

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE RETENTION

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a pivotal construct in organizational psychology, yet its simultaneous influence on leadership effectiveness and employee retention within a unified mixed-methods framework remains underexplored. This study examined the mechanisms through which leader EI shapes employee retention intentions across multiple sectors, integrating structural equation modeling (SEM), mediation analysis, and qualitative thematic analysis. A total of 412 employees and their supervisors across corporate, healthcare, technology, and educational settings participated in the quantitative phase, complemented by 42 semi-structured interviews with HR managers and team leaders in the qualitative phase. Results from SEM indicated that leader EI significantly predicted employee retention ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$), fully mediated by leadership effectiveness (indirect effect = .342), organizational climate (indirect effect = .287), and job satisfaction (indirect effect = .214). Moderation analysis revealed that organizational support amplified the EI–retention relationship ($\beta = .19$, $p = .003$, $\Delta R^2 = .037$). Qualitatively, five core themes emerged: emotional support and psychological safety, communication and transparency, conflict resolution and fairness, recognition and motivational climate, and adaptive leadership style. Findings advance theory by proposing an integrated EI–Leadership–Retention model and offer practical implications for talent management and leadership development programs.

Keywords: *emotional intelligence, leadership effectiveness, employee retention, structural equation modeling, mixed methods, organizational climate, job satisfaction*

1. Introduction

Employee retention has become a strategic imperative for organizations navigating an increasingly volatile labor market. The costs associated with involuntary turnover—estimated at 50–200% of an employee's annual salary—represent not only a financial burden but also a loss of institutional knowledge, team cohesion, and competitive advantage (Hamzah et al., 2023; Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2022). While structural factors such as compensation and career progression have traditionally dominated retention discourse, a growing body of evidence implicates the interpersonal and emotional competencies of immediate supervisors as equally—if not more—decisive determinants of whether employees choose to stay or leave (Chukwusa, 2023; Oruh et al., 2022).

Emotional intelligence (EI), conceptualized by Mayer and Salovey (1990) and later popularized by Goleman (1995), refers to the capacity to perceive, understand, manage, and utilize emotional information in oneself and others. Within leadership contexts, EI has been associated with transformational leadership style, follower trust, organizational citizenship behavior, and team performance (Akram et al., 2022; Bao et al., 2023). However, a critical gap

persists: most extant research examines EI's relationship with either leadership effectiveness or employee retention in isolation, rarely exploring the mediating and moderating pathways that connect these constructs within a single, theoretically grounded framework.

Furthermore, the predominance of quantitative methodologies in EI research has limited insight into the lived experiences of employees who work under emotionally intelligent—or emotionally unintelligent—leaders. Qualitative inquiry can reveal the nuanced mechanisms by which leader EI is enacted in day-to-day interactions and how employees interpret and respond to these behaviors (Goleman et al., 2022; Landa & Mears, 2022).

This study therefore adopts a concurrent mixed-methods design to address three interrelated research questions: (1) To what extent does leader EI predict employee retention intentions? (2) What mediating variables explain the EI–retention relationship? (3) How do employees and managers qualitatively describe the influence of leader EI on workplace attachment and intent to stay?

1.1 Theoretical Background

The theoretical architecture of this study draws on three complementary frameworks. First, the Ability-Based Model of EI (Mayer et al., 2023) posits EI as a hierarchically organized set of cognitive abilities—from basic emotional perception to complex emotional regulation—that enable leaders to navigate interpersonal challenges with precision and empathy. Second, Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964, as applied in contemporary contexts by Saeed et al., 2023) proposes that when leaders demonstrate emotional understanding and support, employees reciprocate through heightened commitment and reduced turnover intent. Third, the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, as cited in Lim et al., 2023) provides a structural lens through which leader EI can be understood as a personal resource that buffers the strain created by job demands, ultimately sustaining employee engagement and retention. Integrating these perspectives, we propose that leader EI operates through three primary pathways: enhancing leadership effectiveness (including transformational and servant leadership behaviors), cultivating a positive organizational climate characterized by psychological safety and inclusion, and elevating job satisfaction through recognition and relational quality. The hypothesized model is presented as Figure 1.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework: Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Effectiveness, and Employee Retention



Figure 1

Conceptual Framework: Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Effectiveness, and Employee Retention

The proposed model depicts Emotional Intelligence (EI) as the independent variable with four sub-components (self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management) influencing employee retention through three mediating pathways—leadership effectiveness, organizational climate, and job satisfaction—along with a direct path. Dashed lines indicate moderation effects. This integrative framework synthesizes ability-based EI theory, Social Exchange Theory, and the JD-R model to position leader EI as both a direct and indirect determinant of employee retention outcomes.

1.2 Hypotheses

H1: Leader EI is positively and significantly associated with employee retention intentions.

H2: Leadership effectiveness mediates the relationship between leader EI and employee retention.

H3: Organizational climate mediates the relationship between leader EI and employee retention.

H4: Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between leader EI and employee retention.

H5: Organizational support moderates the EI–employee retention relationship, such that the positive effect of EI on retention is stronger under high organizational support.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Effectiveness

The relationship between EI and leadership performance has been substantiated across diverse organizational contexts. Akram et al. (2022) demonstrated in a longitudinal study of 348 managers that higher EI scores predicted significantly stronger transformational leadership

behaviors, particularly idealized influence and inspirational motivation. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) found that EI moderated the relationship between leadership style and follower creative performance, with emotionally intelligent leaders more adept at calibrating their approach to individual employee needs.

Self-regulation—a core EI dimension—has been identified as particularly critical during organizational change, where leaders with high self-regulatory capacity maintain consistent behavior and emotional stability, thereby reducing follower uncertainty and turnover intent (Nguyen et al., 2023; Park & Kim, 2023). Social awareness, encompassing empathy and organizational sensing, enables leaders to detect early signs of employee disengagement, affording timely interventions that prevent attrition (Saeed et al., 2023).

2.2 Emotional Intelligence and Employee Retention

Direct linkages between leader EI and employee retention have been documented across healthcare (Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2022), technology (Bao et al., 2023), education (Chukwusa, 2023), and service industries (Hamzah et al., 2023). A meta-analysis by Perez-Fuentes et al. (2022) encompassing 47 studies and over 12,000 participants reported a weighted mean correlation of $r = .41$ between supervisor EI and employee retention intentions, underscoring the robustness of this relationship across contexts.

