



The Impact of Digital Leadership on Talent Retention: The Mediating Role of Digital Emotional Intelligence among Academic Staff in Iraqi Public Universities

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the relationship between Digital Leadership and Talent Retention and explore the mediating role of Digital Emotional Intelligence between academic staff in Iraqi public universities. The quantitative cross-sectional design was used, and the data for this study were collected from 146 questionnaires obtained from four public universities in Iraq. The proposed model was tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4, employing a two-stage approach for the higher-order constructs. The results indicate that Digital Leadership positively and significantly predicts Digital Emotional Intelligence ($\beta = 0.581, p < 0.001$) and Talent Retention ($\beta = 0.442, p < 0.001$), while Digital Emotional Intelligence also positively predicts Talent Retention ($\beta = 0.304, p = 0.010$). Digital Emotional Intelligence also partially mediated between Digital Leadership and Talent Retention with an indirect effect $\beta = 0.176, p = 0.019$. 33.8% of the variance in Digital Emotional Intelligence was explained by Digital Leadership, and 44.4% of the variance in Talent Retention was explained by Digital Leadership and Digital Emotional Intelligence together. These findings highlight Digital Emotional Intelligence as an important mechanism through which Digital Leadership contributes to Talent Retention, emphasizing the need for university leaders to integrate digital leadership capabilities with employees' emotional competencies in digitally mediated work environments.

Keywords: Digital Leadership, Digital Emotional Intelligence, Talent Retention, Higher Education, PLS-SEM

Introduction

As technology advances at a rapid pace, it's changing the way organizations function, how they communicate, and how they make decisions, creating a new paradigm of digital leadership. Unlike traditional leadership, which has primarily focused on maintaining organizational stability and supervising routine operations, digital leadership emphasizes guiding organizations through digital transformation by integrating technological innovation with strategic management and human-centered leadership. Thus, digital leadership is now not just defined as technical skills, but as a strategic strength of the organisation that helps leaders cope with uncertainty, foster innovation and generate long-term value in digitally changing contexts [1]. The digital transformation is becoming increasingly complex, and leaders are taking on more than just the implementation of the digital systems. Modern digital leaders are tasked with setting digital courses, fostering innovative organizational cultures, supporting organizational learning, promoting responsible technology use and boosting employee readiness to function in a digitally enabled world. Technology should not be seen as an end, but as a strategic resource that assists organizations in adapting, being resilient, and continuously improving [2]. The shift towards digital leadership has become especially crucial in higher education institutions (HEIs), where digital technologies have permeated teaching, scientific research, academic administration, institutional communication, and knowledge exchange in the institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the importance of academic leaders who are adept at handling virtual learning environments, supporting digital learning collaboration, driving innovation and ensuring institutions are responsive to current educational issues. Empirical evidence shows that successful digital leadership has the potential to support knowledge sharing, organizational learning, employee engagement and institutional performance, thus enhancing the capacity of universities to deal with the ongoing technological changes [3]. In the field of education, too, it is evident that digital transformation does not only rely on the technological infrastructure available, but also on leaders being able to inspire staff to embrace technological advances and change. While digital technologies offer new opportunities for teaching, learning, communication and knowledge sharing, strategic leadership in digital technologies is needed to guide the strategic direction, administrative plans, support for digital literacy and awareness of any barriers that may prevent staff from supporting digital technologies effectively. Prior studies have thus focused on the importance of institutional leaders as models for effective technology use and the need to promote the use of digital tools and tools that support academic activities [4].

Digital leadership, in this sense, is not limited to technical skills, but also involves strategic, behavioral, and organizational aspects. The digital direction should be communicated clearly to the leaders, innovation and collaboration should be encouraged, employees should be empowered to play their part in digital transformation and an organisational culture that enables the use of digital technology in a responsible and effective way should be created. This wider perspective is relevant to higher education, as it is important for the digital transformation to be connected with the human and organizational dimension of change and technological development [5], [6].

There is no one agreed-upon dimensional structure of digital leadership in the literature. The construct has been operationalized in various ways based on theory, context, and purpose of measurement. This difference mirrors the dynamic and

context dependent nature of digital transformation rather than a lack of conceptual relevance of digital leadership.

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has one influential framework in educational circles. In this context there are various dimensions of digital leadership, such as Visionary Leadership, Digital Citizenship, and Systemic Improvement, and more. For instance, [7], used the ISTE technology leadership framework and outlined the dimensions of digital leadership as Visionary Leadership, Digital Citizenship and Systemic Improvement. Likewise, Anwar and Saraih explored digital leadership from three angles in their study of higher education institutions: Visionary Leadership, Digital Citizenship, and Systemic Improvement. Their study provides direct empirical evidence of the relevance of these dimensions in higher education and examined their relationships with knowledge sharing and emotional intelligence among faculty members [8].

The strategic dimension of digital leadership is identified as Digital Vision, analogous to Visionary Leadership in the digital leadership literature. It's about the leader's capacity to define, share, and execute a vision for the institution's digital future and to ensure digital vision is focused on institutional goals and future growth. In the higher education landscape, a clear digital vision can help academic leaders look ahead on technology trends, foster innovation, facilitate digital transformation efforts and staff the institution for the next big technological shifts. Digital leaders are not driven by reactive approaches to technological advances, but through a sense of direction that relates technology to the vision for the long-term. This is also seen in the educational digital leadership literature in terms of the importance of visionary leadership. AlAjmi [9], [10], identifies Visionary Leadership as a major component of digital leadership and emphasizes its role in establishing a clear direction for the organization and guiding stakeholders toward technological advancement. As a result, Digital Vision showcases the leader's capacity to foresee digital trends, set a digital vision, articulate it and integrate digital transformation goals into the organization's efforts [11].

