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Gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention for promoting college students' well-being: A quasi-experimental studyMelati Sumari^{a,*}, Dini Farhana Baharudin^b, Amira Najiha Yahya^a, Yusni Mohamad Yusop^c^a Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, University of Malaya, Malaysia^b Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia^c Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of a gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention on the well-being of college students. We hypothesised that participation in the intervention would increase feelings of well-being. A single-group quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test measures was employed. A convenience sample of 95 college students consented to participate—the intervention, conducted over four weeks between November and December 2023, involved weekly gratitude group sessions. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) was used to assess well-being before and after the intervention. Descriptive statistics and paired sample t-tests were conducted to analyse the data. Qualitative data from participants' reflection reports were also thematically analysed for supportive evidence. Results indicated that post-test well-being scores were significantly higher than pre-test scores ($p < .05$). The findings suggest that the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention significantly improved college students' well-being.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Positive psychology is one field counsellors refer to that helps clients in counselling sessions, especially to improve the client's well-being. One of the aspects studied in positive psychology is gratitude. Gratitude in positive psychology is different from the concept of gratitude in Islam. In positive psychology, gratitude is a pleasant feeling or emotion towards benefits obtained (Emmons, 2004). Emmons and Stern (2013) further stated that this feeling or gratitude is related to processed information by a person, namely confirming goodness or good things in one's life and acknowledging that the source of such goodness is partly from external parties other than oneself. As for Seligman (2005), gratitude means to be grateful for a gift given, and positive experiences of good things encourage good deeds towards others. Gratitude in positive psychology is related to positive emotions resulting from appreciation for something received from others.

1.1.1. Gratitude (*shukr*) in Islam

From the perspective of the Quran, gratitude is part of the value and virtue of Islamic teachings, particularly in the aspect of *tasawwuf*.

Gratitude is one of the stages of perfecting faith towards Allah's mercy and eternal well-being (Lumbard, 2021). The word "*shukr*" is derived from the words syin, kaf, and ra, which sound like syakara, the root word. It means "praise for goodness" and "full of something" (Hidayat, Rahmat, and Supriadi (2019). Verbs for "*shukr*" in Arabic covers *syakara-yasykuru-syukran-wa syukran-wa syukranan*. Based on this root word, "*shukr*" means praise for goodness and revealing something to the surface. From the terminology point of view, "*shukr*" is the recognition of Allah's favours, accompanied by submission to Him, and the use of such favours according to Allah's wills and demands (Mahfud, 2014).

There are various views on gratitude among scholars such as Imam at-Tabari, who considers the word "*hamd*" synonymous with the word "*shukr*". However, Imam al-Qurtubi rejects that view by stating that "*shukr*" is not as broad and general as "*hamd*". This is because "*hamd*" means praising a person who is praised for his or her character without pretending to be of good service to the person giving praise. Meanwhile, "*shukr*" means praising the person who is praised for the kindness that has been given to the person praised (Madany, 2015). Some scholars argue that the word "*shukr*" is broader than "*hamd*" because "*shukr*" needs to be exercised through the heart, the mouth, and the other limbs, while "*hamd*" is only verbal (Madany, 2015).

In general, "*shukr*" in Islam is seen as a form of acknowledgment

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towards favours given by Allah accompanied by submission to Him by using the blessing in accordance with what He commanded. Blessings obtained (whether by own efforts or through an intermediary) must always be returned to the real benefactor, Allah.

1.1.2. Previous studies on gratitude

People with high levels of gratitude practice a positive outlook about themselves, even in challenging or stressful situations, promoting well-being. In Islam, being grateful can positively affect the one practising it. A study by Akmal and Masyhuri (2018) found that the meaning of “*shukr*” is ‘receiving all the blessings from Allah with feeling happy and followed by gratitude for the gift by saying ‘*Alhamdulillah*’ (All praises and thanks (be) to Allah the Lord of the universe) and carrying out all His orders and share the blessings that have been given’. The meaning of “*shukr*” includes accepting, being grateful, feeling enough, and enjoying. In addition, Mohammad Takdir (2018) listed seven effects of gratitude from an Islamic perspective, which are building a sincere personality, forming a true altruistic self, preventing corruption, preventing pessimism, preventing being arrogant, preventing blaming God, and making life calmer, which in the end achieves true happiness and well-being.

