

MBA Candidates' Openness to Using Digital Technologies to Develop their Emotional Intelligence

Mihaela GOLOGAN¹
Nicoleta CĂRUCERU²
Bianca Andreea BALINT³

Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a critical competence in the context of digitalisation, especially for managers. While executives select MBA studies to improve their hard and soft skills, traditional curricula are criticised for having a predilection for hard skills development at the detriment of soft skills. The scope of this research is to identify if the integration of digital tools for mastering emotional intelligence could align with managers' expectations, by analysing their learning preferences and their potential adoption barriers at the same time. To accomplish this objective, a preliminary quantitative analysis was used on a sample of 25 MBA candidates. Data analysis was conducted using nonparametric tests on 11 hypotheses. The findings reveal a significant openness of MBA candidates to integrate emotional intelligence learning through digital tools. Although the study did not support the hypothesis that digital technologies influence emotional intelligence, it highlights the importance of digital readiness. Notably, time, costs, security, and technologies are not a challenge for managers, and business schools can address this need through hybrid learning integration.

Keywords: *emotional intelligence, MBA, digital tools, digital learning, manager.*

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1. Introduction

Today's managers operate in environments shaped by uncertainty, rapid change, and complex interpersonal dynamics, especially in the context of ongoing digitalization. These conditions have led to a shift in the competencies required for effective management. Modern organizations no longer rely only on technical expertise or analytical abilities. Instead, they place increasing emphasis on interpersonal, adaptive, and emotional skills. These are now considered essential for

¹ Mihaela Gologa, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, E-mail: gologanmihaela24@stud.ase.ro

² Nicoleta Căruțeru, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, E-mail: carucerunicoleta18@stud.ase.ro

³ Bianca Andreea Balint, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, E-mail: balintbianca22@stud.ase.ro

effective leadership. Among these competencies, emotional intelligence (EI) has gained particular attention. It plays an important role in communication, decision-making, teamwork, and overall organizational performance (Goleman, 2004; Côté, 2014).

The concept of EI was first introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990). They defined it as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions. Goleman (2004) later expanded this perspective into a broader competency-based framework. This includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These dimensions have been consistently associated with leadership effectiveness and improved organizational outcomes (Joseph and Newman, 2010; Salameh-Ayanian, Tamer, and Maalouf, 2025). As organizations become more collaborative and less hierarchical, the ability of managers to navigate emotional and social interactions becomes increasingly important. In this context, EI can be seen as a core managerial capability rather than a complementary one.

Also, management education has adapted to the evolving demands of the labor market, particularly through Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs. These programs were initially designed to develop managerial expertise for industrialized economies. Over time, they have incorporated a broader set of competencies. These include leadership, strategic thinking, and soft skills (Isazada and Jafarov, 2024). More recently, MBA curricula have placed greater emphasis on learning from experience and personal development. There is an increasing focus on emotional and social skills. This reflects the growing recognition of EI as a key driver of managerial success.

At the same time, digital technologies have significantly reshaped both organizational practices and educational processes. Digitalization includes the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), artificial intelligence (AI), and online learning platforms. These developments have enabled new forms of interaction, collaboration, and knowledge acquisition (Bond et al., 2018). Importantly, this transformation has not only affected how tasks are performed. It has also changed how emotions are expressed, perceived, and managed in professional environments.

This change has contributed to the development of the concept of digital competence. It refers to the ability to effectively use digital technologies for communication, problem-solving, and knowledge creation (Ferrari, Punie, and Brečko, 2013; Sillat, Tammets, and Laanpere, 2021). Building on this, recent literature has introduced the concept of digital EI. This concept integrates emotional competencies with digital skills. It emphasizes the ability to understand, express, and manage emotions in digitally mediated environments (Audrin and Audrin, 2023). From this perspective, digital EI can be seen as an extension of traditional EI.

Within this, digital tools are increasingly explored as potential means for developing EI. These include e-learning platforms, virtual simulations, artificial intelligence-based applications, and online collaborative environments. Such tools can support reflective learning, provide feedback, and simulate complex interpersonal situations. They can also enhance self-awareness. In this way, they

contribute to the development of emotional competencies (Durham et al., 2023). However, their effectiveness depends not only on their design and functionality. It also depends on users' willingness to adopt and actively engage with them.

Despite these developments, empirical evidence regarding the use of digital technologies for EI development remains limited. This is particularly the case in the context of MBA education. Previous research has examined EI in leadership and the role of digitalization in learning processes. However, the intersection of these domains has received less attention. There is limited empirical evidence regarding whether future managers are open to using digital tools for developing emotional competencies. It is also unclear how frequently such tools are used in practice, and which factors influence their adoption.

