaviour (Srivastava 2013, 97), has been at the forefront of studies on well-being. It has been identified as a protective factor against mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression, which directly affect the well-being of young people, especially those who may be more vulnerable to mental health risks (De la Barrera et al. 2023, 1–3). High emotional intelligence is also associated with increased positive affects (Loi et al. 2021, 94), lower perceived stress (Enns et al. 2018, 226), and better coping strategies (Morales-Rodriguez & Perez-Marmol 2019, 5–7).

Both media literacy and emotional intelligence are essential to digital intelligence. However, compared to the former variables, digital intelligence is a relatively new construct that was first introduced in 2004 (Stiakakis, Liapis, & Vlachopoulou 2019, 1–2). The IEEE 3527.1™ Standard for Digital Intelligence (DQ) released in 2021 defined it as the cumulation of technical, cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-emotional competencies grounded in universal moral values, which enable people to navigate and adapt to the ever-changing digital world. Inherent in this definition is that it involves both computational and methodical thinking, as well as digital practices and behaviour. Digital intelligence or digital quotient is often associated with other digital competence constructs, such as digital literacy, digital citizenship, and digital emotional intelligence (Stiakakis, Liapis, & Vlachopoulou 2019, 2–4; Na-Nan, Roopleam, & Wongsuwan 2019, 1466–1468). Yang (2022) suggested that media literacy and information literacy are related to digital intelligence in the workplace setting (30). Positive relationships between emotional intelligence and digital intelligence were also reported (Bak 2020, 44; Yeke 2023, 396–399). Hence, it is not surprising that Stiakakis, Liapis, and Vlachopoulou (2019) argued that digital intelligence is equally crucial as the regular intelligence quotient, especially in countries where the overload of information in the digital sphere is more overwhelming than what the population can deal with (2–4; 12), which then may have adverse effects on one's well-being.

It is therefore evident that media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence may act as the three axes of defence that enable digital citizens to engage critically and responsibly online. Following this argument, the present study hypothesises that media literacy and emotional intelligence predict digital intelligence.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

High media literacy has been linked to improved well-being as it steers users away from misinformation, fake news, and harmful digital information. For example, Bahramian et al. (2018) reported that high media literacy is associated with high well-being and better media consumption among adolescents (1–2). O'Rourke and Miller (2022) also found that media literacy is necessary for allowing consumers to make critically informed decisions regarding the information presented to them (96–97). These findings indicate that good media literacy leads to positive media consumption, allowing individuals to analyse online information critically, and subsequently, attain positive well-being. A study by Zulkarnain et al. (2022) reported that Malaysian youths believed that misinformation and fake news could be combated by having media literacy skills, particularly when verifying news (51–53). This skill set makes youths feel self-assured and confident, suggesting that it can promote online safety and digital well-being (Pandian, Baboo, & Yi 2020, 356–358).

In contrast to media literacy, emotional intelligence is not a widely taught skill set in Malaysia. In their study on rural Malaysian school students, Rathakrishnan et al. (2019) found that emotional intelligence and psychological well-being are unfamiliar concepts, as the majority reported having moderate to low levels of emotional intelligence and well-being (69–70). The study, however, found a significant relationship between the predictive nature of emotional intelligence and the well-being of those students. Given that technology plays a significant role in current day-to-day life, it is only logical to investigate how technology or media comes into play in the relationship between emotional intelligence and well-being. Previous studies such as those by Balluerka et al. (2016, 1) and Shaheen and Shaheen (2016, 209–211) have reported positive correlations between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. As such, Mascia et al. (2020) suggested that the association between digital technology and emotional intelligence and well-being merits further exploration (4–6).

In the Malaysian context, research on digital intelligence and well-being is still scant. A review of digital citizenship skills in Malaysia by Susanty et al. (2019) has revealed that digital intelligence is among the digital education courses that should be taught to Malaysian schoolchildren to promote well-being and protect them from the harmful elements prevalent in the digital world. Therefore, studying digital intelligence as a tool for promoting well-being among users could help overcome or lessen the adverse effects of digital exposure (819).

