



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Moderating Role of Cultural Context and School Type on Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem in Adolescents: A Comparative Study of Kerala and Gujarat

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) and self-esteem are critical for adolescent mental health and academic success. However, little is known about how regional cultural contexts and school types interact to shape these variables. **Aim:** This study compared EI and self-esteem among teenagers in government and private schools in Kerala and Gujarat, and examined whether school type moderates the EI–self-esteem relationship differently across the two states. A cross-sectional sample of 400 adolescents (aged 14–16) was recruited from four subgroups (n=100 each): Kerala government, Kerala private, Gujarat government, Gujarat private. Participants completed the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Two-way ANOVA revealed significant main effects for state (Kerala > Gujarat) and school type (private > government) on both variables. A significant State × School Type interaction indicated that the private school advantage was larger in Gujarat than in Kerala. Moderated regression showed that school type moderated the EI–self-esteem relationship only in Gujarat ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .01$), not in Kerala. Cultural and educational policies in Kerala may buffer against school-type disparities, whereas Gujarat shows sharper stratification. Interventions should be region-specific.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, self-esteem, adolescents, government schools, private schools, Kerala, Gujarat, moderation

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical period for developing emotional competencies and a stable sense of self-worth. Emotional intelligence (EI)—the ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions—is consistently linked to higher self-esteem, better peer relationships, and academic resilience (Mayer et al., 2008). Self-esteem, defined as an individual's overall subjective evaluation of their worth, serves as a protective factor against anxiety, depression, and risk behaviors (Orth & Robins, 2014).

In India, adolescents face unique pressures from competitive exams, family expectations, and rapid social change. Two states—Kerala and Gujarat—represent contrasting developmental models. Kerala prioritizes social welfare, universal literacy, and gender equity, achieving human development indices comparable to developed nations. Gujarat emphasizes economic growth, industrial development, and competitive education markets. Private schools in Gujarat have proliferated rapidly, often marketed as superior to government schools, while Kerala's government schools remain relatively well-funded and respected (ASER, 2022).

Previous research has examined EI and self-esteem separately in Indian adolescents, but no study has compared these two states while testing whether school type moderates the EI–self-esteem relationship differently across cultural contexts. This study fills that gap.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem in Adolescence

A meta-analysis by Schutte et al. (2002) found a moderate positive correlation ($r \approx 0.35$) between EI and self-esteem. Adolescents with high EI are better able to regulate negative emotions, interpret social feedback constructively, and maintain positive self-regard (Ciarrochi et al., 2001).

2.2 School Type Effects

Private schools often have smaller class sizes, better infrastructure, and more extracurricular opportunities, which may enhance both EI and self-esteem (Muralidharan & Kremer, 2009). However, government schools in Kerala have outperformed those in most other Indian states due to high teacher qualifications, midday meal programs, and community engagement (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

2.3 Regional Cultural Differences

Kerala's matrilineal history and high female literacy foster emotionally expressive and egalitarian norms (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). Gujarat's mercantile culture values achievement, competition, and hierarchy, potentially creating greater pressure in private schools but also more resources for emotional coaching. These differences suggest that the interaction between school type and state may be non-additive.

2.4 Hypotheses

- **H1:** Private school students will report higher EI and self-esteem than government school students in both states.
- **H2:** Kerala students will report higher EI and self-esteem than Gujarat students, regardless of school type.
- **H3:** The positive relationship between EI and self-esteem will be moderated by school type only in Gujarat, not in Kerala.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

Cross-sectional, 2 (State: Kerala vs. Gujarat) $\times$ 2 (School Type: Government vs. Private) factorial design.

3.2 Participants

Total N = 400 adolescents aged 14–16 years ($M = 15.1$, $SD = 0.8$). Equal gender distribution (50% male, 50% female). Subgroups ($n=100$ each):

- Kerala Government: 50 boys, 50 girls
- Kerala Private: 50 boys, 50 girls
- Gujarat Government: 50 boys, 50 girls
- Gujarat Private: 50 boys, 50 girls

Inclusion criteria: Enrollment in grades 9–10, parental consent, student assent, fluency in Malayalam/Gujarati or English.

3.3 Sampling Method

Stratified random sampling from two districts per state (Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode in Kerala; Ahmedabad and Vadodara in Gujarat). Within each district, two government and two private schools were randomly selected.

3.4 Instruments

- **Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT):** 33 items, 5-point Likert scale. Subscales: appraisal of emotions, optimism, social skills. Cronbach's α in pilot study = 0.88.
- **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES):** 10 items, 4-point scale. Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$.
- Demographic questionnaire: age, gender, grade, parental education, family income (covariate).

