

The Nexus between Emotional Intelligence and Communication Apprehension amongst Millennial in Malaysia

Shideh Ziaee Boroujeni, Mudiarsan Kuppusamy

Abstract: *The two concepts of emotional intelligence (EI) and communication apprehension (CA) have been studied extensively in separate contexts and to some extent in connection with each other, but the components of EI have never been studied in relation to CA. This dissertation aims to illuminate whether EI and each of its four components (the skills of perceiving, using, understanding and managing emotions) are negatively related to CA. Past literature indicates that CA, a handicap that harms some people in the society, has a negative impact on personal, professional and academic success and that EI is a skill that can be mastered; hence, the most important contribution of this study is that CA can be overcome or alleviated. The underpinning theories of the research are Theory of Communication Apprehension, Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Social Intelligence Theory and Theory of Emotions. Data for this quantitative study has been collected from over 400 undergraduate university students via a survey containing tests on CA and EI and processed via SPSS. Findings from the research suggest there is an inverse relationship between EI and CA and all the five hypotheses are accepted. However, to ensure generalizability of the results so as to implement new educational policies on EI and CA awareness among Millennials, diverse populations, different locations and more variables need to be tested applying more specific sampling methods.*

Keywords: *Communication apprehension, Emotional intelligence, Millennials*

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication apprehension is the feeling of anxiety and fear that an individual experiences prior to and during the communication process (McCroskey, 1977). These negative emotions affect how a sender delivers the message and how the receiver understands the message, thus complicating the whole communication process. The Theory of Communication Apprehension claimed that only oral communication caused fear and anxiety. After further research with different samples, though, he added singing and writing apprehension to the theory. He studied communication apprehension for years before including various elements such as personal life, workplace and academia into the theory (McCroskey, 1984). Although people communicate on a daily basis in different environments, speaking in front of others has been touted as a source of fear and anxiety for many (Matuszak & Steve, 2013). Having proper communication skills is a success component both in workplace and in personal life.

Manuscript published on 30 January 2019.

*Correspondence Author(s)

Shideh Ziaee Boroujeni, Centre of Business Innovation & Digitisation, Faculty of Business Management, Asia Pacific University, Malaysia.
Mudiarsan Kuppusamy, Centre of Business Innovation & Digitisation, Faculty of Business Management, Asia Pacific University, Malaysia.

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Communication within the family environment is the most important element in creating and keeping relationships stable. (Sanj, 2017). In social situations, highly apprehensive people are viewed by other people as less attractive, less intimate, less credible and more detached (Michael, 2015). Hence, apprehensive people go on fewer dates and find it hard to solidify their relationships (Sheahan, et al., 2009) which could have a direct effect on their self-esteem. Studies also show that there is a strong relationship between high communication apprehension and low self-esteem (Sungjun Kim, 2015). Communication apprehension causes ineffective communication, which can significantly impede professional skills. Job interviews are especially difficult for communication apprehensive people who are less likely to be chosen by interviewers because they are perceived to be less attractive and less trustworthy (Ayres and Crosby, 2009).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive, access, understand and generate emotions so as to assist thought and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer and Salovey, 2016). Emotional intelligence has a great positive impact on mood and self-esteem (Malouff, et al., 2014) and these two concepts directly affect personal success. Self-esteem can actually have an impact on all aspects of life. Marshall described self-esteem as a “favorable global evaluation of oneself” (Marshall, et al., 2015). Hence the level of one’s emotional intelligence determines how they view themselves and how they interact with others. Research also shows that having a higher emotional intelligence contributes to professional success (Retallick, 2015). Emotional intelligence plays such an important role in leadership that Goleman, et al. (2002) asserted that as employees get promoted, their emotional intelligence competencies become even more crucial. On the other hand, employees who have higher levels of emotional intelligence are also more successful at their work because they can build and maintain professional relationships and usually outperform their peers (Wan, et al., 2014). The authors suggested that 80% of success in life depends on the level of emotional intelligence in an individual and only 20% depends on general intelligence. According to him, people with a higher EI know that they always have options on how to respond to their emotions and act on them and this makes their lives richer and more vibrant. Goleman (1995, 2011) believed that on an individual level, emotional intelligence comprises self-awareness and self-management, whereas on a social level, it embodies social awareness and social skills.