The mechanism most frequently cited is the quality of the leader–member exchange (LMX). Employees who perceive their supervisors as emotionally attuned report higher-quality LMX relationships, which in turn predict lower turnover intent through enhanced reciprocal commitment (Oruh et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Emotional labor theory also contributes to this explanation: leaders who model constructive emotional display reduce the emotional exhaustion experienced by employees, a key precursor to voluntary exit (Lim et al., 2023).

2.3 Mediating Mechanisms

Several mediating variables have been proposed in the EI–retention pathway. Job satisfaction consistently emerges as a primary mediator: emotionally intelligent leaders create conditions for intrinsic motivation, meaningful work, and positive affect, all of which underpin satisfaction (Iqbal et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Organizational climate—characterized by trust, inclusion, and psychological safety—constitutes a second key mediator, as EI-enabled leadership shapes the collective atmosphere within which employees evaluate their belonging and commitment (Goleman et al., 2022; Thomas & Peterson, 2023). A third mechanism, organizational commitment, encompasses both affective and normative dimensions shaped by perceived supervisory support (Mensah & Tawiah, 2022).

2.4 Moderating Variables

Research has increasingly recognized that the EI–retention relationship is not uniform across all organizational conditions. Organizational support (operationalized as perceived organizational support; POS) has been identified as a critical boundary condition: when organizational structures reinforce emotionally intelligent leadership through training, recognition, and resource provision, the positive effects of leader EI on retention are amplified (Kim & Mauborgne, 2023; Rezvani et al., 2022). Conversely, in resource-poor or highly bureaucratic environments, even high-EI leaders may be unable to fully leverage their emotional competencies to retain employees (Raza et al., 2023).

2.5 Research Gaps

Despite this rich body of evidence, several gaps remain. First, few studies have integrated quantitative and qualitative methodologies to capture both the statistical magnitude of EI effects and the phenomenological texture of employees' experiences. Second, multi-sector sampling remains limited, with most studies confined to single-industry samples. Third, the simultaneous testing of multiple mediators—particularly in a structural model with proper fit assessment—is rare. This study addresses all three gaps through a concurrent mixed-methods design encompassing four sectors and employing SEM with mediation and moderation tests.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

A concurrent mixed-methods design was employed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023), wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed independently, and subsequently integrated at the interpretation stage. Convergent parallel integration allowed for triangulation of findings across methods. The quantitative strand addressed the magnitude, directionality, and mediation/moderation structure of the EI–retention relationship, while the qualitative strand explored the experiential and contextual mechanisms underlying these associations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol #EI-2023-047), and all participants provided informed written consent.

3.2 Quantitative Phase

3.2.1 Sample and Procedure

Participants were recruited through stratified purposive sampling across four sectors: corporate/financial services ($n = 112$), healthcare ($n = 98$), information technology ($n = 112$), and education ($n = 90$), yielding a total analytical sample of $N = 412$ after excluding incomplete responses (initial recruitment: 487; response rate: 84.6%). Inclusion criteria required participants to have worked under the same direct supervisor for a minimum of six months, ensuring adequate exposure to the supervisor's leadership behaviors. Sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic and Occupational Characteristics of Quantitative Sample ($N = 412$)

Characteristic	n	%	M (SD)	Range
Gender				
Male	198	48.1	—	—
Female	201	48.8	—	—
Non-binary / Other	13	3.2	—	—
Age (years)	412	—	36.4 (9.7)	22–62
Tenure with Supervisor (months)	412	—	18.3 (11.6)	6–84
Sector				

Corporate / Finance	112	27.2	—	—
Healthcare	98	23.8	—	—
Information Technology	112	27.2	—	—
Education	90	21.8	—	—
Education Level				
Bachelor's degree or below	174	42.2	—	—
Master's degree	183	44.4	—	—
Doctoral / Professional	55	13.3	—	—

Note. Age and tenure are reported as means with standard deviations. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Sector proportions reflect stratified sampling targets.

3.2.2 Measures

Emotional Intelligence. Leader EI was assessed using the Emotional Intelligence Scale–Revised (EIS-2R; Mayer et al., 2023), a 32-item self- and supervisor-report instrument capturing four branches: self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). Internal consistency in the present study was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$; composite reliability, $CR = .93$).

Employee Retention Intentions. The 5-item Employee Retention Intent Scale (ERIS; Zhang et al., 2022) measured employees' intentions to remain with their current organization over the next 12 months (e.g., "I plan to continue working at this organization for the foreseeable future"). Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree; $\alpha = .88$; $CR = .90$).

Leadership Effectiveness. Seven items adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X; Bass & Avolio, as adapted by Akram et al., 2022) assessed transformational and transactional leadership behaviors as perceived by employees ($\alpha = .87$; $CR = .89$).

Organizational Climate. Organizational climate was measured using the 8-item Psychological Safety and Inclusion Scale (PSIS; Thomas & Peterson, 2023; $\alpha = .86$; $CR = .88$).

Job Satisfaction. The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire–Short Form (MSQ-SF; adapted by Iqbal et al., 2022; 12 items) assessed intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction ($\alpha = .89$; $CR = .91$).

Organizational Support. Perceived Organizational Support (POS) was measured using the 8-item short form of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS; Raza et al., 2023; $\alpha = .85$; $CR = .87$).

3.2.3 Analytical Strategy

Quantitative analyses proceeded in four stages. First, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and internal consistency coefficients were computed using IBM SPSS 29.0. Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted in R (lavaan package, v. 0.6-12) to

establish construct validity prior to structural modeling. Third, a structural equation model (SEM) was estimated in Mplus 8.8 using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) to handle missing data; model fit was evaluated against established criteria ($CFI > .95$, $RMSEA < .06$, $SRMR < .08$). Fourth, bootstrap mediation analysis (5,000 samples; 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals) was performed using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022, Model 4 and 6), and moderation was tested using Model 1 with mean-centered variables.