Digital Citizenship is the moral, ethical and responsible aspect of digital leadership. It concerns the leader's ability to promote appropriate, ethical, secure, and responsible use of digital technologies while creating an organizational culture in which employees recognize their responsibilities when using digital resources and platforms. Digital citizenship becomes especially significant in higher education, where academic, administrative staff members, and students alike are increasingly using digital systems, digital communication platforms, digital information, social media, and digital learning environments. Consequently, digital leaders need to promote responsible digital behavior while ensuring that technology is used in ways that respect ethical, professional, legal, and security requirements. Digital Citizenship is specifically listed as one of the key elements of the ISTE-based digital leadership framework, and also identified within the higher education model studied by Anwar and Saraih (2024). Digital Citizenship then is the leader's ability to encourage ethical, responsible, secure, and effective digital citizenship, and to build digital responsibility culture within the educational institution [12],[13].

While some previous studies have suggested wider multidimensional models of digital leadership, the present study does not seek to encompass all the aspects listed in the literature. Rather, it is being implemented in two parallel aspects, Digital Vision (Visionary Leadership) and Digital Citizenship. This selection aligns with the instrument of measurement presented in the present study and fits into the higher

education setting. The strategic aspect of digital leadership is Digital Vision, which is about direction, development and implementation of digital transformation. Digital Citizenship is the ethical and behavioral aspect—it's about using digital technologies responsibly, securely and appropriately. Together these two dimensions reflect complementary aspects of digital leadership – the strategic direction of digital transformation and the responsible way of using digital technologies in the organization. In the past systemic improvement was regarded as an important dimension in the systems, but it was not included in the measurement model of this study, as it was not asked to the respondents in the questionnaire. This way, there is consistency between the theoretical framework and empirical measurement model [14].

Based on this, the present study defines Digital Leadership by eight measurement items that contain four items for Digital Vision (Visionary Leadership) and four items for Digital Citizenship.

Conceptual Definition

The present study defines Digital Leadership as: (Following from the above discussion)

The ability of university leaders to provide strategic direction for digital transformation, formulate and communicate a clear digital vision, and promote responsible, ethical, secure, and effective use of digital technologies within the organization.

This is a conceptualization that views digital leadership as a strategic and human capacity of an organization instead of a technical skill. It is especially applicable at the level of higher education institutions, where leaders must spearhead digital change and help their employees engage in digital transformation, use technology responsibly, collaborate and adapt to the institution.

Operationalization in the Present Study

Construct	Dimension	Number of Items
Digital Leadership	Digital Vision / Visionary Leadership	4
	Digital Citizenship	4
Total	2 dimensions	8

Digital Emotional Intelligence

There is a fast growth of digital technologies and a pervasive use of digital communication platforms that have significantly reshaped the way of communication and interpersonal relationship in organizations. Communication is no longer restricted to in-person interactions, but is now taking place via email, social media, virtual meetings, messaging apps and online media more than ever. These digitally mediated worlds are different from the nonverbal setting of interaction because such cues are less likely to be available, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and immediate response. Such characteristics may increase the possibility of misunderstanding emotions and interpersonal situations, thereby making the ability to recognize, understand, regulate, and appropriately respond to emotions in digital environments increasingly important.

The term Digital Emotional Intelligence (DEI) has been coined to extend emotional intelligence to a new area of human communication and interaction, which is mediated by digital technologies. Audrin and Audrin [15], [16], defined digital emotional intelligence as a combination of emotional intelligence and digital competence, which can be interpreted as a construct lying on the intersection of

these two disciplines, acknowledging the unique nature of digitally-mediated interactions which cannot be fully defined by traditional concepts of emotional intelligence.

The rise of DEI is a movement from studying emotional processes in face-to-face interactions to a study of how people perceive, express, regulate, and react when interacting with others via digital technologies. The digital environment is not just a medium through which communication takes place; it can shape the way emotions are expressed, interpreted and experienced. Digital media have been shown to influence the intensity and nature of emotions and how emotions are perceived and understood by others.

This skill is especially important in modern day workplaces where workers are increasingly using digital technology for communication, collaboration, information sharing and decision making. People who can: identify their own emotions, manage their reactions, understand other people's emotions and manage interpersonal relations effectively might have an advantage in maintaining positive interactions in digitally mediated workplaces.

Dimensions of Digital Emotional Intelligence

Literature on digital EI is a work in progress and none of the dimensional structures has achieved full consensus in the scholarly world. This can be attributed to the relative novelty of the construct and the different theoretical perspectives used in its conceptualization and measurement. As a result, much of the recent research has leveraged existing models of emotional intelligence and tailored components of these models to the unique attributes of digital environments. Gómez-Vallarta et al provide an important contribution by summarizing some existing models of emotional intelligence and the elements that could be used in digital environments. Their resulting model comprises four major dimensions: self-awareness, self-control, awareness of others' emotions, and relationship management, together with a number of subdimensions and indicators. The paper by Gómez-Vallarta et al goes beyond conceptualization as the authors also created and tested a digital emotional intelligence measurement instrument. It was originally developed with 60 items and after expert evaluation and statistical validation led to a final version with 38 items, divided into 10 subdimensions. According to the study, the instrument development process entailed the examination of existing models of emotional intelligence, the identification of dimensions that could be adopted to the digital context and adjustments to the emotional intelligence indicators in relation to digitally mediated contexts. Like that, Leeuw and Joseph investigated the relationship of digital emotional intelligence with self-awareness and self-management, digital empathy and relationship management. They have focused on the importance of these skills in digital communication and virtual collaboration [17].

The current study draws on the literature to conceptualize DEI as a capacity with five dimensions: digital self-awareness, digital self-regulation, digital empathy, digital relationship management, and emotionally intelligent digital decision-making.

Digital self-awareness is the capacity to identify and be aware of their feelings and emotions when engaging with digital technologies and platforms and recognise the impact of digital experience on their emotions and behaviour. It includes the exploration of personal feelings, an awareness of their origins, and the understanding that activities within digital environments can have an impact on later emotional reactions[18].

