

Gratitude and psychological well-being among university students

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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being among university students in Indonesia, motivated by increasing concerns about the psychological well-being of university students characterized by high levels of stress and anxiety. Gratitude is hypothesized to be a significant internal factor in supporting psychological well-being. This quantitative correlational study involved 76 active university students in Indonesia who were Muslim, aged 17-23 years old, and willing to complete the questionnaire. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being (RPWB) scale which measures six dimensions of psychological well-being, and the Indonesian adaptation of the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) scale to measure gratitude. Data were analyzed using Jamovi software version 2.6.44 or JASP version 0.18.0.1. Normality test results showed that the psychological well-being scale data were normally distributed, while the gratitude scale data were not normally distributed. However, the Pearson correlation test showed a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.563 with a significance value (p -value) of <0.001 . This indicates a strong positive relationship between gratitude and students' psychological well-being. The higher the gratitude, the higher the level of psychological well-being. This finding strengthens the empirical evidence from previous research that shows the important role of gratitude in improving individual psychological well-being, especially among university students.

Kata Kunci:

Gratitude,
psychological well-being,
university students

DOI :

[10.20885/iscip.vol2.art11](https://doi.org/10.20885/iscip.vol2.art11)

Psychological well-being is not merely the absence of psychological disorders but reflects positive psychological functioning and self-realization. Ryff (1989) conceptualizes psychological well-being as a multidimensional construct consisting of self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Students with high psychological well-being tend to demonstrate effective emotional regulation, meaningful interpersonal relationships, clear life direction, and greater resilience in facing academic challenges. In contrast, low psychological well-being is associated with higher stress levels, academic disengagement, and decreased life satisfaction.

Various internal and external factors influence psychological well-being. External factors include social support and environmental conditions, whereas internal factors involve personal psychological resources such as resilience, optimism, emotion regulation, and positive cognitive tendencies. Among these internal resources, gratitude has gained increasing attention within the field of positive psychology as a potential protective factor. Gratitude is defined as a dispositional tendency to recognize and appreciate the positive aspects of life and the benevolence of others (Emmons & McCullough, 2002; McCullough et al., 2002). It involves cognitive recognition of benefits received, affective feelings of thankfulness, and behavioral expressions of appreciation. As a stable psychological trait, gratitude shapes how individuals interpret life events and respond to stress (Wood et al., 2010).

Empirical findings consistently demonstrate that gratitude is positively associated with indicators of well-being. Studies among university students show that higher gratitude is related to greater life satisfaction, lower psychological distress, and better emotional functioning. Research conducted in Indonesia has also reported significant positive correlations between gratitude and psychological well-being. However, a review of existing literature reveals several limitations. First, some studies focus on specific subgroups, such as working students, which limits generalizability to the broader student

population. Second, variations in cultural context suggest that the strength and manifestation of gratitude may differ across populations. Third, not all studies employ culturally adapted and psychometrically validated instruments within the Indonesian context.

Based on these considerations, there remains a need for further empirical examination of the relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being among active university students in Indonesia using validated measurement tools. The main problem addressed in this study is whether gratitude is significantly related to psychological well-being among Indonesian university students. Unlike previous studies that focused on limited populations or specific conditions, this research integrates culturally adapted instruments and examines students from diverse study

programs and regions, thereby providing a broader representation of the Indonesian academic context.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being among university students in Indonesia. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of evidence-based psychological interventions and campus programs that foster gratitude as an internal psychological resource to enhance students' well-being. By strengthening the empirical foundation in the Indonesian context, this study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of positive psychology and student mental health research.

Psychological well-being is not merely defined by the absence of psychological distress, but rather by the presence of positive psychological functioning and the ability to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. In this regard, psychological well-being reflects how individuals perceive, evaluate, and manage their lives in a holistic manner. One of the most influential conceptualizations of psychological well-being was proposed by Ryff (1989), who described it as a multidimensional construct encompassing optimal psychological functioning rather than momentary pleasure or emotional comfort.

According to Ryff (1989), psychological well-being consists of six interrelated dimensions, namely self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Self-acceptance refers to an individual's ability to acknowledge and accept both positive and negative aspects of the self. Positive relations with others reflect the capacity to build warm, trusting, and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Autonomy involves independence in thought and behavior, allowing individuals to regulate themselves according to internal standards rather than external pressures. Environmental mastery refers to the ability to manage life situations effectively and utilize surrounding opportunities to meet personal needs. Purpose in life reflects a sense of meaning, direction, and intentionality, while personal growth emphasizes continuous development, openness to experience, and the realization of one's potential. Together, these dimensions illustrate that psychological well-being is a complex and dynamic condition that supports individuals in achieving optimal functioning across life domains (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

This conceptualization aligns with the perspective of self-determination theory proposed by Ryan and Deci (2001), who argue that psychological well-being emerges from the fulfillment of basic psychological needs and the construction of meaning in life, rather than from the pursuit of positive emotions alone. Within the university context, students who demonstrate high psychological well-being tend to show better emotional regulation, stronger interpersonal relationships, clearer life goals, and greater resilience in coping with academic and social challenges.

