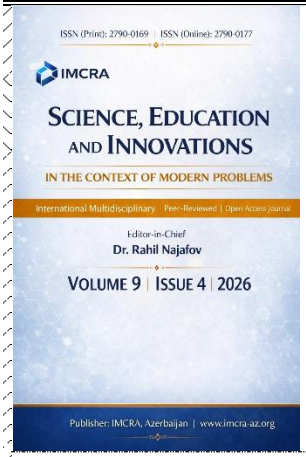

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revisiting Gratitude Interventions in Higher Education: A Grounded Theory Analysis of Student Experiences and Well-Being Outcomes

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore and critically analyze students' subjective experiences, perceptions, and reflections following their engagement in a positive psychology intervention centered on gratitude within a higher education context. The research employed a qualitative design, utilizing content analysis of 97 reflective assignments submitted by undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in positive psychology courses at a large public university. The analytical process was guided by a grounded theory approach, enabling the identification of emergent patterns and conceptual categories derived directly from participants' narratives. The findings revealed six major thematic domains: (1) students' perceptions of the intervention and associated challenges, (2) the influence of the gratitude exercise on interpersonal relationships, (3) conceptual reflections on gratitude as a psychological construct, (4) perceived effects on emotional states, including stress and mood, (5) personal transformation and anticipated long-term impacts, and (6) the applicability of experiential learning within academic settings. Overall, the results corroborate existing literature emphasizing the effectiveness of experiential learning strategies in enhancing psychological well-being. The study further suggests that gratitude-based interventions can be successfully integrated into higher education curricula across multiple levels, contributing to both academic and personal development.

Citation

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Introduction

Positive psychology, as defined by Sheldon and King (2001), is a scientific discipline focused on the systematic study of human strengths, virtues, and factors that enable individuals to flourish and lead meaningful lives. Unlike traditional psychological approaches that primarily emphasize pathology, positive psychology seeks to understand and promote well-being, resilience, and optimal human functioning. Over the past two decades, the field has witnessed substantial growth, driven by both academic interest and public engagement, with key contributions from scholars such as Martin Seligman (2019) and Tim Lomas (2016).

Empirically validated interventions within positive psychology—such as gratitude exercises, acts of kindness, and strengths-based activities—have demonstrated significant effectiveness in enhancing well-being and life satisfaction. For instance, gratitude interventions, as developed by Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (2003), have been consistently associated with improved emotional states and increased positive affect. Similarly, kindness-based interventions have shown measurable benefits in promoting prosocial behavior and psychological health. Beyond general populations, these

interventions have also demonstrated clinical relevance, particularly among individuals experiencing depression, stress, and anxiety, as well as among older adults and highly motivated populations.

Among the most widely studied positive psychology interventions are the "gratitude visit," "three good things" exercise, and the application of signature strengths. These interventions have been shown to produce sustained improvements in happiness and reductions in depressive symptoms (Seligman et al., 2005). However, subsequent replication studies have yielded mixed findings, suggesting that the effectiveness of such interventions may vary depending on contextual and individual factors. For example, some studies indicate that participants engaging in positive psychology exercises may not significantly outperform control groups receiving placebo-like interventions. These inconsistencies highlight the need for further research to better understand the mechanisms underlying these interventions and to identify the conditions under which they are most effective.

In recent years, the application of positive psychology within educational contexts—commonly referred to as "positive education"—has gained increasing attention. This approach integrates well-being interventions into academic curricula with the aim of fostering both psychological resilience and academic success. Universities worldwide have begun incorporating positive psychology courses, such as the widely recognized "Science of Well-Being" course at Yale University, reflecting a broader shift toward student-centered educational models that prioritize mental health and holistic development.

Given the rising prevalence of stress, anxiety, and psychological distress among university students, there is a growing need for innovative, evidence-based interventions that can be embedded within academic environments. Experiential learning, which involves active participation in structured psychological exercises, has emerged as a promising approach in this regard. Prior studies have demonstrated that students enrolled in positive psychology courses that incorporate experiential components report increased life satisfaction, reduced stress, and improved emotional well-being compared to those in traditional courses.