This is in line with Gómez-Vallarta et al, who view self-awareness as one of the

most dominant components of digital emotional intelligence and link it with the ability to understand and identify emotions triggered by digital platforms and how they impact the individual. Leeuw & Joseph also stress the significance of self-awareness in digital contexts as the ability to identify and analyse feelings, and the perception of the effects of digital experiences on emotional reactions. They further associate self awareness with communication, relationships, and decision making. Digital self-awareness is more than just knowing what you are feeling, it's knowing what digital experiences you're having, what emotional responses you're having, and what behaviors are likely to follow.

Digital Self-Regulation

Digital self regulation is the ability to manage emotions, reactions and behaviours in digitally mediated interactions, especially ones that might lead to anger, frustration, anxiety and/or impulsiveness. It means to suppress the initial feeling response and think through the repercussions of that response before expressing or reacting to it. Emotional self-control is reflected in Gómez-Vallarta et al as the ability to regulate one's emotions triggered by digital technologies, to think before posting or commenting, to control one's impulses, and to prevent the spread of inaccurate information due to emotional reactions. Therefore, digital self-regulation is defined as the ability to shift from automatic and emotional responses to more conscious, controlled and contextually appropriate digital actions.

Digital Empathy

In digital empathy, the person understands the emotions of others in digital interaction and shows understanding and support in digital interaction tools. This ability is especially relevant in digital contexts because many cues that are present in the in-person exchange are missing or diminished, and it is harder to understand others' emotions. Gómez-Vallarta et al incorporate empathy into their digital emotional intelligence model and associate it with the ability to understand others' emotions and express understanding and support through digital tools. Digital empathy is also identified as key aspect of digital emotional intelligence along with self-awareness and relationship management by Leeuw and Joseph. This ability can help minimize misunderstandings and foster positive interactions in the context of organizational communication. Digital empathy is therefore not just about acknowledging others are feeling emotion, but also knowing what emotion they're feeling and how to respond to it in a way that is suitable in a digital communication context.

Digital Relationship Management

Digital relationship management is the ability to build, maintain and manage relationships effectively with others via digital media. It includes the ability to communicate, collaborate, manage differences, resolve conflicts and positively influence others in digitally mediated environments. The ability is becoming more and more significant in organizations that are driven by virtual meetings, email, collaborative platforms, etc., where people need to establish good professional relationships without many of the attributes of face-to-face interpersonal interaction. Both authors and editors, Leeuw and Joseph, explicitly link relationship management in digital environments to aspects of collaboration, conflict management, and influence, and highlight the need to be aware of the differences in behavioral and emotional reactions across digital contexts and environments. In the same way, Gómez-Vallarta et al place relationship management within one of the key aspects of their model of digital emotional intelligence [19].

Digital relationship management, therefore, is the social aspect of digital emotional intelligence and the ability of an individual to communicate, collaborate, manage conflict and build relationships in a digital space [20].

Emotionally Intelligent Digital Decision-Making

In digital environments, having to process a lot of information and then make decisions is becoming more and more the norm, as well as thinking about the needs, expectations and emotional reactions of other people. Emotional capabilities may therefore influence how individuals interpret digital information, evaluate alternatives, and consider the human and social consequences of their decisions.

Leeuw and Joseph indicate an association between self-awareness and decision-making, suggesting that greater awareness of one's emotional state may contribute to more effective decision-making, communication, and interpersonal relationships.

Accordingly, the present study operationalizes emotionally intelligent digital decision-making as the individual's ability to incorporate emotional and human considerations when processing digital information and making decisions in digitally mediated contexts. This involves balancing digital evidence and information with the emotional, interpersonal, and human implications of decisions.

However, this dimension is treated in the present study as an operational component of the proposed research model, rather than as a universally established independent dimension of digital emotional intelligence. The literature reviewed provides theoretical support for the relationship between emotional capabilities and decision-making, but does not establish digital decision-making as a universally accepted fifth dimension of DEI. This distinction is maintained to ensure that the conceptualization of the construct does not extend beyond what is currently supported by the literature.

Conceptualization of Digital Emotional Intelligence in the Present Study

Based on the preceding discussion, digital emotional intelligence is defined in the present study as:

The individual's ability to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions, understand and empathize with the emotions of others, manage interpersonal relationships effectively during digitally mediated interactions, and incorporate emotional and human considerations when processing information and making decisions in digital contexts.

Accordingly, the present study operationalizes digital emotional intelligence through five dimensions:

1. Digital Self-Awareness
2. Digital Self-Regulation
3. Digital Empathy
4. Digital Relationship Management
5. Emotionally Intelligent Digital Decision-Making

This conceptualization views digital emotional intelligence not simply as a technological extension of conventional emotional intelligence, but as an emotional and behavioral capability that manifests within the distinctive conditions of digitally mediated interaction. It therefore recognizes both the emotional competencies emphasized in conventional emotional intelligence models and the contextual characteristics introduced by digital environments. This perspective is consistent with the emerging literature emphasizing the integration of emotional and social capabilities within digital competence and digitally mediated interaction.

Talent Retention

The retention of academic staff talent is emerging as a significant strategic issue for higher education institutions as the institutions have relied on the presence of qualified and talented academic staff in order to sustain good academic quality, research productivity, institutional knowledge and organizational performance over the long-term. The increasing competition for academic talent, changing career expectations, technological transformation, and professional mobility have made retaining valuable employees a significant challenge for higher education institutions. Loss of talented academics can lead to higher recruitment and replacement expenses, loss of institutional knowledge, loss of research capacity, loss of professional networks, loss of research continuity and loss of education quality. Thus, the issue of talent retention has become an important part of the sustainable human capital management in HEIs [21]. Talent retention should be distinguished from the broader concept of talent management. Talent management encompasses a wider set of organizational activities concerned with attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining high-performing and high-potential employees in strategically important position. In contrast, talent retention focuses specifically on the organization's ability to create conditions that encourage valuable employees to remain with the institution and reduce the likelihood of their departure. Thus, retention represents an important outcome of broader talent-management practices rather than being synonymous with talent management itself.