Also, existing research suggests that the implementation of digital learning tools may be influenced by several factors. These include individual characteristics such as age, professional experience, and field of activity. In addition, perceived barriers may play an important role. These include time constraints, costs, technological limitations, and concerns related to data security (Kaddouri et al., 2024). Understanding these aspects is essential for designing effective educational interventions. It is also important to align MBA programs with the expectations and needs of their participants.

The present study aims to investigate MBA candidates' openness to using digital technologies for EI development. More specifically, it examines the current use of digital tools for EI development, the willingness to adopt such tools in the future, and the perceived barriers associated with their use. In addition, the study explores the influence of demographic and professional characteristics on the adoption of digital technologies in this context.

2. Literature review

2.1 MBA Studies as a Tool for Management Development

Nowadays, when we refer to MBA (Master of Business Administration), we refer to a form of advanced studies (Isazada & Jafarov, 2024) comprised of theoretical knowledge intertwined with practical expertise, with emphasis on strategic thinking, analytical capabilities, and entrepreneurial mindset, leading to the ability to perform in complex business environments, a feature desired in the corporate world. But back in 1908, when the first MBA program was established at Harvard Business School (Garner, 2021), its main purpose was to train managers in the industrialized sector. Throughout the time, there were many changes and updates to the learning program, to keep the pace with the economical changes of the environment (AGBM, n.d.): (1) 1990s period use of corporate influence, specializations, globalization and integration of technology; (2) 2000s period use of executive education, online learning and focus on leadership and soft skills; (3) 2010s and nowadays period use of diversity and inclusive, curriculum based on

technology and data-driven, as well as sustainability and social responsibility; thus, it became the standard qualification for managers.

Research conducted by Isazada and Jafarov (2024) regarding the value of the MBA, used two theoretical approaches: the human capital theory of Gary Becker, in which education and training lead to higher productivity, progress in career and salary increase, and the transformational leadership theory of James MacGregor Burns, in which the growth of the leaders through education and development leads to inspiration and innovation, driving organizational change, with better support provided to the various teams while navigating business challenges. Also, another advantage of the MBA degree mentioned by this research (Isazada & Jafarov, 2024) is the future career opportunities in various sectors such as consulting, finance, and technology, where the skills acquired during the studies, from leadership to negotiation and decision-making abilities, are much needed and desired by the organizations. On top of these features, the MBA's transformative nature helps the students to gain or grow their emotional intelligence, as well as cultural awareness and networking skills, leading to future career opportunities and collaboration.

For the MBA students to achieve all these, there are several strategic management tools and techniques (SMTT) such as SWOT Analysis, PESTEL Analysis, Porter's Five Forces and Balanced Scorecard (LSPM, 2022), with applicability and use in the real world organisations, as shown by the research conducted by Qehaja et al. (2017) that identified the most used SMTT being the ones mentioned above, together with other SMTTs such as benchmarking, "what if" analysis, vision and mission statements, business financial analysis, key success factors analysis, cost-benefit analysis and customer satisfaction.

Research done by Fisher (2019) uses Evidence-Based Management (EBMgt), a managerial approach (Gifford & Velghe, 2025) that links research to practice, intending to improve the decisions taken by managers, using evidence from various sources, as well as for academia, with the use of the systematic review that builds up the theoretical part and the real-world impact. Gifford and Velghe (2025) mention four main sources of evidence: practitioner expertise, scientific literature, organizational data, and stakeholder views, and identify a six-step approach to EBMgt: (1) critical thinking used to substantiate the questions of an investigation; (2) sourcing, (3) appraisal, (4) prioritization, (5) aggregation of evidence to inform decisions; and (6) assessment of the outcomes of implemented decisions. Fisher's research (2019) refers also to the New World Kirkpatrick Model (Kirkpatrick & Kayser, 2022), with its four levels of training evaluation: level 1, reaction, with focus on engagement, relevance and customer satisfaction; level 2, learning, with focus on knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence and commitment; level 3, behavior, with focus on on-the-job-learning, encouragement, monitoring, reinforcing and reward; and level 4, results, with focus on leading indicators and desired outcomes. The results of Fisher's research (2019) showed that the organizations consider the following competencies of their future employees the most important: work experience, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and the MBA graduates have acquired these desired competencies.

