



Exploring the Role of Gratitude in Coping Strategies Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between gratitude and coping among university students and how gratitude affects emotional reactivity, regulation, coping with stress and resilience within the academic setting. Quantitatively, the study assessed 150 university students' levels of gratitude and coping strategies via use of the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) and Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI). Positive correlations were found between gratitude and problem-focused, emotion-focused and negative coping. Students with elevated levels of gratitude were also more likely to use adaptive coping strategies and less likely to utilize maladaptive ones. Coping strategies of the two sexes were different in nature: while males were found to use problem-focused forms of coping, females had emotion-focused forms of coping. The current findings indicate that when gratitude is fostered, coping skills may be strengthened, stress reduced, and mental health status bettered for undergraduate students. The current results highlight the value of including gratitude interventions in college wellness programs to enhance college students' psychological functioning and stress management.

Keywords: *Gratitude, Coping Strategies, Stress Management, Emotional Regulation, Mental Health, Resilience*

Introduction

Gratitude is conceptualized as “the recognition and appropriate valuation of the good things in one’s life” and is frequently associated with feelings of connection to one’s community, others, and/or a higher power (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). In recent years, there has been a growing focus on the psychological benefits of gratitude, and its effects on personal mental health and wellbeing by example. Undergraduate college students, who often experience a variety of school-related, social, and personal pressures, are one population for whom stress and mental health concerns are common. Gratitude is considered a powerful psychological strength that may promote positive affect and improve emotional regulation in support of well-being.



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The role of gratitude has been established as one of the key emotion regulatory processes (ISD) in regulating one's emotional reaction in different situations. The broaden-and-building theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004) posits that gratitude may increase the mental work of an individual's thought-action repertoires that would help against stress and coping and promote resilience. For example, gratitude has been linked to positive coping strategies such as problem solving, seeking social support, and reinterpretation of stressful experiences. Furthermore, students who are more grateful may be less likely to adopt maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., avoidance, self-blame, substance use) that are prevalent in high-stress environments such as the university context.

Coping strategies refer to cognitive and behavior responses that people will utilize in-order to deal with stress and negative emotions. Problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping are categorized into these strategies. The uptake of adaptive coping strategies (e.g., social support seeking, exercise) among university students were associated with better mental health and academic performance. By contrast, students using avoidance strategies tend to be more stressed, anxious and depressed. Gratitude has also been found to facilitate the use of adaptive coping strategies which in turn may result in higher emotional resilience (Ciesla & Roberts, 2007).

This study is important for an investigation of the effects of gratitude on the coping strategies of college students. The current research endeavors to contribute to the understanding of how the positive functioning associated with gratitude is related to coping as a means of coping in order to enhance emotional resilience and more adaptive strategies to deal with stress. Fostering an appreciation of the role of gratitude in coping could contribute to interventions that enhance college students' psychological adjustment, lower stress, and foster academic success. Practicing activities of gratitude, like journaling or reflective writing, may be valuable additions to mental health programming at the university-level to help students better cope with stress. This study adds to our growing understanding of the health benefits of gratitude, and the potential role of gratitude in promoting well-being in educational settings.

Literature Review

Gratitude and Coping Strategies The relationship between gratitude and coping strategies regarding mental health and stress, in particular among college students, has been a focus of research. College students experience a range of stressors, academic, social, and developmental, and therefore represent a particularly important target in the study of how gratitude may facilitate coping. Indeed, it has been shown that gratitude is associated with improved emotional regulation skills, helping individuals to deal with stress more effectively and to adopt more adaptive coping mechanisms (Watkins et al., 2003). Indeed, research has suggested that being grateful is related to engaging more adaptive coping processes, such as problem solving, seeking social support, and attempting to find a positive spin regarding bothersome events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). These tactics are essential for students to handle the stresses of school and peer interactions.