From an organizational perspective, retaining talented employees is particularly important because talented individuals possess knowledge, skills, and capabilities that may be difficult to replace. Mather and Bam characterize talent as individuals who possess valuable knowledge, skills, and abilities, demonstrate above-average performance in strategically important positions, and show a willingness to engage in continuous learning and development. Consequently, losing such employees can weaken organizational knowledge and capabilities and may adversely affect long-term organizational sustainability.

The importance of talent retention is particularly pronounced in higher education because academic staff constitute a major source of knowledge production, scientific research, innovation, and educational quality. The departure of experienced academics may interrupt research projects, reduce scientific productivity, weaken institutional knowledge, and disrupt established academic and professional relationships. Consequently, universities increasingly need effective approaches to retain academic talent and maintain the human capital required for sustainable institutional development.

Recent research indicates that talent retention is influenced by a combination of organizational and employment-related conditions rather than by financial incentives alone. These conditions include leadership quality, organizational culture, opportunities for continuous learning and professional development, empowerment, organizational fairness, psychological support, and a work environment that responds to employees' changing expectations. In higher education, organizational climate, work environment, work-life balance, and talent-management practices have also been identified as important factors associated with academic staff retention.

Leadership is particularly relevant to talent retention because leaders influence employees' perceptions of organizational support, recognition, participation, development opportunities, and the quality of their working environment. Effective

leadership can create conditions that encourage trust, participation, appreciation, and continuous development, thereby strengthening employees' willingness to remain with the organization. Research in higher education similarly identifies leadership quality as an important factor associated with the retention of academic talent.

Today, the connection between leadership and talent retention has become more relevant as universities make the transition to digital transformation. Digitalization has changed how academic staff communicate, collaborate, teach, conduct research, and perform administrative activities. So, modern leaders are expected to establish digital working spaces that promote collaboration, sharing of information, lifelong learning, and the effective application of digital technologies. Such environments may strengthen organizational engagement and commitment and consequently contribute to employee retention.

Digital leadership can thus be a growing antecedent of talent retention in HE contexts. Digital leaders can influence employees' work experiences by providing strategic direction, supporting technological adaptation, facilitating communication and collaboration, encouraging continuous learning, and creating organizational environments that help employees respond effectively to digital transformation. Recent research further suggests that digital leadership competencies combined with digital emotional intelligence can contribute to a healthier digital work environment and strengthen employees' connection with the organization.

This is especially relevant to the current study, which looks at Digital Leadership as an antecedent of Talent Retention. The argument is that digital leadership may contribute to employees' willingness to remain by creating supportive organizational conditions, strengthening communication and collaboration, facilitating adaptation to technological change, and supporting employees' professional and interpersonal needs. This is also consistent with the wider talent-management literature which focuses on matching leadership capacity with employee development and organisational agility to ensure places where talented employees will want to stay to contribute longer term.

Retention, then, is not only the absence of turnover of employees. Instead, it is an indication of the organisation's capacity to develop conditions where talented workers are prepared to work with the organisation in the long term. In the context of higher education, good retention leads to continuity of the institution, a sustainable organizational development, the preservation of organizational knowledge, the productivity of research, and the quality of education.

Based on the above literature, Talent Retention for this research is defined as the desire and commitment of talented academic employees to continue their employment at their current university and to work with the university for a long-term.

This conceptualization emphasizes employees' desire and commitment to remain with the organization, not just that no one left the organization. It thus reflects the attitudinal aspect of retention and is consistent with the wider literature which has looked at employee intention to stay as a key measure of retention.

However, in the current study, Talent Retention is considered as a unidimensional construct, as the instrument of measurement does not differentiate it in separate dimensions. Eight items measure the construct that address respondents' willingness and intentions to stay in their current university.

Operational Definition Talent Retention is the willingness and intentions of

talented academic employees to stay on with their university and to have a strong long-term employment contract with the university.

Create dimension number of Items Talent Retention (TR) single dimension.

Hypotheses Development

Digital Leadership and Talent Retention

With the digital world rapidly changing, organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to attract, develop and retain talented staff. Digital leaders are essential in higher learning institutions in establishing positive working conditions that support innovation, collaboration, lifelong learning and organizational commitment. By promoting employee empowerment, digital communication, professional development, and adaptive organizational cultures, digital leadership enhances employees' willingness to remain within their institutions. Recent studies indicate that digital leadership positively impacts on employee engagement, organizational commitment, innovation capability and workplace satisfaction (which are also well-documented antecedents of talent retention). Moreover, talent management literature has highlighted that the quality of leadership is one of the most critical factors that decides the retention of employees within higher education institutions (HEIs). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Digital Leadership Positively influence Talent Retention.

Digital Leadership and Digital Emotional Intelligence

With the profound impact of digital transformation on the use of technology-mediated communication by employees, the importance of emotional competencies in digital environments has grown. Digital leaders can also impact employees with their strategic direction, technological help and by setting the example when interacting digitally – encourage trust, collaboration, regulation of emotions, and the creation of psychologically safe environments. Recent studies indicate that digital leadership enhances employees' emotional awareness, virtual empathy, emotional regulation, and digital well-being by creating supportive organizational climates that facilitate emotionally intelligent digital interactions. Thus, it is expected that leaders who can blend technological and interpersonal skills will be able to improve their employees' Digital Emotional Intelligence.

H2 Digital Leadership has a positive impact on Digital Emotional Intelligence.

Digital Emotional Intelligence and Talent Retention

In recent years, Digital Emotional Intelligence became a necessary skill for workers who work within a technologically driven environment. People with higher Digital Emotional Intelligence skills have better emotional regulation, are more adaptable in their virtual environments, collaborate better virtually, have better interpersonal relationships, and feel psychologically well. These skills are linked to increased organizational engagement, commitment and reduced turnover intentions. Empirical studies in recent years have shown that Digital Emotional Intelligence has a positive impact on the well-being, collaboration, resilience, and effectiveness of employees, thus raising their willingness to stay in a digitized organization. Hence, it may be assumed that those who score higher on the Digital Emotional Intelligence are more likely to stay in their institutions.