Despite these advancements, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning students' subjective experiences and perceptions of such interventions, particularly when participation is a required component of coursework. One specific intervention—the "gratitude visit"—is especially relevant, as it involves direct interpersonal engagement and emotional expression, often requiring participants to step outside their comfort zones. While this exercise has been linked to positive emotional and relational outcomes, limited research has examined how students perceive and internalize this experience within an academic context.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by providing an in-depth qualitative analysis of students' reflections on gratitude-based experiential learning. By examining how students interpret, respond to, and derive meaning from such interventions, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of positive psychology in higher education and its potential to enhance both academic and personal development.

Literature Review

Positive psychology has emerged as a significant domain within contemporary psychological science, focusing on the systematic study of human strengths, virtues, and factors that contribute to well-being and flourishing (Sheldon and King, 2001). Unlike traditional deficit-oriented approaches, this field emphasizes the enhancement of life satisfaction, meaning, and optimal functioning across personal and social domains (Martin Seligman, 2019). Over recent decades, the field has expanded rapidly due to increasing academic attention and societal demand for interventions that promote mental health and resilience (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016).

A substantial body of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) in improving psychological well-being. For instance, gratitude-based interventions, such as those developed by Emmons and McCullough (2003), have been shown to significantly enhance positive affect and life satisfaction. Similarly, kindness-oriented activities have been associated with increased happiness and prosocial behavior (Otake et al., 2006). Meta-analytic evidence further supports the efficacy of PPIs in reducing depressive symptoms and improving overall well-being across diverse populations (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Dickens, 2017).

Despite these promising findings, the literature also reveals inconsistencies regarding the magnitude and sustainability of intervention effects. Some replication studies suggest that participants engaging in positive psychology exercises may not perform significantly better than those in control conditions (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). Moreover, recent meta-analyses indicate that while gratitude interventions can positively influence well-being, their impact on clinical symptoms such as depression and anxiety may be modest (Cregg & Cheavens, 2020). These mixed findings highlight the importance of further research to identify moderating variables and contextual factors influencing intervention effectiveness.

In parallel, increasing attention has been directed toward the integration of positive psychology into educational settings, often referred to as "positive education." This approach seeks to combine academic learning with the promotion of psychological well-being and resilience (Seligman et al., 2009). Empirical studies suggest that incorporating positive psychology interventions into university courses can lead to improved student outcomes, including increased life satisfaction, reduced stress, and enhanced emotional well-being (Goodmon et al., 2016; Maybury, 2013).

Experiential learning has been identified as a particularly effective pedagogical approach for delivering positive psychology content. This method involves active engagement in structured activities, enabling students to apply theoretical concepts to their own lives (Biswas-Diener & Patterson, 2011). Research indicates that such experiential exercises—such as writing gratitude letters or recording daily positive experiences—can produce measurable improvements in well-being and psychological functioning (Seligman et al., 2005; Woodworth et al., 2017).

The growing prevalence of mental health challenges among university students further underscores the relevance of such interventions. According to the American College Health Association (2019), a significant proportion of students report experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and academic pressure. In response, higher education institutions have increasingly adopted well-being initiatives aimed at enhancing student resilience and promoting holistic development (Watts, 2017). Positive psychology interventions are particularly well-suited for these contexts due to their practical applicability and evidence-based foundation (Waters, 2011).

Among the various interventions, gratitude-based exercises have received considerable attention due to their demonstrated psychological and interpersonal benefits. Gratitude has been linked to improved emotional regulation, stronger social relationships, and healthier behavioral patterns, including better dietary habits (Fritz et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2010). Longitudinal studies further suggest that gratitude contributes to increased social support and reduced stress and depression over time (Wood et al., 2008).

However, despite the extensive literature on the outcomes of positive psychology interventions, there remains a notable gap concerning participants' subjective experiences, particularly in structured academic environments. While previous studies have primarily focused on quantitative outcomes, fewer investigations have explored how individuals perceive, interpret, and internalize these interventions. Qualitative methodologies, such as grounded theory and thematic analysis, offer valuable tools for capturing these nuanced experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rich, 2017).