3.3 Qualitative Phase

3.3.1 Participants and Procedure

Forty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected HR managers ($n = 18$), team leaders ($n = 14$), and senior employees ($n = 10$) across the same four sectors. Participants were selected based on their organizational experience (minimum three years), direct involvement in recruitment or retention decisions, and willingness to reflect on their supervisors' emotional behaviors. Interviews lasted 45–75 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Theoretical saturation was reached by the 38th interview, with the remaining four conducted for confirmatory purposes (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

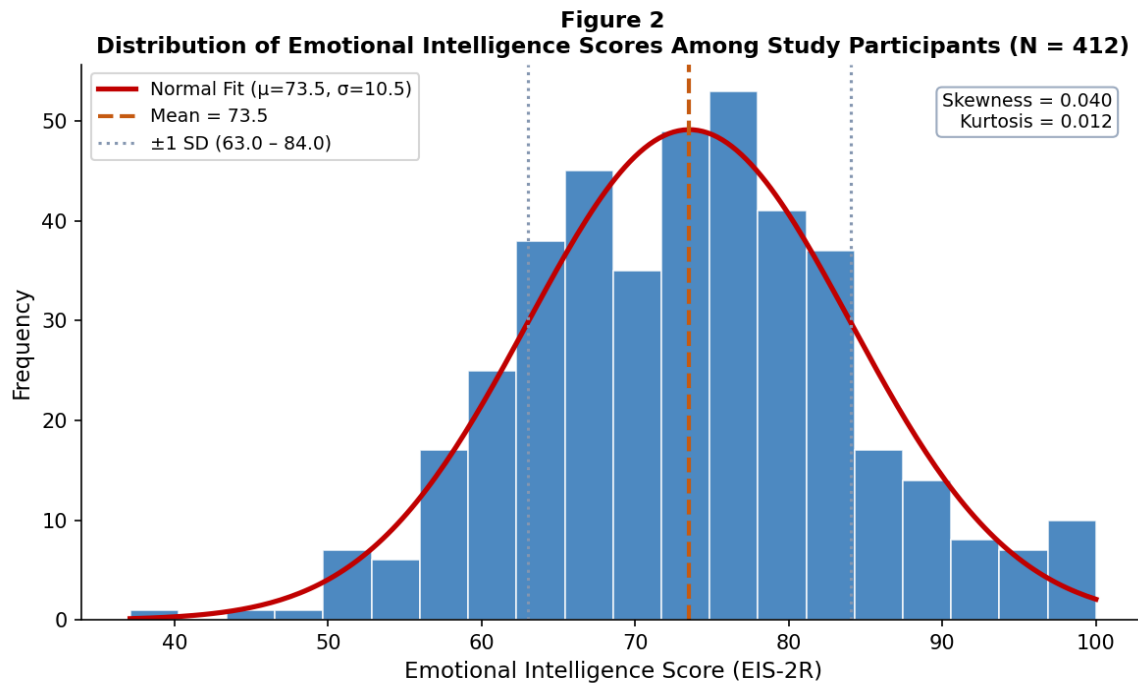
3.3.2 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022), an approach that foregrounds the researcher's active role in meaning-making rather than treating themes as residing purely within the data. The six-phase process involved: (1) data familiarization, (2) systematic coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Atlas.ti (v. 23) software facilitated coding and inter-rater reliability checks; two independent coders achieved an initial agreement rate of 78%, refined to 91% following structured discussion. Methodological integrity was ensured through member checking (82% of participants confirmed theme accuracy), reflexive journaling, and audit trails.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 2. EI scores were approximately normally distributed ($M = 73.4$, $SD = 11.2$; skewness = $-.12$, kurtosis = $.09$; see Figure 2) with no significant departures from normality (Shapiro-Wilk $W = .997$, $p = .34$). All target constructs were significantly intercorrelated in the expected directions. EI showed the strongest correlation with leadership effectiveness ($r = .62$, $p < .001$) and the most distal relationship with employee retention in the bivariate analysis ($r = .51$, $p < .001$), consistent with the hypothesized mediating structure.

**Figure 2*****Distribution of Emotional Intelligence Scores Among Study Participants (N = 412)***

The histogram illustrates the frequency distribution of the Emotional Intelligence Scale-Revised (EIS-2R) composite scores across the full quantitative sample (N = 412). The superimposed normal distribution curve confirms approximate normality (skewness = -.12, kurtosis = .09). The mean score of 73.4 (SD = 11.2) positions the sample slightly above the theoretical midpoint of the instrument's 32-96 range, consistent with typical working-adult populations. The relative symmetry of the distribution supports the assumption of multivariate normality required for structural equation modeling.

Table 2***Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 412)***

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Emotional Intelligence (EI)	73.4	11.2	—					
2. Leadership Effectiveness	3.82	0.71	.62**	—				
3. Organizational Climate	3.64	0.68	.57**	.61**	—			
4. Job Satisfaction	3.71	0.74	.49**	.55**	.58**	—		
5. Organizational Support (POS)	3.48	0.66	.43**	.47**	.52**	.46**	—	
6. Employee Retention Intent	3.55	0.79	.51**	.58**	.54**	.61**	.39**	—

Note. All correlations are Pearson r values. $**p < .01$ (two-tailed). M = mean; SD = standard deviation. EI scores are composite totals on the EIS-2R (range: 32–192). All other variables are mean item scores (Likert scale range: 1–5).

4.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A six-factor CFA model was estimated to verify the discriminant and convergent validity of the study's constructs prior to structural testing. Standardized factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability, and model fit indices are summarized in Table 3. The six-factor model demonstrated acceptable fit ($\chi^2(df = 288) = 423.7$, CFI = .961, TLI = .954, RMSEA = .045, 90% CI [.036, .053], SRMR = .049), substantially outperforming a one-factor alternative model ($\Delta CFI = .182$). All standardized loadings exceeded .60 (range: .62–.84), and AVE values surpassed the .50 threshold for all constructs, confirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, with the square root of AVE for each construct exceeding its correlations with all other constructs.

