





Construction of spiritual meaning in the transformation of gratitude for freshmen



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This study explores the dynamics of emotional expression of freshmen students at a public university in Indonesia, focussing on the role of gratitude in helping them overcome challenges and maintain academic vigour. Using qualitative methods with open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews, this study involved 20 freshmen from one public university. The results showed that the majority of students expressed gratitude to God as the main expression, while a minority also valued the role of social support and personal achievement. The findings also revealed that despite uncertainties, fears and disappointments, gratitude remains a fundamental and culminating emotion. Gratitude not only helps students overcome challenges but also enhances their resilience and motivation. Spiritual Meaning Construction Theory serves as an analytical tool, highlighting that spiritual experiences and expressions of gratitude are strongly influenced by an individual's social and cultural context. The theory emphasises that the experience of religion or spirituality has no universal truth, but rather varies according to each individual's interpretative framework. The findings suggest that the expression of gratitude in freshmen not only reflects universally inculcated spiritual beliefs but is also a result of the meaning-making processes by individuals within their social and cultural context. Implications for higher education institutions include the importance of developing orientation, counselling and academic support programmes that support students' expression of gratitude and resilience. Programmes that promote resilience and gratitude can help students overcome challenges and stay motivated throughout their academic journey.

Contribution: This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexity of emotions experienced by freshmen as well as the important role gratitude plays in helping them overcome challenges and maintain enthusiasm in pursuing their academic goals.

Keywords: gratitude; freshmen students; emotional expression; resilience and motivation; spiritual meaning construction.

Introduction

In recent years, the study of gratitude has gained significant attention in psychology and educational research. Gratitude has long been recognised as an important factor contributing to an individual's psychological well-being (Burzynska-Tatjewski, Stolarski & Matthews 2022; Zhang et al. 2022). Various studies have shown that expressions of gratitude can increase happiness, reduce symptoms of depression and strengthen social relationships (Armenta, Fritz & Lyubomirsky 2017; Froh, Bono & Emmons 2010; Zhu et al. 2024). In an educational context, students who are able to develop gratitude tend to have higher levels of well-being and are better able to cope with academic stress (Garg & Sarkar 2020; Kong, Ding & Zhao 2015; Sapmaz et al. 2015). Previous research has largely focussed on quantitative analyses, exploring the correlation between gratitude and psychological well-being, often neglecting the more in-depth qualitative aspects of how individuals experience and express gratitude in specific contexts (Hahn, Brzoska & Kiessling 2024; Hu et al. 2024; Zhen et al. 2021). The transition to higher education represents a critical period in young adults' lives, characterised by significant changes and challenges. For freshmen at public universities in Indonesia, this transition is further intensified by the highly competitive admission process. As a result, being accepted into public universities is considered a privilege, often accompanied by a profound sense of gratitude. This unique condition provides a rich context for exploring how gratitude is constructed and utilised as a coping mechanism to navigate academic pressures and the challenges of life transitions.

While there is a wealth of research highlighting the benefits of gratitude, there is still a gap in the literature regarding qualitative explorations of gratitude among college freshmen. Most studies utilise quantitative methodologies, which while valuable, often fail to capture the depth and complexity of individual experiences and expressions of gratitude. In addition, existing research has not adequately addressed the cultural and contextual factors that influence gratitude, especially in non-Western environments such as Indonesia (Liem 2020; Riany, Meredith & Cuskelly 2017). This is important given the cultural emphasis on gratitude and the centrality of religious and social support systems in many Indonesian communities. Furthermore, the experiences of freshmen, especially their emotional dynamics and coping mechanisms during the early stages of their academic journey, need more in-depth investigation to complement the existing quantitative findings.

This study makes a significant contribution by focussing on a specific context and population, namely freshmen at public universities in Indonesia. Through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the dynamics of emotion and gratitude among freshmen in public universities in Indonesia. The novelty of this research lies in an in-depth exploration of the categories of emotional expressions that form part of the construction of spiritual meaning in the gratitude of college freshmen. In addition, this study examines the role of social and economic background in shaping the emotional experiences and expressions of gratitude of freshmen. This study also presents another novelty by integrating postmodernism theory and the theory of meaning in life. This approach helps to understand how freshmen interpret gratitude spiritually and use it as a source of emotional strength to face academic and life challenges. Hence, this study not only contributes to the existing literature on gratitude and student well-being but also offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers to better support students in navigating the challenges of academic and life transitions. Additionally, it provides a novel perspective on the construction of spiritual meaning through experiences of gratitude, presenting an integrated approach to understanding the interplay between psychological, social and spiritual dimensions in the context of higher education.