There is a continuous interest in this topic, from the point of view of the organizations that aim to hire skilled managers to be able to obtain the best results in this nowadays changing and challenging business environment, as well as from MBA students and graduates who would like to access a higher management position in a certain organization. This is why the current MBA programs, as per the literature reviewed, are evolving to these requirements, by having customized programs, with a focus on entrepreneurship, use of data and analytics, while using a digital and/or hybrid format of the courses.

2.2 Emotional Intelligence as a Competence for Managers

When assessing the leadership and behavior in organizational environments, the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) is highlighted, as it represents the ability to model how an individual acts when it comes to perception, processing and managing the emotions within the influence of the workplace setup (Salameh-Ayanian et al, 2025), concept defined by Daniel Goleman (2004), based on research of Salovey and Mayer (1990) and their ability model of EI, Goleman proposing a mixed model comprised of five core competencies: (1) self-awareness, which enables the identification and understanding of the emotions and triggers of the individual, and the effects they have on other individuals, (2) self-regulation, which allows the individual to manage their emotional responses, by controlling the impulsive reactions and maintaining the equanimity, (3) motivation, which is an intrinsic quality of the individual with focus on achieving the desired goals, while maintaining a positive attitude, despite hurdles encountered, (4) empathy, which makes the individual able to recognize and understand others' point of views (through cognitive empathy) and feelings (through emotional empathy), and (5) social skills, which supports the leaders to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and build cooperative relationships (Goleman, 2004), and ultimately leading to effective leadership. In addition to this, Bar-On's model of emotional quotient (EQ) mentions that EI is important for individual well-being, as well as adaptability and social functioning (Bar-On, 2005). Bar-On's model of emotional-social intelligence (ESI) with its Emotional Quotient Inventory (the EQ-i) focuses on five composite scales: intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general mood; thus showing an interest in the analysis of these concepts. Research conducted by Coronado-Maldonado and Benítez-Márquez (2023) mentioned that, based on Bar-On's scale, researchers Petrides and Furnham created the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue), while Goleman created the Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI). However, they also identified that although these scales present a high level of reliability and internal consistency, the scales cannot identify and indicate whether the concepts they assess have already been measured by other, more established methods (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023). Another research conducted by Wappenschmidt and Schulenburg (2024) related to Antonakis et al.'s perceptions, which build on the

above-mentioned concepts and introduce the importance of cognitive intelligence and leadership style, besides the EI, in order for effective and successful leadership.

When analyzing leadership through the lenses of EI, research by Coronado-Maldonado and Benítez-Márquez (2023) concludes that for effective leadership, there has to be a strong emotional component, that is, the emotional intelligence, and how the leader can manage the emotions of their teams proactively or reactively can influence the effectiveness of the leadership of the organization. In line with these findings, Jain (2023) reflects on the organizations and their challenges and opportunities and considers that effective leadership with leaders equipped with emotional intelligence can help the organization to have effective communication, to build strong relationships, to have effective conflict management and decision making, while motivating and inspiring the teams and their members.

Leaders should anticipate the changes in the competence requests on the job market and align their and employees' skills with industry evolution (Grigorescu et al., 2020). In the context of artificial intelligence implementation, the role of employees is changing from simple executants to a more strategic role (Pantea et al. 2024) where emotional intelligence receives a central role. Moreover, emotional intelligence provides the determination to perform at work and to improve the quality of work (Sabie et al., 2025).

EI and EQ will continue to be of interest for the researchers, as well for the organizations and their leadership, due to constant changes of the organizational environment and the characteristics of the employees and nature of the tasks and responsibilities performed, in line with the enhancement and rapid changes in technology due to artificial intelligence, in a world with constraints, challenges and opportunities that shift from one day to the next, with noticeable impact in terms of organizational impact, enhanced decision making, talent retention and cost effectiveness.

2.3 Digitalisation in the Context of Learning Emotional Intelligence

Given the rise of technology use in the present time, the emotional intelligence concept has evolved to the Digital Emotional Intelligence (DEI/dEI), intertwining the emotional intelligence with the digital competence (DC). While the EI components have been mentioned above, as per Audrin and Audrin (2023), the components of DC are: (1) information, (2) communication and collaboration, (3) critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making abilities, (4) safety and legality, all with focus on the use of digital technology, and (5) digital foundation skills, thus DC is not comprised only by the technical skills, but also knowledge, skills and attitudes (Sillat et al., 2021), a simplified concept of DC being the ability of individuals to perform tasks and activities in the digital environment (Audrin & Audrin, 2023) which can be deeply influenced and modelled by the labor market (Sillat et al., 2021), with digital tools as part of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), such as use of artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR), machine learning (ML), for analytics, learning modules and collaboration online

platforms (Saikia & Dutta, 2025), which also requires an adequate technological infrastructure in order to function at the normal parameters, as well as maintaining the appropriate data privacy and security, and appropriate and specific training of the users (Kaddouri et al., 2024).