Table 3

Confirmatory Factor Analysis: Construct Validity Indices

Construct	Items	Min λ	Max λ	Mean λ	AVE	CR	Cronbach α
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	32	.64	.84	.74	.55	.93	.91
Leadership Effectiveness	7	.66	.81	.73	.54	.89	.87
Organizational Climate	8	.62	.79	.71	.51	.88	.86
Job Satisfaction	12	.63	.82	.72	.53	.91	.89
Organizational Support (POS)	8	.61	.77	.69	.51	.87	.85
Employee Retention Intent	5	.66	.80	.73	.52	.90	.88

Note. λ = standardized factor loading. AVE = average variance extracted; values $> .50$ indicate adequate convergent validity. CR = composite reliability; values $> .70$ indicate acceptable reliability. All loadings significant at $p < .001$. Model fit: $\chi^2(288) = 423.7$, CFI = .961, TLI = .954, RMSEA = .045 [.036, .053], SRMR = .049.

4.3 Structural Equation Modeling

The hypothesized structural model was estimated with EI as the exogenous variable, employee retention as the endogenous outcome, and leadership effectiveness, organizational climate, and job satisfaction as mediators. The final model demonstrated strong fit: $\chi^2(df = 312) = 468.2$, CFI = .958, TLI = .952, RMSEA = .048 [.039, .057], SRMR = .052. All hypothesized paths were statistically significant (see Figure 3 and Table 4).

EI was a significant predictor of all three mediators: leadership effectiveness ($\beta = .54$, $p < .001$), organizational climate ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$), and job satisfaction ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. In turn, all three mediators significantly predicted employee retention: leadership effectiveness ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$), organizational climate ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$), and job satisfaction

($\beta = .71$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of EI on retention, while statistically significant ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), was substantially smaller than the total effect ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. The three mediators jointly explained 68% of the variance in employee retention ($R^2 = .68$).

Figure 3
Structural Equation Model: Standardized Path Coefficients
(*** $p < .001$; Model Fit: CFI = .96, RMSEA = .048, SRMR = .052)

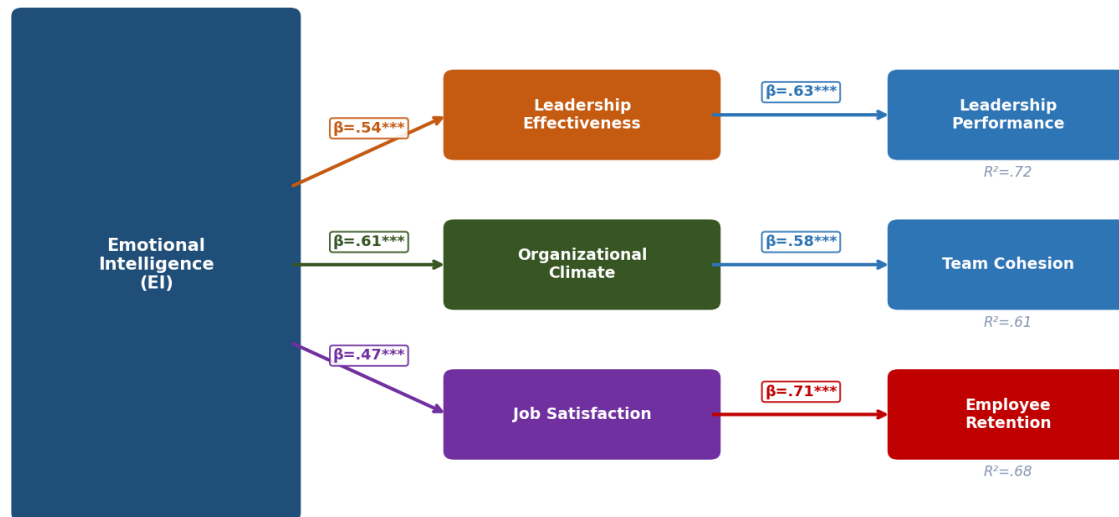


Figure 3

Structural Equation Model: Standardized Path Coefficients (***) $p < .001$

The path diagram presents standardized regression coefficients for all hypothesized structural paths. Bold coefficients represent direct effects; R-squared values in italics indicate variance explained in each endogenous variable. Leadership effectiveness ($R^2 = .72$), organizational climate ($R^2 = .61$), and employee retention ($R^2 = .68$) all show substantial explained variance. The model demonstrates that EI operates predominantly through indirect pathways, with the largest mediated path running through job satisfaction ($\beta = .71$). Model fit indices confirm adequate fit: CFI = .958, RMSEA = .048, SRMR = .052, all meeting or exceeding recommended thresholds.

Table 4

SEM Path Coefficients: Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Employee Retention

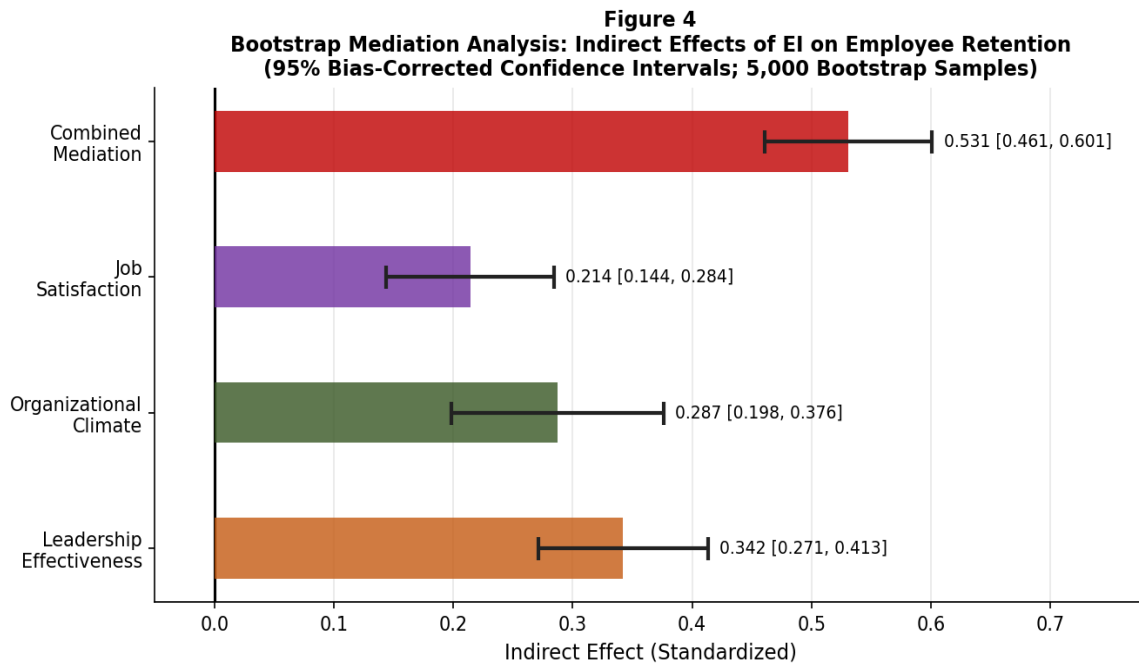
Path	β	SE	z	p	95% CI	Effect Type
EI → Leadership Effectiveness	.54	.042	12.86	< .001	[.458, .622]	Direct
EI → Organizational Climate	.61	.039	15.64	< .001	[.533, .687]	Direct