Considering that media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence each play a significant role in ensuring critical consumption of media, preventing harmful media practices, and combating digital threats and online misconduct, the present study aims to examine these variables in association with the well-being of Malaysian youth. Drawing on Büchi's (2024) digital well-being theory that focuses on individual digital practices, their co-occurring harm and benefits, and how they affect users' well-being (173–180), the present study hypothesises that media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence predict psychological well-being. The hypothesised links are illustrated in Figure 1.

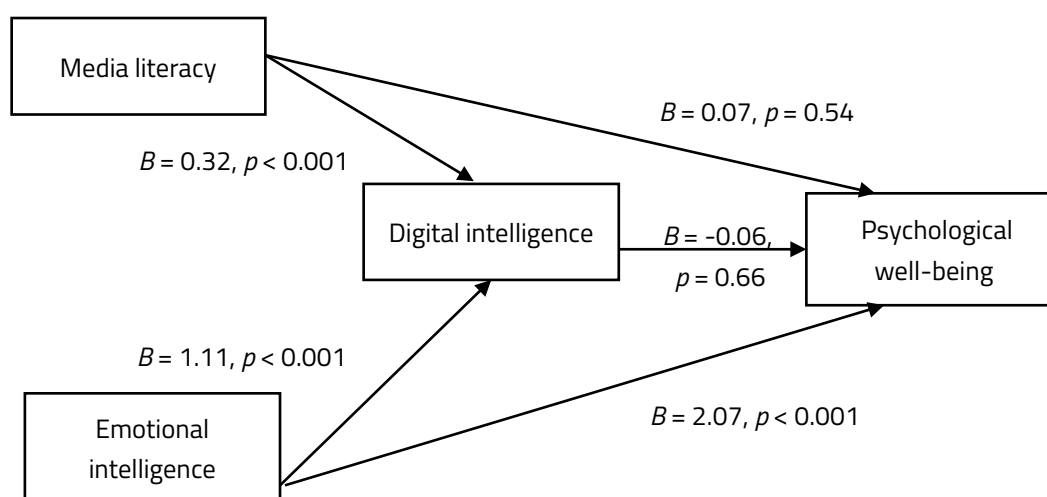


Figure 1: Relationships among media literacy, emotional intelligence, digital intelligence, and psychological well-being. Source: authors.

(Note: See Table 2 for an overview of the statistical symbols depicted in Figure 1.)

METHODOLOGY

Sample and procedure

A cross-sectional, online research was conducted on a sample of Malaysian students and young adults aged 18 to 25 years with Internet access and a smartphone ownership. Prior to collecting the data, ethical approval and permission to use the research instruments were obtained. Then, an online Google Form containing survey items was created and pilot-tested with 16 participants who met the criteria required for the study to determine the survey's feasibility and practicality. The survey's Google form used for this study is available at <https://forms.gle/as5WtxNkNzndyzHR7>. The pilot participants reported that the items were easy to understand; hence, no major amendments were made to the survey, and the finalised version was used for the main study.

Following the pilot study, the link to the main study was distributed through media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality of data were ensured by including an informed consent agreement in the first section of the survey form. Participants were only allowed to continue the study once they agreed to the informed consent agreement. They were also allowed to withdraw from the study at their request. The survey link was released and promoted every day for two weeks and eventually received 168 responses.

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Mean (<i>M</i>) and Std Deviation (<i>SD</i>)
Gender			
Male	46	27.4	
Female	122	72.6	
Age			
18	1	0.6	<i>M</i> = 22.68; <i>SD</i> = 1.29
19	4	2.4	
20	7	4.2	
21	17	10.1	
22	18	10.7	
23	91	54.2	
24	20	11.9	
25	10	6.0	
Ethnicity			
Malay	161	95.8	
Indian	2	1.2	
Others	5	3.0	
Education level			
SPM	2	1.2	
Matriculation/Foundation	11	6.5	
Diploma	24	14.3	
Undergraduate	130	77.4	
Postgraduate	1	0.6	

Employment status

Working full-time	27	16.1
Working part-time	7	4.2
Studying	118	70.2
Waiting for a job/study offer	14	8.3
Neither working nor studying	2	1.2