Psychological well-being among university students is shaped by the interaction of external and internal factors. External factors include social support from family, peers, and the academic environment, which foster feelings of security, belonging, and emotional connectedness. Social support has been consistently associated with higher levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction, particularly among young adults navigating developmental and academic transitions (Keyes et al., 2002). Internally, psychological resources such as emotion regulation, resilience, and optimism play a crucial role in enabling individuals to cope effectively with stress and adversity. Effective emotion regulation, especially through adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, has been shown to be positively associated with well-being (Gross, 2002).

Among these internal psychological resources, gratitude has received increasing attention as a protective factor within the framework of positive psychology. Gratitude is defined as a dispositional tendency to recognize and appreciate the positive aspects of life and the benevolence of others (Emmons & McCullough, 2002). According to Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, gratitude involves cognitive recognition of benefits received, affective feelings of thankfulness, and behavioral expressions of appreciation. As a relatively stable psychological trait, gratitude influences how individuals interpret life events and respond to stressful experiences (Wood et al., 2010).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that gratitude is positively associated with various indicators of psychological well-being, including higher life satisfaction, lower psychological distress, and better emotional functioning. Gratitude has also been shown to strengthen key dimensions of psychological well-being, such as self-acceptance, positive relations with others, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). Through its cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, gratitude encourages individuals to adopt a more positive appraisal of life experiences and to engage in adaptive coping strategies when facing challenges.

Based on this theoretical foundation, gratitude can be understood as an important internal psychological resource that contributes to the development and maintenance of psychological well-being among university students. Understanding the relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being is therefore essential for explaining how students achieve optimal psychological functioning and maintain mental health within the academic context.

METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with a correlational design to determine the relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being among active students. A quantitative approach was chosen because it allows for the collection and

analysis of data in numerical form, thereby producing objective and measurable information (Siroj et al., 2024). A correlational design was used to test the relationship between variables without testing the cause-and-effect relationship (Creswell, 2014).

Data collection was conducted using a Google Form questionnaire distributed through social media such as WhatsApp and Instagram. The scales used were a 1–6 Likert scale for Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWB) and a 1–7 Likert scale for the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6). The research population was all active students in Indonesia. The sampling technique used was nonprobability sampling with purposive sampling, which is the selection of samples based on certain criteria: active students in Indonesia, Muslim, aged 17–23 years, and willing to fill out the questionnaire voluntarily. Data were collected from June 3 to July 1, 2025, with a total of 90 respondents. After the elimination process, 76 valid data were obtained for analysis. The majority of respondents were aged 19–21 years, with the most common age being 20 years (35.5%). Most had a bachelor's degree (85.5%) and came from Java. The most common study program was psychology (25.7%).

The dependent variable in this study is psychological well-being, measured using the RPWB developed by Ryff (1989), consisting of 42 items (21 favorable and 21 unfavorable) covering six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. This scale has been validated in the Indonesian student population with excellent reliability ($\alpha = .85-.91$) and has adequate convergent and discriminant validity. The independent variable is gratitude, measured using the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) adapted by Grimaldy and Haryanto (2020). The adapted version consists of 11 items on a 1–7 Likert scale. This scale shows good reliability ($\alpha = .789$) and has strong convergent and discriminant validity, as shown by positive correlations with subjective well-being and life satisfaction, as well as negative correlations with depression.

RESULT

Research findings showed that the average (mean) score of psychological well-being in each dimension is above the midpoint of the Likert scale 1-6. The Personal Growth (PG) dimension shows the highest mean of 4.58, indicating that respondents tend to feel that they are constantly learning, changing and growing. Meanwhile, the Self-Acceptance (SA) dimension has the lowest average of 3.80, although it is still above the midpoint. In general, these results show that student respondents tend to have a fairly good to high level of psychological well-being in most of its dimensions.

Table 1

Gratitude scale

	CA	AA	BA
Mean	6.21	5.76	5.63
Median	6.40	5.80	6.00

Based on the data displayed in Table 6, it is known that the average (mean) score of gratitude in each aspect tends to be high, considering that the Likert scale used is 1-7. The Cognitive aspects (CA) aspect shows the highest mean of 6.21, indicating that respondents strongly agree that there are many things to be grateful for in their lives. The Affective aspects (AA) and Behavioral aspects (BA) aspects also showed high averages of 5.76 and 5.63 respectively. This indicates that respondents generally feel and express gratitude. Overall, this descriptive data shows that student respondents have a high level of gratitude.