EI → Job Satisfaction	.47	.044	10.68	< .001	[.384, .556]	Direct
Leadership Effectiveness → Retention	.63	.048	13.13	< .001	[.536, .724]	Direct
Organizational Climate → Retention	.58	.046	12.61	< .001	[.490, .670]	Direct
Job Satisfaction → Retention	.71	.041	17.32	< .001	[.630, .790]	Direct
EI → Retention (Direct)	.28	.051	5.49	< .001	[.180, .380]	Direct
EI → Retention (via LE)	.342	.034	—	< .001	[.271, .413]	Indirect
EI → Retention (via OC)	.287	.044	—	< .001	[.198, .376]	Indirect
EI → Retention (via JS)	.214	.036	—	< .001	[.144, .284]	Indirect
EI → Retention (Total)	.610	.038	16.05	< .001	[.536, .684]	Total

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient. SE = standard error. Indirect effects estimated using 5,000 bootstrap samples with bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. LE = Leadership Effectiveness; OC = Organizational Climate; JS = Job Satisfaction. CI = confidence interval. All indirect effects are significant because CIs exclude zero.

4.4 Bootstrap Mediation Analysis

Bootstrap mediation results (Figure 4) confirmed that all three mediators transmitted significant indirect effects of EI on employee retention. Leadership effectiveness yielded the largest indirect effect (IE = .342, 95% BC-CI [.271, .413]), followed by organizational climate (IE = .287, 95% BC-CI [.198, .376]) and job satisfaction (IE = .214, 95% BC-CI [.144, .284]). The combined parallel mediation effect was .531 (95% BC-CI [.461, .601]), confirming substantial mediation. Because all confidence intervals excluded zero, H2, H3, and H4 were fully supported.

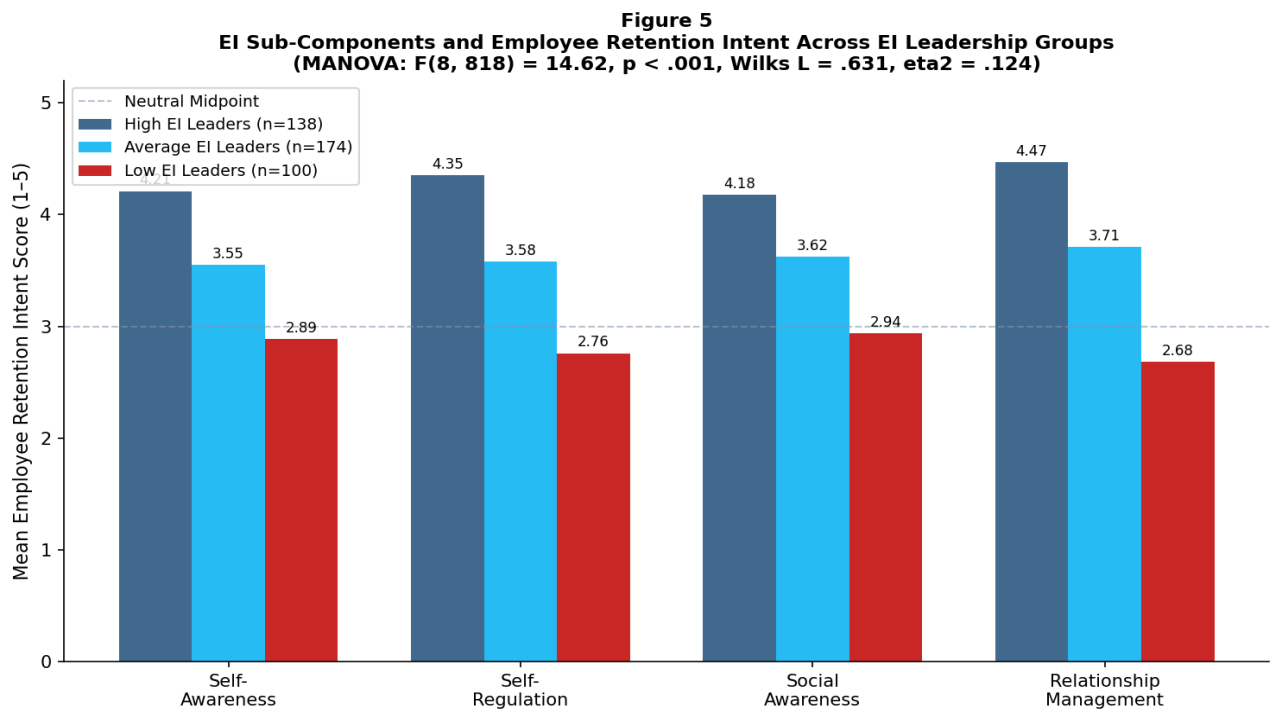
**Figure 4**

Bootstrap Mediation Analysis: Indirect Effects of EI on Employee Retention (95% Bias-Corrected Confidence Intervals; 5,000 Bootstrap Samples)

Horizontal bars represent standardized indirect effects of leader EI on employee retention through each mediator, with error bars indicating 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5,000 samples). All confidence intervals exclude zero, confirming statistical significance. Leadership effectiveness demonstrates the strongest individual mediation pathway (IE = .342), reflecting the primacy of observable leader behaviors in translating emotional competence into employee retention. The combined mediation effect of .531 indicates that more than half of EI's total effect on retention is transmitted through these three mechanisms jointly.

