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Investigating the Role of Social Intelligence and Psychological Hardiness in Emotional Creativity Among University Students

Raziyeh Larki [a], **Alireza Heidarei** [a *]

a. Department of Psychology, Ahv.C., Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran.

***Corresponding author:** Department of Psychology, Ahv.C., Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran. Postal Code: 6861423235. E-mail: heidarei@iau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Background: Managing the academic and interpersonal demands of higher education requires effective emotional regulation. Emotional creativity, characterized by the capacity to experience and express novel, authentic, and adaptive emotions, is vital for student well-being. This study investigated the predictive roles of social intelligence and psychological hardiness in emotional creativity among university students.

Methods: A descriptive correlational (cross-sectional) research design was utilized. The study included 151 students (103 females, 48 males) selected using convenience sampling from Ahvaz Petroleum University, Iran, in 2024. Participants completed the Emotional Creativity Inventory, the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale, and the Ahvaz Psychological Hardiness Scale. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlations and simultaneous multiple regression in SPSS version 26.

Results: The findings indicated significant positive correlations between social intelligence and emotional creativity ($r = 0.40$, $P < 0.001$) and between psychological hardiness and emotional creativity ($r = 0.31$, $P < 0.001$). The regression model demonstrated that social intelligence and psychological hardiness collectively accounted for 27.4% of the variance in emotional creativity ($R^2 = 0.274$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.269$, $F = 58.23$, $P < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Social intelligence and psychological hardiness are significant predictors of emotional creativity. Enhancing social competencies and fostering resilient cognitive frameworks can promote adaptive emotional processing and provide a foundation for targeted psychological interventions in universities.

1. Introduction

The transition to university life marks a critical developmental period characterized by profound academic, social, and personal challenges. University students frequently encounter high levels of stress due to rigorous academic demands, career uncertainty, financial pressures, and the complexities of establishing new interpersonal relationships and support networks (Córdova Olivera et al., 2023; Ruiz-Camacho & Gozalo, 2025). These multifaceted stressors often exceed the capacity of basic emotional regulation strategies, leading to increased vulnerability to anxiety, depressive symptoms, academic burnout, and diminished well-being (Ghanbari et al., 2020). Consequently, understanding the psychological mechanisms that enable students to thrive in such demanding environments is of paramount importance. In this context, basic emotional regulation is no longer sufficient; students must cultivate advanced emotional adaptability that allows them to process ambiguous situations and generate constructive, contextually appropriate responses to novel socio-academic hurdles (Ruiz-Camacho & Gozalo, 2025).

Central to this advanced emotional adaptability is the concept of emotional creativity. Originally conceptualized by Averill (1999), emotional creativity is a psychological construct characterized by the capacity to experience and

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express emotions in ways that are novel, effective, and authentic. Unlike conventional views of emotional responses that emphasize instinctual, universal, or rigid reactions, emotional creativity highlights the psychological flexibility required to tailor affective responses to highly specific and complex situational demands (Čábelková et al., 2022; Oriol et al., 2016). Extensive research indicates that emotional creativity has been associated with adaptive functioning, psychological resilience, academic engagement, and long-term success in both educational and occupational domains (Bulathwatta & Lakshika, 2023; González-Zamar & Abad-Segura, 2021; Yousefi & Baharvand Ahmadi, 2017). Individuals with high emotional creativity are better equipped to transform emotional ambiguity into opportunities for constructive coping, thereby expanding their repertoire of adaptive emotional responses when facing novel and ongoing challenges typical of university life.

A primary psychological factor that may contribute to emotional creativity is social intelligence. Social intelligence encompasses the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacities necessary to accurately perceive, interpret, and effectively manage complex interpersonal relationships and social dynamics (Liu & Boyatzis, 2021). This multifaceted construct includes social information processing, social awareness, and social skills, enabling individuals to demonstrate empathy, situational awareness, and effective communication (Jose & Thomas, 2024; Aryani et al., 2024). Socially intelligent individuals may be better equipped to navigate complex social networks. Their ability to recognize subtle emotional cues and manage interpersonal challenges may provide them with broader social experiences that support the generation of original and adaptive emotional responses (Merlin & Prabakar, 2026; Taheri et al., 2017). In the university context, where students must continuously interact with diverse peers and faculty, social intelligence may provide a cognitive basis for emotional creativity by enabling individuals to adapt their emotional responses to different interpersonal situations and develop more nuanced and innovative forms of emotional expression that support social harmony and personal adjustment. Alongside social intelligence, psychological hardiness serves as another critical intrapersonal resource associated with emotional creativity. Psychological hardiness is widely conceptualized as a resilient personality trait that buffers against the detrimental effects of stress (Jianping et al., 2022). It comprises three interrelated dimensions: commitment (a sense of purpose and involvement in life activities), control (the belief in one's ability to influence outcomes), and challenge (the tendency to view stressors as opportunities for growth rather than threats) (Malkin et al., 2019). Hardy individuals typically approach adversity with a growth-oriented mindset, which helps preserve cognitive and emotional resources. This resilient framework is theorized to promote openness to a wide spectrum of emotional experiences and greater tolerance for emotional distress, thereby creating an optimal internal environment for emotional creativity (Kuška et al., 2020; Hassan & Abdulkareem, 2025). Rather than resorting to rigid defensive mechanisms, hardy students may be more capable of synthesizing novel and constructive emotional expressions when confronted with university-related pressures.