Previous studies in the field of positive psychology show positive effects of gratitude. For example, a study by Consedine, Brenton, Hofman, and Serlachius (2020) found a positive effect of gratitude on the physical body. Being grateful is also linked to psychological, social, and emotional well-being, allowing individuals to build new and maintain existing relationships (Jans-Baken et al., 2019). Research findings also report gratitude as increasing resilience against depression, anxiety, and stress (Noh & Lee, 2011; Ritchie et al., 2023). A grateful person also has a mindset of always looking for positive aspects in their daily lives (Kwon, Kim, & Lee, 2006). Liu (2020) found that grateful people have high life satisfaction. Being grateful increases the perception of happiness and well-being (Abdul Raop & Abdul Kadir, 2011; Jans-Baken et al., 2019). Akmal & Masyhuri (2018) summarised the positive effects of gratitude, including being generous to others, optimistic in living life, having a better mood, having self-esteem, having a positive outlook on life, taking the initiative, having better coping skills, staying away from blaming behaviour, a strong predictor of individual well-being, as well as feeling satisfied with life experience. So, the results from previous studies on gratitude are positive.

1.1.3. Gratitude intervention

Gratitude interventions have emerged as one of the most well-known research areas in positive psychology on promoting well-being. Most gratitude interventions are psychoeducational self-help techniques that aim to elicit or increase one’s gratitude level (Davis et al., 2016).

An intervention often used in counselling sessions or self-development programmes is a gratitude journal, which involves writing about people, objects, or events to increase gratitude (Fekete & Deichert, 2022). While writing in a gratitude diary, the individual usually will record their gratitude towards people, objects, or events by listing or counting regularly (Emmons, 2007; Lomas, Froh, Emmons, Mishra, & Bono, 2014). Another popular format is ‘the three good things’, where the individual will list three good things that have happened to them (Seligman et al., 2005). At the beginning of the intervention, individuals involved may find it strange or complicated to examine the things to be grateful for. However, after some time immersing in the process, they will acknowledge the existence of positive elements in life and become more appreciative. This is because, through this intervention, one’s view becomes broader and more profound as one begins to see behind the difficulties and focus on blessings in the present. This creates an appreciation for things taken for granted and positive emotions (Emmons, 2007).

A study by Emmons and McCullough (2003a, 2003b) compared the properties of gratitude on three different groups to identify the effect of gratitude on psychological and physiological well-being through writing in a diary. Among the tasks given, the group members have to write

down the things they are grateful for weekly or daily according to the group that has been set. The study found that those in group 1 who are in a constant state of gratitude experience positive effects such as being more optimistic about life, more time exercising, and showing fewer physical symptoms. Meanwhile, those in group 2 showed high positive feelings, providing emotional support and motivation to others. In group 3, those grateful reported improved sleep quality, were optimistic, related to others better and showed highly positive feelings.

Likewise, a local study by Noor, Abdul Rahman, and Mohamad Zahari (2018) on 59 students aged 22–29 in college found that writing three good things that happened to them daily for 14 days, this activity raised the level of gratitude of the students as well as their life satisfaction and reduces symptoms of psychological problems. This shows the effectiveness of reflection and expressing positive things, which helps individuals feel more grateful.

Gratitude journaling is a popular intervention as it is relatively easy to follow through and apply daily (Kaczmarek et al., 2015). Previous studies have found that among the benefits of gratitude journaling are increased levels of well-being, increased levels of positive affect, increased gratitude, and interpersonal relationships among adults and adolescents (Emmons & McCullough, 2003a, 2003b; Froh et al., 2009, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009).

Another method of intervention that is more common in cultivating or enhancing gratitude levels is gratitude groups. Most gratitude groups are in the format of psychoeducational groups (Lomas et al., 2014). However, there is still a lack of research into the effectiveness of these group interventions, even though group work is one of the most widely practised modalities in clinical and non-clinical settings (Vinogradov, Cox, & Yalom, 2003). Among the studies include gratitude promotion groups for elementary school children (Froh et al., 2014; Kalamatianos, Kounepou, Pezirkianidis, & Kourmoussi, 2023; Owens & Patterson, 2013) and adults (Gabana et al., 2020; Tofangchi, Kajbaf, & Ghamarani, 2013; Wong, McKean Blackwell, Goodrich Mitts, Gabana, & Li, 2017).