H3 Digital Emotional Intelligence has a positive impact on Talent Retention.

The Mediating Role of Digital Emotional Intelligence among Academic Staff in Iraqi Public Universities

While there is evidence that digital leadership has an impact on positive organizational outcomes, the pathways through which that impact is achieved are

not fully understood. Leadership aspects have an impact on employee behaviour, not only in the context of organizational policies and managerial practices, but also in the context of the employees' emotional experiences in digital work environments. Digital leaders create emotionally supportive virtual workplaces that strengthen employees' emotional regulation, digital empathy, trust, and collaboration, thereby enhancing Digital Emotional Intelligence. Subsequent employees with higher Digital EI then reported a higher level of organizational commitment, better workplace relationships, and greater plans to stay in the organization. In this way, it is expected that Digital Emotional Intelligence will be an important psychological process in which Digital Leadership will contribute to the improvement of Talent Retention.

H4: Digital Emotional Intelligence mediates the relationship between Digital Leadership and Talent Retention.

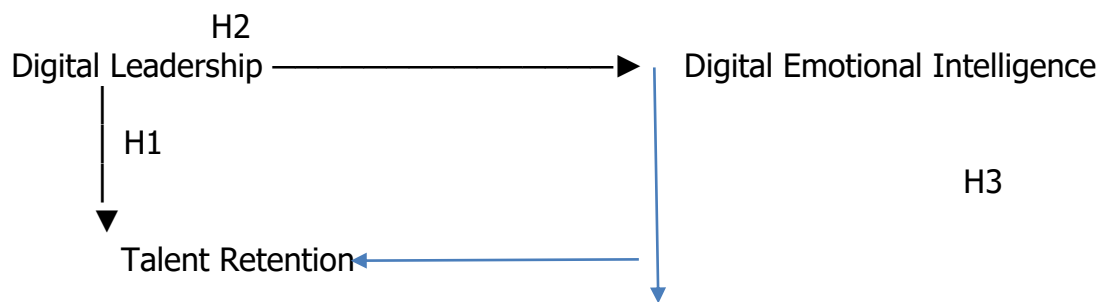


Figure 1. Structural Model and Hypotheses

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative design with cross-sectional research to explore the relationships between Digital Leadership, Digital Emotional Intelligence and Talent Retention in Higher Education Institutions. The study aimed to validate the proposed hypotheses and the conceptual framework with the empirical data derived from the survey the academic staff filled out, which led to the selection of a quantitative approach. Cross-sectional survey research has been the most commonly used research method in leadership and organizational behaviour research because of the advantage it offers in studying relationships between latent constructs in organizational contexts.

Sample and Data Collection

The population of the study was the academic staff of public Iraqi universities. Academic staff were chosen as they are engaged directly in implementing digital leadership practices by university managers at all their activities related to teaching, research and administration. The data were collected by using the structured self administrated questionnaire sent through the official institutional channels electronically. There was voluntary, anonymous and confidential participation. After discarding incomplete questionnaires, 146 were acquired and kept for final analysis from four Iraqi public universities.

Measures

The measurement instrument consisted of four sections. The first section collected respondents' demographic information, whereas the remaining sections

measured the study constructs using previously validated scales adapted from the existing literature. Each item was measured with a 5-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree).

Construct	Measurement Source
Digital Leadership	Van Wart et al. (2016); Zeike et al. (2019); Gui et al. (2024)
Digital Emotional Intelligence	Audrin and Audrin (2023, 2024); Leeuw and Joseph (2023); Kashive and Raina (2025)
Talent Retention	Van der Merwe and Botha (2024); Mishra et al. (2025)

Data Analysis

The proposed research model was analysed using **Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM)** through SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM was selected because it is appropriate for prediction-oriented research, theory extension, and models incorporating emerging constructs and mediation effects. The analysis followed the two-stage procedure recommended by Hair et al., comprising assessment of the measurement model followed by evaluation of the structural model.

Table Operational Definition of the Study Constructs

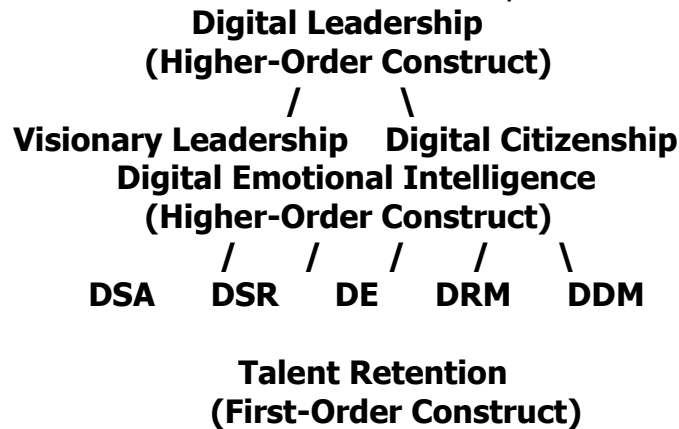
Construct	Operational Definition	Dimensions	No. of Items	Measurement Source
Digital Leadership (DL)	Digital leadership refers to the ability of university leaders to strategically utilize digital technologies, inspire digital transformation, promote innovation, and create an organizational environment that supports digital collaboration and continuous improvement.	Visionary Leadership Digital Citizenship	8 (4+4)	ISTE (2009, 2014); Van Wart et al. (2016); Zeike et al. (2019); Gui et al. (2024)

