Emotional Intelligence: A Case Study on the Impact of Fiction Reading

Layne Acree
Tiffin University, United States
acreele@tiffin.edu

Hieu Phan
Ph.D., Morningside University, United States
phanj@morningside.edu

ABSTRACT: This study critically examined the relationship between reading fiction and the development of Emotional Intelligence (EI) to assess whether engagement with narrative literature contributes to the enhancement of empathy, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social skills. To address this question, an online survey was administered to a sample of 97 participants, who provided information about their personal characteristics and reading behaviors. The survey included self-report items on reading habits, a validated emotional intelligence scale using a Likert format, and the Author Recognition Task (ART) to measure reading exposure objectively. The Author Recognition Task (ART) was employed to validate claims of frequent reading based on the premise that regular readers are more likely to recognize established authors. Emotional Intelligence was assessed using a self-report questionnaire utilizing a Likert scale. The analysis revealed minimal to no correlation between the quantity of fiction read and participants' levels of emotional Intelligence. While the study is subject to certain limitations, the findings represent the outcome of a rigorous and systematic data analysis process. These findings suggest that while reading fiction is often associated with emotional and cognitive growth, the relationship may be more complex or influenced by additional variables not captured in this study. Implications for future research and educational practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS: emotional intelligence, emotional impact, emotional literacy, perspective-taking, emotional competence, literary engagement, social cognition, emotional expression, psychological development, theory of mind, emotional awareness, self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, empathy, emotional perception, interpersonal skills, emotional understanding, emotional control, emotional development, fiction, reading habits, literary fiction, imagination, empathy, storytelling, literary analysis, cognitive development

Introduction

In an era where emotional intelligence is increasingly recognized as essential for personal and professional success, researchers continue to explore various ways individuals can develop this skill. One promising area of investigation is the potential impact of reading fiction. Fictional narratives not only entertain but also offer readers immersive experiences in the lives, thoughts, and emotions of others. The ability to perceive, understand, manage, and utilize emotions effectively—has gained increasing attention in psychological, educational, and social research due to its relevance to personal well-being, interpersonal relationships, and professional success. These experiences could foster greater empathy, emotional insight, and social awareness —core components of emotional intelligence.

The idea that literature can shape emotional development has gained traction in recent years, particularly as studies have pointed to a connection between reading fiction and empathetic growth. However, the extent of this relationship remains unclear, especially when considering individual differences in reading habits, genre preferences, and frequency. This study examines the relationship between reading fiction and emotional intelligence, specifically examining whether the number of books read per year correlates with higher EI scores. To strengthen the analysis, the study controls for age, gender, education level, and self-reported reading frequency. By employing both self-assessment measures and the Author Recognition Task (ART) to validate reading habits, this research aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of how engagement with narrative fiction may contribute to emotional intelligence across diverse individuals.

Literature Review

Fiction and Empathy: Theoretical Perspectives

While emotional intelligence is often developed through direct interpersonal interactions, reading fiction offers a unique and powerful platform for emotional growth. Through engaging with the diverse emotional landscapes and complex characters found in literary works, readers can gain a deeper understanding of their own emotions as well as the emotions of others. Fictional narratives provide opportunities for empathy as readers immerse themselves in the experiences of characters from varied backgrounds and perspectives. Moreover, the emotional journeys depicted in fiction can enhance emotional regulation and social skills, making literature a valuable tool for cultivating emotional intelligence. This paper will examine the role of reading fiction in developing emotional intelligence, with a focus on its impact on fostering empathy, self-awareness, and enhanced interpersonal relationships.

According to Bal & Veltkamp (2013), "reading influences empathetic skills beyond simple emotional effects." They found that a reader has to "become fully transported into the story to change as a consequence of reading, to become more

empathetic." This concept of "transportation" suggests that when readers deeply engage with a narrative, they not only follow the plot but also connect emotionally with the characters, experiencing their joys, struggles, and personal growth. This immersion facilitates a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, enabling readers to broaden their emotional range and empathy. By identifying with characters from diverse backgrounds or unfamiliar circumstances, readers can develop a more nuanced awareness of emotions, which enhances their ability to relate to others in real life. Furthermore, this emotional engagement has been linked to increased emotional intelligence, particularly in areas like emotional regulation and social awareness.