One intervention of particular interest is the "gratitude visit," which involves expressing appreciation directly to another individual. Although this exercise has been shown to produce positive emotional outcomes, it also presents unique challenges, as it requires participants to engage in emotionally demanding interpersonal interactions (Kumar & Epley, 2018). Understanding how students navigate these experiences within academic settings is essential for evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of such interventions.

Therefore, building upon existing literature, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining students' subjective experiences and insights related to gratitude-based experiential learning. By employing a qualitative approach grounded in participants' reflections, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how positive psychology interventions function within higher education and how they may be optimized to enhance student well-being.

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative methodology has increasingly been recognized as an essential approach for examining how individuals interpret, internalize, and experience positive psychology interventions within real-life contexts (Corbin, 2017; Rich, 2017). In contrast to quantitative methods, qualitative approaches allow for a deeper exploration of subjective meaning-making processes, particularly when investigating experiential learning and emotional responses. Accordingly, the present study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing participants' lived experiences and reflective insights.

A grounded theory–inspired approach was employed to guide the analytic process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is particularly suitable for generating conceptual understanding from textual data, as it facilitates the emergence of themes through systematic, inductive analysis rather than imposing predefined theoretical frameworks. This approach was complemented by the constant-comparative method, which enables iterative comparison across data segments to refine categories and enhance analytical rigor (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Participants and Sampling

The study sample consisted of students enrolled in six undergraduate courses (five of which were honors-level) and one graduate-level course focused on introductory positive psychology at a large public university in the Northeastern United States (N = 119) . The undergraduate courses were open to students from various academic disciplines and were not restricted to psychology majors, whereas the graduate course included master's and doctoral students specializing in psychology.

Participants were not required to have prior knowledge of positive psychology, which enhanced the ecological validity of the study by capturing authentic first-time engagement with positive psychology interventions. This diversity in academic background and experience allowed for a richer understanding of how individuals from different contexts perceive and respond to experiential learning activities.

Of the total enrolled students, 97 reflection assignments met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis. Twelve assignments were excluded due to incomplete submission or failure to provide the required reflective component . This selective inclusion ensured that the dataset comprised sufficiently detailed and meaningful reflections suitable for qualitative analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), data were collected from written reflection assignments submitted as part of course requirements. These assignments required students to critically reflect on their experiences with a series of structured positive psychology interventions integrated into the course curriculum.

The interventions were based on empirically validated practices from the positive psychology literature, including:

- Identifying and applying personal character strengths (Seligman et al., 2005)
- Recording three positive experiences daily (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman et al., 2005)
- Writing a future-oriented life narrative or obituary (Vail et al., 2012)
- Practicing active and constructive responding in interpersonal interactions (Passmore & Oades, 2014)
- Engaging in savoring exercises to enhance present-moment awareness (Jose et al., 2012)
- Performing acts of kindness or prosocial behavior (Otake et al., 2006)

The course culminated in the "gratitude visit" intervention, a widely studied yet emotionally demanding exercise requiring participants to express gratitude directly to another individual (Kumar & Epley, 2018; Seligman et al., 2005). Students were instructed to compose a gratitude letter and deliver it either in person or via alternative communication methods. They subsequently submitted a 1–2 page reflective essay describing their emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal experiences.

Assignments were submitted electronically through the university's learning management system and were anonymized prior to analysis to ensure confidentiality and reduce potential bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigor was maintained throughout the study. All data were de-identified before analysis to protect participants' anonymity. The principal investigator, who was responsible for course instruction and grading, was not involved in the coding or analysis process to minimize potential bias . Participation in the study was based on course enrollment, and students were encouraged to provide honest and critical reflections without pressure to produce socially desirable responses.