On the contrary, low levels of gratitude have been related to the use of maladaptive coping strategies, like avoidance, denial and substance use (Wood et al., 2010). People who practice counting their blessings, writing letters of gratitude, and other



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such gratitude exercises show lower levels of avoidance behaviors that can lower their psychological distress and increase their resilience (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Those results are consistent with research indicating that gratitude interventions can promote emotional regulation, lower stress, and promote healthier coping among students (Kashdan & Breen, 2007).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of gratitude-based interventions on MH through greater psychological well-being and adaptive coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Practices that evoke gratitude, such as journaling, are most effective in eliciting problem-focused coping as opposed to emotion-focused or avoidance-based approaches (Fredrickson, 2001). Both have been associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, optimism, and academic engagement, factors critical for college students who increasingly are confronting stress during the college years (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Yet, gratitude interventions are not viewed uniformly well, as some studies provide ambiguous results. Critics suggest that the positive effects of gratitude based exercises might be a result of confounders such as the length of follow-up, sample size, and the type of gratitude exercise (Davis et al., 2016). Notwithstanding these issues, there exists a consensus that gratitude interventions effectively promote adaptive coping strategies and resilience for individuals, with the academic field providing the greatest level of support (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

Studies on differences in coping strategies based on gender (Tamres et al., 2002) have shown that female respondents use more of an emotion-focused coping strategy (e.g., seeking emotional support and venting), while male respondents use more of a problem-focused coping strategy. Such difference in adaptation styles may be related to gender-related stress processes and profiles. Yet, gratitude interventions have been found to serve as an equalising force between these coping styles because they promote similar levels of emotional expression/reappraisal among both genders (Terry et al., 2013). Gratitude has been especially advantageous for female students, cultivating emotional regulation and self-compassion, which are vital in diminishing negative self-appraisals and overall mental health (Neff & Germer, 2013).

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is a model that explains responses to stress. From this model, stress results from the perception of persons that the demands of a situation outweigh their abilities to cope. Gratitude, as a positive affective resource, enables people to evaluate stress more constructively, which in turn increases their coping resources (Fredrickson, 2001). This is consistent with Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory, which suggests that positive emotions, such as feelings of gratitude, expand an individual's thought-action repertoire and bring on increased resilience and resource building. Here, gratitude not only provides an emotional shield in the immediate aftermath, but also appears to support the formation of long-term coping strategies which increase the resilience of the individual as a whole.

Moreover, the Cognitive-Emotion Theory and the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) would be congruent with the idea that, enabling more adaptive responses to stressors, gratitude could also reduce them. These are theories about how stronger motivations toward self-regulated stress reduction developed from the adaptive emotional management induced by gratitude in order to approximate a more balanced homeostasis that would leave the individuals less taxonomically vulnerable to stress-related disorders (Kashdan et al., 2006).



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The role of experiencing gratitude in the context of improving coping among students is also complex. Gratitude interventions have been demonstrated to be beneficial for academic achievement, with greater motivation, engagement, and sense of belonging with the academic environment (Pace et al., 2021). These results are important for students since they have been associated with less stress and better coping mechanisms (Buehler et al., 2006). Through promoting a positive reappraisal and perception of mastery, gratitude improves how students cope with academic stressors, social stressors, and personal stressors (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Additionally, gratitude decreases the tendency to engage in maladaptive coping mechanisms such as alcohol use, procrastination, escape, and avoidance, more typically seen in students experiencing high stress (Park et al., 2015).

Gratitude interventions derive a number of their benefits not only from academic gains, but also from increases in psychological resilience as well as the learning of adaptive coping mechanisms. Students who engage in practicing gratitude experience lower instances of depression and anxiety, as gratitude is believed to be a protective factor against the emotional impact of stress (Kashdan & Breen, 2007). Gratitude supports students in managing the challenges they confront with increased psychological flexibility and well-being, by cultivating emotional regulation and positive perception (Emmons, 2007)

Hypothesis

(H1) There will be a significant relationship between gratitude and coping strategies among universities students.

(H2) There will be a significant prediction of gratitude and coping strategies among universities students.

(H3) There will be a gender difference between gratitude and coping strategies among universities students.