State

Selangor	89	53.0
Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur	17	10.1
Johor	10	6.0
Kelantan	9	5.4
Pahang	8	4.8
Perak	7	4.2
Negeri Sembilan	6	3.6
Pulau Pinang	5	3.0
Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya	5	3.0
Kedah	4	2.4
Terengganu	3	1.8
Sarawak	2	1.2
Melaka	1	0.6
Perlis	1	0.6
Sabah	1	0.6

Most frequently used applications or websites*

Instagram	115	68.5
Twitter	100	59.5
TikTok	83	49.4
WhatsApp	29	17.3
YouTube	23	13.7
Snapchat	12	7.1
Facebook	10	6.0
Reddit	5	3.0
Pinterest	6	3.6
Telegram	3	1.8
LinkedIn	2	1.2
Google	2	1.2
Discord	1	0.6
Tumblr	1	0.6
Twitch	1	0.6
Wattpad	1	0.6

* Participants were allowed to select more than one application or digital media.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants ($n = 168$). Source: authors.

The majority of participants were Malay (95.8%), female (72.6%), and full-time students (70.2%), with a mean age of 22.68 ($SD = 1.29$). Participants came from various educational backgrounds,

with the vast majority being undergraduate degree holders (77.4%), followed by diploma students (14.3%), matriculation or foundation students (6.5%), Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) holders (1.2%), and postgraduate degree students (0.6%). The participants came from various states of Malaysia, with the top three being Selangor (53.0%), Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur (10.1%), and Johor (6.0%). As a part of the demographic questions, participants were asked to list their most frequently used applications or digital media websites. We found that the most used application was Instagram (115 users), followed by Twitter (100 users) and TikTok (83 users). The least used applications were Discord, Tumblr, Twitch, and Wattpad, with only one user for each application. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Variables and measures

Demographic questions (i.e., gender, age, education level, state, employment status, and frequently used media applications) were asked in the survey, together with the following scales. The New Media Literacy Scale developed by Koc and Barut (2016) was used to measure media literacy. The scale has 35 items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *1 = Strongly Disagree* to *5 = Strongly Agree*. Total scores for all items were calculated, with scores of 35 to 81 considered low, 82 to 128 moderate, and 129 to 175 high media literacy (841–842). In this study, the scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.96.

The Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale, a shortened version of the Emotional Intelligence Scale developed by Davies et al. (2010), was used to measure emotional intelligence. The scale consists of 10 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *1 = Strongly Disagree* to *5 = Strongly Agree*. It was scored based on the total score of the items, where scores of 10 to 23, 24 to 37, and 38 to 51 are classified as low, moderate, and high levels of emotional intelligence, respectively (204–206). This scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.82.

Digital intelligence was measured by the Digital Intelligence Quotient Questionnaire, a 33-item scale developed by Na-Nan, Roopleam, and Wongsuwan (2019) on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *5 = Strongly Agree* to *1 = Strongly Disagree* (1469–1472). The total score of all items was computed, with scores of 33 to 77 were categorised as low, while scores of 78 to 122 and 123 to 167 were categorised as moderate and high, respectively. This scale showed high internal consistency in the present study (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89).

The study used the Psychological Well-Being scale developed by Ryff and Keyes (1995) to measure psychological well-being (720–721). The scale consists of 42 items measured on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from *1 = Strongly Disagree* to *6 = Strongly Agree*. Items 3, 5, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36, 39, and 41 were reverse-scored, which means that for these items on the scale of 1 to 6, 1 = Strongly Agree and 6 = Strongly Disagree, accordingly. All items were then calculated, with higher scores representing a higher state of psychological well-being. Scores below the 25th percentile, between the 25th and 75th percentile, and above the 75th percentile are interpreted to mean low, moderate, and high well-being. In this study, the scale also obtained a high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha = 0.89.

Data analysis

Data were computed and analysed using IBM SPSS Version 26. Preliminary assumption testing was completed prior to any further analysis to confirm that the data met the assumptions of independence of residuals, homogeneity of variance, and no concerns around multicollinearity. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed to assess patterns and distribution of the data, where means and standard deviations were computed for all predictor and outcome variables. A series of Pearson correlational analyses were then used to determine the intercorrelations among the variables. Finally, two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted using digital intelligence and psychological well-being as the outcome variables to test the last hypothesis. Table 2 provides an overview of the statistical terms and symbols used in this study.