Digital Emotional Intelligence (DEI)	Digital emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and appropriately express emotions while interacting through digital technologies and virtual environments.	Digital Self-awareness Digital Self-regulation Digital Empathy Digital Relationship Management Emotionally Intelligent Digital Decision-Making	15 (3×5)	Audrin & Audrin (2023, 2024); Leeuw & Joseph (2023); Kashive & Raina (2025)
Talent Retention (TR)	Talent retention refers to the intention and willingness of talented academic staff to remain employed at their current university while maintaining long-term organizational commitment.	Single Dimension	8	Van der Merwe & Botha (2024); Mishra et al. (2025); Collings et al. (2024)

Table Measurement Scale Summary

Construct	Code	Dimension	Number of Items
Digital Leadership	VL	Visionary Leadership	4
Digital Emotional Intelligence	DC	Digital Citizenship	4
	DSA	Digital Self-awareness	3
	DSR	Digital Self-regulation	3
	DE	Digital Empathy	3
	DRM	Digital Relationship Management	3
	DDM	Emotionally Intelligent Digital Decision-Making	3
Talent Retention	TR	Single Dimension	8
Total			31

Figure 2. Hierarchical Structure of the Study Constructs



Results

Measurement Model Assessment

Table 1. Outer Loadings

Construct		Indicator / Dimension	Loading	t-value	p-value
Digital Leadership (HOC)	Leadership	Digital Citizenship	0.912	17.653	<0.001
		Visionary Leadership	0.962	32.225	<0.001
Digital Emotional Intelligence (HOC)	Emotional	Digital Empathy	0.712	7.672	<0.001
		Digital Relationship Management	0.735	8.720	<0.001
		Digital Self-Regulation	0.799	11.395	<0.001
		Digital Self-Awareness	0.787	9.191	<0.001
		Emotionally Intelligent	0.887	17.607	<0.001
		Digital Decision-Making			
Talent Retention		TR1	0.785	18.980	<0.001
		TR2	0.717	10.993	<0.001
		TR3	0.798	18.975	<0.001
		TR4	0.849	27.617	<0.001
		TR5	0.865	34.739	<0.001
		TR6	0.811	24.601	<0.001
		TR7	0.890	41.757	<0.001
		TR8	0.832	21.952	<0.001

Interpretation: All outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.712 to 0.962, and were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. These results confirm adequate indicator reliability. For the higher-order constructs (Digital Leadership and Digital Emotional Intelligence), estimated using the two-stage approach, the loadings represent the relationships between each first-order dimension and its respective second-order construct.

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
Talent Retention	0.930	0.934	0.942	0.672

Interpretation: The results demonstrate high internal consistency for the Talent Retention scale, with Cronbach's alpha (0.930), ρ_A (0.934), and ρ_C (0.942) all exceeding the 0.70 benchmark. The AVE value of 0.672 exceeds the 0.50 threshold, confirming convergent validity.

Note: Digital Leadership and Digital Emotional Intelligence are higher-order constructs estimated using the two-stage approach. Their reliability and convergent validity are assessed through their respective first-order dimensions, whose loadings are reported in Table 1.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity – HTMT (Higher-Order Constructs)

Construct Pair	HTMT Ratio
Digital Leadership $\leftrightarrow$ Digital Emotional Intelligence	0.593
Digital Leadership $\leftrightarrow$ Talent Retention	0.662
Digital Emotional Intelligence $\leftrightarrow$ Talent Retention	0.582

Interpretation: The HTMT values among the three higher-order constructs ranged from 0.582 to 0.662, all below the conservative threshold of 0.85. The results further suggest that there was sufficient discriminant validity between the three factors: Digital Leadership, Digital Emotional Intelligence, and Talent Retention. Because the assessment of the discriminant validity in the final structural model involves relationships between the higher-order constructs in the final model, discriminant validity among the three key constructs is not assessed based on the HTMT values of the relationships between the higher-order constructs and lower-order constructs within the higher-order constructs.

Structural Model Assessment

Table 4. Inner Model Collinearity (VIF)

Predictor	Dependent Variable	VIF	Status
Digital Leadership	Digital Emotional Intelligence	1.000	No collinearity
Digital Emotional Intelligence	Talent Retention	1.510	Acceptable
Digital Leadership	Talent Retention	1.510	Acceptable

Interpretation: All inner VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 1.510, well below the common threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity is not a critical concern in the structural model.

Table 5. Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Effect Size (f^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	Predictor	f^2	Effect Size
Digital Emotional Intelligence	0.338	0.333	Digital Leadership	0.510	Large
Talent Retention	0.444	0.436	Digital Leadership	0.233	Medium
			Digital Emotional Intelligence	0.110	Small

Interpretation: Digital Leadership explains 33.8% of the variance in Digital Emotional Intelligence ($R^2 = 0.338$). Together, Digital Leadership and Digital Emotional Intelligence explain 44.4% of the variance in Talent Retention ($R^2 = 0.444$). Based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines, the effect of Digital Leadership in influencing Digital Emotional Intelligence is large ($f^2 = 0.510$), the effect of Digital Leadership in Digital Talent Retention is medium ($f^2 = 0.233$), and the effect of Digital Emotional Intelligence in Digital Talent Retention is small ($f^2 = 0.110$).

Table 6. Path Coefficients – Direct Effects

Hyp.	Path	β	t	p	95% CI	Decision
H1	DL $\rightarrow$ TR	0.442	4.011	<0.001	[0.226, 0.649]	Supported
H2	DL $\rightarrow$ DEI	0.581	10.164	<0.001	[0.432, 0.669]	Supported
H3	DEI $\rightarrow$ TR	0.304	2.586	0.010	[0.049, 0.512]	Supported

The interpretation is that the path analysis shows that the Digital Leadership variable has a significant and positive influence on Digital Emotional Intelligence ($\beta = 0.581$, $p < 0.001$) which supports the hypothesis H1. Digital Emotional Intelligence is also a significant predictor of Talent Retention ($\beta = 0.304$, $p = 0.010$), thus supporting H2. Digital Leadership also has a significant influence on Talent Retention ($\beta = 0.442$, $p < 0.001$), and thus confirms H1. All the confidence intervals are not null, again indicating the strength of these effects.