Despite the widely recognized importance of emotional creativity in promoting psychological well-being and adaptive functioning, empirical research examining its specific developmental predictors among young adults remains fragmented. While previous studies have independently explored the protective roles of social intelligence and psychological hardiness in reducing stress and enhancing resilience, there is a notable paucity of literature investigating how these two constructs jointly contribute to the facilitation of emotional creativity. This gap is particularly relevant for university populations, who face unique transitional stressors. Understanding the dynamic interplay between interpersonal competencies (social intelligence) and intrapersonal resilience (psychological hardiness) is essential for developing evidence-based educational and counseling interventions.

The present study was designed to address this gap in the existing literature. It aimed to investigate the role of social intelligence and psychological hardiness in predicting emotional creativity among university students. Specifically, it was hypothesized that (1) social intelligence would be positively associated with emotional creativity, and (2) psychological hardiness would be positively associated with emotional creativity. Furthermore, it was expected that both variables would make unique contributions to the prediction of emotional creativity when examined simultaneously.

This investigation holds significant theoretical and practical implications. By clarifying the predictive roles of these psychosocial resources, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the factors that foster emotional adaptability during emerging adulthood. Such knowledge can inform the design of targeted interventions, such as social skills training programs and hardiness-enhancing workshops, ultimately supporting university students' mental health and academic success.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Design and Participants

The current study employed a descriptive-correlational (cross-sectional) research design. The target population comprised all undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at Ahvaz Petroleum University, Iran, during the 2024 academic year. A convenience sampling strategy was utilized to recruit participants. Initially, 175 survey packets were distributed across various university faculties to promote demographic diversity. Of these, 24 questionnaires were excluded due to invalid or grossly incomplete responses (e.g., more than 20% missing data, patterned or invariant responding, or failure to pass attention checks). Consequently, the final sample consisted of 151 students (103 females and 48 males). The sample size was determined based on statistical power considerations for multiple regression analysis. Assuming a medium effect size (f^2 =

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0.15), power of 0.80, and α = 0.05, a minimum of approximately 100-120 participants was required. The achieved sample of 151 exceeded this threshold, providing adequate power. The primary inclusion criteria required participants to be actively enrolled at the university and willing to participate. Participants were excluded only if they returned incomplete or improperly answered questionnaires.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Emotional Creativity Inventory (ECI)

Emotional creativity was assessed using Averill's (1999) Emotional Creativity Inventory. This 30-item self-report instrument assesses four facets of emotional creativity (preparedness, novelty, authenticity, and effectiveness) using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Total scores range from 30 to 150, with higher scores indicating greater emotional creativity. The Persian version has demonstrated acceptable reliability in Iranian samples, with Cronbach's α ranging from 0.72 to 0.85 (Ghadiri Nezhdyan & Abdi, 2010). In the present study, the instrument demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.81).

2.2.2 Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS)

Social intelligence was assessed with the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (Silvera et al., 2001). This 21-item questionnaire measures three domains (social information processing, social awareness, and social skills) on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The Persian version has shown good psychometric properties (Rezaie, 2011). In this study, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.84).

2.2.3 Ahvaz Psychological Hardiness Scale

Psychological hardiness was measured using the Ahvaz Psychological Hardiness Scale (Kiamarthi et al., 1998). This 27-item inventory uses a 4-point scale (0 = never to 3 = often). After reverse-scoring the relevant items, total scores range from 0 to 81, with higher scores indicating greater hardiness. Previous Iranian studies have reported Cronbach's α values between 0.75 and 0.87 (Kiamarthi et al., 1998). In the current sample, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.84). All instruments were administered in their validated Persian versions.