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The Relationship between Communication Apprehension and Emotional Intelligence

Both communication apprehension and emotional intelligence are emotional concepts. Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and regulate emotions in ourselves and in others (Giorgi, et al., 2016). Communication arouses a wide array of emotions in almost everyone, but individuals with higher levels of communication apprehension experience those emotions in more negative forms such as fear and anxiety (McCroskey, 1977). In this paper, the relationship between these two concepts is being looked into: whether emotional intelligence affects communication apprehension or not. The importance of the study lies in the fact that these theoretical concepts can have a positive or negative impact on a person's educational, professional and personal life. Communication apprehension can affect academic success, professional achievements and personal life. If emotional intelligence is proved to have an impact on communication apprehension, then it can indirectly affect other variables such as educational success, workplace success, relationships and self-satisfaction as well. There are some similarities between the two concepts: they both have emotional elements in them (King & Finn, 2017) they can both change with experimented and proven methods (Tedesco & Patterson, 2015) and they both affect self-esteem either positively or negatively as discussed earlier (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2014).

Millennial

Millennials, Net Generation or Gen Y, are the demographic cohort that follow Gen X. These terms refer to individuals who reached their young adulthood around the turn of the 21st century. The credit of coining the term goes to Neil Howe and William Strauss, American authors of "Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069", according to whom the cohort are individuals born between 1982 and 2004 (Howe & Strauss, 1992). The largest generation in number is moving into its prime spending years and about to reshape global economy based on their different worldview, priorities and expectations. Digital Natives are technology-savvy and hyper-connected social media experts who have had access to the Internet since childhood and that is what makes them unique. In their world, the frontiers of technology seem unlimited because of their sheer access to information and the amount of computational power they have always had at their fingertips. Moreover, their interaction and communication with others have totally changed because of their frequent use of social media. A research conducted on Millennials in 2013, shows that those who prefer computer-mediated communication (CMC) to interpersonal interaction suffer higher levels of CA and vice versa, i.e. those who have a higher rate of CA communicate more frequently through devices than in face-to-face situations (Burke, et al., 2013). Scholars in National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) conducted an extensive research on social anxiety in real-life and online interactions among Millennials. Based on the findings of their study, respondents showed fewer signs of social anxiety during CMC than in face-to-face situations. The reason being that negative self-image, negative bias, fear of performing poorly and fear of humiliation, which are the main contributors to social anxiety, are less likely to affect one's ability to communicate online than in person. Moreover, misinterpretation of social cues and facial expressions is less

probable online and the interaction is less stressful because participants do not need to respond immediately. So while CMC facilitates communication for individuals with high CA, it robs them of the opportunity to face their fears and overcome them (Bindley, 2011; JY, et al., 2012). Millennials lack the necessary social skills to interpret nonverbal cues and body language during a face-to-face communication and this makes them more apprehensive of interpersonal interactions (Knockmedia, 2015). Online connections lack the authentic exchange of feelings, because there is always the option of editing a message. Making mistakes in social interaction contributes to us being mentally stronger, an opportunity taken away from Millennial by digital technology. Lack of experience in making errors and correcting them is another reason for higher CA in Gen Y (Agrawal, 2017). Within this ambit, the objective of this study is to examine the relationships between emotional intelligence and communication apprehension, the ability to perceive emotions and communication apprehension, the ability to use emotions and communication apprehension, the ability to understand emotions and communication apprehension and the ability to manage emotions and communication apprehension in Malaysian millennial.

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research has adopted the quantitative approach using survey. The sampling procedure adopted for this research is non-probability, with purposive and convenience sampling approaches. In terms of the measurements, McCroskey's (1970) PRCA-24 self-reporting instrument with four subscales were used to test four different areas of communication apprehension: meeting, public, group and dyadic. Each of these four subscales consists of six statements, which add up to a total of 24 statements, 12 of which are written with positive words and 12 with negative verbiage. It is the most reliable and valid instrument in measuring oral communication apprehension (Jones, 2014; Stephen, et al., 2017). Further, in order to measure EI, an adapted test based on the four subscales of the ability-based instrument, Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) has been designed. The test was developed based on MSCEIT subscales, using an online 341 item, MSCEIT-based test as a guideline and based on Plutchik's Theory of Basic Emotions. The correct answers to the questions about emotions in the EI test are based on the information provided in Goleman's book "Emotional Intelligence" about emotions (anger, fear, love, surprise, disgust and sadness) and the reactions they cause in human mind and body.