Methods

Using qualitative methods, this study sought to capture the voices of freshmen admitted to one of Indonesia's public universities and gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences with gratitude. The focus was to understand how freshmen feel and express gratitude, or why they do not, in the context of higher education. This qualitative approach was chosen to complement existing quantitative studies, with the aim of adding depth to existing knowledge. The study was conducted at a single public university, which is a common feature in educational studies. This facilitated access to a convenience sample of freshmen admitted through

various selection channels, ranging from merit to written examinations. The freshmen selected were those admitted within the last 6 months, resulting in a fairly representative final sample of participants.

A total of 20 freshmen participated in the data collection. Non-participation was mostly because of time constraints or academic commitments, with a few questions not answered at all. The majority of participants had no direct contact with the researcher prior to data collection, thus reducing bias in their responses. Data collection was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved the distribution of an open-ended questionnaire designed to gather baseline information about freshmen's experiences of gratitude. This questionnaire allowed participants to express their thoughts and feelings freely. The second stage was in-depth interviews which aimed to deepen the findings from the questionnaires and gain a more detailed understanding of the students' experience. These interviews were conducted face-to-face to build better connections and get more in-depth responses.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they are able to capture the individual's voice in an open yet purposeful manner. Although this research was exploratory in nature, it aimed to touch on areas highlighted in the literature. The interview protocol was broadly based on the literature on gratitude and allowed participants to reflect on their experiences (Emmons, McCullough & Tsang 2004; McCullough, Tsang & Emmons 2004). The research instrument was semi-structured by inviting students to discuss their experiences of being admitted, reflections on their experiences during the selection process and their involvement on campus. Gratitude was introduced as a theme, encouraging students to reflect on its relevance to their experiences. A pilot interview was conducted to test the face validity of the tool. Participants came from a range of study programmes, with a balanced representation of males and females. Most interviews lasted between 30 to 60 min, generating 10 h of data. Data analysis was conducted with open coding followed by thematic analysis. The credibility of the study was maintained by endeavouring to accurately represent the meanings and expressions of gratitude from participants.

Participants received an information sheet and signed a consent form prior to the interview, with the option to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used for data reporting, and no conflicts of interest were identified. The researchers ensured the trustworthiness of the responses, considering them an authentic reflection of the participants' experiences. Data were stored on a password-protected computer and will be destroyed once results are published.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Institut Agama Islam Negeri Langsa & Universitas Negeri Malang (reference no.: 33 /In.24/RJ/PP.00.9/09/2023).

Results

Dynamics of freshmen's gratitude expression

Gratitude was perceived by the respondents as a positive feeling. They welcomed the feeling of gratitude in their lives and spoke of various past, present and future contexts in which it resonated. These contexts included reflections back to learning experiences at school, the struggles of selection along with experiences with family, friends and their prayers. There was a sense of variation in the capacity or willingness to be grateful and participants seemed to attribute their own capacity for gratitude to their life experiences. This study analysed the participants' direct statements and identified several categories such as expressions of happiness, anxiety and resilience within the frame of gratitude directed towards God and humans. The following is an explanation based on the results of the thematic analysis of the research data.