1.1.4. Gratitude and counselling

Students who study in institutions of higher learning or college are a group that is in the transitional phase of adolescence towards adulthood (McGoldrick & Carter, 2006). In this phase, they are faced with various stressful situations. For example, adaptation to college life, ensuring good academic achievement, managing peer relationships, and starting to live independently (Tolcher, Cauble, & Downs, 2022). For counselling students, the pressure is expected to be higher due to the requirements of the academic curriculum to prepare them to become professional counsellors. In addition, the training experienced by counselling students, especially when handling client cases in counselling sessions, requires them to have an optimistic, altruistic personality and highly empathic skills towards clients. They also risk being more prone to burnout issues when handling complicated cases. This requires careful self-care to ensure that their well-being is guaranteed.

The practice of gratitude can provide space for students to connect with themselves and God and restructure emotions and thoughts for well-being.

1.2. Rationale of the study

This study examines the impact of a gratitude (*shukr*) intervention and its potential benefits to students’ well-being. College students face life transitions such as academic pressures and social challenges, which expose them to high-stress levels and lower life satisfaction (Barbayannis, Bandari, & Zheng, 2022). Numerous studies indicate the prevalence of mental health issues within this demographic, highlighting the need for more effective interventions (Green, 2024). One critical factor that influences students’ mental health is well-being. Enhancing well-being can lead to better academic performance, improved social interactions, and more resilience.

Gratitude has numerous psychological benefits, including reducing

stress and increasing life satisfaction. Additionally, studies from the positive psychology framework suggest that gratitude practices can expand an individual's positive emotions and resources (Emmons & McCullough, 2003a, 2003b). Gratitude interventions have also been shown to generate positive emotions and increase well-being. In the Islamic context, gratitude, also known as *shukr*, is a deeply rooted concept that connects an individual to the people around them and their God, Allah. For students from these backgrounds, integrating cultural and religious concepts into well-being interventions can enhance their relevance and acceptance. This cultural adaptation may lead to greater engagement and effectiveness.

Even though there is previous research on gratitude interventions, there is a limited focus on group-based gratitude interventions explicitly tailored to college students and even less so on culturally adapted versions (Lee & Kim, 2024). This gap presents an opportunity to explore the effectiveness of such interventions in a higher education setting. Group interventions have been shown to provide a supportive environment where students can share experiences, foster a sense of community, and learn from each other. A group-based intervention incorporating cultural and religious elements specific to Islam, such as gratitude (*shukr*), can enhance participants' sense of identity and connection to their faith, making the intervention more relatable and meaningful.

This group intervention also helps facilitate spiritual growth by incorporating Quranic verses as part of the Islamic teaching of recognising the importance of gratitude. Furthermore, in a group setting, participants can act as a peer group that supports and enhances motivation to continue the practice by sharing progress and discussing challenges. Group dynamics can enhance the intervention's impact, providing social support and reinforcing positive behaviours.

Developing and validating effective gratitude interventions can provide counsellors and educators with practical tools to enhance student well-being. Such interventions can be integrated into existing wellness programs and support services, contributing to a holistic approach to student health.

1.3. Purpose and Hypothesis

This study aimed to describe a gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention for college students and determine its impact on their well-being. The following research questions guided this quasi-experimental study:

What is the impact of the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention on the mental well-being of college students?

How do participants subjectively experience and perceive the effects of the gratitude intervention?

- 1) To what extent is there a statistically significant difference between college students' pre-test and post-test well-being levels after receiving the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention?
- 2) To what extent is there a statistically significant difference between college students' pre-test and post-test gender after receiving the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention?

Hypothesis. Participants who engage in the gratitude (*shukr*) intervention will significantly increase mental well-being from pre-test to post-test.

Hypothesis 1. Gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention will significantly improve the well-being of college students.

Hypothesis 2. Gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention will significantly improve the well-being of male college students.

Hypothesis 3. Gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention will significantly improve the well-being of female college students.

1.4. Significance of the study

There is still a lack of studies on the impact of gratitude interventions specifically for Muslim students in a group format. Despite the growing recognition of gratitude interventions in counselling and positive psychology, there is a paucity of research focusing on culturally tailored interventions that reflect specific populations' unique values and practices. By conducting this study, the researchers can contribute to the existing literature on gratitude interventions, specifically on the well-being of students.

Gratitude (*shukr*) is particularly significant in Islamic teachings. It is part of Islamic values and is associated with acknowledging Allah's blessings. Exploring the effects of a gratitude intervention within Muslim students' cultural and religious context adds to understanding how gratitude practices can be tailored to specific populations and resonate with their cultural and religious values. Such insights can enhance the cultural competence of mental health interventions, ensuring they are relevant and respectful to the target population.