III. RESULTS

A. Descriptive Statistics

Interestingly, the mean score of PRCA-24 is very close amongst male and female respondents, while there is a slight difference between the means in the two age groups and CA has decreased by 2.09% in older respondents, which is in line with previous findings: EI increases with age causing a decline in CA. Students in the field of business have the lowest mean score in CA: 2.91% lower than

engineering students and 2.12% lower than IT students. This could be partly due to the fact that business courses deal more with humanities and require a higher level of social skills. However, there is no significant difference between male and female respondents and the two age groups in terms of the mean scores of EI test. Business students have slightly higher levels of EI, which makes perfect sense because their CA is also lower than students of other majors.

The mean scores of the two subscales of “Perceiving Emotions” and “Using Emotions” are higher than those of the subscales of “Understanding Emotions” and “Managing Emotions”, in relation to gender, age and field of study consistently. This affirms the finding that “Managing Emotions” and “Understanding Emotions” have a higher influence on CA than “Using Emotions” and “Perceiving Emotions”. The two more influential subscales are the harder components of the EI test and naturally respondents have scored lower on these subscales.

Inferential Statistics

Hypotheses were first tested via Pearson’s correlation and the results show that there is a strong, inverse relationship between EI and CA ($r=-.784, p<.0005$) which is in accordance with all previous studies. As for the impact of the elements of EI on CA, the results are summarized below. Perceiving other people’s emotions and identifying their feelings accurately is a basic emotional intelligence skill, which involves being aware of how others feel, differentiating between similar emotions such as anger, disgust, sadness and fear and determining the degree to which those emotions are present (Caruso, 2004). The better emotional read an individual has on a situation, the more appropriately s/he can respond to and interpret nonverbal cues, an ability that reduces fear and anxiety during communication. The results of this study show that there is a moderate, inverse relationship between the two variables of Perceiving Emotions and CA ($r=-.539, p<.0005$).

The ability of Using Emotions relates to the decision-making skill of an individual in challenging situations and determines whether the problem-solving process is rational or not. Emotions determine the way people think and view the world; that is why individuals have different viewpoints and see things from different perspectives (Caruso, 2004). The more an individual can harness his/her feelings for more effective problem-solving, rational decision-making, logical reasoning and creative thinking, the better s/he can prioritize the cognitive system to attend to what is important and focus on the best course of action to be taken in any given circumstances. This will empower an individual and reduce his/her feelings of fear and anxiety and, in turn, reduce communication apprehension. The results of this study show that there is a moderate, inverse relationship between the two variables of Using Emotions and CA ($r=-.428, p<.0005$).

The skill of Understanding Emotions enables an individual to recognize patterns in emotions, be it her/his own emotions or other people. Thus, the individual can relate emotions to situations, find patterns in them, predict the outcome and pinpoint the reasons for emotions (Caruso, 2004). Accepting the fact that emotions can change over time and that one can have conflicting emotions simultaneously enhances one’s self-understanding and skills in dealing with people. The more one understands people and their emotions, the more effectively s/he can communicate with them and the less fear and anxiety s/he will feel prior to and during communication. The results of this study show that there is a strong, inverse relationship between the two variables of Understanding Emotions and CA ($r=-.619, p<.0005$).

Managing Emotions can be applied both to oneself and others. It is the ability to use one’s feelings wisely instead of just acting on them without pondering, so it is a combination of feeling and thinking with the intention of making the best possible decisions and taking the most effective actions. (Caruso, 2004) If a person can manage his/her emotions well, s/he has the ability to make the best out of an awkward situation. For example, the negative feeling of anger can help the person to overcome injustice or bias if combined with judicious thinking. Otherwise, it can be destructive and blinding, leading to antisocial behavior. The ability to use feelings in combination with thinking enables a person to communicate proactively and not reactively and this reduces anxiety and fear. The results of this study show that there is a strong, inverse relationship between the two variables of Managing Emotions and CA ($r=-.684, p<.0005$).

Multiple regression analysis for the model are as follows:

A multiple correlation coefficient of $R=.819$ indicates a strong level of association between the four subscales of EI and CA. The R Square value (.671), which is based only on the sample, shows that a relatively high proportion of the variance of CA is accounted for by the chosen subscales of EI. Even the Adjusted R Square (.668), which corrects this bias by providing a value expected in the population, indicates a large effect size and a strong model fit according to Cohen’s classification. This implies that most of the relevant and theoretically logical independent variables have been captured in this study (Cohen, et al., 2002). The order of the influence of each component of EI on CA is determined by multiple regression test to be as follows: Managing Emotions has the highest influence on CA ($\beta=-.381, p\text{-value}<.0005$), followed by Understanding Emotions ($\beta=-.314, p\text{-value}<.0005$), Perceiving Emotions ($\beta=-.280, p\text{-value}<.0005$) and Using Emotions ($\beta=-.114, p\text{-value}<.0005$). These results are in line with those of Pearson’s correlation as mentioned above.