2.3 Procedure

Data collection occurred in formal classroom settings during scheduled class times, following coordination with faculty administrators. The primary researcher administered the survey packets to ensure standardized instructions and address participants' questions. Participants received a brief overview of the study aims, were assured that participation was voluntary and would not affect their academic standing, and provided informed consent. The questionnaires were completed anonymously in a quiet environment. Completed questionnaires were securely collected by the researcher.

2.4 Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26). Descriptive statistics were computed for demographic characteristics and study variables. Before hypothesis testing, the data were screened for missing values (handled via listwise deletion), univariate and multivariate outliers, and the assumptions of parametric tests, including normality (assessed via skewness/kurtosis and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test), linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity (VIF < 5), and independence of residuals. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine bivariate associations. Subsequently, a simultaneous multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the predictive contributions of social intelligence and psychological hardiness to emotional creativity. The significance level was set at α = 0.05. Effect sizes and 95% confidence intervals were reported where appropriate.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

All procedures adhered to the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and were approved by the Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch (ethics code: IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1403.250). Participants were fully informed about the study objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. No personally identifiable information was collected.

3. Results and Discussion

The final sample comprised 151 university students. Demographic characteristics were as follows: 72.2% (n = 109) were aged 19-29 years, and 27.8% (n = 42) were aged 30-39 years. Regarding relationship status, 60.9% (n = 92) were single, while 39.1% (n = 59) were married. The sample was predominantly female (68.2%, n = 103) compared with male participants (31.8%, n = 48).

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis for the main study variables. Participants reported a mean score of 64.28 (SD = 11.38) on emotional creativity, 86.34 (SD = 14.58) on social intelligence, and 46.38 (SD = 11.83) on psychological hardiness. All variables showed approximately normal distributions, with skewness and kurtosis values falling within the acceptable range of -1 to +1. No significant outliers or violations of normality assumptions were detected.

As shown in Table 2, Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant positive associations between the predictor variables and emotional creativity. Social intelligence was moderately correlated with emotional creativity (r = 0.40, *P* < 0.001), and psychological hardiness showed a significant but somewhat weaker positive correlation (r = 0.31, *P* <

0.001). No multicollinearity issues were present (VIF values < 2.0 for both predictors).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, skewness, and kurtosis for the study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Emotional creativity	64.28	11.38	-0.15	0.42
Social intelligence	86.34	14.58	0.64	-0.31
Psychological hardiness	46.38	11.83	-0.09	0.35

Table 2. Pearson correlations between emotional creativity and the predictor variables

Variable	Emotional creativity	*P*
Social intelligence	0.40	0.001
Psychological hardiness	0.31	0.001

A simultaneous multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined predictive power of social intelligence and psychological hardiness on emotional creativity. As presented in Table 3, the overall model was statistically significant, F = 58.23, $P < 0.001$, R = 0.52, $R^2 = 0.274$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.269$. Both predictors made unique and statistically significant contributions. Social intelligence (B = 0.30, SE = 0.05, $\beta = 0.30$, t = 3.16, $P = 0.001$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.40]); Psychological hardiness (B = 0.32, SE = 0.06, $\beta = 0.31$, t = 5.72, $P = 0.001$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.44]). Additional diagnostics confirmed that assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and independence of residuals were met. These results indicate that higher levels of social intelligence and psychological hardiness are significantly associated with greater emotional creativity among university students, with both variables contributing uniquely to the model.

Table 3. Simultaneous multiple regression analysis predicting emotional creativity

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	*P*	95% CI
Social intelligence	0.30	0.05	0.30	3.16	0.001	[0.20, 0.40]
Psychological hardiness	0.32	0.06	0.31	5.72	0.001	[0.20, 0.44]
Model summary	R = 0.52	R^2 = 0.274	Adj. R^2 = 0.269	F = 58.23	*P* < 0.001	-

The primary objective of the present study was to elucidate the predictive roles of social intelligence and psychological hardiness in fostering emotional creativity among university students. Consistent with the hypotheses, the findings demonstrated that both psychosocial constructs were significant positive predictors of emotional creativity. These results contribute to the growing body of literature on the psychological resources that support emotional adaptability during the challenging transition to university life.