Additionally, gratitude interventions have gained recognition in counselling and positive psychology as practical techniques for promoting well-being. Nevertheless, there is limited research on their application within college student populations, particularly in group settings. Conducting the intervention in a college student population aligns with counsellors' goals to support their clients' well-being and provide practical implications that can be integrated into counselling practice.

The study's findings could also lead to developing culturally sensitive intervention protocols that can be utilised in counselling, improving the well-being of Muslim students and potentially other cultural groups with similar values. The study also can inform policymakers and educational institutions about the benefits of incorporating culturally based gratitude interventions into students wellness programs, promoting a holistic approach to mental health that considers religious and cultural diversity (Hatipoglu & Kaya, 2023; Zhao, Zhang, Yu, et al., 2023).

Moreover, the intervention's group format allows for examining social dynamics and peer support mechanisms within the intervention (American Psychological Association, 2019), which can amplify the benefits of gratitude practices. Understanding these dynamics can help design more effective group-based mental health interventions that leverage social support to enhance individual well-being (Wong et al., 2017).

In summary, the study contributes to the literature on gratitude interventions and cultural adaptations, its potential practical implications for counselling and educational practices, and the development of policies. Identifying the effectiveness of a gratitude (*shukr*) intervention for Muslim college students in this study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in promoting mental health and well-being.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design and respondents

A single-group quasi-experimental study design was utilised as all respondents received the same intervention under the same conditions (Cranmer, 2018; Kazdin, 2011). This design is appropriate because it allows for measuring changes in participants' well-being before and after the intervention within the same group, providing insight into the intervention's effectiveness without the need for a control group. It is particularly suitable in educational settings where random assignment to different groups may not be feasible or ethical. The choice for this design is, therefore, especially suitable for measuring the effect of the gratitude (*shukr*) intervention program on college students' well-being. This research was conducted at a public university in Malaysia between November and December 2023. The G*Power program was utilised to

calculate the respondents needed for the study. A power analysis for *t*-test for the difference from constant (one sample case) was performed with significance level $\alpha = .05$, power $(1-\beta) = 0.80$, number of measurements = 2, number of groups = 1, correlation among repeated measures = 0.40, and medium effect size $f = 0.50$. Based on the criteria, the total sample size suggested is 41.

The inclusion criteria of respondents are second-year students of a four-year counselling program who are enrolled in an Islamic counselling course during the semester. One student withdrew from the program. Therefore, the final sample involved in this study was 95 students, which suits the required sample size. All the respondents agreed to participate in the four-week gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention program. In this study, students' information was collected using a self-reported survey. The survey included basic sociodemographic questions about the students' background information on gender and age. For confidentiality, each participant was assigned an identification number.

2.2. The intervention

The gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention was developed as part of the content in the Islamic counselling course, ABA2313 Counselling in the Quran and Hadith. This course is offered to second-year students at a public university in Nilai, Malaysia. The intervention comprised daily gratitude journaling. The students needed to record three things they were thankful for daily for four weeks and attend a 2-h psychoeducational group session each week. During the group sessions, the respondents were provided input on selected verses from the Quran on the theme of gratitude. The meetings include every participant in the group. They discuss and ponder upon the verse and share their journal entry. They finally connected and made meaning from the group input with their daily life. Daily gratitude journaling of three things one is grateful for aligns with the principles of positive psychology, which cultivates positive emotions and promotes well-being. At the same time, the psychoeducational group session with input from the Quranic gratitude verses was adapted from a religious framework, namely Islamic psychology. Table 1 shows the intervention weekly verses and activities.

The intervention's objective is for the students to better understand the experience of gratitude and how this practice can enhance their well-being in life.

2.2.1. Theoretical foundations of the intervention

Theoretical foundations for the gratitude (*shukr*) intervention were derived from various psychological and religious frameworks. One central psychological framework that underlies the intervention is positive psychology. This theoretical framework studies well-being, character virtues and strengths, and positive emotions that one goes through in life. The basis for gratitude interventions in positive psychology is the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004), where gratitude broadens an individual's cognitive and behavioural repertoires, enabling them to build psychological resources and become

more resilient. The target is to develop positive emotions by getting them to join activities that increase gratitude, hence promoting growth, building relationships, and overall well-being (Davis et al., 2016; Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Killen, Macaskill, & Knight, 2020; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

