

# Empowering SME Firm Performance: The Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence in Job Satisfaction

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## Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are key economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness drivers. This study investigates the mediating role of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) in the relationship between job satisfaction and firm performance among SMEs in Malaysia. This research explores various dimensions of job satisfaction, including work environment, salary and benefits, personal development, organizational infrastructure, leadership, working hours and work-life balance, to determine their impact on EQ and firm performance. EQ, encompassing emotional regulation and interpersonal effectiveness, is posited as a critical determinant of firm success. This study aims to develop actionable insights for enhancing SME competitiveness through EQ-driven strategies by addressing research gaps in understanding EQ's role in SMEs. By adopting a quantitative approach, this study will employ a survey-based methodology of management-level employees across Malaysian SMEs. Data will be analysed through PLS-SEM to evaluate the hypothesised relationships. The findings aim to provide actionable insights for SME owners, policymakers, and researchers by highlighting EQ as a strategic tool for improving firm performance and fostering sustainable growth. Ultimately, this research provides a comprehensive framework for leveraging EQ as a competitive advantage, contributing to theoretical understanding and practical applications in SME management and policy formulation.

**Keywords:** Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Job Satisfaction, Firm Performance, Motivation

## Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are integral to economic growth and innovation. Their adaptability and entrepreneurial mindset enable them to meet evolving market demands, fostering regional economic expansion (Martin & Thurik, 2010). SMEs play a vital role in driving innovation, generating income, and creating employment opportunities

(Reece, 2001). These enterprises continuously seek ways to enhance their competitive edge through innovative strategies, combining the right resources, insights, and approaches to address challenges effectively. Globally, SMEs contribute to the economic vitality of nations by promoting job creation and intensifying market competition. Despite their critical role, SMEs face substantial challenges, including competitive pressures and complexities in business processes (Redmond, Mumford, & Teach, 1993). One prominent issue is human resource management, particularly fostering employee creativity and motivation to ensure sustainable firm performance (Carmeli et al., 2009).

In the 21st century, emotional intelligence (EQ) has emerged as a critical determinant of firm success, especially for SMEs navigating competitive landscapes. EQ encompasses the ability to manage emotions effectively, influencing motivation, confidence, and firm performance (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002). On the other hand, the significance of job satisfaction in organizational success cannot be overstated. It is strongly linked to enhanced firm performance, reduced absenteeism, and increased employee retention (Lambert et al., 2005). Employees' job satisfaction is shaped by factors such as work environment, compensation, leadership, and opportunities for personal development (Clark & Oswald, 1996). When combined with EQ, these factors can significantly enhance organizational effectiveness (Goleman, 1998). EQ fosters better interpersonal relationships, stress management, and decision-making capabilities, all of which contribute to improved job satisfaction and firm performance (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2012).

From Malaysia's perspective, the SME sector exemplifies the importance of EQ and job satisfaction in economic growth. SMEs comprise approximately 98.5% of all businesses in Malaysia, highlighting their dominance in the nation's economy (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Despite their prevalence, Malaysian SMEs face challenges such as limited resources, talent retention, and competitive pressures. The integration of EQ into managerial practices can mitigate these challenges, enhancing employee satisfaction and overall firm performance (Rozell et al., 2002). Additionally, research on the mediating role of EQ in the relationship between job satisfaction and firm performance remains underexplored, particularly in the context of Malaysian SMEs (Deb et al., 2023). Existing studies have primarily focused on developed nations, overlooking Malaysia's unique cultural, demographic, and economic characteristics. Addressing this gap is essential to provide actionable insights for policymakers and business owners to enhance SME performance through EQ-driven strategies.

Based on these premises, this quantitative study intends to contribute to closing this gap by investigating the mediating effect of EQ between job satisfaction and SME firm performance in Malaysia. This study focuses on various dimensions of job satisfaction factors, including working environment, salary and benefits, personal development opportunities, organizational infrastructure, leadership, working hours and work-life balance. The research aims to establish whether EQ can enhance the relationship between these factors and firm performance, offering practical solutions to improve employee satisfaction and organizational outcomes. The findings will contribute to the theoretical understanding of EQ's role in organizational success and offer practical implications for SME owners, policymakers, and researchers. Moreover, the significance of this study lies in its potential to provide a comprehensive framework for leveraging EQ as a strategic tool to enhance SME

competitiveness. As Malaysia strives to enhance its global competitiveness, integrating EQ into SME management practices will be instrumental in achieving these goals (IMD World Competitiveness Ranking, 2024). Thus, this study underscores the importance of EQ in mediating the relationship between job satisfaction and firm performance, offering valuable insights into enhancing organizational effectiveness in the Malaysian context.