In the context of an increased interest of researchers in the field of emotional intelligence (Necula, 2025), it is observed that in companies, more digitalized ones have a better stability of workforce compared to the more traditional ones (Vodă, et al. 2025). In-depth analysis of the technical IT sector, emotional intelligence is not less present; in fact, it reflects the level of engagement in achieving success at work (Covrig et al., 2025). Research conducted in 2024 regarding the influence of digital technology use on emotional intelligence concluded that this hypothesis is not supported (Hadi et al., 2024). EI has been proven to be more of a facilitator in adopting digitalization (Lydiana et al. 2025) and a tool to mitigate technostress. Despite these previous results, because this research analyzes from the perspective of learning emotional intelligence through digital tools by a person with high business responsibility, the situation could be more favorable for having a direct impact. In this context, the H1 hypothesis was formulated:

H1. The use of digital tools has contributed to the development of emotional intelligence

Since 2020, there have been studies that confirmed that the majority of managers from public and private businesses have started using digital tools in their daily work (Bencsik, 2020) and continue to do so at the moment of this research (Arees, 2025). Considering that MBA candidates are dominant managers, due to admission rules, hypothesis H2 is:

H2. MBA candidates have already used digital tools.

From the perspective of self-reflection as part of emotional intelligence, a study published in 2025 (Eidenmüller et al., 2025) brought to light the fact that managers still prefer using traditional tools such as observation or notebooks. Meanwhile, initiatives for digital tools usage in emotional learning exist (Madanchian & Taherdoost, 2025), and it is expected to increase the openness and abilities of managers to use digital tools; hypothesis H6 was stated:

H3. MBA candidates are open to using digital tools for emotional development

Technology challenges, such as rapid development and diversity, are barriers to adopting digital tools, especially for older managers (Yozi & Mbokota, 2024). The obstacles are even higher when it refers to the abstract parts of management, such as social or emotional areas (Yozi & Mbokota, 2024). Although until now, no research has addressed the question of emotional intelligence directly from this perspective, by extrapolating the previous research, hypothesis H4 is:

H4. Managerial experience influences the openness to using digital technologies for Emotional intelligence development

Looking by age, a study done on Generation Z (Yavuz et al., 2024) shows that they have the ability to easily combine emotional intelligence with digital

competencies. Focusing on the highest business level responsibilities, a shift appears: age, gen, education level, or field of activity have no more influence on digital tools usage (Biclesanu et al., 2021). As long as managers have the responsibility to ensure performance, no matter their age or field of activity, hypothesis 5 was composed as:

H5 Field of activity and age do not influence the use of digital technologies for EI

The MBA studies were long-term, concentrated on hard skills (such as finance), rather than soft skills (such as communication). Mintzberg in 2004 warned about this “skill gap”: it is no longer about digitized decisions; it is a real need for coaching, networking, and others. From this perspective, hypothesis H7 was stated:

H6 MBA candidates want digital learning for IE integrated into MBA programs

Continuing the investigation on learning IE, in the last year, among young people, the preference for hybrid learning has risen. This was observed in an academic environment (Ghazali-Mohammed et al., 2024), which also applies to this research.

H7 The preference for hybrid IE learning is influenced by age

Learning, particularly emotional intelligence, is a desire for managers; they may have concerns that stop them from improving. One of the obstacles is time, a limited resource for everyone, more stringent in some fields, like logistics (Cichosz et al. 2020). Money is the second concern in digitalization (Restrepo-Morales et al., 2024), recognized by companies due to its initial investment at a high level. After money and time are invested in the new digital tools, technical errors appear, prevalent at the start of usage, adding in this way new disappointments for their investor and users (Wu, 2021). Later raises a supplementary anxiety linked to data privacy and security, but financial issues and personal information are the most stringent (Diener & Špaček, 2021). For these reasons, four hypotheses were created:

H8 Lack of time is an obstacle to learning EI digitally.

H9 The technology is not sufficiently resolved to be used in IE

H10 The cost of applications is an obstacle

H11 The application security is an obstacle

Finally, the main aim of the paper is to identify if emotional intelligence is not just a tool necessary for digital adoption; it can also be the vice versa: a digital tool can contribute to sustaining the development of EI for managers in the MBA context.