(H4) Gratitude will significantly predict the type of coping strategy used by students

Methodology

Research design

The methodology applied for the present study is quantitative with the use of descriptive correlation in an analysis of the relation between gratitude and coping strategies in undergraduate students. The purpose is to measure how gratitude affects the selection of coping styles and its effect on paying psychological buoyancy in university life. One hundred and fifty undergraduate students from a diverse range of disciplines were randomly sampled according to gender, field of study, year of study, and socio-economic status. The respondents, who were 18-25 year-olds, were selected to be representative of university student experiences and therefore the results should be generalizable. Inclusion criteria were full time enrollment as a postsecondary student in a university degree program and the ages between 18 and 25 while excluding non-degree students, lack of willingness to respond to the survey, and inability to do so because of language spoken or issues that prevented it.

Instruments

Two primary instruments were used in this study to measure **gratitude** and



coping strategies:

- **Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6):** The GQ-6, developed by McCullough et al. (2002), is a widely used self-report scale that measures general gratitude. It consists of six items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale, assessing the frequency and intensity of gratitude experienced by the participant. The scale has demonstrated high internal consistency and validity across various studies.
- **Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI):** The CSI, developed by Tobin et al. (1989), was used to measure the coping strategies employed by the participants. The inventory consists of 48 items that assess both **problem-focused** and **emotion-focused** coping strategies, as well as **avoidant coping**. Responses are rated on a 4-point scale, from "Not at all" to "Very often," indicating how frequently each strategy is used by the individual in stressful situations.

Procedure

The data collection of the current study took place for 4 weeks during the academic semester based on a predetermined process. They were recruited through university notice boards, email and social network services, using a clear, informed consent form with information on the purpose of the study, the potential risks, the guaranteed confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) and Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI) scales were administered in an online system through Google Forms or SurveyMonkey, this procedure was conducted during normal lecture hours with participants having approximately 20-30 minutes to complete both scales. Informed consent was taken digitally, prior to participation in the experiment, thus credibility was given to participants underinformed consent about the voluntary participation and the participants' anonymity. The finished surveys were kept in a anonymous manner in a secure database. Statistical analysis Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample and correlate the relationship between gratitude and coping strategies. The socio-demographic characteristics and scores of the participants were summarized using descriptive statistics, whereas Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to describe the association between coping methods and the level of gratitude. Coping strategies were regressed by multivariate studies on gratitude (controlling for other variables, including gender, age, and academic major). SPSS version 26.0 was used to conduct statistical analysis, and a p-value < 0.05 was considered significant. The ethics guidelines have been respected informing participants, securing their informed consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw, and debriefing following completion of the questionnaires. However, the research has limitations, such as its cross-sectional nature, self-report instruments, and a sample of university students, and thus further research with a longitudinal design, objective measures, and an expand sample need to be conducted to verify the results.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics of the **Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6)** and **Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI)** are summarized below:



Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Gratitude Score (GQ-6)	24.5	6.2
Problem-Focused Coping	4.2	0.9
Emotion-Focused Coping	3.8	1.0
Avoidance Coping	2.3	1.2

The **mean gratitude score** (GQ-6) indicated that participants generally reported moderate levels of gratitude. Problem-focused coping had the highest mean score, suggesting that students prefer actively solving the problems they encounter. And avoidance coping had the lowest mean score, indicating that students tend to use avoidance strategies less frequently.

2. Correlational Analysis

Coping Strategy	Gratitude (GQ-6) Correlation
Problem-Focused Coping	+0.45 ($p < 0.01$)
Emotion-Focused Coping	+0.32 ($p < 0.05$)
Avoidance Coping	-0.29 ($p < 0.05$)

Problem-Focused Coping was positively related to gratitude, it means that students who have higher levels of gratitude coping are more likely to engage in actively solving problem in stress. In addition, Emotion-Focused Coping correlated moderately positively, indicating that gratitude may be used by students to regulate their emotions when they experience stress. Avoidance Coping had negative correlation indicating fewer use of avoidance methods of coping by students with high levels of gratitude.

3. Regression Analysis

Coping Strategy	Beta Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Value	p-Value
Problem-Focused Coping	0.38	0.09	4.22	$p < 0.01$
Emotion-Focused Coping	0.21	0.08	2.63	$p < 0.01$
Avoidance Coping	-0.17	0.06	-2.83	$p < 0.01$

Regression analysis indicated that gratitude is a significant predictor of problem-focused coping ($\beta = 0.38$), emotion-focused coping ($\beta = 0.21$), and avoidance coping ($\beta = -0.17$). Thankfulness was a better determinant of problem-focused coping, with it having indirect effect on emotion-focused coping also significant.