Table 2

Normality test

	SA	PRWO	A	EM	PIL	PG
Standard deviation	.696	.742	.724	.671	.562	.625
Shapiro-Wilk p	.336	.609	.209	.254	.343	.159

Based on the data displayed in Table 2, it is known that the Shapiro-Wilk significance value (p-value) for all dimensions of the psychological well-being scale (> .05) indicates that the data on this variable is normally distributed.

Table 3

Aspects of Gratitude Scale

	CA	AA	BA
Standard deviation	.892	.876	1.35
Shapiro-Wilk p	<.001	<.001	<.001

Based on the data displayed in table 3, it is known that the Shapiro-Wilk significance value (p-value) for all aspects of the Gratitude Scale (<.001) indicates that the data on this variable is not normally distributed.

Table 4

Correlation test

		Psychological Well-Being	Gratitude
Psychological Well-Being	Pearson's r	-	
	df	-	
	p-value	-	
Gratitude	Pearson's r	.563	-
	df	74	-
	p-value	<.001	-

Based on the data displayed in Table , it is known that the correlation coefficient (r) value of .563 indicates a strong positive relationship between gratitude and the level of psychological well-being of students. This means that the higher the level of gratitude that students have, the higher their level of psychological well-being tends to be, and vice versa.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to determine the relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being in active university students in Indonesia. Data analysis shows that there is a strong positive relationship between the two variables, evidenced by the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) of .563 which is statistically significant. This means that the higher the level of gratitude that students have, the higher the level of psychological well-being experienced, and vice versa.

The results of this study are in line with most of the research that has been conducted by previous researchers who also found a significant relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being. Research by Wood et al. (2009) on British students showed a positive relationship between gratitude with psychological well-being and life satisfaction, with a correlation of $r=.43$ in the student population. In addition, research conducted by Afifah and Ansyah (2022) on Indonesian students also obtained similar results, with a correlation coefficient of $r=.49$ and confirmed that individuals with higher levels of gratitude tend to have better psychological well-being. This study even showed a slightly stronger correlation than these studies, which could be due to respondent characteristics, adaptation of the measuring instrument, or cultural factors.

While many studies show significant results, there are also studies that report weak or insignificant relationships between gratitude and psychological well-being. For example, in a study conducted by Mahmood et al. (2019) on university students in Pakistan, found a lower correlation ($r=.27$), and one study on university students in Japan recorded an insignificant relationship, presumably due to cultural differences and less explicit expressions of gratitude in that context. These variations confirm that the strength of the relationship between the two variables can be influenced by the cultural context, subject characteristics, as well as the measurement instrument used.

The conceptualization of the relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being is based on positive and humanistic psychology theories. Fredrickson's (2004) Broaden-and- Build theory explains that positive emotions such as gratitude can broaden mindsets and build long-term psychological resources, including self-acceptance, positive relationships, and personal growth. Gratitude also helps individuals make more positive meaning of life experiences, accept themselves, and establish constructive social relationships, all of which are key dimensions of psychological well-being according to Ryff. In addition, gratitude is often associated with adaptive coping, finding meaning in difficult events, and increasing motivation to improve. The descriptive results display that the personal growth aspect of psychological well-being and the cognitive aspect of gratitude have the highest scores among their dimensions, supporting the argument that students are currently at an active and reflective phase of self-development.

While this study provides empirical evidence of a strong positive relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being ($r = .563$; $p < .001$), several limitations must be addressed. The relatively small sample size ($n = 76$) restricts the statistical power and the generalizability of the findings to a broader student population. Furthermore, the non-normal distribution observed in the gratitude variable necessitates a cautious interpretation of the results, despite the high significance level yielded by the Pearson correlation. Future research is encouraged to employ larger sample sizes to enhance generalizability. Additionally, future studies should consider utilizing non-parametric analyses or data transformation techniques if normality assumptions are not met, ensuring greater methodological rigor and validity in exploring internal psychological resources among university students.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of data analysis, it can be concluded that there is a strong positive relationship between gratitude and the level of psychological well-being in active students in the Indonesian academic environment. This is indicated by the correlation coefficient (r) of .563 with a significance value (p -value) $<.001$. Thus, the higher the level of gratitude that students have, the higher their level of psychological

well-being tends to be, and vice versa. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that grateful individuals tend to have lower stress levels, are able to see the positive side of life, and have higher life satisfaction. Gratitude is also associated with an increase in the hormones oxytocin and serotonin, which play a role in promoting emotional well-being and reducing anxiety. Overall, the results of this study confirm the important role of gratitude as one of the psychological capitals that can strengthen aspects of students' psychological well-being.

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