Gratitude to God

The majority of freshmen first express gratitude to God for the many blessings they have been given, including the opportunity to study at their chosen university. The expression of gratitude to God reflects recognition of the divine role in their lives and trust in his wisdom in directing the course of life. Here are some of the participants' statements that reflect this category:

'I am grateful for the favors that God has given me for allowing me to go to college and to be able to experience college and grateful to God for giving sustenance to my parents that allows me to go to college.' (Participant 1, female, student)

Gratitude to significant person

Freshmen expressed gratitude to those around them and to themselves for their personal achievements. Although they did not specifically mention God, these expressions of gratitude reflected an appreciation of social support and a sense of pride in individual achievement. The following statement illustrates this category:

'I am grateful to be surrounded by obedient people who have great tolerance, and it motivates me to be like them who have broad understanding.' (Participant 3, female, student)

Fear

Some participants also expressed fear and confusion related to their college experience. They noted uncertainty in course selection and anxiety towards challenging tasks. Here are some statements that reflect this category:

'I felt a little shocked because of the courses that I thought were not easy.' (Participant 5, male, student)

Sadness and disappointment

A small number of participants expressed feelings of sadness and disappointment, particularly in relation to choosing a programme of study that they felt was inappropriate. However, they also noted social support from new friends and parental pride. Here are some of the participants' statements that reflect this category:

'Sad because I am still a little jealous of some of my friends who managed to get into the university or major that they dreamed of since high school.' (Participant 2, female, student)

Tuition fee anxiety

Anxiety related to financing is a major concern for freshmen. The government policy on single tuition fees sets the amount of tuition fees based on the financial ability of parents and the selection path followed by students. Based on the results of the study, the average amount of *Uang Kuliah Tunggal* (UKT [single tuition]) Auth is Rp3 971 172.00 (Rupiah), or about \$264.00 per semester. Students who paid the lowest UKT spent Rp400 000.00 (\$26.70), while the highest paid Rp12 000 000.00 (\$800.00). Here are some student statements related to financing anxiety:

'I often feel anxious about what if I can't continue my studies later just because of family economic factors.' (Participant 10, male, student)

'My parents in the village sometimes do not have money because my brother and I are both studying.' (Participant 13, female, student)

'The tuition fee is very high for me at 5 million.' (Participant 17, male, student)

To overcome the cost anxiety, some students reviewed the tuition fee and appealed as expressed by one respondent:

'My concern is about the tuition fee, hopefully I can appeal in semester 3.' (Participant 18, female, student)

In addition, students also applied for the Indonesia Smart Card scholarship. The study found that 19% of respondents had already received the scholarship, but some were still waiting for the selection process from the campus:

'I am afraid that my college scholarship application will not be accepted, the second is about the obstacles during college that will happen in the future, whether I can get through it or not.' (Participant 20, female, student)

While financial anxiety is a significant challenge, it also creates a sense of gratitude among freshmen. The various emotions they experience, be it happiness, sadness, anxiety or exhaustion, ultimately boil down to gratitude. When facing financial difficulties, students learn to appreciate every help and support they receive, whether from God, parents, family or educational institutions. This gratitude becomes the foundation for happiness and motivation to continue striving to achieve their academic goals. Because after all, for the first semester, they can get through and be accepted as freshmen.

Gratitude builds resilience

Despite feelings of fear, confusion and sadness, participants demonstrated resilience and the ability to be grateful. They attributed gratitude to the strength and support they found in their religious beliefs, which helped them overcome obstacles and keep their spirits up. Here are some statements that reflect this category:

'When I felt that, I had the wrong major and low self-confidence, I was able to express gratitude by surrendering to Allah as my God, which gave me the energy to do my best in relation to my future.' (Participant 6, male, student)

Based on these categories, the results show the complexity of emotions experienced by college freshmen, as well as the important role gratitude plays in helping them overcome challenges and maintain their enthusiasm in pursuing their goals. Initially, some respondents felt that they had chosen the wrong major, but as the months went by, they began to realise the right direction and the right way to find solutions to their mistakes. In fact, they have new energy to be more enthusiastic in realising their dreams.

Discussion

This research suggests that gratitude plays an important role in helping freshmen cope with early college challenges. This study identified several categories of freshmen's emotional expressions in the context of gratitude, which comprehensively explain the dynamics of their feelings as they embark on their initial college journey. The majority of freshmen express gratitude to God for the many blessings they have received, including the opportunity to study at their chosen university. These expressions of gratitude reflected recognition of the divine role in their lives and trust in his direction in determining the course of life. The participants indicated that this experience strengthened their faith and motivation in pursuing their academic goals. A small number of students also expressed gratitude to those around them, such as family and friends, for the support they received (Du et al. 2021). While not directly mentioning God, these expressions of gratitude highlight the importance of social support in motivating and empowering students. It also shows that gratitude can serve as a strong emotional link between individuals and their environment.

