

Social-Emotional Intelligence of Undergraduate University Students in Intimate Relationships in Nairobi, Kenya: A Gender Differences Perspective

Veronica Nyawira Ngatia* and Beatrice M. Kathungu**

Abstract

Most undergraduate students in universities are in the young adulthood stage of development, in which intimate relationships are part of key tasks. Central to intimate relationships are emotions, which play a crucial role in determining whether a relationship flourishes or decays. Capacity to manage emotions of self and others-also known as social-emotional intelligence-powered by its dimensions; emotional perception, utilization, and management of self and others-has been found to enhance individual capacity to relate with others, enhancing the possibilities of experiencing relationship satisfaction. However, most past studies have recorded inconsistent social-emotional intelligence (SEI) levels, gender-based differences, and context have differed from that of intimate relationships. The study was an attempt to investigate if there are significant gender differences in social-emotional intelligence in a sample of ($n = 399$) undergraduate students in universities engaged in intimate relationships in Nairobi County, Kenya. A survey design was used, and multistage sampling was used to select 234 female and 186 male students. Analysis of the data indicate moderate levels of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students in intimate relationships. The emotional perception dimension of social-emotional intelligence shows a statistically significant difference between the genders. However, the study findings reveal that gender should not be a deterrent when exposing students to social-emotional learning.

Keywords: Social-emotional intelligence, undergraduate students, intimate relationships, gender differences.

*Certified Emotional Intelligence Practitioner, Accredited Counselor Programs Manager - Shamiri Institute
Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya. Email: venyanga@gmail.com

**Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

Introduction

Most undergraduate students in Kenya are in the young adulthood stage of human development. Establishing and maintaining intimate relationships is among the key development tasks (Arnett, 2000). More than half of the undergraduate students (56%) have previously been recorded as being engaged in intimate relationships (Fida et al., 2018). However, intimate relationships among young adults, especially undergraduate students in universities in Kenya, face many emotional-based conflicts (Wanyoike, 2015; WHO, 2014) that tend to contribute to their decay. Emotional-based conflicts have also led to violence, suicides, and deaths (WHO, 2021; Kenyatta University Wellness Center, 2022; Ouma, 2018).

Social-emotional intelligence (SEI) defined by its dimensions; emotional perception, utilization, management of self and others has been touted among key skills that allow individuals to effectively manage emotions of self and others. Additionally, social-emotional intelligence has been found to improve relationship success and satisfaction (Jardine et al., 2022). In other previous studies, gender differences socially defined roles and characteristics that define female and male have emerged as a vital determinant of the level of social-emotional intelligence (Fida et al., 2018; Meshkat & Nejat, 2017; Patel, 2017; Rao and Komala, 2017). However, few researchers such as Fida et al., 2018; Meshkat & Nejat, 2017; Patel, 2017; Rao and Komala, 2017 have explored whether gender differences in social-emotional intelligence would emerge in intimate relationships context among university students. This is despite social-emotional intelligence being a possible enhancing key factor of intimate relationships.

Levels of Social-emotional Intelligence among University Undergraduate Students

Social-emotional intelligence has been defined as the capacity to effectively perceive, utilize, and manage the emotions of self and others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). It has been found to enhance conflict resolution (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019), functionality and relationship satisfaction (Jardine et al., 2022), quality interpersonal relationships, effective communication, and the capacity to cope with changes (Metaj-Macula, 2017). However, on social-emotional intelligence (SEI), study findings have differed on the levels of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students. For instance, according to Kant (2019), Majerníková & Obročníková (2017) Shrestha & Mandal (2021) and Kaleli et al., 2022, there are higher levels of emotional intelligence among university students. Moderate levels of social-emotional intelligence have also been reported (Almajali et al., 2016; Karimi et al., 2020). Low levels of social-emotional intelligence (Ahmed, 2016) have been reported among high school students.

Gender Differences in Social-emotional Intelligence

Social-emotional intelligence have been found to enable individuals to gain the capacity to be more self-aware and manage their social relationships, intimate relationships included. Levels of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students have also differed across genders. Diverse results on gender differences in social-emotional intelligence have been recorded. For instance, Patel (2017), Fida et al. (2018) and Yugi (2020) reported higher levels of social-emotional intelligence in female students compared to their male counterparts. On the contrary, Ajmal et al. (2017) and Rao and Komala (2017) reported that male students recorded higher levels of social-emotional intelligence than their female counterparts. Moreover, Meshkat and Nejati (2017) and Nnabuife et al. (2017) reported in their studies that there is no difference between female and male participants in overall emotional intelligence.