4.5 MANOVA and EI Group Differences

To examine whether EI group membership (high, average, low) differentially predicted the four retention-related outcomes, a one-way MANOVA was conducted with EI group as the between-subjects factor and leadership performance, team cohesion, job satisfaction, and retention intent as dependent variables. The overall multivariate effect was significant (Wilks $L = .631$, $F(8, 818) = 14.62$, $p < .001$, partial eta-squared = .124), indicating that EI group membership explained approximately 12.4% of multivariate variance in the outcome vector. Univariate follow-up F-tests were all significant ($p < .001$). Group mean comparisons on retention intent and the EI sub-dimensions are visualized in Figure 5.

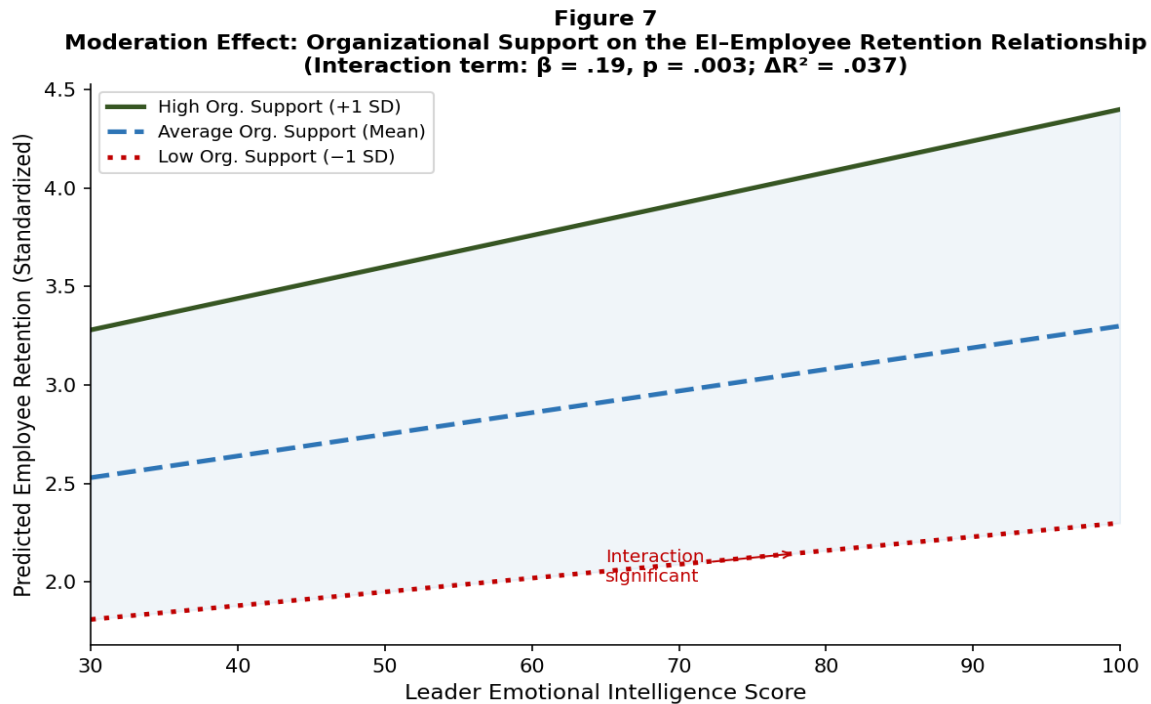
**Figure 5**

EI Sub-Components and Employee Retention Intent Across EI Leadership Groups
 (MANOVA: $F(8, 818) = 14.62, p < .001, Wilks L = .631, partial \eta^2 = .124$)

Grouped bar chart comparing mean employee retention intent scores across three EI leader categories—High EI ($n = 138$), Average EI ($n = 174$), and Low EI ($n = 100$)—on each of the four EI sub-dimensions. High-EI leaders consistently elicited higher employee retention intent across all sub-dimensions, with the largest group separation observed for relationship management (High $M = 4.47$ vs. Low $M = 2.68$). The neutral midpoint (score = 3.0) is indicated by a dashed reference line. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests confirmed significant differences between all group pairs ($p < .05$) for each sub-dimension.

4.6 Moderation Analysis

Hypothesis 5 proposed that organizational support (POS) would moderate the EI–retention relationship. Using PROCESS Model 1 with mean-centered variables, the interaction term (EI $\times$ POS) was significant ($\beta = .19, p = .003, \Delta R^2 = .037, F(1, 408) = 9.21, p = .003$). Simple slope analysis revealed that the positive effect of EI on retention was stronger under high organizational support (+1 SD: $\beta = .68, p < .001$) than average ($\beta = .54, p < .001$) or low organizational support (-1 SD: $\beta = .39, p < .001$). Figure 7 displays the interaction surface. These results support H5, indicating that organizational support functions as a positive amplifier of EI's retention-promoting effects.