The Contribution of Fiction Reading to Empathic Understanding

The relationship between fiction and empathy has become a focal point in recent psychological and literary studies, particularly in understanding how narrative engagement influences emotional development. Stansfield and Bunce (2014) emphasize this connection, stating that "reading fictional stories is associated with the development of empathy in children, suggesting that there is an important link between the empathy felt for fictional characters and the ability to empathize with people in reality." This observation aligns with broader research indicating that fiction serves as a simulation of social experience, allowing readers to practice perspective-taking and emotional understanding in a safe and imaginative context. By emotionally investing in the characters' lives and problems, readers can enhance their capacity for real-world empathy, making fiction not just a form of entertainment but a tool for emotional education and the development of higher emotional intelligence.

Fiction as a Tool for Emotional and Cognitive Development

Building on the previous findings, recent research has further clarified the nuanced relationship between reading fiction and empathy by distinguishing between its cognitive and affective components. As their study notes, "The results of the present study support the existence of relationships between reading fiction and 'real-world' empathizing abilities. Moreover, they indicate that two different types of empathy, cognitive and affective, have separate relationships with how much fiction an individual reads and how transported they are when reading a story" (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014). This suggests that both the quantity of fiction read and the degree of narrative immersion play distinct roles in shaping empathic abilities. Cognitive empathy- understanding another's mental state- tends to correlate with how often individuals read fiction, whereas affective empathy- emotionally resonating with others- is more strongly linked to the reader's level of emotional engagement or ability to transport into the story. These findings underscore the multifaceted impact that reading fiction has on emotional

development, supporting the notion that narrative experiences can be powerful tools for fostering real-world social understanding.

Reading and Emotional Intelligence: Empirical Insights

Reading—particularly during early childhood—has been increasingly recognized as a foundational influence on the development of emotional intelligence (EI). According to Worldreader (n.d.), engagement with literature enables readers, especially children, to identify, comprehend, and regulate both their own emotions and those of others. Early childhood represents a critical developmental window during which essential EI components such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy begin to emerge, and reading plays a vital role in cultivating these capacities.

Worldreader (n.d.) further emphasizes that fictional narratives expose readers to diverse emotional contexts and social experiences beyond their immediate realities. This exposure facilitates the development of empathy by prompting readers to mentally simulate and understand the thoughts and emotions of fictional characters. The article notes that self-regulatory behaviors begin to emerge by approximately age four, and by age eight, social and emotional patterns become more deeply established—highlighting the importance of reading during these formative years.

In addition to its developmental significance, the article underscores the pedagogical value of reading, advocating for its integration into educational curricula not solely for literacy acquisition but also as a tool for fostering emotional literacy. Through discussions of character motivations and emotional responses, readers engage in reflective thinking and emotional articulation—skills integral to emotional intelligence. Consequently, reading initiatives offer a meaningful opportunity to promote emotional growth across age groups, supporting healthier interpersonal relationships and more thoughtful decision-making.

Fiction Reading and Its Impact on Emotional Intelligence and Social Cognition

Hammond (2019) examines how reading fiction can enhance our capacity to understand and empathize with others, suggesting that engaging with fictional stories enables readers to experience the emotions and perspectives of diverse characters. This immersive process, often described as "transportation," allows readers to step into the minds of others, thereby enhancing empathy and social understanding. Fiction's unique ability to present complex social situations and emotional experiences offers readers a safe space to explore human behavior and develop emotional skills that can transfer to real-life interactions. Several studies highlight that reading literary fiction, in particular, enhances performance on tasks related to the theory of mind and the ability to attribute mental states to others, a critical element of emotional intelligence. However, the effects depend on how deeply a reader engages with the fictional narrative; the more emotionally involved

and transported a reader becomes, the stronger the potential benefits. Additionally, not all fiction has an equal impact on readers, with emotional and challenging stories having the most significant effect on empathy and prosocial behavior.

Empirical Questions

This study investigates whether increased fiction reading correlates with higher emotional intelligence levels while also exploring how this relationship may be moderated by demographic variables such as gender, distinct reading habits (reader versus non-reader), frequency of reading measured by the number of books read per year, and the genres preferred by readers.

1. Does reading more fiction books cause one to have a higher level of emotional intelligence?
2. Do results vary based on gender? (Male vs. Female)
3. Do results vary based on reading habits? (Reader vs. Non-Reader)
4. Do results vary based on reading frequency? (Books per Year)
5. Do results vary based on the readers' genre of choice?

Data and Methodology

Sampling/Demographic

This study employed a 2x2 factorial, between-subjects, non-repeated measures design, with gender (male vs. female) and reading status (reader vs. non-reader) as the two independent variables. Participants were classified according to self-reported reading behaviors and their performance on the Author Recognition Task (ART), which functioned as an objective proxy for reading exposure. The primary objective of this design was to investigate potential interactions between gender and fiction-reading habits in relation to emotional intelligence (EI) levels.