Besides positive psychology, this intervention was also based on the social exchange theory. Gratitude is a social emotion that comes up as a response to the perception of receiving a valuable benefit from others. Based on this social exchange theory, social behaviour results from an exchange process where individuals seek to maximise benefits and minimise costs in their interactions. This will inspire individuals to recognise and appreciate others' acts of kindness, encouragement and contributions. Consequently, they will feel motivated to reciprocate positive actions. The recognition and appreciation foster positive social exchanges and reinforce a cycle of prosocial behaviour, enhancing connections and relationships with others. These positive connections are crucial for mental well-being and provide social support. Increased social support reduces feelings of isolation and contributes to a sense of belonging and community. This leads to lower stress, anxiety, and depression and higher life satisfaction and overall well-being (Shahzad & Shafi, 2023). Gratitude interventions encourage individuals to focus on the positive aspects of their interactions with others, which can shift their overall perspective towards a more optimistic and appreciative outlook. This positive shift can reduce negative thought patterns and promote resilience.

Another framework that is important in this intervention is Islamic psychology, a religious framework that emphasises faith-based interventions (Pasha-Zaidi, Al-Seheel, Bridges-Lyman, & Dasti, 2021). This framework incorporates Islamic teachings and values, such as gratitude, to promote mental well-being (Chalmiers, Istemi, & Simsek, 2023). Islamic framework underscores the importance of gratitude in enhancing one's relationship with Allah (God) by encouraging individuals to express gratitude to Allah and others in one's life and, for example, being grateful for one's health, food, family, and many other blessings. Expressions of gratitude can be in many forms, including giving charity, praying, and practising regular remembrance (*zikr*) and supplications.

By emphasising gratitude practice, one becomes more aware that every blessing received manifests Allah's mercy and grace. This awareness enhances their *tawhid*, which is the belief in the oneness of Allah and that all favours and blessings come from Allah alone. Additionally, reflecting on verses that highlight gratitude and internalising the messages in the holy book of Islam, i.e. the Quran, allows them to be closer to Allah, as the Quran provides divine guidance. The intervention also seeks to promote the integration of gratitude into the individual's daily life.

Accordingly, these theoretical foundations provide a framework for the gratitude (*shukr*) intervention to develop a positive outlook, foster better connections and relationships, enhance mental and spiritual well-being, strengthen faith, and facilitate individual growth. Through integrating positive psychology, social exchange theory, and Islamic psychology, the intervention aims to holistically improve the well-being of Muslim students by addressing the spiritual, social, and psychological dimensions.

2.2.2. Targeting gratitude to influence mental well-being

From the theoretical perspective, the gratitude intervention focuses on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes. This can be found in previous studies that show the influence of gratitude on well-being. Higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness can happen by regularly practising gratitude. Individuals can cultivate an optimistic outlook by acknowledging and appreciating the positive aspects of life, which enhances their overall sense of well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003a, 2003b).

Individuals engaging in the gratitude intervention that comprised gratitude journaling and reflecting on Quranic verses in

Table 1
Gratitude group intervention weekly verses and activities.

Week	Selected Quranic Verses	Activities
1	2: 152, 2: 172 (gratitude for blessings bestowed)	Discussion of the selected verse Sharing journal entry (daily record of three things that they are grateful for)
2	2: 56, 3: 123, 4: 147 (gratitude for faith)	Discussion of the selected verse Sharing journal entry (daily record of three things that they are grateful for)
3	31: 31, 42: 33, 34: 18-19 (relationship of gratitude (<i>shukr</i>) and patience (<i>sabr</i>))	Discussion of the selected verse Sharing journal entry (daily record of three things that they are grateful for)
4	3: 145, 14: 7 (increase in blessings as a reward for gratitude/good deeds)	Discussion of the selected verse Sharing journal entry (daily record of three things that they are grateful for)

psychoeducational groups are encouraged to focus on positive aspects of their lives, count their blessings, and acknowledge the things they appreciate. Thought patterns can be reframed by shifting focus from negative-related thoughts to gratitude-related, optimistic thoughts (Kashdan & Breen, 2020; Sahar, Baranovich, and Tharbe (2022; Al-Seheel & Noor, 2016). In the face of adversity, acknowledge that tests and trials can serve as a means of purification and spiritual growth. Individuals may learn to change their perspective on past experiences and find lessons, growth opportunities, or silver linings in challenging circumstances by expressing gratitude for the strength and patience bestowed by Allah during difficult times. This cognitive shift can improve mood, increase optimism, and reduce rumination (O'Connell et al., 2020, O'Shea, & Gallagher, 2020; Sirois & Wood, 2021). Again, this is in line with studies that highlighted how gratitude helps counteract negative emotions such as envy, resentment, and regret. Focusing on what one has rather than lack can reduce negative emotions' impact and promote a balanced emotional state (Wood et al., 2010). This also supports previous studies where gratitude helps individuals build psychological resilience by encouraging them to recognise and appreciate positive aspects of their experiences, especially during challenging times, which enables quicker recovery from setbacks and maintains mental health (Cregg & Cheavans, 2020).