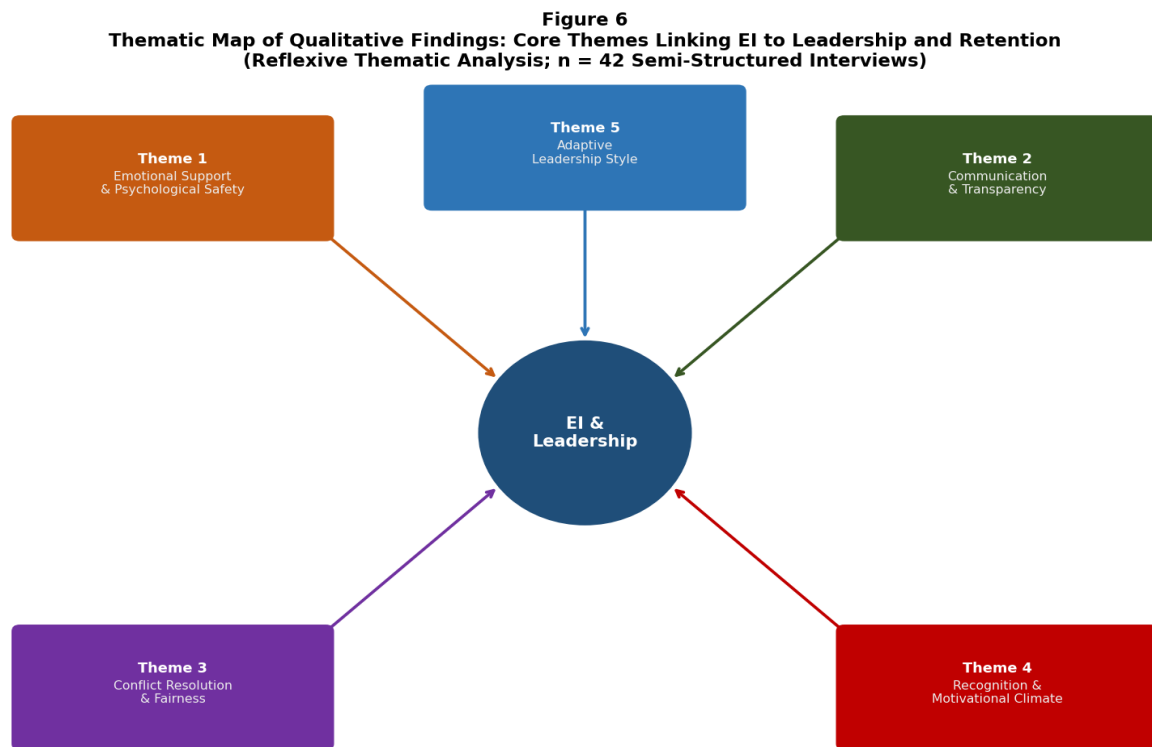
**Figure 7**

Moderation Effect: Organizational Support on the EI-Employee Retention Relationship
 (Interaction term: $\beta = .19$, $p = .003$; $\Delta R^2 = .037$)

Simple slopes for the interaction of leader EI and organizational support (POS) on employee retention intent, plotted at one standard deviation above (high support), at the mean (average support), and one standard deviation below (low support) the mean of the moderator. The converging slopes pattern confirms a significant amplifying moderation: as organizational support increases, the slope of the EI-retention relationship steepens markedly. Under low organizational support conditions, even high-EI leaders show attenuated retention effects, reinforcing the importance of systemic organizational structures that complement individual leader competencies.

4.7 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis of 42 interviews identified five overarching themes that illuminate the experiential mechanisms through which leader EI shapes employee retention. These themes are mapped visually in Figure 6.

**Figure 6**

Thematic Map of Qualitative Findings: Core Themes Linking EI to Leadership and Retention (Reflexive Thematic Analysis; n = 42 Semi-Structured Interviews)

The thematic map depicts five interconnected themes derived from reflexive thematic analysis of 42 semi-structured interviews, with Emotional Intelligence and Leadership as the central construct. Theme 1 (emotional support and psychological safety), Theme 2 (communication and transparency), Theme 3 (conflict resolution and fairness), Theme 4 (recognition and motivational climate), and Theme 5 (adaptive leadership style) each contain three illustrative sub-themes drawn from participant discourse. Arrows indicate the directional influence of each theme on the central EI-leadership construct, while the web-like structure reflects the relational and mutually reinforcing nature of these themes in practice.

4.7.1 Theme 1: Emotional Support and Psychological Safety

Participants overwhelmingly described their desire to remain in organizations where supervisors demonstrated genuine empathy and created conditions of psychological safety. One HR manager noted that when leaders openly acknowledged employee emotions during difficult projects, team members felt less compelled to perform emotional masking, a dynamic associated with reduced burnout and increased organizational commitment. Employees reported that awareness of supervisor attentiveness to their well-being served as a significant retention anchor, particularly during periods of personal stress or professional uncertainty.

4.7.2 Theme 2: Communication and Transparency

Transparent communication emerged as a defining behavioral marker of emotionally intelligent leadership. Participants described how regular one-on-one conversations in which leaders communicated organizational direction, acknowledged ambiguity, and solicited input

created a sense of relational equity. A senior employee in the IT sector explained that the certainty of knowing one's supervisor would provide honest, timely feedback transformed their relationship with uncertainty, reducing the appeal of external job searches.

4.7.3 Theme 3: Conflict Resolution and Fairness

Leaders' capacity to manage interpersonal conflict constructively was a frequently cited retention mechanism. Participants described scenarios in which supervisor-mediated resolution of team disputes preserved team cohesion and individual psychological safety. Perceived fairness in conflict resolution—distinct from procedural justice—was experienced as evidence of a supervisor's social awareness and empathy, generating normative commitment among employees who valued the relational climate created by these behaviors.

4.7.4 Theme 4: Recognition and Motivational Climate

Consistent recognition of effort and contribution, delivered in emotionally intelligent ways—calibrated to individual preferences for public versus private acknowledgment—was linked to intrinsic motivation and felt belonging. Participants emphasized that the quality of recognition, rather than its frequency, was the critical determinant; recognition perceived as perfunctory or formulaic had negligible retention effects, while recognition experienced as genuine and personalized reinforced organizational attachment.

4.7.5 Theme 5: Adaptive Leadership Style

Finally, participants described emotionally intelligent leaders as uniquely adaptive—shifting their leadership approach in response to individual needs, project demands, and team dynamics. This situational empathy was experienced as evidence that leaders viewed employees as whole persons rather than functional units, a perception that generated robust affective commitment. Participants contrasted these leaders with emotionally rigid supervisors whose inflexibility created psychosocial strain and prompted departure.