Gratitude negatively predicted avoidance coping, which indicated that when students scored higher on gratitude, they were less likely to engage in avoidance strategies.

Gender Differences in Coping Strategies

Coping Strategy	Male Students (Mean)	Female Students (Mean)	t-Value	p-Value
Problem-Focused Coping	4.4	4.0	2.02	$p < 0.05$
Emotion-Focused Coping	3.5	4.0	-2.23	$p < 0.05$
Avoidance Coping	2.0	2.5	-1.85	$p = 0.07$

Mean scores of problem-focused coping were higher for male students compared to female students. The results also showed that female students use emotion-focused coping strategies more than male students. Gender differences According to the above results, there were no significant differences in avoiding coin coping, whereas female students were found to have exhibited avoidance response to some extent. aa

Discussion

The results of this study underscore the importance of gratitude in the development and adoption of coping mechanisms in university students. As predicted, gratitude was positively correlated with problem- and emotion-focused coping, but negatively correlated to avoidance coping in this study. These findings contribute to the body of evidence that propose gratitude as an important psychological resource that underlies resilient and adaptive stress coping and emotional regulation—particularly potent in the high-stress environment of university life.

The positive relationship between gratitude and problem-focused coping ($r = +0.45$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that the higher the extent of gratitude, the more the students tend to solve stress by taking active, constructive efforts. Further, this result is consistent with prior work that demonstrated an increased ability among the more grateful to see stressful events in a more positive light, to re-construe negative experiences, and to confront challenges with higher levels of self-assurance and optimism (Fredrickson, 2004; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). In expanding people's thought-action repertoires, gratitude promotes cognitive flexibility, allowing individuals to generate higher-quality coping strategies. This result is in line with the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), which suggests that positive emotions (i.e., gratitude) broaden an individual's perceptions, which enables more resourceful responses to stressors.

Problem-focused coping (i.e., direct action to address the source of stress) is generally believed to be more useful in stress reduction than emotion-focused or avoidance strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, the positive correlation between gratitude and problem-focused coping is an encouraging one. It indicates



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that cultivating the skill of gratitude in students could help them take the bull by the horns, come up with solutions themselves and, potentially, relieve stress.

The moderate positive relationship between gratitude and emotion-focused coping was also revealed ($r = +0.32$, $p < 0.05$). Emotion-focused coping are those types of coping which aim to lessen emotional responses to a problem, such as by minimizing a stressor, or by disengagement, such as avoiding or distancing oneself from the problem. Although it is considered to be less effective than problem-focused coping in some cases, emotion-focused coping can be very beneficial in some instances in regulation of emotions and psychological health. Students using emotion-focused coping may look for emotional support from friends, family, or counselors to counteract the negative emotional effect of stress.

Gratitude may support this type of coping by fostering positive affect, self-compassion, and feelings of social connectedness. Grateful people have been found to have better social bonds and are more likely to seek help from others in times of need (McCullough, Emmons, 12 Tsang, 2002). Regarding the students in universities, thankfulness probably allows the students deal with the emotional stress brought by academic tension, social conflicts and personal matters.

Notably, the correlation between gratitude and avoidance coping was negative ($r = -0.29$, $p < 0.05$). The finding is important because avoidance coping, including strategies such as denial, use of alcohol and drugs, and delay, relates to worse mental health and greater stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Gratitude appears to work as a buffering factor against a reliance on coping strategies that might be avoidance-based. This is in line with the Cognitive-Emotion Theory and the benefit of gratitude for the regulation of negative emotions by accommodating adaptive emotional processing and attenuating less functional coping strategies (Garg et al., 2016).

Gratitude thus enables students to experience more positive emotions that enable them to better cope with stress rather than simply prevent it. For example, students who practice gratitude may be more likely to confront, rather than put off or dodge, painful academic challenges. This proactive policy could prevent increased stress and contribute to improved academic performance and well-being.