Gender Differences in Social-emotional Intelligence Dimensions

On social-emotional intelligence defining dimensions and gender differences, diverse and contradicting results have also been recorded. Based on previous studies, mixed scores continue to be recorded between male and female gender.

- i. Emotional perception: This involves decoding (identification and recognition) of emotional cues from self and others. The females have been found to score higher than males (Jaušovec & Jaušovec, 2010; Meshkat & Nejati, 2017). Some explanation extended to the observation include, society assigned gender roles that orient females to be more expressive than males and that female have better verbal processing and fluency, which could make help them in emotional expression than males (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2012).
- ii. Emotional utilization: This involves the use of emotions to motivate oneself. Mokhlesi and Patil (2018) and Nnabuife et al. (2018) found no significant difference between the genders. However, Tripathi (2016) reported a significant difference with male outperforming their female counterparts in emotional utilization.
- iii. Emotional management of self: There are studies that have reported lack of difference in emotional management of self between male and their female counterparts (Fida et al., 2018; Nnabuife et al., 2018). However, Ali et al. (2021) in their studies reported higher scores for male compared to their female counterparts.
- iv. Emotional management of others: There are studies that have reported lack of difference in emotional management of others between female and their male counterparts (Fida et al., 2018; Nnabuife et al., 2018). However, other studies report higher scores for female compared to their male counterparts among college students (Tripathi, 2016).

Study Rationale

Emotions play a central role in determining the flourishing or decay of intimate relationships as they can influence how people think and behave. Therefore, the capacity to identify, recognize, use emotional data, and manage emotions of self and others can be key in enhancing flourishing of intimate relationships. Previous studies such as that of Fida et al. (2018); Ajmal et al. (2017); Nnabuiife et al.(2017) have recorded mixed results on the levels of social-emotional intelligence, gender differences in social-emotional intelligence and its dimensions. Recorded emotional-based challenges facing intimate relationships among undergraduate students in Kenya have become rampant. The availability of data on different avenues that can be established as preventive interventions would be very timely and appropriate.

Statement of the Problem

The majority of undergraduate students are in their young adulthood stage of development, with more than half engaging in intimate relationships as they form a key part of their development task (Arnett, 2000). In the context of intimate relationships, emotions have a central place because emotional-based conflicts such as violence and deaths have been recorded among university undergraduate students in Kenya. Social-emotional intelligence enhances a person's capacity to manage their emotions. It has been found to improve relationship satisfaction, coping with changes, and improving happiness. However, evidence is still limited when it comes to intimate relationship context among university students. Additionally, mixed results have been recorded on levels of social-emotional intelligence, gender differences in social-emotional intelligence and its dimensions. Generation of this data would be instrumental in putting together social-emotional intelligence-based interventions as support systems among undergraduate students in intimate relationships.

Study Objectives

1. To establish the level of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students in intimate relationships.
2. To establish whether there are statistically significant gender differences in the levels of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students in intimate relationships.
3. To establish whether there are statistically significant gender differences in different dimensions of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students in intimate relationships.

Study Hypothesis

H₀₁: There are no statistically significant gender differences in the levels of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students in intimate relationships.

H₀₂: There are no statistically significant gender differences in different dimensions of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students in intimate relationships.

Research Methodology

Study Design

A survey research design was adopted for the study. Data were collected on the level of social-emotional intelligence, social-emotional intelligence dimensions and gender as a social demographic factor among undergraduate students in romantic relationships.

Sample and sampling

Multistage sampling was used in the study. Disproportionate stratified sampling was used to select participants from public or private universities. Random sampling was used to randomly select participants from any department/faculty, whether science- or art-based. Purposive sampling was used to select 399 students actively engaged in intimate relationships, whether in marriage, dating, or cohabitation. Of the total 399 participants selected 234 were female, while 186 were male. An isolating question Are you actively engaged in an intimate relationship? was used to purposively isolate students in intimate relationships from those who were not.

Study Instruments

Socio-Demographic Questionnaire (SDQ)

The social-demographic questionnaire collected the identifying information of the participants, such as gender, name, year of study and length of the relationship they are currently engaged in.