## **Literature Review**

### *Job Satisfaction*

Higher firm commitment, improved firm performance, overall satisfaction, fewer absences from work, a lower risk of work-related stress, and a lower rate of employee turnover are all associated with job satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2005; Byrd et al., 2000). According to Taris & Schreurs (2009), Schneider, Hanges et al., (2003) and Koys (2001), there is a correlation between several performance indicators for the firm and employees' job satisfaction. According to Clark & Oswald (1996), salary & other benefits increase job satisfaction. Job insecurity has been found to be negatively associated with the employee's job satisfaction, involvement, engagement, commitment, and trust in the firm (Richter & Naswall, 2019; Huang et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2010; Belschak et al., 2010; Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002).

To acquire recognition, money, promotions, and other outcomes that contribute to a sense of fulfilment, job satisfaction is a necessary component (Kaliski, 2007). According to Brown (2009), job satisfaction is dependent upon various elements such as firm policies, social status, work conditions, compensation, benefits, job security, and interpersonal relationships with peers and supervisors. As noted by Schleicher et al. (2011), job satisfaction is an important element in influencing physical and psychological health, withdrawal cognitions and behaviours, and firm performance. According to Amoopour et al. (2014), the satisfaction of employees makes them more committed to their work and customers.

### *Emotional Intelligence*

Emotional intelligence forms the core of our feelings and behaviour (Antonakis et al., 2009; Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). According to Salovey & Sluyter (1997), EQ is the association of emotion with cognition. As noted by Goleman (1998), emotional competencies are more important in contributing to work excellence than pure intellect and expertise. According to Bressert (2007) and Nggermanto (2002), an intelligence quotient (IQ) counts for roughly 10% (at best 25%); the rest depends on everything else including EQ. Employees with emotional intelligence are seen as vital assets in terms of boosting corporate performance, productivity, and effectiveness (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2012; Carmeli, 2003; Lam & Kirby, 2002).

EQ refers to an individual's capacity to understand and manage emotions (Soenarto et al., 2019; Rechberg, 2019; Cherry, 2018). A firm that promotes more positive emotions at work is likely to have more motivated employees (Erez & Isen, 2002). Effective leaders rely on EQ to help convey their messages (Lewis, 2000). EQ leads to greater creativity and the ability to come up with more ideas in the brainstorming process (Sowmya & Panchanatham, 2016; Neshat et al., 2012; George & Zhou, 2007). According to Modassir & Singh (2008), interpersonal relationships in both our personal and professional lives are disrupted by EQ. According to Peristiwo (2013), McLaughlin (2012), Awad & Kada (2012), Ahmetoglu et al.

(2011) and Boren (2010), EQ has implications for social interactions such as negotiation, obtaining and organizing resources, identifying and exploiting opportunities, managing stress, obtaining and maintaining customers, and providing leadership.

According to Yitshaki-Hagai & Rothstein (2011), EQ is crucial for entrepreneurs who want to be creative and use creative work practices. Underutilized EQ by an entrepreneur would limit their potential for creativity and consequently face a decline in commercial success (Ghorbani et al., 2012). Entrepreneurs with low EQ may have trouble comprehending the requirements and desires of their customers (Fukuda, 2011). In addition, Buchko (2013) argues that no matter the role in which we are involved, EQ influencing our feelings and state of mind is always present.

### *Firm Performance*

Firm performance can be evaluated through financial and non-financial measures. Firm performance is affected by non-monetary and monetary incentives (Olusadum & Anulika, 2018; Bakotic, 2016; Ibrahim & Brobbey, 2015; Ackah, 2014). According to Thomas & Eden (2004) and Sirilli (1987), firm performance represents the financial outcomes from a specified period of time. Firm performance most of the time, emphasizes are on financial: return on assets, return on equity, excess market value and average market value, profitability, market share and employment growth (Murphy et al., 1996; Richard, 2000; Wach et al., 2016; Ingram et al., 2017).

According to (Walker & Brown, 2004; Gorgievski et al., 2011), the most frequently mentioned firm success criteria are firm performance, firm growth, employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, personal satisfaction, social responsibility and a good work-life balance. A blend of financial and non-financial measures is vital to describe the overall position of the firm performance (Laitinen, 2002). Richard et al. (2009) found that the most commonly used objective tools to measure a firm performance are EBIT (earnings before interest and taxes), profit margin, ROA (return on assets), ROCE (return on capital employed), ROE (return on equity), ROI (return on investment), ROS (return on sales) and EVA (economic value added).