Table 7. Mediation Analysis – Specific Indirect Effect

Hypothesis / Path	β	T	P	95% CI	Mediation Type
H4: DL $\rightarrow$ DEI $\rightarrow$ TR	0.176	2.355	0.019	[0.025, 0.315]	Complementary Partial

Interpratetion. Specific indirect effect of Digital Leadership on Digital Emotional Intelligence - Talent Retention: The effect was positive ($\beta = 0.176$, $p = 0.019$). Further, there was a direct path from Digital Leadership to Talent Retention ($\beta = 0.442$, $p < 0.001$), with both the direct and indirect paths operating in the same direction, which is evidence for complementarity partial mediation. It means that the Digital Emotional Intelligence partially mediates between Digital Leadership and Talent Retention.

Table 8. Total Effects

Path	Total Effect (β)	t	P	95% CI
DL $\rightarrow$ DEI	0.581	10.164	<0.001	[0.432, 0.669]
DEI $\rightarrow$ TR	0.304	2.586	0.010	[0.049, 0.512]
DL $\rightarrow$ TR	0.619	9.953	<0.001	[0.471, 0.722]

Interpretation: The total effect of Digital Leadership on Talent Retention is 0.619 ($p < 0.001$), which consists of a direct effect of 0.442 and an indirect effect of 0.176 through Digital Emotional Intelligence. This decomposition provides clear statistical evidence for the mediation mechanism.

Table 9. Model Fit

Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model	Threshold	Interpretation
SRMR	0.054	0.054	< 0.08	Acceptable fit

Interpretation: The SRMR value of 0.054 is below the recommended threshold of 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), indicating an acceptable model fit.

Measurement Model Assessment

Indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were used in order to test the measurement model. The outer loadings were between 0.712 and 0.962, and statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. For Talent Retention, Cronbach's alpha (0.930), rho_A (0.934), and rho_C (0.942) exceeded 0.70, and AVE (0.672) exceeded 0.50. Discriminant validity was found, with the higher-order constructs having HTMT values from 0.582–0.662.

Structural Model Assessment

Structural model was tested in terms of collinearity (VIF), coefficient of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2) and path coefficients. All the inner VIF values were less than 5 (Table 4), with no VIF value above the cutoff point of 10.0, which means there are no critical collinearity problems. Digital Emotional Intelligence ($R^2 = 0.338$) accounted for 33.8% of the variance in Digital Emotional Intelligence and Digital Leadership accounted for 44.4% of the variance in Talent Retention ($R^2 = 0.444$). The effect size of Digital Leadership on Digital Emotional Intelligence was large ($f^2 = 0.510$), while its effect on Talent Retention was medium ($f^2 = 0.233$), and the effect of Digital Emotional Intelligence on Talent Retention was small ($f^2 = 0.110$) (see Table 5).

The path analysis (Table 6) revealed that Digital Leadership significantly predicts Digital Emotional Intelligence ($\beta = 0.581$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Digital Emotional Intelligence ($\beta = 0.304$, $p = 0.010$) and Digital Leadership ($\beta = 0.442$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predict Talent Retention, thus supporting H3 and H3, respectively. The specific indirect effect (Table 7) of Digital Leadership on Talent Retention through Digital Emotional Intelligence was significant ($\beta = 0.176$, $p = 0.019$), indicating complementary partial mediation. The total effect of Digital Leadership on Talent Retention was $\beta = 0.619$ ($p < 0.001$), as shown in Table 8. Lastly, the SRMR value of 0.054 (Table 9) is within the recommended range (SRMR = 0.08) [22].

Discussion

H1 proposed that Digital Leadership positively influences Talent Retention. The results supported this hypothesis ($\beta = 0.442$, $t = 4.011$, $p < 0.001$). The study showed that digital leadership is linked to increased commitment to stay with their universities among academic staff. In the higher-education setting, leaders who offer digital direction, communication and collaboration, professional development, and support employees' adaption to technological change could foster conditions that improve attachment to the organization and decrease turnover. The finding aligns with the previous study by Van der Merwe and Botha and Mishra et al which identified leadership quality as one of the important antecedents of employee retention in higher education.

H2 suggested that Digital Leadership has a positive impact on Digital Emotional Intelligence. The results supported this hypothesis ($\beta = 0.581$, $t = 10.164$, $p < 0.001$). The large effect size ($f^2 = 0.510$) shows that Digital Leadership is a significant predictor of Digital Emotional Intelligence. This result aligns with recent studies on the connection between digital leadership and emotional skills and digital well-being in technology-mediated work settings [23].

H3 suggested that Digital Emotional Intelligence has a positive impact on Talent Retention. The results supported this hypothesis ($\beta = 0.304$, $t = 2.586$, $p = 0.010$). It indicates that those who are more adept at identifying and managing their emotions, as well as others' emotions, and who manage digital relationships and respond positively to digitally mediated interactions have a higher likelihood of having a positive relationship with their institution. This finding is in line with recent studies that demonstrate how digital emotional competencies can contribute to workplace efficiency, resilience, collaboration, and well-being [24].

Mediation Analysis

The mediation impact, on a theoretical level, could certainly be significant due to the fact that it suggests that there exists a psychological mechanism through which leadership practices result in retention outcomes. Digital leaders can help create emotionally supportive digital workplaces through setting good examples, fostering teamwork and responsible technology use. These conditions can enhance employees' capacity to identify and control emotions, comprehending the emotions of others, and managing digital relationships, all of which can enhance organizational attachment and intentions to stay [25].

This revelation builds on the growing body of literature by introducing Digital Emotional Intelligence as a pathway for Digital Leadership to become Talent Retention. Existing research has pointed to the role of leadership in employee retention and the role of digital emotional intelligence in digitally mediated work separately. This study links these streams in a higher-education context, and empirical evidence of the mediation of Digital Emotional Intelligence is provided [26].