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Table 1. Summary of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses		p-value	Pearson's Correlation	Multiple Regression	Status
H1	There is an inverse relationship between emotional intelligence and communication apprehension among Millennials	.000	-.784	R= .819	Accepted
H2	There is an inverse relationship between the ability to perceive emotions and communication apprehension among Millennials	.000	-.539	$\beta = -.280$	Accepted
H3	There is an inverse relationship between the ability to use emotions and communication apprehension among Millennials	.000	-.428	$\beta = -.114$	Accepted
H4	There is an inverse relationship between the ability to understand emotions and communication apprehension among Millennials	.000	-.619	$\beta = -.314$	Accepted
H5	There is an inverse relationship between the ability to manage emotions and communication apprehension among Millennials	.000	-.684	$\beta = -.381$	Accepted

IV. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Bibi et al. (2016) demonstrated that there is a strong positive relationship between emotional intelligence communication apprehensions (CA) (Bibi, et al., 2016). Millennial are the generation who have always had social media, internet and smartphones at their fingertips and computer-mediated communication (CMC) is proven to be responsible for higher levels of CA. Many Malaysian millennial, comprising of almost 50% of the country's workforce, suffers higher levels of CA, partly because of excessive use of internet and social media, which blocks the way for real communication (Kaur, et al., 2012). Communication apprehension vastly affects our personal, professional and academic life in a negative way. There are numerous high school students, university students, job seekers and employees out there who suffer moderate to high levels of CA. They struggle to build and solidify relationships, get intimate, present themselves properly in job interviews and work harmoniously in a team. All these will negatively affect their performance in school, university or workplace and, in turn, increase their apprehension and submissiveness, which makes things even worse and the vicious cycle goes on. Millennials are the people who will be seeking jobs soon or who are currently working, but find it challenging to adapt to the demanding communication requirements of the workplace, be it speaking up in meetings, to a group of colleagues, to one individual colleague or in a group.

The findings of this study show that there is a negative relationship between EI and CA: the higher the EI, the lower the CA. This is good news as there are many things that can be done to increase EI and respectively decrease CA such as training sessions and workshops aiming at enhancing emotional intelligence, managing stress, controlling emotions, raising emotional awareness and bettering social skills. However, these programs need to be implemented on a lifelong basis to produce durable effects. On the other hand, there are numerous programs that can lower CA, such as visualization (Ayres & Hopf, 2009), systematic

desensitization (Barlow, et al., 2016) and cognitive behavioral modification (CBM) (Freud, et al., 2012).

Since the majority of Malaysian millennial have average levels of CA (Kaur, et al., 2012), this finding prove that it is worthwhile for policy makers in the education sector to consider implementing such programs and workshops into school and university curricula nationwide. School and university students are the future job seekers of Malaysia, who need proper communication skills to be successful in their personal, professional and academic lives. Skills such as self-awareness, social awareness, teamwork, confident presentation, discussion, public speaking and dyadic conversation are fundamental requirements of a brighter future for Malaysian millennial. Moreover, leaders in the workplace can use these findings to their advantage. They can increase the productivity of their employees by investing in such workshops continuously and reaping the rewards in the long run. More emotionally intelligent workers know how to handle awkward situations efficiently, how to collaborate with their workmates wisely and how to communicate with clients confidently. These traits will benefit the business much more than the initial cost of the workshops and training sessions (Gunkel, et al., 2014; Rohaizad, et al., 2017). Finally, individuals can take advantage of these results too. Anyone seeking a more satisfying professional, personal or academic life can personally attend such workshops/classes or work on their emotional intelligence with the aim of lessening communication apprehension.

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AUTHORS PROFILE

Shideh Ziaee Boroujeni Is working in Centre of Business Innovation & Digitisation, Faculty of Business Management, Asia Pacific University, Malaysia.

Mudiarasan Kuppusamy Is working in Centre of Business Innovation & Digitisation, Faculty of Business Management, Asia Pacific University, Malaysia.