A total of 97 participants were recruited through social media platforms using a non-probability convenience sampling strategy. While this method enabled broad and rapid participant access, it introduced limitations regarding the generalizability of the findings due to the sample's lack of demographic representativeness. Of the participants, 85 identified as female, 11 as male, and one as non-binary. Racial diversity was minimal, with 99% identifying as White or Caucasian and only one participant identifying as Black or African American.

Educational attainment among participants varied: 8.2% reported holding a high school diploma, 13.4% an associate degree, 26.8% a bachelor's degree, 45.4% a master's degree, 3.1% a doctoral degree, and 3.1% selected "other." Although participants self-identified as either readers or non-readers, the ART results indicated that most had some familiarity with published authors. Only six individuals met the criteria for classification as non-readers, thereby limiting the

contrast necessary for robust group comparisons based on reading frequency or literary exposure.

Fiction reading Males	Fiction reading Females
Non-reading Males	Non-reading Females

Data Analysis

A total of 97 individuals participated in this study. Participants were recruited through voluntary response sampling via social media platforms, enabling individuals to self-select into the study. Of these participants, 85 identified as female, 11 as male, and one as non-binary. The sample exhibited limited racial diversity, with 99% identifying as White or Caucasian and only 1% identifying as Black or African American. Educational attainment was also collected: 8.2% of participants reported holding a high school diploma, 13.4% an associate degree, 26.8% a bachelor's degree, 45.4% a master's degree, 3.1% a doctoral degree, and 3.1% selected "other," which included alternative forms of education such as vocational training or incomplete college attendance.

Data collection was conducted through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The instrument consisted of four demographic items (gender, age, race, and education level) and three questions pertaining to reading habits, including the number of books read per year, preference for fiction or nonfiction, and favored genres. Two standardized instruments were used to assess the primary variables of interest: the Author Recognition Task (ART) and a self-report Emotional Intelligence (EI) questionnaire. The ART, a validated proxy for print exposure and literary engagement, presented participants with a list of 60 names—30 of which were genuine, published authors and 30 fictitious "foils." Participants were instructed to identify all recognized authors. This measure served to validate self-reported reading frequency and to distinguish between readers and non-readers. However, with only six participants meeting the criteria for non-readers, the ART did not yield sufficient variability to serve as a meaningful group differentiation tool and was of limited analytic value in this study.

Emotional intelligence was assessed using a 20-item self-report scale designed to measure four core dimensions of EI: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Participants responded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Summed responses yielded a total EI score ranging from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater emotional intelligence. Following data collection, responses were exported into Microsoft Excel and SPSS for cleaning, coding, and analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize demographic characteristics and reading behaviors. Group comparisons—such as between readers and non-readers, and between male and female participants—were

conducted alongside correlational analyses to examine relationships among reading frequency, gender, and EI scores. Due to the low number of non-readers, some comparative analyses lacked statistical power and were interpreted cautiously. Additionally, exploratory analyses considered the effects of genre preference and educational attainment on EI, although limitations in survey design (e.g., allowing participants to select multiple genres) constrained the specificity of these findings.

Procedures

Participants accessed the survey through a hyperlink disseminated via social media platforms. Upon opening the survey, they were presented with an informed consent form detailing the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, assurances of confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Participants indicated their consent to participate by selecting the designated agreement option before proceeding.

Following informed consent, participants completed a brief demographic section that collected information on gender, age, race or ethnicity, and highest level of educational attainment. Subsequently, they responded to three items assessing their reading habits, including the number of books reads annually (categorized as 0, 1–10, 11–50, or 50+), the type of literature typically read (fiction vs. nonfiction), and preferred genres. Participants then completed the Author Recognition Task (ART), a validated instrument designed to measure print exposure. The ART presented a list of 60 names, comprising 30 actual published authors and 30 fictitious foil names. Participants were instructed to identify all names they recognized as real authors. This task functioned as a validity check to determine the extent to which participants' self-reported reading frequency corresponded with their familiarity with literary figures.
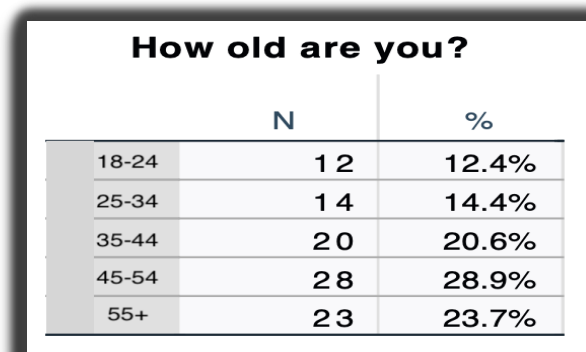
Immediately following the ART, participants completed a 20-item Emotional Intelligence (EI) questionnaire. This self-report instrument assessed four core domains of EI: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Participants were instructed to answer based on their typical thoughts, feelings, and interpersonal behaviors. The entire survey process required approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Upon submission, participants received a debriefing message and were thanked for their participation. Survey responses were automatically captured via Google Forms, organized and preliminarily coded in Microsoft Excel, and subsequently imported into SPSS for statistical analysis. Analyses focused on examining relationships among reading habits, gender, and emotional intelligence scores.