3. Research Methodology

Some of the MBA candidates who wish to make informed decisions about their future studies participate in dedicated events. At these events, MBA providers all around the world have the opportunity to present their learning offer as the best choice for their prospects. The event was promoted by the organiser some weeks

before. The participants are invited to participate in a panel discussion where 3-4 MBA schools answer open questions and/or to register for a one-to-one discussion with school representatives. This discussion is a mix of information sharing and a match based on an interview between the school and the candidate. The event is free for MBA candidates. For MBA schools, it represents a marketing activity.

This kind of event is organised in Bucharest, Romania, twice a year in spring and autumn. The event lasts around 4 hours, including breaks, and each one-to-one discussion takes 10-15 minutes. The maximum capacity is around 120 one-to-one discussions, but many of the participants chose to speak to 2-3 schools.

During the two events organised in 2025. The sampling method used is non-probabilistic, sampling through convenience (Tharenou et al., 2007) by participating and applying a survey to the event's participants. This variant was chosen because research had direct access to participants in their normal environment. A total of 25 responses were received. This research was not sponsored by the event organiser, nor by any MBA school present at the event.

The questionnaire application was conducted using the Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing method, which combines the advantages of face-to-face contact with a researcher with those of online survey administration. The researchers asked the event participants to complete the survey on their own phones by scanning a QR code. Before their answer, the scope of the research, duration, and how to fill it. The advantages of this face-to-face contact are ensuring trust in the confidentiality of data, answering any questions that they may have, and reducing any uncertainty that the responder can have (Gonzalez et al., 1990).

The participants answered on their privacy without external influence. The advantages of online answering are the comfort of answering during their waiting time on their own device, having confidential information in written form, and the fluidity of the question-answer (Caeyers et al., 2012).

The questionnaire contains 7 sections (1) 5 questions for EI level identification bases on Goleman 5 arias (Goleman, 2004) (3) 4 questions regarding general openness to use digital tools (4) 5 questions exploring the willingness to learn emotional intelligence using digital tools (5) 4 questions addressing the barriers in using digital tool to learn emotional intelligence (6) 3 open question where responder could express in their words information about the subject (7) 4 question for demographic information.

The questions from sections 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 were evaluated on a Likert scale on 5 levels. The 5-level scale is a tool often used in research to identify digitalisation readiness (Thi Thu Thuy, 2023), to analyse emotional intelligence (Mirhosseini et al., 2020), and for learning/ knowledge sharing (Tønnessen et al., 2021).

The demographic section collected basic information about gender, age group, field of activity, and year of experience in management. This information will help identify the preference difference between responders

For data analysis, a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to allow a descriptive exploration and the testing of main variables. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation) provide an initial profile of MBA

candidates. Due to the small sample size (N=25) and the data collected through Likert scales, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was utilized to assess the relationship between emotional intelligence and digital openness. For the qualitative analysis, determined from the open questions, content text analysis was applied to identify recurrent themes and language patterns, to obtain a contextual interpretation that complements the numerical data.

4. Results

4.1 Data Preparation and Analysis of Survey Response

The survey answer was exported from Google to Excel. For data preparation, a check was performed of data missing, data duplication, or inconsistency (long string responses) using standard deviation; no issues were found. For data analysis, the Jamovi 2.6.44 application was used. This software was selected for its non-parametric test functionalities, especially the Kruskal-Wallis test, which is suitable for the Likert scale on small data.

For each participant, a composite score was generated to identify the level of openness to use digital tools and the level of emotional intelligence. The level of openness to use digital tools was calculated as an arithmetic mean of 4 items based on usage frequency, usage openness, and project involvement. While emotional intelligence is the arithmetic mean of 5 items, constructed based on Goleman's five areas of emotional intelligence. Using multi-item scales offers a higher level of reliability compared to a single measurement.

Analysing the internal consistency of the scales, it was identified as a high level for both Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω (Table 1) over 0,8, which exceeds the limit of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978), suggesting that items are interrelated and correctly measure their concepts. Standard deviation indicates greater dispersion among responders with openness to using digital tools (1.11) than among those with higher emotional intelligence (0.77).

Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega coefficients for openness to use digital tools and emotional intelligence

Table 1

	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω
Emotional intelligence	5.00	3.8	0.77	0.80	0.81
Openness to using digital tools	4.00	3.91	1.11	0.89	0.90

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

Note: SD = Standard deviation

4.2 Hypothesis Evaluation

As can be observed from Table 2, there is no correlation between the level of openness to use digital tools and the level of emotional intelligence (p-value = 0.26 > 0.05). Although Spearman's rho has a positive value of 0.26 due to a great value of p-value this relationship can not be confirmed. Considering that only 25 responses were analysed, the results are not statistically relevant. H1 is not supported. Future research could be conducted in a larger sample to validate the findings.