Symbol	Name	Description
n	Sample size	Number of samples or cases.
M	Mean	Sample mean.
SD	Standard deviation	Sample standard deviation.
α	Cronbach's alpha	A measure of the reliability of a scale.
r	Pearson's r	Pearson's correlation coefficient value.
p	Probability (p) value	Probability of the sample exhibiting the observed difference under the assumption that there is, in fact, no difference in the population.
R^2	R -squared	The proportion of variance in the outcome variable that is shared by the predictor variable.
F	F -ratio	A statistic to test the overall fit of the model in simple regression and multiple regression.
B	Unstandardised regression coefficients	The strength of the relationship between a predictor and the outcome variable.
β	Standardised regression coefficient	The strength of relationship between a predictor and an outcome in a standardised form.
SE	Standard error	The standard deviation of the sampling distribution of a statistic.
CI	Confidence intervals	A range computed using sample statistics to estimate an unknown value of a parameter with a stated level of confidence.
t	t -statistic	In the linear model, a statistic that is used to test whether an unstandardised regression coefficients value is significantly different from zero.

Table 2: Overview of statistical terms and symbols used in this study. Source: authors.

RESULTS

No deviations from normality in the histograms and the normal probability plots (P-P plots) were found for media literacy, emotional intelligence, digital intelligence, and psychological well-being. Inspection of the assumption of homoscedasticity found that the data were normally distributed, with no obvious pattern found for all variables. Upon examination of the multicollinearity

assumption, the tolerance values (range: 0.525 to 0.681), and variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranging from 1.469 to 1.904 indicated that the multicollinearity assumption is met (Field 2018, 534).

Descriptive statistics results in Table 3 show that, on average, participants' media literacy scores are within the high range (i.e., 129 to 175), with a mean score of 144.00 ($SD = 19.08$). They also have a mean score of 41.44 ($SD = 5.28$) for emotional intelligence, with 76.2% having high emotional intelligence and 23.8% having moderate emotional intelligence levels. The results for digital intelligence also follow a similar pattern ($M = 129.82$, $SD = 15.39$), with 66.7% obtaining high and 33.3% obtaining moderate digital intelligence scores. No low category scores were recorded for all three variables. For psychological well-being, with a mean score of 157.76 ($SD = 23.73$), the results show that 27.4%, 46.4%, and 26.2% of participants reported high, moderate, and low scores, respectively.

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)	Mean (<i>M</i>)	Std. Deviation (<i>SD</i>)	α	1	2	3	4
1 Media literacy		144.00	19.08	0.96	-	0.57**	0.61**	0.29**
• Low	0 (0)							
• Moderate	41 (24.4)							
• High	127 (75.6)							
2 Emotional intelligence		41.44	5.28	0.82		-	0.61**	0.47**
• Low	0 (0)							
• Moderate	40 (23.8)							
• High	128 (76.2)							
3 Digital intelligence		129.82	15.39	0.89			-	0.27**
• Low	0 (0)							
• Moderate	56 (33.3)							
• High	112 (66.7)							
4 Psychological well-being		157.76	23.73	0.89				-
• Low	44 (26.2)							
• Moderate	78 (46.4)							
• High	46 (27.4)							

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the variables ($n = 168$). Source: authors.

The Pearson correlations results in Table 3 show that media literacy is positively and significantly correlated with emotional intelligence ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$), digital intelligence ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$), and psychological well-being ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$). There are moderate, positive relationships between emotional intelligence and digital intelligence, $r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$, and between emotional intelligence

and psychological well-being, $r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$. The results also indicate that digital intelligence is significantly and positively associated with psychological well-being, $r = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$.

With digital intelligence as the outcome variable and media literacy and emotional intelligence as the predictors, the regression results yield a statistically significant model, $R^2 = 0.48$, $F(2, 165) = 74.58$, $p < 0.001$. Both media literacy ($B = 0.32$, $\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional intelligence ($B = 1.11$, $\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predict digital intelligence. In the second analysis, when psychological well-being was regressed onto media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence ($R^2 = 0.22$, $F(3, 164) = 15.51$, $p < 0.001$), we found that only emotional intelligence predicts well-being ($B = 2.07$, $\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$). See these results in Table 4 and Figure 1.