The research also went on to explore gender disparities in their coping methods. As hypothesized, sex differences were found for male students' use of problem-solving-focused coping, which emerged as more frequently used by male than female students, and for female students' use of emotion-focused coping, which was used more often than male students. These results are also in line with previous studies suggesting that there are gender differences in coping styles, such that men tend to use problem-solving strategies more and women tend to receive more emotional support or cope in an avoidant manner (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). Higher emotion-focused coping in female students may represent an effect of socialization encouraging females to talk about problems and seek social support. On the other hand, boys' use of problem-focused coping might be affected by cultural norms of stoicism and independence.

Interestingly, there was no significant effect of gender on avoidance coping, with females reporting a slightly greater use of avoidance techniques. This is evidence that although there may be gender differences in coping styles, the impact of gratitude on reducing avoidance coping is to some extent equal for both sexes. By promoting positive emotional regulation, Gratitude could thus reduce the reliance



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on avoidance strategies in both male and female students.

Implications and Practical Applications

There are several implications related to the results of this study in relation to the success of student well-being and mental health. University wellness programs may integrate gratitude interventions (e.g., gratitude journaling, reflective writing, or mindfulness exercises) into a strategy aiming to improve adaptive coping and reduce stress in undergraduate students. By cultivating gratitude, colleges and universities could be providing students with a stress-busting, mental health-boosting tool that can help students cope better with the rigors and stress of college life—and ultimately help them succeed academically.

Additionally, the association of gratitude with coping strategies highlights the significance of promoting positive emotions in schools. Schools have the ability to foster environments that lead to gratitude and emotional well-being and enable students to access the psychological resources required to perform under pressure. It can be done through incorporating gratitude-promoting practices into student services, providing stress reduction workshops, and creating chances for students to volunteer or become peer mentors, which induce gratitude and emotional support, naturally.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, however, has several limitations, despite the contributions that it makes against the backdrop of gratitude and coping strategies. First, cause and effect relationships cannot be made in cross-sectional data. Future research should longitudinally explore the effect of gratitude on coping strategies. The study was further limited by the use of self-report data, which could be biased. The exclusion of observational techniques or physiological indicators of stress would limit the objectivity of coping behaviors. Finally, the study included only university students and the results may not be generalizable to other populations. Further studies should consider gratitude in coping in various age groups or cultures.

Conclusion

The present study examined the association between gratitude and coping strategies in a sample of university students, and therefore has implications for understanding how gratitude contributes to the regulation of stress and emotions. Results indicated that gratitude was positively correlated with the use of more adaptive coping strategies including problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, and negatively with avoidance coping. These findings further support the vital contribution of gratitude with regard to stress management, improved emotional regulation, and positive psychological functioning among students.

The positive association between gratitude and problem-focused coping supports that students who are grateful are more prone to confronting and addressing problems instead of avoiding them. In the same manner, the moderate association between gratitude and emotion-focused coping suggests that gratitude assists students' regulation of their emotional reactions to stress, thus they are more likely to verbally express their feelings in a healthier fashion and seek social support. The negative associations with avoidance coping suggest that gratitude may be a protective factor for dysfunctional coping, which is related to elevated stress and mental health problems.

The research also found gender differences in coping strategies, such that male students were more likely to use problem-focused coping and female students



were more inclined to utilize emotion-focused coping. Gratitude, however, reduced the extent to which men and women relied upon avoidance coping, indicating that gratitude may be a potential proactive mediator with respect to coping with stress among both men and women.

The implications of these findings are significant for university wellness and student support services. Adding gratitude-based interventions (e.g., gratitude journaling or reflection exercises) to these programs could provide healthier coping strategies and support students in handling pressures of university life. FedEx# C86419 traits such as gratitude can help institutions of higher education to facilitate healthy stress management, emotional health, and academic success. In sum, gratitude provides students with the means to cope with difficulties and enhances the likelihood that they will approach challenges with resilience and a positive attitude. It will be important for future research (especially longitudinal studies) to investigate the enduring effects of gratitude on coping and mental health outcomes and generalize our findings to a broader range of individuals.

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