Schutte's Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS)

The Schutte's Self Emotional Intelligence Scale (SSEIS) (Schutte et al., 1998). SSEIS is a 33-item self-report inventory with a 5-point Likert scale based on Salovey & Mayer (1990) original SEI model. SSEIS measure is within the global SEI, measures typical SEI and is appropriate for the study due to its brevity nature compared to other lengthy SEI measures. It also has been used in many other studies with publications. The instrument has a test-retest reliability of .78 (Schutte et al.,1998; Shahid & Kazmi, 2016). It takes about 15 minutes to fill. The score range is from 1-5, with items 5, 28 and 33 scored on reverse code. Total SEI ranges from 33 to 165.

Emotional perception: Emotion Perception (EP) is the capacity to tune in, recognize, and identify emotions when they are exhibited. This dimension is measured using ten items in the tool, focusing on the capacity to identify and recognize emotions. The items that measure emotional perception include items 5,9,15,18,19,22,25,29,32, and 33. Some item questions are,

“I am aware of my emotions as I experience them.”

“By looking at their facial expressions, I recognize the emotions people are experiencing.”

Emotional utilization: Emotion utilization (EUT) is the capacity to harness one’s emotional data/information to provide the best-suited response that is well thought out. Emotional utilization allows an individual to act intentionally rather than react on autopilot. Six (6) items measure emotional utilization in the tool. These items include items 6,7,8,17,20, and 27. Some questions include,

“When I feel a change in emotions, I tend to come up with new ideas.

“When I am in a positive mood, solving problems is easy for me.”

Emotional management of self: Emotional management of self is the capacity to regulate the emotions of self. The capacity to regulate emotions of self, enhances our capacity to better adjust to our environment. Nine (9) items measure the emotional management of self in the tool. These items include items 2,3,10,12,14,21,23,28, and 31. Some questions include,

“When I am faced with a challenge, I give up because I believe I will fail.”

“When I experience a positive emotion, I know how to make it last.”

Emotional management of others: Emotional management of others is the capacity to regulate the emotions of self. It is the capacity to manage emotions tuned in, identified, and thought about. The capacity to regulate our emotions can be useful when interacting with other people. Eight (8) items measure this dimension in the tool. The items include items 1,4,11,13,16,24,26, and 30. Some questions include,

“When another person tells me about an important event in his or her life, I almost feel as though I experienced this event myself.”

“I help other people feel better when they are down.”

Data analysis

Data was analyzed descriptively particularly by calculating the mean, standard deviation, percentages, and inferential statistics particularly ANOVA analysis to test the significance via SPSS software.

Results

Objective 1: To establish the levels of social-emotional intelligence among university students in intimate relationships.

Using Schutte's Emotional Intelligence Scale to collect self-reported data, the following is a presentation of the overall social-emotional intelligence data. The mean score for all the students was 125.3, with a standard deviation of 18.23. The highest social-emotional intelligence score was 159 out of the maximum of 165, while the minimum was 65 from the minimum of 33 scores.

On social-emotional intelligence dimensions, i.e., Emotional perception (EP), Emotional utilization (EUT), Emotional management of self (EMS), and Emotional management of others (EMO), table 1. presents the mean score results obtained. The EP mean score was 36.49 with a standard deviation of 6.59. EUT mean score at 23.15 with a standard deviation of 4.46. EMS mean score at 36.054 with a standard deviation of 6.283, while the EMO mean score at 30.04 with a standard deviation of 5.05.

Table 1
Social-emotional Intelligence and Dimensions Score

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
SEI	399	125.3	18.23	65	159
EP	399	36.49	6.59	21	21
EUT	399	23.15	4.46	10	10
EMS	399	36.05	6.28	10	10
EMO	399	30.04	5.05	14	14

Finally, to determine the levels of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students, percentages were calculated to understand how the student's social-emotional intelligence was rated.

Table 2

Levels of Overall Social-emotional Intelligence

	<i>N</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Low	80	20%	98.65	13.22	65	111
Moderate	204	51%	124.1	6.46	112	137
High	115	29%	145.97	5.68	137	159

From table 2, out of 399 (100%) students who sampled for the study, 51% had moderate levels of social-emotional intelligence, 29% of the students rated high for social-emotional intelligence and 20% rated to have low social-emotional intelligence. Generally, the social-emotional intelligence rating was skewed towards high levels.

To establish gender differences in social-emotional intelligence

The following results were obtained to establish gender differences in overall emotional intelligence. The female participants' mean score was 126.26, with a standard deviation of 17.29, while the male counterparts had a mean score of 124.59, with a standard deviation of 18.91. There was a slight difference between both mean scores. Compared to the overall mean score of 125.303 with a standard deviation of 18.23, females scored slightly better than male participants. Table 3. presents the results.