Additionally, students were given the option to modify or opt out of certain exercises if they experienced discomfort, thereby respecting participant autonomy and emotional well-being. No demographic data were collected, further ensuring anonymity and reducing the risk of identification.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a combination of inductive and deductive coding strategies, consistent with grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The analytic process followed an iterative and systematic approach:

1. Initial Coding:
   A preliminary set of deductive codes was developed based on the research questions and existing literature. Simultaneously, inductive coding was applied to identify emergent themes directly from the data.
2. Codebook Development:
   A team consisting of a graduate researcher and trained undergraduate assistants independently reviewed subsets of the data to generate initial codes. These codes were then consolidated into a structured codebook through collaborative discussion.
3. Iterative Analysis:
   The coding team engaged in weekly meetings to refine the codebook, resolve discrepancies, and ensure consistency across coders. Disagreements were resolved through consensus, enhancing the reliability of the analysis.
4. Thematic Analysis:
   Thematic analysis was employed to identify overarching patterns and themes within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach emphasizes the active role of researchers in interpreting data and constructing meaningful categories.

The analysis was supported by MAXQDA 2020 software (VERBI Software, 2019), which facilitated systematic data organization, coding, and retrieval. The constant-comparative method ensured that themes were continuously refined and validated across the dataset, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adhered to established qualitative research criteria, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation was achieved through multiple coders, and iterative discussions enhanced analytical consistency. The use of both inductive and deductive coding further strengthened the validity of the findings by integrating theory-driven and data-driven perspectives.

Results and Thematic Analysis

The qualitative analysis revealed six overarching thematic domains that reflect students' subjective experiences with gratitude-based experiential learning interventions . These themes included: (1) students' evaluations of the intervention and perceived challenges, (2) emotional and interpersonal difficulties encountered during participation, (3) transformations in interpersonal relationships, (4) conceptual reflections on gratitude as a psychological construct, (5) perceived effects on mood and stress levels, and (6) anticipated long-term personal and behavioral changes beyond the course context.

1. Perceptions of the Intervention and Experiential Learning

Overall, participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the gratitude-based intervention, emphasizing its transformative and emotionally impactful nature. Many students reported that, compared to other course assignments, the gratitude visit exercise produced a more profound psychological effect, contributing to increased happiness and emotional awareness. These findings align with prior research demonstrating that experiential learning approaches in positive psychology significantly enhance student engagement and well-being (Biswas-Diener & Patterson, 2011; Goodmon et al., 2016).

Students frequently described the intervention as "eye-opening" and "transformative," suggesting that structured experiential activities facilitate deeper cognitive and emotional processing than traditional didactic learning methods. This supports the broader literature on experiential education, which highlights the importance of active participation in fostering meaningful learning outcomes (Kolb, 1984; Seligman et al., 2009).

2. Emotional Challenges and Psychological Discomfort

Despite the overall positive reception, many participants reported experiencing emotional discomfort, vulnerability, and anxiety during the intervention. Expressing gratitude explicitly—particularly in interpersonal contexts—was perceived as challenging, especially for individuals unaccustomed to emotional disclosure.

These findings are consistent with prior studies indicating that positive psychology interventions, while beneficial, may require individuals to confront emotional barriers and step outside their comfort zones (Kumar & Epley, 2018). Emotional vulnerability, though initially uncomfortable, has been identified as a critical mechanism through which such interventions produce meaningful psychological change (Brown, 2012; Passmore & Oades, 2014).

Some participants also highlighted cultural and familial factors that influenced their discomfort, particularly in contexts where emotional expression is not commonly practiced. This observation underscores the importance of considering sociocultural variables when implementing positive psychology interventions (Flores & Lee, 2019).

Table 1. Summary of Thematic Findings from Gratitude Intervention Analysis

Theme	Description	Key Findings	Representative Insights	Supporting Literature
1. Perceptions of the Intervention	Students' overall evaluation of the gratitude exercise and experiential learning approach	High satisfaction; perceived as meaningful and transformative	Students described the intervention as "eye-opening" and more impactful than traditional assignments	Biswas-Diener & Patterson (2011); Goodmon et al. (2016)
2. Emotional Challenges	Emotional discomfort, vulnerability, and anxiety during participation	Initial discomfort due to emotional exposure and unfamiliarity with expressing gratitude	Participants reported feeling "awkward" or "emotionally vulnerable" when delivering gratitude messages	Kumar & Epley (2018); Brown (2012)