Some participants also faced uncertainties related to their college experience, such as challenging course selection and confusing assignments. These feelings of fear and confusion reflect the challenges that new students face in adjusting to a new environment and new academic demands. This underscores the need for better support in facilitating their adaptation. A small number of participants also expressed feelings of sadness and disappointment related to their college experience, particularly regarding the selection of a study programme that was not their priority choice (Ramadhani et al. 2023). Nonetheless, social support from new friends and pride from parents remained a balancing factor that strengthened them in facing these challenges. This confirms that the process of transitioning to college is not always smooth and can involve significant emotional challenges (Al-Labibah Furqon, Ramli & Atmoko 2024; Pohan et al. 2024c). Anxiety related to financing college is one of the main focusses for freshmen.

The results show large variations in the amount of fees paid by students, reflecting the diversity of their economic backgrounds. These feelings of anxiety and worry highlight the importance of policies that support fair and affordable

access to education for all students. To address concerns related to tuition fees, some students undertook reviews and appeals. In addition, applying for government scholarships for financially challenged students was also an important strategy used by some students. While these financial challenges were significant, the experience also created a deep sense of gratitude for the support they received from various parties (Almanwari, Md Saad & Zainal 2024; Zhao & Akhter 2023). Despite being faced with various challenges and negative feelings such as confusion and disappointment, new students demonstrated a remarkable ability to persevere and overcome obstacles (Maksutova et al. 2023). Gratitude proved to be a source of emotional strength for them, helping to maintain their enthusiasm in pursuing their academic goals and adjusting to a pristine environment.

The findings of this study are in line with previous studies showing that gratitude is closely related to psychological well-being. However, this study makes a unique contribution by focussing on freshmen and their emotional dynamics in a college context. Some previous studies may not have specifically examined the role of gratitude in dealing with early challenges in higher education. Especially in the context of Indonesia, being accepted to a public university is prestigious for freshmen and their families because of limited capacity and various kinds of preparation and selection that are followed. The results of this study differ from those of various gratitude experts who state that gratitude is only expressed towards humans. For example, McCullough et al. (2008) suggest that feelings of gratitude arise from recognising the role of other people's kindness in achieving positive outcomes. In another concept, Emmons and McCullough divide gratitude into two meanings, namely worldly and transcendental (McCullough et al. 2004). For the mundane meaning, gratitude is conveyed to humans for the benefits they receive, while for the transcendental context, it is more about thanking each other spiritually.

In the context of the results of this study, we analyse that what is more appropriate to use is the concept of Al-Ghazali which states that the form of gratitude of a human being is manifested in three aspects, namely: inwardly acknowledging the blessing, outwardly talking about it and manifested by action as a form of obedience to Allah in the form of worship (Al-Ghazali 1998; Al-Seheel & Noor 2016; Hasan & Tamam 2018). Thus, gratitude for being accepted as a new student at a state university is a blessing, even though it goes through various long and difficult selection processes. When students consider all of that as a blessing from God, all feelings turn into gratitude which produces happiness and enthusiasm to do the best for themselves and others, this is what is then referred to as the concept of worship (Chalmiers, Istemi & Simsek 2023; Pohan et al. 2024b).

In the concept of religion, gratitude is not only when getting favours, but also when facing trials and tribulations and even death, which requires a servant to continue to thank God (Pohan 2024; Pohan & Astuti 2024). In addition, the feelings

of sadness experienced by students when they were accepted into a major that was not their first choice, and then the various tasks undertaken made them exhausted, it turns out that gratitude, especially to God, makes them more resilient in undergoing lectures. This is in accordance with various studies which state that gratitude contributes to life satisfaction, mental health and reduces symptoms of distress in individuals (Leavy, O'Connell & O'Shea 2023; Unanue et al. 2019; Valikhani et al. 2019).