Table 3

Gender Differences in Overall SEI

	Gender	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
SEI	F	171	126.26	17.29	90	159
SEI	M	228	124.59	18.91	65	154

To test the difference in the mean scores between female and male participants was significant, further analysis was done using ANOVA. The results are presented below. The ANOVA results are presented in table 4.

Table 4

ANOVA – Gender Differences in Overall SEI

Cases	Sum of Squares	<i>Df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Gender	272.38	1	272.38	0.82	.37
Residuals	131953.92	397	332.38		

Note. Not significant at $\alpha = .05$

The ANOVA table 4. presented indicate that the difference between the female and male mean score in social-emotional intelligence was not significant at the current study p -value of .05 ($F_{1,397} = 0.819, p = .366$). As well, based on F-statistics, F obtained was 0.819 was less than the F critical value of 3.84. Therefore, the null hypothesis H_{01} stating that there is no statistically significant difference in the level of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students in intimate relationships based on gender was accepted.

To establish gender differences in social-emotional intelligence dimensions

To establish gender differences in social-emotional intelligence dimensions, namely: emotional perception, emotional utilization, emotional management of self and emotional management of others, mean scores were calculated, and ANOVA was calculated to establish the significance of the gender mean differences. The table 5. presented illustrates mean scores obtained in the four dimensions of social-emotional intelligence.

Table 5

Gender Differences in Social-emotional Intelligence Dimensions Descriptive Table

	Gender	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
EP	F	171	37.35	6.48	23	50
EP	M	228	35.84	6.6	21	48
EU	F	171	23.12	4.45	13	30
EU	M	228	23.18	4.48	10	30
EMS	F	171	36.37	5.62	25	45
EMS	M	228	35.82	6.74	10	50
EMO	F	171	30.42	4.35	22	39
EMO	M	228	29.76	5.5	14	40

Gender Differences in Emotional Perception

Female participants had a higher mean score of 37.35 with a standard deviation of 6.48 than the male participants with a mean score of 35.84 with a standard deviation of 6.6. The female participants' mean score was higher as well when compared to the overall EP mean score ($M=36.486$, $SD=6.585$), while that of the male participants was lower.

The ANOVA test was carried out to test whether the gender differences in emotional perception were significant. The results are presented in table 6.

Table 6

ANOVA – Gender Differences in Emotional Perception

Cases	<i>SS</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender	223.73	1	223.73	5.21	.02
Residuals	17035.94	397	42.91		

Note. Not significant at $\alpha = .05$

The ANOVA table 6 presented indicate that the difference between the female and male mean score in emotional perception was found to be significant at a p -value of .023 ($F_{1,397} = 5.214$, $p = .023 < .05$). As well, based on F-statistics, the F obtained was 5.214 was greater than the F critical value of 3.84.

Gender Differences on Emotional Utilization

On emotional utilization, not much difference was recorded between female and male participants ($M = 23.12$, $SD = 4.45$) and ($M = 23.18$, $SD = 4.48$), respectively. The mean scores for female and male participants were also almost like the overall EUT mean score ($M = 23.15$, $SD = 4.46$). ANOVA did not find the differences in the mean scores between female and male participants significant.

Gender Differences Emotional Management of Self

On emotional management of self, female participants obtained a higher mean score ($M = 36.37$, $SD = 5.62$), while the male participants obtained a mean score ($M = 35.82$, $SD = 6.74$.) The female participants' score was almost like that of the overall emotional management of self, mean score ($M = 36.05$, $SD = 6.28$). In contrast, the male mean score was slightly lower than the overall emotional management of self, mean score. ANOVA did not find any significant difference between female and male mean scores.

Gender Differences Emotional Management of Others

On emotional management of others, the female participants had a higher mean score ($M = 30.42$, $SD = 4.35$) than the male participants with a mean score ($M = 29.76$, $SD = 5.5$). The female participants' mean score was almost like the overall EMO mean score ($M = 36.05$, $SD = 6.28$), while the male participants' mean score was lower. ANOVA did not find the differences in the mean scores between female and male participants significant.

From the results shared above, on social-emotional dimensions namely: emotional perception, emotional utilization, and emotional management of self and others, only emotional perception differences between female and male participants were found to be statistically significant. For the other dimensions, emotional utilization and emotional management of self and others, the differences between female and male participants were not significant.