The gratitude intervention may also involve encouraging individuals to express appreciation directly to others or engage in acts of kindness. So, by recognising the kindness, support, and efforts of others, individuals strengthen social connections and foster positive relationships (Chen et al., 2021, Wu, & Kee, 2021; Kong, Ding, & Zhao, 2020). This social support is crucial for mental well-being, as it provides emotional and practical resources. In addition, gratitude increases empathy and compassion, often leading to altruistic behaviours that enhance social bonds and create a sense of fulfilment (Harandi, Taghinasab, & Nayeri, 2017).

At the same time, it contributes to a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life, where the individuals cultivate a grateful heart, develop a sense of humility, and deepen spiritual connections with Allah (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). By regularly practising gratitude, individuals may experience increased self-worth, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. By engaging in reflective practices, individuals also deepen their appreciation for Allah's favours and develop a greater sense of awe and wonder.

The gratitude (*shukr*) intervention intends to cultivate gratitude as a continuous state of mind and incorporate it into their daily lives (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Individuals are encouraged to express gratitude to Allah for the smallest blessings, show appreciation to others, and practice gratitude through acts of kindness and service (Pasha-Zaidi et al., 2021).

Overall, the intervention utilises the interconnection of gratitude's cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual processes to promote well-being (Sansone & Sansone, 2010; Tolcher et al., 2022). Incorporation of practices that align with theoretical frameworks allows the intervention to develop positive emotions, enhance social connections, facilitate personal growth, and ultimately improve individuals' overall quality of life.

2.2.3. Fidelity of the intervention

In ensuring the Fidelity of the intervention, participants were provided with clear instructions and guidelines on how to engage in the intervention. At the beginning of the intervention, the purpose, the specific tasks they need to perform (gratitude journaling and attending psychoeducational group), and the expected duration of four weeks were explained to the participants. The participants were also reminded of attendance at the sessions. Sessions were scheduled, and sufficient time was allowed for discussion, sharing, and reflection. In addition, a guideline comprising the content and structure of each session, including the selected Quranic verses, discussion topics, and the specific activities to be conducted during each session, as shown in Table 1, was

created. A record of participants' attendance, participation in group sessions, and completion of journal entries were maintained. This helped track adherence to the intervention and provides valuable data for analysing the outcomes and maintaining consistency throughout the whole group process.

2.3. Measures

The researchers feel that collecting quantitative data supported by qualitative data would allow a more holistic understanding of the impact of the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention. For quantitative data, a self-reported questionnaire survey was given to the respondents at the beginning (pre) and the end of the intervention (post). This was then supported by qualitative data in which the respondents reported their reflections at the end of the intervention.

2.3.1. Well-being scale

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) was used to measure well-being. The scale consists of fourteen items ("I have been dealing with problems well"), and ratings are made on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 5 = "strongly agree"). In its original form, the scale was found to be one-dimensional, explaining 51% of the variance (Toprak & Sari, 2023). It has been validated for use with those 16 and above, involving students and general population samples. The internal validity for this scale is 0.89 for the student population. The Cronbach's alpha in the present study was 0.86.

2.3.2. Reflection report

The student's reflection report is a qualitative means of better understanding the students' individual experiences while participating in the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention. The students must answer questions such as – "How did the gratitude group impact your mental state?" "How did the gratitude group impact your relationship with others?" "How did the gratitude group impact your spiritual state?" "What did you learn about yourself and others?". Additionally, through this reflection report, students can connect to the concept of gratitude and its benefits via their own experience, better understand the virtue of gratitude from the Islamic perspective, and improve their self-improvement by maintaining the practice in real life.

2.4. Data collection

At the beginning of the intervention (pre), the respondents filled out the scales, followed by another session at the end of the intervention (post). The time spent to answer the questionnaire is approximately 10–15 min. The respondents were free to ask questions about the study or withdraw from continuing the study. The respondents were provided informed consent and completed the questionnaire.