3. Interpersonal Relationship Transformation	Changes in relationships following the gratitude intervention	Strengthened emotional bonds, increased closeness, improved communication	Students reported improved relationships with parents, friends, and mentors	Emmons & McCullough (2003); Wood et al. (2010)
4. Conceptual Understanding of Gratitude	Development of deeper cognitive and emotional understanding of gratitude	Shift from superficial expressions to authentic, intentional gratitude	Participants recognized gratitude as a meaningful psychological and relational process	Algoe (2012); Emmons & Mishra (2011)
5. Emotional Well-being Outcomes	Effects of the intervention on mood, stress, and emotional states	Improved mood, reduced stress, emotional relief	Students reported feeling "lighter," "relieved," and "emotionally refreshed"	Sin & Lyubomirsky (2009); Dickens (2017)
6. Long-Term Impact and Behavioral Intentions	Anticipated future application of gratitude practices	Intentions to continue gratitude practices; increased self-awareness and optimism	Participants planned to integrate gratitude into daily life and relationships	Seligman et al. (2005); Lyubomirsky et al. (2011)

3. Interpersonal Relationship Transformation

One of the most significant outcomes reported by participants was the improvement in interpersonal relationships. Students frequently described enhanced emotional closeness, increased appreciation, and strengthened bonds with recipients of their gratitude expressions, particularly parents, close friends, and mentors.

These findings corroborate existing research demonstrating that gratitude is strongly associated with improved relationship quality, increased prosocial behavior, and enhanced social connectedness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood et al., 2010). Longitudinal evidence further suggests that gratitude fosters social support and contributes to relational resilience over time (Wood et al., 2008).

Participants' reflections indicate that explicit expressions of gratitude can challenge assumptions about mutual understanding in relationships. Many students reported realizing that their feelings of appreciation had not been adequately communicated, reinforcing the importance of intentional emotional expression in maintaining healthy interpersonal dynamics.

4. Conceptual Understanding of Gratitude

Participants demonstrated a deeper and more nuanced understanding of gratitude as a psychological construct following the intervention. Rather than viewing gratitude as a routine social norm (e.g., saying "thank you"), students began to conceptualize it as a meaningful emotional and relational process.

This shift in understanding is consistent with theoretical perspectives that distinguish between superficial expressions of gratitude and more profound, intentional practices that contribute to well-being (Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Wood et al., 2010). Participants highlighted the importance of "authentic gratitude," emphasizing that meaningful expression requires reflection, intentionality, and emotional engagement.

Moreover, several students identified internal psychological barriers to expressing gratitude, such as perceived independence or reluctance to acknowledge reliance on others. These insights align with psychological theories suggesting that gratitude is closely linked to humility, interdependence, and social awareness (Algoe, 2012).

5. Effects on Mood, Stress, and Emotional Well-Being

A significant proportion of participants reported improvements in mood, emotional relief, and reduced stress levels following the intervention. Many described feeling "lighter," "relieved," or "emotionally refreshed" after completing the gratitude exercise.

These findings are consistent with empirical evidence indicating that gratitude interventions can enhance positive affect and reduce psychological distress (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Dickens, 2017). Notably, the timing of the intervention—often coinciding with final examinations—highlighted its potential as a coping mechanism during periods of heightened academic stress.

Research suggests that gratitude can buffer stress by promoting cognitive reappraisal and enhancing emotional regulation (Wood et al., 2008; Fredrickson, 2001). The present findings support this perspective, demonstrating that even brief interventions can produce immediate psychological benefits.

6. Long-Term Impact and Behavioral Intentions

Participants frequently expressed intentions to incorporate gratitude practices into their daily lives beyond the course. Many reported that the experience prompted self-reflection, increased self-awareness, and a reevaluation of personal values and relationships.

This aligns with prior research indicating that positive psychology interventions can produce sustained changes in behavior and well-being when individuals continue to engage in the practices (Seligman et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). Participants' reflections suggest that experiential learning not only enhances immediate well-being but also fosters long-term personal development.

Students also reported broader cognitive shifts, including increased optimism, a greater sense of purpose, and heightened appreciation for life experiences. These findings support the theoretical framework of broaden-and-build theory, which posits that positive emotions expand cognitive and behavioral repertoires, contributing to long-term psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001).

Discussiion.