Results

Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study did not demonstrate a strong relationship between the number of books read annually and participants' levels of emotional intelligence (EI). As illustrated in the accompanying figure, emotional intelligence scores remained relatively consistent across reading frequency groups. Participants who reported reading no books per year had an average EI score of 77.83 (on a scale of 100), those reading 1–10 books averaged 78.51, those reading 11–50 books averaged 81.49, and those reading more than 50 books scored an average of 77.92. These findings suggest that the volume of books read alone may not significantly influence emotional intelligence. The broad categorization of reading frequency— particularly the 11–50 book range—may have masked more nuanced differences in participants' reading habits and their corresponding EI scores. For instance, individuals who read 12 books annually may engage with literature in ways that differ considerably from those who read closer to 50 books. Similar patterns emerged when analyzing emotional intelligence about participants' gender and educational attainment. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution due to the lack of demographic diversity in the sample. Of the 97 participants, 85 identified as women, 11 as men, and one as non-binary. Furthermore, 99% (96 participants) identified as White or Caucasian, while only 1% (1 participant) identified as Black or African American. This lack of diversity may have introduced bias or limited the generalizability of the results.

The Author Recognition Task (ART), which was included to validate participants' reported reading habits and to control for inaccurate self-reporting, proved to be of limited utility in this context. Only six participants identified as non-readers, suggesting that the ART did not effectively differentiate between levels of literary engagement within the sample. Additionally, the ART primarily assesses familiarity with author names rather than depth of engagement with fiction or narrative complexity—factors that may be more closely associated with emotional intelligence. As such, the ART may not have been the most appropriate instrument for this study's objectives.

How old are you?		
	N	%
18-24	12	12.4%
25-34	14	14.4%
35-44	20	20.6%
45-54	28	28.9%
55+	23	23.7%

Figure 1: Age of Participants (N=97)

What is your highest level of education?

	N	%
High School	8	8.2%
Associates	13	13.4%
Bachelors	26	26.8%
Masters	44	45.4%
Doctorate	3	3.1%
Other	3	3.1%

Figure 2. Level of Education (N=97)

How many books do you read per year?

	N	%
0	6	6.2%
1-10	35	36.1%
11-50	43	44.3%
50+	13	13.4%

Figure 3. Number of Book Read (N=97)

Report

TOTAL

How many books do you read per year?	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
0 books	77.83	6	9.928
1-10 books	78.51	35	6.701
11-50 books	81.49	43	6.974
50+ books	77.92	13	10.789
Total	79.71	97	7.711

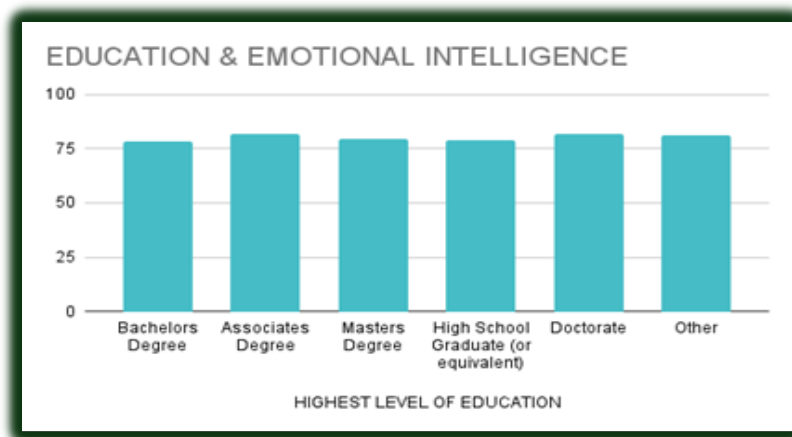Figure 4. Total Number of Book Read (N=97)
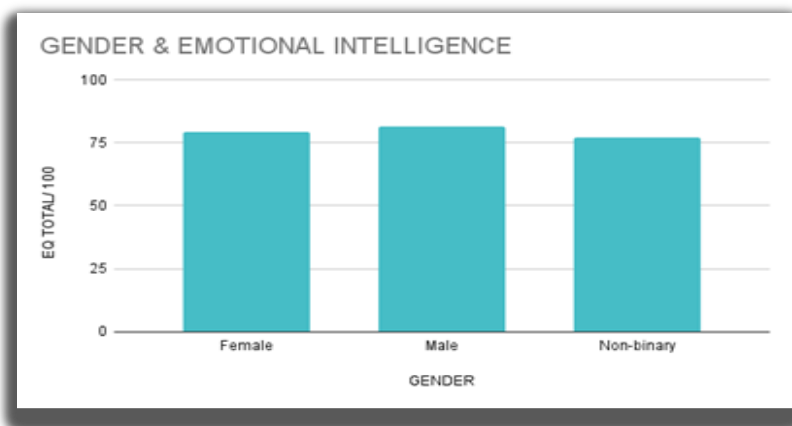
Figure 5. Highest Level of Education (N=97)