Variable		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI		β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
				Lower	Upper			
Outcome: Digital intelligence								
Predictor	Media literacy	0.32	0.06	0.21	0.43	0.40	5.84	< 0.001
	Emotional intelligence	1.11	0.19	0.71	1.49	0.38	5.55	< 0.001
$R^2 = 0.48$, $F(2, 165) = 74.58$, $p < 0.001$								
Outcome: Psychological well-being								
Predictor	Media literacy	0.07	0.11	-0.16	0.29	0.06	0.62	0.54
	Emotional intelligence	2.07	0.41	1.27	2.88	0.46	5.07	< 0.001
	Digital intelligence	-0.06	0.15	-0.35	0.23	-0.04	-0.44	0.66
$R^2 = 0.22$, $F(3, 164) = 15.51$, $p < 0.001$								

Table 4: Regression coefficients for predicting digital intelligence and psychological well-being.

Source: authors.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study are discussed in the context of existing research on the relationships among media literacy, emotional intelligence, digital intelligence, and well-being in young adults. Based on the findings, participants in this study generally have high media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence. This is a slight departure from Chin and Zauddin's (2019) study that found young adults have a moderate level of media literacy (471–472). Nevertheless, irrespective of the high/moderate categories, it is safe to conclude that Malaysian students and young adults are comfortable consuming, creating, and using technological devices and digital contents competently without the aid of other people. These findings are reasonable given that students and young adults constitute the highest Internet penetration group in the country, with computer usage among those aged 15 years and above increasing from 80.0% in 2020 to 83.5% in 2021, and Internet usage that significantly rose to 96.8% in 2021 compared to 89.6% in 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022^b).

Perhaps the most interesting result of this study is the participants' moderate level of psychological well-being, with another 26.2% experiencing low well-being. A substantial amount of

research (e.g., Dickson et al. 2018; Benvenuti et al. 2023) has highlighted concerns with screen time and the adverse effects of technology on the mental health, education, and well-being of children and youths. As such, their potential health risks should not be ignored, because it is evident that excessive, unsafe, or irresponsible usage can adversely affect this specific populace. More efforts should be taken accordingly to bring them to the level of thriving, i.e., positive human development and healthy functioning.

It was also found that both media literacy and emotional intelligence predict digital intelligence. This result suggests that to be digitally intelligent, one must, for the most part, be media literate and emotionally astute. When people encounter negative experiences online (e.g., hateful speech, violent comments, misinformation, or incivilities), they tend to regress into negative coping mechanisms such as retaliating, trolling, or doxing. An emotionally intelligent and media-literate person, however, would recognise the issue at hand and assess the situation rather than reacting hastily or emotively. The emotionally astute and media-literate person would then be free to deal with the issue more constructively.

Finally, only emotional intelligence is predictive of psychological well-being among youths in Malaysia, which is consistent with the direction reported in the literature. For example, Moeller et al.'s (2020), study on trait emotional intelligence has found that students with higher emotional intelligence reported a higher psychological well-being score (6–8). In particular, they found that students with higher emotional intelligence felt a strong sense of “belongingness” which decreases the risk of stress and loneliness and, subsequently, leads to a better state of well-being, implying a moderating effect of belongingness on the emotional intelligence-well-being relationship. This moderating role of belongingness could be attributed to why the present study found a significant association between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. Digital media, particularly positive social media interactions, could provide a sense of belongingness among young adults, allowing them to develop their sense of empathy, as well as their ability to understand and express feelings, which then can increase their well-being.

In contrast to previous research (e.g., Bahramian et al. 2018; O'Rourke and Miller 2022), the results of the present study show that media literacy does not predict psychological well-being. It is possible that media literacy does not play as big a role as previously thought in determining the level of youths' well-being in terms of digital or online practices. Young adults nowadays have grown alongside digital media, thus possibly making media literacy inherent or a built-in skill that these young adults possess, making them more media literate than the generations that preceded them. Evidence of this phenomenon can be seen in De Leyn et al.'s (2022) study on teenagers' perception of media literacy, in that this media-saturated population is self-aware of the risks and detrimental effects of media consumption (228–234). The researchers also revealed that concerns with teenagers' media literacy come from a protective perspective of adults and policymakers who do not necessarily consider that these primary media users (i.e., teenagers and young adults) are already confident of their media literacy skills. Looking only from this perspective, too, may limit the understanding of how the youths really perceive media contents.