This study was designed to generate deeper insights into the pedagogical implementation of positive psychology within higher education, with particular emphasis on students' subjective experiences of a structured intervention known as the *gratitude visit*. The research contributes to the broader field of positive psychology by examining how experiential learning activities influence emotional engagement, interpersonal awareness, and reflective thinking among college students.

Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study systematically examined 97 reflective assignments collected from both undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in positive psychology courses at a large public university. A deductive analytical framework was employed to identify recurring themes, emotional responses, and perceived outcomes associated with participation in the gratitude intervention.

The findings revealed that the majority of students reported predominantly positive experiences, highlighting increased emotional awareness, strengthened interpersonal connections, and enhanced appreciation for meaningful relationships. However, the data also indicated the presence of certain challenges. A subset of participants described feelings of discomfort, vulnerability, and emotional exposure during the exercise. In particular, the act of expressing gratitude in a direct and personal manner disrupted established relational norms and, in some cases, elicited awkwardness or emotional unease. These findings underscore the complexity of experiential learning interventions and suggest that while such exercises are impactful, they may also require structured guidance and emotional support mechanisms.

Importantly, although students were not explicitly instructed to connect the exercise outcomes to their personal lives, many participants spontaneously provided deep, introspective reflections. Several students articulated long-term implications of the activity, suggesting that experiential exercises can foster sustained cognitive and emotional engagement beyond the classroom context. This indicates that students possess the capacity for meaningful reflection when provided with appropriately designed pedagogical tools.

Furthermore, a significant number of participants reported transferring the concept of gratitude into other areas of their lives, including family relationships, friendships, and daily interactions. This transferability highlights the broader applicability of positive psychology interventions and supports their integration into general education curricula. Given the increasing prevalence of psychological distress among university students, scalable and evidence-based interventions such as gratitude exercises represent a valuable avenue for promoting well-being at the population level.

The study also reinforces prior research demonstrating the effectiveness of experiential learning in enhancing student engagement and psychological outcomes. The implementation of structured, interactive exercises appears to facilitate deeper understanding and internalization of theoretical concepts, thereby bridging the gap between academic knowledge and real-life application.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. Notably, the absence of detailed demographic data restricts the ability to contextualize findings across variables such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background. Additionally, the sample predominantly consisted of honors students and a limited number of graduate participants, which may reduce the generalizability of the results to the broader student population. Another limitation is the lack of integration between qualitative insights and quantitative measures, which could have strengthened the robustness of the findings through methodological triangulation.

Nevertheless, the study benefits from rich qualitative data collected in real time, allowing for authentic and nuanced insights into students' lived experiences. The absence of structured prompts regarding outcomes may have further reduced expectancy bias, enabling more genuine reflections.

Gratitude, as a central construct in this study, is widely recognized in psychological literature as a powerful determinant of both mental and physical well-being. It has been associated with reduced stress levels, improved emotional regulation, and

enhanced social functioning. The present findings suggest that gratitude is not only theoretically significant but also practically accessible and meaningful to college students—a population that stands to benefit greatly from such interventions.

Illustrative reflections from participants further emphasize the emotional impact of the exercise. For instance, one student noted a profound shift in emotional state following the expression of gratitude, highlighting the reciprocal benefits experienced by both the giver and the recipient. Such observations reinforce the interpersonal dimension of gratitude and its role in strengthening social bonds.

Future research should build upon these findings by addressing several key questions. First, it is necessary to identify the specific mechanisms through which gratitude interventions exert their effects—whether through cognitive reflection, emotional expression, or social interaction. Second, researchers should explore individual differences that may influence responsiveness to such interventions. Third, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the durability of observed benefits and to determine the optimal timing and frequency of intervention implementation within academic settings.

Additionally, integrating mixed-method approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of outcomes by combining subjective experiences with measurable psychological indicators. Expanding the diversity of study samples would also enhance the external validity of future research.