Correlation between openness to use digital tools and emotional intelligence

Table 2

	Openness to use digital tools	
emotional intelligence	Spearman's rho	0.26
	df	23.00
	p-value	0.26
	N	25.00

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

Regarding the usage of digital tools for emotional intelligence development, the non-parametric Wilcoxon test conducted against a theoretical neutral reference (test value=3), was utilized. The p-value of 0.003 and W of 267 (Table 3) indicate that the responders have a relevant preference for using digital tools, confirming the H2 hypothesis. It is a shift from the traditional perception of face-to-face learning to digital EI learning.

Digital tools usage level

Table 3

	Mean	SD	Wilcoxon W	p-value
Openness to use digital tools	3.91	1.11	267.00	0.003

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

A series of one-sample Wilcoxon tests was performed to compare the constructs against the theoretical neutral midpoint (test value=3) to demonstrate that the results are not random or inconsistent for hypotheses H2-H11.

The results obtained for the openness to use digital tools for emotional development, as shown in Table 4, have statistical significance (p<0.05), demonstrating a clear positioning of MBA candidates towards digitalization. This means that H4 is confirmed.

Openness to using digital tools for my emotional development

Table 4

	Wilcoxon W	Statistic	p-value
Open to using digital tools for my emotional development.	One-sample T-test	153.00	0.008
	Normality test	0.86	0.002

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

Using linear regression to identify if managerial experience is or not influencing the openness to using digital technologies for emotional intelligence development (Table 5) shows that having more experience negatively influences the openness to using digital tools. Therefore, H4 is confirmed. Having R^2 very small demonstrates that other factors influence digital adoption more than experience or age.

Managerial experience influences the openness to using digital tools for my emotional development

Table 5

	Estimate	SE	t	p
Experience	3.69	0.32	11.51	<0.001
	0.00	0.03	-0.01	0.992
	R	R²	Normality	p
	0.002	0.00	0.86	0.003

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

Note: SE = standard error; t = Student's t-test statistic; R = Pearson correlation coefficient; p = p-value, R^2 = coefficient of determination (variance explained)

The obtained large value for p-value (>0,05 according to Table 6) regarding the influence of age and field of activity on the openness to using digital tools for emotional development indicates that, as estimated in Hypothesis 5, there is no influence. Neither analysing in detail by group age or field, it is not confirmed. Comparing the p-value for age groups, using detailed post-hoc analysis, there are no relevant differences between them, suggesting that age is no longer a barrier to learning by using digital tools.

The Kruskal-Wallis test exceeds the 0,05 threshold significantly. These findings suggest that the willingness to adopt digital technologies for emotional intelligence is a transversal characteristic of the sample. Although the non-statistical relevance, observing ϵ^2 value for age and field, the field of activity has more influence than age. This observation can be investigated in future research. Furthermore, examining df (degree of freedom) again for the field of activity is higher, indicating a fragmentation among responders.

Age and field influence on openness to using digital tools for EI

Table 6

	H	df	p	ϵ^2
AGE→ Openness to using digital tools for my emotional development	1.59	3.00	0.661	0.0663
			W	p
	28-35	36-45	0.282	0.997
	28-35	46-45	-1.333	0.782
	28-35	<=27	-1.014	0.891
	36-45	46-45	-1.696	0.668
	36-45	<=27	-1.043	0.882

	H	df	p	ϵ^2
	46-45	<=27	0.000	1.000
Openness to using digital tools for EI	12.20	12.00	0.428	0.509

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

Note: H = Kruskal-Wallis statistic, df=Degrees of Freedom; p = p-value; ϵ^2 = Effect Size; W = Wilcoxon statistic

Being an event dedicated to MBA clients to whom the school should address their practical needs; responders were requested to evaluate the willingness to learn emotional intelligence through digital tools. Using the non-parametric Wilcoxon test against the neutral midpoint (test value = 3), a p-value with statistical significance ($p=0.048 < 0.05$ in Table 7) was obtained. Even though the p-value is at the superior limit, having the mean difference at 1.00 and W at 111, the candidates' need is confirmed (H6). Having a median of 4 indicates, supplementary, that the majority of responders expressed agreement on the question. They are no longer traditional; they expect that digital tools are automatically included in the curricula. The technology integration should be addressed in MBA agenda.