### *Theoretical Foundations*

Motivation is the desire to do something, and it relates to EQ because your desires can promote different feelings toward something. According to Locke (1968), motivation and performance are higher when individuals set specific, difficult but achievable and time-bound goals. The five elements of EQ at work include self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, according to Goleman (1990, 1995). Emotional intelligence (EQ) is characterized by five domains: interpersonal management, self-motivation, emotional recognition of others, and self-awareness. Motivation is how behaviour gets started, energised, sustained, directed, and stopped (Schermerhorn et al., 1995). According to Gallese & Goldman (1998), 'emotionally intelligent' is the measure of a person's competence in maintaining the rational-emotional balance required at the inner mental level. Motivation relates to cognition (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). As noted by Eccles & Wigfield (2002), beliefs are the primary sources of motivation. Motivation is an umbrella concept encapsulating the psychological processes that direct, energize, and sustain human behaviour (Mitchell & Daniels, 2003). As expressed by Grenberg & Baron (2003) motivation is the set of a process

that arouses, directs and maintains human behaviour toward attaining some agreed-upon goal.

Studies have demonstrated the role of motivation in facilitating firm productivity (Van den Broeck et al., 2010; Gagne & Deci, 2005). According to Weiner (2013) and Wigfield et al. (2009), motivation is an inner or social stimulus for an action. When individuals set goals for themselves but lack the proper EQ, the motivation factor will drop. Individuals must have a burning desire or passion for all short, medium and long-term goals they set to fully invest their emotional and physical energy in achieving them (Sterrett, 2014). As noted by Mukokoma (2016), it is intrinsic and extrinsic boosters that inspire one to achieve a target goal. Employees who are satisfied with working conditions may depend on factors like working hours, location and relevant demographics (Gilbert et al., 2018). According to Mukokoma (2018), EQ and motivation are separate. As expressed by (Tocino-Smith, 2019), EQ is the driver behind meaningful socialisation. If one individual in a relationship lacks EQ, the relationship is guaranteed to deteriorate because he/she will not be able to control internal impulses, feel the correct amount of empathy or regulate their emotions toward the other individual (Tocino-Smith, 2019). An interpersonal relationship is built on honed social skills through EQ.

Being emotionally intelligent involves being motivated to overcome the myriad problems that may develop when interacting with others, particularly in stressful work contexts (Trigueros et al., 2020). Researchers have recently focused on EQ due to its importance to employees' motivation and the prevalence of work-related conflicts (Khosravi et al., 2020). Workplace environments, job satisfaction, and employee departments have all been shown to be important predictors of motivation to work (Basalamah & As'ad, 2021). Motivation to work can be intrinsic when employees have the drive to carry out their duties at work not necessarily because they are rewarded for their efforts (Oh & Roh, 2022). EQ enables leaders to develop empathy and understanding towards their employees' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Empathy builds trust, cultivates a positive work environment, and powers motivation. EQ equips leaders with strong communication skills, including active listening, clear articulation, and empathy in conversations. Effective communication fosters a sense of purpose, enables alignment, and ignites motivation. EQ enables leaders to recognize and appreciate their employees' efforts and achievements genuinely. EQ empowers leaders to provide personalized recognition, which boosts morale, enhances job satisfaction, and motivates employees to continue performing at their best. EQ enhances leaders' ability to support and mentor their employees. Supportive leadership builds trust, fosters professional growth, and motivates employees to take on new challenges.

Studies consistently show that motivation is a strong predictor of job performance and productivity (Jalagat, 2016; Cerasoli et al., 2014; Grant, 2008). The more motivated the employees, the better performance and higher productivity they will demonstrate (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Jalagat, 2016). A good-performing team of employees translates directly to a stronger financial outcome (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Marimuthu et al., 2009). Regardless of the firm structure, understanding the skills and motivational factors of all types of employees has remained cantered in determining the firm's performance (Kim & Kim, 2021; Blackburn et al., 2013). Knowing how to effectively motivate employees is essential for driving productivity, engagement, and overall performance. Additionally, by leveraging EQ, leaders can connect

with their employees on a deeper level, understand their needs and strengths, and establish a motivating, gratifying, and successful work environment. Job satisfaction alone is not enough for sustainable motivation.