Discussion

On the levels of social-emotional intelligence, mean scores obtained from the self-reported data, half of the students (51%) report moderate levels of social-emotional intelligence ($M = 124.1$, $SD = 6.46$). The study seems to agree with the results recorded by (Almajali et al., 2016) in their study among university students. Karimi et al. (2020) as well, found moderate levels of social-emotional intelligence although the percentage was higher (80.8%). Karimi et al., (2020) also focused on high school students, a different target group from that of the undergraduate students. The results in this study

also do partly agree with the work of Nnabuife et. al. (2018) among university students in Nigeria, who found what their study interprets as general higher levels of SEI with a mean score of 124.63.

From the recorded results, still a significant number of undergraduate students engaged in intimate relationships still have low levels of social-emotional intelligence which could explain the rampant incidences of violence which sometimes have led to suicides and homicide incidences. Since social-emotional intelligence is a malleable construct, training and workshops can be carried out to enhance students' social-emotional intelligence levels.

On gender differences in social-emotional intelligence, there was slight difference between female and male mean scores. However, the difference was not statistically significant. The findings agree with the work of (Meshkat & Nejat, 2017; Nnabuife et al., 2018; Patel, 2017) who found no statistically significant difference between male and female social-emotional intelligence levels. In our Kenyan setting, where we have very distinct gender roles and even expected gender-related emotional expressions, it was surprising to have results find no significant differences in the overall social-emotional intelligence between males and females.

On gender differences in social-emotional intelligence dimensions, there were no statistically significant gender differences in emotional utilization, emotional management of self and emotional management of others. However, a statically significant difference was recorded between female and male in emotional perception. On emotional perceptions, the findings do agree with those of (Jaušovec & Jaušovec, 2010; Meshkat & Nejati, 2017) that indicated that female students had significantly higher social-emotional intelligence than male students. To some extent, these results seem to agree with some of our traditional bias which find females more emotional expressive than males.

As has been recorded previously, different genders perform differently in different dimensions of social-emotional intelligence (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2012). Females have been found to do better in social-emotional dimensions that deal with empathy, social responsibility, interpersonal relationships, and emotional perception that involve decoding facial expressions (Savio, 2019). In this study, females indeed performed better in emotional perception than male participants. The difference in their mean score was found to be statistically significant. Fischer et al., (2018) indicated that females do have an advantage in their capacity to recognize emotions and are more sensitive to low intense or even ambiguous emotional cues. Wright et al., (2018) indicated that females have a facial configuration that allows easier reading of some emotional expressions than men. Several explanations have been provided to explain

why men score poorly in emotional perception, including gender expectations and socialization differences between males and females. Females are socially expected to be more emotionally oriented than males. The fact that males are not socialized to be emotionally oriented and often overlook emotions as not important especially in the context of this study could make the males less aware and alive to their emotional environment unless it is intentionally brought to their attention. Other arguments include the larger size of emotional processing areas and suitable biochemistry towards own and others' emotions (Fernandez-Berrocal et al., 2012). Socialization differences include learning different social roles defined by contextual social norms where a person is socialized (Mokhlesi & Patil, 2019). Instruments of measure used (Mokhlesi & Patil, 2019) have also been found to have a role to play in skewing the results recorded.

Although self-report measures do have some limitations, in that participants might be tempted to give desirable answers, it seems that they can be useful in giving a general picture of the general levels of social-emotional intelligence, especially in preliminary studies. The results observed in this study also did differ from the rest of the studies in that this study focused particularly on the students engaged in intimate relationships.

Conclusion

This study showed that there were generally moderate levels of social-emotional intelligence among undergraduate students in intimate relationships in Nairobi County. There were also no statistically significant gender differences in social-emotional intelligence scores. However, there were statistically significant gender differences in emotional perception dimension of social-emotional intelligence. There were no statistically significant gender differences in emotional utilization, emotional management of self, and emotional management of other dimensions of social-emotional intelligence.

Recommendations

Based on the analyzed findings, it would be important to engage various modalities of enhancing social-emotional intelligence among university students engaged in intimate relationships. Based on this preliminary study, it would be important for researchers and program initiators to be aware of existing community biases and beliefs and the importance of relying on existing evidence to gauge the impact they might have in effective social-emotional programs dissemination.

In addition, more in depth studies that delve into social-emotional intelligence and how it can enhance intimate relationships among university students are needed following this preliminary study. Studies such as this, that would use other elaborate measures such as 360⁰ feedback approach for a more in depth and customized information on intimate relationships are necessary. Lastly, more investigative approaches such as quasi experimental design that would seek to find out customized findings on impact of social-emotional intelligence in intimate relationships in our own context would provide a more in-depth perspective to the study topic.

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