MBA candidates want digital learning for IE in MBA programs

Table 7

	Statistic	p	Mean dif	Median	SD	SE
Wilcoxon W	111.00	0.048	1.00	4.00	1.16	0.23
Normality test	W 0.84	0.001				

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

Note: p = p-value; SD = Standard deviation, SE = standard error

If the presence of Emotional intelligence learning using digital tools can be discussed due to the close value to the standard $p=0,05$; regarding the hybrid format of learning, it is a clear preference for it, indicated by a p-value=0.006 (table 8) on the Wilcoxon test, which is significantly lower than 0.05. Corroborating with a mean difference of 1.00 units indicates a significant shift in collective perception from neutrality to an attitude of active acceptance. As in the above table 7, also here exists the same median of 4 with standard error ~0,2 it reconfirms the same group tendency. H7 is confirmed, demonstrating that the future of emotional intelligence learning in a business environment lies in a balanced multi-modal approach.

MBA candidates want digital learning for IE integrated into MBA

Table 8

	Statistic	p	Mean dif	Median	SD	SE
Wilcoxon W	202.00	0.006	1.00	4.00	1.25	0.26
Normality test	W 0.77	<0.001				

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

Note: p = p-value; SD = Standard deviation, SE = standard error

Analysing the obstacle in learning emotional intelligence: time available for learning, the development of technology, the price, and the security of the application that could be used for emotional intelligence learning, none of them was confirmed at the Wilcoxon test from the neutral midpoint (test value=3) p-value (Table 9) is significantly higher than 0.05 and the median of 3. All responders have a neutral opinion (median is 3); all four factors are not perceived as an obstacle, nor as an advantage. These results underline the readiness for digital EI tools usage.

Supplementary regarding barriers, it addressed an open question to identify other obstacles, but no new issues were identified. Even though at the group level, time is not an issue, at the individual level, four responders expressed time as a personal concern, validating the preference for hybrid learning. For MBA studies providers, this information indicates to them that the market is open, with the condition of efficient integration.

MBA candidates want digital learning for IE integrated into MBA

Table 9

		Statistic	p	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Time	Wilcoxon W	75.00	0.539	3.00	3.00	1.26	0.25
	Normality test	0.92	0.039				
Technology	Wilcoxon W	90.50	0.252	3.16	3.00	1.14	0.23
	Normality test	0.92	0.063				
Price	Wilcoxon W	36.00	0.611	2.96	3.00	1.17	0.23
	Normality test	0.87	0.004				
Security	Wilcoxon W	87.50	0.304	3.12	3.00	1.30	0.26
	Normality test	0.91	0.029				

Source: author adapted from Jamovi 2.6.44

Note: p = p-value; SD = Standard deviation, SE = standard error

The responders were requested to indicate what digital tools they had used for learning emotional leadership. They indicated podcast, elearning, videos, artificial intelligence, blogs, and e-books. Also, they were asked about noticing other leaders using or promoting digital tools to increase emotional intelligence; only 25% of them confirmed. This percentage indicates that this good practice is not extended, and a possible difference between what they express theoretically through questions answered and what they do in practice.

4. Discussion

Our study examined MBA candidates' openness to using digital technologies for EI development and explored the role of several influencing factors. Overall, the findings indicate a generally positive attitude toward the use of digital tools in this area.

The results do not support the first hypothesis, as no statistically significant relationship was identified between the use of digital tools and the level of EI (Table

10). Despite the observed positive tendency, the association was not statistically significant due to the small sample size. This suggests that higher EI may not be a direct result of using digital tools. This result supports the idea that complex social and cognitive processes, rather than isolated technological interaction, are how EI develops (Mayer et al., 2016). As a result, digital tools may serve as facilitators rather than directly determining emotional competence.

The results demonstrate (Table 10) that participants have already used digital tools for learning related to EI, supporting the second hypothesis. It suggests that MBA candidates already integrate these instruments into their strategies for learning. This outcome is in accordance with studies that demonstrate how digital learning environments are becoming more and more integrated into higher education and help students develop cross-disciplinary abilities that go beyond technical knowledge (Redecker, 2017).

The respondents' intention to utilize digital tools for the development of EI supports the third hypothesis (Table 10). That suggests that attitudes regarding technology-assisted learning in this field are usually favourable. This result is in accordance with Ifenthaler and Schumacher's (2016) results, which indicate that students are becoming more open to digital learning options, especially when they provide flexibility, accessibility, and learning autonomy.