In conclusion, this study provides compelling evidence that experiential positive psychology interventions, particularly gratitude-based exercises, are both feasible and beneficial within higher education contexts. While challenges related to emotional vulnerability must be carefully managed, the overall findings support the integration of such approaches into psychology curricula and broader educational frameworks. By fostering emotional awareness, interpersonal connection, and reflective capacity, these interventions hold significant potential for enhancing student well-being and academic engagement.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive qualitative examination of students' subjective experiences with gratitude-based interventions within a higher education context, offering important insights into the pedagogical and psychological value of integrating positive psychology practices into academic curricula. By employing a grounded theory–informed approach to analyze reflective assignments, the research moves beyond purely outcome-based evaluations and instead captures the nuanced ways in which students interpret, internalize, and respond to experiential learning interventions.

The findings demonstrate that gratitude-based exercises, particularly the gratitude visit, function as powerful mechanisms for enhancing emotional awareness, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and promoting psychological well-being. Students reported meaningful shifts in their emotional states, including reductions in stress and improvements in mood, as well as increased appreciation for significant relationships in their lives. These outcomes reinforce existing evidence that positive psychology interventions can produce both immediate and potentially enduring benefits in non-clinical populations, particularly among university students who are increasingly exposed to psychological stressors.

At the same time, the study highlights the complexity of such interventions by revealing the presence of emotional discomfort, vulnerability, and situational challenges associated with direct expressions of gratitude. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of gratitude interventions is not solely dependent on their content but also on the contextual, interpersonal, and cultural conditions in which they are implemented. Emotional discomfort, rather than being a limitation, may represent a critical component of the transformative process, facilitating deeper reflection and authentic engagement.

A key contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on the role of experiential learning as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and lived experience. Unlike traditional instructional methods, experiential interventions enable students to actively engage with psychological concepts, thereby fostering deeper cognitive processing and personal relevance. The spontaneous emergence of reflective insights among participants further indicates that well-designed interventions can stimulate sustained engagement beyond the classroom, encouraging students to integrate learned practices into their everyday lives.

Moreover, the findings underscore the broader educational value of gratitude interventions as tools for promoting holistic student development, encompassing not only academic outcomes but also emotional resilience, social connectedness, and personal growth. In light of the growing prevalence of mental health challenges in higher education, such interventions offer scalable and evidence-informed strategies for enhancing student well-being at an institutional level.

Despite these contributions, the study is not without limitations. The absence of demographic data restricts the ability to examine variations across different student populations, while the reliance on self-reported reflections may introduce subjective bias. Additionally, the lack of quantitative measures limits the ability to assess the magnitude of observed effects or establish causal relationships. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating mixed-method designs, longitudinal approaches, and more diverse samples to enhance generalizability and analytical depth.

Further investigation is also needed to explore the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of gratitude interventions, including the roles of emotional expression, cognitive reframing, and social interaction. Understanding these processes will

be essential for optimizing intervention design and tailoring implementation strategies across different educational and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this study affirms that gratitude-based positive psychology interventions represent a valuable and feasible approach to enhancing student well-being within higher education. By fostering emotional awareness, interpersonal connection, and reflective capacity, such interventions contribute not only to individual flourishing but also to the creation of more supportive and engaged academic environments. As higher education institutions continue to evolve in response to complex societal challenges, the integration of evidence-based well-being practices should be considered a central component of contemporary educational innovation.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any academic or personal consequences.

All data were anonymized prior to analysis to ensure confidentiality and privacy. No personally identifiable information was collected or reported. Additionally, the course instructor was not involved in the coding or analysis process in order to minimize potential bias and ensure objectivity.

Participants were also given the option to modify or decline participation in emotionally sensitive components of the intervention, particularly the gratitude visit exercise, thereby respecting individual autonomy and emotional well-being.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents agreed to the use of their anonymized reflections for research purposes.

Funding

This research received no external funding. The study was conducted as part of academic and institutional research activities within the university context.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, without any financial or commercial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict.

Author Contributions

The author was solely responsible for all aspects of the study, including:

- Conceptualization and research design
- Data collection and methodology development
- Data analysis and interpretation
- Writing, reviewing, and editing the manuscript

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical and privacy considerations, raw data are not publicly available.

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Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the affiliated university, ensuring that all procedures complied with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

AI Usage Statement (optional but strong for journals)

No artificial intelligence tools were used in the data collection, analysis, or interpretation of results. AI tools were used only for language editing and formatting purposes where applicable.

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