2.5. Data analysis

Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for Windows (version 24.0; SPSS Inc.). Questionnaires of 95 students who completed both the pre-test and post-test were used for descriptive and paired sample t-tests. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the respondents' demographic data. This includes the frequency, the mean, and standard deviation. The paired sample Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to evaluate if there was a significant difference at a significance level of 0.05 in students' well-being scores before (pre-test) and after (post-test)- gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention.

2.6. Ethics

The faculty review board reviewed and approved the research before it was conducted. Each respondent has explained the objectives and procedures of the research. The questionnaire packet included a cover

letter explaining the intervention's goal. It also includes information on how the data will be used, a guarantee of confidentiality, and the respondent's right to withdraw from the study. After explaining the study, the students signed the informed consent forms. Students' names and identification numbers were eliminated from the records to guarantee anonymity.

3. Results

3.1. Demography of study respondents

95 students from the counselling program were involved in this study, comprising 16 males (16.8%) and 79 females (83.2%). The students' ages ranged from 20 to 24 years.

3.2. Effect on students' well-being

Table 2 shows the student's well-being mean scores and standard deviations during the pre-test ($M = 46.1$, $SD = 7.8$) and post-test ($M = 61.0$, $SD = 8.6$). Using a paired sample t -test revealed there was a statistically significant difference ($t(94) = 16.1$, $p < .05$) in the students' well-being scores when comparing before and after the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention. Specifically, the respondents presented a significant increase in their well-being after the intervention. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

3.3. Effect based on students' gender

At the pre-test, male respondents' well-being mean score was 41.6 and increased to 60.3 after participating in the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention. On the other hand, the female respondents' well-being mean score on the pre-test was 47.0; during the post-test, the mean score increased to 61.3 (Table 2). Comparison of the student well-being across genders, before and after intervention, was performed using paired sample t -test. The significance level was set at $p < .05$. Results revealed there was a statistically significant difference and improvement in both male ($t(15) = 8.3$, $p < .05$) and female ($t(78) = 14.1$, $p < .05$) students' well-being after participating in the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention. Therefore, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported.

3.4. Reflection report data

All respondents responded positively to the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention. As the study progresses, the respondents' reflection report data are as follows.

3.4.1. Experience of well-being

The students stated that they could feel changes in themselves about their emotional, cognition, and spiritual well-being. These findings are evident in the respondents' quotes as follows:

"I feel happier and more positive towards life when I realise there are many things in life that I can be thankful for." (P8)

"I can see changes in myself. I am now more positive and more open to others." (P10)

Table 2
Differences in students' well-being.

Item	Mean		t(p)
	Pre-test	Post-test	
Total sample (N = 95)	46.1	61.0	16.1 ($p < .05$)
Male (n = 16)	41.6	60.3	8.3 ($p < .05$)
Female (n = 79)	47.0	61.3	14.1 ($p < .05$)

"It has changed by way of thinking. Before I usually was too focused on complaining how passive my life is, there is nothing interesting in my life. But now I've changed. I'm glad that this intervention allows me to appreciate what I have in the present." (P12)

"I am convinced that Allah will provide me with enough blessings when I practice gratitude." (P55)

In terms of behavior, the respondents also see changes such as becoming more aware and intentionally being grateful that reflected in their actions, as exemplified by the following quotes:

"Before this program, there are times when I spend too much, but after joining the group and having daily journaling, I am more aware. I was more careful with money and use it more wisely." (P3)

"I noticed that I will make sure that I pray on time, after the call for prayer. I feel that because Allah has provided me with abundance of blessings, so I need to show my thankfulness by not procrastinating my prayer." (P32)

3.4.2. Other benefits

Besides the experience of well-being, the respondents also view that the gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention can help clients train themselves to have an optimistic perspective on life and reliance on Allah. Additionally, practicing gratitude helps individuals to have empathetic attitude towards others and build positive behaviors.

"This intervention has increased my awareness and common sense to have an optimistic view about life, especially because there is a reason why gratitude is emphasised in the Quran and Islamic teaching." (P10)

"Another thing that I learnt was gratitude allows me to deepen my empathy towards those people who are less fortunate than myself." (P4)

There are also others that link the experience to their field of study as counselors. By practicing gratitude in their daily life, a counselor can take care of their own emotion and spiritual well-being, not only guiding others in their counselling session.