Some respondents, although not explicitly expressing gratitude to God but to another significant person, actually did not ignore or forget God. All expressions of gratitude of students participating in the study were a form of gratitude to God, followed by expressions of gratitude to parents, family and close people (Chalmiers et al. 2023; Upenieks & Ford-Robertson 2022; Watkins et al. 2024). The results of this study contribute that to see the description and development of quantitative instruments that can measure gratitude in the Indonesian context, it is necessary to include divine values because it is a basis that cannot be separated from the character of Indonesian society from any religious point of view (Pohan et al. 2024a). Gratitude turns out to cause a positive facial aura so that it can increase motivation and prosocial behaviour, especially strengthened by religiosity (Daulay, Assingkily & Munthe 2022; Li et al. 2023; Pang, Song & Ma 2022). This is the role of counsellors who are sensitive to students' conditions, allowing them to assist those experiencing a lack of gratitude because of various academic pressures.

Construction and transformation of freshmen gratitude: Processes, emotional dynamics and coping strategies

Figure 1 of this gratitude pyramid illustrates the construction of gratitude among freshmen, which is divided into three main sections. At the top, there is the gratitude felt by the majority of freshmen, at 70%. These students feel grateful for being accepted into their

first choice of major and college. This gratitude puts them at the top of the triangle.

The middle section illustrates the transformation experienced by the 30% of new students who feel less grateful for being accepted into their second or third choice. This transformation process involves several symbolic steps: (1) Thinking (symbolised by the brain): realising that not everyone can be admitted to a public university; (2) Feeling (symbolised by the heart): deeply realising that the result is the best of the efforts made; (3) Behaving (symbolised by the eyes): understanding that re-registering and becoming a new student is the best step to take; (4) Act (symbolised by hands): committing to do the best for oneself and one's family while being a student; (5) Responsible (symbolised by scales): maintaining balance is the main key to living life as a student.

At the bottom, there is a sense of a lack of gratitude, which shows freshmen who initially felt ungrateful for not being accepted at their first choice.

The transformation process from less gratitude to gratitude is the novelty of this research. This process is based on gratitude to God and close people such as family, which forms resilience to live life as a new student. This pyramid emphasises that gratitude, combined with thinking, feeling, proactivity and responsibility, will bring about a successful transformation for new students. The pyramid is also a cycle, as gratitude is not a stable state. After a successful transformation from being less grateful to thinking, feeling, being, acting and being responsible, students will reach a high state of gratitude (Algoe & Chandler 2024). However, at some point in the academic journey, students may experience a decrease in gratitude triggered by various factors from within themselves and the environment. The transformation process from less gratitude to gratitude involves several symbolic steps, including recognising blessings, feeling emotional connections and committing to proactive actions. This aligns with McCullough et al.'s concept of mundane and transcendental gratitude and Al-Ghazali's framework, which emphasises gratitude as a multidimensional process expressed through thought, speech and action. For Indonesian freshmen, gratitude is understood not only as an acknowledgement of blessings but also as a proactive effort to persevere and adapt to academic challenges, shaped by cultural and spiritual values, and reflecting collective and religious practices.

During the first 3 months of being a student, they have experienced a wide range of emotional dynamics, including happiness, anxiety, sadness and resilience. Gratitude can ease negative emotions such as anxiety and sadness and strengthen positive emotions such as happiness (Aditama et al. 2023). Expressing gratitude to God and others helps students to focus on the positive things in their lives, thereby reducing the negative impact of stress and anxiety. In addition, students' social and economic backgrounds also influence their expressions of gratitude and emotional dynamics. Students from economically disadvantaged

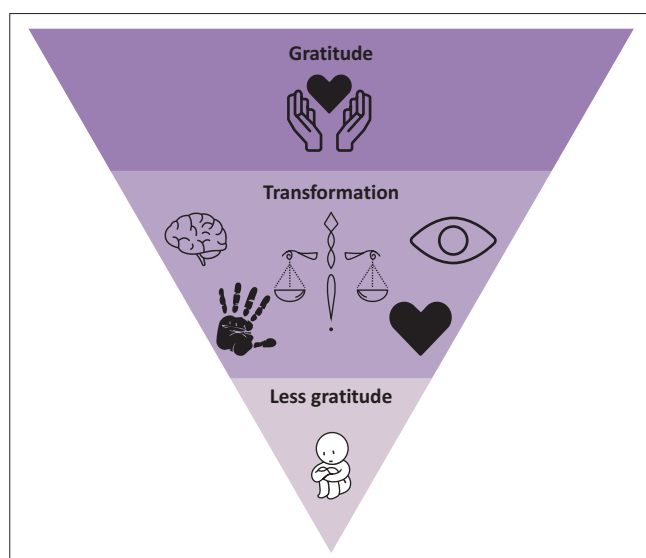


FIGURE 1: Pyramid of gratitude construction in freshmen.