The fourth hypothesis is confirmed by the analysis (Table 10), which demonstrates that managerial experience influences an individual's capacity to apply digital tools for the development of EI. Experts may rely more on conventional learning and leadership development methods because they believe these methods are more effective in developing interpersonal skills. This interpretation corresponds to models of technology acceptance that emphasize how experience shapes perceived utility and behavioral intention (Venkatesh, Thong, and Xu, 2012).

The results support the fifth hypothesis (Table 10) because neither age nor occupation was found to have a statistically significant impact on willingness to use digital tools. This implies that the respondents' perception was rather homogeneous. While previous studies suggest that contextual and demographic factors can impact technology adoption (Tarhini et al., 2014), these variations were not apparent in this study.

The sixth hypothesis is also supported by the results (Table 10). It indicates that respondents are in favor of MBA programs to include digital tools for the development of EI. This shows the growing need for adaptable, technologically advanced learning environments in management education. According to Kane et al. (2015), the findings are consistent with the broader transformation of business education, where digital tools are increasingly used to support more individualized learning pathways and improve traditional teaching methods.

The results also show a preference for hybrid learning formats that combine traditional and digital methods (Table 10). This indicates that digital learning is not perceived as a replacement for face-to-face interaction. Instead, it is seen as a complementary solution. This is consistent with the idea that blended learning environments can improve learning outcomes and student engagement. These effects

are particularly visible when flexibility and interaction are effectively integrated (Boelens et al., 2017).

Regarding perceived barriers, the results do not support hypotheses eight to eleven (Table 10). Lack of time, technological limitations, cost, and security concerns were not identified as significant obstacles. Respondents mostly expressed neutral attitudes. This suggests that these factors are not perceived as critical barriers in this context.

A summary of the research hypothesis

Table 10

Hypothesis	Short description of the hypothesis	Result status
H1	The use of digital tools has contributed to the development of emotional intelligence	Not supported
H2	MBA candidates have already used digital tools	Supported
H3	MBA candidates are open to using digital tools for emotional development	Supported
H4	Managerial experience influences the openness to using digital technologies for emotional intelligence development	Supported
H5	Field of activity and age do not influence the use of digital technologies for EI	Supported
H6	MBA candidates want digital learning for IE integrated into MBA programs	Supported
H7	The preference for hybrid IE learning is influenced by age	Supported
H8	Lack of time is an obstacle to learning EI digitally.	Not supported
H9	The technology is not sufficiently resolved to be used in IE	Not supported
H10	The cost of applications is an obstacle	Not supported
H11	The application security is an obstacle	Not supported

Source: authors' own contribution

This finding contrasts with previous research, which identifies such elements as constraints in digital adoption (Alalwan et al., 2016). In this case, MBA candidates seem to adopt a more pragmatic perspective. They appear to focus more on opportunities than on limitations when it comes to digital learning tools.

In addition, the lack of statistically significant relationships in some cases may be influenced by the limited number of observations. The sample size is relatively small. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Taken together, the results suggest that MBA candidates are generally receptive to the use of digital technologies for EI development. This is particularly visible when such tools are integrated into flexible and hybrid learning formats. However, openness to digital tools does not appear to be directly associated with higher levels of EI. This indicates that technology should be seen as a supporting component. It is not, on its own, a determining factor in the development of emotional competencies.

5. Conclusions

The research successfully validates that MBA candidates possess a significant interest in developing their emotional intelligence during their future studies using digital tools (H3), although it did not conclude that digitalisation can influence emotional intelligence (H1). This also suggests that the new knowledge can be assimilated more easily because candidates already have a previous background in using digitalisation (H2) for daily activity or for other learning subjects, and there is no standard obstacle that could stop them from achieving (time, money, security, or technology) an improved level of IE (H9-H11). Certainly, other psychological or cultural factors could limit IE development, and it should be addressed by future studies.

An important benefit of this research is for business schools (H6) by enabling them to make informed decisions regarding the integration of emotional intelligence in their curricula. This will complete the technical business skills already covered. Also, MBA providers have a clear way of integrating these studies by implementing digital tools and hybrid learning (H7) while preserving the human touch for soft skill teaching. These findings is aligned with Henry Mintzberg's "skill gap" detected on the MBA agenda.

In conclusion, managers in the position of MBA candidates are focused on achieving performance, including in the area of emotional intelligence, regardless of their age or activity (H5). While years of management experience can have a subtle influence on their interest in emotional intelligence, the overall trend is one of digital tool acceptance. By addressing this need directly with the proper settings, business schools can empower managers to overcome business challenges efficiently.

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