In brief, creating a theoretical framework and making use of a supporting model is critical to ensuring that research is well-organized, firmly based on the body of knowledge, and able to produce conclusions that are both significant and understandable. Thus, the theoretical structure of this study is built upon an underpinning theory by Deb, Nadita & Shohel (2023) which serves as the foundation for the evidence of this investigation. Following the theory, this study aims to measure the mediating effect of EQ between job satisfaction and firm performance of SMEs and to identify the critical success constructs and significant path of EQ between job satisfaction and firm performance.

## **Hypotheses Development**

### ***Job Satisfaction***

#### ***Working Environment***

The working environment, encompassing physical, social, and psychological conditions, significantly influences employee well-being, job satisfaction, and performance (Hoopock, 1935). It impacts workplace relationships, collaboration, and health, with stress being a potential negative outcome of an unpleasant environment (Adeoye & Torubelli, 2011; Loepp, 2015). Intangible factors such as improved communication, enjoyable settings, and social involvement contribute more to job satisfaction than tangible rewards (Ineson & Berechet, 2011; Ineson et al., 2013). Aligning employees with organizational goals further enhances satisfaction and commitment (Zopiatis et al., 2014). A positive working environment also fosters career opportunities, boosts morale, and enhances output beyond financial benefits (Stamolampros et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2020; Awada et al., 2022). Moreover, EQ, as an innate ability shaped by workplace interactions, is linked to job satisfaction, with features of the working environment influencing EQ levels (Mayer & Salovey, 1993; Abraham, 2000). Social support and higher EQ levels correlate with improved satisfaction in the workplace (Yousef, 2016; Sunita et al., 2020). Therefore, the hypotheses are:

**H1a.** Working environment positively affects the SME firm performance.

**H1b.** Working environment positively affects the EQ of SME employees.

#### ***Salary and other Benefits***

Salary and other benefits are considered crucial in the employee-employer relationship, as they provide stability for employees and allow firms to maintain competitiveness (Denisi & Griffin, 2014; Gupta & Shaw, 2014). While employees value extrinsic rewards such as salary, bonuses, and benefits, intrinsic rewards like praise and recognition also significantly influence job satisfaction and performance (Jean et al., 2017; Sajuyigbe et al., 2013). Competitive compensation packages enhance employee motivation, retention, and firm performance (Mayson & Barret, 2016; Presslee et al., 2013). Employees remain loyal and productive when they perceive the salary and benefits system as fair and commensurate with their efforts (Ali & Raza, 2015). Furthermore, salary and benefits contribute to emotional well-being, with EQ playing a role in achieving better compensation outcomes (Cote et al., 2010; Haro & Castejon, 2014). However, the relationship between EQ and compensation is debated, with studies like Antonakis et al. (2009) finding no significant link in certain contexts. Thus, the hypotheses for

this research suggest that salary and other benefits positively affect both SME firm performance and the EQ of SME employees. Thus, it can be hypothesised:

**H2a.** Salary and other benefits positively affect the SME firm performance.

**H2b.** Salary and other benefits positively affect the EQ of SME employees.

### *Personal Development*

Personal development is a critical factor in enhancing firm performance, creating value by improving employees' skills and fostering competitive advantage (Fairfield-Sonn, 1987; Peteraf, 1993). It enables employees to perform effectively in challenging conditions and contributes significantly to a firm's efficiency, profitability, and competitive standing (Adeniyi, 1995; Cooke, 2000). Personal development, through career development, training opportunities, and skill enhancement, boosts individual and organizational performance while reducing turnover and improving employee retention (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2000; Shaw et al., 1998). It enhances job satisfaction and psychological support, fostering creativity and confidence, and reducing stress (Kong et al., 2015; Madera et al., 2016). Although some critique personal development for its cost and uncertain impact on firm performance (Wright & Geroy, 2001; Kraiger et al., 2004), its role in increasing productivity and achieving firm goals is evident (Sitnikov et al., 2017). High-EQ individuals benefit from personal development through improved relationships, conflict resolution, and stress management, which enhance decision-making and emotional regulation (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Based on these insights, it can be hypothesized that:

**H3a.** Personal development positively affects the SME firm performance.

**H3b.** Personal development positively affects the EQ of SME employees.

### *Organizational Infrastructure*

Organizational infrastructure consists of systems, protocols, policies, procedures, and processes that provide structure to a firm, support operations, and ensure consistent practices regardless of leadership changes. Key elements include human resources, training, supervision, communication, and continuous quality improvement systems, alongside utilities such as transportation networks and telecommunications. The quality of organizational infrastructure significantly affects firm performance in terms of output, income, and productivity (Helpman & Krugman, 1985; Wan & Zhang, 2017). Effective infrastructure fosters employee autonomy, decision-making, and customer experience improvement (Stamolampros et al., 2019). Trust, respect, and communication within the organizational infrastructure enhance stakeholder relationships and project success (Rezvani et al., 2016). At individual, team, and firm levels, collaboration and mutual trust supported by infrastructure policies lead to improved performance and collective expectations (Costa & Anderson, 2011; Gillespie & Mann, 2004). Infrastructure facilitates alignment between employees and organizational processes, driving collaboration and high performance (Pinjani & Palvia, 2013). Thus, this study hypothesized:

**H4a.** Organizational infrastructure positively affects the SME firm performance.

**H4b.** Organizational infrastructure positively affects the EQ of SME employees.

### *Leadership and Management*

Leadership and management encompass techniques and styles that support, oversee, and motivate employees, significantly influencing job satisfaction and performance (Frye & Breaugh, 2004; Gaertner, 1999). Effective leadership minimizes work-family conflict, fosters

loyalty, and enhances employee well-being and satisfaction, ultimately reducing turnover (Rhoades et al., 2001; Becker, 2002). Empowering employees through supportive leadership improves service quality and firm performance (Chiang & Jang, 2008). Leadership also shapes workplace culture, inspiring behaviour and boosting productivity to meet business objectives (Ukko et al., 2017; Wnuk, 2017). A positive leadership climate encourages collaboration, reduces stress, and aligns employee efforts with organizational goals (Ali et al., 2018; Heimerl et al., 2020). EQ is a critical factor in leadership effectiveness, enabling leaders to manage emotions, communicate effectively, and motivate teams, which drives job satisfaction and project success (Goleman, 1998; Rezvani et al., 2016). Managers with high EQ positively influence workplace dynamics, fostering creativity, teamwork, and higher employee satisfaction (Bryant & Malone, 2015; Scott-Halsell et al., 2008). Based on these arguments, the hypotheses are:

**H5a.** Leadership and management positively affect the SME firm performance.

**H5b.** Leadership and management positively affect the EQ of SME employees.

#### *Work-Life Balance*

Work-life balance (WLB) refers to the harmony between work responsibilities and personal life, contributing to overall job satisfaction (Kelliher et al., 2019; Abendroth & Dulk, 2011). Effective WLB practices enhance firm performance through increased productivity, reduced turnover intentions, and improved employee commitment (Allen, 2001; Wood et al., 2008). Firms offering WLB practices report better market performance and cost savings, as exemplified by IBM's telecommuting policy saving \$700 million in real estate costs (Hartel et al., 2007; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). Employees with high emotional intelligence (EQ) are better at managing WLB, leading to greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, and stress regulation (Salovey & Grewal, 2005; Extremera & Fernandez-Berrocal, 2006). Managers with strong EQ can address employees' personal needs, fostering balance and improved job performance (Carmeli, 2003). Conversely, work-family conflicts result in emotional instability, stress, and reduced performance (Kayaalp et al., 2020; Armstrong et al., 2015). Although empirical evidence is inconclusive on achieving both high work performance and personal life satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2009; Greenhaus et al., 2003), WLB positively influences firm performance and the EQ of employees. Thus, this study hypothesised:

**H6a.** Work-life balance positively affects the SME firm performance.

**H6b.** Work-life balance positively affects the EQ of SME employees

#### *Working Hours*

Working hours refer to the time spent at work daily, with job satisfaction heavily influenced by justified working hours, workload management, and breaks (Campbell & Wanrooy, 2013; Reynolds & Aletraris, 2010). Long working hours are associated with job dissatisfaction, work-family conflicts, and reduced performance (Karatepe & Kilic, 2007; Reynolds & Aletraris, 2010). Besides, excessive overtime negatively impacts employees' health, well-being, and WLB, reducing firm performance and satisfaction (Yang et al., 2023; Xian et al., 2022). According to Oliva & Sterman (2001), the imbalance between service capacity and demand interact with overtime leads to the erosion of the service standards and loss of revenue. Chan & Siu (2010) explore overworked employees prefer to make less money, as a trade-off for a reduction in their excessive overtime. However, fun elements of the job can mitigate the negative perception of long hours (Ineson et al., 2013). Countries with high annual working hours report mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, especially with



mismatched work hours (Lee et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2016; Bannai & Tamakoshi, 2014). Despite adverse effects, leisure activities like hobbies and exercise improve well-being and stress management (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2010). Firms with excessive overtime complaints do not enhance performance, and working hour mismatches increase turnover intentions (Woo, 2016; Ni et al., 2024). Based on these arguments, this study proposed hypotheses as follows:

**H7a.** Working hours positively affects the SME firm performance.

**H7b.** Working hours positively affects the EQ of SME Employees

### **Emotional Intelligence and Firm Performance**

EQ is explained either by the ability model proposed by Mayer & Salovey (1990) or the mixed model as proposed by researchers such as Bar-On (1997) and Goleman (1995). According to Mayer & Salovey (1990), EQ is the ability to monitor one's own and others' thinking and actions, involving accurate appraisal, appropriate expression, and adaptive regulation of emotions. Goleman (2005) emphasizes EQ as the ability to motivate oneself, manage setbacks, control impulses, regulate emotions, and maintain stress. Bar-On (1997) views EQ as a combination of emotional and social competencies that enable effective self-expression, understanding of others, and coping with daily demands. Gardner (1993) links EQ to interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, while Mayer, Salovey & Caruso (1997) outline its four dimensions: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions in oneself and others.

EQ has been identified as a significant predictor of job performance, job satisfaction, and leadership effectiveness. According to Goleman (1995, 1998), EQ is twice as important as other factors in predicting employee performance. Employees with high EQ are better at handling stress, building relationships, and achieving career success (Cooper, 1997; Gowing, 2001). EQ correlates with life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and entrepreneurial success through self-awareness, self-management, and relationship management (Wong & Law, 2002; Lopes et al., 2004). High EQ in managers fosters effective communication, team decision-making, and positive workplace environments, contributing to improved firm performance (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017; Stephens & Carmeli, 2016).

Studies show that EQ is central to leadership and team dynamics, influencing organizational outcomes significantly. EQ enhances interpersonal relationships, reduces stress, and improves adaptability and planning in challenging tasks (Deepika, 2016; Stephens & Carmeli, 2016). Managers with high EQ balance cognitive and affective components, creating positive workplace moods and increasing employee satisfaction (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). EQ reflects the integration of intelligence, empathy, and emotions to foster better decision-making, problem-solving, and interpersonal interactions (Sultana et al., 2021). It strengthens self-awareness and confidence, contributing to both individual and organizational success. Standing on this foundation of arguments the below hypotheses for this research are laid for testing:

**H8.** Emotional intelligence of employees positively affects the firm performance of SMEs.

**H9.** Emotional intelligence of employees mediates the relationship between employee job satisfaction (working environment, salary and other benefits, opportunity of personal development, firm infrastructure, leadership and management, WLB, working hours) and SME firm performance

### Conceptual Framework

This study's theoretical framework is developed to improve the research's informativeness as a future data source for scholars, business owners, and Malaysia's economic planners. The theoretical framework of this study is organized following the theory by Deb et al. (2023), with additional job satisfaction dimensions which is work-life balance as an added value. Based on a relevant theory and hypotheses development, the conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1.