backgrounds tend to be more concerned about financing their studies but also show strong gratitude for the financial and social support they receive (Sudarsana et al. 2024). Factors such as family support and economic conditions play an important role in shaping students' emotional experiences.

Freshmen use a variety of coping strategies to deal with stress and anxiety, including self-reflection, prayer and seeking support from friends and family. Gratitude is often an integral part of these strategies, helping college students to focus on the positive aspects of their lives. Coping strategies involving gratitude have been shown to be effective in relieving stress and improving emotional well-being (Arizona et al. 2023). By implementing different ways of transforming, students can return to gratitude without falling to the bottom and becoming less grateful students. This is important to avoid negative impacts on academic tardiness and failure. Continuous transformation is key for students to maintain gratitude and achieve academic success (Jin & Wang 2019).

Construction of spiritual meanings in freshmen's expressions of gratitude to God

Religious and spiritual support plays an important role in shaping freshmen's gratitude and resilience. Religious beliefs provide them with strength and emotional support, which help them overcome obstacles and keep their spirits up (Watkins, Frederick & Davis 2022). Recognition of the Divine role in their lives is often a source of inspiration and motivation. The construction of gratitude to God involves three interconnected stages: cognitive recognition of divine blessings, an emotional connection with God as a source of strength, and proactive actions such as prayer and academic perseverance. These stages reflect a dynamic meaning-making process, where freshmen integrate their spiritual beliefs with their academic journey, shaping gratitude as both a personal and collective experience. In the context of gratitude to God, we utilise a postmodernist approach that highlights that spiritual experiences are strongly influenced by the individual's social and cultural context (Wilt & Exline 2022). The experience of gratitude to God can be seen as the result of social and cultural constructions, which vary among individuals and social groups (Krause & Ellison 2009; Uchida, Norasakkunkit & Kitayama 2004). Postmodernism emphasises that there is no single explanation or universal truth in the experience of religion or spirituality (Dueck & Parsons 2004). In the Indonesian context, the construction of gratitude to God is deeply rooted in cultural and religious values that emphasise collectivism and spirituality. These cultural elements enrich Postmodernism Theory by demonstrating how gratitude is shaped not only by individual interpretation but also by collective practices, such as family prayers and community rituals. This perspective extends the Meaning of Life Theory by highlighting the social dimensions of meaning-making in gratitude, which are often overlooked in Western contexts. In addition, the Meaning of Life Theory explains how individuals seek,

pursue and maintain meaning in their lives (Martela & Steger 2016; Pohan et al. 2025). Expressions of gratitude to God can be part of this meaning-seeking process, where students relate their experiences to a larger purpose or meaning, namely glorifying God through gratitude and honouring the gifts given.

Thus, the combination of Postmodernism Theory and Meaning of Life Theory in the context of new students' expression of gratitude to God can provide an interesting perspective. The postmodernist approach highlights that spiritual experiences such as expressions of gratitude to God are strongly influenced by an individual's social and cultural context (Yin 2018). Each individual and social group can have a unique construction of what it means to be grateful to God. Postmodernism emphasises that there is no single explanation or universal truth in the experience of religion or spirituality; instead, these experiences are highly variable and dependent on each individual's interpretative framework (Lunn 2009).