The results of this study also reveal that digital intelligence does not significantly predict psychological well-being. It is likely that the lack of awareness of the significance that both media

literacy and digital intelligence have on well-being may have contributed to this result. As argued by Stiakakis, Liapis, and Vlachopoulou (2019), many countries are often faced with the influx of digital information and struggle to develop measures or policies to catch up with the deluge of this information (2–4; 12). Thus, it is possible that in Malaysia, a country that faces similar issues, digital citizens are still on their way to catching up with the wealth of knowledge on digital media. This, in turn, accounts for their lack of media consciousness on the ways and steps of navigating through the knowledge, possibly leading them to overlook the importance of digital competency skills such as media literacy and digital intelligence.

CONCLUSION

The present study began with the hypotheses that media literacy and emotional intelligence would predict digital intelligence and that media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence would predict psychological well-being. Analyses of the data fully supported the former and partially supported the latter. More specifically, the results confirmed that digital intelligence is significantly predicted by media literacy and emotional intelligence. In contrast, while emotional intelligence significantly predicted psychological well-being, media literacy and digital intelligence did not.

In line with the rapid growth of technology and its great benefits that ease our lives, we cannot ignore that digital media and technology are also harmful agents that bring forth 21st-century threats. To unsuspecting users, these threats could pose significant harm as they could alter one's opinions and perceptions, and they are at risk of serious digital crimes such as fraud, blackmailing, and information theft. Therefore, society, should place more importance on the tools and skills needed for media users to successfully combat these threats while simultaneously playing their role as responsible digital citizens. Efforts must be made to rectify and address digital threats for the safety of digital citizens, especially the younger generation, who will continuously face the influx of technological advances and the wealth of readily accessible online information.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature on the predictive role of media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence and its relationship with the well-being of Malaysian young adults. Drawing from previous research, it is clear that media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence each have a hand in ensuring media users' well-being. Thus, the present study provides some directions for future researchers interested in studying the importance of these variables in maintaining and promoting well-being, particularly for active digital users in the Malaysian context.

This study also offers practical implications for educational institutions and policymakers in that it provides a groundwork for improving media education for Malaysian youth. Although the Malaysian government passed the Anti-Fake News Act in 2018, the threat of fake news and misinformation is still rampant in the digital sphere (Fernandez 2019, 178–180). Based on the findings of this study, universities and educational institutions could design a course to instil media literacy, emotional intelligence, and digital intelligence skills that can be used as tools against the dangers of negative digital media use. Through such a course, students could learn to critically consume media and better shield themselves from the threats that they may encounter in the digital realm.

It is necessary to interpret the results of this study with caution because its correlational nature does not suggest causation between media literacy, emotional intelligence, digital intelligence, and well-being. Therefore, although this study reports a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and well-being, it does not indicate that high emotional intelligence increases psychological well-being. Studies with experimental and longitudinal designs would be more appropriate to further delineate the relationships among these variables. Future research should also be conducted with increased sample size and representation from all the states of Malaysia. Although the present study did receive participants from 15 out of 16 states/federal territories in the country, the number of representatives for each state/federal territory remained low. The moderate sample size could also be increased to ensure a better interpretation and generalisability of the results.

The association between digital intelligence and well-being is relatively new, as demonstrated by the scarcity of literature on the topic. However, as highlighted by Na-Nan, Roopleam, and Wongsuwan (2019), digital intelligence is a much-needed tool for users to combat digital threats (1466). As previously discussed, digital threats could inflict harm on users' well-being. Therefore, further research is recommended to provide more insights into the relationship between these two variables, perhaps spanning a broader scope.

Finally, a more in-depth study could be conducted that considers potential factors like belongingness that could influence the relationships among media literacy, emotional intelligence, digital intelligence, and well-being. Equally important is to closely examine the predisposed media literacy and media awareness among adolescents and young adults as this could provide a deeper understanding of the importance of media awareness and media competency skills for well-being, as well as uncover whether these media users are better equipped with tools against digital threats than previously thought.

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Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Department of Psychology, International Islamic University Malaysia (Reference Number: S3/-2-2022-003).

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