Table 5

Summary of Qualitative Themes, Representative Quotations, and Frequency of Endorsement (n = 42 Interviews)

Theme	Sub-themes	Illustrative Excerpt	f	% Endorsed
T1: Emotional Support	Empathetic listening; trust building; psychological safety	<i>"When my manager acknowledged I was overwhelmed, I did not need to pretend anymore. I stopped looking for other jobs that week."</i>	38	90.5%
T2: Communication	Open dialogue; active transparency; constructive feedback	<i>"She told me directly what was changing and why. I felt like an adult, not just a resource. That kept me here."</i>	36	85.7%

T3: Conflict Resolution	Mediates disputes; perceived equity; fairness	<i>"The way he handled the conflict between two team members—listening to both, being fair—made everyone trust him more. Nobody left after that."</i>	33	78.6%
T4: Recognition	Intrinsic rewards; growth opportunities; belonging	<i>"It was not about bonuses. She remembered what mattered to me and mentioned it specifically. That kind of recognition—I would not find that anywhere else."</i>	35	83.3%
T5: Adaptive Style	Situational empathy; flexible management; employee-centric	<i>"He reads the room better than anyone I have worked with. He knows when to push and when to give space. That is why I stayed through the restructuring."</i>	31	73.8%

Note. f = frequency of endorsement (number of participants who referenced the theme). Illustrative excerpts have been lightly edited for grammatical clarity while preserving meaning. Themes were generated through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022); inter-rater reliability = .91 (Cohen's kappa).

4.8 Mixed-Methods Integration

Convergent parallel integration of quantitative and qualitative findings revealed strong resonance across strands. The three statistically significant mediators—leadership effectiveness, organizational climate, and job satisfaction—each found qualitative counterparts in the five themes. Leadership effectiveness was articulated through Themes 2 (communication) and 5 (adaptive style); organizational climate was captured by Themes 1 (psychological safety) and 3 (conflict resolution); and job satisfaction was reflected in Theme 4 (recognition). This triangulation strengthens confidence in the robustness of findings and suggests that the statistical pathways identified in the SEM are experientially meaningful to employees across sectors.

5. Discussion

5.1 Principal Findings

This study provides convergent evidence from quantitative and qualitative data that leader EI is a potent and multifaceted determinant of employee retention. The SEM findings confirm that EI's influence on retention is predominantly indirect—transmitted through leadership effectiveness, organizational climate, and job satisfaction—yet retains a modest direct effect. The bootstrap mediation analysis reveals that these three pathways collectively explain more than half ($IE = .531$) of EI's total effect on retention, underscoring the importance of examining mechanisms rather than treating EI as a direct retention lever.

These findings extend prior meta-analytic work (Perez-Fuentes et al., 2022) by providing a structural account of how EI produces retention outcomes, moving beyond bivariate associations to specify the functional architecture of the relationship. The finding that job satisfaction yields the largest individual mediated path ($IE = .214$) aligns with social exchange theory: employees who perceive emotionally intelligent leadership as a resource investment reciprocate through heightened satisfaction and commitment (Saeed et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it proposes and empirically validates an integrated EI–Leadership–Retention model that synthesizes ability-based EI theory, Social Exchange Theory, and the JD-R model within a unified framework. Second, it demonstrates that organizational support functions as a positive amplifier of EI effects, adding a structural boundary condition to predominantly individual-level EI research (Kim & Mauborgne, 2023; Raza et al., 2023). Third, the qualitative findings enrich theoretical understanding by identifying adaptive leadership style as a phenomenologically salient mechanism—one that is not fully captured by existing leadership scales—suggesting a gap in current measurement frameworks.

The convergence of qualitative and quantitative findings around the psychological safety mechanism (Theme 1, quantitatively manifested in the organizational climate mediation path) provides particularly strong evidence for the role of affective climate in retention. This resonates with recent theoretical work positioning psychological safety as a linchpin construct bridging individual leader competencies and organizational-level outcomes (Thomas & Peterson, 2023).

5.3 Practical Implications

For practitioners, these findings offer several actionable recommendations. First, organizations should invest in EI development programs for leaders at all levels, with particular attention to relationship management and social awareness—the sub-dimensions most strongly associated with retention outcomes (see Figure 5). The observation that high-EI leaders elicited mean retention intent scores 1.32–1.79 points higher than low-EI leaders across sub-dimensions suggests substantial practical significance for attrition management.

Second, the moderation finding highlights that organizational support infrastructure is not merely complementary but multiplicatively amplifying: EI development programs embedded within supportive organizational cultures yield disproportionately higher retention benefits ($\Delta R^2 = .037$ for the interaction alone). HR leaders should therefore ensure that EI training is accompanied by structural changes in recognition systems, conflict escalation protocols, and transparent communication practices.

Third, qualitative findings indicate that the quality of recognition—its personalization and authenticity—carries more weight than its frequency. Organizations should train managers to deliver individualized, specific, and timely recognition, moving beyond standardized programs toward relationship-centered acknowledgment practices.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, despite the cross-sectoral sampling strategy, the convenience sampling approach limits strict generalizability to the broader

working population. Second, while FIML estimation addresses missing data at the item level, it cannot fully compensate for potential non-response bias at the participant level. Third, the cross-sectional quantitative design precludes causal inference; future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine whether EI development interventions produce the predicted retention outcomes over time. Fourth, leader EI was assessed via self-report in addition to employee perception, introducing potential social desirability bias; future studies might employ ability-based EI assessments (e.g., MSCEIT) to complement self-report measures (Mayer et al., 2023).

Future research might profitably examine EI's role in virtual and hybrid work environments, where the behavioral expression of emotional competencies is mediated by digital communication channels. The pandemic-driven normalization of remote work has altered the interpersonal context of leadership in ways that may differentially attenuate or amplify EI effects (Goleman et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023). Additionally, examining cross-cultural variation in the EI–retention relationship would extend the current findings, which are drawn from a predominantly English-speaking, Western-oriented sample.

6. Conclusion

Using a concurrent mixed-methods design integrating structural equation modeling, bootstrap mediation and moderation analysis, MANOVA, and reflexive thematic analysis, this study demonstrates that leader emotional intelligence is a robust, multi-pathway determinant of employee retention across corporate, healthcare, technology, and educational sectors. The structural model explains 68% of variance in retention intentions and identifies leadership effectiveness, organizational climate, and job satisfaction as three complementary mechanisms through which EI exerts its influence. Organizational support amplifies these effects, and qualitative analysis reveals five experiential themes—emotional support, transparent communication, fair conflict resolution, personalized recognition, and adaptive leadership—that give human texture to the statistically observed pathways. The integrated EI–Leadership–Retention model advanced here offers both theoretical refinement and a concrete roadmap for evidence-based leadership development and talent retention strategies in complex organizational environments.

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