Model Fit and Explanatory Power

Steady state model is structurally adequate in both explanatory and model fit. The model fit was good with SRMR value of 0.054, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.08. Digital Leadership accounted for 33.8% of the variance in Digital Emotional Intelligence ($R^2 = 0.338$) and Digital Leadership and Digital Emotional Intelligence together accounted for 44.4% in the variance of Talent Retention ($R^2 = 0.444$). The effect-size analysis showed a large effect of Digital Leadership on Digital Emotional Intelligence ($f^2 = 0.510$), a medium effect of Digital Leadership on Talent

Retention ($f^2 = 0.233$), and a small effect of Digital Emotional Intelligence on Talent Retention ($f^2 = 0.110$). Overall, the model has some useful explanatory power, in the case of Talent Retention, and also suggests that there are other factors not captured in this model that have a role in explaining the outcomes of retention.

Theoretical Implications

The study builds on the growing literature by combining the three concepts of Digital Leadership, Digital Emotional Intelligence and Talent Retention into a cohesive theoretical framework in higher education. First, the results corroborate the previous research in the field of Digital Leadership, as it proves that digital leadership does not only impact technological or strategic outcomes, but also relates to employees' emotional capabilities in digitally mediated work. Second, the significant indirect effect offers empirical evidence for Digital Emotional Intelligence as a path to link Digital Leadership to retention outcomes. Third, the study links the emerging body of literature on digital emotional intelligence and digital leadership with the existing talent-retention literature. The complementary partial mediation is important because it shows that the mediation function of leadership goes on the one hand directly and on the other hand indirectly through employees' emotional abilities in digital interactions [27].

Practical Implications

Firstly, digital leadership development investments are critical. University leaders need to be equipped with the technological skills, as well as the skills needed to communicate a digital vision, to encourage students to be digital citizens and to foster digital workplaces. Leadership development programmes should focus on strategic and behavioural aspects of digital leadership.

Second, it is important to promote the development of digital emotional intelligence in the teaching team. Digital emotional intelligence training can be incorporated into the professional development of universities, particularly those related to digital self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, managing relationships, and making decisions based on digital emotional intelligence. This training could enable employees to operate in digital environments more effectively and boost employee commitment to the organization.

Finally, HR initiatives that incorporate leadership development with emotional intelligence training will probably be more effective in retaining talent than will discrete actions. Organizational-level factors (such as leadership quality, digital culture) and individual level factors (such as employees' emotional competencies) should be taken into consideration for talent retention strategies.

Fourth, digital transformation in higher education is a process that is not solely about technology but also about human and emotional aspects of change. Leaders need to be emotionally and interpersonally supportive of their people as they adjust to new technologies in order to implement successful digital transformation.

Limitations and Future Research

A number of limitations must be recognized in this study.

The cross sectional design prevents causal inferences. The hypothesized relationships are supported by the data, but the direction of effects is not determinable. Longitudinal designs could be used for future research to explore the long-term impact of digital leadership and digital emotional intelligence on talent retention.

Secondly, it is only an Iraqi public university sample, which could limit the generalizability of the results to other settings. These relationships can be explored

in other higher education institutions, other cultures, or other institutions of the same culture.

Third, the study was self-reported so this could have included social desirability and common method variance. While procedural remedies were used (anonymity, confidentiality, different scale anchors), future research might include measures of actual talent retention (actual turnover) and/or multiple sources of measures (supervisor ratings, institutional records).

In the fourth instance, the study focused on only two dimensions of digital leadership (Visionary Leadership and Digital Citizenship). Other dimensions that could be integrated into future research are Systemic Improvement, Digital Culture, or Innovation Focus.

Fifth, the study examined digital emotional intelligence as a single higher order construct. Future research should investigate whether there are certain dimensions of digital emotional intelligence (dei) which have differential mediation effects between digital leadership and talent retention (e.g., digital empathy, digital self-regulation).

Sixth, the study did not consider any moderators like organizational culture, technological readiness or demographic factors. Further research might examine circumstances when the relationships are stronger and/or weaker.

Hypothesis Testing Summary

H1: Digital Leadership $\rightarrow$ Talent Retention ($\beta = 0.442$, $p < 0.001$): Supported.
H2: Digital Leadership $\rightarrow$ Digital Emotional Intelligence ($\beta = 0.581$, $p < 0.001$): Supported.
H3: Digital Emotional Intelligence $\rightarrow$ Talent Retention ($\beta = 0.304$, $p = 0.010$): Supported. The mediation by Digital Emotional Intelligence between Digital Leadership and Talent Retention was hypothesized and confirmed through the complementary partial mediation model: Hypothesis 4: Digital Emotional Intelligence mediates the relationship between Digital Leadership and Talent Retention (indirect $\beta = 0.176$, $p = 0.019$): Supported; complementary partial mediation.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate between Digital Leadership and Talent Retention with the role of Digital Emotional Intelligence as a mediator among academic staff of four public universities in Iraq. The study employed a two-stage approach for higher-order constructs and PLS-SEM to test four hypotheses. All four hypotheses are confirmed by the results. Digital leadership has a direct and indirect positive impact on talent retention, because of digital emotional intelligence. Based on the mediation analysis, it was found that there was a complementary partial mediation model, where digital emotional intelligence has an important mediating role in the digital leadership in enhancing the willingness of employees to stay in their institutions. The study fills the gaps in the literature by linking digital leadership, digital emotional intelligence, and talent retention in a comprehensive theoretical framework and empirical evidence for the relationships between them in the context of Higher Education. It also provides real-world advice for university decision-makers aiming to seek to keep academic talent in the face of digital transformation. The study suggests that digital leadership and digital emotional intelligence are complementary organizational capacities that will both help retain talent. Such universities are likely to be better in maintaining their performance in the digital age and to attract and keep qualified academic staff.

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