Figure 6. Gender of Participants (N=97)

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between reading fiction and emotional intelligence (EI), controlling for age, gender, education level, and the number of books read. The investigators surmised that greater engagement with narrative literature could enhance individuals' empathy, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social skills. Although previous research has frequently suggested a positive association between fiction reading and emotional development, the findings of this study revealed a more complex and inconclusive relationship. The findings of this study have important implications, suggesting that reading fiction may serve as a valuable means of fostering emotional intelligence. This insight is particularly relevant to disciplines such as education, criminal justice, psychology, and social work, where emotional intelligence plays a vital role in effective professional practice.

A central insight emerging from this study is that the depth of emotional engagement with fiction, rather than the sheer volume of reading, may play a more critical role in the development of emotional intelligence. Several potential

mechanisms may explain how reading fiction influences emotional intelligence. One prominent explanation is that fiction offers an emotional simulation, enabling readers of varying ages, genders, and education levels to engage with diverse emotional experiences and perspectives within a safe, imaginative context. Through this process, readers may cultivate a deeper understanding of complex human emotions and social dynamics, thereby contributing to the development of key emotional intelligence competencies. Emotional intelligence is shaped by an interplay of cognitive, emotional, and experiential factors, and fiction may impact its development in more nuanced ways than can be captured by reading frequency alone.

Conclusion/Limitations/Future Scope

Overall, the findings of this study neither conclusively supported nor directly refuted the existing literature on the relationship between reading fiction and emotional intelligence (EI). The results presented a nuanced perspective, offering mixed insights into this association. Although previous research has often emphasized a strong link between fiction reading and the development of emotional competencies, this study did not demonstrate a significant correlation between the number of books read annually and participants' self-reported emotional intelligence levels. These findings suggest that reading volume, in isolation, may not be a sufficient indicator of emotional intelligence. Additionally, the limited representation of non-readers in the sample restricted the ability to conduct meaningful comparisons. The use of broad categorical ranges—such as the "11–50 books per year" group—may have further masked potential trends that a more granular classification could have illuminated.

Nevertheless, this study had several limitations. Although the sample size was adequate for preliminary analysis, it may not have fully captured the demographic and experiential diversity of the broader population. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures for both reading habits and emotional intelligence introduced potential response biases. The study's duration may also have been insufficient to detect long-term changes in emotional intelligence development. Emotional intelligence is a complex, multifaceted construct likely influenced by numerous unmeasured variables, such as personality traits, life experiences, and preferred reading genres. A methodological limitation included allowing participants to select multiple preferred genres, which complicated the analysis of genre-specific effects on emotional intelligence. Moreover, the Author Recognition Task (ART), intended to validate self-reported reading frequency, was less effective than anticipated; with only six participants identifying as non-readers, the ART lacked sufficient variability to serve as a reliable screening measure. Furthermore, as the ART assesses familiarity with author names rather than the depth of reading or emotional engagement, its applicability to emotional intelligence was inherently limited.

Despite the noted limitations, the findings indicate that the emotional impact and depth of engagement with fiction may hold greater significance for the development of empathic abilities than the sheer quantity of books read. Future research would benefit from employing more targeted methodologies, such as analyzing the influence of specific genres, assessing readers' emotional responses to narrative content, and exploring the extent to which individuals identify with fictional characters. Longitudinal studies could also offer valuable perspectives on how sustained exposure to fiction contributes to emotional growth over time. Although this study did not provide clear evidence supporting a direct relationship between reading volume and emotional intelligence, it adds to the existing body of literature by underscoring the complex and multifaceted ways in which fiction may shape emotional development.

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