4. Discussion

4.1. Effectiveness of the intervention on well-being

This study attempts to use gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention as part of experiential learning in counselling. Compared with baseline and previous studies, the average mean of the level score at post-test is higher. This score indicated that gratitude (*shukr*) group intervention could significantly improve students' well-being. This finding supports another previous study on the effect of gratitude training on well-being conducted with students. The input from the psychoeducation group and the experiential learning provides gratitude practice opportunities that may be retained in real life. The increase in well-being echoes the previous studies on the effect of gratitude on well-being, as evidenced by Emmons (2007), Lomas et al. (2014) and Emmons and McCullough (2003a, 2003b). Through the intervention, students practice learning from one another in the group by experiencing gratitude. The meaning-making process from the personal experience of gratitude may be more potent for enhancing one's well-being.

4.2. The reflection on the intervention

It was found that all students gave a positive evaluation in their reflection report. Having experienced such intervention, the students recognised that progress has been shown in personal and professional growth. Personal growth was reflected in the changes in their well-being comprising emotions, thinking, spirituality, and behaviour. Professional

growth was also reflected when the students felt more empathetic and understanding of their professional roles as Muslim counsellors. Self-evaluation of the students' growth shows their ability to convert learning (gratitude) into future tools in promoting and enhancing the well-being of clients and themselves as counsellors.

4.3. Theoretical contributions

Regarding contribution to theory, the study's findings illustrate the usability of the gratitude (*shukr*) intervention in promoting college students' well-being. Specifically, this study adds to the understanding of group-based gratitude interventions. Gratitude groups have been shown to have benefits in emotional and interpersonal relations (Emmons & McCullough, 2003a, 2003b). Looking at the effectiveness of groups to enhance the well-being of students shows how the collective and collaborative aspects influence personal enhancement. Furthermore, it suggests that a culturally based well-being intervention that integrates cultural and religious can enhance their relevance and acceptance of Muslim students, leading to greater engagement and effectiveness. In addition, this study bridges the gap between Western and Islamic approaches based on integrating the concept of gratitude (*shukr*) into group counselling. This further enhances the feasibility of a culturally tailored approach by incorporating religious and cultural values (Rassool, 2000) into group counselling practices to increase students' well-being. This study also provides interesting insights into how male and female Muslim students respond to the intervention. Although both male and female groups vary initially, they show significant increases after the intervention. This suggests that gratitude (*shukr*) intervention may universally improve well-being, with the influence of gender differences. The focus on Muslim college students adds to the body of knowledge on gratitude interventions and highlights the importance of religious and cultural relevance in counselling practice. It allows future research to explore deeply how diverse cultural understanding and practices of gratitude can be applied in many communities and populations.

4.4. Practical implications

Practical implications in this research include the usability of the gratitude (*shukr*) intervention for Muslim college students, which has the potential to be extended to other colleges in Malaysia to maintain well-being and satisfaction in life. Besides college counsellors, faculty members and other staff can collaborate to encourage and remind students of the importance of the practice of gratitude. Additionally, as male and female students may have a distinct preference in how they perceive gratitude, college counsellors can tailor interventions to be gender specific. In other words, the delivery or content of gratitude (*shukr*) intervention should resonate with the diverse needs, perspectives and experiences of male and female students.

5. Limitations and recommendations

The limitations of this research include using a convenient sample and the lack of a control group during the intervention due to the limitation of instructors for the course. Furthermore, the study was conducted only in one university. This restricts the findings of this study from being generalisable. In addition, the number of group members in which the total number of male students is fewer than the females. However, it is common for the field to have fewer males than females. Even though the research results are good, the inference of the results may be better if the amount of respondents is closer to reality. Future studies should use a larger sample size to allow for a broader generalisation, implementing randomised control procedures. Future studies may also continue follow-up by investigating the intervention's long-term effects on students' well-being.

6. Conclusion

Gratitude Group (*shukr*) intervention integrated into a counselling course could significantly improve students' well-being and experience of gratitude. Through the intervention, students practice gratitude as a learning experience and think deeply about a virtue important in one's life. The well-being of the students was significantly increased, which was an outcome that benefited them. Having experienced the gratitude group intervention, all students provided a positive evaluation and believed that progress was made, either in terms of their well-being or their learning, both personally and professionally.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Melati Sumari: Writing – review & editing. **Dini Farhana Bahardin:** Conceptualization. **Amira Najihah Yahya:** Methodology, Data curation. **Yusni Mohamad Yusop:** Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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