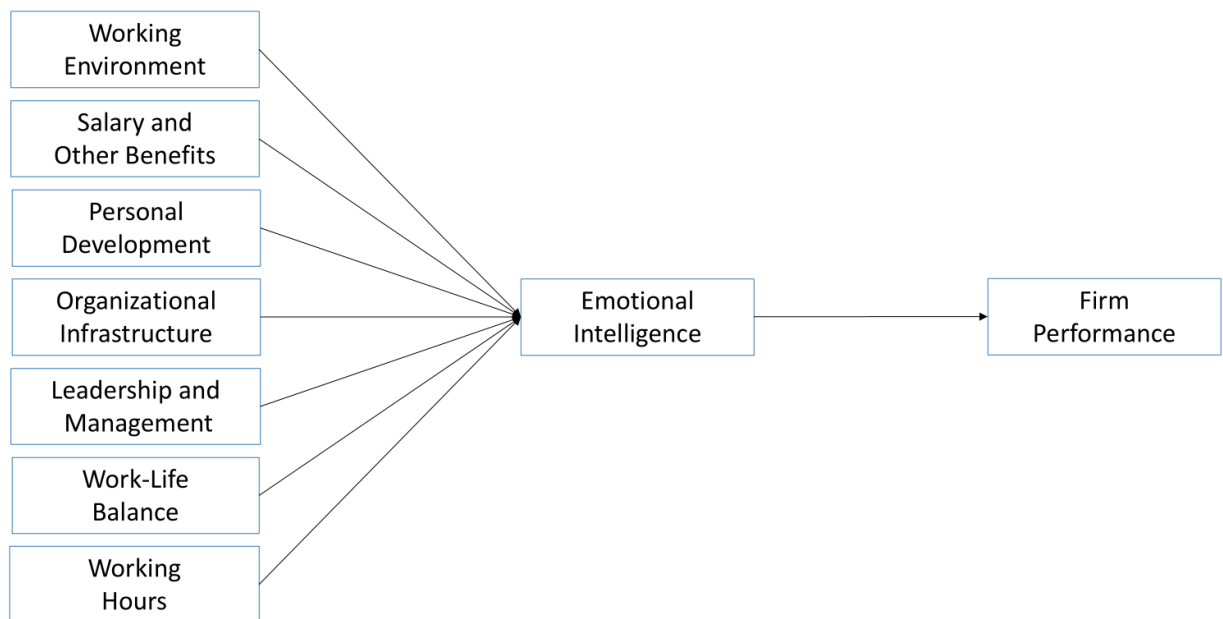


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

### Research Methodology

Schwardt (2007) defines research methodology as a theory of how an inquiry should proceed. It involves analysis of the assumptions, principles and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry. According to Schwardt (2007), Creswell & Tashakkori (2007), and Teddlie & Tashakkori (2007), methodologies explicate and define the kinds of problems that are worth investigating; what constitutes a researchable problem; testable hypotheses; how to frame a problem in such a way that it can be investigated using particular designs and procedures; and how to select and develop appropriate means of collecting data. This research methodology's paradigm is built on a causal approach paradigm. This section will provide the research roadmap and summarise the research methodology, to answer research questions and meet the study objectives.

#### *Research Design*

As defined by Leedy (1997) research design is a plan for a study, providing the overall framework for collecting data. MacMillan & Schumacher (2001) define it as a plan for selecting subjects, research sites, and data collection procedures to answer the research question(s). The research design constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data to provide results that are judged to be credible. The research design follows a structured quantitative approach to examine the relationships between job

satisfaction, emotional intelligence (EQ), and SME firm performance. This study adopts cross-sectional studies in which data are collected from a large number of management-level employees of SMEs in Malaysia at a single point in time. The survey method is a constructive research methodology and can be considered a systematic data collection tool used in large-scale investigations (Smith et al, 1994; Borg & Gall, 1989). Information collected by questionnaires is often quantifiable (Borg & Gall, 1989). This cross-sectional survey collects data from Malaysian SMEs' management-level employees.

### *Survey Questionnaire*

The researcher adopted the questionnaire from the previous researchers Stamolampros et al. (2019), Bufquin et al. (2017) and Ineson et al. (2013) for working environment; Gallardo et al. (2010), Jean et al. (2017) and Naidu & Satyanarayana (2018) for salary and other benefits; Kong et al. (2018) and McPhail et al. (2015) for personal development; Heimerl et al. (2020), Campbell & Wanrooy (2013) and Reynolds & Aletraris (2010) for organization infrastructure; Kong et al. (2018) and McPhail et al. (2015) for leadership and management; Beauregard et al. (2009), Lazar et al. (2010), Mahesh et al. (2016), Pandey (2019) and Opatrna & Prochazka (2023) for WLB; Xu & Cao (2019), Lillo-Banuls et al. (2018), Kim & Jogaratnam (2010), Gallardo et al., (2010), Karatepe & Kilic (2007) and Namasivayam & Zhao (2007) for working hours; Laborde et al. (2014), Sultana et al. (2021), Daus & Ashkanasy (2005) and Rooy & Vismesvaran (2004) for EQ; Sultana et al. (2021), Ahmad & Raja (2021), Guy & Lee (2015), Deepika (2016), Higgs & Dulewicz (2014) and Huang et al. (2010) for firm performance, which have been endorsed by the international academic journal.

### *Population*

According to the Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO), the number of the labour force in Malaysia is 15,391,700 employees in December 2023. Employees in the categories of plant and machine operators and assemblers (1,584,400) and elementary occupations (1,844,400) are omitted from this study because their work is repetitive and based on standard operating procedures. Only 11,962,900 employees in Malaysia will be the focus population of this study.

### *Unit Analysis and Sampling Frame*

The unit of analysis of this study is employees of SMEs. This research focuses on the employees (excluding plant and machine operators, assemblers, and elementary jobs) of all Malaysian SMEs registered with the Malaysian Companies Commission. According to the Malaysia Department of Statistics (2023), SME firm make up 98.5% of all businesses in the country. The employees of all SMEs in the nation are estimated by the Malaysia Department of Statistics to be approximately 70% of the overall employees, as of 2023. Thus, 8,374,030 (or 70% of 11,962,900) SME employees are the sampling frame of this research.