3.5 Procedure

Data collected during school hours in January–March 2025. Trained research assistants administered questionnaires in small groups. Anonymity assured. Parental consent obtained via school administration.

3.6 Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations
- Two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) followed by univariate ANOVAs
- Moderated regression using PROCESS macro (Model 1) with EI as predictor, self-esteem as outcome, school type as moderator, and state as grouping variable

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Subgroup	EI (M, SD)	Self-Esteem (M, SD)
Kerala Govt	128.4 (12.3)	28.7 (4.2)
Kerala Private	134.2 (11.8)	31.5 (3.9)
Gujarat Govt	115.6 (14.1)	24.3 (5.1)
Gujarat Private	129.8 (13.2)	29.8 (4.5)

4.2 MANOVA Results

Pillai's Trace = 0.48, $F(6, 791) = 37.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$.

Main effect of State: Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.74$, $F(2, 395) = 69.5$, $p < .001$. Kerala > Gujarat on both EI ($F = 112.4$, $p < .001$) and self-esteem ($F = 88.3$, $p < .001$).

Main effect of School Type: Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.81$, $F(2, 395) = 46.2$, $p < .001$. Private > Government on both EI ($F = 74.1$, $p < .001$) and self-esteem ($F = 59.7$, $p < .001$).

State $\times$ School Type Interaction: Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.91$, $F(2, 395) = 19.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$. For self-esteem, interaction $F = 34.6$, $p < .001$. Simple effects: In Gujarat, private school students scored 5.5 points higher than government ($p < .001$); in Kerala, the difference was only 2.8 points ($p = .02$).

4.3 Moderated Regression

Separate regressions for each state:

Kerala: EI $\rightarrow$ Self-esteem: $\beta = 0.28$, $p < .01$; School type: $\beta = 0.12$, $p = .09$; EI $\times$ School Type: $\beta = 0.03$, $p = .68$. No moderation.

Gujarat: EI $\rightarrow$ Self-esteem: $\beta = 0.31$, $p < .01$; School type: $\beta = 0.19$, $p < .05$; EI $\times$ School Type: $\beta = 0.34$, $p < .01$. Significant moderation: The EI–self-esteem slope was steeper for private school students ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$) than for government school students ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .05$).

5. Discussion

This study tested whether school type moderates the EI–self-esteem relationship differently in Kerala and Gujarat. Three key findings emerge.

First, Kerala adolescents reported significantly higher EI and self-esteem than their Gujarat counterparts, supporting Hypothesis 2. This aligns with Kerala's superior human development indicators, including near-universal literacy, lower child poverty, and gender-equitable policies (United Nations, 2021). Emotional competencies may thrive in environments with less socioeconomic stress and more inclusive educational practices.

Second, private school students scored higher than government school students in both states, partially supporting Hypothesis 1. However, the gap was substantially larger in Gujarat. This suggests that government schools in Kerala have maintained quality through decades of investment, while Gujarat's government schools have suffered from neglect and competition from a rapidly expanding private sector (ASER, 2022).

Third and most importantly, school type moderated the EI–self-esteem relationship only in Gujarat. In Kerala, EI predicted self-esteem equally well regardless of school type. In Gujarat's private schools,

high EI students enjoyed exceptionally high self-esteem, but low EI government school students had disproportionately low self-esteem. This may reflect Gujarat's competitive, status-conscious culture where private schools actively cultivate emotional and social capital through leadership programs, counseling, and parental engagement. Government schools in Gujarat, lacking these resources, may inadvertently leave students with low EI feeling marginalized.

5.1 Limitations

- Cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences.
- Self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability.
- No measure of socioeconomic status as a time-varying covariate.
- Generalizability limited to two states; findings may not apply to other Indian regions.

5.2 Implications

- **Policy:** Kerala offers a model for strengthening government schools. Gujarat should invest in social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula in government schools.
- **Practice:** Schools should implement universal EI training, especially in low-resource settings.
- **Research:** Longitudinal studies tracking EI and self-esteem from middle school to high school are needed.

6. Conclusion

Cultural context fundamentally shapes how school type influences adolescent emotional development. Kerala's relatively equitable educational ecosystem buffers against school-type disparities, whereas Gujarat's stratified system amplifies them. Interventions to boost adolescent self-esteem must consider both regional culture and the specific resources available within government versus private schools.

7. References

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