A central finding of this research is the significant positive association between social intelligence and emotional creativity. This outcome aligns well with previous empirical work showing that socially adept individuals consistently exhibit higher levels of emotional originality and effectiveness (Oriol et al., 2016). Theoretically, social intelligence encompasses a broad spectrum of competencies, including acute social awareness, empathy, and refined communication skills (Liu & Boyatzis, 2021; Jose & Thomas, 2024). In the university context, students with elevated social intelligence are better attuned to subtle social cues, group dynamics, and the emotional states of their peers. This heightened perceptual sensitivity likely acts as a cognitive catalyst, enabling them to break away from conventional emotional reactions and generate novel, context-appropriate emotional responses that foster interpersonal harmony and personal adjustment (Aryani et al., 2024; Merlin & Prabakar, 2026). Such abilities appear particularly valuable in environments characterized by diverse peer networks and frequent social negotiation.

Furthermore, the current results robustly established psychological hardiness as a significant, independent predictor of emotional creativity. This finding is consistent with studies linking resilient personality traits to enhanced emotional flexibility and depth (Kuška et al., 2020; Bulathwatta & Lakshika, 2023). Hardiness, comprising the dimensions of commitment, control, and challenge (Malkin et al., 2019; Jianping et al., 2022), functions as a vital cognitive buffer. Hardy students tend to perceive academic and social adversities not as overwhelming threats but as opportunities for growth. This positive reframing reduces psychological distress and preserves cognitive-emotional resources, thereby creating an internal psychological safety net that supports deeper exploration of emotional experiences and more creative emotional expressions (Hassan & Abdulkareem, 2025).

When evaluated concurrently, the integration of social intelligence and psychological hardiness offers a comprehensive and complementary framework for understanding the genesis of emotional creativity. Social intelligence provides the external, interpersonal toolkit necessary for navigating complex social environments, while psychological hardiness supplies the internal fortitude required to withstand stress and maintain emotional equilibrium (Mugabekazi, 2026). Operating in tandem, these resources may enable students to process emotionally charged information more deeply and express it in ways that are both original and highly adaptive. The model accounted for 27.4% of the variance in emotional creativity, suggesting that a meaningful portion of individual differences in this ability can be explained by the combination of these two constructs. However, the remaining variance indicates that other factors-such as general intelligence, personality traits, or cultural influences-also play important roles and warrant further investigation.

These findings extend previous research by demonstrating that emotional creativity, as conceptualized by Averill (1999), is not an isolated trait but emerges from the dynamic interaction between interpersonal acumen and intrapersonal resilience. This dual-pathway perspective has important theoretical implications for models of emotional functioning in young adults facing transitional stressors (Ruiz-Camacho & Gozalo, 2025; Shengyao et al., 2026).

Despite these valuable insights, several limitations must be considered. The cross-sectional design fundamentally precludes causal inferences regarding the directionality of

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relationships. The reliance on self-report questionnaires may have introduced social desirability bias or common method variance. Furthermore, the use of convenience sampling restricted to students at a single institution in Ahvaz, Iran, limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural, socioeconomic, or educational contexts. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to clarify temporal relationships, incorporate multi-method assessments (e.g., behavioral observations or peer ratings), and recruit more diverse samples.

From a practical standpoint, the present results suggest that university counseling centers and student support programs could benefit from developing interventions aimed at enhancing both social intelligence and psychological hardiness. Examples include structured social skills workshops, resilience training programs based on hardiness principles, and integrated emotional creativity modules. However, such recommendations should be implemented cautiously and subjected to rigorous empirical evaluation through randomized controlled trials.

In summary, the current study provides correlational evidence supporting the predictive roles of social intelligence and psychological hardiness in relation to emotional creativity. By illuminating these relationships, the findings offer a foundation for future research and applied efforts to support university students' psychological well-being and adaptive emotional functioning.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this cross-sectional study provides evidence that social intelligence and psychological hardiness are significant positive predictors of emotional creativity among university students. Students with higher levels of these psychosocial resources may be more likely to demonstrate originality and effectiveness in emotional expression. While these results highlight the potential value of fostering social skills and psychological hardiness, the correlational nature of the data warrants cautious interpretation. Future longitudinal and intervention studies are needed to establish causal pathways and evaluate the effectiveness of targeted programs across diverse student populations. Overall, strengthening social intelligence and psychological hardiness may represent promising avenues for supporting university students' emotional well-being and adaptive functioning.

Authors' Contributions

Raziyeh Larki: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data collection; Formal analysis; and writing of the original draft. **Alireza Heidarei:** Study design; Supervision; Validation; Writing; Reviewing; and editing of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no competing interests in this research.

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Ethical Considerations

The approval was granted under the ethics code IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1403.250.

Using Artificial Intelligence

The Artificial Intelligence tools were not used in this research.

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