Meanwhile, the Meaning of Life Theory focusses on how individuals seek meaning in their lives (Czyżowska & Gurba 2022). Expressions of gratitude to God can be seen as part of this meaning-seeking process, where new students try to relate their academic experiences to a greater purpose or meaning, such as glorifying God through gratitude for the gifts given, such as the opportunity to study at their chosen university (Buqa 2024; King 2017). In the combination of these two theories, the experience of gratitude to God is not only seen as a reflection of universally instilled spiritual beliefs but also as a result of the meaning-making done by individuals within their social and cultural contexts (O'Dea, Igou & Van Tilburg 2023). This illustrates the complexity and subjectivity in the experience of religion and spirituality, where each individual has a unique way of interpreting and expressing gratitude to God according to their own background and life experiences (Disabato et al. 2017; Prusak et al. 2021). Thus, the combination of the two theories can be referred to as Spiritual Meaning Construction Theory. It includes elements from Postmodernism Theory which highlights the social and cultural construction of spiritual experiences, as well as from Meaning of Life Theory which emphasises the individual's search for meaning in the expression of gratitude to God. As such, Spiritual Meaning Construction Theory emphasises that the experience of gratitude to God is the result of the construction of meaning by individuals within their social and cultural context. This theory emphasises that gratitude is not merely an emotional response or religious practice but a multidimensional construct shaped through dynamic interactions between individual experiences, cultural norms and social influences. For Indonesian freshmen, gratitude to God emerges as a process of meaning-making that integrates spiritual beliefs with their academic and social experiences, reflecting both individual interpretation and collective religious practices.

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of gratitude by introducing the Spiritual Meaning Construction Theory, which uniquely integrates the Postmodernism Theory and the Meaning of Life Theory. This framework provides a novel perspective by emphasising the interplay between individual, social and cultural dimensions in constructing gratitude to God. By applying this theory in the context of Indonesian freshmen, this study highlights the importance of cultural and religious factors in shaping spiritual experiences, offering a fresh contribution to the global literature on gratitude.

Implications for higher education institutions

These findings have several important implications for higher education institutions. Firstly, it is important for universities to recognise and support freshmen expressions of gratitude, both to God and to others. Orientation programmes, guidance and counselling that acknowledge and support religious beliefs and social support networks can help students feel more connected and supported (Maksutova et al. 2023). Secondly, universities need to provide adequate academic guidance and support to help freshmen adapt to higher academic demands. This could include guidance and counselling programmes, study skills workshops and easier access to academic support services (Sofyan et al. 2024). Thirdly, it is important to acknowledge and address the feelings of sadness and disappointment that may be experienced by new students who are not accepted into their first-choice study programme. Psychological support and counselling can help students overcome negative feelings and find the right path to academic and personal success. Finally, developing programmes that promote resilience and gratitude can help students overcome challenges and stay motivated throughout their academic journey. This could include resilience training, support groups and activities that promote gratitude. This study has several limitations that need to be considered. Firstly, this study was conducted on a small scale and only involved freshmen from three public universities, so the findings may not be generalisable to the entire population of freshmen in Indonesia. Secondly, the data collection methods used were open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews, which may not cover the full spectrum of freshmen's experiences and feelings. Future research can explore the dynamics of emotion and gratitude of freshmen in more depth through longitudinal studies. In addition, comparative analyses with other universities and quantitative research could provide further insights.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of gratitude in helping freshmen at a public university in Indonesia overcome challenges and maintain academic motivation. Gratitude, primarily directed towards God and secondarily towards social support and personal achievements, fosters resilience and strengthens faith. Despite experiencing negative emotions like uncertainty and anxiety, students rely on gratitude as a coping

mechanism. Financial concerns, particularly tuition fees, emerged as a major challenge, emphasising the need for scholarships and fee reviews. In line with the Construction of Spiritual Meaning theory, gratitude is influenced by social and cultural contexts, serving as part of a meaning-seeking process. This study underscores the importance of supporting students' gratitude expressions through orientation programmes, academic guidance, psychological counselling and resilience-building initiatives. Future research should expand the sample size, incorporate diverse methodologies and explore emotional dynamics through longitudinal studies to deepen understanding and provide more comprehensive insights. Higher education institutions can use these findings to enhance policies and programmes aimed at fostering student well-being and success.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

R.A.P., M.R., A.A. and S.A. made significant contributions to the work reported in the manuscript. R.A.P. was responsible for conceptualisation, methodology, writing original draft, project administration, reviewing and editing. M.R. was responsible for data curation and supervision. A.A. helped with the writing of original draft, reviewing, editing and supervision. S.A. was responsible for reviewing, editing and supervision.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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