### *Sampling Design*

The medium-sized industries, with full-time employees in the manufacturing sector ranging from 50 to 200. Full-time employees in the services sector should be at least 50 but no more than 75 who are registered with SME Corporation Malaysia will be contacted, asking for cooperation to participate. Those employees' responses to the Google questionnaire form are considered the primary source of information for this study. For this study, voluntary response sampling will be used to obtain the sample. An email will be sent to the SME

companies, urging that their management help inform and encourage their staff to participate in this survey. The selection of the respondents is through a random sampling approach to represent the population of this research (Gobena, 2020; Mulatu, 2022). According to Acharya (2013), in this method, every individual has an equal chance of being selected in the sample from the population. Simple random sampling makes sure that every person in a population has an equal probability of being chosen as a response (Thomas, 2020).

### *Sampling Size*

Based on the works of Hair (2017) and Sekaran & Bougie (2016), it could be suggested that the sample size could be between 30 to 500; 10 times the number of independent variables within the research model; or 10 times the number of paths pointing to the dependent variable in the research model. Therefore, the sample size of this study is 385 to represent the population.

### *Measurement Instrument*

Measurement Instrument discusses the development of the construct, the measurement of scale, the coding used to represent the scale how these constructs are validated, and its reliability to test the hypotheses and support the objectives of this research. Measurement instruments give details about the validity and reliability of the instrument as well as a description of the scores that it produces.

### *Coding Scale*

The 5-point Likert scale will be used to rate the study's questions. The scale that was used in this study with the following values 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-agree and 5-strongly agree. A 5-point Likert scale is preferred to facilitate the respondent to provide their feedback with ease, dilutes extreme judgments, and has a more balance in the directional categories with a neutral point for the choices of answers (Dawes, 2008; Leung, 2011).

### *Pilot Test*

A pilot study will be conducted to provide the researcher with preliminary information on the quality of the measurement equipment that has been developed. With the information acquired, improvements to the measurement device could be made before the real study is conducted. The pilot research sample identified is representative of the actual study's population distribution. Respondents for the pilot survey will be chosen at random and will include managers, executives, officers, and employees from SMEs in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The number of pilot sample respondents is projected to exceed 30, the minimal number required for the model to be assessed.

### *Data Collection*

This study questionnaire will be distributed using online survey tools (Google Form questionnaire). Seven randomly selected firms will be emailed to request collaboration and support in encouraging their staff to participate in the study via the Google form questionnaire. SME owners, CEOs, and employees (respondents) will be informed about the research's objectives and purpose. All respondents will be notified that their information will be kept strictly confidential and will not be disclosed by the researcher. The questionnaire is a standardised, highly structured design. It does not allow respondents' opinions and feelings to be expressed freely. This method is considered efficient and effective for obtaining primary

data from a sample of a population (Kamugisha et al., 2022; Kaoga et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2017).

### *Data Analysis*

SmartPLS will be used for hypothesis testing. PLS has been introduced as a causal-predictive approach to SEM, which focuses on explaining the variance in the model's dependent variables (Chin et al., 2020). PLS-SEM is evolving rapidly as a statistical modelling technique. This study will adopt the PLS-SEM approach rather than the covariance-based (CB) SEM because this study deals with small sample size, non-normal data, categorical and ordinal data, multivariate and addresses causal and relationship approaches within the theoretical model which does not deal with theory testing which suits CB-SEM (Astrachan et al., 2014; Hair Jr. et al., 2017).

### **Conclusion**

This study emphasises the critical role of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) as a mediating factor in the relationship between job satisfaction and SME firm performance. By synthesising existing literature, this study highlights how various dimensions of job satisfaction—such as working environment, salary and benefits, personal development, leadership, work-life balance, and organizational infrastructure—contribute to employee well-being and organizational success. The discussion establishes that EQ enhances these relationships by improving employees' emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and decision-making capabilities, ultimately leading to improved firm performance. Given these insights, SMEs should integrate EQ-driven strategies into their management practices to foster a more engaged workforce and sustainable business growth. Future empirical research should validate these conceptual relationships through quantitative and qualitative studies, further exploring sector-specific applications and cultural influences on EQ in SME settings. By leveraging EQ as a strategic tool, SMEs can strengthen their competitiveness and adaptability in an evolving business landscape.

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